

## **Change and continuity in Indian politics and party system: Revisiting the results of 2014 Indian general election**

**Abstract:** The 2014 Indian general election marked a single party – the Bharatiya Janata Party, winning a majority of seats in Lok Sabha, the first time since the 1984 election. The Congress, the other main national party, suffered its worst ever defeat. This election was termed by some as a 'critical election' signalling the advent of a new phase of a 'BJP dominated' party system in India. In this paper, I revisit the results of this election, and of the subsequent state assembly elections to analyse if these signal a substantial change in the political landscape and the party system in India. I argue that although Congress' decline has continued, and the BJP has won many recent state assembly elections, it is premature to conclude that the Indian party system has shifted to a 'BJP dominated' one. Further, given India's first-past-the-post electoral system, and a diffuse political environment where state and regional parties continue to be strong in many parts of the country, achieving a legislative majority remains a difficult proposition for a single party.

## INTRODUCTION

India is a federal democracy with a parliamentary system of government, broadly based on UK's Westminster model, with two houses of the national parliament: a directly elected lower house, *Lok Sabha* and an indirectly elected upper house, *Rajya Sabha*. The *Lok Sabha* is the main legislative body comprising 543 members elected from single-member districts following the first-past-the-post (FPTP) or the single member plurality electoral system (SMPS).<sup>1,2</sup>

The Indian party system has gone through a number of phases. The first phase saw the dominance of the Congress party from the first general election<sup>3</sup> in 1951 until about 1967.<sup>4</sup> Kothari (1967) describes the Indian party system during this phase as a Congress dominated 'system', but one which was nevertheless competitive. It consisted of a 'party of consensus' and the 'parties of pressure'. While the factions within the party of consensus (the Congress) exerted the pressure from within, the parties of pressure included the opposition parties, dissident groups from the Congress and other interest groups. The period between 1967 and 1993 has been termed as 'Congress-opposition system' (Yadav, 1996), when Congress' domination came under attack from other parties. Congress fought the 1977 election after a state of emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and was defeated by the *Janata Party*, an amalgamation of various anti-congress parties.<sup>5</sup> However, *Janata Party* split subsequently, and the Congress returned to power in 1980, to be defeated again in 1989 by the National Front, a coalition of opposition parties, of which the *Janata Dal* was the main constituent.

In general, since the 1990s, India has witnessed a move towards a fragmented multiparty system, which could no longer be defined with reference to the Congress. The 1990s also saw the rise of the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), and parties such as the *Samajwadi Party* (SP), the *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD), and the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) that drew their main support from the lower and backward caste groups. Yadav (1996) describes the period since 1989 as the 'Third Electoral System', in respect of a new pattern of electoral outcomes as well as its

determinants. He notes that, 'The most obvious and easily identified characteristic of the third electoral system is the change in the choice set available to the voter' (Yadav, 1999: 2395). The fragmentation of the party system also led to an era of large, often unstable coalition governments during this period, where electoral alliances were largely driven by the desire to win power rather than being based on ideology. Further, the 'national constituency phenomenon' of the 1970s and 1980s, which saw large victories for a national party was replaced by a party system with a greater influence of the regional parties. Yadav (1999:2394) explains this phenomenon by noting that 'A typical electoral verdict in this period took the form of a nation-wide or sometimes state-wide wave for or against the Congress.'

The BJP, which emerged as the main challenger to the Congress in the 1990s was formed in 1980, and is seen as a Hindu nationalist party. It won just 2 seats in the 1984 election, but gradually increased its influence, forging alliances with regional parties to form a coalition government at the centre in 1998. Although this government did not last very long, BJP led the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to form a coalition government between 1999 and 2004. Congress' success in the 2004 election was also largely attributed to its alliance-making strategy, which led to it forming and leading a coalition of parties, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The Congress-led UPA repeated its success in the 2009 election defeating the NDA. Table 1 summarises the evolution of the Indian party system and the governments formed at the centre during 1951-2009.

**Table 1 Government formation and evolution of the Indian system**

Election	Election year	Government formed	Phase of party system evolution
1	1951	Congress	Congress domination
2	1957	Congress	
3	1962	Congress	
4	1967	Congress	
5	1971	Congress	Congress decline/opposition
6	1977	Janata Party	
7	1980	Congress	
8	1984	Congress	
9	1989	National Front coalition	Fragmentation of the party system
10	1991	Congress (minority government)	
11	1996	United Front coalition	
12	1998	BJP (coalition government)	
13	1999	BJP-led NDA coalition government	
14	2004	Congress-led UPA coalition government	
15	2009	Congress-led UPA coalition government	

Thus, at the time of the 2014 election, the two main national parties, the BJP and the Congress, contested to win a majority for their respective alliances, the NDA and the UPA. Although state and regional parties continued to be strong in specific parts of the country, the rise of a credible third force or party to challenge the Congress and BJP led alliances at the centre looked unlikely.

## THE CONTEST AND THE CAMPAIGN

The 2014 general election was conducted during April – May, using 930,000 polling stations and 1.7 million electronic voting machines (EVMs). It involved 464 parties, over 8000 candidates, an electorate of 834.1 million, and witnessed a turnout of 66.4%, the highest ever in an Indian general election. The Congress-led UPA coalition government, which was in power since 2004, faced issues of corruption, and lack of good governance especially in its second term after the 2009 election. Further, the economic growth had slowed, inflation was high, and there was a perception of policy paralysis within the government. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was blamed for his failure to prevent corruption scandals relating to the allocation of 2G spectrum and coal blocks, and further, Congress' practice of having two power centres – a party president and a prime minister – made the latter look ineffectual (Sridharan, 2014).

Many regional parties decided to fight the election on their own, anticipating a greater post-election role in the government formation. These included *Janata Dal (United)* (JDU) in Bihar, *All India Trinamool Congress* (AITC) in West Bengal, *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (ADMK) in Tamil Nadu, BSP and SP in Uttar Pradesh and *Biju Janata Dal* (BJD) in Orissa. As Tillin (2015) points out, in both 2009 and 2014, political parties focused increasingly on post-poll rather than pre-poll arrangements. A new challenger to the mainstream political parties was the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) - 'common man's party', which emerged from the anti-corruption civil society movement of 2012, and decided to contest the 2014 election in 432 of the 543 constituencies.<sup>6</sup>

The main leadership contest was between Congress's Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi of the BJP. Modi, the then chief minister of the state of Gujarat, was chosen as the prime ministerial candidate of the NDA in September 2013 but not without controversy. One of BJP's oldest allies JDU, decided to leave the NDA due to Modi's alleged role in the anti-Muslim riots of 2002 in Gujarat, and there were also concerns expressed by few senior BJP leaders. Although a Supreme Court inquiry cleared Modi of any charges, a section of the media and opposition parties continued to question his role in these riots. Rahul Gandhi belongs to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, which has given India three prime ministers, but had limited political experience compared to Modi who had been the chief minister of Gujarat for over a decade. Modi, as Jaffrelot (2015:159) states, was 'able to project a clean image, in contrast to the Nehru/Gandhi family...partly due to the fact that he presented himself as a bachelor, dedicated to the cause of the nation, when others were part of lineages resulting in corruption, because relatives had to get their due.'

