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## Winning big: The political logic of winning elections with large margins in India

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### ABSTRACT

Politicians winning elections with large margins of victory, beyond what is necessary to win electoral contests, what we term “winning big”, is a common, yet under-studied phenomenon across the world. Political economy models suggest that winning big is not an optimal allocation of scarce campaign resources in a SMP/FPTP electoral system. Inductive inquiry shows that incumbent politicians likely to win nevertheless campaign hard, often devoting considerable effort and resources, for reasons that remain unexamined. Focusing on India, this article explores a range of reasons that can help explain this phenomenon through an innovative research design that combines quantitative analysis with in-depth elite interviews with incumbent MPs from 10 states. We distinguish the phenomenon of “winning big” from that of “safe” seats, identify and probe factors that can contribute to large margins, including candidate strategy, party popularity, mobilizers, electoral uncertainty, and party control. Our findings suggest that while political parties in India, as elsewhere, do not spend more money on electoral contests that they likely to win comfortably, winning big can be the result, among other factors, of a party strategy to establish a reputation for invincibility, and/or individual efforts, stemming from a sense of political vulnerability felt by politicians, underestimated in the literature on safe seats.

### Introduction

This article seeks to understand and explain the common yet neglected phenomenon of what we term “winning big”, whereby incumbent politicians win with a substantially larger margin of victory than is necessary to win an electoral seat convincingly.<sup>1</sup> From the standpoint of political economy models, this poses a puzzle.<sup>2</sup> Strategically, political parties have little incentive to devote resources to safe seats, as campaigns can be costly and the margin of victory in a safe seat is of little consequence in terms of support for a political party in the legislature.<sup>3</sup> Despite this logic, there are many instances of politicians winning with large margins of victory. Furthermore, inductive inquiry suggests that incumbent politicians likely to win nevertheless

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campaign hard, often devoting considerable resources and effort to campaigning, for reasons and motivations that remain unexplored.<sup>4</sup> We seek to understand and explain the phenomenon with reference to India, the world's largest electoral democracy, drawing upon elite interviews conducted with 22 incumbent MPs from 10 states. In India's single member plurality (SMP) or first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, where voters select one candidate in a single constituency among all candidates contesting an election, politicians do not have an incentive to defeat their electoral adversaries with a large number of votes. Despite this logic, there are many instances in India and elsewhere of the practice that we refer to as *winning big* or *running up the score*.

Our concept of winning big advances existing knowledge on "safe seats", a phenomenon familiar to analysts of comparative politics. Deploying a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative analysis with interviews, we explore a range of explanations for why politicians in FPTP systems win with large margins. Our findings suggest that large margins of victory can be the *unintended consequence* of factors that parties and individuals only partially control, including party (including leader) popularity, electoral support for rivals, party organisation, mobilization by party workers, and alliances. Furthermore, whereas from the standpoint of political *parties*, the logic behind not devoting substantial electoral resources to safe seats is clear, from the standpoint of *individual* politicians, it can make strategic sense to devote resources to winning big, notably as they compete with others for being re-nominated by a party. This is recognized, but under-researched in the literature.<sup>5</sup> Further, in some cases, large margins of victory can result from the strategy of a political *party* to demonstrate its overwhelming strength in the electorate. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, incumbent politicians likely to win often campaign hard for reasons to do with political *vulnerability*, which can derive from the electoral environment, as well as party control, underestimated in the literature on safe seats.

## Review of the literature

The literature on electoral contests suggests that political parties devote most of their electoral resources to winning marginal seats, where the chances of ousting an opposition party incumbent are greatest due to swing voters. Likewise, political parties devote relatively fewer resources and field weaker candidates to contest in safe seats. Safe seats are conventionally understood to be seats in a legislative body that are likely to be retained with a large majority in an election and where the chances of alternation of power are low. Safe seats are characterized by low inter-party competition, infrequent turnover, or fluidity.<sup>6</sup> In some instances, political parties have altered electoral constituency maps (e.g., "gerrymandering" in the US), to guarantee a maximum of safe seats.<sup>7</sup>

The literature on safe seats has typically focused on the reasons why there is a high proportion of incumbent members in the US House of Representatives (over 90% incumbency rate in some instances) who manage to get reelected over extended periods of time and whose party's dominance in specific electoral districts is only challenged when the incumbent politician retires or dies.<sup>8</sup> In some instances, local competition is so low that there are repeated instances of uncontested seats in US congressional elections.<sup>9</sup> Other strands of literature have paid attention to the factors that are likely to undermine the prevalence of safe seats and highlighted the effectiveness of efforts to disrupt safe seats through institutional mechanisms such as redistricting<sup>10</sup> or electoral challenger spending.<sup>11</sup> Some authors have shown the limited impact that redistricting has on introducing competitive electoral races.<sup>12</sup> In their examination of US congressional races, they attributed the interplay between district-level partisanship preferences, incumbency, and campaign spending as developing a "pattern of reinforcing advantages that leads to extraordinarily uncompetitive elections." Safe seats can make incumbent politicians invulnerable to electoral defeat,<sup>13</sup> thus presenting an electoral structure that fosters pork barrel politics and weakens democratic accountability.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon of safe seats is less pronounced in late-industrializing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>15</sup> In some parliamentary systems in Asia, for instance, strong anti-incumbency waves are the norm, such as India's national and subnational legislatures since the late 1980s.<sup>16</sup> The causes for frequent electoral turnover typically include recurrent political and economic crises,<sup>17</sup> internal institutional structures that encourage term limits,<sup>18</sup> and the inability of politicians to successfully manage voter expectations, i.e. "endemic discontent" during periods of rapid economic transformation.<sup>19</sup>

The operationalization of what constitutes a safe seat reveals further problems, given the array of electoral systems that exist, such as single member plurality (SMP), alternative voting (AV), supplementary voting (SV), single transferable voting (STV), and two-round voting (TRV). The Australian Electoral Commission (2016) offers a helpful cut-off point of a safe seat and defines a "fairly safe" seat as one where the elected candidate wins between 56% and 60% of the vote. A "safe seat" is one where the elected candidate receives over 60% of the vote. However, Australia uses an AV electoral system for its lower house, the Parliament,<sup>20</sup> so it would be hard to draw an analogy as to what constitutes a safe seat in an SMP electoral system, like India's, using this particular definition.

We therefore do not deploy the concept of safe seats and its accompanying assumptions. Instead, we demarcate a related but distinct phenomenon. Borrowing from sports terminology, we term the phenomenon "winning big." The concept of "winning by a blowout" in sport refers to winning with a larger margin of victory than is necessary to ensure the opponent's defeat.<sup>21</sup>

However, in electoral politics, the motivations and reasons that engender the phenomenon of winning big are not clear. Is this a result of a deliberate strategy on the part of the political parties, of individual politicians, an unintended outcome of managing uncertainty in electoral contests, or are other factors at play (eg. the ideological dominance of a party in an area)?

## Context

India, the world's largest electoral democracy, has a history of regular elections since its independence from Britain in 1947. Characterized as a one-party dominant (OPD) system in the initial decades after Independence,<sup>22</sup> India's party system has become increasingly fragmented since the 1990s, both at the national and the regional level. Politicians face difficulties getting re-elected, with high degrees of anti-incumbency. There is no financial support from the state for political parties for elections in India.

In this article, we focus on “winning big” among parliamentarians (MPs) from India's lower house of parliament, the *Lok Sabha* (House of the People), composed of a maximum of 552 Members of Parliament (MPs), with 543 MPs elected directly from parliamentary constituencies. Indian electoral constituencies are further split into general seats and those specifically reserved for Scheduled Caste (SCs) and Scheduled Tribe (STs), groups deemed historically disadvantaged. In India's federal system, the number of electoral constituencies per state is roughly equivalent to the state's total population. While India's territorial constituencies are roughly of a similar geographic size, there is wide variation in the total number of electors in each parliamentary constituency. For instance, in the 2014 general election in India, the five largest parliamentary constituencies had an average total number of electors of 2.33 million, whereas the five parliamentary constituencies with the lowest total number of electors had approximately 151 thousand voters.

