

Issues in General Election 2009

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The issues raised in the 2009 Lok Sabha election campaign by the major alliances and the response of voters to them present a mixed picture. The National Election Study 2009 survey indicates that voters did not consider some of the issues highlighted by political parties to have much relevance to them and these had almost no impact on voting decisions. They included, for instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign issues such as the Indo-United States nuclear deal and the Ram Sethu controversy. However, economic concerns, basic services, welfare policies and citizens' security were significant in influencing voting decisions. Surprisingly, the United Progressive Alliance's vote did not suffer much even though the price rise and terrorist attacks during the government's term in office were matters of concern to a majority of the voters.

The Lok Sabha election of 2009 was seen as an electoral competition mainly between two coalitions, one led by the Congress and the other by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The run-up to the election witnessed the Third Front, headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPI(M), forcing certain issues into the political domain. The Congress, at least in part, appeared to respond to these besides trying to seek re-election on the basis of its own programme. The BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) sought to emphasise the issue of leadership and the personality factor alongside criticism of the ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The election result showed that the issues raised by the NDA and the Third Front during the election did not cut much ice with Indian voters. Instead, they gave the Congress a larger mandate than in 2004.

Political analysts and the media were quick to attribute the impressive performance of the UPA to its track record of governance and inclusive policies such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), the farm loan waivers and other popular schemes. In principle, in the context of electoral politics, voters align with a party on the basis of the issues that appeal to them the most. However, this exercise of "choice" depends heavily on how political parties define issues and which issues they choose to project. Thus, there is always a possibility of a disjunction between the issues projected by parties as important and the issues that voters feel are crucial. In other words, issues and opinions may operate independent of the structures of political choice, social alignments and election outcome. The issue dimension of voting has as much to do with the opinions held by the citizens as it does with the options offered by political parties (Yadav 2004).

It therefore becomes imperative to empirically probe what the key issues were in the Lok Sabha election of 2009. Were the issues on which the political parties contested the election and the set of issues which the voters felt were crucial the same or were they different? This article explores this question. It seeks to situate the latest election in the context of the electoral issues that dominated the last few elections; then reports on the issues that were raised by the three political alliances. This helps in analysing the competing and contrasting nature of the issues on which the election was contested. Finally the article examines if the issues raised by the parties and issues perceived by the voters as crucial were the same. It also tries to establish whether the issues raised by political parties appealed to a cross section of voters.

Table 1: Voters' Prioritisation of Issues in Election (2009, in %)

Issues in the Election	Yes	No	Not Heard
Price rise	48	21	29
Terrorist attacks	39	23	36
Livelihood/employment	34	20	47
Farmers suicides	30	21	47
Indo-US nuclear deal	18	19	61
Ram Sethu controversy	18	18	63

Rest, "No opinion".

Source: NES 2009, weighted data set.

Changing Spectrum of Issues

The 1990s saw the rise of many contentious issues in the electoral arena. Political formations grouped and regrouped during this period, often on the basis of these issues. Initially, no single party was in a position to force its own agenda on the political process. This meant that multiple menus criss-crossed the new political formations in the post-Congress era. While this was evident in 1989 itself, the 10th Lok Sabha election in 1991 was marked by a multipolarity of political formations, matched by the multipolar nature of their issue menu. While the Janata Dal contested on the issue of Mandal (reservation of seats for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs), the BJP banked on mandir

Table 2: Price Rise Was More Important among Employed (%)

Issue Among	Yes	No	Not Heard
All	48	21	29
Service/jobs	60	24	14
Agriculture	43	20	34
Urban	54	24	20
Rural	45	20	32

Rest, "No opinion".

Source: NES 2009, weighted data set.

occupied national space. The 1996 Lok Sabha election was held against the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu communalists and the riots that occurred in many parts of the country. This was also the time that the issues of economic reforms and liberalisation emerged. The Congress backed economic reforms and projected the incumbent Prime Minister P V Narashima Rao as one who saved the country from an imminent economic disaster. On the other hand, the BJP contested on the issue of Hindutva. Thus the issue of secularism versus communalism remained a key one in both the 1991 and 1996 general elections.

The next general election in 1998 had as its backdrop the failure of the non-Congress, non-BJP government and therefore the implicit theme of stability. The BJP underplayed the Hindutva issue and sought to occupy the non-Congress space by forging the NDA and collaborating with many state-level parties that were interested in keeping the Congress out of power. With the Congress and the BJP having not much difference on economic and foreign policy issues, the issue of liberalisation took a backseat. By 1999, a new set of issues emerged. The BJP questioned the foreign origin of Congress President Sonia Gandhi and exploited nationalist sentiment by referring to the Kargil conflict with Pakistan and the nuclear test explosions of 1998. The 2004 election once again witnessed a change in the spectrum of issues. The BJP made good governance and economic progress during its tenure the main plank. These issues figured prominently in its election campaign based on the theme of "India Shining".

