WORKING PAPER

SEPTEMBER 2019

The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System

Milan Vaishnav and Jamie Hintson

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Introduction

In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) claimed the first single-party majority in the lower house of India's parliament (the Lok Sabha) in three decades. The BJP's victory, spearheaded by the party's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, ushered in a debate among political scientists and political analysts over whether the country's electoral politics was experiencing a paradigm shift. Indian politics was synonymous with coalition politics between 1989 and 2014, following decades of Congress Party dominance at the national level; but for that quarter century, no single party was strong enough to earn a parliamentary majority on its own, relying instead on dozens of pre- and post-election allies to form a governing coalition.

The BJP's breakthrough in 2014, therefore, prompted a debate about whether India had left the era of multipolarity, fragmentation, and coalitions behind in favor of a new, dominant-party system in which the BJP assumed the role of central pole that the Congress had once played. Political scientists were starkly divided in their assessments. Some scholars downplayed the magnitude of the 2014 electoral verdict. "From the perspective of the vote shares won by the country's main political parties, not as much has changed as the news headlines might suggest," wrote Adam Ziegfeld.[1] Another assessment, penned by Rekha Diwakar, concluded that "although the Congress decline has continued, and the BJP has won many recent state assembly elections, it is premature to conclude that the Indian party system has shifted to a BJP-dominated one."[2]

Other scholars were less hesitant in asserting that India was witnessing the birth of a new party system. In the *Journal of Democracy*, E. Sridharan wrote: "The results were dramatic, possibly even epochal. The electoral patterns of the last quarter-century have undergone a sea change, and the world's largest democracy now has what appears to be a new party system headed by a newly dominant party."[3] Similarly, Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma noted that with its historic victory, "the BJP has clearly replaced the Congress as the system-defining party" and would likely become the "focal point of electoral alignment and re-alignment" in India.[4]

Finally, some took cognizance of the winds of change, but were unwilling to make strong claims in light of a single data point. For instance, Milan Vaishnav and Danielle Smogard concluded their assessment of the 2014 results by noting that if the trends persist, "India may well have closed the book on twenty-five years of electoral politics and moved into a new era."[5] In the same vein, Louise Tillin remarked that the extant evidence is "somewhat equivocal as to whether the 2014 elections mark a departure in longer term electoral patterns or the consolidation of a new social bloc behind the BJP."[6]

The reasons for the divergence in expert assessments are easy to decipher. In addition to the difficulty of rendering definitive judgments based on a single election, the BJP's victory in 2014 relied on near-total sweeps of a relatively small number of states in the Indian union; in fact, 75 percent of the BJP's parliamentary tally in 2014 came from just eight states in the north, west, and central regions of the country.[7] Second, although the BJP clinched a majority in the Lok Sabha, it was nowhere close to a majority in India's upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha. This is crucial, as both houses must provide their assent if a bill is to become law. Finally, the BJP's reach was limited at the level of India's states, which are in many ways the most important sites of everyday governance. Prior to the 2014 election, the BJP ruled just five (of twenty-nine) states[8]—below even its previous high of seven states (achieved in 2012).[9]

In the wake of the 2019 general election results, which come on the back of significant political changes at the level of India's states, there is empirical support for more unequivocal judgments. Indeed, the available evidence points in one direction: 2014 was not an aberration; it was instead a harbinger of a new era.[10] India does appear to have ushered in a new, fourth party system—one that is premised on a unique set of political principles and that shows a clear break with what came before. In the 2019 general election, the BJP did the unthinkable: the party clinched a second consecutive majority in the Lok Sabha, a feat that was last accomplished by the Congress Party in 1980 and 1984.

FIGURE 1
Lok Sabha Election Results, 2009–2019
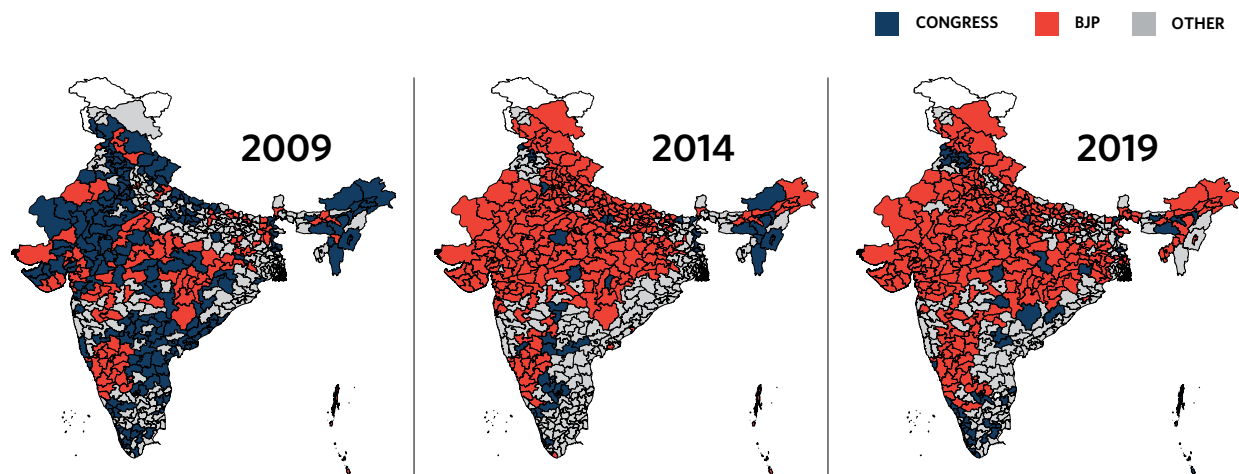
While most political analysts expected the BJP to return to power with relative ease, very few anticipated the magnitude of the victory. The BJP won 303 seats (out of 543) in the Lok Sabha, while its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) won a whopping 353 seats in total.[11] In cruising to victory, the BJP bested its historic 2014 performance in which it earned 282 seats on its own while its alliance clinched 336 seats in all. Conversely, the result produced yet another disappointment for the opposition Indian National Congress, which won a paltry 52 seats (just 8 better than its 2014 total).

The BJP has methodically expanded its footprint in India's states as well. As of June 2019, the party controls twelve states while its allies control another six.[12] This represents a qualitative leap from its national reach just five years ago. Furthermore, the party made significant gains in the Rajya Sabha; at the time of writing, the BJP occupies 80 seats to the Congress' 48.[13] The BJP's allies control another 31 while other parties control the remaining 80 seats.[14] If current trends continue, the NDA could seal a majority in the 245-member body as soon as late 2020.

This paper outlines some of the fundamental principles of India's fourth electoral system. It begins with a review of India's three previous electoral orders, drawing on the seminal work of Yogendra Yadav. It then reviews the basic principles of the third party system and demonstrates how recent elections violate many of the commonly accepted tenets associated with the status quo. Namely, in the third party system, no national party served as the central gravitational force organizing politics. Electoral politics was marked by increasing party fragmentation, intensifying political competition, and a federalization of national politics. Furthermore, national voter turnout appeared to be relatively stagnant, painting a stark contrast with rising turnout in state elections—a signal that states had become the primary venues of political contestation as opposed to national-level politics. Finally, the third party system was characterized by a changing composition of political elites in which lower castes—Dalits (Scheduled Castes, or SCs) as well as Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—gained political representation, largely at the expense of upper and intermediate castes.

Today, many of these principles stand altered, and 2014 represents a key structural break. While the focus of much of this paper is on the attributes of political contestation, which can be derived from official electoral data compiled by the Election Commission of India, there are other perhaps less quantifiable traits that also suggest Indian electoral politics is operating according to a new set of rules. These factors include the BJP's ideological hegemony, its organization and fundraising prowess, and its charismatic leadership (as manifest by Prime Minister Modi).

The final section asks some questions that the dawn of a new electoral system has raised for the study of Indian politics. The fact that the scale of the BJP's 2019 general election victory caught so many

political observers on the back foot suggests that this is an opportune time to question some foundational assumptions about Indian politics that have underpinned mainstream electoral analysis.

India's Electoral Systems

There is broad consensus that India's electoral history—from the inaugural postindependence general election in 1952 until the sixteenth Lok Sabha elections in 2014—can be roughly divided into three electoral orders. Yogendra Yadav, one of India's leading political scientists, was among the first to provide this organizational rubric. Yadav has also argued that a new electoral system commences whenever an observer can "detect a destabilisation of [an old system] and its replacement by a new pattern of electoral outcomes as well as its determinants."[15]

1952 to 1967: Congress Dominance

Between 1952 and 1967, the Congress Party dominated Indian politics, both at the center and across her states. As the party primarily responsible for winning India her independence and home to many of the most respected nationalist leaders, the Congress benefited from widespread popular appeal as the umbrella organization under which India would establish its postindependence identity. As a catchall party that sought—in theory if not always in practice—to provide a pan-Indian representation for all of India's diverse caste, linguistic, and religious groups, the Congress Party's penetration into Indian society was unmatched.

The inadequacies of the other players on the political scene fueled that dominance. While a raft of opposition parties keenly contested elections, opposition forces were badly fragmented, which limited their ability to mount a serious campaign to unseat the Congress. Instead, the most salient political competition often occurred between factions within the Congress Party representing different ideological viewpoints.[16] Despite the party's reputation as a big-tent party, the Congress was significantly controlled by the upper castes, who accounted for the lion's share of its elected representatives at the state and national levels and its most prominent, visible national leaders.

1967 to 1989: Growing Opposition at the State Level

The year 1967 proved to be a critical inflection point, ushering in the dawn of India's second party system.[17] Although the Congress's grip on power in New Delhi remained firm, its hold on India's state capitals began to fade. With the exception of the election of 1977—when the Congress was badly punished for then prime minister Indira Gandhi's autocratic excesses during Emergency Rule between 1975 and 1977—the party remained the default choice for governance at the center. But new expressions of caste and regional identities chipped away at the party's monopoly of subnational

politics. The 1960s gave rise to India's "first democratic upsurge"—to borrow Yadav's term—when populous OBC groups first mobilized to ensure that their political power was in greater alignment with their demographic weight and their increasing economic clout.[18]

1989 to 2014: Dawn of Coalition Politics

Whatever semblance of Congress dominance that remained after 1967 would come to an end in 1989, which denoted the start of coalition governance in New Delhi and the third party system. Although the Congress's grasp on national power had gradually weakened in the 1960s and 1970s, by the end of the following decade it had completely given way to a multipolar constellation of forces in which the Congress was no longer the single pole around which politics revolved. Three powerful forces—often termed "Mandal, masjid, and market"—disrupted Indian politics, prompting a realignment in politics.

The first of these forces was the Mandal Commission, a government task force that recommended that OBCs be given access to quotas governing higher education seats and civil service posts. Until this point, quotas—or "reservations," as they are known in Indian parlance—were restricted to Scheduled Castes/Dalits and Scheduled Tribes. It was on the backs of the agitation around Mandal that India witnessed what Yadav dubbed a "second democratic upsurge," or the catapulting of traditionally disadvantaged groups into the corridors of political power.[19] During this period, many caste-based parties representing Dalit and OBC interests firmly entrenched their position among the representative class.

The second force was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by pro-Hindu forces associated with the BJP. They sought to replace the mosque with a *mandir* (temple) marking the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. This ethno-nationalist mobilization helped fuel the BJP's sudden rise from a party that won just two seats in the 1984 general election to the only national alternative to the Congress. As the successor to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and a party driven by a Hindu nationalist worldview, the BJP was initially limited to the heartland of the country. Its main votaries hailed from the relatively privileged communities of Brahmins and Banias. The new political context allowed the BJP to make inroads among lower castes and extend its appeal beyond its traditional core geographies.[20]

The third and final factor was the market, due to India's decision to liberalize its economy in 1991, embrace the forces of globalization, and welcome global economic integration. This rupture with the past redefined the boundaries of mainstream economic discourse in India, creating both new alignments in favor of opening up as well as reactionary forces who fretted about the adverse consequences for India's poor and its limited industrial base.

Beyond India's Third Party System

In order to evaluate whether India has truly entered a new era of politics with the BJP's recent general election victories in 2014 and 2019, it is necessary to clarify the precise attributes of the third party system against which any future change can be measured. Broadly speaking, there are six defining attributes of the third party system.

Principles of the Third Party System

First, the absence of a central pole in national politics between 1989 and 2009 is perhaps the central feature of the third party system. Although the Congress played that role for decades, after 1989 it no longer had the breadth and depth of support required to define the system. Although the BJP would soon emerge as the only other truly national party to give the Congress a serious fight across multiple states, it too had limitations of demography, geography, and ideology.

Second, the third party system was an era of political fragmentation. The number of parties contesting elections surged after 1989 as the Congress order broke down for good. Political entrepreneurs created new parties with abandon, hoping that earning a few seats—or even a solid vote share—would grant them newfound leverage in the coalition age.

Third, electoral contests became markedly more competitive on nearly every dimension. Victory margins came down and the share of candidates winning an outright majority of votes in their constituencies dropped. It became commonplace for candidates to emerge as victorious members of parliament (MPs) with only a plurality, as opposed to a majority, of votes in their constituency.[21]

Fourth, the entire political system became highly federalized. National elections were no longer truly national in nature; they were more akin to a collection of state-level verdicts. State and national elections also exhibited a clear, interactive pattern. National-level outcomes were directly influenced by the state-level verdicts that preceded them, but the intensity of the effect depended on the proximity of the two polls. Honeymoon and anti-incumbency effects at the state level directly impacted national polls.

