Coalition Math Could Matter Most in India's 2019 Election

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After seven phases of voting spread out over six weeks, on May 23, 2019, India will count the votes from its mammoth general election. While the lion's share of media attention to date has focused on the fortunes of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the country's principal opposition party, the Indian National Congress, the final result could hinge on the performance of dozens of smaller parties in the fray.

In Indian general elections, the two premier national parties do not fight elections alone; rather, each party heads a front—or coalition of parties—consisting of smaller (typically regional or caste-based) parties with whom it shares a pre-poll alliance. These dueling alliances—the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA)—involve bespoke seat-sharing arrangements that amplify a national party's reach and stature, especially in regions where it may have a limited presence. Smaller coalition partners, in turn, earn a shot at national power if their front emerges triumphant.

These dueling coalitions are not fixed in time. Rather, constituent members regularly switch sides depending on the whims of their party leaders, state-specific policy concerns, and sheer political expediency. For instance, the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), one of the BJP's smaller allies in Bihar, exited the NDA following a seat-sharing spat ahead of the 2019 polls. This time around, the RLSP teamed up with the Congress and other opposition forces to take on the NDA. Similarly, some parties that were unaligned in 2014 have migrated to either national front in the intervening years. For instance, the Janata Dal (Secular), a key regional party in the state of Karnataka, joined the UPA following its decision in May 2018 to put aside past differences and form a regional government in conjunction with the Congress.

Figure 1 demonstrates the contribution (in terms of votes and seats) that allies have made to the BJP and the Congress over the last three general elections in 2004, 2009, and 2014.[1] In 2009, the Congress won 206 seats on its own—a far cry from the 272 it needed to earn a majority (there are 543 directly elected seats in the

Lok Sabha Seats by Major Party and Alliance, 2004–2014
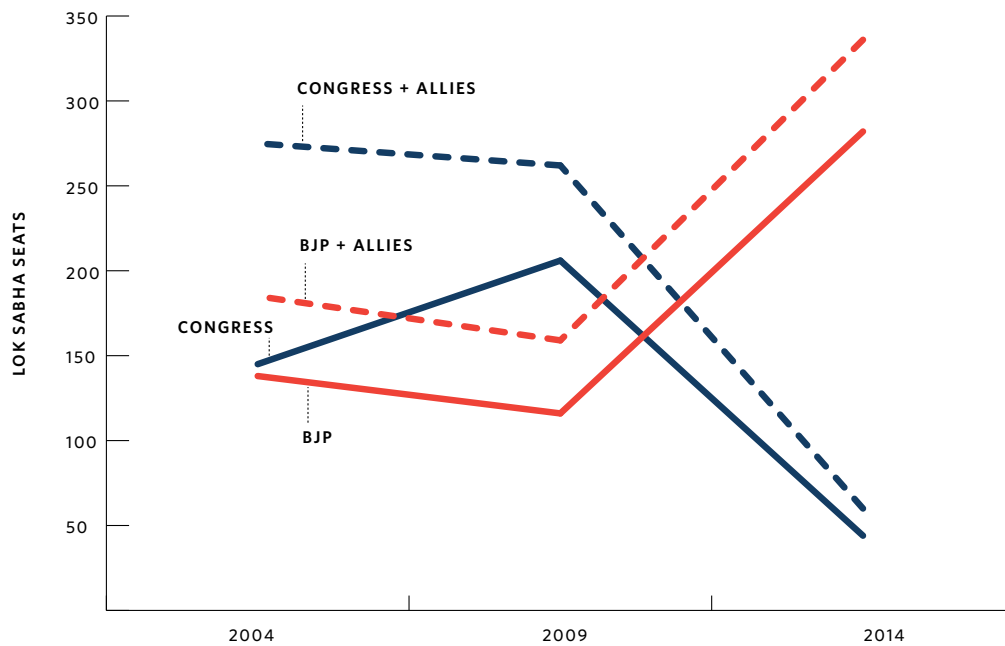
SOURCES: Lokniti-CSDS, "National Election Study 2004: An Introduction," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 51 (2004): 5373–5382; Lokniti-CSDS, "Statistics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 203–205; and Lokniti-CSDS, "Statistics: National Election Study 2014," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 39 (2014): 130-134.

