

Changing Nature of Party System in India

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Abstract

The decisive victories of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections have revived debates on the transformation of India's party system, particularly the possible return of a dominant-party model and the decline of coalition politics. Since independence, India has functioned within a multi-party framework, initially marked by the dominance of the Indian National Congress, which shaped political competition for nearly two decades. This dominance began to decline after the 1967 general elections, leading to increased political competition, regionalization, and the rise of coalition governments at both state and national levels, the 1990s, coalition politics had become the norm, contributing to greater inclusivity despite concerns over instability, the emergence of the BJP as a majority-winning party since 2014 represents a significant shift in this trajectory. This study examines whether India is moving away from a fragmented, coalition-based system toward a new dominant-party system led by the BJP. It also assesses the broader implications of this transformation for democratic competition, regional representation, and political stability in contemporary India.

Keywords: Party system, Elections, Coalition politics, BJP, Congress, India.

Introduction

Indian electoral politics has undergone significant changes since 2014 with the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the dominant political force. The BJP has become the central pole of contemporary Indian politics, reshaping both the party system and the broader political structure. The interaction between the party system and political system has long been studied, but the rise of the BJP has added a new dimension to this discourse. With consecutive majority victories in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections and its expansion across several states, the BJP is seen as marking the emergence of a "second dominant party system" after the decline of the Congress system [1]. The party has established a new political hegemony based on the combination of electoral strength and ideological consolidation [2], where development, Hindutva, and nationalism act as key pillars [3], this dominance remains contested. While the BJP is electorally strong, it is argued that it is still evolving toward broader social hegemony [4]. The decline of the Indian National Congress, once the principal national party, and its inability to build effective alliances has further strengthened the BJP's position [1]. At the same time, regional parties continue to challenge the BJP at the state level, though their influence remains geographically limited [3], the study examines whether India is moving beyond coalition politics and political fragmentation toward a new dominant-party system led by the BJP.

From Congress Dominance to Coalition Politics (1952-2014)

India adopted a multi-party system from the outset; however, the dominance of the Indian National Congress overshadowed other political parties at both national and state levels until 1967. The Congress functioned as an umbrella organization representing diverse social groups, interests, and ideologies, leading scholars to describe this phase as a "one dominant party system" [5]. Its organizational strength, rooted in the freedom movement, enabled deep societal penetration and effective resource distribution, while internal factionalism often substituted for opposition [6]. The 1967 general elections marked a critical turning point, ending Congress dominance at the state level and initiating the second electoral system characterized by political competition and coalition formation [6]. The weakening of Congress, combined with socio-economic changes, facilitated the rise of regional and opposition parties. This period witnessed the transition from intra-party competition to inter-party coalitions [7]. Although Congress retained its central role through the 1970s and 1980s, its dominance steadily declined due to internal fragmentation and the rise of new social groups, particularly Other Backward Classes (OBCs), which intensified electoral competition [6]. The 1989 elections marked the beginning of the third electoral system and an era of coalition politics at the national level [6]. During the 1990s and early 2000s, regional parties gained prominence, and coalition governments became the norm.

Both the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) relied heavily on regional partners, reflecting the increasing regionalization and fragmentation of Indian politics [8]. This phase established coalition governance as a stable and inclusive feature of India's political system. The 2014 general elections marked a watershed moment in Indian politics, producing the first single-party majority in the Lok Sabha since 1984, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing a majority on its own. In contrast, the Indian National Congress suffered its worst electoral defeat, even more severe than its post-Emergency setback in 1977. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) entered the elections amid allegations of corruption, policy paralysis, and governance deficits, which significantly eroded public trust [9]. An implementing several welfare programs, including employment, health, and rural development schemes, the UPA failed to translate these initiatives into electoral gains. Growing public dissatisfaction, intensified by anti-corruption movements such as the Lokpal agitation led by Anna Hazare, further weakened its position [10]. Economic slowdown and governance challenges created a favorable environment for the BJP's electoral rise. The 2014 elections were distinctive in their scale and style. The campaign was highly resource-intensive and marked a shift toward a leadership-centric, quasi-presidential model [11]. Narendra Modi emerged as the focal point of the campaign, with the BJP framing the election as a referendum on his leadership. His projection as a self-made leader, combined with his governance record as Chief Minister of Gujarat, resonated strongly with voters, particularly the youth and middle class [12]. Strategically, the BJP combined traditional campaigning with innovative digital outreach. Its emphasis on development, encapsulated in the slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas," repositioned the party beyond identity politics and appealed to aspirational voters [13].

The effective use of social media and targeted communication further strengthened its electoral appeal, contributing to a decisive shift in India's party system.