Fifth, voter turnout surged at the state level while national political mobilization cooled. As states became the primary venues for political contestation, voter turnout patterns shifted in kind. In the third party system, the gap between voter turnout at the state and national levels saw unprecedented divergence.

Finally, there was a clear change in the social composition of the representative class. For instance, in northern Hindi belt states, the combined share of OBC and SC legislators superseded that of upper caste and intermediate castes for the very first time.

Discontinuities across all six of these hallmarks of the third party system were on display in the electoral outcomes of the two most recent general elections—2014 and 2019—not to mention in the shifting dynamics at the subnational level.

From Multipolarity to Unipolarity

Recall that the Congress Party fulfilled the role of a hegemon between 1952 and 1989. From 1952 to 1977, the Congress Party controlled the reins of power in New Delhi without interruption. Although the Janata coalition ousted the Congress following Indira Gandhi's termination of a twenty-one-month period of Emergency Rule, its reign was short-lived. By 1980, the Congress Party was back in power in New Delhi and it further improved its strength in the 1984 polls in the aftermath of Gandhi's assassination. As discussed earlier, there were shifts during this period at the state level, where the Congress Party's position post-1967 sharply declined, but the Congress hold on national politics was more or less intact.

The Congress's privileged position in New Delhi evaporated after the 1989 elections (see figure 2). Although the Congress vote share never once exceeded 50 percent, it stood at 45.8 percent in the first electoral system and dipped slightly to 43.3 percent in the second party system. Aside from the 1977 election, when the Congress vote share dipped to 34.5 percent, the party's vote share had never fallen below 40 percent between 1952 and 1984. This was in sync with its commanding position in the broader party system. In contrast, the Congress vote share between 1989 and 2009 was only around 30.6 percent—a sharp decline from what came before.

FIGURE 2
**Congress Party Vote Share in Lok Sabha Elections, 1952–2019**
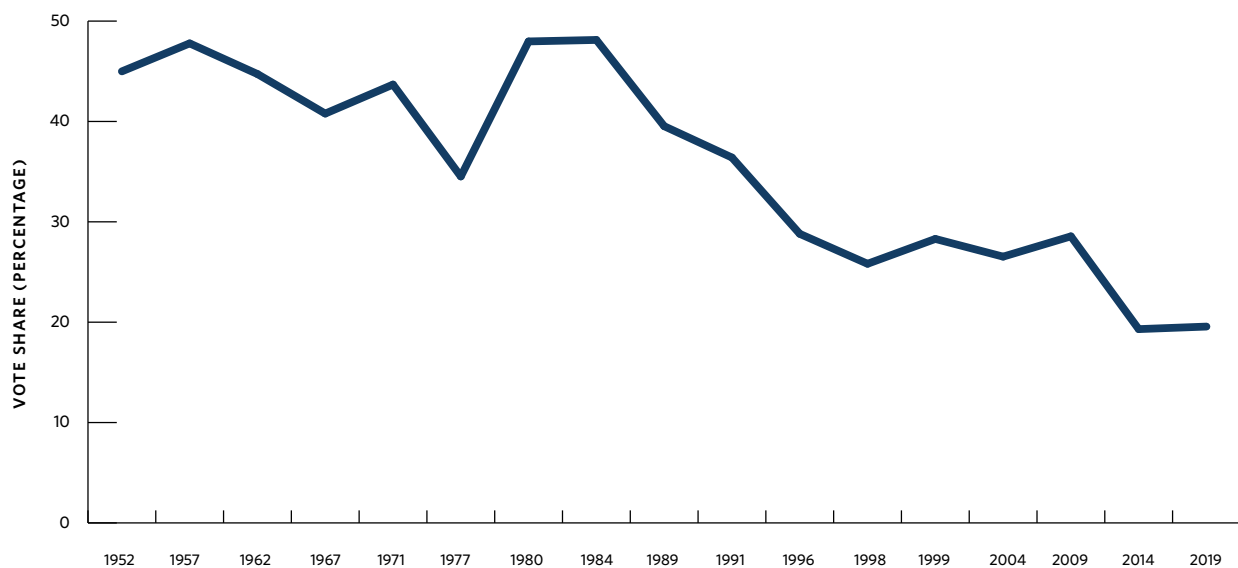
SOURCE: Election Commission of India; authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

Similarly, the BJP's share of the vote peaked at 25.6 percent in 1998 and subsequently experienced a secular decline (see figure 3). It is hard to imagine that, just a decade ago, many observers—including some within the BJP itself—questioned whether the party had hit a plateau whose best days were behind it.[22] In India's 2009 general election, the BJP won just 116 seats and notched just 18.8 percent of the vote on its way to a second consecutive election defeat at the hands of the Congress.

In terms of aggregate electoral outcomes, the 2014 and 2019 elections stand apart. In 2014, the BJP won 282 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, while its NDA coalition partners earned another 53 seats. The tally of the incumbent Congress, on the other hand, sunk to just 44 seats—its worst electoral showing since independence (its previous low was 114 seats in 1999). This outcome was historic on several counts. First, the BJP won India's first single-party majority in the Lok Sabha since 1984, the year the Congress Party under Rajiv Gandhi won an overwhelming mandate in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Second, 2014 was the first time in postindependence history that a single party other than the Congress had claimed a majority of seats in parliament. Third, although the BJP won a majority of seats off of just 31 percent of the vote, it exceeded its previous best performance (25.6 percent in 1998) by a significant margin. Furthermore, its allies brought the NDA's combined vote share to 38.5 percent.[23]

FIGURE 3
BJP Performance in Lok Sabha Elections, 1984–2019
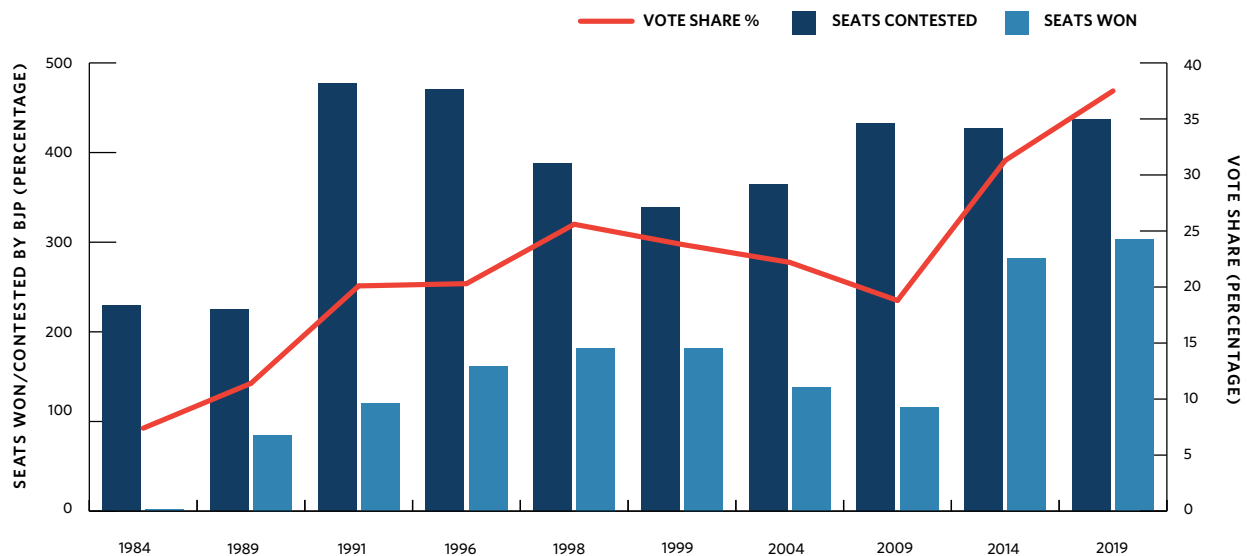
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

Headed into the 2019 race, many election analysts doubted the BJP's ability to replicate its 2014 feat for at least four reasons.[24] First, the BJP's victory was fueled by virtually running the tables in a select set of states. For the BJP to match its 2014 benchmark, analysts thought the party would have to once more sweep this relatively limited swath of territory—especially given its limited presence in the south and east of India. Given the forces of anti-incumbency present in Indian politics, a repeat of the same magnitude seemed improbable.[25]

Second, Modi relentlessly campaigned in 2013 and 2014 on a pledge to usher in *acche din* (good times) for the Indian economy by generating rapid economic growth, creating millions of jobs, and revitalizing India's moribund investment cycle.[26] Yet large parts of this lofty economic narrative simply did not materialize during Modi's first term in office. Growth in India's per capita gross domestic product (GDP), while solid, was by no means stellar.[27] While the Modi government successfully tamed inflation—the Achilles' heel of its predecessor—one unintended, adverse consequence was historically low growth in farm prices.[28] While low inflation is a boon for urban consumers, it often harms the fortunes of rural producers. As a result, rural wages had largely stagnated.[29] Finally, official data pointed to a slowdown in job creation. A report of the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), suppressed by the government but leaked to the press, found that joblessness spiked to unprecedented levels in 2017–2018.[30]

Third, there were nascent signs that the opposition parties had minimized, though by no means fully resolved, their coordination dilemmas.[31] In the 2014 election, many opposition parties chose to fight the BJP on their own, as opposed to forming constructive alliances to keep the BJP at bay. As a result, in several pivotal states, divisions within the opposition served to fragment the anti-BJP vote, leading to the former's electoral marginalization. In 2019, the opposition adopted—at least rhetorically—a strategy of cooperation. In several key states, such as Uttar Pradesh (India's biggest electoral prize with 80 parliamentary seats), longtime rivals joined forces not due to any common ideological commitment or adherence to a unified leadership, but rather as an existential impulse to prevent their marginalization.

In reality, these shifting dynamics did little to curb the BJP's electoral juggernaut. The BJP, in 2019, earned 37.4 percent of the all-India vote and won 303 seats, the best results for any party since 1989 and 1984, respectively. The composition of the BJP's support base also points to intriguing trends. Although the BJP's seat tally from the Hindi belt dipped slightly—the eight states mentioned earlier still accounted for 66 percent of the BJP's overall tally in 2019—the party suffered only modest attrition in terms of its seat share. In fact, in many states across the country, the BJP's vote share actually rose to new levels. In thirteen states and union territories—stretching from Chandigarh to Karnataka—the BJP's vote share surged past 50 percent.

But what is most interesting about the 2019 election results is how the BJP has made significant inroads into eastern India. Traditionally, the BJP has been seen as a party of Hindi-speaking northerners, a designation that puts it at odds with India's eastern corridor, where politics revolves around subnational mobilization driven by powerful linguistic and cultural identities. For instance, in 2014, the BJP won just 3 seats in the states of West Bengal and Odisha; both states feature dominant regional parties with a formidable grassroots presence, the Trinamool Congress and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), respectively. In 2019, the BJP won 26 seats in these same states—cementing its position in both states as the principal opposition, ousting the Left (in Bengal) and the Congress Party (in Odisha). In this election, the BJP even opened its account in the southern state of Telangana by winning 4 seats—an outcome few election analysts had foretold.[32]

Beyond geography, the BJP also increased its support from nearly all Hindu caste groups. From upper castes to OBCs to Dalits and tribals, the BJP's vote share increased from its 2014 level— according to the 2019 National Election Study conducted by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).[33] Although the party has traditionally performed well in more urban areas, in 2019 (as in 2014) it dominated across settlement types. In fact, in 2019 the BJP made its biggest gains in rural areas. Similarly, the party increased its vote share across social classes, with the share of poor voters backing the BJP increasing the largest (from 24 to 36 percent in five years).

An additional sign of the BJP's pan-Indian dominance is the fact that, in 2019, it contested more seats than the Congress Party for the first time in history. In 2019, the BJP fielded candidates in 436 parliamentary constituencies, compared to 421 for the Congress. This is a telling measure because it speaks to the reach of the party organization; both national parties are more likely to cede seats to coalition partners where they feel that they have a low probability of winning.

Out of those 436 constituencies where its candidates' names featured on the ballot, the BJP finished as the winner or runner-up in 375 (see figure 4). The Congress managed to finish in the top two in just 261 races. This too represents a striking departure from the past. In 1984, the Congress was a top-two finisher in 510 constituencies, compared to the BJP's 105. In three decades, the parties' fortunes completely reversed: Congress was competitive in only half as many races as it had been in 1984, while the BJP was nearly four times as competitive.

