

2019 election and the future of Indian democracy

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2019 Election and the Future of Indian Democracy

Through an impressive victory in the 2019 national election, Narendra Modi has catapulted the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to become the dominant and system defining political party in India. BJP's dominance is a consequence of Modi's charisma, a narrative built around nationalism and development, and also an absence of a credible opposition. This presents both opportunities and dangers for the Indian democracy.

2019 national election

The recently concluded 17th national election in India saw Narendra Modi led BJP retain power and improve its seat and vote share. It was an extraordinary victory in a country as diverse as India, and reinforced the BJP as the dominant political force and Modi's status as the most powerful political leader. It is useful to recall that Modi had also led the BJP to win a majority in the 2014 national election, first time any party was able to do so in the last 30 years.

Modi ran a relatively efficient and corruption-free administration in his first term (2014-19) as Prime Minister, but was criticised by opposition parties for condoning an anti-Muslim stance adopted by some BJP leaders, and subverting democratic institutions and processes for electoral gains. He was also accused of promoting an aggressive form of Hindu nationalism despite promising inclusive development for all communities. The opposition parties' election campaign also focused on the negative impact of Modi's policies, in particular, 'demonetisation', a measure delegitimising certain currency notes, and an inefficient implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Farmers' distress, rising unemployment and deteriorating economic situation were other factors highlighted by the opposition during the election campaign to attack Modi and the BJP.

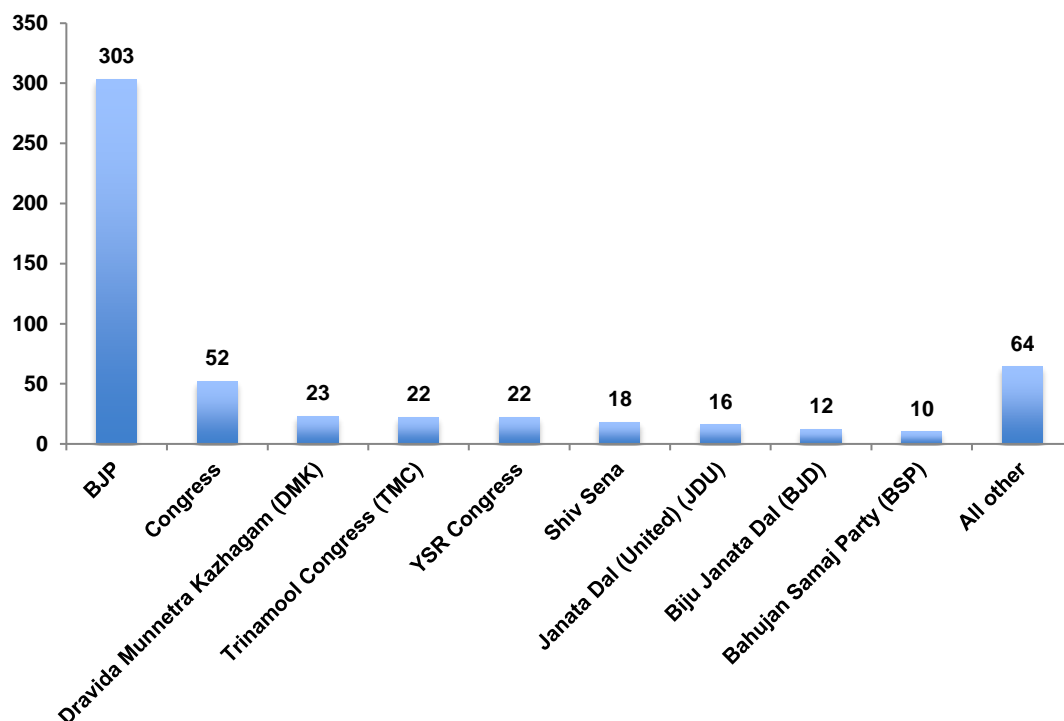
BJP's campaign on the other hand projected Modi as a decisive leader and focused on his track record of providing corruption-free administration, and policies that benefitted all sections of the society, especially the poor and the marginalised. BJP also claimed to be the only party that had the political will to take strong action against Pakistan for its alleged support to anti-India terrorist organisations. The Indian Air Force's strike against alleged terror camps in Balakot, Pakistan at the eve of the election was used to invoke a nationalistic sentiment, and was cited as a proof of Modi's effective leadership. Modi presented himself as the nation's protector – 'chowkidar' (watchman), and he, along with many prominent BJP leaders, added this prefix to their names on social media.

