

Electoral Realignment in India: Party System Dynamics in the 16th Lok Sabha Elections (2014)

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Introduction

The 16th Lok Sabha elections 2014 embarked on distinctly different phase of Indian democratic journey, with distinct change in party politics in the 21st century. The party system has gone through several stages since independence. It persisted through a "one party dominant system" or "Congress System," a brief bi-party system, a multi-party system, bi-polarity or multi-polarity, and finally majority party rule. The 15th Lok Sabha elections of 2009 saw a shift in the party system toward alliance politics and alliance formation, spearheaded by national political parties like the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by the Congress, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP, the Third Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) {CPI (M)}, and the Lalu-Paswan Mulayam grouping, known as the Fourth Front. The parliamentary elections in 2014 was different from earlier elections, produced one major party rule (BJP led NDA) at the Centre, which brought changes in the power structure at the top.

Origin and Evolution of Party System in India

Political parties were emerging in Asia as a result of colonialism. Many social, economic, and political organizations, such as the British Indian Associations of Calcutta, Madras, Bombay 1851/52, Singh Sabha, and Arya Samaj, among others, attempted over time to raise political consciousness among the general public and provide a platform for the party system in particular. A. O. Hume's creation of the Indian National Congress in December 1885 marked the start of a new era in party evolution.

The first phase was described as the "Congress System" by Rajni Kothari and the "one party dominant system" by Morris Jones. In eight state assemblies out of sixteen states in 1967—Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras/Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh—the regional forces made their presence known by undermining the Congress's overwhelming dominance. Thirty years of Congress Party rule, eleven years of Indira Gandhi's administration, and twenty-one months of an emergency that had put the country on an authoritarian path came to an end in 1977 with the post-emergency general election. The Congress Party and Janata Party engaged in direct combat during this phase of the 1977 parliamentary elections. With a two-thirds (2/3) majority in the Lower House and 351 seats, the results of the 7th Lok Sabha elections in 1980 reinstated the Congress' hegemony. With less than 43% of all valid votes cast in its favor, it was able to secure sixty-seven percentage seats in the House of People. The assassination of Indira Gandhi cast a shadow over the 1984 national elections and created a wave of sympathy for the Congress Party. This led to the Congress Party, led by Rajiv Gandhi, winning 404 Lok Sabha seats with 49.10 percent of the vote.

Emergence of Multi-Party System at National Level and Coalition Politics: 1989-1999:

The decisive stimulus for change came between 1989 and 1991 in what was christened as the three 'Ms' of Indian politics, that is, 'Madal, Mandir and Market' (Mandal Commission report, Lord Rama Temple and new economic policy). The five general elections held between 1989 to 1999 outcome demonstrated certain facts of life concerned with party politics. Firstly, the Indian National Congress was unable to return to the position it had before 1989. Secondly,

there was no viable alternate of party to replace the Congress Party. By 1999, the Janata Dal (JD) turned into a small number of region based parties with various JD offshoots, willing to join BJP coalition government.

National Alliance System and Resurgence of Congress Party: 2004-2009:

The 14th Lok Sabha elections in 2004 marked the first time that two significant alliances, the NDA and the UPA, competed at the national level in Indian politics. A pivotal moment in the Congress Party's history, the alliance's formation helped them win the 2004 national elections. However, the BJP gave in to hubris (extreme pride) and rejected important allies like the DMK, among others. TRS, RJD, DMK, NCP, JMM, PDP, and others were affiliated with the Congress Party. It was made possible by this alliance formation to establish a ruling coalition with Manmohan Singh as the nation's prime minister. With the exception of a few expectations, the BJP's electoral performance fell well short of those of its major alliance partners.

CPI (M), which pulled together their respective constituents. These major national parties stressed on different political issues. The BJP's NDA emphasized on the issue of leadership and personality factor along with criticizing the ruling coalition of the UPA-I. The Congress responded to these, besides trying to seek reelection on the basis of its own programme. The outcome of general elections indicated that the issues raised by the NDA and Third Front during the campaign, did not cut much ice with Indian voters; instead, they gave larger mandate to Congress Party than in 2004. In a nut shell, the general elections in 2009, was contested on menu of issues, which rose by political parties in general, and three formations, in particular. The National Election Study 2009, by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, indicated that the issues such as nuclear deal, terrorism, 'Ram Setu', and black money etc. raised by political parties had almost no impact on voting decisions of voters and voters did not consider these as relevant. By and large, it seems that 15th Lok Sabha elections were determined by the outcome of many "small battles, fought on local issues", not on caste and community lines.

