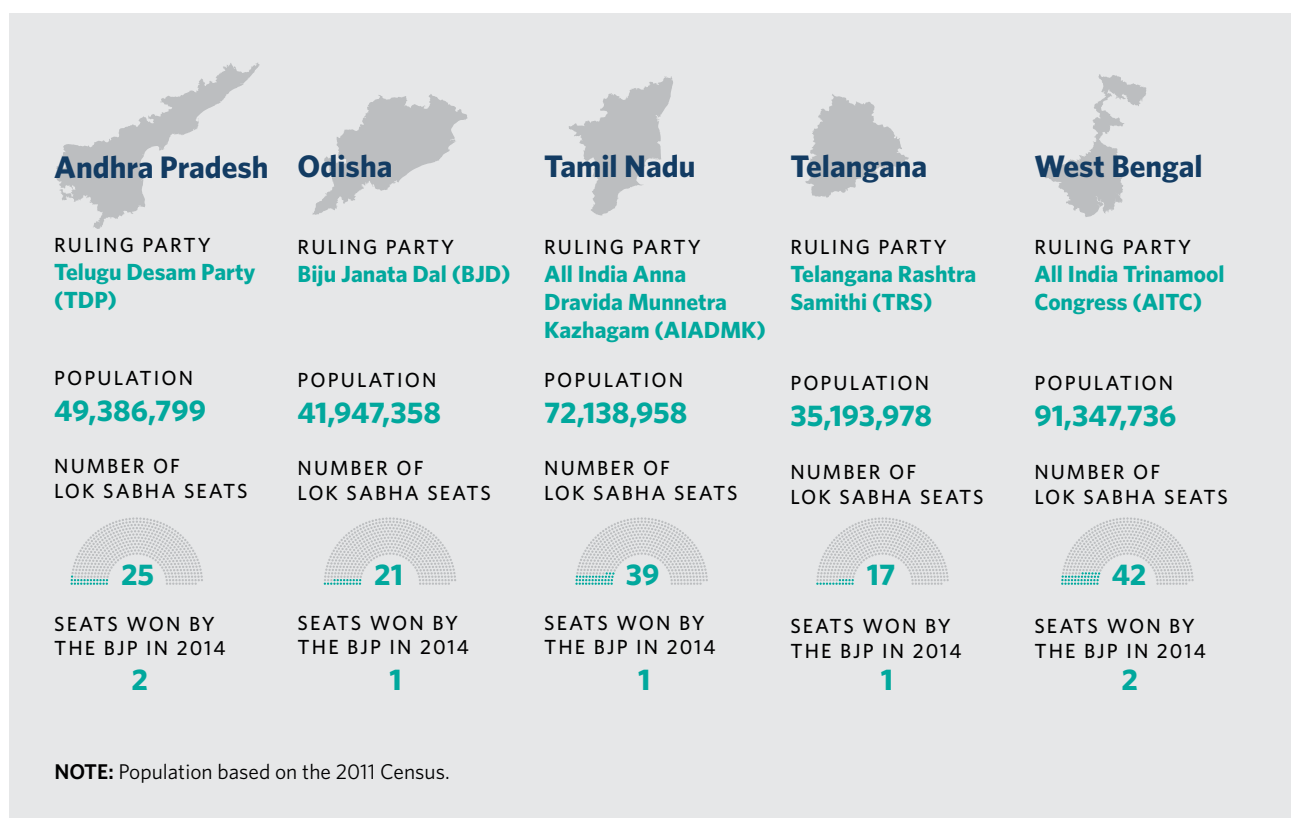INDIA ELECTS 2019

The BJP's East Coast Challenge

MILAN VAISHNAV AND JAMIE HINTSON

With India's December 2018 state elections now settled, analysts have begun prognosticating about the outcome of the spring's main event: the country's general election. Following the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) losses in three critical states in the so-called Hindi heartland—Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan—nearly all election experts expect that the BJP will struggle to equal its 2014 performance, in which it bagged a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha (India's lower house of parliament). The primary reason for this shared consensus is that, if the recent state elections are any guide, the BJP is set to lose a considerable clutch of seats in north and central India, which disproportionately powered its rise in 2014. Five years ago, the BJP eviscerated opposition parties in the heartland. In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, the party's alliance won 73 out of 80 seats. In Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, the BJP won a combined 78 out of 80 seats on offer. Whether due to lackluster job creation, rural economic anxiety, a newly collaborative opposition, or India's counterintuitive trends against incumbency, the number of BJP seats in this electorally crucial region will necessarily come down.

This means that the BJP is on the hunt for new seats it can pick up to offset the losses it will likely sustain in its core areas. Priority number one for the ruling party is making inroads along India's eastern seaboard—a long stretch of territory extending from West Bengal in the northeast down India's coast to the southernmost tip of Tamil Nadu. Together, the five states on this seaboard—Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, and West Bengal—account for 290 million people, or one-quarter of the Indian population (see box).

