

TOPIC GUIDE: YOUTH LEADERSHIP

**"YOUNG POLITICIANS OFFER THE BEST
HOPE FOR INDIA'S POLITICAL FUTURE"****PUBLISHED: 01 DEC 2009****AUTHOR: SHUBHODEEP SHOME**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Note that this Topic Guide was produced for Debating Matters India, and looks at the issues from a specifically Indian perspective.

The **2009 general elections to 15th Lok Sabha** [🔗](#) marked a leadership contest between the octogenarian L.K. Advani and the septuagenarian Dr. Manmohan Singh. Yet, under the surface there was some confusion about both the candidates. Some in the Congress wanted Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Gandhi dynasty to be projected as the Prime Ministerial candidate. In the BJP, there were quiet murmurs about the younger Narendra Modi, the popular Chief Minister of Gujarat replacing Advani. This confusion reflects the conflict between the traditional relevance of elder leadership in India and a desire to see better representation for India's burgeoning youth population. In particular, the simmering discontent with the failure to protect Mumbai in November 2008 from Pakistan based attackers had brought forward vociferous demands for political change. Many commentators say that it is only the youth that can raise Indian politics from the mess it is mired in. How true is this statement? For example, the young **Raj Thackeray** [🔗](#) seems to have no moral qualms about succeeding his Uncle Bal in violent linguistic politics. Varun Gandhi is another in his late twenties, who shocked the nation by delivering **hate speeches in Pilibhit** [🔗](#) in a blatant attempt to polarise voters. Student politics today has recently been associated with violence and mayhem. At the same time, it is hard to deny the immediacy and effectiveness of young leadership, epitomised particularly in Western leaders like Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and now, Barack Obama. Is youth the panacea for all of India's political ills? Do young leaders threaten democracy in their eagerness to capture power? Or are there deeper problems to blame for the mess Indian democracy is in?

For further reading use the menu bar on the right hand side.

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

Cool heads are better than young hearts?

India faces a plethora of threats at any given time: internal divisions, insurgencies and territorial disputes with its nuclear neighbours Pakistan and China. In particular, India's secularism and political recognition for diversity is always under considerable pressure. As one author notes: 'In mature democracies there are sharp constraints within which any political force is permitted to propagate **politics of hate** but the RSS has understood that in India the constraints are much less operative, although they do exist'. It is this weakness that makes the political system unstable, with the next riot or mass protest just around the corner. In politics, crucial policy and executive decisions boil down to the stature of a leader, of which age is a vital part in Asian culture. In recent times, A.B. Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh's mature and measured leadership are regarded as having taken the country in the right direction. Both have made serious departures in foreign policy by befriending the USA, initiated economic reforms and remained unprovoked by Pakistan. Driving older people away from politics by **practising ageism**, as British Conservative MP Andrew Tyrie points out, 'will encourage the rise of the professional politician - the bright young thing who has done nothing else in life and who has no understanding or experience on which to draw.' On the other hand, it is embarrassing that India has not been able to capitalise its vast resources comprehensively to reduce subsistence issues like hunger and infant mortality. This leads to the conclusion that India needs a change in mindset to approach its problems. Young Indians in **corporate India** have already shown tremendous achievement. Perhaps it is this innovation that is required to reinvent Indian politics into a more dynamic process?

Are India's aged leaders wedded to the past?

India's political culture seems mired in old ways of thinking. In particular, there seems to be an immature belief in the political class that it is politically expedient to create a 'vote bank' on the basis of a controversy rather than unite people on constructive issues. On the other hand, cadre-based parties like the BJP or the CPI(M)'s aged leaders are regularly caught completely out of touch with modern thinking on social or economic issues respectively. This has the consequence of developing an unprofessional attitude towards power that sustains a culture of corruption, nepotism and divisiveness. Therefore, young politicians who share a more modern world-view arguably offer the best hope to end such a debilitating trend. After all it was an enlightened generation that pressed for and achieved India's independence and established its democracy. However, the horrifying state of affairs in student politics that resulted in the **James Lyngdoh Committee Report** on student elections shows us that the young can seem as committed to destructive politics as the old.

A vote for youth is a vote for dynastic politics?