Moreover, during their election campaigns and rallies, each party emphasized a specific issue and raised important slogans. Their policy thrust was broadly indicated by these slogans. The Congress Party's slogans were "stability" and "inclusive growth" through inclusive governance, "Bharat Nirman" (India growth), "aam aadmi ke badhte kadam, har kadam per bharat buland" (common man steps towards progress and on each step of common man India is growing), and, most importantly, "jai ho" (towards victory) from the Oscar-winning movie Slumdog Millionaires to draw large crowds at rallies and other events. The BJP promoted key slogans 'good governance', development, security and attempted to project the personality of its leader, L.K. Advani by airing slogans 'majboot neta, nirnayak sarkar' (strong leader, decisive government). The leadership of BJP spoke against indecisiveness of the UPA-I government. The 2009 parliamentary elections became more of collection of numerous state elections, in which local issues were defining the contest. 'The localization of national election' was only a reflection of changing India. The results of the 2009 parliamentary elections, conclusively demonstrated that the Congress' alliance strategy paid it rich dividends. Consequently, the UPA won 262 seats, with Congress alone getting 206 seats and crossing the 200 mark for the first time since 1991, its share of popular votes also rose to 28.6 percent, an increase of two percent of over 2004. On all accounts, the position of the Congress Party in the Parliament was impregnable.

Toward Majority Party Rule: 2014 General Elections:

Unlike previous elections, the 2014 parliamentary elections resulted in a single major party rule at the center, which altered the top power structure. With 282 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP secured an absolute majority in the Lower House. These days, a party's ability to stay in power for an extended period of time depends less on the backing of its alliance partners. As a result, NDA members are no longer as significant in matters of national policy and power distribution. Therefore Indian polity, in general and party system in particular now entered into a new era of 'one party majority rule', in which BJP occupied the position of dominance in ruling alliance of NDA in 2014.

Unlike 2009 general elections, the main contest was between two alliances, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) head by the Congress Party and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP in 2014. Each alliance was supported by smaller regional parties, although in several states the two main alliances faced considerable opposition from the strong regional parties that fought election independently.

These were regional parties, and their leaders—J. Jayalalitha of the AIADMK, Mamata Banerjee of the TC, Naveen Patnaik of the BJD, Chandrashekhar Rao of the TRS, Chandrababu Naidu of the TDP, and Jagan Mohan Reddy of the YRS Congress—survived in their respective regions by keeping their distance from the Congress and the BJP. According to the data, 64 of the 86 registered parties that ran in Lok Sabha elections between 1989 and 2014 are still active in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Some have discontinued, while others have combined with other organizations. The number of parties running for and winning seats has significantly increased as a result of the party system's fragmentation or federalization. There has been a significant rise in the category of regional parties.

The emergence of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) gave voters another option in 2014 general elections. Its new approach to politics and aggressive campaign against corruption appealed to many voters. There had been a surge of support for AAP after its success in 2013 Delhi assembly election. Consequently, the AAP was turning out to be an emerging third force. But AAP's abdication from government responsibility caused widespread disillusionment among voters. It won only four Lok Sabha seats from Punjab and two percent of the national votes. However, the AAP did much to set the agenda of the election, directing attention towards the issue of governance and corruption.

The issues of corruption, governance and development were prominent in elections. The BJP emphasised development of robust infrastructure, opening up of Indian economy to private capital, and building a brand India making it a globally competitive economy. Narendra Modi harped upon the Gujarat model of development based on rapid industrialisation by providing necessary incentives to the business houses to set up industries and business and focusing on the development of infrastructures such as roads, ports, electricity and water. The BJP manifesto proclaimed that India instead of remaining a market for global industry, should become a global manufacturing hub.¹⁸ The BJP and Modi campaign was focused on economic growth, development, infrastructure and creation of jobs etc rather than previous core issues of the party such as Lord Rama Temple, Article 370 and Common Civil Code. Narendra Modi maintained distance from inflammatory remarks of party leaders such as Amit Shah, Giriraj Singh and Pravin Togadia by stating that "they don't derail the party". Narendra Modi like Tony Blair reinvented the BJP, and made the party market friendly, which was not pushing 'swadeshi economics', but governance and not religious politics.

In public discourse, Modi filled a void. Rahul Gandhi was still a reluctant public speaker at the time, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had fallen into an apparently permanent state of silence. His natural ability to speak made him a popular choice for audiences looking for efficient transportation. The goal was to position Modi as an urban hero in addition to a pen-India leader. The rupee fell to its lowest point in relation to the dollar during the month Modi was crowned prime minister, and retail inflation was in double digits. He symbolized and channelized the anger of urban people against the UPA-II government by using various slogans such as Ma Ganga ne bulaya hai; Janata Maaf nahi Karegi, Bahut Hua Bhrastachar, Abki bar Modi Sarkar (the voter will not forgive, enough of corruption, time for Modi government) chappan inch kee chahati etc.