INDIA'S EAST COAST BATTLEGROUND

In India's 2019 general election, the five states that comprise India's eastern seaboard will be crucial electoral battlegrounds. While each is currently governed by a different regional political party, the BJP believes that it can improve its presence in the region to buttress its efforts to recapture a parliamentary majority—either on its own or through allies.

Andhra Pradesh	Odisha	Tamil Nadu	Telangana	West Bengal
RULING PARTY	RULING PARTY	RULING PARTY	RULING PARTY	RULING PARTY
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS)	All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)
POPULATION	POPULATION	POPULATION	POPULATION	POPULATION
49,386,799	41,947,358	72,138,958	35,193,978	91,347,736
NUMBER OF LOK SABHA SEATS	NUMBER OF LOK SABHA SEATS	NUMBER OF LOK SABHA SEATS	NUMBER OF LOK SABHA SEATS	NUMBER OF LOK SABHA SEATS
25	21	39	17	42
SEATS WON BY THE BJP IN 2014	SEATS WON BY THE BJP IN 2014	SEATS WON BY THE BJP IN 2014	SEATS WON BY THE BJP IN 2014	SEATS WON BY THE BJP IN 2014
2	1	1	1	2

NOTE: Population based on the 2011 Census.

This translates into 144 parliamentary seats (out of a total strength of 543). In India's 2014 general election results, this corridor is conspicuous by the BJP's absence (see figure 1). Whether, and to what extent, the BJP is able to improve its performance on India's eastern coast could make or break its 2019 chances.

REGIONAL VERSUS REGIONALIST PARTIES

Political scientist K. K. Kailash has argued that the BJP faced three kinds of electoral opponents in achieving its historic election victory in 2014. The first was the Congress Party, the BJP's archrival and the only other political party with a pan-Indian footprint. Fortunately for the BJP, the Congress was uniquely unpopular due to its ineffective, scandal-tainted second term in power between 2009 and 2014. As a result, where the Congress

and the BJP were the two most competitive parties, the BJP simply cleaned the floor with its national rival (see figure 2). In the 189 contests in which the BJP and Congress were the top two parties, the BJP won 166, or 88 percent.[1]

The second category consists of regional parties, or parties that are only electorally relevant in a specific region but may have larger national ambitions. The BJP also performed very well against parties in this category—such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and the Janata Dal (United)—which are largely concentrated in the Hindi belt. When pitted against regional parties, the BJP even fared slightly better than it did against the Congress, winning 91 percent of 114 head-to-head contests.

The third category of opponent is a different type of regional party—what Kailash calls a "regionalist" party.

FIGURE 1
BJP's Performance, 2014 Lok Sabha Election
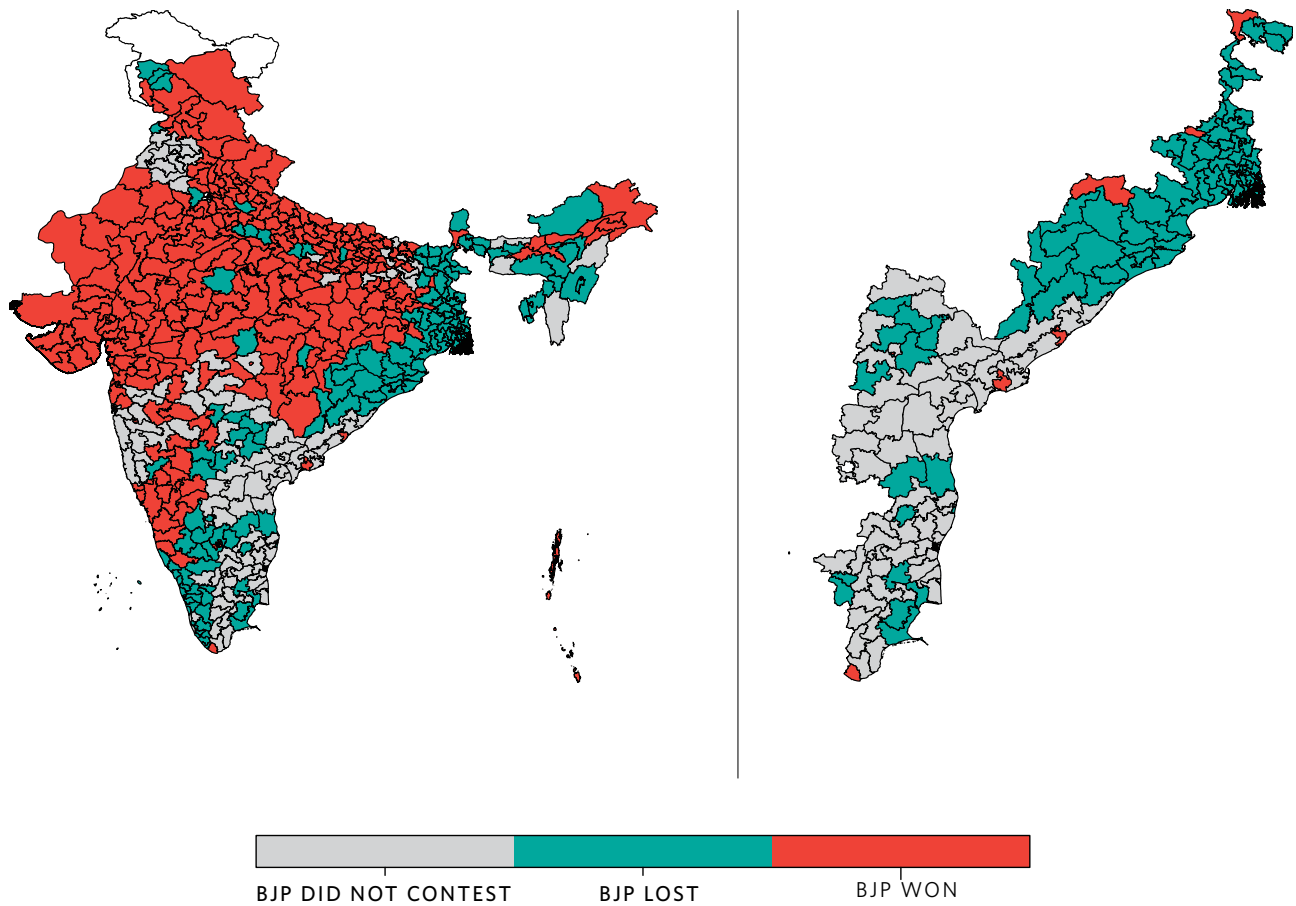
BJP DID NOT CONTEST   BJP LOST   BJP WON