Thanks largely to the BJP's stellar performance, 2019 also saw the highest share of incumbents win reelection (see figure 5). In all, 67 percent of incumbent MPs who sought reelection won their races, the highest rate since 1984. To put this number in context, just 42 percent of incumbents won in the decisive 2014 general election and 50 percent emerged victorious in 2009.
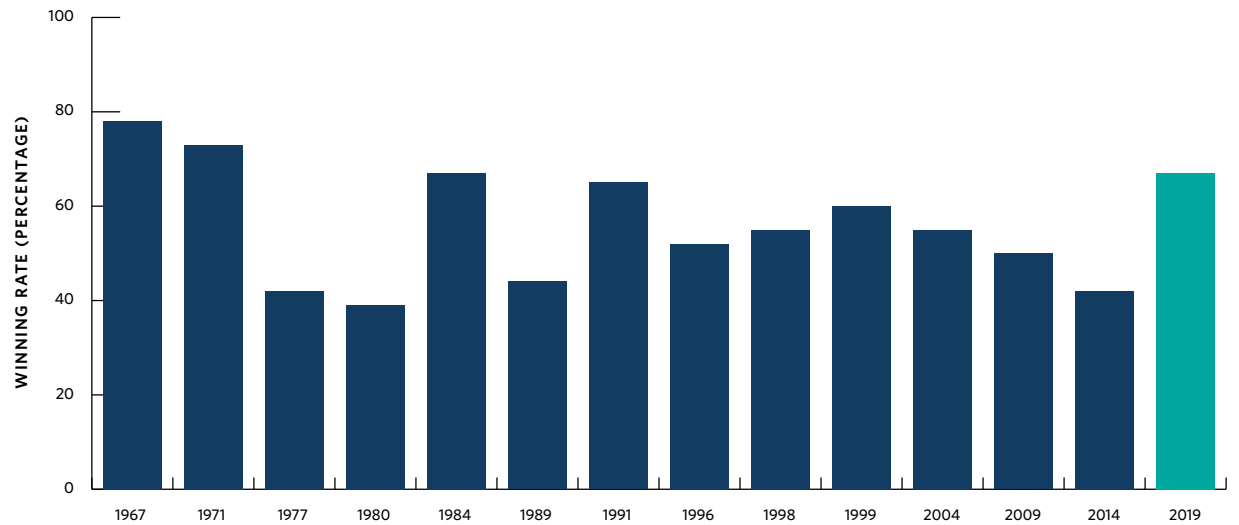
FIGURE 4

BJP and Congress Record of Top-Two Finishes in Lok Sabha Elections, 1984–2019
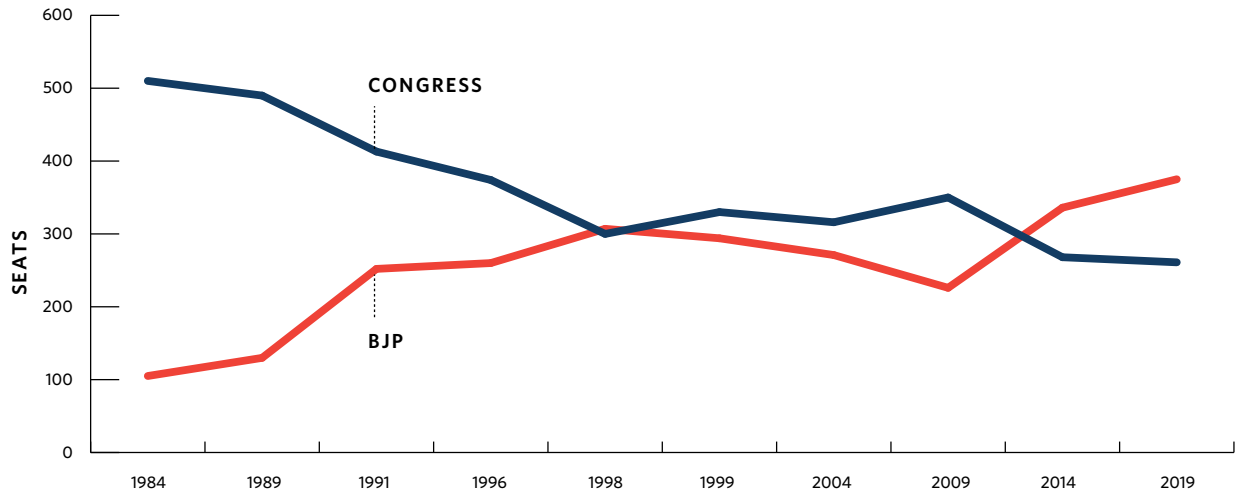
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

FIGURE 5

Winning Percentage of Recontesting Incumbent MPs in Lok Sabha Elections, 1967–2019


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

Yet an exclusive focus on general election outcomes blinds observers to systemic changes occurring on other fronts. Although the BJP boasted a relatively limited presence at the state-level prior to the 2014 election, its fortunes greatly improved following the emergence of Narendra Modi on the national scene. As of June 2019, the BJP holds chief ministerial positions in twelve states while its NDA allies control another six (see figure 6). While these numbers have come down after the BJP's December 2018 losses in three state assembly elections, the growth in the BJP's presence at the state level is remarkable. During the BJP's previous stint in power under the late prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the BJP controlled at most six state governments. Conversely, the Congress Party today is at the helm of just five states—one-third of the party's tally as recently as 2013. In fact, the BJP's gains have largely come at the expense of the Congress, as the share of chief ministers headed by a regional party has remained roughly steady since 2006.

The BJP's control of state governments has meant, not surprisingly, that its share of state legislators— or members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)—has also experienced marked growth (see figure 7). Since the BJP's inception, it had badly trailed both the Congress and regional parties in terms of its representation among MLAs. In 1980, for instance, just 4 percent of India's MLAs belonged to the

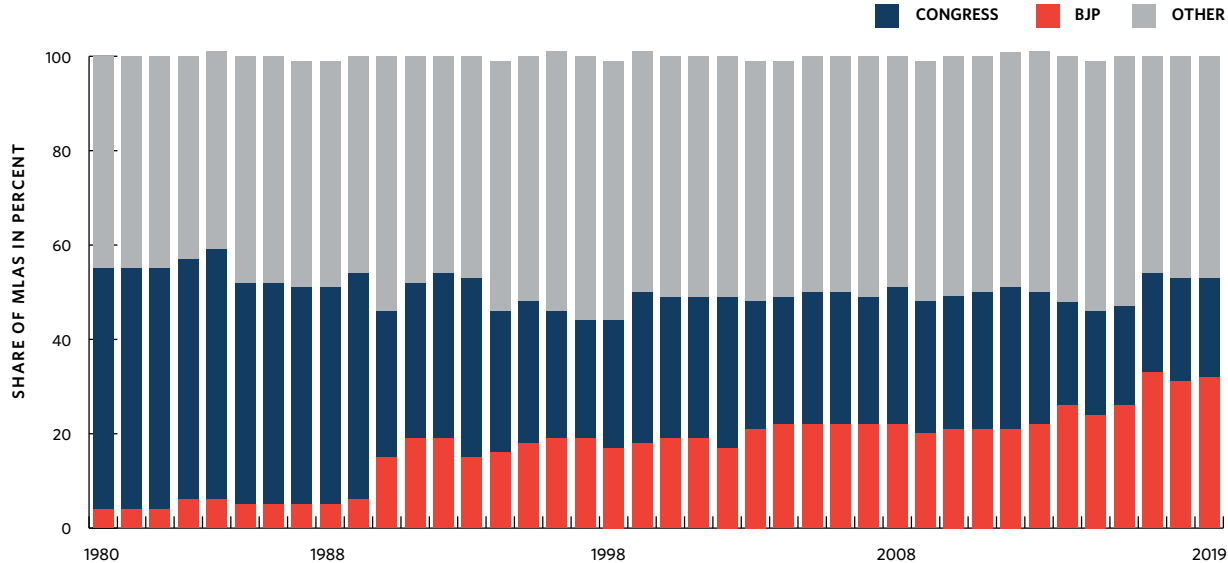FIGURE 6
Number of Chief Ministerial Posts, 1956–2019
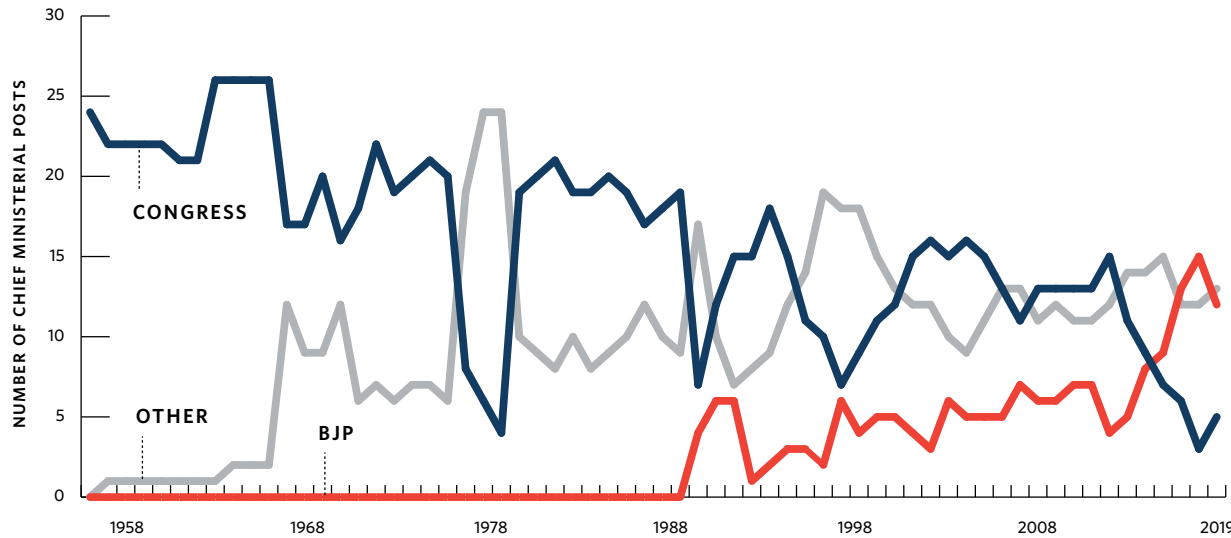
NOTE: This figure depicts the annual breakdown of chief ministerial posts belonging to the Congress, BJP, and other parties from 1956 to June 2019. The share of states with missing data due to the imposition of Article 356 (President's Rule) is not shown here.

SOURCE: Vaishnav-Ravi dataset on Indian chief ministers, 1956–2019.

FIGURE 7
**Share of State Legislators, 1980–2019**

NOTE: This figure depicts the annual share of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) belonging to the Congress, BJP, and other parties from 1980 to June 2019. Due to rounding, the shares do not always add up to 100 percent.

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

BJP compared with 51 percent for the Congress and 45 percent for a disparate set of regional parties. During Vajpayee's tenure, the BJP finally crossed the 20 percent threshold and lagged behind a declining Congress share by just a few percentage points. Then, in 2014, the BJP, for the first time, surpassed the Congress and has never looked back. As of June 2019, the BJP boasts 32 percent of MLAs compared to 21 percent for the Congress and 47 percent for all other parties.

Another metric of the BJP's hegemonic status is the party's improved standing in the Rajya Sabha. Here too, the BJP's growth has been significant (see figure 8). From a paltry 5 percent of Rajya Sabha seats in 1984, the BJP's representation in the upper house grew to 22 percent in 2008 before falling back to 17 percent in 2014. Since then, its share has shot up and in 2017, for the first time, the BJP's tally surpassed that of the Congress. As of July 2019, the BJP's share stood at 32 percent as compared to the Congress Party's 20 percent share. In total, the BJP-led NDA currently has 111 members in the upper house and is 12 seats short of a majority.[34] If the NDA performs well in upcoming state polls in Haryana, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra, it is possible that it will be able to claim a majority at the end of 2020 given that a total of 82 seats will open up between now and the end of next calendar year.[35]

FIGURE 8
Share of Rajya Sabha Seats, 1980–2019
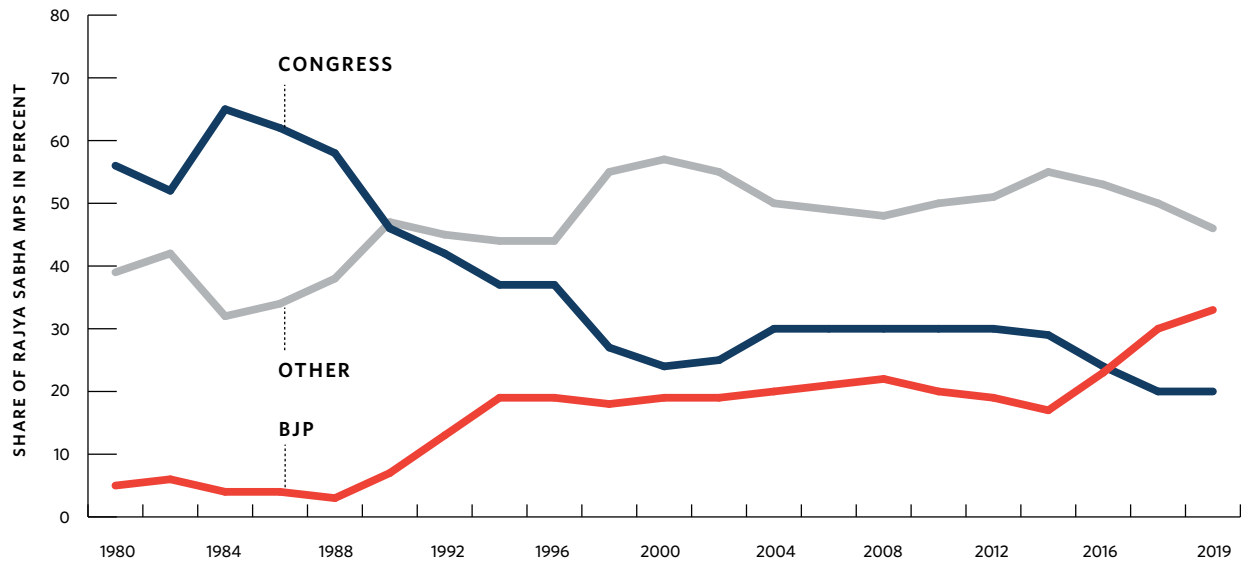
NOTE: This figure depicts the bi-annual share of Rajya Sabha Members of Parliament (MPs) belonging to the Congress, BJP, and other parties from 1952 to June 2019.