In addition to traditional campaigning methods such as distributing pamphlets, touring constituencies, organising rallies and road shows, parties also used social media to communicate with the voters. Modi ran an energetic campaign attending over 5000 events and addressing nearly 500 public rallies. An innovative part of his campaign was the use of 3D holographic technology, which enabled him to address the voters and be 'present' at multiple locations at the same time. BJP's use of '*Chai Pe Charcha*' (discussion over tea) gained prominence after a senior Congress leader mockingly addressed Modi as a '*Chai-wallah*' (a tea boy). Congress created a social media platform called *Khidki* (window) to communicate with the voters. However, as Torri (2015: 67) notes, 'Rahul and his team fell back on an electoral strategy that was not proactive, but reactive – reactive to the storm of accusations that had scourged the party in the second half of the 2009-14 legislature.'

BJP's campaign centred around the issues of economic development, corruption and effective governance to capitalise on the frustration of the voters' about lack of jobs, lower growth and high inflation (Vaishnav, Kapur, and Sircar, 2014). Congress stressed inclusive growth, right to health and social security, as well as further

affirmative action for socially disadvantaged groups. Modi's campaign put less emphasis on BJP's coalition partners or the party's organisation, and instead highlighted his credentials as a leader. According to Jaffrelot (2015:157), this 'personalisation of the act of voting enhanced an already existing tendency to presidentialise a parliamentary system where MPs in recent years began to matter less and less.'

Modi progressed towards being a national face of the BJP because of his successive wins in Gujarat state elections in 2002, 2007 and 2012, and a long stint as the state's chief minister during 2001-2014.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on Modi's electoral successes in Gujarat, Jaffrelot (2013: 90) states that 'Modi simply keeps updating his brand of high tech populism based on his claim to embody Gujarat while protecting the state from the Centre, and he still relies on a discourse that combines Hindu nationalism (slightly de-emphasized) and 'development' (considerably over-emphasized).' During the 2014 election campaign, Modi emphasised the 'Gujarat Model' of economic development; it was unprecedented in a general election, that a prime ministerial candidate appealed to voters based on his past achievements as a chief minister.

While BJP had previously used religious appeals, highlighting the issue of constructing a Hindu *Ram Mandir* (temple) in *Ayodhya* as a key electoral issue, this was relatively peripheral to BJP's strategy in 2014.<sup>8</sup> However, Chacko and Mayer (2015:522) note that 'Despite its careful avoidance of Hindu nationalism at the national level however, divisive electioneering appeal appeared through the campaign at the local level in key, polarised constituencies.' Modi was supported in his campaign by the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) – a right wing Hindu nationalist organisation, especially since the RSS leaders recognised Modi to be a true Hindu nationalist (Jaffrelot, 2015:162). The campaign against Modi attempted to paint him as a divisive Hindu nationalist and someone who favoured big business. His 'Gujarat Model' of development was criticised as being ephemeral and overstated, and some parties also expressed concerns about the negative influence that RSS could have over Modi.

Although the BJP and Modi did not explicitly use caste and class as part of their electoral strategy, the fact that Modi belonged to a backward caste was highlighted in states such as Bihar, where caste has historically been an important determinant of voting behaviour. Overall, caste, community and identity continued to be important in the 2014 election, although the BJP and AAP, in particular, attempted to focus their campaigns on the issues of development and effective governance. The 2014 general election was seen as one of the more significant ones in the recent years, where a clear and decisive result would create political stability, while a fractured mandate would usher in another era of opportunistic politics in India (Diwakar, 2015).

## EXPLAINING THE VERDICT

### *Election results*

Table 2 provides a summary of seats and votes won by the BJP and Congress and their respective alliances – the NDA and the UPA in the 2014 election.<sup>9</sup> The NDA won 336 (62%) seats, a gain of 195 seats compared to its 2009 result. The BJP achieved a majority on its own, winning 282 (52%) seats, a gain of 166 seats on the basis of 31% vote share, 12% higher than in 2009. BJP's victory was mirrored by Congress' defeat, which suffered a loss of 162 seats and a reduction of 10% in its vote share compared to 2009.

**Table 2** Summary of 2014 general election results

Party/Alliance	Seats			Seat Share			Vote Share		
	2014	2009	Change	2014	2009	Change	2014	2009	Change
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	282	116	+166	52%	21%	+31%	31%	19%	+12%
Allies	54	25	+29	10%	5%	+5%	8%	6%	+2%
<b>National Democratic Alliance (NDA)</b>	<b>336</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>+195</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>+36%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>+14%</b>
Congress	44	206	-162	8%	38%	-30%	19%	29%	-10%
Allies	15	28	-13	3%	5%	-2%	4%	8%	-4%
<b>United Progressive Alliance (UPA)</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>-175</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>-32%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>-14%</b>
<b>Other Parties/NOTA*</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>-20</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>-4%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>-0%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>543</b>		<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>		<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\* **Note:** In 2014 election, a new option for voters - NOTA ('None of the Above') was introduced, which accounted for 1.1% of votes. NOTA votes are not taken into account for calculating valid votes.

**Source:** Election Commission of India data and author's calculations.

In continuation of the trends seen since the 1990s, 'Other Parties'<sup>10</sup>, whose appeal is largely limited to a region or a state, continued to perform well, winning 217 (40%) seats and about 50% of votes in 2014 (see Table 3).

**Table 3**                      **Seat and vote shares in general elections 1989 - 2014**

Year	Largest party			Runner up party			Other Parties		
	Number of seats	Seat share %	Vote share %	Number of seats	Seat share %	Vote share %	Number of seats	Seat share %	Vote share %
1989	197	37%	40%	143	27%	18%	189	36%	42%
1991	232	45%	36%	120	23%	20%	169	32%	44%
1996	161	30%	20%	140	26%	29%	242	45%	51%
1998	182	34%	26%	141	26%	26%	220	41%	48%
1999	182	34%	24%	114	21%	28%	247	45%	48%
2004	145	27%	27%	138	25%	22%	260	48%	51%
2009	206	38%	29%	116	21%	19%	221	41%	52%
2014	282	52%	31%	44	8%	19%	217	40%	50%
<b>Average</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>48%</b>

**Note:** Largest party and Runner up party are categorised based on the number of seats won.

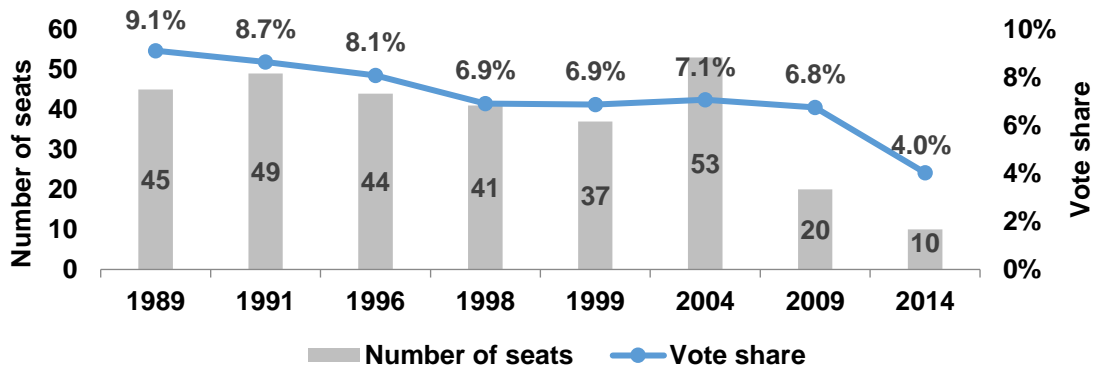
**Source:** Election Commission of India data and author's calculations.