SOURCE: Author's analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

Regionalist parties are regional in the sense that their electoral catchment is geographically circumscribed. But, unlike parties in the second camp, regionalist parties focus on the interests of their particular states, and they mobilize voters by frequently appealing to their state's regional pride, culture, language, and customs. By and large, regionalist parties dominate politics in the eastern seaboard, and the BJP struggled to make much of a dent when facing them in 2014 (see figure 3, on page 5). For instance, in the state of West Bengal, the ruling AITC won 34 of the state's 42 seats. In Odisha, the BJD won

21 of 22 seats. In Tamil Nadu, the AIADMK captured 37 of the state's 39 seats on offer.

All told, the BJP won just 7 out of the region's 144 seats on offer in 2014 (see figure 4, on page 6). This was actually an improvement from the lone seat the party won in 2009 yet still only matches the party's 2004 performance. The largest number of seats the BJP has won in this region was 22, back in 1999 (it claimed 15 seats in 1998 but, prior to that, had been virtually shut out of the eastern coast).

FIGURE 2

Comparison of the BJP's Performance Against Its Opponents, 2014 Lok Sabha Election
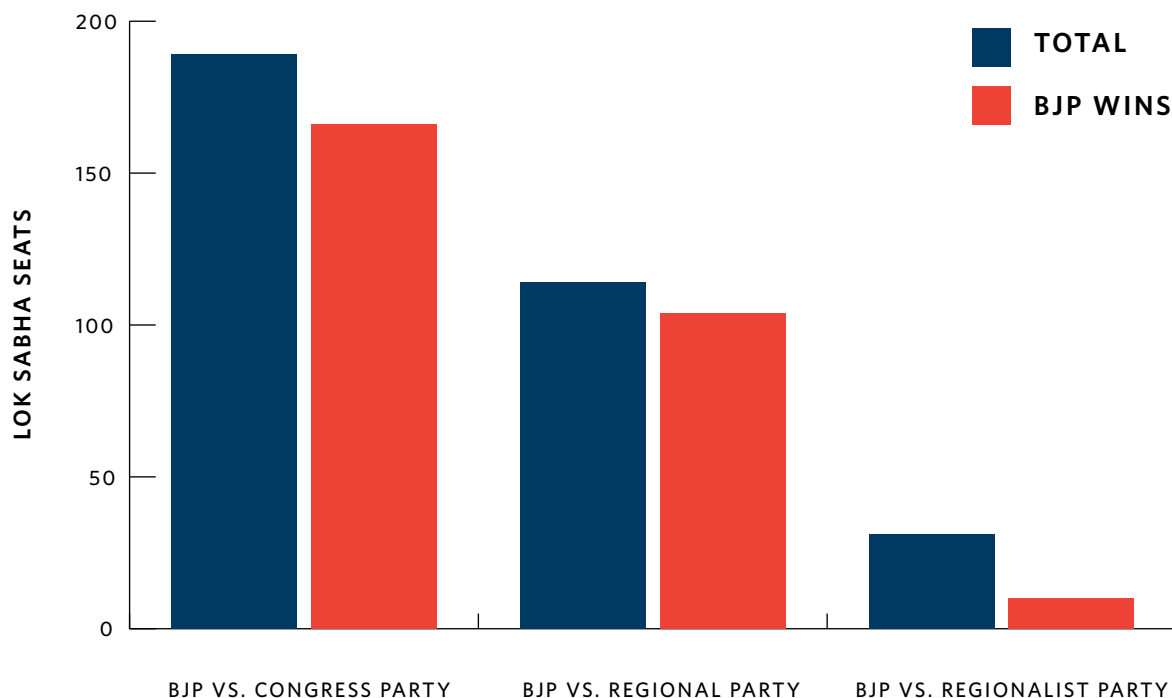
SOURCE: Author's analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

