

Duality — understanding Indian voter behaviour

As the election results of the 18th Lok Sabha were announced on June 4, 2024, they sent ripples across the political landscape. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 240 seats, but fell well below the majority mark in the Lok Sabha. Though the general election lacked the “criticality” of a power shift, it would be a mistake to overlook the Indian voter’s nuanced behaviour and the diversity of factors they consider when making electoral choices.

This article examines such “diversity” through the lens of prudence and paradox inherent in electoral behaviour, drawing on data from the poll surveys conducted by the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS). The article uses pre- and post-election surveys conducted by Lokniti, predominantly from 2024 but also includes data from 2014. By examining voters’ responses to diverse themes captured in the survey, it aims to reflect both the discerning and contradictory nature of voter decision-making, representing two different sides of a vibrant democracy.

Duality in decisions?

Any discussion on voters’ choices must start by examining the independence and substance of those choices. As 56% of respondents make their independent voting choices, it is crucial to examine whether those choices are informed and substantial. According to Lokniti’s pre-poll survey of 2024, unemployment and price rise were the most important issues for 50.7% of voters to decide on whom to vote for, outnumbering the construction of the Ram Temple, which influenced only 7.5% of voters, and the ideological rhetoric of Hindutva, which was a voting issue for a mere 2.3%. This shift points to a preference for substantive socio-economic issues over ideological constructs.

The BJP’s hegemony is often said to rest on ideology. Over the past decade, the BJP has worked to solidify its narrative, creating an ideological arc that includes milestones from the dilution of Article 370 to the inauguration of the Ram Temple. Despite the significant emphasis on

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A Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey highlights prudence and paradox in voter decision making

unemployment by voters, this ideological arc has exerted considerable influence on voters, with 22.4% of respondents highlighting the construction of the Ram Temple as the most appreciated work done by the central government in the last five years. However, when examining how this appreciation translates into electoral support, the shrewdness of the Indian voters becomes apparent. While many acknowledge the significance of the Ram Temple, this did not necessarily translate into votes for the BJP. Over 21% of respondents credited the country’s overall development for granting the ruling party another term. In stark contrast, the dilution of Article 370 and the construction of the Ram Temple were cited by only 1.3% and 5.2% of voters, respectively, as reasons to support the BJP.

This dichotomy, where voters appreciate the construction of the temple but do not vote for the same, challenges the notion that Indian politics is predominantly organised around ideological cleavages. The prudence of voters has accentuated the diminishing appeal of purely ideological narratives, which have proved insufficient to override socio-economic priorities. This reflects a complex and discerning electorate that prefers tangible socio-economic progress over ideological symbolism.

The subject of leadership

While the ideological arc helped the BJP, it was not solely responsible for its success in forging a pan-Hindu vote from a fragmented electorate, culminating in the once-in-a-generation electoral victory of 2014. It was Narendra Modi’s charisma and unique popularity that played a pivotal role, with Mr. Modi’s personal popularity surpassing that of the BJP by about eight percentage points, according to the Lokniti post-poll survey of 2014. These developments indicate a desire among the electorate for a strong and charismatic leadership.

In the post-poll survey of 2024, when asked whether the country should have a strong leader who does not have to bother about elections, over 67% of voters advocated having such

leaders. However, 57.5% of voters emphasised the need for checks and balances, with around 70% affirming the right of citizens to interfere and hold leaders accountable. This juxtaposition highlights the prudence in valuing robust leadership but not a leader who cannot be questioned and held accountable.

The need for a strong leader and the impact of the Hindu voter’s ascendancy compel us to examine how minority communities are perceived by the electorate. Revealing a nuanced stance, around 49% of respondents agreed that in a democracy, the will of the majority should prevail. However, over 48% of the electorate supported the protection of minority interests, even if not liked by the majority. Also, over 57% of Hindus supported the idea that Muslim Dalits should be included in the Scheduled Castes list. The paradox here is that majoritarian inclinations coexist with a prudent recognition of minority protections in a democracy, which highlights that Hindu-majority cultural-religious expressions cannot always be reduced to anti-minority/Muslim sentiments.

