



India’s Domestic Political Setting

Overview

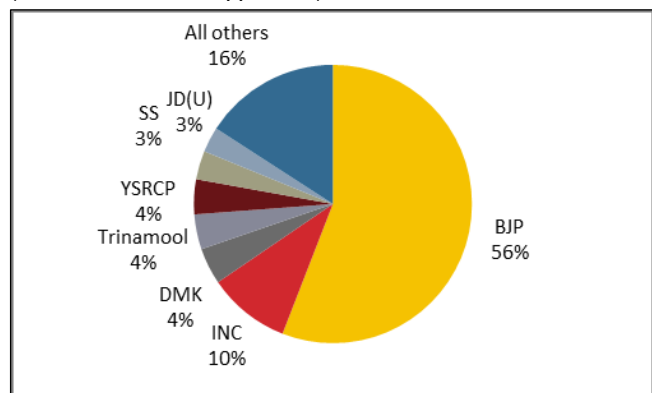
India, the world’s most populous democracy, is, according to its Constitution, a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic” where the bulk of executive power rests with the prime minister and his Council of Ministers (the Indian president is a ceremonial chief of state with limited executive powers). Since its 1947 independence, most of India’s 14 prime ministers have come from the country’s Hindi-speaking northern regions, and all but 3 have been upper-caste Hindus. The 543-seat **Lok Sabha (House of the People)** is the locus of national power, with directly elected representatives from each of the country’s 29 states and 7 union territories. The president has the power to dissolve this body. A smaller upper house of a maximum 250 seats, the **Rajya Sabha (Council of States)**, may review, but not veto, revenue legislation, and has no power over the prime minister or his/her cabinet. Lok Sabha and state legislators are elected to five-year terms. Rajya Sabha legislators are elected by state assemblies to six-year terms; 12 are appointed by the president.

Elections to seat India’s 17th Lok Sabha were held in April and May 2019, when the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, or “Indian Peoples Party”) won a sweeping and repeat victory under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In 2014, the BJP had become the first party to attain a parliamentary majority in 30 years, and it was able to expand that majority in 2019 to become the first party to win consecutive majorities since 1971. Modi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist, ran a campaign seen as divisive by many analysts. While he and his party have long sought to emphasize development and good governance, five years in office have brought a mixed record, and this election cycle revolved around nationalism, with growing concerns among many observers that strident Hindu majoritarianism represents a threat both to India’s religious minorities and to the country’s syncretic traditions. Still, hundreds of millions across the country voted to keep the remarkably popular prime minister in power for another term. The BJP, under then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, previously had led a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition in power from 1999 to 2004.

The Indian National Congress Party (hereinafter “Congress Party”) and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition, in power from 2004-2014 with Manmohan Singh in the top office, suffered a second consecutive electoral rout. The party of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress had dominated the country’s politics from 1947 to 1977. Nehru’s daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mohandas Gandhi), and her son, Rajiv, also served as prime minister; both were assassinated in office. The party’s presumed prime ministerial candidate in 2014 and 2019, Rajiv’s son, Rahul, again oversaw a failure to win even the 10% of seats required to officially lead the Lok Sabha opposition.

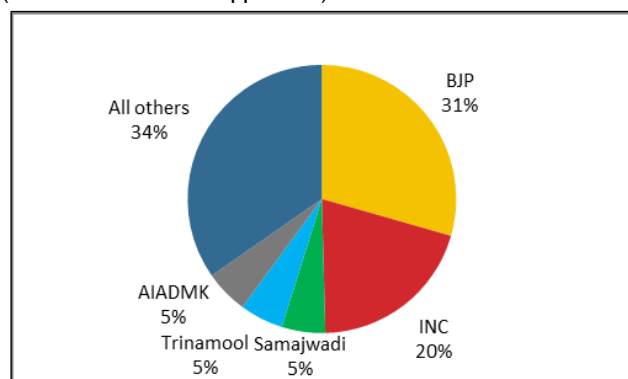
The BJP and Congress are India’s only genuinely national parties. In previous recent national elections they together won roughly half of all votes cast, but in 2019 the BJP boosted its share to nearly 38% of the estimated 600 million votes cast (to Congress’s 20%; turnout was a record 67%). The influence of regional and caste-based (and often “family-run”) parties—although blunted by two consecutive BJP majority victories—remains a crucial variable in Indian politics. Such parties now hold nearly one-third of Lok Sabha seats. In 2019, more than 8,000 candidates and hundreds of parties vied for parliament seats; 33 of those parties won at least one seat. The seven parties listed below account for 84% of Lok Sabha seats (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Party Representation in the 17th Lok Sabha (543 total seats + 2 appointed)



The BJP’s economic reform agenda can be impeded in the Rajya Sabha, where opposition parties can align to block certain nonrevenue legislation (see **Figure 2**).