Indian general elections are scheduled to occur on a five-year cycle. [Table 1](#) lists successful incumbent MPs in India between the 2004–2014 general elections. We also provide the political party that the politician represents, the state, the electoral constituency, the percentage of votes obtained, and the margin of victory in each election. Additionally, for the 2014 elections, turnout and declared expenditure data is provided, as context for the interviews.

[Table 1](#) shows that there is discernible evidence of “winning big” among incumbent politicians, with no observable geographic or political patterns. Predictably, some of the successful incumbents listed in [Table 1](#) are well-known politicians and former prime ministers (e.g., Rahul Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, H.D. Deve Gowda, L.K. Advani, Mulayam Singh Yadav); however, this is not the case for a majority of successful incumbents. In 2014, the share of reelected candidates, was 29.83% (162 individual candidates were reelected, taking by-polls into account).<sup>23</sup>

Table 1. List of successful incumbent Lok Sabha MPs (2004–2014).

Incumbent	Party	Constituency	State	Category	2004		2009		2014		Candidate spending (Rs.)	
					% of votes won	Margin of victory (%)	% of votes won	Margin of victory (%)	% of votes	Margin of victory (%)		Turnout (%)
Asaduddin Owaisi	AIMIM	Hyderabad	Andhra Pradesh	GEN	38.39	10.15	42.14	15.58	52.88	20.83	53.29	11,04,462
Biren Singh Engti	INC	Autonomous	Assam	ST	31.38	6.01	41.17	15.51	39.92	4.43	77.36	52,74,552
Rajen Gohain	BJP	Nowgong	Assam	GEN	43.59	3.99	38.11	4.54	40.16	11.67	80.72	50,11,084
Astrarul Haque	INC	Kishanganj	Bihar	GEN	NA	NA	38.19	12.81	53.15	20.96	64.52	30,12,628
Vishnudeo Sai	BJP	Raigarh	Chattisgarh	ST	50.74	11.45	47.44	5.97	53.16	17.39	77.6	55,59,119
Ramesh Bais	BJP	Raipur	Chattisgarh	GEN	54.53	18.78	49.19	7.8	52.36	13.72	65.69	43,79,767
L.K. Advani	BJP	Gandhinagar	Gujarat	GEN	61.04	25.68	54.89	15.4	68.03	42.49	65.49	34,13,079
Dr Kirit Solanki	BJP	Ahmedabad West	Gujarat	SC	NA	NA	54.61	13.21	63.91	33.17	62.87	29,12,109
Darshana Jardosh	BJP	Surat	Gujarat	GEN	NA	NA	52.45	10.75	75.75	56.22	63.87	25,38,887
Jayshree Patel	BJP	Mahesana	Gujarat	GEN	NA	NA	48.31	3.16	57.78	20.8	67.03	28,50,142
Gaddigoudar P.C.	BJP	Bagalkot	Karnataka	GEN	52.9	19.27	48.06	4.12	52.95	10.8	68.81	37,44,434
Ananth Kumar	BJP	Bangalore South	Karnataka	GEN	48.29	7.78	48.2	4.14	56.88	20.51	55.73	37,94,109
H. D. Devegowda	JD(S)	Hassan	Karnataka	GEN	50.71	20.86	50.64	29.7	44.43	8.76	73.47	34,51,810
E Ahmed	IUML	Malappuram	Kerala	GEN	NA	NA	54.64	14.76	51.29	22.82	71.26	60,21,571
Kamal Nath	INC	Chhindwara	Madhya Pradesh	GEN	40.89	8.44	49.41	14.62	50.54	10.53	78.99	46,55,389
Jyotiraditya Madhavrao Scindia	INC	Guna	Madhya Pradesh	GEN	49.96	12.9	63.6	38.43	52.89	12.36	60.83	51,56,162
Sumitra Mahajan	BJP	Indore	Madhya Pradesh	GEN	59.46	22.69	48.77	1.44	64.92	35.45	62.25	35,01,385
Rakesh Singh	BJP	Jabalpur	Madhya Pradesh	GEN	54.54	17.41	54.29	16.73	56.34	20.82	58.55	38,93,044
Jyoti Dhurve	BJP	Betul	Madhya Pradesh	ST	NA	NA	52.62	15.29	61.43	31.36	65.16	35,72,185
Adsul Anandrao Vithoba Chandrakant Khaire	SS	Amravati	Maharashtra	SC	48.6	7.87	42.91	8.43	46.51	13.73	62.26	47,62,267
Ahir Hansaraj Gangaram Chavan Harishchandra	SS	Aurangabad	Maharashtra	GEN	52.37	13.36	35	4.52	52.99	16.48	61.84	50,66,673
Arjun Charan Sethi	BJP	Chandrapur	Maharashtra	GEN	43.51	7.11	33.55	3.61	45.77	21.28	63.28	57,18,392
Prasanna Kumar Patasani	BJP	Dindori	Maharashtra	ST	NA	NA	41.26	5.48	55.94	25.52	63.4	31,76,036
	BJD	Bhadrak	Odisha	SC	52.47	10.15	44.86	5.91	46.43	16.58	73.59	20,45,021
	BJD	Bhubaneswar	Odisha	GEN	51.32	13.16	56.32	35.55	49.25	21.25	58.38	19,68,801

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Incumbent	Party	Constituency	State	Category	2004		2009		2014		Candidate spending (Rs.)
					% of votes won	Margin of victory (%)	% of votes won	Margin of victory (%)	% of votes	Margin of victory (%)	
Tathagata Satpathy	BJD	Dhenkanal	Odisha	GEN	53.59	15.55	46.53	21.78	43.5	13.18	56,87,731
Baljayant "Jay" Panda	BJD	Kendrapara	Odisha	GEN	NA	NA	51.13	12.93	52.74	18.39	53,14,579
Pinaki Misra	BJD	Puri	Odisha	GEN	NA	NA	48.01	23.22	50.33	25.34	36,68,197
Arjun Ram Meghwal	BJP	Bikaner	Rajasthan	SC	NA	NA	42.92	3.44	62.84	33.1	50,54,141
Rahul Gandhi	INC	Amethi	Uttar Pradesh	GEN	66.18	49.33	71.78	57.24	46.71	12.33	39,11,123
Adityanath	BJP	Gorakhpur	Uttar Pradesh	GEN	51.3	20.61	53.85	29.42	51.8	30.05	38,28,373
Mulayam Singh Yadav	SP	Mainpuri	Uttar Pradesh	GEN	63.96	46.93	56.44	24.9	59.63	36.49	52,02,498
Sonia Gandhi	INC	Rae Bareilly	Uttar Pradesh	GEN	58.75	38.81	72.23	55.83	63.8	42.75	30,60,120
Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury	INC	Baharampur	West Bengal	GEN	51.25	9.97	56.91	19.63	50.54	30.88	31,30,585
Dinesh Trivedi	AITC	Barrackpore	West Bengal	GEN	NA	NA	49.28	6.44	45.53	19.65	42,57,180

Source: Election Commission of India <https://eci.gov.in/>

From the aggregate data, it is not clear whether individual politicians intentionally seek to win big, or are just playing it safe and winning by big margins as a consequence; or whether other factors result in large victories, such as electoral waves and support for a party, party strategies and alliances, and constituency-level demographics.

### Possible explanations

To evaluate the reasons that may result in politicians winning with large margins of victory in a SMP/FPTP electoral system, we considered several explanations.

- (1) *Party popularity*: Winning big could be the result of *popular support for the party* to which the candidate belongs, which in turn could derive from the popularity of a political leader and/or a party program. Large margins of wins in elections could be the result of efforts of representatives to deliver a large electoral mandate for their political party, and/or its political leadership,<sup>24</sup> and/or the party program. In the 2014 Indian national elections and since, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) electoral victories are attributed to the popularity of its leader, Narendra Modi.<sup>25</sup>
- (2) *Party organization*: In a classic study of the prevalence of safe seats in Britain, in relation to candidate selection, Rasmussen argued that in the "great majority of constituencies the victor in an election is preordained even before candidates are adopted . . . the effective choice, the true political power lies with the . . . party organization."<sup>26</sup> One implication of this view relevant for us here is that large electoral victories could be an indicator of the strength of party organization, its capacity to mobilize the party's voters to turn out and vote. By contrast, where party organization is weak, and a party does not have the capacity to monitor voters' intentions, parties and representatives may also end up allocating extra resources to secure a seat.<sup>27</sup> In other words, large electoral victories could result from a *weak* party organization, which does not offer necessary information to politicians regarding the strength of their political opponents. Alternatively, if parties are weak, politicians may seek to win big in order to develop their own personalistic networks. While in the latter case, winning big is the outcome of strategic choice of politicians, in the other scenarios outlined, incumbent politicians might win with large margins of victory *without* intending to do so.
- (3) *Party control*: Winning big could result from a feeling of vulnerability among politicians vis-a-vis their party. A study of U.S. state legislators holding safe seats showed that many incumbent politicians "feel electorally insecure even though they may win re-election by large margins" and consequently "work hard to ensure re-election with a comfortable



margin”.<sup>28</sup> Feelings of electoral insecurity may derive “from both the campaign and the party environments”.<sup>29</sup> In India, with party leaders known to wield enormous influence over candidates through their control over candidate selection, insecurity about being re-selected or re-nominated by their party may be a key reason for a politician to attempt to win big.