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of data on Rajya Sabha membership, https://rajyasabha.nic.in/.

FIGURE 9
Number of Parties Represented in the Lok Sabha, 1962–2019
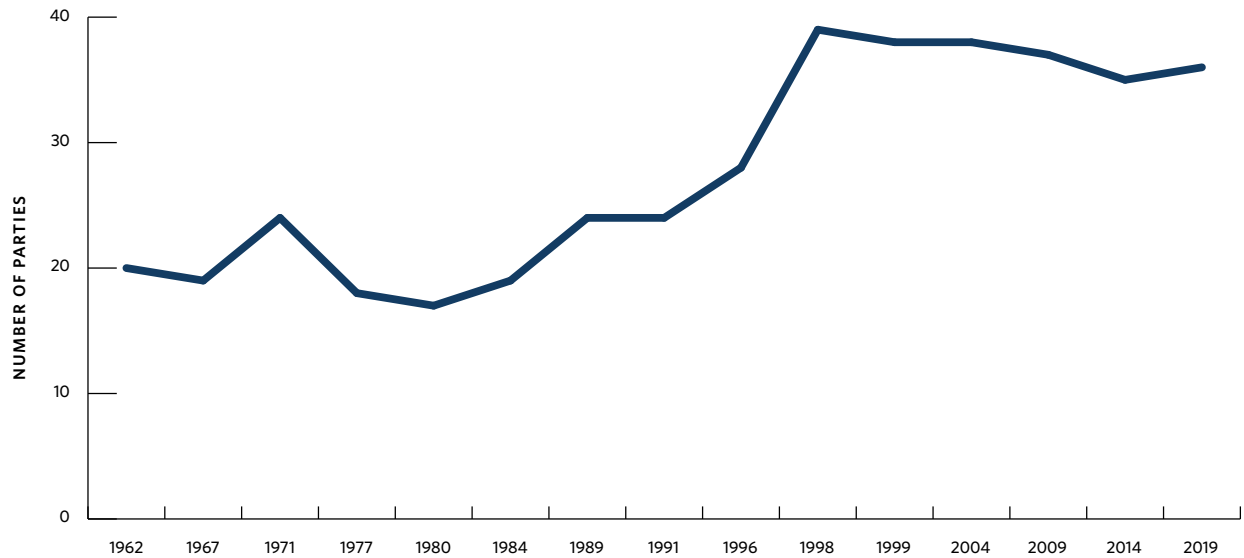
AUTHORS' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

Reduction in Political Fragmentation

A second characteristic of the third party system is growing electoral fragmentation. As the dominant-party era gave way to the onslaught of coalitions, there was a surge in the number of political parties contesting elections. In India's inaugural general election in 1952, fifty-five parties fielded at least one candidate. While that might sounds like a large number, that figure grew exponentially in the mid-to-late 1980s. A mere thirty-eight parties contested the 1984 general election, while 117 entered the fray just five years later. There were two factors behind this growth. First, regional and caste-based parties multiplied in proportion to the degree of popular disenchantment with the Congress Party. Second, as coalition governance became the default position in New Delhi, political entrepreneurs had every incentive to strike out on their own and form new political parties. With just a small clutch of seats, a single party could be the pivotal party required to form a parliamentary majority—making the party leader the ultimate kingmaker.[36] By 2009, candidates from 370 political parties contested parliamentary elections.

Similar trends in political fragmentation appear when one looks only at the winners of India's general elections (see figure 9). Whereas twenty political parties boasted at least one MP in 1962, this figure first increased gradually in the coalition era before surging in the 1990s. In the first two elections in the new coalition era, twenty-four parties found representation in parliament, a figure that would rise to as many as thirty-nine in 1998.

On the surface of it, political fragmentation in India today appears to be as strong as ever. The number of parties represented in Parliament has remained in the upper thirties for two decades: thirty-six parties are currently represented in the Lok Sabha. However, merely adding up the number of parties represented in parliament gives equal weight to a party with thirty MPs and a party with just one MP. In order to derive a more accurate measure of political fragmentation, political scientists prefer to calculate the effective number of parties, which essentially weighs parties by the number of votes (or seats) they actually earned.[37] This metric paints a very different picture of the political fragmentation story (see figure 10). Let's begin first with the effective number of parties (ENP) based on the votes parties actually won in the general election. Before 1989, the ENP for votes never broached 5.0; in the 1977 and 1984 elections—the former of which saw an anti-Congress wave while the latter saw a pro-Congress wave—the ENP was actually below 4.0. This metric has been especially elevated between in the coalition era: it stood at values between 6.7 and 7.6 between 1996 and 2009. In 2014, the ENP dropped to 6.9 but was roughly in line with the overall trend. In 2019, the concentration of votes was markedly higher: at a value of 5.4, it stood just marginally higher than the 1991 level (5.1).

FIGURE 10
Effective Number of Parties (Votes) in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962–2019
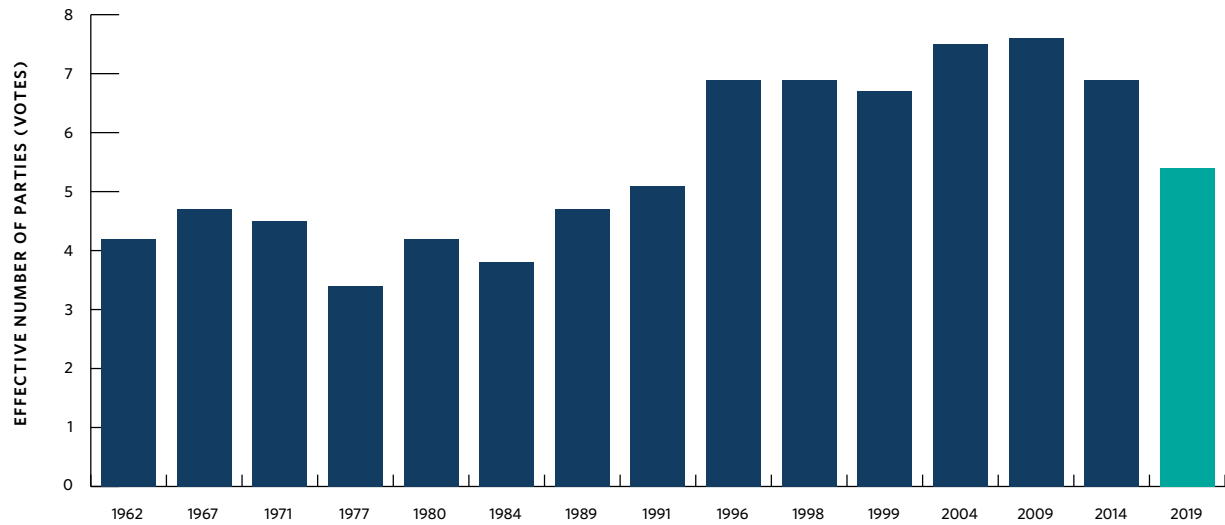
SOURCE: Election Commission of India; authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.
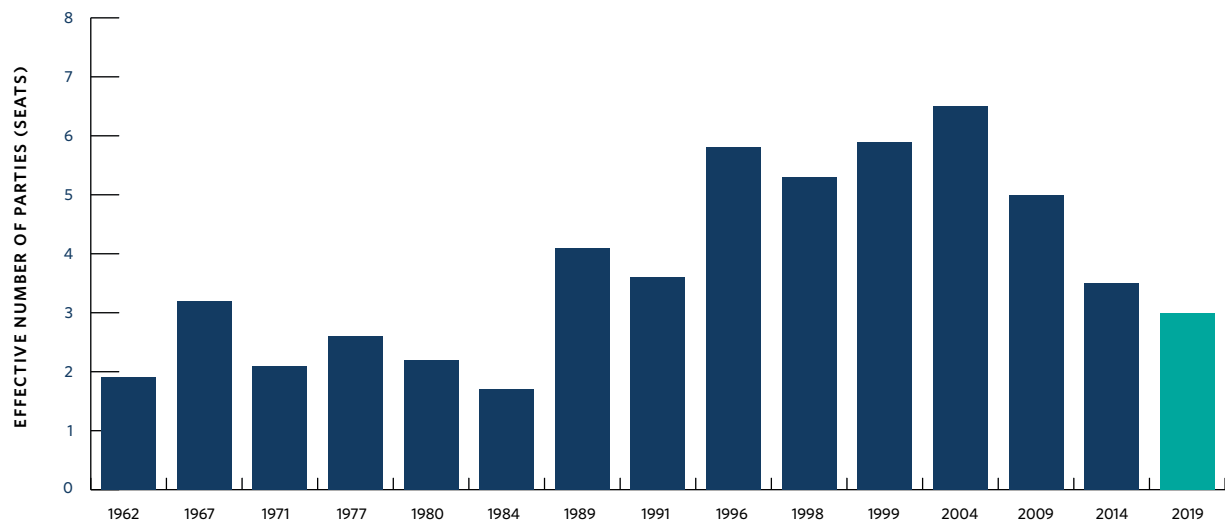
FIGURE 11
Effective Number of Parties (Seats) in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962–2019
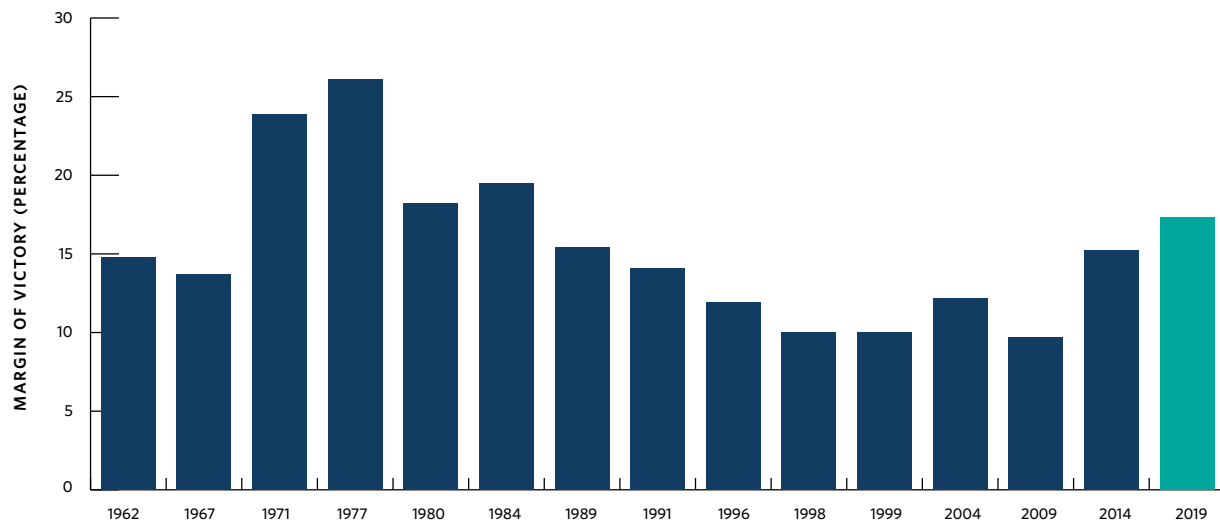

SOURCE: Election Commission of India; authors' analysis of Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

The results are even more dramatic when calculating the ENP by seats: at an all-India level in 2019, there is an ENP of just 3.0 (see figure 11). This is a remarkable shift from the coalition era. During the dominant-party era of the Congress, the ENP in terms of seats regularly stood between 1.9 and 2.6—with the lone exception of the 1967 election, which saw a more fragmented verdict. But these numbers truly soared in the post-1989 period: in 2004, the ENP stood at 6.5, more than double the 1967 value. This one summary statistic captures the fragmentation and dispersion of the coalition era in a simple and succinct way. It also illustrates how different the two most recent Lok Sabha elections have been: the BJP's dominance in 2014 and 2019 means that smaller, regional parties are losing ground to a domineering hegemonic force in the form of the BJP.

Weaker, Not Stronger, Political Competition

Over the past several decades, political competition has grown considerably. One way of measuring the degree of competition is to look at the average margin of victory—that is the difference in the vote share of the winner and the immediate runner-up—across parliamentary constituencies in a general election (see figure 12). In 1962 and 1967, the average margin of victory was between 13 and 15 percent. Elections became notably *less* competitive over the next two election cycles. Margins shot up in the 1971 election, which the Congress swept, and in the 1977 election, which the Janata Party dominated. Many individual races were effectively landslides: in 1971, the average margin was 24 percent and this grew to 26 percent in 1977.