The main contest was between the two coalition blocs - BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Although the Congress lost most of the state assembly elections held after the 2014 national election,

it was able to win power in the states of Punjab in 2017 and three important Hindi speaking states - Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh towards the end of 2018. In this respect, BJP faced a somewhat rejuvenated Congress in 2019 under the leadership of newly appointed party president Rahul Gandhi. Although many regional leaders tried to form a united alliance in order to defeat Modi, these efforts were only partially successful due to complicated political trade offs between parties, and a lack of agreement on a common opposition prime ministerial candidate. BJP ran a presidential style campaign, focusing voters' attention on Modi's leadership and achievements in contrast with Rahul Gandhi's relative inexperience and the absence of a prime ministerial candidate representing the opposition.

As shown in Figure 1, BJP won 303 of 542 (56%) seats on the basis of a 37% vote share, while the next largest party, the Congress, won only 52 (10%) seats. The balance of the seats were won by a number of regional parties such as DMK, TMC and YSR Congress, which were influential in their respective states. These results appear to endorse a more positive vote for Modi compared to 2014, which was largely seen as an anti-Congress vote. This election has also shown that 'leadership' factor has become even more crucial for parties' success than in the past. Modi appealed directly to voters during the election campaign, and stated that every vote for the BJP would come into 'Modi's pocket'.

Figure 1 Number of seats won – 2019 national election



Source: Collated by the author based on Election Commission of India statistics.

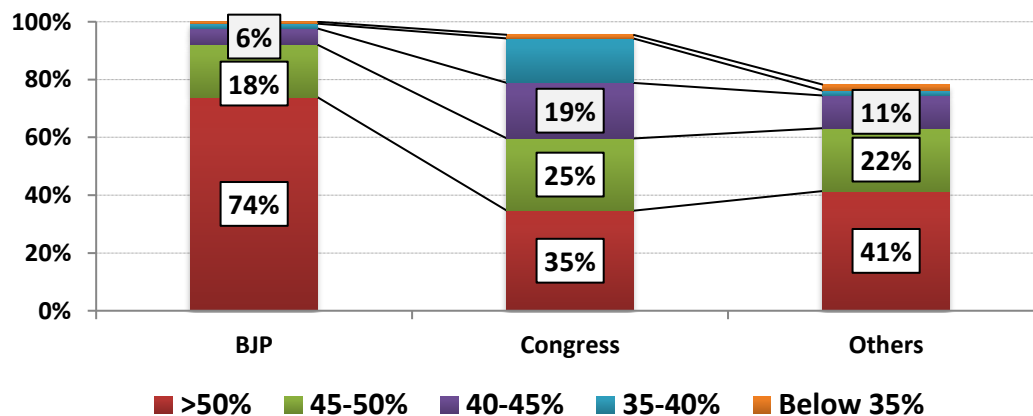
BJP received a much higher share of seats than votes because of the inherent disproportionality of the First past the post electoral system (FPTP), but there are more fundamental reasons that underpin the emergence of the BJP as India's dominant party, akin to the Congress of the 1950s and the 1960s.