- (4) *Signaling effects to challengers*: Another plausible explanation relates to the strength of anti-incumbency waves, which could motivate incumbent politicians to win big as a signal to potential challengers regarding the likely costs of challenging their seat.<sup>30</sup> Some literature also suggests that incumbents who lose an election have a very difficult time regaining that seat in a revenge-seeking win.<sup>31</sup> Here, electoral victories with a large margin of victory may act as a pre-emptive insurance policy, demonstrating an individual politician’s capacity to fend off potential challengers.
- (5) *Jockeying for national leadership posts*: Another potential explanation for winning big involves a politician’s intention to attain national party leadership positions or ministerial cabinet positions.<sup>32</sup> The theoretical expectation here is that incumbent politicians in safe seats are invulnerable to national political trends. As such, they are able to accrue seniority within congressional committees, and thereby discretionary power over the allocation of resources, providing continuing incumbency advantages in future elections.<sup>33</sup>
- (6) *Electoral turnout*: Safe seats tend to have disproportionately lower turnouts,<sup>34</sup> particularly in majoritarian electoral systems.<sup>35</sup> In India, the electoral constituencies that are reserved for lower caste and indigenous tribal groups (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) have historically seen low electoral turnouts.<sup>36</sup> In constituencies presumed to have a low turnout, high margins may result if incumbent politicians are seeking to raise turnout, *even if they are certain* of electoral victory. Another hypothesis is that successful incumbents win big on account of efforts by multiple candidates to increase turnout by mobilizing voters. Recent research shows that a higher number of candidates through an increase in the number of independent candidates for example, causes higher electoral turnouts.<sup>37</sup>
- (7) *Alliances and competition*: Alliances, official and tacit, can make a big difference to margins in contexts of multi-polar contests in FPTP systems. The margin of victory could be a primarily a function of the effective number of contestants after alliances, rather than the resources put in by parties or candidates. Alternatively, with inter-party competition and shifting fortunes making even safe seats unstable,<sup>38</sup> candidates and parties may devote considerable resources to campaigning.

Furthermore, *intra-party* competition, notably factional conflicts during the course of an election campaign, may lead candidates to devote substantial resources to seats they are likely to win in.

While analytically separable, empirically in practice, these explanations often work together, and are of course not mutually exclusive. The aim of our exploratory study was to evaluate these explanations in relation to evidence from recent Indian elections, and thereby, to narrow down and refine hypotheses for future research on the subject.

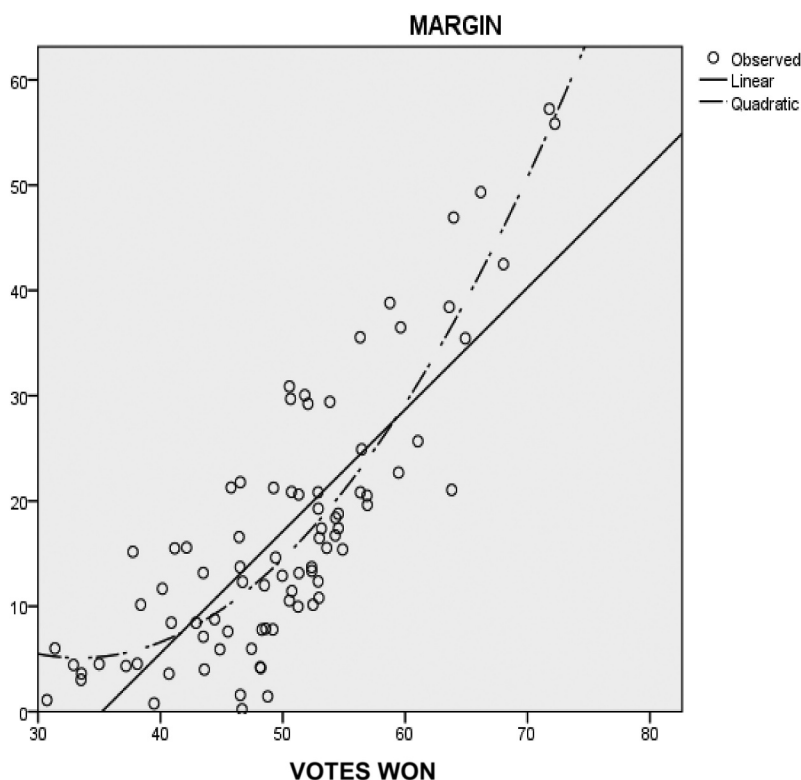
## Methods

In order to probe the likely reasons for “winning big,” we followed a mixed-methods approach. We conducted an initial quantitative analysis of the electoral performance of incumbent MPs who have won with large margins of victory, followed by in-depth interviews of politicians. While representing electoral outcomes quantitatively is possible, it is of limited value and faces significant methodological obstacles. Given India’s high levels of diversity and geographic patterns of political differentiation, the overall number of cases of winning with big margins of victory is comparatively small. Accordingly, our analysis relies mainly on evidence from interviews, ethnographic observations and in-depth fieldwork shadowing two MPs in “safe” BJP seats.

Figure 1 illustrates a strong mechanical correlation between the percentage of votes obtained by a successful incumbent politician and the final margin of victory between the winner and the second largest opponent. As discussed, these electoral outcomes are counter-intuitive in SMP/FPTP electoral systems where the margin of victory is irrelevant.

Figure 1 shows that there is a strong positive linear correlation ( $R^2 = .646$ ) between the percentage of votes won by the successful incumbent and the final margin of victory. The pattern of data in Figure 1 shows, however, that the line of best fit is a correlation expressing a quadratic relationship ( $R^2 = .737$ ) between percentage of votes won and their corresponding margins of victory. As Figure 1 shows, politicians who win with less than a 40% majority attain margins of victory that are less than 10%. However, successful incumbent politicians who reach a 50% threshold in the percentage of votes have escalating margins of victory that increase from 20% to nearly 60 percentage points.

Since the classic case studies by Fenno,<sup>39</sup> and Kingdon,<sup>40</sup> reliance on interviews and observed actions of politicians has become atypical in political science. While a dominant strand of literature premised on public choice assumptions portrays politicians as principals who have designed institutions that ensure favorable outcomes for themselves,<sup>41</sup> it is unclear whether politicians actually view themselves in this manner. In order to



**Figure 1.** Percentage of votes obtained and the final margin of victory.

understand how successful incumbent MPs viewed their margins of victory, we carried out rolling elite interviews in Delhi between December 2015–December 2016.