BJP's win was the biggest by a single party since the 1984 election, and the party achieved best-ever vote and seat share since its formation in 1980. It was also the first time that a non-Congress party achieved a majority since the 1977 election. Due to BJP's majority, this election did not witness any post-poll negotiations, which was a usual feature of the coalition governments in India since 1989. The 2014 results were termed as 'dramatic', which signalled a transition towards a new phase of 'BJP dominant' party system (Sridharan, 2014).

The Congress slipped to its lowest ever vote and seat share in a general election, and could not even attain the status of the main opposition party in *Lok Sabha*.<sup>11</sup> The scale of Congress' defeat was further illustrated by the fact that two regional parties – ADMK and AITC, which won 37 and 34 seats respectively were not far behind Congress' tally of 44 seats. The two main Left parties - Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and Communist Party of India (CPI), continued to face electoral decline, and in total, won only 10 seats (4% vote share) compared to 20 (6.8% vote share) in 2009 and 53 (7.1% vote share) in 2004 – see Figure 1.



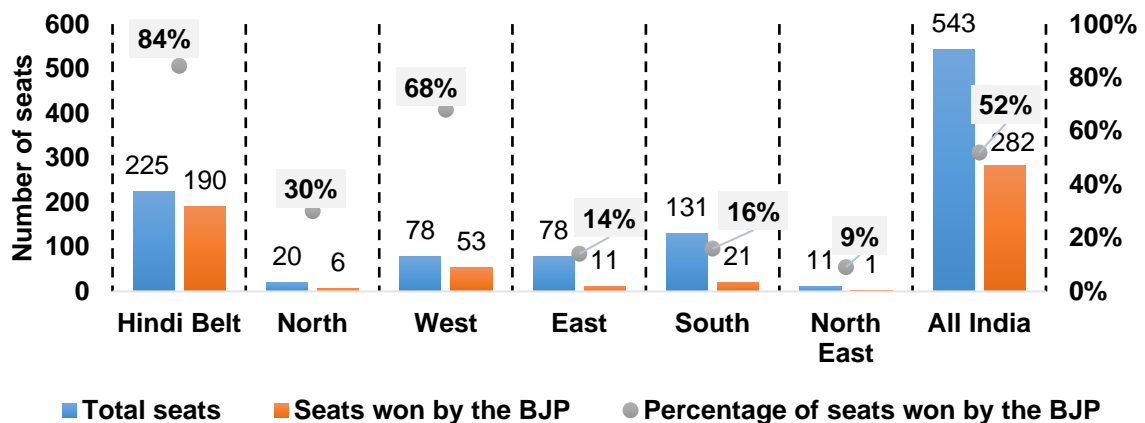
**Figure 1 Performance of Left parties 1989 – 2014**



Source: Election commission of India statistics and author's calculations.

Figure 2 shows that the positive swing towards the BJP was concentrated in the Hindi belt and the West region, which helped it to achieve sweeping victories in many populous and electorally important states.<sup>12</sup> The BJP won a staggering 84% of the seats in the Hindi belt, and 68% of the seats in the West region. It also did well in the North region, winning 30% of the seats.

**Figure 2 BJP's performance by region**



Source: Election Commission of India data and author's calculations.

Table 4 provides further evidence that BJP's victory was concentrated in the Hindi belt and the Western region of the country. These two regions in total contributed 74.6% and 86.2% of the votes and seats respectively, the BJP won nationally.

**Table 4**      **BJP's share of seats and votes in 2014 general election**

Region	Total number of seats		BJP's vote share		BJP's seat share	
	Total	% of total	Total	% of Total	Total	% of Total
<b>Hindi Belt</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>17.7%</b>	<b>57.6%</b>	<b>35.0%</b>	<b>67.4%</b>
North	20	4%	0.5%	1.5%	1.1%	2.1%
<b>West</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>5.2%</b>	<b>17.0%</b>	<b>9.8%</b>	<b>18.8%</b>
East	78	14%	3.4%	11.0%	2.0%	3.9%
South	131	24%	3.8%	12.5%	3.9%	7.4%
North East	11	2%	0.1%	0.4%	0.2%	0.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>30.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>51.9%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Source:** Election Commission of India data and author's calculations.

Within the Hind belt, it was BJP's performance in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), which has the maximum number of seats in *Lok Sabha* that proved crucial in it achieving a majority.<sup>13</sup> It won 71 of 80 seats in UP (based on 43% vote share), compared to just 10 in 2009.<sup>14</sup>

BJP also made some inroads in states, where it had not been previously successful in winning a significant share of votes or seats. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, BJP achieved a vote share of 10% and 5.5% respectively. Although it could not win a seat in Kerala, it won one seat in Tamil Nadu, the first time since 1999. In West Bengal, the BJP achieved its highest ever vote share of 17% and won 2 of the 42 seats. BJP won its first-ever plurality of seats in Assam winning half the state's 14 seats and 37% of the votes.

However, regional parties continued to dominate in many states. In West Bengal, AITC under Mamata Banerjee's leadership won 34 of the 42 seats (based on a 40% vote share); in Orissa, BJD led by Naveen Patnaik won 20 of the 21 seats (based on a 45% vote share), while in Tamil Nadu, ADMK led by J Jayalalithaa won 37 of the 39 seats (based on a 45% vote share). However, as Tillin (2015) points out that an important development in this election was that regional parties such as the BSP and SP in UP, and RJD in Bihar, which had reshaped the landscape of northern Indian politics since 1989 by mobilising around lower caste identities, fared poorly.

## *Reasons for BJP's win and Congress' loss*

The announcement of Modi as the prime ministerial candidate early in BJP's campaign appears to have contributed to the party's success in this election. Chhibber and Ostermann (2014) refer to Modi's effective use of 'vote mobilisers', whose support for a party goes beyond voting, and involves organising funds, door-to-door campaigning, leaflet/poster distribution, etc. They find that 32% of the vote mobilisers would have voted for another party had Modi not been BJP's prime ministerial candidate. Similarly, Heath (2015) finds that BJP's ability to appeal to voters who had not been well mobilised previously was a significant factor in explaining the party's victory. However, while BJP's win had much to do with a Modi-driven campaign, its effect also needs to be contextualised with an ineffective Congress leadership that was ranged against it (Shastri and Syal, 2014).

