**[Can Modi score without electronic voting machines?](https://www.dawn.com/news/1817454/can-modi-score-without-electronic-voting-machines)**

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published February 27, 2024

THE question would seem odd, given the chorus of drumbeats from the media, mostly Indian but also some foreign, proclaiming victory for the Indian prime minister in the coming April-May elections.

Do revisit the claims anyway, preferably with an open mind. Two lessons from India’s electoral history beg a fresh discussion about the prospects for a free and fair election ahead. And then see the potential for the ruling party to stick with its premature claim of a landslide.

The examples of Rajiv Gandhi and Atal Bihari Vajpayee losing the polls would help. Gandhi lost the election after winning the unprecedented 400-plus seats in the previous round. And Vajpayee lost his third term bid after the opinion polls failed to see through the hollowness of his heavily advertised ‘India Shining’ campaign. Could Prime Minister Narendra Modi win the landslide of 400-plus seats he has predicted for the BJP in a free and fair election? The key is free and fair elections.

It was the BJP, which, after losing the second time in a row to the Manmohan Singh-led alliance in 2009, went to town badmouthing the electronic voting machines, commonly known as EVMs. They lost the elections because the EVMs were rigged. So claimed BJP supporters. A party adviser also published a detailed book canvassing support against the voting machines and claiming that Lal Kishan Advani’s crushing defeat as the BJP’s prospective successor to prime minister Vajpayee wouldn’t be possible but for the disputed EVMs.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who succeeded Singh, would hear no criticism of the EVMs, having led the BJP to an unprecedented victory on its own strength in an election conducted through the electronic medium. Advani had hoped that the Mumbai terror carnage of November 2008 would lay Manmohan Singh low in his second bid. Surprising him, Singh won. The boot now is on the other foot. Mr Modi has assiduously refused to respond to opposition demands to go back to ballot paper for more transparent voting.

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Scores of good and not-so-good arguments have been offered about the need for greater transparency in going forward even while not completely discarding the EVMs. There is a supreme court-backed option, for example, of verifiable slips that could be generated by the electronic machines at the time of voting. The voters would receive them as proof of their choice and put the paper back into an assigned box in their polling booth. This way any discrepancy can be ascertained between the EVM count and the receipts from the box.

The election commission, whose head is now effectively handpicked by the prime minister after the BJP government vetoed a supreme court ruling on a fairer composition, insists on accepting the receipt method only on a sample of booths, not all of them. Which leaves room for doubts to linger on ahead of the polls, potentially India’s most crucial ever. The risk from an opaque EVM is thus seen as something to worry about. All eyes are on the apex court although it hasn’t looked too keen to step in to follow up on its own orders.

An equally potent threat to a fair election in 2024, as feared by the opposition, emanates from the people who conduct the elections. The incident in the mayoral election in Chandigarh is being seen as a warning. The presiding officer at the mayoral poll reportedly took over the sole charge of counting and cancelling the votes to help the BJP, something akin to the charges made by the former commissioner of Rawalpindi about alleged brazen rigging against Imran Khan’s candidates.

The difference in India is that the supreme court overturned the Chandigarh officer’s headcount and delivered the election to the joint candidate of Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party. This alliance is shaping into a concrete threat to Mr Modi’s heavily advertised declaration of confidence that he would secure 400-plus seats in the 543-seat Lok Sabha. However, the twin threats from the EVMs and the glimpse of rigging seen in Chandigarh have alerted the opposition to the challenges it could face.

Shorn of the two areas of concern, where are the 400 seats for the BJP-led coalition going to come from, the break-up being 370 for BJP and 30 for allies?

One had been giving reasons for questioning the media’s claim, but now there are stronger voices making the point. “I cannot see any legitimate justification for any such confidence,” wrote former bureaucrat and well-regarded political analyst Avay Shukla in *The Wire*. “At its present tally of 303, the BJP has plateaued out in the West and its Hindi heartland stronghold. It cannot improve its tally here. Its prospects are no better in the east and in the south than they were in 2019. In fact, they have deteriorated in Karnataka, Telangana, and in the northeast with Congress’s victory in the first two polls and the fires in Manipur.” If anything, says Shukla, the BJP is likely to lose a significant chunk of seats.

A data-crunching site run by Ajay Prakash, What Does This Data Say, quoted by Shukla, indicates that the BJP’s total tally is likely to come down by 40 seats, at the very least. Signs of worry among BJP’s supporters are palpable, mostly coming from the widely airbrushed, but extremely successful march by Rahul Gandhi under the sobriquet of ‘Unite India and Deliver Justice to Everyone’.

Gandhi has been wading through Uttar Pradesh currently amid underreported outpourings of support from unemployed youth, women and the underclasses. He was strategically received by former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav, and pictures from the route march have rattled the Hindutva establishment.

The fly in the opposition’s ointment is the twin threat seen from EVMs and what Shukla calls “a national roll-out of the Chandigarh mayoral model”. It remains a fair reason to worry.

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