2014 Lok Sabha Election Verdict: Dawn of a Second Dominant Party System

The 2014 Lok Sabha election results marked a decisive shift in India's party system, signaling the emergence of a "second dominant party system." The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured 282 out of 543 seats independently and 336 seats along with its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, a significant increase from its 116 seats in 2009 [14]. This victory was accompanied by a substantial rise in vote share, reflecting a broad-based electoral expansion. The BJP's dominance was particularly pronounced in the Hindi heartland, where it achieved an unprecedented sweep, winning a majority of seats with high vote shares [15]. It also performed strongly in western India and made notable inroads into non-traditional regions such as the Northeast, eastern India, and parts of southern India, often with the support of regional allies [16]. Importantly, the BJP succeeded in expanding its social coalition, gaining support across caste groups, including upper castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, and tribal communities [16], the Indian National Congress experienced its worst electoral performance, securing only 44 seats with a significantly reduced vote share [17]. Its decline was evident across regions, particularly in the Hindi belt, where it failed to maintain its traditional support base. The party's inability to regain momentum after its earlier recovery phase further contributed to this setback [17], the scale of the BJP's victory, some scholars argue that its vote share of around 31 percent reflects the mechanics of the first-past-the-post system, which can amplify seat share without a proportional increase in votes [18]. Nevertheless, the 2014 verdict marked a structural shift, positioning the BJP as the central force in India's evolving party system.

Table 1

Political parties/ Alliances	Seats Won by political parties	The vote share of political parties (in % points)	Gain/Loss in votes share (In % points)	Gain/Loss in seats won(% points)
NDA	336	38.3	+12.0	+195
BJP	282	31.1	+12.3	+166
BJP Allies	54	7.2	-0.3	+29
UPA	59	23.0	-9.8	-173
Congress	44	19.3	-9.3	-162
Congress Allies	15	3.7	-0.5	-11
BSP	0	4.1	-2.1	-21
Left	12	4.8	-2.8	-12
Others	136	29.8	+2.7	+11

Source: Source: Election Commission of India

The verdict of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has been interpreted in multiple ways. While some viewed it as a mandate for change driven by an "aspirational India," others described it as a "critical election" marking the emergence of a BJP-dominant party system [19]. E. Sridharan characterized the outcome as "dramatic and epochal," reflecting a fundamental transformation in India's electoral landscape [20]. Similarly, Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma argued that the BJP has emerged as a "system-defining party," becoming the focal point for electoral alignment and realignment, and signifying the advent of a "fourth party system" [21].

Scholars such as Milan Vaishnav and Danielle Smogard suggest that the 2014 elections initiated a new political trajectory that could potentially end the long phase of coalition politics and fragmented competition [22], the election is seen as a turning point, indicating a shift away from regionalization and multi-polarity toward a more centralized, dominant-party framework led by the BJP. The BJP's expanding geographical reach, growing social coalition, and consistent electoral success at both national and state levels have strengthened its position as the central pole of Indian politics.

As a result, some scholars, including Suhas Palshikar, describe the BJP as a “hegemonic party,” given its increasing influence across electoral, ideological, and social dimensions [13].

2019 Lok Sabha Elections and Consolidation of BJP Power

The 2019 Lok Sabha elections reaffirmed that the 2014 verdict was not an anomaly, but rather indicative of a structural shift in India’s party system. Scholars argue that the results marked the consolidation of a “fourth party system” and strengthened the emergence of a second dominant-party system led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) [24]. This transformation is attributed not only to electoral success but also to a deeper ideological consolidation in favor of the BJP [15]. The BJP secured an even stronger mandate in 2019, winning 303 seats with a vote share of 37.36 percent, which increased further to 44.84 percent when combined with its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners [16]. This marked one of the highest vote shares achieved by any party in recent decades. The party maintained its dominance in northern and western India while making significant gains in eastern and northeastern states, reflecting its expanding geographical reach [17]. An important feature of the 2019 elections was the consolidation of a broad social coalition. The BJP significantly increased its support across various Hindu caste groups, including upper castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Dalits, and Adivasis, thereby transforming its social base [18]. This consolidation was driven by the party’s strategic blending of nationalism, Hindutva, and developmental narratives, which resonated across diverse voter segments [15]. The opposition alliances in several states, the BJP’s electoral strategy and ideological positioning enabled it to maintain a dominant position, the 2019 elections reinforced the BJP’s role as the central pole of Indian politics and further entrenched its status as a system-defining party.

BJP and State level Electoral Dynamics Since 2014 North East

The performance of the BJP in the subsequent assembly elections remains mixed.