Chacko and Mayer (2015) stress BJP's dramatic success to convert votes into seats in the context of FPTP electoral system as an important factor in its winning majority in *Lok Sabha*. Kumar and Sardesai (2014) reported that BJP and its allies had a greater likelihood of winning seats where the turnout increase was higher. According to Sridharan (2014), the strong correlation between higher turnout and BJP's victory shows that the party's efforts to mobilise voters won the party large gains in this election.

BJP also gained by getting support of diverse social groups. It is generally regarded as a party of upper-caste Hindus, with some support among the middle castes and limited or no support amongst the Dalits and Muslims respectively. The CSDS post-election survey showed that 54% of voters from upper-castes, 34% from other backward castes (OBCs), 24% of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), 38% of the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 8% of Muslims voted for the BJP (Sridharan, 2014). Stressing this point, Suri and Palshikar (2014) state that BJP's success was made possible, among other factors, due to its electoral strategy of reinventing social engineering in what may be termed as its second transformation. Similarly, Chhibber and Verma (2014) argue that although BJP's support base still remains Hindu, upper

caste, and Hindi-speaking, BJP managed to break the social and geographical barriers necessary to secure an outright majority.

It is also important to view BJP's victory in the context of Congress' worst ever performance in a general election. According to Palshikar (2014c), Congress' defeat reflected not just the failure to retain its vote share, but also the lack of a clear social profile of its voters. Chacko and Mayers (2015) argue that Congress' loss was a result of a long-term decline in its organisation, and its inability to handle the rise of identity politics, making it a 'catch-none' from being a 'catch-all' party. And, these long-term drivers in conjunction with the proximate causes of an ineffective campaign, corruption scandals, lacklustre leadership and an anti-incumbency sentiment contributed to Congress' worst ever defeat in a general election. Palshikar (2015) states that the factors responsible for the decline of the Congress were the organisational neglect and its failure to engage in politics thereby ceding the socio-political space to other parties. Some scholars interpreted Congress' loss as a rejection of its social protection policies and a vote in favour of economic reforms (Desai, 2014). However, post-poll surveys showed little support for an uninhibited free-market economic liberalisation amongst BJP voters (Chhibber and Verma, 2014).

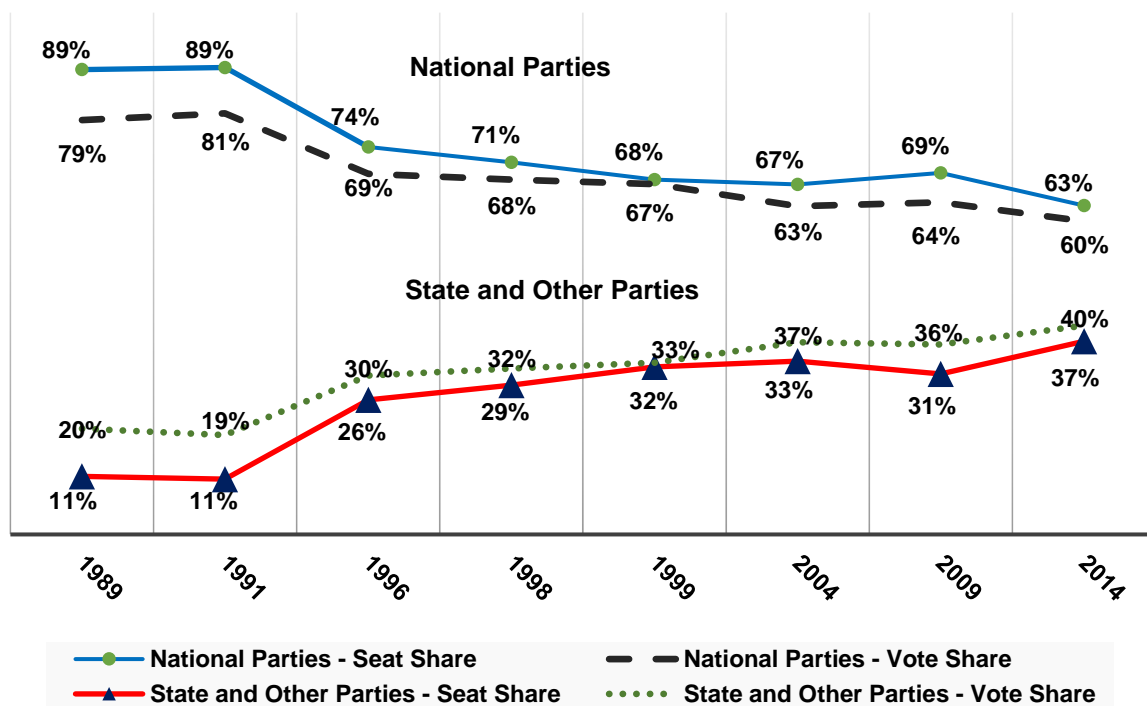
### *Interpreting the verdict*

This election was seen by many as being historic, which could trigger a systemic change in voting behaviour and political landscape of the country. Palshikar (2014a) termed it as a 'critical' election where a single-party government had made a comeback after two decades of coalition and minority governments, while according to Chhibber and Verma (2014), the BJP has clearly replaced the Congress as the 'system-defining' party. Desai (2014) suggested that this election may mark the nationalisation of Indian politics, and a reversal of political fragmentation along caste and regional lines, where issues rather than identity become more prominent. Wyatt (2014:35) stated that the 2014 election shattered the assumption that the Indian party system was so fragmented that a single party could not achieve an outright

majority. Sridharan (2014:20) termed the results as ‘dramatic’, possibly even ‘epochal’, whereby India had what appeared to be a new party system led by a dominant party, the BJP. According to Heath (2015), although it may be too early to tell whether the 2014 election represents a critical result in the traditional sense, it is clear that a major electoral change has occurred.

However, there were also many continuities evident in this election, and to that extent the characterisation of this being a critical or a transformational election may be an exaggeration. The trend of decline in the vote and the seat share of national parties versus the state and other parties continued. In 1989, national parties won 89% of the seats and 79% of the votes, but these shares dropped to 63% and 60% respectively in 2014 (see Figure 3). The results for the state and other parties have followed the opposite trend (Diwakar, 2015).

**Figure 3** Electoral performance of national, state and other parties 1989 - 2014

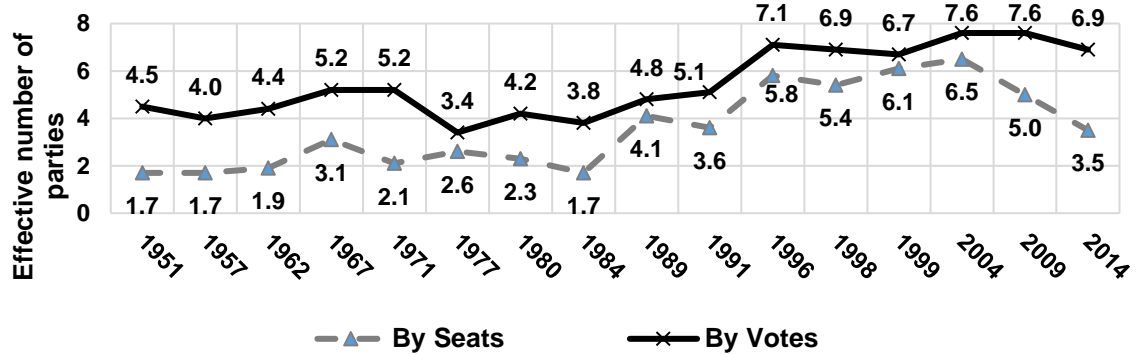


**Source:** Author’s calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Although effective number of parties (ENP) by seats at the national level declined from 5.0 in 2009 to 3.5 in 2014, ENP by votes, arguably a better indicator of the

fragmentation of the party system, witnessed a smaller decline from 7.6 in 2009 to 6.9 in 2014 (see Figure 4).<sup>15</sup> Since the 1990s, this measure has averaged around 6.8, and therefore, ENP of 6.9 in 2014 does not signal a clear reversal of the trend of fragmentation of the Indian party system (Diwakar, 2015).