For this exploratory study, our sample for interviews comprised successful incumbent politicians who had won consecutively in 2009 and 2014, and with margins of around 10% in one or both elections. We excluded MPs who did not win in 2014; thus, those who had won in 2004 and 2009 only were not interviewed. Our sample comprised MPs who have won with large margins; for exploratory purposes, we did not seek to distinguish whether these reasons are different or similar to those offered by politicians who do not win big. After repeated attempts of reaching out to the 35 national parliamentarians who won in the parliamentary elections of 2009 and 2014 across 13 states (see [Table 1](#)), we were able to interview 22 MPs. Our interviewees were MPs of diverse religious, caste, and educational backgrounds from 10 states across a range of parties, including the BJP, the INC, the BJD, and the Shiv Sena. The interviews, which ranged from 20 minutes to 2.5 hours in duration, were conducted with the protocols suggested in *Elite and Specialized Interviewing*.<sup>42</sup>

Interviewing Indian MPs who had won with large margins of victory was not easy. From our perspective, classic textbooks on elite interviewing<sup>43</sup> woefully understate the practical difficulties of carrying out interviews of politicians, particularly in hierarchical social settings where politicians enjoy a high degree of personal impunity. Elite interviewing “is characterized by a situation in which the balance is in favor of the respondent.”<sup>44</sup> Politicians in India, like elsewhere, face extraordinary constraints on their time.<sup>45</sup> Our interviewees did not include most party leaders and eminent politicians – despite repeated efforts, we were not able to access these MPs within the time-frame of our study. Furthermore, individual interviews with politicians are often held in social settings in India, in the presence of administrative staff, security detail, and visitors, in conditions that are not conducive for the disclosure of information on sensitive topics such as election finance. Elite interviews also pose other challenges, notably, MPs are practiced interviewees, accustomed to deflecting questions and evading answers to sensitive topics.

We sought to address some of these constraints in our field-work. We carried out semi-structured, open-ended interviews in English, Hindi, and Gujarati; some BJP politicians preferred to be interviewed in Hindi, in keeping with party ideology. We were able to obtain more frank and valuable information in situations where we managed to establish a degree of trust with our interviewees through repeat interviews over multiple visits. We queried incumbents on why they campaigned hard even when victory was largely assured. We asked them about the nature of support that they received from their political party and how they evaluated their prospects for electoral victory. Ultimately, we tried to ascertain what according to the politicians were the main reasons for their large margins of victory, and how they interpreted the importance of their substantial wins. Several politicians offered candid observations on what they considered important for their electoral survival. We evaluated interview narratives in relation to ethnographic observations in Delhi, multi-sited fieldwork in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, as well as macro-level analyses.<sup>46</sup> Our study yielded new and often surprising information about the phenomenon of “winning big.”

## **Case-study**

### ***Party support and strength***

At the outset, our findings suggest that in India as elsewhere, political parties *do not spend more money on seats perceived as safe*. In some instances, politicians from seats perceived as safe reported that their budgets “were paltry” compared to seats that were “dicier.” More commonly, respondents across different parties reported that they had fewer

election rallies with nationally recognized leaders. Politician D commented: “A seat next to mine was not [safe] so I understand the [party’s] concentration on that seat, because when [a leader] comes there, it makes a difference to the atmosphere (*mahaul banta hai*), it has an effect.” Importantly, our respondents, across lines of party, region and seniority, sought unprompted, to *complicate understandings* of what counts as *election spending* and *party resources* in an election campaign. They questioned our assumptions regarding party spending for their seat, emphasizing the resources *in kind* provided by their party, notably organizational support. For instance, Politician D said that while there were no rallies by leaders in their constituency, “the party doesn’t leave us unsupported – party infrastructure, base is so good, [there were] so many active workers (*sakriya karyakata bahut the*) ...party had not abandoned us.” Politician E from a regional party said that at a time when his seat was perceived as marginal, the party replaced the previous candidate “by a more prominent candidate like me. You could say that was a way of spending more on the seat.” We examine our respondents’ attempts to complicate our understandings of campaign expenditure further below.

One explanation we considered for winning big was *weak party organization* (explanation 2). Politicians may invest more resources than necessary to win a seat if their party organization lacks the capacity to collect and communicate adequate information regarding the strength of political opponents. Some scholars of Indian politics have argued that there has been a steady erosion of party organization in India.<sup>47</sup> There are, of course, multiple measures of party strength; furthermore, scholars have found that the strength of party organization in India varies across parties, regions and over time.<sup>48</sup> However, our interviews and fieldwork observations do *not* support the claim that party organization in India is weak. Most of our interviewees who won with large margins of victory, across different parties, reported a solid organization of party workers for campaigning and information on opponents.

The BJP is well known to be a party of cadres with an impressive network of party workers and an online membership that can be mobilized at short notice.<sup>49</sup> Most BJP politicians cut their teeth early in their careers by being party workers and maintain close links with their former colleagues and the RSS organization (*sangathan*). In interviews, BJP MPs mostly referred to themselves as party workers or cadre (*karyakarta*). Politician C told us that “as a party worker, I had contact with people from the start ... meeting with party workers, listening to what is in their minds, doing their work – the bond and attachment – is there with party workers. ... we have many party programmes (*karyakram*) ... and we have to go ... so the information (*jaankari*) is there.” During field-work, we saw that BJP MPs were frequently instructed by party leaders to attend

voter outreach programs organized to coincide with popular Hindu festivals in different regions (e.g., *Navratri* in Gujarat, *Holi* in Uttar Pradesh). In such politico-religious celebrations (*utsavs*), politicians were instructed to mingle with voters to communicate the achievements of national and regional BJP governments. With BJP MPs interacting with Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs), district and village-level representatives, these served as effective modes of party socialization and as well as enhancing party visibility in the electorate.

Several regional party MPs *also* reported receiving good information from their party workers regarding their electoral support. Politician B said: “I do not win an election on my own strength; we have a political infrastructure and party workers who practically fight the election at the grassroots level and it is only [through] their efforts that one wins the elections. Naturally, those devoted workers are very much acquainted with the ground situation.” Politician F from another regional party told us that his party workers had a fairly accurate understanding of political support: “I almost had the figures . . . booth-wise that from which booth I would get what kinds of votes . . . even before starting.” Most said their own party workers were their main source of information. In a few cases, MPs said they received information about their relative strength from their political opponents. Politician A said he had sufficient information as “Opposition parties own people come and tell . . . ” Finally, the high *frequency* of elections in India at multiple levels – village, district, and state assemblies in addition to national elections – was cited as providing a good source of information regarding the levels of support of a candidate and their party in the constituency.

If our incumbents knew that they would win, and had good information about their opponents’ level of support, why did they still run up the score? Did they believe that the size of their margin of victory would enable career advancement (explanation 5), in the form of ministerial positions for instance, or serve as a demonstration effect, to fend off potential rivals, for example (explanation 4)?

### ***Does the margin of victory matter for individual careers?***

In our interviews, most politicians confirmed our assumption that the margin of victory was *not a significant factor* motivating their efforts. For instance, Politician A said that “ . . . I don’t believe in those things . . . simple victory margin is important.” Politician D voiced a similar perspective: “I feel winning is winning. Whether you win by 5 votes or by 5 lakh.” Most respondents did not attach a great deal of importance to having won by large margins of victory. Several were surprised to learn of the scale of their achievement relative to other MPs when we informed them as part of our study.

Margins of victory were *not* seen as important for claiming leadership positions in Parliament or in the party by our respondents. Politician E told us that having a large margin of victory “gives you some bragging rights, but beyond that, not really . . . In Parliament, people have the attitude that . . . even if they win by 200 votes, they are there for the same length of time . . . if you win with a large margin, it gives you a certain panache . . . credibility . . . [you] will be treated with a sub-text of respect, that this is not a person to be taken lightly.” Politician F put his finger on the issue, saying margin did not matter for getting a ministerial post “because it is difficult to apportion that your margin was from what factor, whether it is leadership, party, organization, or you didn’t have a good opponent.”

For a few, the margin of victory mattered for personal *satisfaction*, as recognition by the voters for their individual efforts and competence, even if it brought no further rewards. Politician E said “I really care for the number of votes I get [as] the approach has been to reach all sections of my constituents, as many of my constituents as possible, and to convince them that I am doing the best that I can . . . that seems to have paid off . . . At the moment, I am about a lakh more than the two other margins combined, which is the margin I would like to retain . . . having put in all the effort . . . if I was going to win by a margin of less than X lakhs, it would have meant that voters were not adequately recognizing my efforts . . . ” Politician F from another region said: “Margin is always important . . . it shows how competent you are. You could just pass, but in order to get an A+, you need to work harder. That goes to prove you have an approval rating from every household . . . ” A couple of respondents saw their margins as indicating the level of support for the individual MP in the electorate, *beyond* support for their party.