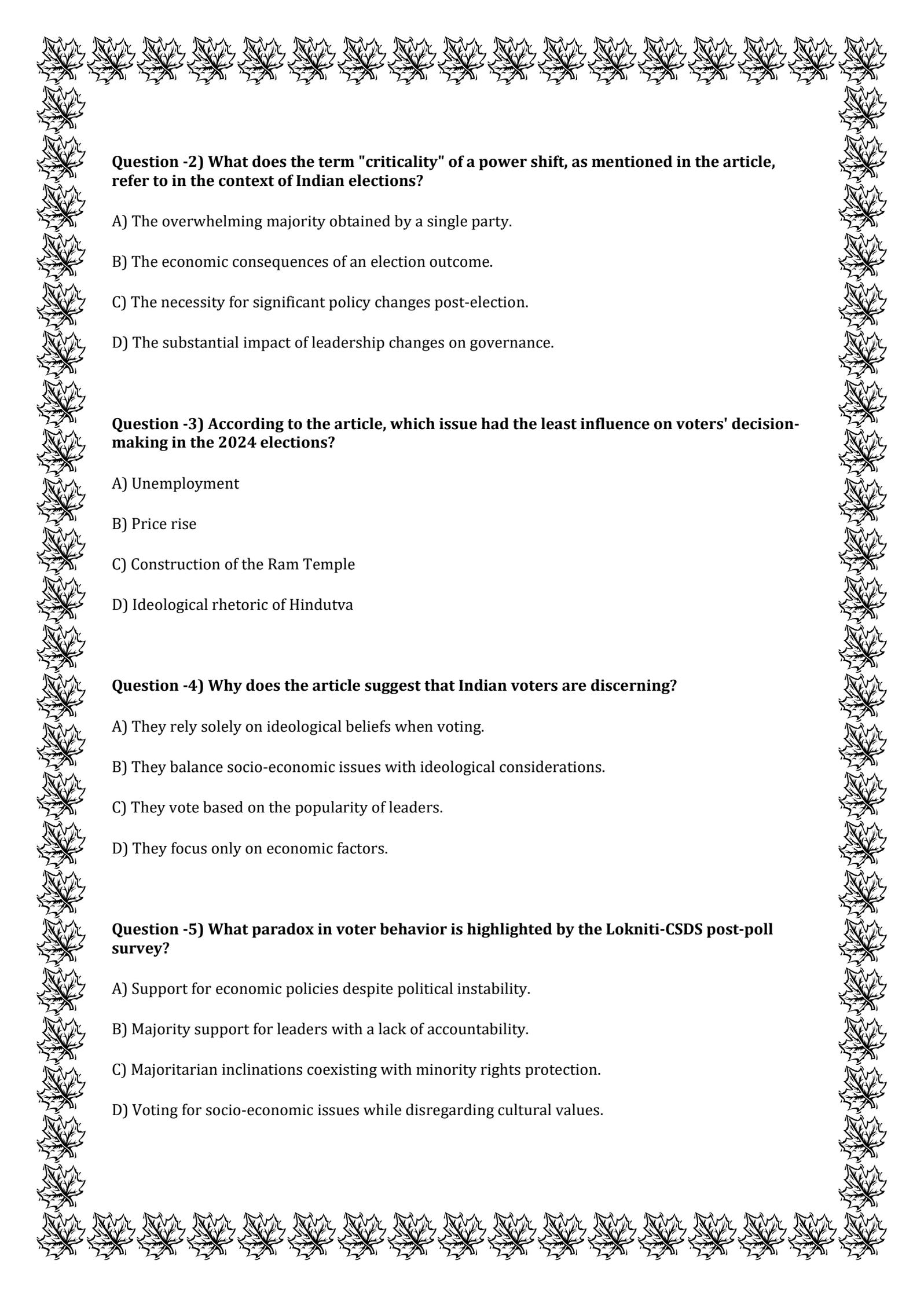
Institutions of change

The post-poll study showcases a blend of prudence and paradox in voter behaviour, highlighting democracy’s dynamic nature. This nuanced behaviour reflects the essence of democracy, which is “change”. According to the survey, 42% of voters consider the opportunity to change the government through free and fair elections as democracy’s most essential characteristic, while over 34% prioritise equal rights for everyone. This underscores voters’ commitment to democratic principles, balancing majoritarian inclinations with minority rights protection. Although these elections did not result in a ‘critical’ power shift, they reveal the electorate’s complex decision-making, navigating between stability and change, ideological preferences, and pragmatic concerns, reflecting a discerning and progressive democracy.

The views expressed are personal

Question -1) Which of the following best captures the main theme of the article?

- A) The impact of economic factors on Indian elections.
- B) The ideological influence on Indian voters’ decision-making.
- C) The dual nature of Indian voter behavior combining prudence and paradox.
- D) The decline of BJP’s popularity in recent elections.



Question -2) What does the term "criticality" of a power shift, as mentioned in the article, refer to in the context of Indian elections?

- A) The overwhelming majority obtained by a single party.
- B) The economic consequences of an election outcome.
- C) The necessity for significant policy changes post-election.
- D) The substantial impact of leadership changes on governance.

Question -3) According to the article, which issue had the least influence on voters' decision-making in the 2024 elections?