In India successful young politicians, like Milind Deora, Agatha Sangma or India's youngest MP Ahmad Hamdullah Saeed, are inevitably part of a dynasty. This means that by and large they have not had to establish themselves through hard fought competition but been handed the reins by default. Dynastic politics reflects a cheap celebritisation (considerable media resources are expended on documenting Rahul Gandhi's every move – the nationality of his girlfriend or his exercise habits) where the person becomes more important than policies and action. An older leader who has competed for leadership is therefore preferable to a young one who is not just unmeritorious but also inexperienced. However, **David Axelrod**, Barack Obama's political strategist says: 'Campaigns themselves are a gauntlet in which you get tested. People get to see how you handle pressure and how you react to complicated questions. It's an imperfect and sometimes maddening system, but at the end of the day it works, because you have to be tough and smart and skilled to survive that process.' Winning an election in India is no mean feat and a lot of hard work. As in Bollywood or business, there are plenty of 'star kids' who have failed completely to make use of the opportunities given to them. The **entitled middle**

classes do not vote and do not seem to be interested in participating in the heat and dust of politics. It may therefore be likely, as Javed Gaya points out, that ‘paradoxically, the modernisers are not going to be the Meera Sanyals, rootless wonders, in their chiffon saris but the scions of dynasties such as Rahul, Sachin Pilot, Jyotiraditya Scindia (or) Omar Abdullah.’

Is the ‘cult of youth’ a product of political crisis?

The discussion about the need for younger, fresher politicians is not confined to India. Western democracies have also sought solutions to the political crises they face by looking to political leaders who are not tied to the past. The recent election of US president Barack Obama provoked great excitement on the grounds that he represented something very different – he is relatively young, with a young family; he is not tied to the Clinton, Bush or Kennedy dynasties; and as the first black US president, he symbolised a certain harmonisation of racial divisions. The extent to which Obama was able to **mobilise the youth vote** led to a **high electoral turnout**, which was greeted positively as a sign that a fresh new leader could challenge political apathy and reawaken civic engagement amongst a disengaged younger population. But for some, Obama’s youthful appeal was symptomatic of a bigger problem: a ‘cult of youth’ that **denigrates experience and wisdom**, representing society’s loss of faith in itself and its traditions. In the UK, the election of the relatively young prime minister Tony Blair in 1997 was understood to represent a political sea-change: moving beyond the traditional party politics of left and right, towards the more pragmatic and appropriate **politics of the ‘third way’**. But while New Labour clearly marked a break from the past, some commentators argued that this would not lead to new political solutions but to **greater instability and insecurity**, as historic conventions and loyalties were ripped up without a clear sense of solid political principles that could replace them. Does youth necessarily bring with it a new form of politics, or does it merely lead to a shallower, unconvincing regurgitation of the ways of the past? Even if young politicians can provide a break with historic conventions, to what extent can they be expected to achieve new solutions to complex political problems? Does the ‘cult of youth’ mean genuinely engaging young people in politics, or flattering them for cynical ends?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

India’s tragedy: it lacks a credible leadership

Namita Bhandare **LiveMint** 9 December 2008

Politics: Crisis of leadership, not capacity

Prem Trivedi **Rediff** 23 May 2008

The big question about Barack Obama

Judy Keen **USA Today** 17 January 2007

The dynasty in myth and history

Ramachandra Guha **India-Seminar.com** 1 January 2006

The young turks of Indian politics

Siddharth Srivastava **AsiaTimes Online** 2 April 2004

A crisis of leadership

Gita Piramal **Business Today** 16 November 1998

FOR

The dynastic sheen in politics

Javed Gaya **DNA India** 27 May 2009

Young politicians raring to go

Nivedita Ganguly **The Hindu** 13 April 2009

Barack Obama and the Myth of inexperience

John Wilson **OpenEd News** 5 October 2008

We need young politicians

Rishabh Bhandari **The Times of India** 6 November 2007

Sachin Pilot, Congress Candidate from Dausa Arti Dhar

The Hindu 25 March 2004

The objectification of the youth

Shivam Vij **IndiaTogether** May 2003

AGAINST

Obama and the Cult of Youth

Matt Patterson **American Thinker** 24 November 2009

Who's afraid of student politics?