A majority of MP’s however said that their margin was indicative of support for their *party*, as much as themselves. Politician E said: “Margin of victory is very important. Because it gives you comfort that you are acceptable among a much larger section of the electorate. And that your party has a much more robust presence.” Politician R said “effort is always maximum” in campaigning even when victory is known because “ . . . if you are sure of win, ok let it be, it will be with huge margin because that widens the base of the party. If today I win by 1 lakh, next time, I will try by 2 lakh or 3 lakh or 4 lakh, because that proves the base of party is widening, that is very important.”

In terms of our explanations then, while politicians did *not* see their margins of victory as having any direct bearing on career advancement, for instance, in terms of ministerial posts (explanation 5), these were nevertheless seen as indicating increased support for the candidate and more often for their party (explanation 1). While a few respondents reported personal satisfaction as a motivation, with their large margins indicating a recognition by voters of individual competence and efforts, this does not seem to have been a key factor in running up the score among the majority of MPs interviewed.



### ***What explains large margins of victory? How political parties matter***

As a factor in re-election success, evidence from the US and the UK is mixed on the importance of the incumbent politician's legislative work.<sup>50</sup> In our interviews, a striking revelation was the *absence of discussion of legislative work* as a factor for their continued electoral success. When prompted by our questions, some respondents did mention that voicing the concerns of their constituents in Parliament mattered, as people felt their problems were being raised. Most of the parliamentary work described by our respondents was, however, of the pork-barrel variety, as in the US (unlike the UK). Legislative work, in the form of scrutiny of bills for example, or participation in committees, did not find mention at all in MPs' accounts of their electoral success. Indian MPs, like their counterparts in many other countries, felt that their efforts in parliament counted for little electorally, with their electoral fate depending on their constituency service, and most significantly, the public mood for their party at the time of elections. For instance, Politician D, who regularly put parliamentary questions, said "at the time of elections, no-one looks at this. How many questions I put . . . is nothing . . . at the time of elections, what will be the perception, atmosphere, air determines everything (*hawa pe he sab chalta hai*)." Recent literature on India's state assemblies also suggests the lack of importance of legislative activity.<sup>51</sup>

Instead, all the big winners interviewed saw their mandate as reflecting increased *support for their party* in the electorate. Most of our respondents attributed their high margins to a combination of factors in which their party (and its leader's popularity) among voters were the most significant, and then, in some cases, their own approbation among voters. A seasoned politician from a successful regional party, Politician O, said that "[r]e-election is mainly a result of mandate for the party. I actually believe there is no such thing as a performing MP guaranteed to succeed . . . elections in India [are] largely driven by party waves . . . it would be naïve on my part to say it has anything to do with my personal pluses and minuses."

The BJP politicians interviewed expectedly attributed their large margins of victory in 2014 to the Modi wave (*lehar*), the personal popularity of the Prime Minister, above and beyond electoral support for the BJP. Politician D told us "According to the previous assembly elections, margin could have been X – that base is there [the] party organization. That I won by a margin of 2X however, straightaway we can say is in Narendrabhai's account." Politician C attributed their large margin to Narendra Modi: "[t]here was a lot of enthusiasm (*bhari utsah*) to make Narendrabhai Modi PM . . . all BJP candidates . . . across the country . . . benefitted from it." Politician G told us that Modi "has charisma magic (*jadoo*). The whole country wanted to see itself in him."



Such accounts were not a simply a function of the Modi-centric nature of the 2014 campaign. Several successful MPs from *non-BJP* regional political parties that we interviewed also attributed their high margins of victory to the popularity of *their* party leader. Politician E told us that their [regional] party did well and “a large part of this went to the charisma and the voter’s trust of the Chief Minister and the head of our party ... our vote share increased overall.” We analyze the focus on leadership further below.

When probed on the role of their party, in addition to their leader’s popularity, MPs across party and region spoke of the *mobilizing efforts* of *party workers* as a key factor in their high margins of victory. Many BJP MPs cited *increased turnout* as a reason for their large margins, which they attributed to the efforts of party workers to mobilize BJP voters to come out to vote, and thereby demonstrate the strength of support in the electorate for Modi and the party. Politician S said his huge margin of victory was due to the efforts of “party *karyakarta* who ensured more than 70% voting everywhere.”

Under Amit Shah’s leadership, the BJP has focused on election wins to demonstrate the strength of the party, its capacity to crush its opponents. In Gujarat, which saw several safe BJP seats with high turn-outs, the party’s extensive network of *panna pramukhs* (so called as each was in charge of a printed page from the electoral roll), were tasked with trying to ensure 100% turnout among BJP voters in their wards. Their job on election day was to ring all BJP voters in their neighborhood to check if they had voted, and to follow-up with phone and text messages throughout the day, to try to ensure that all eligible voters from the household had cast their vote. Even if *panna pramukhs* were a bit thinner on the ground on election day than in party rhetoric, our field-work and interviews with party activists in Gujarat during the 2014 elections confirmed their general visibility, deep knowledge of neighborhoods, the voting intentions and whereabouts of voters on election-day. The mobilization efforts of party workers were supported by the incentives and rewards offered by the leadership to increase the party vote in safe BJP seats. A BJP MP we interviewed reported instituting an ingenious competition among party workers and MLAs in their constituency. Turnout targets were set for party workers based on the BJP’s previous performance in the seat, with those bringing in more votes for the party promised increased monies from the MPs constituency fund, in direct proportion to the vote increases they had delivered during elections (“*zyada vote ko MPLAD mein convert karenge*”). Our evidence thus confirms hypotheses that political mobilizers played a key role in the BJP’s famous electoral victory in the 2014 national elections,<sup>52</sup> while suggesting that mobilizers were mostly drawn from the pool of partisans, broadly conceived (including, in the case of the BJP, paid party operatives, *karyakarkas* of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, and members of other Hindu nationalist organizations).<sup>53</sup>

While recent literature has tended to focus on the BJP, however, our evidence suggests that party mobilizers may have played a role in winning big in the case of *non-BJP* national and regional parties as well. If we examine margins of victory in relation to *turnout* (see Table 1), we find that incumbent politicians from a range of parties across the country won with large margins of victory *and* higher than average turnout during the BJP-Modi wave of 2014. MPs winning seats with large margins of victory (over 10% for our purposes here) and above average voter turnout (66.4% in 2014), were drawn from the Indian National Congress (INC), and several regional parties, including notably the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha (4 MPs). Incumbent politicians from non-BJP parties who won with high margins of victory *and* above average turnouts included not just well-known political leaders (e.g. former Prime Minister H.D Devegowda, Janata Dal-Secular), but also veteran MPs from the INC, Trinamool Congress (AITC), and the BJD (see Table 1).

In our interviews, successful MPs from regional parties also emphasized the role of party workers and mobilizers in accounting for their high margins of victory. Speaking with fairly sophisticated understandings of party strength, Politician O said that their party was now virtually a cadre party, a “well-oiled . . . a very lean, mean election machine, just kicks into play when elections come around . . . all regional parties have perfected this art . . . which is why they keep getting re-elected . . .” Similarly, Politician E from another party said his party-workers “know each and every household, who is going to vote for you and who is not going to vote . . . margin is a combination of “party, you, and your team. I knew my organization. It was solid.” Most MPs winning big from different types of parties – religious and secular, ideological and catch-all – across the country – emphasized the role of mobilizers, mainly party workers and members of their team.

In terms of the explanations discussed above, our evidence thus supports the view that high margins of victory can be an indicator of popular support for a party and its *leadership* (explanation 1); as well as the efforts of political mobilizers (explanation 2), in getting the party’s supporters to come out and vote. In several instances, high margins of victory were associated with above average turnout of voters, which we hypothesize could be a *mobilization* effect, a reflection of the efforts of mobilizers, notably *party workers*, associated in many, though not all cases, with party leadership. In the case of the BJP, such efforts seem to be an aspect of party strategy under Amit Shah, to demonstrate its overwhelming electoral strength. Going beyond existing literature, however, our findings suggest that the significance of mobilization for turnout and election victories needs to be probed for *non-BJP* parties as well. And while the role of mobilization is often associated with a popular leader, notably Modi, our findings suggest that the role of mobilizers may account large electoral victories and high turnouts *also* in instances where MPs belong to parties that lack a popular leadership and/or a strategy of winning big.