NOTE: The figure considers those electoral contests in which the BJP and either a) the Congress, b) regional parties, or c) regionalist parties were among the top two finishers in a constituency election. Parties were coded using the classification documented in K. K. Kailash, "Who Survived and Why? Regional Parties in the 16th Lok Sabha Elections," Economic and Political Weekly 49, no. 39 (September 27, 2014): 64-71.

The BJP has generally struggled against regionalist parties for several reasons. First, the BJP is widely perceived to be a party of northern India, which historically provides the bulk of the party's leadership and support. Second, the BJP espouses a pan-Indian, polity-wide platform that might not grab the attention of voters in states where state-specific agenda items are top of mind. As Kailash has argued, if the BJP were to pander too strongly to state-specific interests, it might lose credibility in other states, placing it in a kind of catch-22.

Third, the BJP has typically done best on the eastern seaboard when working with local alliance partners. But electorally relevant parties have not always been willing to ally for the simple fact that their own brands might get tarnished in the process. In 2014, the BJP was able to leverage eventual Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity to bring several key allies to its side. The BJP struck an important alliance with the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and a coalition of smaller, Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu (the most consequential of which was the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam). In Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal, the party contested the election on its own (see figure 5, on page 7).

FIGURE 3

Regional Parties' Performances on the Eastern Seaboard, 2014 Lok Sabha Election
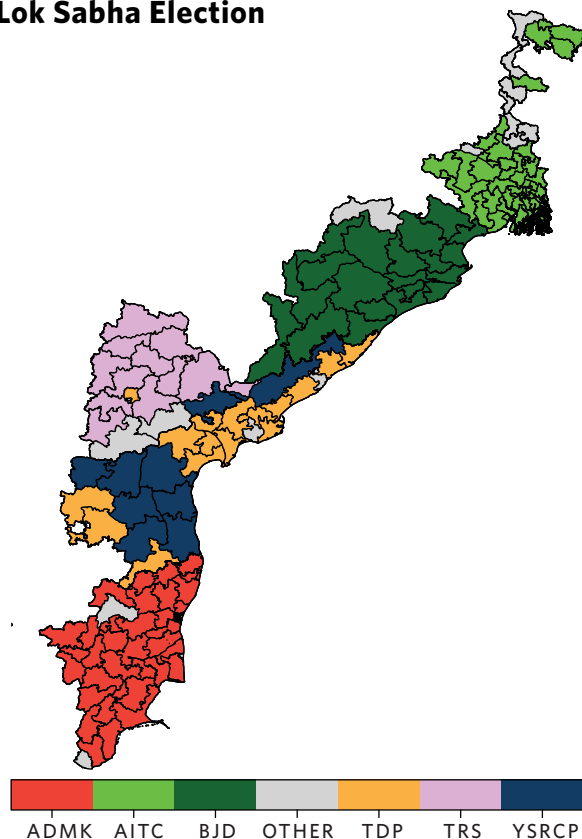
ADMK   AITC   BJD   OTHER   TDP   TRS   YSRCP

THE BJP'S "LOOK EAST" CHALLENGE

As the 2019 elections approach, the BJP faces a mixed picture when it comes to improving its prospects on the eastern seaboard.

Odisha

Odisha arguably represents the BJP's best chance on the eastern coast. For the past eighteen years, the Odisha government has been led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik of the BJD. This makes him the second-longest currently serving chief minister (after Sikkim's Pawan Chamling, who has been in office for twenty-four years). The BJD was once a BJP ally, but it broke with the party in 2009 and, since then, has maintained its distance from the two national parties, refusing to participate in a coalition headed by either the Congress or the BJP. While the BJP won just 1 seat (out of Odisha's 21 Lok Sabha seats) in 2014, losing the remainder to the BJD, it placed second for another 9 seats (see figure 6, on page 8).