**Figure 4** Effective number of parties (by votes and seats) at the national level



**Source:** Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

The number of parties represented in *Lok Sabha*, which saw an upward trend in the recent elections, rising from 24 in 1989 to 40 in 1998, fell marginally to 38 in 2014 (see Table 5). Thus, even on this measure, there is no visible reversal in the fragmentation of the Indian party system. As Sridharan (2014) notes, by standard measures based on either seats or vote share, India still has a multiparty system, and it is too early to say that the BJP has become a new hegemonic party.

**Table 5** Parties represented in *Lok Sabha*

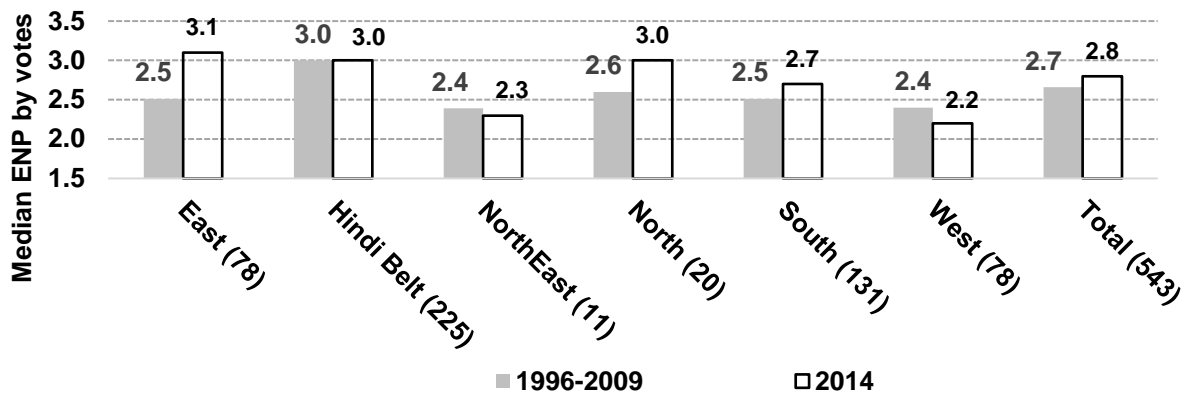
Year	Number of seat winning parties
1989	24
1991	24
1996	28
1998	40
1999	38
2004	38
2009	37
2014	38
<b>Average</b>	<b>33</b>

**Source:** Collated by author based on Election Commission of India data.

At the district (constituency) level too, ENP (by votes) in 2014 was not markedly different from previous elections; the median ENP rose remained unchanged, rising only marginally from 2.7 during 1996-2009 to 2.8 in 2014 – see Figure 5. Although

there are inter-region variations, at an aggregate level the electoral competition in the districts was not much different in this election.

**Figure 5** Median effective number of parties (by votes) at district level



**Source:** Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

The importance of coalition politics also survived in this election. The BJP won 57 of its 282 seats in states where it had electoral alliances with other parties.<sup>16</sup> Further, the BJP still needs to engage with regional parties because it does not have the majority in the *Rajya Sabha*, which has a role to play in the passage of legislation. Forging electoral alliances will be of even greater importance for the Congress, given its poor performance in the 2014 election. Coalition politics remains relevant also because national and regional parties often need to form alliances to win elections at the state level. Yadav and Palshikar (2009) argued that state level was the primary area of political activity and voter mobilisation. In the 2014 election too, where strong regional party alternatives existed, they were preferred to both the national parties (Chacko and Mayer, 2015). Similarly, according to Manor (2015), states which had high-profile non-BJP chief ministers, had centralised power and sustained the institutional capacity to govern effectively, withstood the trend favouring the BJP in this election.

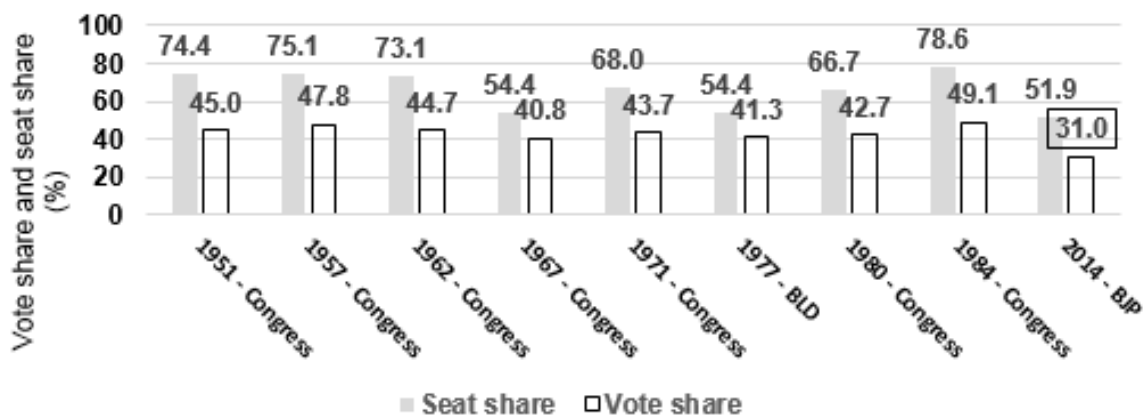
Overall, the decentralisation of political and economic power to the states (Diwakar, 2010), the continuing importance of coalition politics as well as separate timetable for

*Lok Sabha* and state assembly elections continue to offer substantial opportunities for the regional parties to be influential both at the national and the state levels. Similarly, Tillin (2015) argues that the balance between seats held by national and regional parties remained unchanged at an aggregate level in this election. Thus, the hypothesis in respect of the importance of state level politics in influencing national outcomes continued to hold in this election.

According to Heath (2015), since BJP succeeded in winning over voters who had not previously been mobilised, it may have secured a more stable and long-term source of support. However, Tillin (2015) argues that although it was possible that 2014 may be seen as a ‘critical election’ with hindsight, whether it marked a longer term realignment of the party system remains an open question. Similarly, Sridharan (2014) argues that BJP’s success might suggest that India is pivoting from the politics of religion and caste, patronage and populism towards Western-style, left-right debate over economic policy, but voter surveys did not as yet confirm it.