### ***What counts as election spending? Money, mobilizers, sweat***

Election campaigns are known to be expensive, with an estimated \$5 billion spent in the 2014 general election in India, making it the second most expensive election ever at the time.<sup>54</sup> The Election Commission of India imposes limits on election expenditure by candidates, which in 2014 ranged from 70 lakh rupees (approximately \$93,000) per candidate in some of the larger states to 54 lakhs (approx. \$72,000) in smaller states.<sup>55</sup> However, there is no corresponding campaign expenditure limit on political parties, and no requirement that parties declare the names of donors, nor the amounts contributed. While political parties and candidates are legally required to submit a statement of their election expenses within 90 days and 30 days of election results respectively, the capacity of the Indian election commission to enforce its deadlines and limits is weak. Accordingly, extensive cheating to circumvent these limits takes place and is widely known, with “reported election expenditures . . . a fraction of actual spending” in India, as other developing countries.<sup>56</sup> In the “corrupt equilibrium” of how the electoral system works in India, “parties and politicians raise funds from businesses in black money (illicit money, not accounted for or declared to public authorities) form, in return for discretionary contracts and regulatory favors.” The institutionalization of “deliberate evasiveness and false declaration of the amounts and nature of expenditures,”<sup>57</sup> a well-known feature of Indian elections, has been challenged by actors seeking financial transparency, notably the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR).<sup>58</sup> However, India’s party and election finance laws retain well-known loop-holes, even incentives for corruption, with nearly 75% of the income of national parties on some estimates in the form of anonymous secret donations.<sup>59</sup> In such a context, the statements of expenditure submitted by parties and candidates, as well as the sums mentioned in interviews require skeptical scrutiny, and are unlikely to provide accurate information on the sums of money actually spent in election campaigns.

With these caveats, our examination of candidate declarations and interviews nevertheless offered important insights on election spending and margins of victory, as well as MP’s perceptions regarding the role of money in elections. A perusal of the declared candidate expenditure in 2014 shows that most MPs winning with large margins did *not* spend substantially more than average on their election campaigns, as per their expenditure statements (see [Table 1](#)). The overall average candidate spending for the 2014 election campaign was around Rs 40.33 lakhs (54,000USD approx.), based on the declarations of 537 Lok Sabha MPs to the Election Commission of India. In our sample, the average spending was similar (Rs 40.44 lakhs approx.); furthermore, more than half the MPs who won with high margins reported spending less than this sum on their campaign (see [Table 1](#) for details).

This was corroborated by our interviews, with most candidates across party and region emphasizing that election spending was *not the most important factor* in their margins of victory. Politician Q said that “[a]s far as my constituency goes . . . from spending, you do not get votes. People eat [the money], but at the time of vote, [think that the candidate] is spending so much money now for votes, don’t know later if he will do [our] work, stay amongst us (*hamare beech rahega*).” Politician F from a regional party felt that if “you have a good organization, you do not even need so much money.” Some of the politicians who won with the largest margins reported that they did not need to spend “too much” on the campaign. While a common view is that the Election Commission’s limits on the spending of individual candidates are unreasonably low,<sup>60</sup> by and large, this was *not* supported by our interviewees. Instead, some of our respondents felt that in their region, the Election Commission’s candidate spending limits were *more* than sufficient for running a successful election campaign, while recognizing that elections in other regions were more expensive. Here again, our evidence supports macro-level studies which found that a substantial proportion of MPs (33%) declared election expenses in 2014 of less than 50% of the expense limit in their constituency, and large *regional* variations existed in reported spending on election campaigns.<sup>61</sup>

Our respondents then saw little correlation between the money that they spent on their campaign and their margins of victory. None of the big winners interviewed reported making out of the ordinary expenses in their constituencies. Given the vagueness of interview responses, and the well-known problems of data on campaign finance, it would be premature to draw strong conclusions from this evidence. Nevertheless, our respondents’ claims are consistent with the tendency of anti-incumbency in India. With incumbents “who have an advantage in raising political funds . . . regularly voted out of office,”<sup>62</sup> the money spent by politicians does not appear to confer a decisive advantage with regard to margins of victory in electoral contests.

Of course, this is not to suggest that money is immaterial for electoral outcomes, nor that the financial demands of elections are insignificant for candidates. Across national and regional parties, most politicians interviewed reported having to spend from their assets and *personal savings* to a greater or lesser extent on electioneering. Analyses of expenditure declarations suggest that 91% of candidates reported using their own funds, which constituted around 25% of declared election spending on average.<sup>63</sup> Politician B from a national party articulated the burden on politicians of ordinary means posed by the high cost of elections:

I cannot afford freebies . . . I have to spend for organizing those workers who will be campaigning for me, they need food . . .they need [a] little office . . . it should be well-oiled machinery- well-oiled means you have to invest something to get it greased . . .the

election has become a capital-intensive arena ... I am ... lower middle class ... I do not have any industry, or any medical college, or engineering college that many of my colleagues have at their disposal ... it has become a very very tough task to continue ... I have been trying hard by offering my service ... but I have been lagging behind [rival party candidates] because they can offer many things which I cannot ... it is detrimental to democracy however it has become the order of the day now ... it is difficult for common guy to come and get elected ...

Several successful non BJP MPs from regional parties spoke of having to raise funds from industrialist and businessmen friends and relatives. Politician F, who was more forthcoming said, “you do spend money from your personal savings on the campaign.” Politician O from another successful regional party said that “the party gives us something fairly significant, substantial [Long silence] The rest is self, friends, and family.” Politician N told us that “some good friends are there who are financially capable – they ... come forward.” The high cost of election campaigns in India has meant an increasing reliance by political parties on self-financing candidates as scholars have noted, “leading to a highly non-representative population of legislators” as well as “greater levels of corruption in office as legislators try to recoup the costs of contesting elections.”<sup>64</sup>

In terms of the proportion of election funds that they received from their party, while our respondents were somewhat evasive about the exact sums, their responses suggested differences along party lines. MPs from the BJP mentioned much more party support for elections in terms of money and party worker time than MPs from the INC and regional parties like the BJD and Shiv Sena, where a greater reliance on personal savings, and funding from friends and connections was noted. Across parties, MPs who were better off (financially “capable” was the term used most often) felt that they received less financial assistance from their party than others. BJP incumbents alluded to the role of party workers and activists in raising funds for electioneering. Politician R told us that the “[n]ational party gives [funds], but day to day expenses of campaigning are borne by our cadre. So in many small offices, local *karyakarta* (personnel) ... raise funds, they go to the public.” They emphasized: “I am not a rich person.”

From regional parties, Politician F who reported spending from their personal savings on the campaign, also said that a “major portion of money is publicity. Publicity material comes from the party so you are not bothered.” Politician N said that “some financial assistance is given, we get stationery, pamphlets, hand-bills, national leaders, state and district level workers and leaders campaign, we get a lot of that [organizational support].” A couple of MPs from regional parties reported receiving little or no financial support from their party – “1 rally [of a party leader in constituency] that is the maximum support we get from my party, no other support.”<sup>65</sup>

Interview evidence is thus consistent with macro-level analyses of expenditure statements of 543 MPs in the 2014 elections, where some 36% of MPs declared they received no funds from their political parties. On average, a BJP MP reported receiving a much higher proportion of their election funds from their political party (56%), and putting in a lesser proportion on their own funds (20%), compared to the INC (23% party and 28% self), and regional parties such as the BJD (12% party and 52% self) and the Shiv Sena (3% party and 38% self). Donations, loans, from firms and business friends were estimated by ADR at around 33% overall of election spending in 2014.<sup>66</sup>

While emphasizing that money spent *per se* was not a significant factor in their margins of victory, our respondents also unprompted, included *non-monetary resources* provided by the party, as well as their own efforts on behalf of constituents and party workers in their accounts of election spending. BJP politicians' narratives of the organizational resources provided by their party in particular underscored the role of party cadre in mobilizing the vote. Politician S said " . . . *karyakarta* are the medium, no MP can go to every voter. Because *karyakarta* were satisfied [with me] . . . they encashed for us," speaking of his votes as a form of "cash" for the party. Some politicians also said that the municipal corporations controlled by their party gave funds for campaign activities, suggesting another common source of campaign finance associated with rent-seeking.