Anirban Das Mahapatra **The Telegraph (India)** 17 September 2009

Political feudalism

The Hindu 5 September 2009

The age of inexperience

Andrew Tyrie **The Guardian** 1 September 2009

Facing the mirror

Sugata Srinivasaraju **Outlook** 20 May 2009

Wanted: Cool heads

Vinod Mehta **Outlook** 24 December 2001

KEY TERMS

Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.

BACKGROUNDERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

Is there a right space in Indian politics?

Swapan Dasgupta **The Times of India** 5 December 2009

Cool it on China

Nayan Chanda **The Times of India** 31 October 2009

Want Press Coverage? Give me some money

Paul Beckett **The Wall Street Journal** 6 May 2009

Comments: Does youth trump experience in Lok Sabha stakes?

Reuters 29 March 2009

India Votes: Aged and Outdated leaders

M. Shamshur Rabb Khan **Indian Muslims** 19 February 2009

Grow up and move on

Dr. Devdutt Pattanaik **Economic Times** 13 June 2008

Air Marshal Jaffar Zaheer: Principled Indian Air Force officer

Kuldip Singh **Independent** 9 April 2008

Debate: Barack Obama is too inexperienced to be president [↗](#)

Debate.org 19 December 2007

James Lyngdoh Committee Report to frame guidelines on Student Union Elections [↗](#)

23 May 2006

Governance and politics [↗](#)

Vidya Subrahmaniam **India-Seminar** January 2006

The politics of hate [↗](#)

Aijaz Ahmad **Frontline** 12 February 1999

Indian General Election 2009 [↗](#)

ORGANISATIONS

Links to organisations, campaign groups and official bodies who are referenced within the Topic Guide or which will be of use in providing additional research information.

Akhil Bharitya Vidyarth Parishad [↗](#)

Arun Bhatia [↗](#)

Bahujan Samajwadi Party [↗](#)

Bharatiya Janata Party [↗](#)

Communist Party of India (Marxist) [↗](#)

India Youth Congress [↗](#)

Indian National Congress [↗](#)

Indian Youth Climate Network [↗](#)

Meera Sanyal [↗](#)

Muslim Student's Organization of India [↗](#)

National Congress Party [↗](#)

Professionals Party of India [↗](#)

Samajwadi Party [↗](#)

Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth [↗](#)

Student's Federation of India [↗](#)

The Youth Parliament Foundation [↗](#)

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

Is Jagan behind MLA resignation drama? [↗](#)

DNAIndia 11 December 2009

PM snuffs out House crisis with apology [↗](#)

The Telegraph (India) 9 December 2009

Zakaria: India's restrained response is working...for now [↗](#)

Fareed Zakaria **CNN.com** 5 December 2009

Swiss ban on minarets in suprise vote [↗](#)

Alexander G. Higgins **Yahoo News** 29 November 2009

Rahul's quiet talent hunt to strengthen Youth Congress [↗](#)

DNAIndia 7 November 2009

RSS seeks to distance itself from BJP's crisis [↗](#)

Reuters 28 August 2009

Cabinet offer for Nandan Nilekari [↗](#)

P Vaidyanathan Iyer **The Financial Express** 22 June 2009

Congress sweeps Left, Right and Centre [↗](#)

The Times of India 17 May 2009

Professionals may have an answer [↗](#)

Arunima Ghosh **The Statesman** 2 April 2009

Badey daraawne naam hotey hain inke... Karimullah, Mazharullah... Varun Gandhi kaat daalega...' [↗](#)

Indian Express 18 March 2009

Varun Gandhi thanks Bal Thackeray for support [↗](#)

IBNLive 5 March 2009

In Left Country, ex-JP Morgan Vice President in Rahul's sipahi [↗](#)

Ravik Bhattacharya **ExpressIndia** 1 February 2009

I feel the pain and anger of Mumbai: PM [↗](#)

Rediff.com 17 January 2009

India's response to Mumbai attack was matured: Amartya Sen [↗](#)

Thaindian News 17 December 2008

Rahul in party mode soon after Mumbai crisis [↗](#)

India Today.com 1 December 2008

Young leaders should transform India: Abdul Kalam [↗](#)

Indiainfo.com 22 September 2004

My girlfriend is Spanish: Rahul Gandhi [↗](#)

Vrinda Gopinath **ExpressIndia.com** 27 April 2004

Manmohan gets Presidential nod for second term as PM [↗](#)

IndianExpress.com

AUDIO/VISUAL

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