FIGURE 12
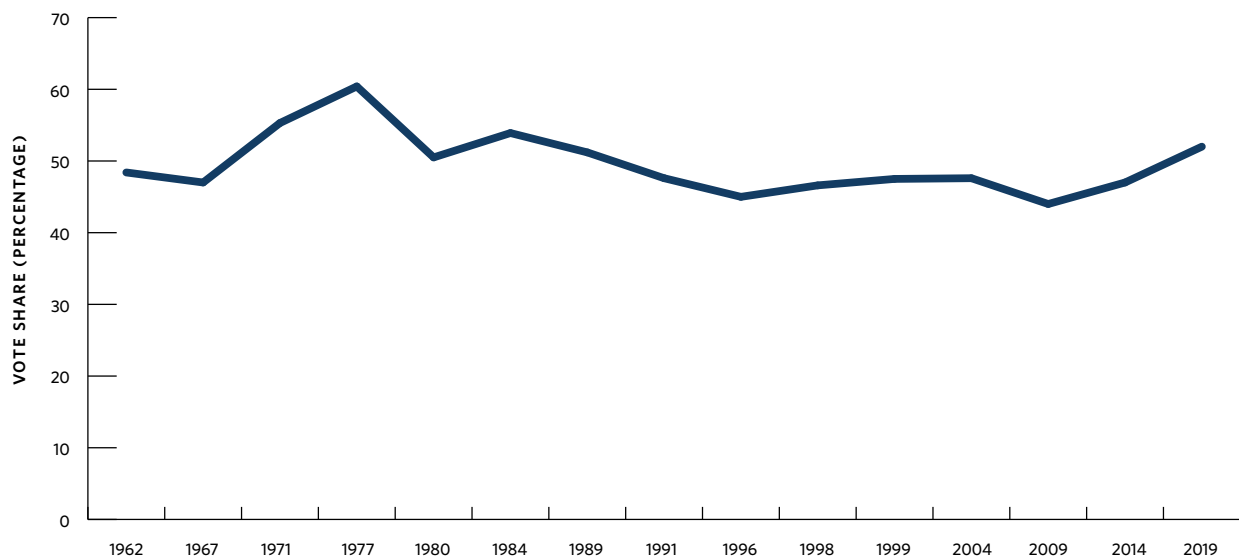**Average Margin of Victory in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962–2019**

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

However, after 1977, margins steadily came down over a period of several decades. By 2009, the average margin of victory sunk to its lowest level in the postindependence era: 9.7 percent. This was just barely lower than the 1998 and 1999 polls, when the margins were 10 percent in consecutive elections.

In 2014, that trend sharply reversed. The average margin in 2014 grew to 15.2 percent—the highest level since 1989, the first year of the coalition era. In 2019, margins grew even further, touching 17.3 percent. This is nearly double the average victor's margin just a decade ago. This aggregate average obscures a great deal of variation across electoral contests. For instance, in seats the BJP won, the margin was a stunning 20.2 percent compared to just 11.0 percent in seats where the BJP was the runner-up and 14.9 percent in places where the BJP was not one of the top two finishers.

Another way of characterizing the competitive environment is to examine the vote share of the winning candidate (see figure 13). Here too, there are interesting patterns over time. Between 1977 and 1989, the average vote share of the winning candidate never once fell below 50 percent. In the 1977 anti-Congress wave, the average winner polled a whopping 60.4 percent. Between 1989 and 2009, however, the average winning vote share never exceeded 50 percent. After falling to a historical low of 44 percent in 2009, the average winner's vote began to creep back up—first to 47.1 percent in

FIGURE 13
**Average Winning Vote Share of MPs in Lok Sabha Elections, 1962–2019**

2014 and once more cracking the 50 percent threshold in 2019 (52.5 percent, to be exact) for the first time since 1989.

In fact, the share of seats in which a candidate won a majority of votes follows a similar pattern (see figure 14). From a peak of 88 percent in 1977, the share of majority winners plummeted to an all-time low of 22 percent in 2009. In 2019, 63 percent of candidates won their respective races with more than 50 percent of the vote—the highest share since 1984 (when 70 percent of parliamentary seats were won with majority support).

Weakening Federalization of National Elections

In the third party system, general election verdicts often resembled a collection of state-level verdicts. This interaction between state and national politics had several components, as laid out by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar.[38] First, national-level political competition in each state was a reflection of the dynamics associated with that state's politics. Second, national elections were regularly influenced by state-level political calendars. Third, the degree of political participation in Lok Sabha elections largely mirrored participation in state-level politics (albeit at a slightly reduced level in national elections). Fourth and finally, the performance of state governments was an important determinant of voter behavior in national elections. As Yadav and Palshikar are quick to point out, this does not

FIGURE 14

Percentage of Lok Sabha Seats Won with Majority Support, 1962–2019
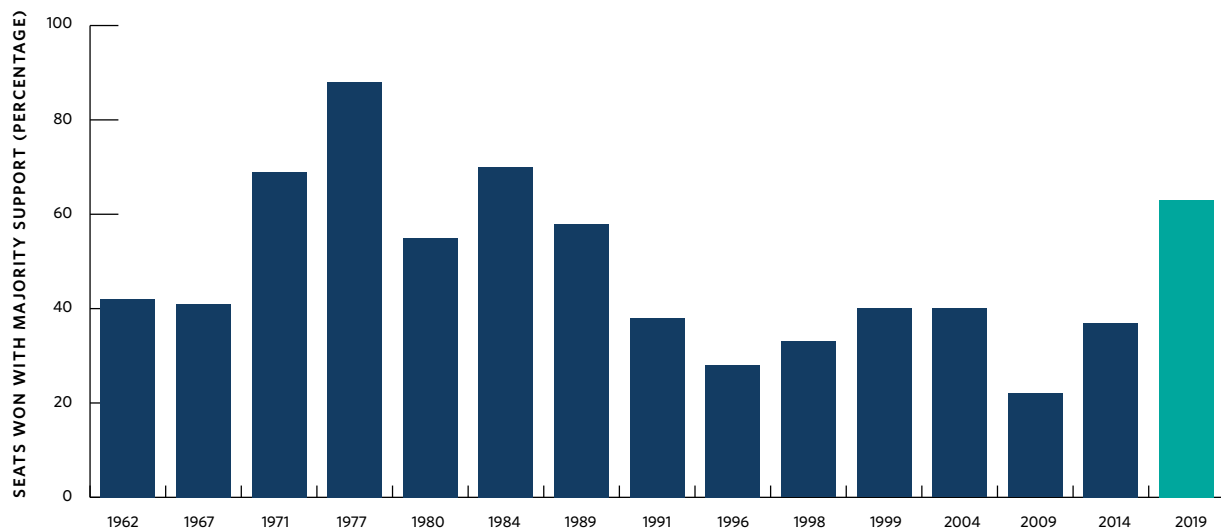
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

mean that national political choices were "duplicative" of choices made in the state political arena; however, it does mean they were "derivative."

Some, though not all, of these dynamics have shifted after 2014. For starters, the format of state-level competition still continues to shape national politics in that state. Furthermore, the levels of turnout in state and national elections continue to demonstrate a strong correlation.[39] However, there has been divergence on the other two counts.

With respect to the electoral calendar, a certain pattern had taken root in the third party system, as documented by Nirmala Ravishankar.[40] If a national election is held in the first year of a state government's tenure, the ruling party in the state has a greater probability of performing well when that state votes. This honeymoon effect lingers through the state government's second year in office, after which incumbency becomes a liability. In year three of a state government's tenure and beyond, the shine enjoyed by the ruling party in the state typically wears off. As a result, that party begins to underperform in national elections and this anti-incumbent "penalty" grows as the distance from the state election grows.

It is for this reason that many analysts had expected the Congress Party to do well in the states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan in the 2019 general election. Just a few months earlier, in December 2018, the Congress Party wrested control of each of these Hindi belt states back from the BJP, which had been the incumbent party in all three. In Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, the BJP had been in power for fifteen years. In each of the previous three election cycles, state elections in these three states preceded general elections by a matter of a few months. In all cases (2003–2004, 2008–2009, and 2013–2014), the party that earned the greatest vote and seat share in the state assembly elections repeated the feat in the national election. In fact, in all but one instance (Madhya Pradesh 2008–2009), the party that emerged victorious in the state election extended its lead over its rival in the following general election.[41]

But in the 2019 general election, this correlation broke down completely. While the winners of assembly elections between 2003–2004 and 2013–2014 in each of these three states went on to gain, on average, an 8 percent additional vote share and 23 percent additional seat share in the subsequent national elections, the Congress actually saw its vote and seat share in the Lok Sabha election plummet after winning the December 2018 polls. The party's vote share declined by an average of 4.5 percent across the three states, while its seat share fell a striking 51 percent on average. For instance, the Congress won 100 of Rajasthan's 200 assembly seats in the state polls but *none* of the state's 25 parliamentary seats on offer less than five months later.

In the state of Telangana, another state that held assembly elections in December 2018, the national verdict also diverged somewhat. The incumbent Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) completely routed the opposition by claiming 88 of 119 seats in the assembly election. The BJP, for instance, earned just 7.1 percent of the vote and just 1 assembly seat in the southern state. Fast-forward a few months and the picture appears somewhat different. While the TRS still won the greatest number of seats in the Lok Sabha polls (9 out of 17), its performance was far less dominant that what the assembly results might have suggested. In fact, the big surprise is that the BJP nabbed 4 Lok Sabha seats and claimed nearly 20 percent of the vote in the state—an outcome that was by no means foreshadowed by the lopsided December 2018 state assembly election.

These recent data points suggest that state and national verdicts have become partially decoupled. This leads to the second important break with the past. In both the 2014 and 2019 elections, Modi managed to presidentialize a parliamentary election by making the election principally a vote on his leadership. Here, the opposition's leadership deficit was the mirror image of Modi's exalted status: there was not a single opposition leader who had the stature or popularity to favorably compete head-to-head with Modi.

In essence, a central component of what people were voting for is Modi's leadership—the belief that he is a decisive leader, is incorruptible, and operates with the national interest at heart. One of the most striking statistics to emerge from the 2019 National Election Study conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) is the fact that 32 percent of voters who supported the NDA said they would have taken their votes elsewhere were it not for Modi.[42] To be clear, a large proportion of NDA voters said the same about Modi in 2014 and of former BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2004 (when the BJP suffered a shock election defeat),[43] but the way in which the BJP has become coterminous with Modi is something that only finds precedence in Indira Gandhi's leadership of the Congress Party.

On the campaign trail, Modi was explicit in rallying supporters with the plea that a vote for the BJP is a vote for Modi, irrespective of whose name actually appears as the local candidate on the ballot. On the hustings, Modi would often implore gatherings to press the *kamal* (the lotus, which is the BJP's election symbol) button on Election Day because "aapka ek vote seedha Modi ke khaate mein jaayega" (your vote will go directly into the account of Modi).[44] This harkens back to the era of the second electoral system when elections functioned as a plebiscite on Indira Gandhi's leadership.

One final aspect of the weakening federal character of elections is the change in the balance of power between national and regional parties. Between 1996 and 2014, voters in India have been evenly

FIGURE 15
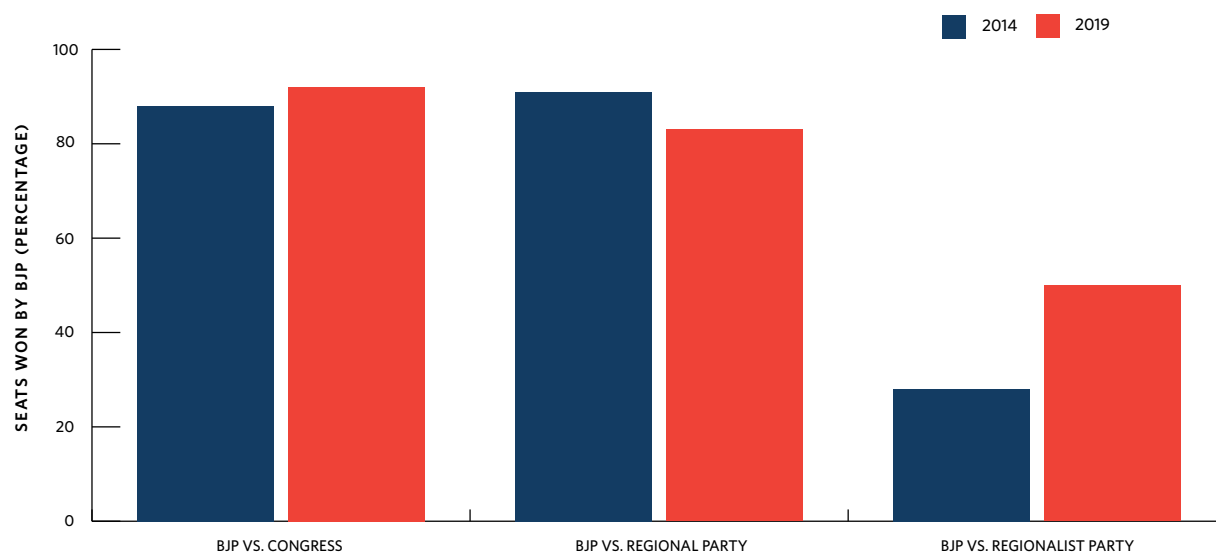**Vote Share in Lok Sabha Elections, 1996–2019**
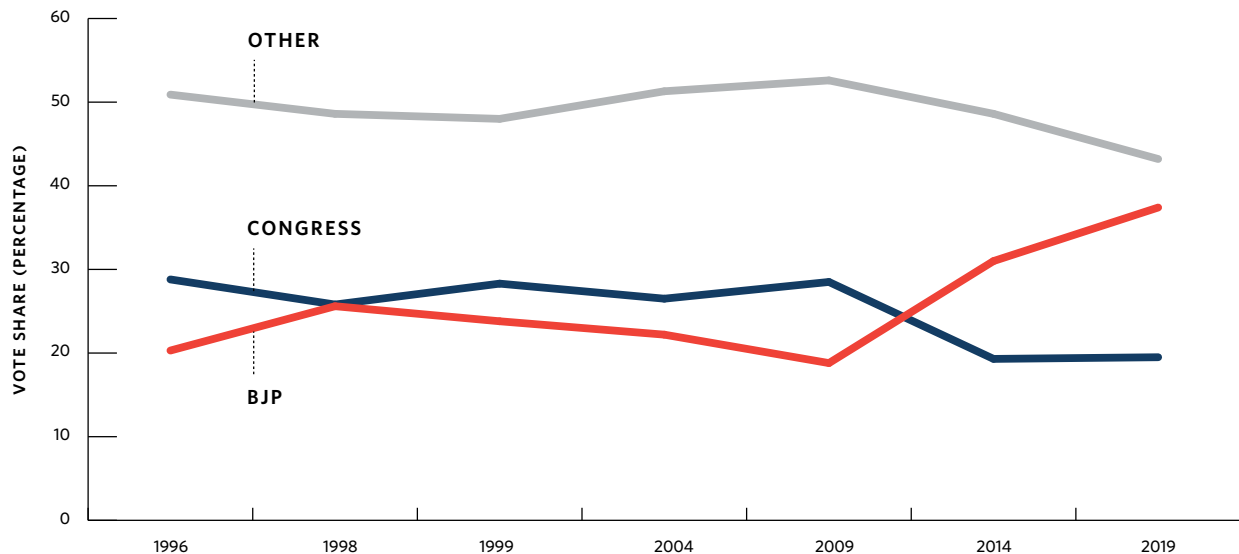
SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Francesca Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Centre for Political Data, 2017.