Across party and region, however, a key factor cited by MPs for their large margins of victory was their own *approachability and the accessibility* to their constituents. Politician G said if you "meet people in their joys and sorrows (*sukh dukh mein saath*) . . . then [you] do not need much money to fight elections." Replicating the sentiment, Politician L from a different party and region stated that the doubling of his margin of victory was because "since 2009, I was with the people, in their joys and sorrows." Politician B, from a national party, told us "I am very much accessible to the common people . . . the voters of my area, they always believe that I try to [do] my best for the benefit of the people, in spite of the fact that I cannot provide all kind of facilities, necessities which they require . . . they do not blame me because they also know my limitations [of money], . . . so long as I will be able to continue the trust quotient, people will help me in winning elections."

Several incumbents saw in-person visits and a high level of constituency presence throughout their tenure as critical to their electoral success, and described their often arduous efforts to meet with their constituents. The performance of MPs in the form of their hard work on behalf of their constituents, as well as symbolic displays of humility to voters during the campaign, recurred in our interviews and observations. Most respondents felt that in person campaigning made a difference to their vote. When probed on why he campaigned hard in person despite knowing he would win anyway, Politician L from a successful regional party said: "[we] have to work hard

during the campaign because specially during elections, our voters have the desire (*khwaish*) that their candidate come to their locality (*mohalla*), village . . . specially women-folk – [it] makes a 5% difference to the vote – we mesmerize people with a personal touch – a sitting member of Parliament . . . they see on TV . . . came to my house, my neighborhood [for] appealing for votes.” While our respondents all felt that the election campaign made a difference to their margins of victory, a few said they did *not* put exceptional effort into campaigning relative to their rivals who lost, or their own continual labor for their constituency as an MP. B from a non-BJP party did not see his high margin of victory as a result of exceptional effort during campaigning as “Election is not a one-time phenomenon . . . it is simply a culmination of your work . . . during the election I did 3–4 public rallies, nothing more.”

India’s geographical size and challenging transportation links mean that efforts by politicians to maintain personal links with their constituents are grueling and time-intensive. Our respondents drew upon idioms of kinship and manual labor to describe their in-person efforts in innovative ways. Some described their electoral success as a measure of reciprocal love with their constituents that characterizes kinship relations. Politician H told us “When we work among the people, for us they are not the public (*janata*), but they become our family. I live in their midst and work. Hence my margin increased (*Janata ka aashirwad badha*).” Another from our sample of successful incumbents, Politician E provided a flavor of the extent of effort involved in reaching out to his constituents in person: “I made it a point during my first term to visit each and every *panchayat* [village/lowest electoral level unit]. Now that is quite a daunting task because my constituency is the size . . . and population of a small European country. To visit all the hundreds of *panchayats* is no mean task . . . I ended up going to many places where no MP had been for years, and in fact finding three *panchayats* where no MP had ever visited.” As per his calculations, he had spent an average of 14 days a month in the constituency, throughout the five years of his electoral term. He colorfully concluded that “. . . my biggest input into winning my elections . . . my biggest budget, has been sweat, gallons and gallons of it.”

In sum, our findings challenge simplistic understandings of the significance of money in election wins. Our sample of successful MPs did not see any correlation between their large margins of victory and the sums of money spent in their campaigns; furthermore, they viewed election spending in broader terms than money alone, to include the efforts of their party workers as well as their own labors for their constituents and party workers. In contrast to the popular image of out-of-touch politicians, many successful incumbents from relatively “safe seats” reported spending considerable physical effort visiting places across their massive constituencies, drumming up support. When spending is construed broadly to include the labor of party workers and candidates, several incumbents did report “spending” substantially more



on campaigning than required to simply win their electoral contest. Perhaps this also suggests a shift in the “homestyle”<sup>67</sup> of Indian representatives, from a preponderance of lordly styles of leadership,<sup>68</sup> based on the remote glamor of kingly authority, toward more democratic forms such as social worker or professional who serves their community.

***Is there such a thing as a safe seat? The pervasiveness of political vulnerability***

Why, when our incumbents had good information regarding their support in the electorate, when their party’s victory in the seat was a foregone conclusion, when margins of victory mattered little for their career progression, did they expend substantial time and resources on winning with large margins? Underlying the responses offered by our interviewees across a range of questions was a pervasive sense of *political insecurity*. Most of our respondents said that there were *no safe seats*. According to Politician B, “. . . In the electoral lexicon, nothing can be called a safe seat because the situation may [change] either in your favor or against.” Politician E from a regional party reiterated this view “there is no such thing as a guaranteed seat. Even the most secure seats have had jitters and been lost.” Highlighting the heterogeneity of his constituency, Politician O, a seasoned politician from a regional party said that “one or two of my assembly seats are very tricky seats . . . It is a very complex system, there are no easy answers. In that sense, no seat is a safe seat in an election. Every seat has to be fought and earned.” Across political parties, our respondents said that while they had some sense prior to the election that their margin of victory would improve, that it would do to the extent it did was not known and was hard to predict. Politician H’s response was typical: “I knew my margin would increase, because I had done work which people had recognized, but not by so much.”

The sense of *electoral vulnerability* that these responses reflect, of politicians feeling “unsafe at any margin,”<sup>69</sup> has been well documented in the literature on US congressional decision-making.<sup>70</sup> When we probed in interviews what a safe margin of victory was, it appeared that the Indian unit of 1 *lakh* (100,000) served as a baseline margin that would provide some guarantee of winning a seat. Politician D said that “1 lakh is safer . . . because of variation, uncertainty (*itna to variation hota hai*).” Politician R also saw 1 lakh as a safe margin. This large margin also suggests that politicians in India do not feel secure regarding their electoral strength.

Why is it difficult for politicians to feel secure of their electoral strength even when they receive good information from their party sources and opponents? Our interviewees brought up several factors making for *complexity and uncertainty* in the electoral context. These included the large size and diversity of constituencies and electorates, the number of parties and independent candidates in the contest,



the shifting alliances between these and factional interests within their own party, and finally, changing approval ratings of the party and the individual during the campaign.

In many cases, our respondents described the extraordinary efforts they undertook to reach their constituents in terms of electoral uncertainty. Politician E said that “opinion polls said I would improve on my previous margin, but it was difficult to predict how much, and during the campaign of course, the fortunes swing up and down—at one point during the campaign when I was being attacked by all kinds of innuendo, it seemed that my margin would actually go down.” Quoting Intel’s CEO, Andy Grove, he said “only the paranoid survive.” Politician N also stressed the absolute need not to “underestimate the voter (*voter ko kam mat samjho*) . . . Sometimes by thinking like that the result can go the opposite way (*ulta ho sakta hai*.)” This highlights one of our significant interview findings, namely, the sense of vulnerability that even seasoned incumbent politicians felt.

In addition to the uncertainty in the campaign context, our interviews revealed another source of electoral vulnerability for successful incumbents, namely *party control* (explanation 3), noted but undertheorized in the literature on safe seats. In the Indian political system, as in many other contexts, representatives are weak in relation to their political parties and leaders as a result of multiple factors, including “an adhoc, personalistic, leader-centric organizational structure,” in which the career of individuals is often decided by “arbitrary decision-making, nepotistic practices or the whims of a few leaders at the top.”<sup>71</sup> In comparative terms, decision-making within Indian political parties, and candidate selection, are opaque, highly centralized and top-down, with power concentrated in the hands of a few party leaders at the top.<sup>72</sup> This is the case both for cadre-based parties such as the BJP and Left parties, as well as mass parties such as the Congress, with differences among parties mostly in the degree and kind of centralization. Furthermore, as Farooqui and Sridharan note, internal party processes tend to weed out incumbents if their current victory prospects look poor, or to accommodate new faces representing “sections of the electorate the parties want to woo.” Parties are able to “drop the majority of candidates of the past election”<sup>73</sup>; furthermore, given the rents associated with elected offices, party tickets to contest elections are in high demand, with candidates competing with each other, often offering money to the party for a ticket. Long, unruly queues of ticket-seekers are a familiar sight outside party offices before lists of party candidates are declared for national, state, and local elections.