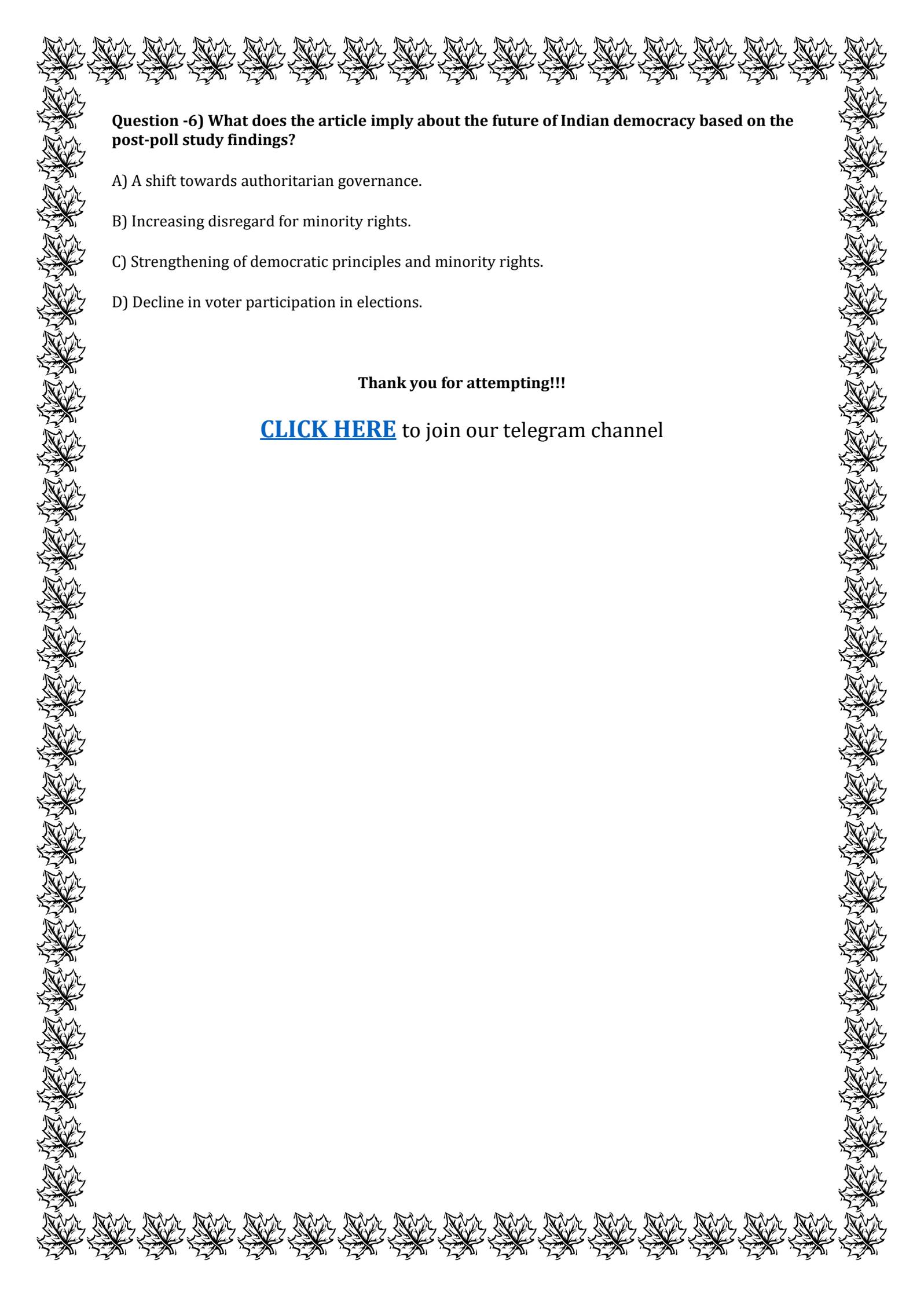
- A) Unemployment
- B) Price rise
- C) Construction of the Ram Temple
- D) Ideological rhetoric of Hindutva

Question -4) Why does the article suggest that Indian voters are discerning?

- A) They rely solely on ideological beliefs when voting.
- B) They balance socio-economic issues with ideological considerations.
- C) They vote based on the popularity of leaders.
- D) They focus only on economic factors.

Question -5) What paradox in voter behavior is highlighted by the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey?

- A) Support for economic policies despite political instability.
- B) Majority support for leaders with a lack of accountability.
- C) Majoritarian inclinations coexisting with minority rights protection.
- D) Voting for socio-economic issues while disregarding cultural values.



Question -6) What does the article imply about the future of Indian democracy based on the post-poll study findings?

- A) A shift towards authoritarian governance.
- B) Increasing disregard for minority rights.
- C) Strengthening of democratic principles and minority rights.
- D) Decline in voter participation in elections.

Thank you for attempting!!!

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