divided between the two big national parties—the Congress and BJP—and other regional parties (see figure 15). As a general rule of thumb, 50 percent of the vote has traditionally gone to the two national parties while the remaining 50 percent has accrued to hundreds of regional players.[45] In 2009, the share of the regional party vote peaked at 52.6 percent. In 2014, that share dipped modestly to 48.6 percent—roughly on par with the level of regional party support in 1998 and 1999. The election in 2019 marked a significant departure from this trend. While the Congress earned roughly 20 percent of the vote in each of the past two elections, the grip of regional parties has declined sharply—and this has redounded to the BJP's benefit. In 2019, the regional party vote share plummeted to 43.2 percent.

Regional parties are, of course, a highly heterogeneous category. Broadly speaking, they can be divided into two groups.[46] On the one hand, there are parties that are only electorally relevant in a specific region but may have larger national ambitions. This includes caste-based parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and the Janata Dal (United) (JD[U])—which are largely concentrated in the Hindi belt. On the other hand are "regionalist parties" that may have a geographically circumscribed catchment area but whose political mobilization rests on appeals to their state's regional pride, culture, language, and customs.

FIGURE 16

Comparison of the BJP's Performance Against Its Opponents in Lok Sabha Elections, 2014–2019

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. Parties are 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.

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

In 2014, the BJP won 88 percent of head-to-head contests with the Congress Party and 91 percent of direct contests with regional, caste-based parties, but just 28 percent of races against regionalist parties (see figure 16). In 2019, the BJP once again dominated in straight fights with both the Congress and regional parties. But it also greatly improved its position vis-à-vis regionalist players, winning 50 percent of all battles where the two faced off. These gains came in states like Odisha, Telangana, and West Bengal.

Heightened Voter Mobilization in National Elections

A fifth characteristic of the third party system was the relatively subdued level of voter turnout in national elections, especially compared to the level of voter interest activation in state elections. Voter turnout in India's first party system averaged 60.1 percent, with high turnouts in the first two general elections that cleared 60 percent before cooling to 55.4 percent in 1962 (see figure 17). In the second party system, turnout fluctuated between a band of 55 and 64 percent in roller-coaster-like fashion, following a pattern of peaks and valleys. Turnout over this period (1967–1984) averaged around 59.6 percent. In the third party system (1989–2009), turnout once more stayed within this band, averaging around 59.1 percent. Turnout stagnated somewhat in the 2004 and 2009 elections, hovering around 58 percent in both polls.
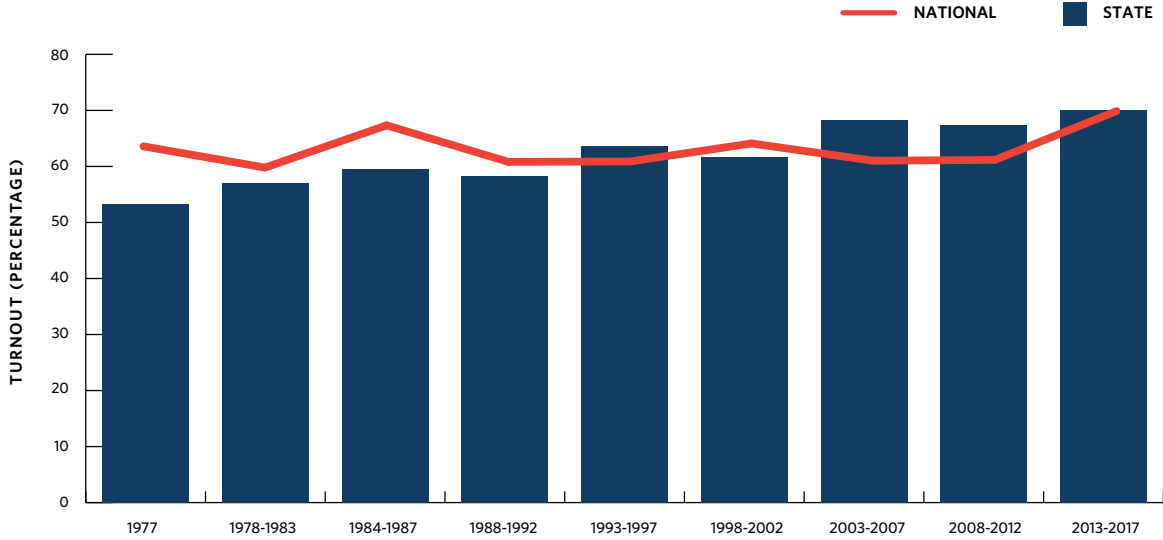
FIGURE 17
Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections, 1952–2019
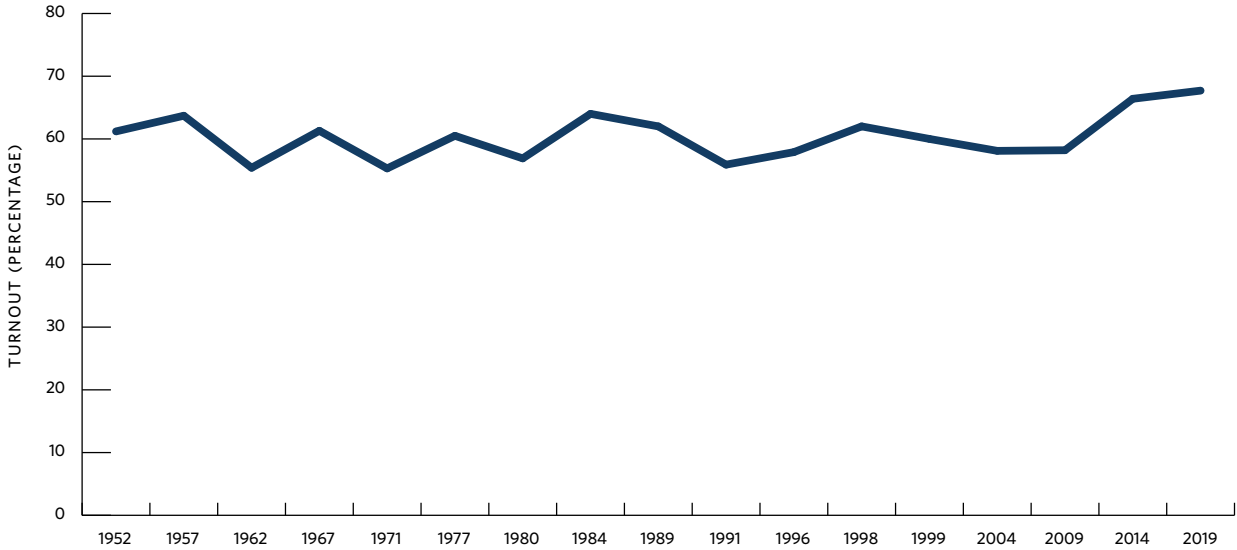
SOURCE: Election Commission of India.

FIGURE 18
State and National Turnout, 1977–2017

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

From this perspective, 2014 exhibits a clear break in voter turnout, when India recorded its highest turnout, at 66.4 percent. This degree of voter mobilization was undoubtedly a reflection of two factors: widespread frustration with the incumbent Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime and the excitement around the candidacy of Narendra Modi. Related evidence shows that areas that saw the highest turnout were precisely those constituencies where the BJP vote surged.[47] In 2019, voter turnout would notch yet another record: according to data provided by the Election Commission of India (ECI), 67.2 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. An average turnout of 66.8 percent in the past two elections demonstrates a clear break with the third party system and what came before. And, once more, the increase in turnout appears to have helped the BJP in 2019. For example, the BJP-led NDA won 87 percent of seats where turnout increased by more than 5 percent from its 2014 level but only 29 percent of seats where turnout decreased by more than 5 percent from 2014.

The gap between national turnout and state turnout is also narrowing. Prior to the start of the third system, national turnout regularly exceeded state turnout (see figure 18). In the coalition era, state turnout skyrocketed while national turnout remained steady. By the mid-2000s, state turnout was exceeding national turnout by an average of 10 percentage points. This gap has shrunk, however, to less than 4 percent between 2013 and 2017.

A final aspect of voter turnout that merits mention is the gender breakdown. Since electoral statistics began accounting for gender in 1967, there has been a clear gender gap in turnout whereby women's participation has lagged far behind men's (see figure 19). From 1967 to 2004, women's turnout has clocked in between 8 and 12 percentage points lower than men's (with the 1984 election following Indira Gandhi's assassination serving as the lone exception). But something has dramatically changed in recent years, beginning in 2009, as the third party system waned. That year, the gap between female and male turnout fell by nearly half, from 8.4 percent in 2004 to 4.4 percent in 2009. The decline grew even more intense in 2014, when the gap shrank to 1.8 percent. In 2019, for the first time in Indian electoral history, male and female turnout rates were virtually at parity (the gap was a negligible 0.1 percent).

The precise drivers of this change are not well understood; it is likely a combination of demand-side shifts (growing female empowerment, a more dense information environment, and so on) and supply-side changes, namely the ECI's stepped-up efforts to reduce the gender turnout gap.[48] To be sure, there is still a gender gap when it comes to voter registration: men still outnumber women on voter rolls, even after taking into account India's male-skewed sex ratio. As of 2014, there were 909 women per 1,000 men on the voter rolls, compared to a population sex ratio of 943 women per 1,000 men according to the 2011 census.[49] However, conditional on being registered, women are now turning out to vote at rates equal to men. This is having important impacts on the nature of

FIGURE 19
Gender-wise Voter Turnout in Lok Sabha Elections, 1967–2019
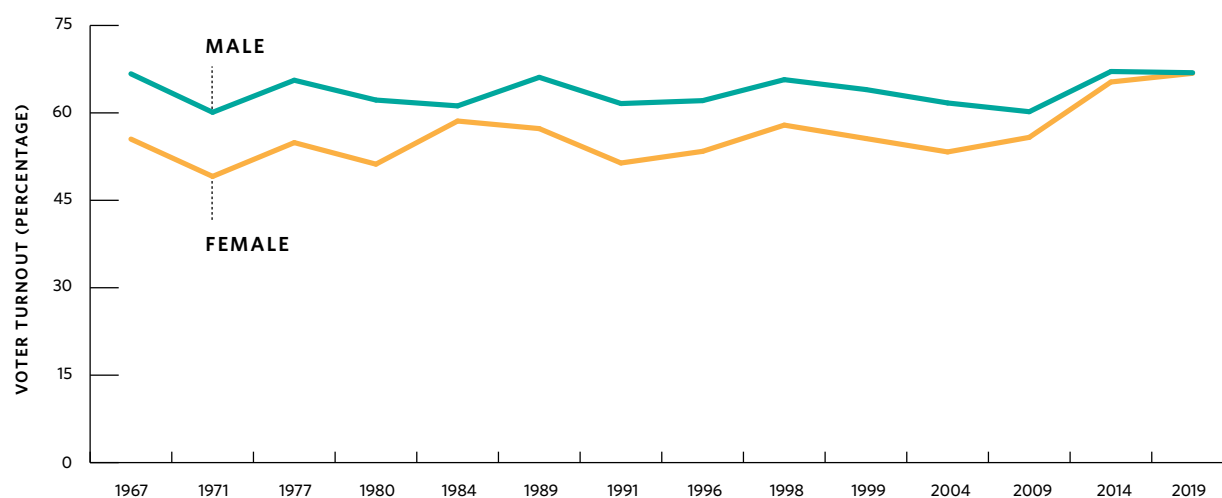
SOURCE: Election Commission of India.

political campaigning in India as parties are increasingly tailoring their outreach and messaging to cater to female voters. While it remains an open question as to how effectively parties channel the priorities of Indian women, it is clear that parties are being pushed to incorporate women into the political discourse as they have become more active, mobilized voters.[50]

Caste and Social Composition

Caste has been an ever-present reality in Indian politics in the postindependence era (and even before). However, the way in which caste has been expressed and mobilized politically has not remained constant. As Yadav points out in his seminal study, in the first electoral system, the most salient social category for politics was *jati* (one of thousands of discrete caste groups that reside within the umbrella categories of upper caste, OBC, SC, and so on).