It is important to emphasise that BJP won on the basis of the lowest ever vote share (31%) achieved by a party winning majority of seats (see Figure 6), and a sweep in a limited geographical area. To this extent, BJP’s seat majority is tenuous.

**Figure 6** Vote share and seat share of party winning majority of seats in *Lok Sabha*

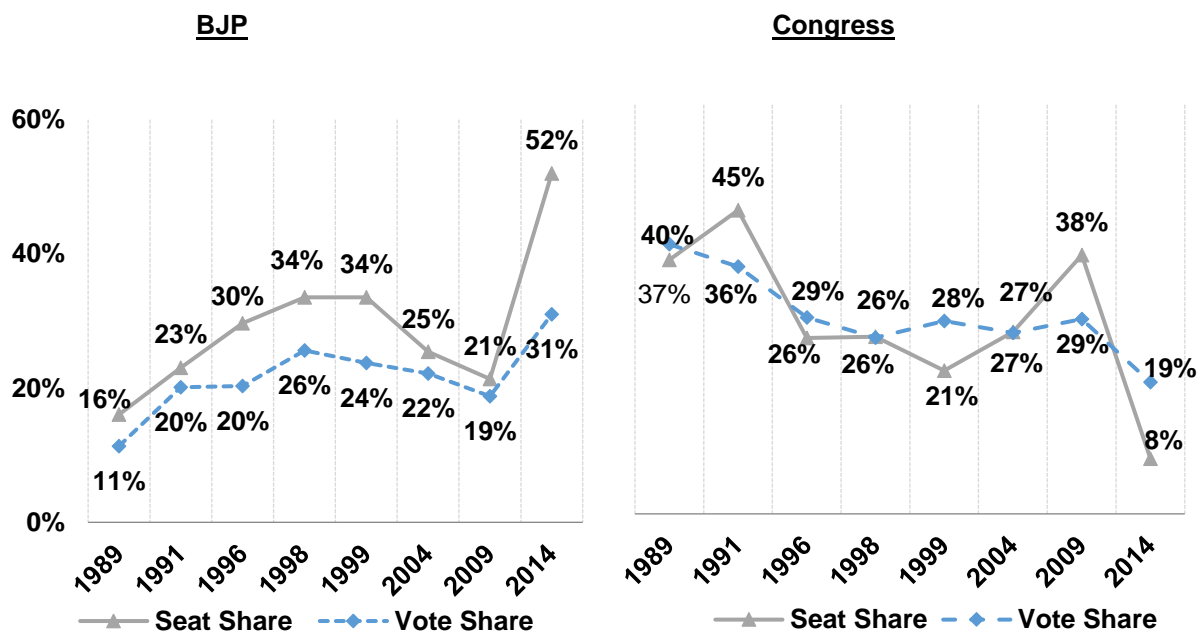


**Source:** Author’s calculations based on Election Commission of India data.



A similar point is made by Macdonald and Moussavi (2015), who argue that BJP's win was neither overwhelming nor unique, and it was the mechanics of FPTP that enabled it to convert its 12% increase in vote share into a massive electoral victory (an increase of 31% in seat share). This is illustrated by Figure 7, which shows that the BJP's gained from a high, 21% seat to vote bonus (seat share less vote share) for the winning party in 2014, compared to an average of about 6% during the period 1989 – 2004. The Congress on the other hand, suffered a loss of 30% in its seat share, while its vote share declined by 10% compared to 2009.

**Figure 7**      **Seat and vote shares of the BJP and the Congress in Lok Sabha**



**Source:** Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

## RE-VISTING THE 2014 ELECTION RESULTS

According to Chacko and Mayer (2016:526), BJP's victory provided it with a best-ever chance to forge a fundamental alignment of Indian politics at the national level. However, it also raised key questions about the likely trajectory of the Indian party system and politics, especially in respect of BJP's ability to consolidate its position in the future elections, and become a 'dominant' party in India.

### *BJP's performance in the recent state assembly elections<sup>17</sup>*

BJP's win in the 2014 general election was followed by its success in state assembly elections in Haryana and Maharashtra in October 2014. It secured a majority in Haryana, and emerged as the single largest party in Maharashtra to form a coalition government. There were many reasons for BJP's success in these two elections, including Modi's popularity and the goodwill enjoyed by the newly elected BJP government at the centre (Palshikar, 2014b; Kumar, 2015). However, cautioning against over-interpreting these results, Wyatt (2015) argues that the BJP gained due to a divided opposition, and was able to win power with a 33.2% vote share in Haryana; and just 27.8% of the vote was enough to form and lead a coalition government in Maharashtra.

These victories were followed by BJP's better than expected performance in Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir (J and K) state elections in December 2014. In Jharkhand, it won the largest number of seats, and led the formation of a coalition government. In J and K, it won the largest share of votes but secured the second largest number of seats, and formed a coalition government with the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The BJP continued its strategy of leveraging Modi's popularity in Delhi and Bihar state assembly elections held in February and October 2015 respectively. However, it suffered defeat at the hands of AAP in Delhi, and a grand alliance (*Mahagathbandhan*) between RJD, JDU and the Congress in Bihar. Although Delhi is not a full-fledged state and only sends a small number of members (seven) to *Lok Sabha*, it is India's capital, and has a high impact on the political landscape of the country. Absence of a credible local leader and popularity of AAP's leader Arvind Kejriwal were the main reasons for BJP's defeat in Delhi. Extensive campaigning by BJP's senior leaders (including Modi) failed to affect the outcome, and AAP won a historic victory winning 67 of the 70 seats. Although BJP lost heavily in respect of the number of seats (3 in 2015 versus 31 in 2013) in Delhi, its vote share remained

almost intact (32.2% in 2015 versus 33.1% in 2013), and it was the Congress, which suffered a substantial decline in its vote share (9.7% in 2015 versus 24.6% in 2013).<sup>18</sup> Overall, the outcome of 2015 Delhi state election reflected the appeal of a new political party, as well as the disproportionality of the FPTP, which helped the AAP to win 96% of the seats with a much smaller 54% share of the votes, while the BJP could only win 3 seats on the basis of a non-trivial 32% share of votes.<sup>19</sup>

In Bihar, BJP's loss was attributed to not projecting a chief ministerial candidate to take on the grand alliance's candidate JDU's Nitish Kumar. As Chakrabarty (2016: 19) states, the recent assembly elections 'emphasised the importance of local leadership...Modi was unable to assuage Bihari voters who felt cheated by the BJP seeking to impose a *bahari* (outsider) as their chief minister.' Although the BJP received highest (24.4%) vote share, the parties which were part of the grand alliance avoided fragmentation of their votes, and were able to win a majority of seats. As Geevan and Nigam (2015) note, 'The formation of the *Mahagathbandan* was a clear recognition that failure to consolidate the fragmented votes [in light of the outcome of 2014 general election] would spell doom [for parties which formed the grand alliance].'<sup>20</sup> The 2015 Bihar election was another example of FPTP producing highly disproportional result in a multi-party contest.