The extent of control exercised by parties and leaders over the selection and career of representatives suggests a high level of *political vulnerability* of MPs, reflected in our interview narratives and field-work observations. In their recorded interviews, all BJP politicians attributed their victory margins in 2014 to the popularity of Modi and their party among voters, attributing little

of their victory to their own candidacy. It has been suggested that incumbents in ideological parties such as the BJP and Left parties may be *more* vulnerable than those in catch-all parties such as the INC, as party leadership has “more leeway” to drop them without “losing the support of their voters since such support is not for particular candidates representing particular interest groups.”<sup>74</sup> Our findings suggest some support for this hypothesis, with BJP MPs noticeably displaying more insecurity vis-à-vis their party relative to others. However, successful MPs from catch-all regional parties also performed deference to their party leadership (frequently referred to as the “supremo”), attributing their large margins of victory to their leader’s popularity with voters, as much as their party’s program and performance. Thus, incumbent vulnerability to a large extent transcended the distinction between ideological and catch-all parties. As Kanchan Chandra has noted, non-elite and regional parties, including the BSP, the Trinamool Congress, and AAP also have authoritarian features, including personality cults around leaders.<sup>75</sup> Our findings thus suggest that explanations for the hierarchical styles of political representation seen among Indian politicians- the obeisance to leaders, the culture of deference – are likely *institutional*, related to the political vulnerability of representatives vis-à-vis their leadership, a result of the structure of decision-making in political parties and the extent of their control over the careers of individual MPs.

In sum, as an explanation for winning big, our findings suggest the sense of political vulnerability of MPs is likely a significant factor, stemming both from uncertainty in the electoral environment, as well as party control. As such, winning big could be the *unintended* result of efforts to secure a victory in an electoral context characterized by voter volatility, alliances and competition and changing campaign environment (explanation 7). Our findings also support explanation 3, with MPs across different types of parties revealing insecurity in relation to their political parties, especially its leadership. Thus, winning big could be the result of *deliberate* efforts on the part of individual MPs to demonstrate their “winnability,” to increase turnout (explanation 7) and/or to deliver a large mandate for their party and its leadership (explanation 1), in a context characterized by intense competition for party nomination and highly centralized parties with leadership control. In other words, given their weak position, individual politicians may be motivated in part by a pervasive sense of political *insecurity* to run up the score, in order to secure the favor of their party leadership and thereby their political career. As Richard Fenno observed several decades ago, the effects of electoral insecurity may have been underestimated, “It may just be that our conventional indicators of electoral marginality are inadequate [and that] . . . subjective assessments of electoral safety are more valid . . . Electoral statistics cannot capture the uncertainty members feel about their re-nomination and re-election.”<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusions

This article is a first-cut at investigating the reasons for “winning big,” an oft-observed phenomenon where politicians win elections with large margins of victory in a SMP/FPTP electoral system, which does not offer institutional incentives to do so. The public choice and institutionalist literature suggest that winning an election with a large margin of victory is not an optimal allocation of scarce campaign resources, therefore, a theoretically motivated explanation must derive from other considerations.

To explore the phenomenon of “winning big,” our study focused on incumbent Indian MPs who won with large margins of victory in national elections between 2004 and 2014. We conducted extensive elite interviews which provided us with a number of counterintuitive insights. Several plausible reasons for winning big are *not* supported by our findings. These include, first, that MPs lack information regarding their electoral strength on account of the *weakness* of political parties. Our findings caution against sweeping assessments of party strength and weakness, suggesting these need to be evaluated along multiple dimensions. Most of our highly successful MPs across national and regional parties said that they had sufficient good quality information regarding their electoral strength, provided for most part by their party workers. Several so-called safe seats also saw higher than average turnouts, which respondents from the BJP and successful regional parties attributed in significant part to the efforts of their party workers. To be sure, Indian political parties lack features of institutionalization such as “clear rules for decision-making and succession”<sup>77</sup>; furthermore, their organizational resources vary substantially across region, as well as across party, with some parties (notably the BJP), expectedly providing more organizational support to their candidates than others. Nevertheless, our study also suggests that incumbents who win with large margins of victory are likely to be supported by an effective network of party workers, a finding that speaks to an extent to the broader relevance of old-fashioned party organization and local machine politics across the world.

Some studies have suggested that the BJP’s electoral victory in 2014 was the result of Modi’s success in drawing vote mobilizers to the party who are *not* partisans.<sup>78</sup> However, our respondents across a range of regional parties emphasized the role of party workers and team-members in getting their vote out. Further research is needed on the role of mobilizers for turnout and victory margins, which may be associated with party leadership and strategy in some cases, but can also exist separately from these, as some of our interviews with successful candidates from non-BJP parties suggest.

A second reason that is *not* supported by our study is more *money* is necessarily spent by parties and individuals who win big. Successful MPs across parties and regions stated that money was *not* the most important

factor in their large margins of victory. The average reported expenditure of our sample of big winners was similar to the overall average expenditure estimated across 543 MPs. This is not to suggest that the cost of election campaigns is irrelevant to outcomes. With most MPs spending from their personal savings, some spoke of the considerable strain that the high cost that election campaigns posed to the continued candidacy of representatives of modest means. Campaign finance is an important area on which more good data is needed, for which candidate interviews are not generally a good source. However, our evidence challenges simplistic views regarding the significance of money in election campaigns. Our successful MPs saw no correlation between the money spent on the campaign and their margins of victory, and all respondents sought to broaden our understanding of election spending *beyond* money, to include non-monetary resources provided by parties, as well as their own labor for constituents and party workers.

What then are the factors which help explain the large margins of victory of incumbent MPs? This takes us to a third striking insight from our interviews, namely, an underlying sense of *vulnerability* reflected in narratives of highly successful incumbents. Most of our incumbent MPs did not feel secure in their seats and claimed that there is no such thing as a “safe seat.”

In the accounts offered, their sense of vulnerability derived in part from a complex and volatile *electoral* environment: the size and diversity of parliamentary constituencies; shifting party alliances and the presence of independent candidates; changing popularity levels of candidates over the course of a campaign; anti-incumbency sentiment among voters. In contrast to the popular image of out-of-touch politicians, most of our respondents emphasized their approachability and accessibility to their constituents, with some detailing the extraordinary lengths to which they went in order to maintain and develop links with their constituents, and the strenuous physical labor involved, given the size of their constituencies.

Interviews and ethnographic observations also suggested another source of incumbent vulnerability: *party control*. With highly centralized parties, leader control over candidate selection, and opaque, highly competitive nomination and career progression processes, Indian MPs are in a weak position in relation to their parties and its leadership. With re-nomination and career progression dependent on the whims of party leaders, it is in incumbents' interest to want to be seen to be doing their utmost for their party and its leadership. And in a context in which some parties, notably the BJP, pursue a strategy of winning big as a demonstration effect of party strength in order to deter rivals, it makes sense for incumbents to seek to run up the score, to demonstrate their loyalty and winnability to the party leadership. One result of this could be *high turnouts in safe seats* observed in several contests, substantially on account of the efforts of incumbents and/or party workers to demonstrate support for the party and its leadership in the electorate. How the

authoritarian structure of political parties incentivizes behavior on the part of MPs to seek to win big, is an important area for further research highlighted by our study.

To conclude, this article has established that winning with large margins and “safe” seats are not synonymous. It has identified a range of factors which can result in MPs winning with large margins of victory, and sought to distinguish those that are most significant for further research from those that are less relevant. Political parties in India as elsewhere do *not* spend more money or leader time on electoral contests that they are likely to win comfortably relative to marginal seats. However, winning big may be the result of a *party* strategy to establish a reputation for invincibility; as such, parties may spend more in terms of MPs and party worker’s time than necessary to simply win electoral contests. Furthermore, individual MPs may pursue a strategy of running up the score, to compensate for uncertainties in the electoral environment, and/or to demonstrate their work for the party. This looming sense of vulnerability experienced by politicians has been highly underestimated in the literature on safe seats.

## Notes

- 1 This is the last article written by Professor Lawrence Saez, a much-valued colleague and friend, who sadly passed away in 2018. I am very grateful to Adam Auerbach, Michael Buehler, Francesca Jensenius, Matt Nelson, Aseema Sinha, E. Sridharan, Arun Swamy, Steven Wilkinson and two anonymous reviewers at *India Review* for reading earlier drafts, and excellent comments. For research assistance at different stages of the project, I would like to thank Dr Sagnik Datta and Avijit Singh. Interviews were conducted mostly in Delhi during 2015–16, by Rochana Bajpai and Poornima Rajeshwar.
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