In the first party system, *jati* was highly embedded within a particular local context. In the second party system, as Yadav notes, *jati*-level identities retained their importance, but changes in the political environment meant that political parties worked to build state-wide alliances of individual *jatis* in order to construct a minimum winning coalition. In the third party system, *jatis* lost their salience as the debate shifted to the umbrella-like *varna* groupings in the wake of the Mandal Commission report and its aftermath. During this tumultuous period, the categories of "OBC" and "Dalit" took on newfound importance as meaningful categories that could structure social and political mobilization.

FIGURE 20
Vote Preference in 2019 Lok Sabha Elections in Uttar Pradesh
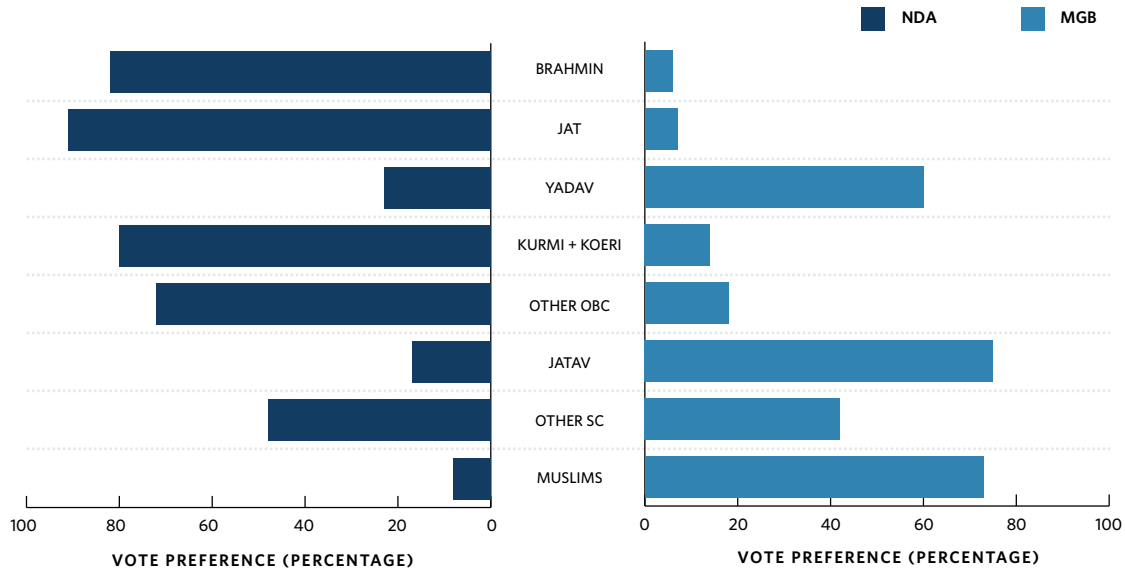
NOTE: NDA represents the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance while MGB represents the "mahagatbandhan" or grand alliance of the BSP, SP, and RLD.

SOURCE: 2019 CSDS-Lokniti National Election Study.

In the fourth party system, these larger umbrella groupings consisting of multiple *jatis* appear to have lost their import.[51] Instead, politics has returned to the construction of *jati*-level alliances, as in the second party system—but with a twist. One of the BJP's great successes in many north Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, has been to undermine the larger caste categories in an effort to create a wedge between dominant *jatis* and subordinate groupings.

For instance, in Uttar Pradesh, the two principal regional parties—the BSP and SP—have commonly been viewed as vehicles for the interests of the dominant Jatav (SC) and Yadav (OBC) *jatis*, respectively. The BJP exploited this perception to the hilt in order to attract non-Jatav SC and non-Yadav OBC voters. The strategy—first honed in 2014, perfected in the 2017 assembly elections, and deployed again in 2019—worked swimmingly. In 2019, the BSP and SP contested elections together to keep the BJP at bay. According to data collected by CSDS, an estimated 60 percent of Yadav voters and 75 percent of Jatav voters backed the BSP-SP combine (known as the *mahagatbandhan*, or grand alliance) (see figure 20).[52] The vast majority of Muslims, a strong votary of the SP, also backed the alliance. However, the data show that other OBC groups strongly broke for the BJP, including 80 percent of Kurmis and Koeris and 72 percent of other OBC groups. Similarly, as many as 48 percent of non-Jatav Dalits supported the BJP in spite of the fact that the BJP (and other members of the Sangh Parivar, the constellation of Hindu nationalist forces to which the BJP belongs) was implicated in a number of anti-Dalit incidents.[53]

FIGURE 21
Caste and Community Breakdown of Hindi Belt MPs, 1989–2019
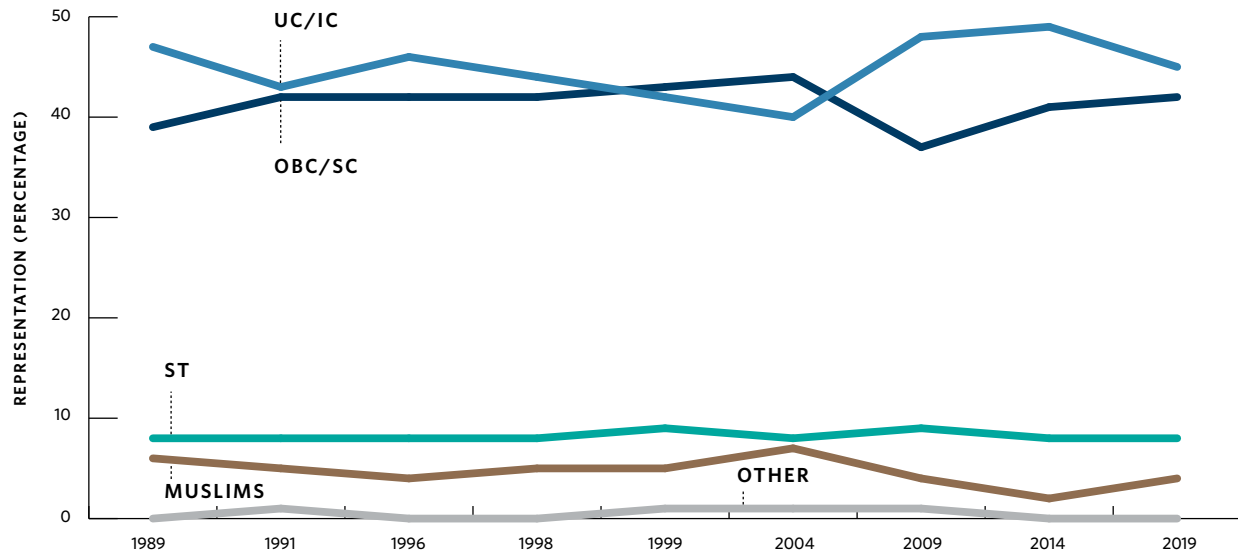
NOTE: UC/IC=Upper Castes and Intermediate Castes; OBC/SC=Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes; ST=Scheduled Tribes. Share of MPs with indeterminate backround not shown here.

SOURCE: Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, "Explained: In Hindi Heartland, Upper Castes Dominate New Lok Sabha," *Indian Express*, May 27, 2019.

In Bihar, the BJP also pursued a similar strategy in an effort to dampen support for the opposition RJD, which is another party seen as favoring the Yadav community. According to CSDS data, 55 percent of Yadavs stuck with the RJD and its alliance partners.[54] But the other OBC groups decisively swung toward the NDA. Because the upper castes are core supporters of the BJP across the board, winning over these new *jati* groups provided the crucial swing vote in favor of the BJP.

But the fourth party system also heralds a shift on a second dimension of social identity, which is the social composition of India's elected representatives. The rise of Mandal politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with pro-Dalit parties like the BSP, had a clear effect on the sociology of power. For instance, data collected by Ashoka University and Sciences Po and analyzed by Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers show a clear shift in the 225 or so MPs of the Hindi belt (see figure 21).[55] In 1989, 47 percent of MPs from Hindi-speaking states were from the upper and intermediate castes, compared to 39 percent from the OBC and SC groupings. This gap shrank over time and eventually, in 1999, the latter overtook the former.

This pattern reversed in 2009, however, and has persisted since. In 2014, 49 percent of Hindi belt MPs came from the upper and intermediate castes as against 41 percent from the backward and Dalit communities. The gap narrowed somewhat in 2019, but the general trend remains unchanged. What

is also striking is the dwindling numbers of Muslims elected to the Lok Sabha from these states—no doubt a consequence, in large measure, of the BJP's dominance in these states. In 2019, the BJP did not give a single ticket to a Muslim candidate in the Hindi belt (for comparison's sake, the Congress nominated eleven Muslims from the same set of states).

The Foundations of the BJP's Power

Plumbing data on electoral returns is useful but has its limits. There are other, not as easily quantifiable, factors that shape the BJP's present hegemony and that help underpin the fourth party system.

BJP as System-Defining Party

One of the defining characteristics of the second party system in which the Congress featured as the dominant power was that national election verdicts functioned as referenda on Congress rule. As Yadav explains, "[a] typical verdict in this period took the form of a nation-wide or sometimes state-wide wave for or against the Congress. The local specificities of the constituency simply did not matter."[56] This could well describe Indian elections in the post-2014 era. Major parties contesting the 2019 elections, with relatively few exceptions, positioned themselves as either supportive of Modi and the BJP or vehemently opposed to them. While the opposition did not succeed in either creating a nationwide coalition to tackle the BJP or unifying behind a common prime ministerial contender, it did forge a series of state-specific alliances that were explicitly constructed on an anti-BJP platform. In the end, the opposition's machinations utterly failed to contain the BJP's rise (arguably, the opportunistic "counter-BJP" coalitions may have strengthened the BJP even further), but there is no denying that the political formations on display were largely in reaction to the BJP's own standing. This is the very definition of a system-defining party.

Furthermore, state elections held between 2014 and 2019 often played out along the same lines. For the BJP, the party more often than not refused to project a chief ministerial candidate, instead preferring to campaign on the backs of Modi's personal popularity as prime minister. Even though Modi's name appeared nowhere on the ballot, the BJP made the case that an alignment between the state and national governments would allow Modi to effectively execute his vision for a New India. With relatively few exceptions, the strategy worked exceedingly well. The opposition, too, used the BJP as a foil to galvanize its own campaigns. For instance, in the 2015 assembly elections in the state of Bihar, an unprecedented coalition of opposition forces—led by longtime rivals Nitish Kumar of the JD(U) and Lalu Prasad Yadav of the RJD—set aside their grievances in order to keep the BJP out of power.[57] Their strategy, in this particular case, worked.

Ideological Hegemony

In an incisive 2018 essay, the political scientist Suhas Palshikar characterized the BJP under Modi as a classic example of a hegemonic political party.[58] Palshikar defined hegemony as having two components: ideology and electoral performance. The BJP's hold on Indian voters has been well documented already in this paper. Equally interesting is how the party has managed to exert its dominance ideologically. According to Palshikar's account, the BJP's twin emphases on Hindu nationalism and what he calls a "new developmentalism" have allowed the party to saturate the political space in India. This has been made possible, in part, by the fact that the Congress Party's legacy of secular nationalism appears to have fallen out of favor and that the BJP has adopted many of the Congress Party's welfarist policies.

A thorough review of the BJP's nationalist ideas is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the party has developed a new, nationalist narrative that has broad currency with the voting public. To reduce this narrative to one of Hindu nationalism would be inaccurate; the party's pro-Hindu views are but one element of its overall nationalist discourse. Broadly speaking, this narrative has three elements.

In the 2014 and 2019 general election campaigns, the party selectively deployed Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) in parts of the country where the party felt it would help consolidate their electoral base.[59] Over the past two decades, the BJP has made sincere efforts at broadening its demographic base beyond a small sliver of Hindu upper castes and trading communities to include Dalits (Scheduled Castes), OBCs, and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes). One way in which it has sought to do this is by using memes such as Ram Mandir (the temple to Lord Ram many Hindus would like to build in Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid once stood), cow protection, and illegal immigration to transcend caste divisions among Hindus. In sections of the Hindi belt and in border districts in Assam and West Bengal, for instance, the party did not hesitate to embrace its traditional bona fides as a strident, pro-Hindu vehicle.