The BJP’s emerging hegemony should not be conflated with electoral invincibility. The Analysis of the state Election since 2014 reflects that the BJP as a party is fallible and vulnerable to defeat given careful electoral calculations by the opposition political parties. Regionally speaking the BJP increased its influence in North East to a great extent. Comparatively the BJP has done remarkably well in the subsequent assembly polls of the northeast, given its past performance in the region. In the 2014 assembly polls of Arunachal Pradesh, the BJP contested 42 seats and won 11 seats with a vote percentage of 31.3 per cent. In the 2019 assembly polls, the party contested 60 seats and won 41 seats with a vote percentage of 51.3 per cent. However, the party’s performance in Skimm Assembly polls remained not that positive. The party could not open its account in the assembly polls of 2014 and 2019. The other north-eastern state where BJP expanded its base in Assam. In the 2016 Assembly polls, the BJP contested 89 seats and won 60 seats with a vote percentage of 29.5 per cent. In the subsequent Assembly polls of 2021, the party contested 93 seats and won 60 with a vote percentage of 33.6 per cent. BJP has also expanded its social base in Manipur. In the 2017 Assembly polls the party won 21 seats out of 61 it contested with a vote percentage of 35.3 per cent. The performance was repeated with an increase in its seat number and vote percentage; it contested 60 seats and won 32 seats with a vote percentage of 38.9 per cent. The BJP has also expanded its base in Nagaland and Tripura to a great extent. In Nagaland Assembly, its seat increased went from 01 in 2013 to 12 in 2018 with a vote percentage of 1.8 per cent to 15.4 per cent respectively. In Tripura Assembly, its number went from 0 in 2013 to 35 with a vote percentage of 1.5 per cent to 43.5 per cent respectively. The party also failed in Meghalaya in terms of its increase in seat tally is concerned. It won 0 seats in 2013 and 2 seats in 2018 with a vote percentage of 1.3 per cent and 9.6 per cent in the two assembly polls. The BJP also was not effective in Mizoram. In the two assembly polls, 2013 and 2018, the party was able to secure 0 and 1 seat with a vote percentage of 0.37 to 8.1 respectively.

Table 2: The electoral performance of the BJP in state elections (2013, 2018)

States/ Union Territories	Seats Contested		Seats Won		Percentage of Votes Polled(%)	
	2013	2018	2013	2018	2013	2018
Rajasthan	200	199	163	73	45.2	39.8
Madhya Pradesh	230	230	165	109	44.88	41.6
Chhattisgarh	90	90	49	15	41.04	33.6
Mizoram	17	39	0	1	0.37	8.1
Karnataka	223	222	40	104	19.9	36.2
Meghalaya	13	46	0	2	1.3	9.6
Nagaland	11	20	01	12	1.8	15.4
Tripura	50	50	0	35	1.5	43.4

Source: Election Commission of India

Table 3: The electoral performance of the BJP in state elections (2014, 2019)

States	Seats Contested		Seats Won		Percentage of Votes Polled(%)	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
Andhra Pradesh	15	173	4	4	2.2	0.9
Telegana*	47	118	5	01	7	7
Arunachal Pardesh	42	60	11	41	31.3	51.3
Odisha	147	146	10	23	18.2	32.8
Skimm	13	12	0	0	0.7	1.6
Maharashtra	260	164	122	105	28.8	26.1
Haryana	90	90	47	40	33.2	36.7
Jammu&Kashmir*	75	NA	25	NA	23.2	NA
Jharkhand	77	79	37	25	31.06	33.8

Source: Election Commission of India

Note:* After the creation of Telengana state, first state assembly elections were held in 2014. The second assembly elections were held in 2018, some eight months before the governments term was to end. For the sake of consistence the 2019 year in the table with regard to Telenagan should be read as 2018.

* In Jammu and Kashmir prior to the abrogation of Article 370, the tenure of the assembly was six years.

Table 4: The electoral performance of the BJP in state elections (2015-2020)

States/ Union Territory	Seats Contested		Seats Won		Percentage of Votes Polled (%)	
	2015	2020	2015	2020	2015	2020
Delhi	69	67	3	8	32.19	38.7
Bihar	157	110	53	74	24.42	19.8

Source: Election Commission of India

Table 5: The electoral performance of the BJP in state elections (2016-2021)

States/Union Territories	Seats Contested		Seats Won		Percentage of Votes Polled (%)	
	2016	2021	2016	2021	2016	2021
Assam	89	93	60	60	29.5	33.6
Kerala	98	115	01	0	10.6	11.4
Punducherry	30	9	0	6	2.4	13.8
Tamil Nadu	NA	20	0	4	2.86	2.6
West Bengal	291	291	3	77	5.6	48.5

Source: Election Commission of India

Table 6: The electoral performance of the BJP in state elections (2017-2022)

States/Union Territories	Seats Contested		Seats Won		Percentage of Votes Polled (%)	
	2017	2022	2017	2022	2017	2022
Goa	36	40	13	20	32.5	33.7
Gujarat	182	NA	115	NA	47.9	NA
Himachal Pradesh	68	NA	44	NA	49.2	NA
Manipur	60	60	21	32	35.3	38.0
Punjab	23	73	3	2	5.4	6.6
Ultrakhand	70	70	57	47	46.5	44.7
Uttar Pradesh	384	376	312	255	39.7	41.6