The BJP's ability to build a political base in western Odisha means that it appears on track to eclipse the Congress as the principal opposition party in the state. In both the 2014 state assembly and national parliamentary elections, the BJP placed third (behind the BJD and the Congress), but its fortunes in local elections indicate a party on the rise. In 2016, the BJP put in a very strong showing in Odisha's local body elections, winning 297 of the state's 849 Zilla Parishad (district council) seats up for contest and 8 of 30 council chairperson positions—trailing only the BJD. The Congress finished a distant third.

As the race for 2019 heats up (the state will host simultaneous state and national elections), the BJP machinery has swung into action. It was no coincidence that Modi chose the city of Cuttack in Odisha to make a major address that kicked off his fourth year in office, in an attempt to raise the BJP's profile in the state and to enthuse the party's local cadre. In fact, the BJP's state unit has even raised the issue of Modi contesting elections from the coastal constituency of Puri in 2019 in an effort to galvanize the party's cadres in the state.[2] The BJP's president, Amit Shah, on a trip last July to inspect the status of the BJP's ground game in Odisha, gave a rousing speech in which he claimed Patnaik had

FIGURE 4
BJP's Performance on the Eastern Seaboard, 1984-2014 Lok Sabha Elections
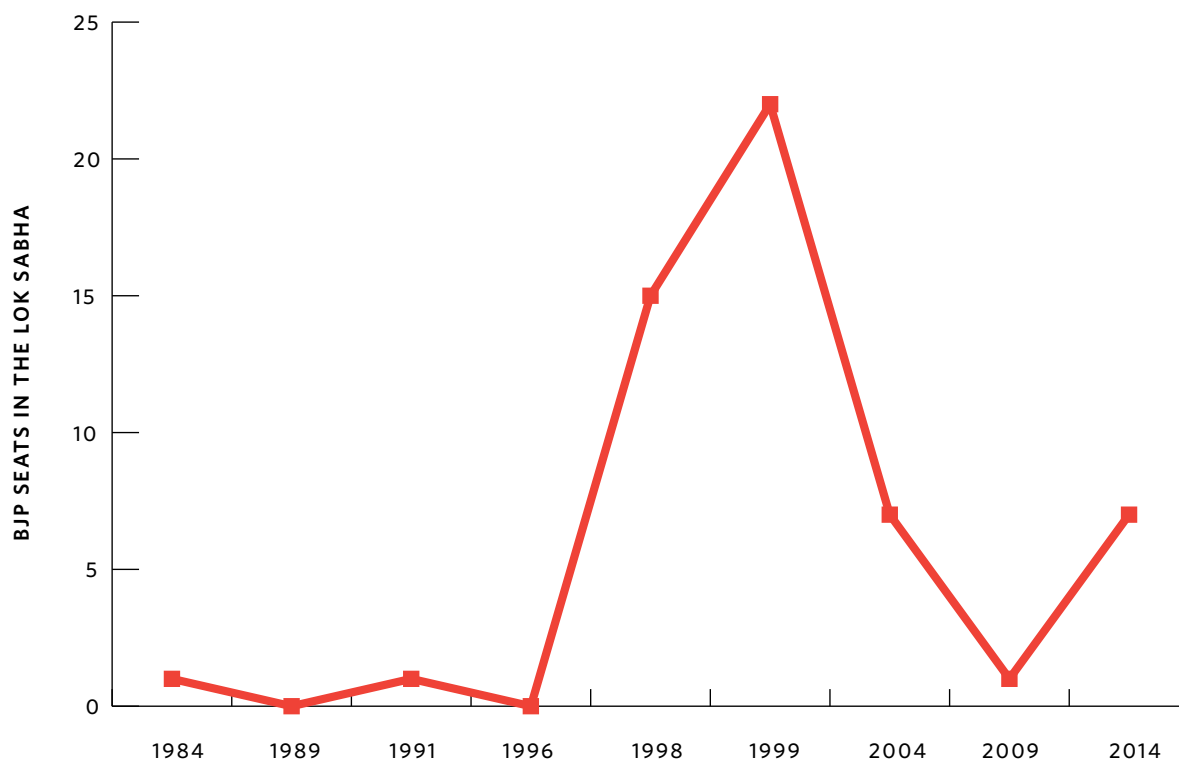
failed to develop the state after eighteen years and should resign. And, in November, a senior BJP functionary let slip that the party had chosen popular Union Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan, a member of parliament from Odisha, to face off with Patnaik as the BJP's chief ministerial candidate in 2019.