After the 2014 victory, the BJP under Modi has expanded its nationalist discourse to include other components. For instance, in recent years it has made use of a more amorphous nationalism that was centered on territorial sovereignty, loyalty to the nation, and resentment toward traditional liberal elites who it painted as out-of-touch, feckless, and compromised by divided loyalties.[60] As political scientist Devesh Kapur perceptively noted, "Now, that old Nehruvian India is giving way and is being replaced by Modi's India, one that is less embarrassed by its limited English and heavy accents. Its nationalism is unapologetic about India's Hindu roots, and it is prepared to be more assertive in defense of what it regards as its national interests – even if it means redefining the idea of the

'nation.'"[61] Modi himself alluded to this social churning when, in an interview with the *Indian Express* toward the conclusion of the 2019 campaign, he boasted of his independence from the elite "Khan Market gang" that had dominated the corridors of power for decades.[62]

The final strain of nationalism, which took center stage in 2019 thanks to a series of events in the foreign policy domain, has to do with a muscularity abroad and a reclaiming of India's rightful place in the world. For the first time in recent memory, voters on the campaign trail routinely told reporters that this election was more than a battle between partisan contenders, it was a battle "desh ke liye" (for the nation).[63] There is no question that tensions between India and Pakistan helped boost this latest strand of nationalism. The Indian response to the February 14 suicide bombing of Indian paramilitary forces in Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, created an aura of crisis that spoke to precisely those attributes that Modi often touts about himself—muscularity, nationalism, and determination.[64] While people did not necessarily vote for national security, per se, India's military response to Pakistan acted as a filter through which voters evaluated Modi and his record. According to survey data from CSDS, voters who were aware of the Indian airstrikes on terrorist targets located near Balakot in Pakistan (actions taken in response to the Pulwama bombing) were more likely to downplay economic concerns when deciding whom to vote for.[65]

Aside from nationalism, the BJP has also managed to dominate the discourse on the economy and economic development. Three ideas have been central to the BJP's posture. First, the Modi government is unabashedly pro-business and the prime minister has contrasted this with the Congress' record—particularly in the final years of its second stint in office between 2009 and 2014—of policy paralysis and burdensome regulation. Although Modi has not emerged as the pro-market reformer that many economists had hoped for, he has been much more consistent about hewing a pro-business line, especially with regards to indigenous Indian business. He has also skillfully linked this unshackling of Indian business to India's prestige abroad. Soon after taking office, for instance, Modi boldly pledged to catapult India's position on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings into the global top 50. After his first term, India's position has improved from 134 (out of 189 countries) to 77 (out of 190 countries)—falling just short of Modi's aspirational goal.[66]

Second, Modi has brandished his bona fides as the ultimate anticorruption reformer. The hallmark of this fight was his government's decision in November 2016 to invalidate 86 percent of India's currency in an effort to squeeze black money circulating in India. While Modi's demonetization gambit largely failed to meet its stated objectives, it did help craft a new political narrative in which Modi and the BJP were positioned against black money, the crooked elites who had fleeced India for

seven decades, and those politicians who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them. Indeed, it is a testament to Modi's oratorical skills and message management that he could turn a largely failed policy that wreaked temporary havoc on the Indian economy into a success story built around his own intent to clean up the system and popular anti-elite resentment.

Third, the prime minister has also refashioned his own image as the architect of India's modern welfare state. If Modi's first pivot was to transition from Hindu strongman to *vikas purush* (development hero) in the latter years of his tenure as Gujarat chief minister, his second pivot has been to shift from a leader who talked incessantly about the middle class, jobs, investment, and growth to one whose main message centers on welfare. This second shift is even more surprising than the first given that Modi's record on social welfare as Gujarat's political chief was less than stellar. Furthermore, his rise to power in 2014 was fueled in part by a stinging critique of the Congress emphasis on welfare as preferring "entitlements" or "doles" over "empowerment."[67]

Either to deflect attention from other shortcomings or to pin the Congress in a corner, one of the main focal points of Modi's first term was a plethora of social welfare schemes his government rolled out between 2014 and 2019. From rural roads to toilets to cooking gas connections, the Modi government amassed a credible record building assets, especially in rural areas.[68] This public provision of private goods was not a substitute for income growth, but it did demonstrate to millions of Indians that the government could be a force for positive change. Given how closely these schemes were identified with the central government, and the prime minister more specifically, they redounded to his benefit. Based on anecdotal evidence, even where households did not directly benefit from subsidies for home construction or could not afford a replacement gas cylinder in spite of a new connection, many voters felt that a corrupt, uncaring state was at last moving in the right direction.[69]

Modi's pro-welfare emphasis has placed the Congress on the back foot for a simple reason: many of the schemes he has invested in were essentially schemes the Congress set up. What Modi did was rebrand them, scale them up, and give them priority status in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). As a result, it is very difficult for the Congress to criticize his actions other than saying that, if it were in power, it would implement the schemes better and on a grander scale. At root, many of these welfare schemes emerged from Congress Party blueprints.

Organizational and Financial Prowess

A political machine that is miles ahead of the competition in terms of its organizational foundations and material resources gave the BJP the ability to project Modi as a leader with unimpeachable credentials, to deliver its nuanced messages of nationalism to different target audiences, and to parry the opposition's jibes.[70] Under the tutelage of BJP President Amit Shah, the party has built a well-

oiled party machine that is organized down to the level of the *panna pramukh*—literally a party worker who is in charge of an individual *panna* (page) of the voter roll linked to a neighborhood polling station.[71]

Furthermore, the BJP owns a first-mover advantage insofar as integrating technology with campaigning is concerned. The BJP has successfully harnessed digital technology from Facebook to SMS to WhatsApp to build cohesion among its workers, between voters, and between workers and voters. The party's organization in West Bengal created and monitored 55,000 WhatsApp groups to win over voters, and the Bengal BJP Facebook and Twitter accounts received 220 million engagements and 4 million impressions, respectively, in the two months leading up to the election.[72] In all, the BJP is reported to have spent over 200 million rupees ($3 million) on its digital campaign.[73]

Even more striking is the BJP's financial advantage. Data on the income of India's major political parties in 2017–2018 compiled and analyzed by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a good governance watchdog, show that the BJP's income was *twice* the combined income of the other six major parties. Based on parties' income tax returns from fiscal year 2018, the Congress raised around 2 billion rupees in donations, compared to a whopping 10 billion rupees for the ruling BJP.[74] The BJP advantage over the Congress when it comes to corporate funding (or the amount that is aboveboard and formally disclosed) stood at twenty to one in 2018.[75] In 2018, the government also formally unveiled a new mechanism of political giving, known as electoral bonds.[76] In essence, these bearer bonds allow a corporation or individual to give an unlimited sum of money to a political party without requiring that either the giver or the recipient disclose the transaction. Based on information acquired through a Right to Information Act request, 95 percent of the bonds purchased in 2017–2018 accrued to the BJP's accounts.[77]

A report issued by the Delhi-based Center for Media Studies (CMS) found that nearly 600 billion rupees were spent on the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and concurrent assembly polls, roughly doubling the amount spent in 2014. While any assessment of actual (as opposed to disclosed) expenditures requires estimation (given the opacity of electoral spending), the report concludes that candidates spent, on average, about four times more than the amount capped by law. The BJP accounted for the bulk of the increase in spending, comprising around 45 percent of all election expenditures, compared to the Congress's 15–20 percent.[78]

Charismatic Leadership
It could be argued that both the 2014 and 2019 elections were Modi's victories rather than the BJP's. In the 2014 race, the BJP encountered a perfect storm of anti-incumbency against the ruling Congress, economic malaise, a pervasive sense of policy paralysis, and lackluster leadership on the

part of the Congress. It is easier to understand in that case how a charismatic, strong opposition leader in Modi—who also enjoyed a well-regarded reputation as a no-nonsense, pro-business economic reformer—was able to take the country by storm. The 2019 case is somewhat more complicated given the prevailing economic headwinds. Yet here too, in spite of the dislocation created by policy errors associated with demonetization and the patchy rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), and the resulting sense of unfulfilled promises, Modi remained extremely popular in the eyes of the electorate.[79]

According to the 2019 National Election Study conducted by CSDS, Modi's net favorability (a measure of his popularity relative to that of Congress President Rahul Gandhi) was roughly at the same level it was in April–May 2014.[80] Although there were expected fluctuations over the five-year period, Modi still led Gandhi by 18 percentage points in April–May 2019. In essence, a central component of what people voted for was Modi's leadership.

Modi's favorability has to be seen in the context of a general dearth of popular, charismatic leaders among opposition forces. Despite the fact that Rahul Gandhi had become more popular, more effective, more diligent, and more present, only a small minority of Indians trust him with the reins of the country. Even though voters voiced many economic grievances related to the BJP's five years in power, at the same time, they viewed Modi as the one national leader best placed to address those grievances.[81]

Despite India's mixed headline economic numbers, the salience of economic issues actually *declined* as the campaign wore on. According to CSDS's nationally representative pre-poll survey, 21 percent of Indians named joblessness as the issue of greatest concern to them ahead of the election. That proportion declined by almost 10 percentage points in just six weeks. The importance of economic issues (which include unemployment, the GST, inflation, and growth) declined over time, with 38 percent claiming they were the most important election issue in March 2019, but just 25 percent reaffirming this once the election had concluded.[82]

Conclusion

Based on the available data, it seems reasonable to conclude with greater confidence that, since 2014, India has indeed embarked on a new chapter in its political evolution. Gone are the days of Congress dominance, but India's grand old party has clearly been replaced by a new, formative political force in the BJP. With the 2019 general election, it is now clear—judging by a multiplicity of criteria— that India is in the midst of a new, dominant-party system.

The dawn of this fourth party system raises important questions that deserve greater exploration by political scientists in the years to come. For starters, how do economic indicators shape voting behavior? For decades, it was believed that good economics did not make for good politics in India.[83] Or, in other words, incumbents did not reap any direct electoral rewards from superior economic performance. According to several assessments, things began to change in 2000s such that economic and electoral performance became mutually reinforcing. For the first time, voters appeared to be punishing incumbents who presided over periods of weaker economic growth and rewarding those who did the opposite.[84]

The 2019 election poses a quandary for this literature as the BJP's track record was extremely mixed when one looks at standard economic indicators like GDP growth, employment, and agrarian well-being. Indeed, it is striking that the economy played such a little role in the 2019 election given that it was the centerpiece in many ways of the 2014 race. As the CSDS data cited above demonstrates, the salience of major economic issues actually *declined* over the course of the six-week campaign. It's possible that the phrase "it's the economy, stupid" is still pertinent but needs to be amended to include "only when there is a viable challenger."

A second issue that deserves greater scrutiny is the role of caste. There are broadly two conceptions of Indian electoral politics. The first is that elections are mainly about arithmetic, or the ability of political parties to amass support from a sufficient number of castes or communities to stitch together a minimum winning coalition. This is one reason why nearly every conversation in an electoral constituency in India begins with a recitation of the caste/religious composition of the electorate. The second conception is that elections are about chemistry, rather than arithmetic. In other words, leadership, messaging, coalition dynamics, and so on trump purely identity-based calculations in which a party's popularity can be measured merely with reference to the vote banks that have traditionally supported it.

The 2019 elections certainly give a fillip to the latter view. That is not to say that caste is no longer a central issue in Indian politics; to the contrary, many pundits have argued that it is alive and well.[85] But the larger point is that if identity considerations were all that mattered and every party's core demographic constituencies were well known, then India would exhibit far less electoral volatility than it does. A useful example here is the 2019 contest in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which saw an unprecedented coming together of the BSP and SP—two sworn enemies—in an effort to parry the BJP. If one were to merely tally up the BSP and SP's combined vote shares from the 2014 general elections, as many analysts did, it would appear that they were poised to evenly split the state's 80 seats with the BJP. In 2014, the NDA earned 43.6 percent of the vote compared to 43 percent for

the BSP-SP (the joint tally of their vote shares plus that of the RLD, a smaller, third ally). In reality, the BJP romped home with 62 seats, and the vote share of the combined BSP-SP declined from its 2014 level. In 2019, the NDA won 50.6 percent of the vote compared to just 38.9 for the opposition alliance.

A third area for further investigation relates to role of political campaigns. In the United States, there is a massive literature on campaign effects, or the influence that political campaigns have on voter behavior.[86] In India, there is very little work that has been able to precisely quantify the impacts of political campaigns on how voters vote. And yet, both the 2014 and 2019 elections suggest that campaigns (not surprisingly) have a material impact on voter behavior. For instance, it is indisputable that the tensions between India and Pakistan helped bolster the BJP's case for reelection even while it is very much disputed how significant this factor was in terms of votes and seats.

To be clear, the emergence of a new party system says nothing about the endurance of that electoral order. While India's previous three systems each had a degree of staying power, the fate of the fourth party system will eventually hinge on the precise dynamics of India's party politics and the vagaries or voter behavior. In addition, the transition from one system to the next can usually only be discerned ex post and with the benefit of retrospective evaluation and hindsight.

The BJP's emergence as a hegemonic force does not mean that the party is somehow inoculated from electoral setbacks. Indeed, between 2014 and 2019, the BJP lost critical state elections in Delhi and Bihar in 2015 and in three northern India states in December 2018 held on the eve of the general election. In fact, the BJP has not won a single state election in calendar years 2018 and 2019 (to date). But the larger point is not about individual wins and losses as it is that the BJP has emerged as a system-defining party, in response to which all others position themselves.

About the Authors

Milan Vaishnav is a senior fellow and director of the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His primary research focus is the political economy of India, and he examines issues such as corruption and governance, state capacity, distributive politics, and electoral behavior.

Jamie Hintson was a James C. Gaither junior fellow with Carnegie's South Asia Program from 2018 to 2019.

Acknowledgments

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