Source: Election Commission of India

Hindi Belt Dynamics and Electoral Performance

The Hindi belt has traditionally been the stronghold of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the party has consistently sought to consolidate its dominance in this region. Prior to the 2014 general elections, the BJP strengthened its position by securing decisive victories in important states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, forming stable governments with substantial vote shares [19]. These victories reinforced the party's electoral base in the heartland, the BJP faced significant setbacks in the 2018 assembly elections, losing power in all three states. Its seat share and vote percentage declined notably, particularly in Chhattisgarh, indicating growing electoral competition and voter volatility in the region [10]. Similarly, in the 2015 assembly elections in Delhi and Bihar, the party suffered defeats against strong opposition alliances, despite intensive campaigning centered on national leadership [11], the BJP demonstrated resilience in subsequent elections. It achieved major victories in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh in 2017, forming governments with strong mandates, especially in Uttar Pradesh where it recorded a landslide win [12]. The party also expanded its presence in states like Haryana and Jharkhand, although its performance in later elections showed fluctuations, including reduced seat shares and occasional electoral losses

[13], while the BJP has maintained its central dominance in the Hindi belt, electoral outcomes reveal a pattern of both consolidation and contestation, highlighting the dynamic and competitive nature of state-level politics within the broader framework of its national dominance.

Southern India: Limited Expansion and Persistent Constraints

In southern India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has faced structural and electoral constraints despite its national dominance. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secured only 30 out of 130 seats across the five southern states—Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Telangana—with the overwhelming majority of these seats coming from Karnataka alone [14]. This reflects the continued dominance of regional parties and the Indian National Congress in the region. Karnataka remains the BJP's primary stronghold in the south, where it has demonstrated consistent electoral strength. The party emerged as the single largest party in the 2018 Assembly elections, marking a significant milestone in its southern expansion [15]. However, its performance in other southern states has remained limited. In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, the BJP has struggled to translate its vote share into electoral

success. The marginal increases in vote percentage, the party has failed to secure meaningful representation in assembly elections [16]. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the BJP's electoral presence has been minimal, with only modest gains and inconsistent performance across elections [17], while the BJP has made strategic efforts to expand into southern India, its growth remains uneven and constrained by strong regional political identities and entrenched party systems. Karnataka stands as the exception, while the broader southern region continues to pose a challenge to the BJP's ambition of nationwide electoral dominance.

Western India: Sustained Dominance with Minor Fluctuations

In western India, particularly in Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Goa, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has largely maintained its dominance since 2014, albeit with some fluctuations in vote share and seat tally. In Maharashtra, the party experienced a modest decline in both seats and vote share between the 2014 and 2019 Assembly elections, indicating increasing electoral competition [18]. Similarly, in Gujarat, although the BJP retained power in 2017, its seat count declined compared to previous elections, reflecting a narrowing margin of dominance despite a stable vote base [39], the BJP strengthened its position in Goa, improving both its seat tally and vote share in subsequent elections, demonstrating its ability to consolidate power in smaller states [14], the BJP's performance in western India reflects relative stability with incremental electoral adjustments rather than structural decline.

Rest of India: Expansion and Competitive Gains

Beyond its traditional strongholds, the BJP has made notable inroads in regions such as Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, and Odisha. In Jammu and Kashmir, the party emerged as a significant political force in the 2014 Assembly elections, particularly in the Jammu region [11]. In West Bengal, the BJP's growth has been particularly striking. While its performance in 2016 was modest, the party dramatically expanded its presence in the 2021 Assembly elections, emerging as the principal opposition and significantly increasing its vote share [12]. Similarly, in Odisha, the BJP improved its electoral performance, increasing both its seat share and vote percentage, signaling gradual expansion in eastern India [13].

Conclusion

Since 2014, the BJP has established itself as the dominant force in national politics, reshaping India's party system. However, its performance in state elections reveals important limitations. The party has faced electoral setbacks in several states, including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, highlighting the impact of anti-incumbency and localized political dynamics, the BJP's relationships with regional allies have evolved, with several long-standing alliances weakening or dissolving due to competitive expansion strategies. This shift has intensified direct competition between the BJP and regional parties, altering the nature of

coalition politics. A important feature of post-2014 politics is the divergence between national and state-level voting behavior. While national elections are increasingly shaped by a centralized leadership-driven narrative, state elections continue to be influenced by local issues and regional identities. As a result, despite its hegemonic position at the national level, the BJP faces challenges in fully overcoming state-specific political dynamics, while India appears to be moving toward a dominant-party system led by the BJP, the persistence of regional diversity and electoral variability suggests that this dominance remains dynamic and contested.

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