Figure 2. Party Representation in the Rajya Sabha (233 total seats + 12 appointed)



Key Government Officials

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** was chief minister of the economically dynamic and relatively developed western

state of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 before becoming India's first-ever lower-caste prime minister. He is a lifelong member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or "National Volunteer Organization"; see below).

Defense Minister **Rajnath Singh** was home minister from 2014 to 2019, BJP president during the 2014 campaign, and has served as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and in the cabinet of the BJP-led government from 1999 to 2004.

Home Minister **Amit Shah**, a top Modi lieutenant and campaign strategist from Gujarat, is also a longtime RSS member, and has been BJP party president since 2014. His first federal cabinet appointment came in 2019.

Finance Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman**, India's first-ever female finance minister, is a Tamil Nadu native and was the BJP's national spokeswoman before serving as defense minister from 2017 to 2019.

External Affairs Minister **Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** was foreign secretary from 2015 to 2018 and has served as India's Ambassador to the United States and China. He is the first-ever career diplomat to hold the MEA portfolio.

Commerce and Industry Minister and Railways Minister **Piyush Goyal**, a former investment banker and BJP stalwart from Maharashtra, has led the railways ministry since 2017 and received the commerce portfolio in 2019.

National Security Advisor **Ajit Kumar Doval**, who took the post in 2014, is a veteran intelligence officer from Kerala and served as Director of the Intelligence Bureau from 2004 to 2005.

President **Ram Nath Kovind**, a former BJP Rajya Sabha member from Uttar Pradesh, became head of state in 2017.

Leading Parties

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) arose in 1980 as the political wing of the RSS, a militant Hindu nationalist and social service group itself founded in 1925 and progenitor of dozens of affiliated organizations (the "Sangh Parivar"). The BJP advocates Hindu nationalism ("Hindutva") and is right-leaning on social policy with a generally more pro-business outlook than others, although it is also home to "swadeshi" (self-sufficiency) sentiments. The party emerged as the only national-level competitor for the Indian National Congress after 1998. The BJP won 303 Lok Sabha seats with 38% of the popular vote in 2019.

Indian National Congress is generally regarded as a populist, center-left party, although a Congress-led government presided over significant economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, is UPA chairwoman and their son, Rahul, serves as party president. Both offered to resign in the wake of historic electoral defeats in 2014 and 2019. The UPA-leading party won 52 Lok Sabha seats with 20% of the 2019 vote.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is a **Tamil Nadu**-based party led by former Chennai mayor M.K. Stalin. Social democratic with a mostly ethnic Tamil constituency, the UPA member won 23 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC), a professedly secular party, wins its support in **West Bengal**, where party

leader Mamata Banerjee is also chief minister. The AITMC, a UPA member from 2004 to 2012, won 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

YSR Congress (YSRCP) was founded in 2011 by Jaganmohan Reddy, the son of a former **Andhra Pradesh** chief minister, after an acrimonious split with Congress. It now dominates the state assembly and won 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Shiv Sena is a vociferously Hindu nationalist, ethnic Marathi party based in **Maharashtra** that has long aligned itself with the BJP at the national level. The NDA member won 18 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)), a secularist, social democratic party with its main votebank in **Bihar**, is led by state Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who aligned the party with the BJP in 2017. The NDA member won 16 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Others: Two major regional parties, Uttar Pradesh's Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party, were bitter rivals that struck a rare alliance to compete with the BJP in 2019. They garnered a combined 47% of the state's total votes, but won a disproportionately low 15 of the state's 80 Lok Sabha seats. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the regional All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), an NDA member, received nearly 19% of the state's votes while winning one of the state's 38 Lok Sabha seats.

Federal System and State Elections

The Indian Constitution divides legislative powers into a Union List, a State List, and a Concurrent List. Although India's union government is granted more powers than in most other federal systems (including that of the United States), the State List provides state assemblies and their chief ministers with exclusive powers over 66 "items," including public order, law enforcement, health care, and power, communication, and transportation networks.

Nearly half of Indians live in only five states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh, with more than 200 million citizens, was among five states holding elections in 2017; these were widely previewed as being a referendum on the central government's performance to date, and they brought a sweeping win for the BJP, which ousted the incumbent Samajwadi Party to take more than three-quarters of Uttar Pradesh's assembly seats—the largest majority for any party in the key "Hindu belt" state since 1980.

Despite some state-level setbacks in late 2018 (Congress won convincingly in Madhya Pradesh and two other states), the BJP is now in power in 12 Indian states, with allied party chief ministers in another 6. The Congress Party controls four state governments, with an ally leading one other. Steadily broadening its state assembly presence in recent years, the BJP now accounts for nearly one-third of the country's state legislators, as compared to just over one-fifth for the declining Congress. This is expected to lead to a BJP majority in the Rajya Sabha as soon as 2021.

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