The Modi had addressed more than 200 rallies by end of March 2014 since becoming BJP's prime ministerial candidate in September 2013. And planned to address 185 rallies spread across 295 constituencies, often doing four, at time even six, in a single day. It is estimated that Modi would have travelled 300000 kilometres, or seven time the earth's equatorial circumference. These rallies established that he is not just as a politician but as a trailblazer, who had evolved, or rather reinvented himself, from demagogue to statesman, from divisive figure to governance guru, from a Hindu identity politician to a problem solving man-the kind who would appeal to an increasingly urbanizing society.

The BJP set 'mission 272-plus', which strategized election as a business venture. The mission 272-plus was signified a desire to win clear majority in the general election. The plus word is referred to think positive. "The more we aim, the more we will get" stated by Narendra Modi. The mission 272 was calculated move, keeping in mind that the BJP did not have an all-India base like Congress, but largely focused on north, west and central India. The belt from Maharashtra in the west to Bihar in the north had 314 Lok Sabha seats across fourteen small and large states.

Clear Mandate for Modi led BJP:

The Narendra Modi cyclone reduced the Congress Party to a double-digit total of forty-four Lok Sabha seats for the first time since independence and cost them the title of Leader of the Opposition. The outcome of the 16th Lok Sabha represents the next phase of "post-Congress polity." Because it lacks the political will and intellectual competence to truly present an alternative to the BJP in terms of governance or political theory, the Congress Party will not be the BJP's main rival during this phase. The primary change in the system is the replacement of coalition politics with majority party rule. The nation is moving from coalition government issues to those resulting from "majority party rule" under a powerful leader. A noteworthy level of political maturity was demonstrated in 2014 by a peaceful transfer of power in terms of parties and structure. In other words, one evident outcome of what might be called a historic election is the replacement of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Congress Party, after ten years with a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) clear majority.

The decisive mandate in favour of Narendra Modi and the BJP challenged traditional political assumption of caste and religion. The Modi's success at articulating an economic agenda and turning it into an electoral rallying point that transcends barriers of caste and religion is a precedent in Indian politics. The four factors seem to have worked in favour of BJP. (I) Narendra Modi took firm control over the party and generate among its core support base. (II) Well organised electoral campaign (III) the anti-incumbency factor fuelled by widespread perception of corruption, lack of development and poor governance of the ruling Congress. (IV) The BJP's

prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and his party campaign focused on economic growth and jobs rather than decisive Hindu nationalist issues as building Ram Temple at Ayodhya Article 370 and Common Civil Code etc. For that, Modi and his team had started early and single-mindedly spearheaded a well-conceived election campaign, using social media and gadgets to reach out to the maximum number. The BJP and RSS cadre worked like a team to orchestrate a presidential form of campaign, pitching a performer Modi against an inexperienced Rahul Gandhi, while the Congress muddled along, trying to make it a communalism versus secularism fight. The Congress had no effective communicator to match Modi. To choose between Modi and Rahul, the voters did not have to think twice.

The 2014 ruling demonstrated the extent of the public's disenchantment with the UPA, whose leadership had not generated much optimism. People had firmly supported a national party headed by a capable leader due to their desire for change. Relentless price increases, an ongoing economic downturn, a lack of governance, freebie politics, minority appeasement, and widespread corruption all caused them to react violently. Over the past two years, the nation's growth rate has fallen below 5%. There were fewer job openings. The Congress forgot reforms so essential to push growth and create jobs. Focusing on rights-based entitlements, it wooed the poor, who were hit hard by price rise, which remained unmanageable and extracted a heavy political price. In a nut-shell, the aspirational middle class, which in 2009 had pinned its hopes on Manmohan Singh, turned to Narendra Modi, who held out the promise of growth, jobs and efficient governance. To domestic and global business houses Modi offered a re-play at the national level of the popular vibrant Gujarat model.

Conclusion

The dynamics of the Indian party system underwent a dramatic change following the 16th Lok Sabha elections in 2014. The long period of coalition politics that had dominated national governance since the late 1980s was clearly broken by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) resounding victory. The BJP proved the increasing appeal of centralized leadership, unified ideology, and successful electoral mobilization by obtaining an absolute majority on its own. In contrast to the fragmented mandates of earlier elections, this result indicated a renewed preference among voters for stable and decisive governance. The election also highlighted important structural shifts within the party system. While national politics appeared to move toward single-party dominance, regional parties continued to exert influence at the state level, indicating the coexistence of centralization and regionalism in Indian democracy. The BJP's success was further reinforced by innovative campaigning strategies, extensive use of digital media, and the projection of a strong leadership narrative, which reshaped electoral communication and voter engagement.

The 2014 elections redefined the contours of party competition in India. They underscored the adaptability of the Indian party system and raised critical questions about the future of coalition politics, ideological polarization, and democratic representation. The mandate for the BJP thus represents both a moment of consolidation and a catalyst for ongoing change within India's evolving democratic framework.

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