In other words, the issue terrain has, over the years, been shaped by Hindu communalism, stability, economic progress and a neoliberal economy. Within this broad matrix, specific issues have been projected by major political parties from time to time.

Issues in 2009

Compared to the very contentious issues that occupied attention during the 1990s, the issue discourse since 2004 has been somewhat muted and low key. While the BJP did raise the issue of

economic progress in 2004, the Congress campaign was circumspect on the issue of secularism. Even on the issues of economic progress and reform, it adopted a cautious position of not rejecting reforms but not being overenthusiastic about their outcome. In 2009, media pundits and politicians lamented during the campaign that this was an issueless election as there was no overarching issue that had nationwide appeal. The *aam aadmi* (common man) pitch of the Congress did not resonate in the manner that *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty) did, but that did not mean there were no issues in the election (Yadav 2009).

A review of the issues raised by the Congress reveals that it made its record of governance and policies of inclusive growth during the last five years its main issues for attracting votes. The promotional campaign of the party focused on its rural infrastructure development programme, "Bharat Nirman", and a progress report of the various schemes launched and implemented for the common people by the UPA government. On the other side, the BJP raised issues such as the indecisiveness of the UPA government, its weak leadership and failure to tackle the issues of terrorism and security. The party diluted its Hindutva image but raked up the issue of Ram Sethu, a chain of limestone shoals between Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, and Mannar, Sri Lanka. The issues raised by the Third Front were the nuclear deal made by the UPA, which was said to be a sellout to the United States, the price rise and its impact on the poor. These issues were not only voiced by the three main alliances in their campaigns but also figured prominently in their manifestos.

Voter Response

Evidently, the political parties wanted voters to make their choice by judging them on the basis of the menu of issues mentioned.

How did voters respond to this? The National Election Study 2009 sought popular responses to these issues. Price rise/inflation was the top-most issue among voters in the 2009 election as Table 1 (p 80) reveals. The voting decision of 48% of the voters was influenced by the issue of the price rise. The increase in inflation was felt more among those who were employed and lived in urban areas. Table 2 reveals that six out of 10 salaried people felt that it was an important issue that needed to be addressed.

The Indo-US nuclear deal signed by the UPA was opposed by both the NDA and Third Front as they saw it as harming the interests of the country. Table 1 shows that more than six out of 10 voters had not even heard about the nuclear deal. Similarly, the Ram Sethu issue raised by the BJP had not been heard about by six out of 10 voters and only 18% said it was an issue.

During the tenure of UPA the country witnessed a spate of terrorist attacks in Delhi, Hyderabad, Malegaon, Mumbai and other places. These attacks were dubbed by opposition parties as evidence of the UPA's ineptitude and soft policies pursued by it in handling terrorism and maintaining internal security. Table 3 reveals that 39% of the voters said that terrorist attacks were an important issue. However, this issue was more important among urban than rural voters.

Table 3: Terrorist Attacks Were a Bigger Issue among Urban Voters and Those with High Exposure to Media (%)

Issue Among	Yes	No	Not Heard
All	39	23	36
Urban	47	27	24
Rural	36	21	41
High media exposure	60	26	13
Low media exposure	40	25	32

Rest, "No opinion".

Source: NES 2009, weighted data set.

It was also an issue among a larger proportion of voters who were exposed to the media. Six out of 10 voters with high media exposure¹ felt that it was an issue in the 2009 election.

The terror attack in Mumbai was highlighted by the NDA and Third Front as an issue and the UPA was blamed for its failure to competently handle it. The NES data reveals that there was not much dissatisfaction with the UPA on this issue (Table 4).

Did the voters who felt that the price rise, terrorist attacks, farmers' suicides and employment were issues in the election vote differently from those who said they were not? The opposition tried to make them important election issues to discredit the UPA and damage its electoral prospects. But there is evidence to show that those who felt that these were election issues did not hold the incumbent government responsible for them. Table 5 shows that those who said that these were important issues tended to vote less for the UPA than those for who did not consider them election issues. But a majority of those who said that these were issues in the election still voted for the UPA.