West Bengal

After Odisha, the BJP thinks that West Bengal offers the next best opportunity for potential growth. Like Odisha, a single party and a single leader—namely, the AITC and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee—dominate the political space in West Bengal. Historically, the BJP has been an afterthought in the state, trailing both the Congress Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in electoral reach. However, after thirty years of Left rule, the Communists' fortunes have been declining, and the Congress has been unable to gain significant ground since its ranks were hollowed out by Banerjee's exit from the party. The BJP has been the beneficiary of these shifting fortunes; in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the party won almost 17 percent of the vote—nearly tripling its 2009 share (see figure 7, on page 9).

While the BJP only claimed 2 of West Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats, it holds as many as the once-dominant Communists. And, as with Odisha, the BJP made inroads in the local body elections held in mid-2018.
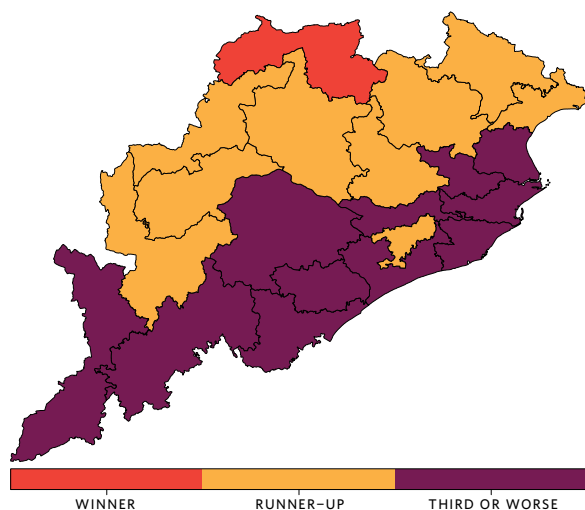
FIGURE 5
NDA's Performance on the Eastern Seaboard, 1984-2014 Lok Sabha Elections
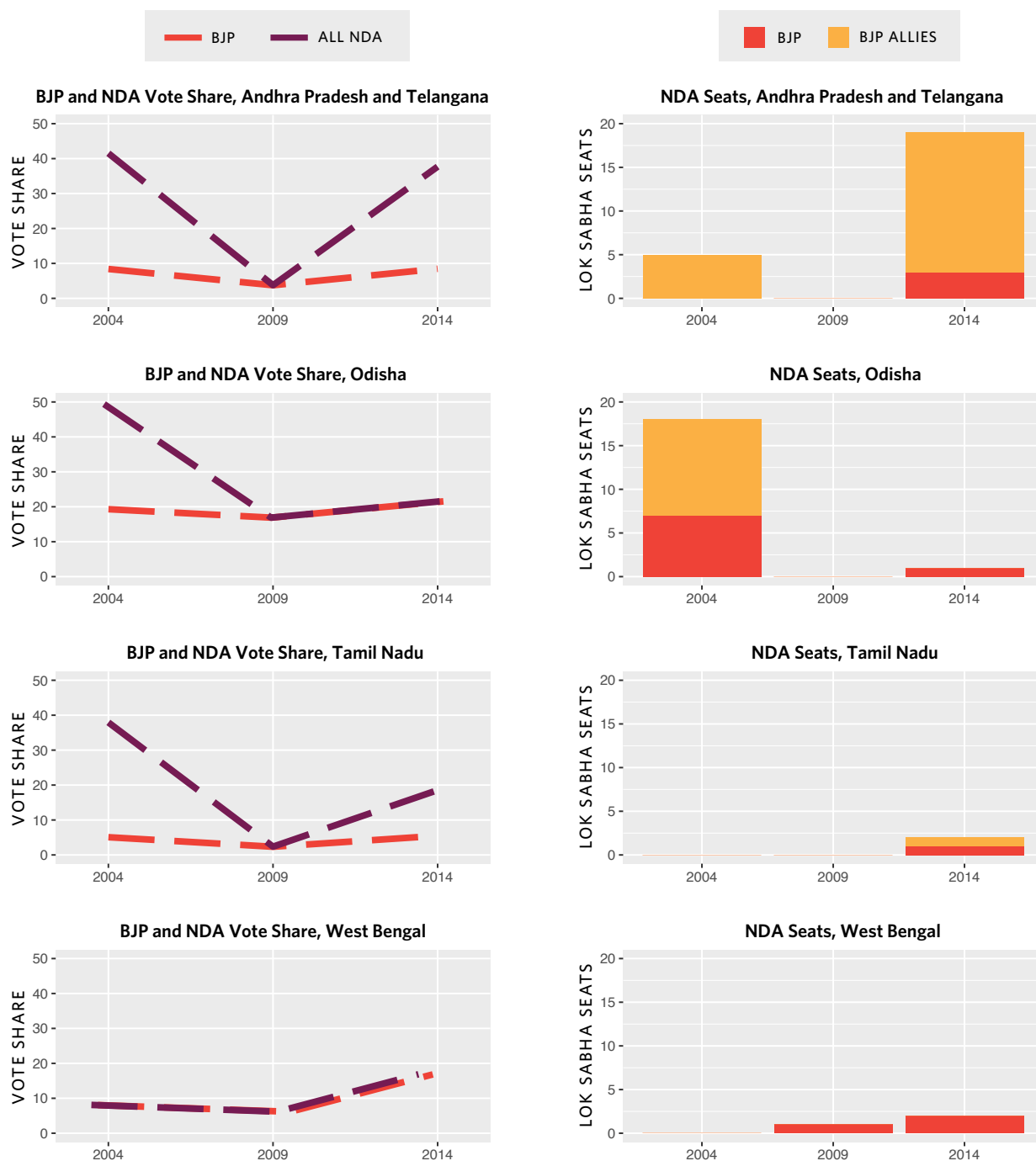
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