The latest state assembly elections were held in May 2016 in the states of Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.<sup>21</sup> The BJP was in contention to form the government in Assam, and projected a local leader as its chief ministerial candidate, and this was an important reason for its win, in addition to the anti-incumbency faced by the Congress government, which had been in power for 15 years. This win enabled the BJP to form the government for the first time in a major state in the eastern part of the country. In West Bengal and Tamil Nadu assembly elections, the trends from the 2014 general election continued with regional parties led by powerful incumbent chief ministers ie Mamata Banerjee of AITC in West Bengal and J Jayalalithaa of ADMK in Tamil Nadu, emerged victorious. In West Bengal, the Congress fought the election in alliance with CPI (M) but was comprehensively defeated by the AITC.<sup>22</sup> In Kerala, the Left Democratic Front (LDF) won 91 seats

while the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) at 47 came second.<sup>23</sup> Overall, for BJP, the latest state assembly election results were encouraging, since in addition to winning in Assam, it won four seats in West Bengal, the party's best performance ever in the state, and for the first time won a seat in Kerala. In contrast, Congress' decline has continued, and in particular, its loss in Kerala, where the party had been in power only for one term was another sign of its worsening prospects as a national party.

As has been discussed earlier, some of the post-election analysis and commentary on the 2014 election had highlighted the possibility of it being a 'critical' (Palshikar, 2015a) or a 'realigning' (Chacko and Mayer, 2016) election, which could signal the end of the phase of coalition governments, and usher in an era of a BJP-dominated party system. On both these points, the results of the recent state elections paint a mixed picture. Although the BJP seems to have consolidated its position by victories in many states, it has also suffered setbacks in Bihar and Delhi.

### *Emerging trends in the Indian party system*

Although the BJP has emerged as the principal national party in India, it is not as yet a 'system-defining' party, which the Congress was in the 1950s and 1960s. The key difference is that there are many parts of the country where regional or state parties continue to be strong. The domination of *Rajya Sabha* still eludes the BJP, and it will be another few years before this can happen, and that too, depends on how the party performs in the forthcoming state elections. BJP's growth is also hampered by a lack of support by Muslims, which comprise a significant proportion of voters in many Indian states. Further, if BJP's opponents can unite and forge a national alliance against it, the party could face a serious challenge to sustain its success in the future elections.

A trend which has continued after the 2014 election is the decline of the Congress, and as things stand now, it seems incapable of challenging the BJP for supremacy at the national level. Similarly, there are no clear signs of the revival of the electoral prospects of the principal communist parties ie the CPI (M) and the CPI. Although the LDF that included the CPI (M) and the CPI won the 2016 state election in Kerala, these parties suffered a major defeat in West Bengal, at the hands of AITC.

There seems to be a role reversal between the Congress and the BJP in the last 10-15 years. Like BJP in the past, the Congress today does not have a national presence, and leads the government in only few - seven states (eight including Bihar, where it is a junior partner), which account for only 7% (15% including Bihar) of India's population. The BJP on the other hand, has become the principal national party, and has also grown its influence in regions where it did not have much presence in the past. In addition to leading the government at the centre, the BJP on its own or with its alliance partners is currently in power in 9 states which account for 43% of India's population. It remains to be seen if BJP can consolidate its gains in the future, but the party appears to be stronger than any national party since the Congress in 1984. The AAP appears to be positioning itself to fill the political space being created by Congress' decline. It has plans to fight the assembly elections in the states of Punjab, Goa and Gujarat in 2017, and its performance in these elections will inform whether the party can present itself as a national party.

In the emerging diffused political landscape, the main challenge to the BJP is likely to arise from a coalition of regional parties or a coalition of regional parties plus the Congress. Mamata Banerjee of AITC and Nitish Kumar of JDU have already hinted that they would be willing to take a more prominent role at the national level in an anti-BJP alliance. The outcomes of UP state assembly election in 2017 will determine how influential the prominent leaders of the state, Mulayam Singh Yadav and his son Akhilesh Yadav of the SP, and Mayawati of the BSP, will be at the national level in the future.

However, it will be difficult for the regional parties to form a stable electoral alliance, since they are led by strong personalities, many of whom have an ambition to play a more prominent role at the national level.<sup>24</sup> So, unless Modi-led BJP government faces a major governance challenge for example, a corruption scandal or an economic crisis, the BJP is poised to maintain its status as the principal national party in India. Overall, India today has a multi-party system, which includes the BJP as the principal national party, which is strong in Hindi belt, western and northern parts of the country; the Congress, the other national party, which however faces decline in its support; and various regional and state parties, with concentrated bases of support in specific parts of the country.

### *Likelihood of coalition governments*

Given the continued importance of the regional parties, it will be challenging for the BJP to repeat its 2014 electoral performance in respect of achieving a majority of seats in *Lok Sabha*, even if it remains the principal national party in India. Table 6 illustrates this point using the data from the last six elections held during the period 1996 – 2014. It shows that the ‘Other’ parties (excluding the top two) have on an average won 235 (43%) seats in *Lok Sabha*, leaving the top two parties with the balance 308 (57%) seats. The results of the 2014 election and the subsequent state assembly elections show that the trend of a substantial number of seats being won by the ‘Other’ – non-BJP, non-Congress parties, is likely to continue. As a result, a party is likely to require a lead of more than 200 seats over the runner-up party in order to get a majority in *Lok Sabha* – see column 6 of Table 6. Although this happened in the 2014 election (with BJP securing a lead of 220 seats over the Congress), the lead of the winning party in the last six elections has only averaged 78 (45 excluding 2014 election) – see column 7 of Table 6.

**Table 6 Lead (in seats) required for a party to get majority in Lok Sabha**

Election	Total number of seats	Seats won by Other parties	Seats won by the top two parties	Seats required for a party to secure a majority	Seats left for the runner up party	Lead required by the winning party over runner up party to secure a majority	Actual lead of the winning party over runner up party (by seats)
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4) = [(1)/2]+1	(5) = (3) – (4)	(6) = (4) – (5)	(7)
1996	543	242	301	273	28	245	21
1998	543	220	323	273	50	223	41
1999	543	247	296	273	23	250	68
2004	543	260	283	273	10	263	7
2009	543	221	322	273	49	224	90
2014	543	217	326	273	53	220	238
<b>Average</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>78</b>

**Note:** ‘Top two parties’, ‘winning party’ ‘runner up party’ are defined in respect of number of seats won.

**Source:** Author’s calculations based on Election Commission of India data.

Further, as discussed earlier, BJP’s 2014 victory rested heavily on its success to convert votes into seats under FPTP, and in this context, a small negative vote swing could affect its chances of repeating its performance in the future elections. In summary, achieving a majority of seats in *Lok Sabha* for a single party (including the BJP) remains a difficult prospect, and consequently, it is premature to announce the end of coalition governments at the centre.

### *Political leadership*

In light of Modi’s ‘presidential’ style of campaigning in the 2014 election, some post-election analysis and commentary referred to the growing importance of political leadership in mobilising voters and winning elections in the Indian situation.