Congress' domination was mainly a result of its historical role in India's anti-colonial movement against the British rule and the charisma of Jawahar Lal Nehru, country's Prime Minister during 1952-1964. Although Congress began to lose its dominance after Nehru's death in 1964 it remained India's principal national party through the 1970s and 80s amid the emergence of the regional parties and identity politics. In the late 1980s, the Indian party system fragmented, and the country went through a coalition era where no party was able to win a majority in national elections until BJP's win in 2014. BJP's victory in 2019 is significant because this is the first time that Congress has remained out of power for two complete consecutive terms, and faces deep organisational and leadership crisis.

BJP as India's dominant national party

BJP's win in 2019 was achieved on the basis of its dominance in electorally important Hindi heartland and the Western regions. It was also able to make inroads into Eastern and North-eastern states of the country notably, West Bengal, Odisha and Telengana. This supports the claim that the BJP is now India's dominant political party, with an expanding and almost a pan-India footprint. In 2019, the BJP won 74% of its seats with more than 50% of vote share, while this figure was 35% and 41% for the Congress and other parties respectively - see Figure 2. This illustrates that a large majority of BJP's victories were achieved based on a positive swing in its favour rather than a division of votes amongst rival parties.

Figure 2 Average vote share of winning party in a constituency

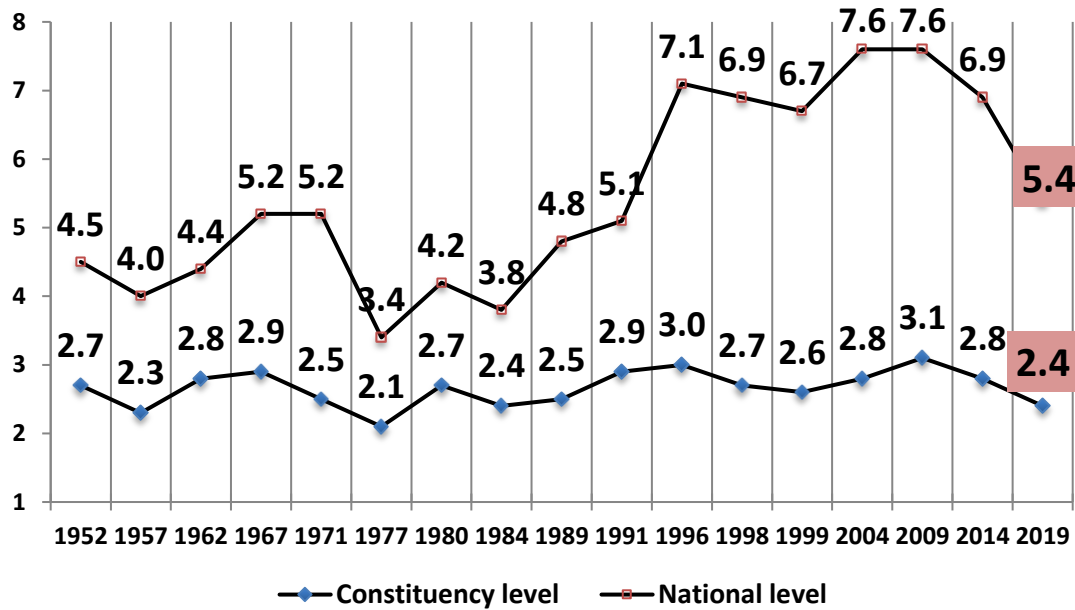


Source: Collated by the author based on Election Commission of India statistics.

Figure 3 shows that the Effective Number of Parties (ENP) by votes, a key measure of party system fragmentation, declined from 6.9 in 2014 to 5.4 in 2019, which is closer

to the levels seen in the period of Congress dominance in the 1950s and 1960s. Even at the constituency level, the ENP has declined to 2.4 indicating a move towards a ‘Duvergerian equilibrium’ equivalent to a two-party competition, with the BJP being the main party in most constituencies, while facing different parties as its main rival in different parts of the country.

Figure 3 Effective number of parties (ENP) by votes



Source: Collated by the author based on Election Commission of India statistics.