It had been argued that if the Congress could imaginatively link prudent economic liberalisation with a credible signal to its core constituencies – the poor and minorities – that it was serious about their welfare, it had the potential of expanding its base (Mehta 2004). Such prescriptive advice was followed by the UPA as the NREGS and farm loan waivers were seen as policies for direct structural redistribution or increased direct transfer of incomes and assets, aimed at intrusive growth, to the rural poor. The politics of direct structural redistribution with sustainable growth for the well-being of the poor was an important issue and it benefited the incumbent alliance in the election.

Table 6 reveals that more than six out of 10 voters in rural India, who said the UPA's popular schemes were an issue, had heard and benefited from at least one of them.² The evidence is that the beneficiaries of the schemes rewarded the UPA in this election. Among them, it was a crucial issue and the UPA vote on the basis of this issue was three percentage points higher than its overall voting percentage. A gap of three percentage points may appear narrow, but it is significant because it still shows the beneficiaries of these schemes were numerically huge.

Voters were asked during the survey to list the issues which should be addressed on a priority basis by the new government. Economic concerns like employment, the price rise and poverty were important to 31% while basic facilities such as drinking

Table 4: Issue of Handling Mumbai Terror Attack (%)

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No Opinion	Net Satisfaction Score
All respondents	61	23	16	+38
UPA voters	65	19	16	+49
NDA voters	59	30	11	+29
Third Front	61	19	20	+42
Other parties	58	24	18	+34

Rest voted "Other Parties".
"Net Satisfaction score" is defined as satisfied with handling the issue minus dissatisfied.
Source: NES 2009, weighted data set.

Table 5: Issue Dimensions of Voting in Election (%)

	UPA	NDA	Left Front	Others' Parties
All	36	24	8	32
Price rise				
An issue	35	24	7	34
Not an issue	40	25	9	26
Terrorist attacks				
An issue	35	26	7	32
Not an issue	39	24	9	28
Livelihood/employment				
An issue	35	25	6	35
Not an issue	39	26	9	27
Farmers' suicides				
An issue	36	22	7	36
Not an issue	39	25	9	27
Indo-US nuclear deal				
An issue	34	24	8	33
Not an issue	37	26	9	28
Ram Sethu controversy				
An issue	33	29	4	34
Not an issue	37	28	6	30

"Not Heard" excluded from analysis.
Source: NES 2009, weighted data set.

Table 6: UPA's Popular Schemes Were a Crucial Issue in Rural India

Issue for Those Who	In (%)
Heard and benefited from at least one scheme	62
Heard at least one scheme but did not benefit from any	23
Not heard of any scheme	15

The popular schemes were the Indira Gandhi Old Age Pension Scheme, NREGS, Farmers' Loan Waiver, Mid-Day Meal Scheme and National Health Insurance Scheme.
Source: NES 2009, weighted data set of rural respondents only.

water, electricity and roads were mentioned by 30%. The third issue on the list was education and health facilities, chosen by 17%. Security was an area of concern to 6%. While these issues are not exactly ignored by political parties, one wonders why opposition parties chose to highlight tangential issues rather than these in the campaign. For the record, the BJP did talk about all these, but at the core of its campaign was terrorism and national security. On its part, the Congress, too, while taking note of many of these issues, chose to highlight its less relevant achievements.

To conclude, it can be said that the general election 2009 was contested not on a single issue that had national appeal but on various issues by the three main alliances. The set of issues presented by political parties and the issues that figured in the minds of ordinary voters were a little different from each other. Thus the issues of price rise and terrorist attacks, which the parties raised, were issues for the voters as well and it affected their voting decisions. But, surprisingly, an analysis of these issues indicates that they were not detrimental to the interests of the incumbent government, as they were widely expected to be before the election. On the other hand, issues like the Indo-us nuclear deal and Ram Sethu controversy were not issues to common voters, most of whom had not even heard of them. The popular policies and schemes run by the UPA government were important issues for the common people and its beneficiaries voted more for the alliance, but to attribute the electoral outcome to this alone would be simplistic.

NOTES

- 1 The Media Exposure Index was created from exposure to the following media from NES 2009 data sets: newspaper-reading habits, listening to news on the radio and watching news on television. Exposure to media was indexed into three categories: Low, those who were sometimes exposed to any one medium and never the rest; Medium, those who were sometimes exposed to two or three media; and High, those who were mostly exposed to three media.
- 2 The Index of UPA Schemes was created from the following variables from NES 2009 data sets: Indira Gandhi Old Age Pension Scheme, NREGS, Farmers' Loan Waiver, Mid-Day Meal Scheme and National Health Insurance Scheme. It was classified into three categories: One, heard and benefited from at least one scheme; two, heard at least one scheme but did not benefit from any of them; and three, not heard of any scheme.

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