NOTE: The top panel combines the results from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, which went to polls together.

FIGURE 6
BJP's Performance in Odisha, 2014 Lok Sabha Election

WINNER   RUNNER-UP   THIRD OR WORSE

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

While the party remained a distant second to the AITC—winning 22 Zilla Parishad seats to the latter's 590—it bagged more seats in each of the three levels of rural local government than did all other opposition parties combined (including independents). Despite these hard-fought gains, the BJP's march remains an uphill one: it lacks a prominent Bengali leader, possesses a relatively weak organizational base, and must come to grips with the fact that Muslims make up 27 percent of the state's population (a demographic that is not a votary of the Hindu nationalist party).

But in both Odisha and West Bengal, the BJP's objective is clear: project itself as the principal opposition and expand its steadily growing presence. In both states, it will go its own way as there are no plausible coalition allies with which it can join forces. In the remaining three states—Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana—the BJP's path forward is less clear.

Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh, the alliance between the BJP and the ruling TDP—which helped lift the former's performance in 2014—collapsed in March 2018. The TDP pulled out of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance after the central government refused to accede to the Andhra Pradesh government's request for a special package that would boost the state's share of central fiscal transfers. As a result, no Andhra party is likely to strike a preelection agreement with the BJP, which has been branded as "anti-Andhra." Without the assistance of a regional ally, and given the ongoing spat between the state government and the BJP central government in New Delhi, it is unlikely the BJP can pick up a sizable number of seats in the state.

Telangana

The BJP was decisively trounced in Telangana's December 2018 assembly elections. The state had been due to hold state elections concurrently with this spring's Lok Sabha polls. In an effort to delink his party's electoral fortunes from a potential pro-Modi wave, K. Chandrashekar Rao, Telangana's chief minister and the TRS party president, abruptly dissolved the state assembly and called early elections. The wily maneuver paid rich dividends: the TRS captured 88 of 119 seats on offer—an increase of 25 seats over its previous tally. The BJP, already a marginal player in the state with just 5 seats in the assembly, was nearly wiped out; it boasts just a single seat now.

Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu is easily the hardest state to forecast as the current political situation is in flux. It is also the east coast state where the BJP is arguably on its weakest footing. The incumbent AIADMK has been in disarray since the December 2016 death of its longtime leader, Jayalalithaa, whose cult of personality dominated her party apparatus. Since her passing, the AIADMK has been engulfed in an internecine conflict between two wings of the party—

FIGURE 7

BJP's Performance in West Bengal, 1999-2014 Lok Sabha Elections
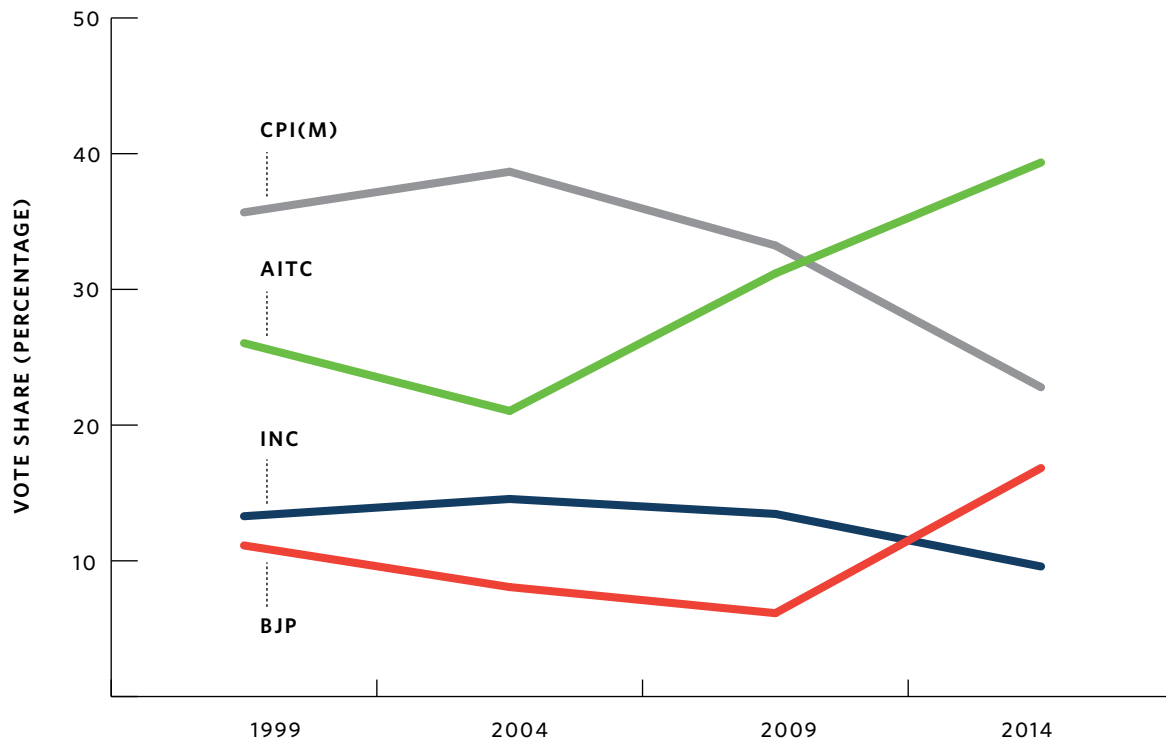
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