Sridharan (2015:28) points out that ‘half the CSDS [Centre for the Study of Developing Societies] survey’s respondents said leadership was important, and as many as a quarter of NDA voters told the CSDS postelection survey that had the alliance not put Modi forward as its candidate for the premiership, they would not have cast their ballots for it.’<sup>25</sup> However, the importance of the leadership factor needs to be contextualised for the 2014 election since ‘the voters were certainly asking for more political authority after 10 years of a rather self-effacing prime minister [Dr. Manmohan Singh] (Jaffrelot and Vernies, 2015:41).’

According to studies (based on western democracies), leaders of parties that have a clear social and/or ideological base (such as the BJP) are not expected to make a significant difference to electoral outcomes (Chhibber and Ostermann, 2014). To this extent, Modi's effect on the 2014 election was anomalous. Political leadership can assume significance in the Indian context in the absence of a clear differentiation amongst parties in respect of policies and programmes (see Yadav, 1999: 2399), and prove to be an important factor in winning over voters. The rise of mass media has also facilitated the trend of growing importance of leaders who effectively speak for their parties, which some refer to as the 'presidentialisation' of parliamentary politics (Mughan, 2000). Verma and Tripathi (2013) argue that the gradual erosion of the legislative bodies in India and the accumulation of power in the hands of the prime minister and chief ministers have made these offices the centre of electoral campaigns.

In a survey of literature on political leadership in India, Sirsika (1965:522) had stated that 'Leadership based on the tradition of sacrifice, dedication and austerity would be replaced by the new leaders who represent their hold on their regions, either due to caste or interest group support...The role and influence of the state Chief Ministers will be more significant in years to come. This might be regarded as a consequence of the strength of regionalism.' More than five decades later, political leadership remains an important factor as is illustrated by Modi's victory in 2014 general election, and the electoral success of regional parties led by high-profile chief ministers in the recent state elections. As Chakrabarty (2016:19) notes that 'In the 2016 assembly elections, the campaign was led by local leaders while the national leaders addressed gatherings at the behest of local party organisations.'

However, given the multi-dimensional nature of political leadership in India, which is based on individual traits as well as identity, there are limitations in drawing any linear generalisations about the importance of this factor. Overall, the effect of leadership on election outcomes is difficult to measure in the Indian context, and warrants further research.



## CONCLUSION

After its victory in 2014 election, the BJP went on to win assembly elections in many (but not all) Indian states, and has consolidated its position as the country's principal national party. Modi continues to be popular, the economy remains stable, if not buoyant, and the NDA government has not faced a major governance crisis in its first two years. For the Congress, electoral losses have continued, and its status and future as a national party is at risk, although it can still make a comeback as it has been able to do so on few occasions in the past.<sup>26</sup> That said, BJP's 2014 victory was achieved on the basis of a relatively low vote share, and the regional and state parties continue to be strong in their respective areas of support. In this situation, if the BJP fails to deliver on its promises, it could lose support especially given the anti-incumbency bias usually faced by governments in India, and its tenuous majority achieved under FPTP.

A political scenario where BJP suffers a setback, and there is no credible alternative at the national level, India could revert to an era of unstable coalition governments. Two years on, it is still premature to view the 2014 election as a 'critical' election in respect of a longer-term realignment of the party system in favour of the BJP as a 'dominant' party. Further, it is unclear whether the 2014 election marks a clear move towards the nationalisation of Indian politics, and a reversal of political fragmentation along caste and regional lines where issues and not identity become electorally more prominent. Recent victories achieved by regional parties in many large India states highlight that caste and region remain important electoral issues. Overall, the Indian political and electoral landscape remains complex where parties and leaders need to adopt different strategies to win elections. Finally, the growing disproportionality between votes and seats highlights the limitations of FPTP electoral system in India amidst a fragmented party system, since it can potentially undermine the legitimacy of the election results.

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- <sup>1</sup> Table A.1 in Appendix provides key statistics on Indian general elections.
- <sup>2</sup> A broadly similar structure operates at the state level.
- <sup>3</sup> 'General election' in this paper refers to election to the lower house of Indian parliament, the *Lok Sabha*.
- <sup>4</sup> The Congress was founded in 1885, and drew support from all sections of the electorate mainly due to its association with India's independence movement against the British colonial rule.
- <sup>5</sup> The *Janata Party* was an amalgamation of the Socialists, *Bharatiya Lok Dal* (BLD), Jan Sangh and Congress (O).
- <sup>6</sup> AAP fought its first election for the Delhi state assembly in 2013. It won 28 of the 70 seats, and formed a minority government. However, Arvind Kejriwal, resigned after only 49 days as chief minister, alleging non-cooperation from the Congress and the BJP.
- <sup>7</sup> Modi first became chief minister of Gujarat in October 2001, being promoted to the office upon the resignation of his predecessor, following the defeat of BJP in by-elections.
- <sup>8</sup> In 1992, Hindu extreme groups demolished the Babri mosque in *Ayodhya* in Uttar Pradesh, which was alleged to have been built over the birth place of Hindu God *Ram*. The Hindu organisations demand that a temple should be built on this site.
- <sup>9</sup> Table A.2 in Appendix provides more detailed election results.
- <sup>10</sup> The largest party and the runner-up party were either the Congress or the BJP except in 1989, where the Congress was the largest and *Janata Dal* the runner up party.
- <sup>11</sup> At least 10% of the 543 ie 55 seats are needed to get the status of the main opposition party in *Lok Sabha*.
- <sup>12</sup> Details of the states included in these regions are given in the Appendix.
- <sup>13</sup> Details regarding BJP's performance in individual states are provided in Appendix (Tables A.3 and related commentary, and A.4).
- <sup>14</sup> The Congress just won two seats, while the SP, which currently leads the state government, could only win 5 seats. The BSP, another important party in UP, drew a blank.
- <sup>15</sup> ENP is calculated based on Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) methodology.
- <sup>16</sup> Maharashtra (23 seats), Bihar (22), Haryana (7), Punjab (2), Andhra Pradesh (2) and Tamil Nadu (1).
- <sup>17</sup> Table A.5 in the Appendix provides a summary of BJP's performance in the recent state assembly elections.
- <sup>18</sup> The Congress failed to win any seat.
- <sup>19</sup> Table A.6 in the Appendix provides a summary of the results of 2015 Delhi state elections.
- <sup>20</sup> Table A.7 in the Appendix provides a summary of the results of 2015 Bihar state elections.
- <sup>21</sup> Elections were also held in Puducherry, which is a union territory.
- <sup>22</sup> The BJP was not in contention to form government in these two states, but achieved its highest ever vote share of 10% in West Bengal winning 4 seats, and 2.8% of votes in Tamil Nadu but no seats.
- <sup>23</sup> LDF's main constituents were CPI (M) and CPI.
- <sup>24</sup> Nitish Kumar of JDU, Mulayam Singh Yadav of SP, Mamata Banerjee of AITC or their party have hinted at their interest in taking a more prominent national role. See [Economic Times](#), 23 April 2016; [Deccan Herald](#), 1 May 2016; [Economic Times](#), 26 May 2016.
- <sup>25</sup> <http://www.cds.in/>.
- <sup>26</sup> Congress managed to recover after its electoral defeats in 1977 and 1999 general elections.