According to Dunleavy (2010:25-26), a dominant party ‘can deny a significant section of the ideological spectrum to any other rival party, threatening to strip all votes away from an opponent which converges too far on their policy position. Thus a dominant party is one that has a protected core vote which it can maintain whatever ideological stance it adopts, although it can also lose substantial levels of support at its peripheries. A dominant party may well be able to maintain its effectiveness advantage even if it loses governmental power temporarily, or even for a relatively extended period.’

A rudimentary analysis of BJP’s performance indicates that the party displays many characteristics of a dominant party. One can argue that the BJP that became the system-defining party following the 2014 national election and has dominated the ‘ideological’ and ‘electoral’ spaces since then. And with its victory in 2019, BJP has become the ‘dominant’ party in India. BJP had a lead of 238 seats in 2014 over its nearest rival, which increased to 251 in 2019, and the party faces no immediate threat to its electoral supremacy. In 2019, the BJP has been able to win a non-trivial number of seats beyond its traditional strongholds in the states in Northern and Western regions. Although Hindu nationalism is the underpinning core political ideology of

the BJP, Modi has attempted to reach out to a wider electorate through the twin strategy of inclusive development as well as pride in Indian nationalism through slogans such as '*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*' (Victory to Motherland India). The opposition parties, including BJP's main rival the Congress and other prominent regional players seem incapable to challenge BJP'S dominance especially at the national level, either on their own or in alliance blocs.

Implications for Indian democracy

The results of the 2019 election and BJP's dominance have important implications for Indian party system and democracy. The return of a single party majority government provides stability in Indian politics and has the potential to deliver rapid economic development. It also presents the dangers of authoritarianism and majoritarianism in the absence of a robust opposition. The Congress has suffered serious setbacks in the past, but was able to recover and come back to power. However, today's Congress seems substantially weakened without a clear sense of direction and faces a real risk of disintegration. Congress has been held together by members of Gandhi family for decades, and Rahul Gandhi's departure as party president presents immediate challenge to Congress's survival as a single unit. Some commentators have argued that the Congress is an over-centralised dynastic party, and no longer a positive force. Therefore, its demise will not necessarily be a threat to Indian democracy and may lead to the emergence of another political force to counter the BJP. However, with no other national or regional party in a position to challenge the BJP, and with no signs of a new political force emerging, the disintegration of the Congress at this juncture would not be healthy for Indian democracy.

India's plural democracy will be strengthened when there is an effective opposition to keep the party in government under checks and balances. That said, Modi has recently stated that his focus in the second term as prime minister will be inclusive development and on winning the trust of all communities ie '*Sabka sath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas*'. He announced scholarships for Muslim girls soon after assuming office in 2019 signalling his attempt to reach out to India's largest religious minority. However, it remains to be seen whether this approach is a mere slogan or becomes one of Modi's core priorities in the future.

BJP's ascendancy has also led to a decline in the salience of identity politics, mainly related to caste, which has both positive and negative implications for Indian democracy. The emergence of caste-based parties in the 1980s and 1990s gave political representation to marginalised and disadvantaged social groups. However, there is a question whether such parties have brought about significant social transformation or have merely promoted personalistic and clientelistic politics when in power.

Congress' dominance of the 1950s and 1960s was largely an outcome of historical circumstances, and it was almost inconceivable that 60 years on, another party could achieve a similar feat given India's social diversity and a fragmented party system. However, the future of BJP as a dominant party is not guaranteed due to various factors, including the vagaries FPTP, where a small swing in vote share can lead to vast changes in the seat share. BJP's electoral success also remains dependent on Modi's charisma, and therefore vulnerable to dip in his popularity. However, as of now, he remains India's tallest leader with no credible challenger in sight. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a leading scholar of Indian politics and democracy has aptly stated, 'we can do a lot of sophisticated sociological analysis, but ultimately this [2019] election is about two words: Narendra Modi.'

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