NOTE: Party abbreviations are as follows: All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]), and Indian National Congress (INC).

one led by Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami, the man handpicked by Jayalalithaa's longtime aide Sasikala to lead the party, and another headed by the Deputy Chief Minister O. Panneerselvam, who served as Jayalalithaa's finance minister. For now, the two factions have put aside their differences (allegedly with the support of the BJP), but the cracks are plainly visible. The party must also contend with its rival, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which has been out of power in the state since 2011 and is spoiling for a fight. While the DMK has also lost its longtime leader, the party stands poised to fill the gap presented by the AIADMK's fracture.

The BJP, for its part, hopes to exploit this power vacuum and earn a more prominent electoral position,

but it would need allies given its limited reach: the party retains a lone parliamentary seat in Tamil Nadu and earned just 5 percent of the state's vote share in 2014. Its performance in state polls has been even less impressive. The best it seems the party could hope for is a postelection alliance with the remnants of the AIADMK, as the DMK has been a regular Congress ally and is less likely to join the BJP.

IMPLICATIONS FOR 2019

Whether the BJP will be able to make up ground on India's east coast to compensate for losses it sustains in former strongholds will hinge on a few crucial factors.

First, while the BJP is unlikely to find a coalition ally in the state of Andhra Pradesh before the 2019 polls, it could stitch together an alliance following the general election. At present, there are rumblings that the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), which currently leads the opposition in the Andhra state assembly, would be open to a postelection alliance with the BJP, providing the latter with additional numbers should it need to build a coalition government. Both parties are opposed to the TDP, which recently had a falling out with the BJP. Furthermore, the leader of the YSRCP, Jaganmohan Reddy, might have incentive to curry favor with the Modi government because he faces federal corruption charges that the central government could ramp up or ramp down as it sees fit.

Second, the BJP must walk a fine line in the state of Odisha. Despite the fact that it is targeting the BJD government and sees the state as its best chance of picking up new seats, the party also understands that if it falls short of a majority in 2019, it might have to bring the BJD onboard as a postelection ally. It is this delicate balance that explains why the BJP and BJD have seen a burst of cooperation, such as the latter's decision to break from the opposition and support the BJP's candidate for deputy chairman in the Rajya Sabha (India's upper house of parliament). The BJD has also backed the BJP government's two major economic policy initiatives, demonetization and the new Goods and Services Tax (GST). Because the BJD had previously been a part of the National Democratic Alliance and is considered to be ideologically compatible, some within the BJP are optimistic that they can patch up old divisions. The catch is that this rapprochement is hard to envision if the two parties are waging bitter partisan battles in Odisha while cooperating in New Delhi.

Third, the BJP must find a way to make the 2019 elections a national referendum on Modi in some states but a state-by-state fight in others. In states where the BJP and Congress are facing off or where regionalist parties hold less sway, the BJP stands to gain if it can make the election about Modi's clean image, record of public service delivery, and strong leadership. But in east coast states, where regionalist parties prevail, the BJP will have to contest elections on the basis of state-specific agendas. Getting this balance right will not be an easy task, and it is potentially an existential one. In 2019, the east coast could well be the gateway to the BJP's second term in office.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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NOTES

1   Unless otherwise indicated, all electoral data used in this article comes from Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017. The full database can be accessed here: http://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/LokDhaba-Shiny/.

2   Given that Modi's parliamentary constituency of Varanasi lies in the electorally crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, such a switch seems unlikely.

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