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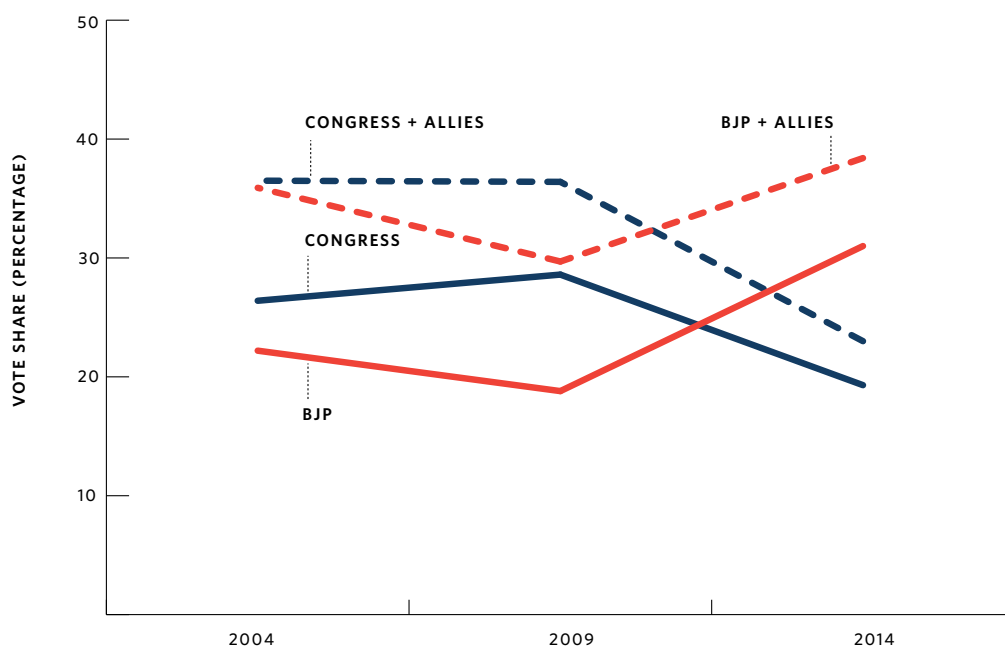
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Lok Sabha, or lower house of parliament). However, the Congress's allies added another 56 seats, bringing the UPA's total to 262—a gap the Congress easily bridged by bringing on additional postelection partners.

In 2014, the BJP contested the elections with its coterie of NDA companions. Although the BJP won a majority of parliamentary seats on its own (as Figure 1 shows), its allies played an important—if unheralded—role. In many states, the support of alliance partners expanded the BJP's vote share and fueled its victories in seats where it may have otherwise fallen short. Perhaps as recognition of this fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi technically heads a coalition government with many Cabinet portfolios manned by members of parliament (MPs) representing the wider NDA family.

PIVOTAL COALITIONS

In 2019, coalitions will likely play an even more decisive role, given that most pre-election surveys suggest neither the BJP nor the Congress will be in a position to form a government on its own. Indeed, the Congress has focused on a decentralized campaign strategy in which state-specific alliances will consolidate opposition votes in an effort to defeat the BJP. For instance, the Congress has stitched up coalitions in key states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, and Maharashtra with the sole objective of defeating the BJP and its allies. It also boasts alliances in other states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the main opposition is not necessarily the BJP but a dominant regional player.

However, on-the-ground realities do not always back up the Congress's rhetoric about fighting this election as part of a unified opposition front. For instance, in the election's most pivotal battleground—the state of Uttar Pradesh, which boasts 80 seats—the Congress is not part of the mahagatbandhan (grand alliance) of opposition parties steered by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), the state's two

leading regional parties. After defeating incumbent BJP members in three key Hindi heartland states—Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan—in a set of state polls in December 2018, the Congress felt this wind was at its back. As a result, it drove a hard bargain with potential partners in the general election. Many regional players felt that the Congress was overplaying its hand and balked at the party's perceived arrogance.

These parties may have a point: the disaggregated election results from December show that the Congress only made sizable gains in seats where the BJP was the incumbent party (see figure 2). In Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Congress performance actually declined in seats where it had been the party in power. The Congress may have mistaken anti-incumbency sentiment for a pro-Congress wave.

By contesting Uttar Pradesh on its own, the Congress threatens to divide opposition votes, although Congress President Rahul Gandhi recently intimated that his party would not put up its strongest candidates where it lacked a solid chance of winning the seat outright. The opposition also stands divided in the state of Delhi, where the Congress was unable to forge an understanding with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—the ruling party in the state. A divided opposition in Delhi helped the BJP sweep the state's 7 seats in 2014 and could do so in 2019 as well.

The BJP entered this election season facing turmoil within the NDA's ranks. In March 2018, a principal ally—the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the ruling party in Andhra Pradesh—exited the coalition in the wake of a major policy dispute. Several smaller parties, from the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) in Tamil Nadu to the Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party (JKPDP), also broke off ties with the BJP. However, over the past several months, the BJP has rebounded and cobbled together a formidable alliance for the 2019 campaign.

FIGURE 2

Congress Performance and Incumbency in December 2018 Assembly Elections

■ CONGRESS INCUMBENT   ■ BJP INCUMBENT
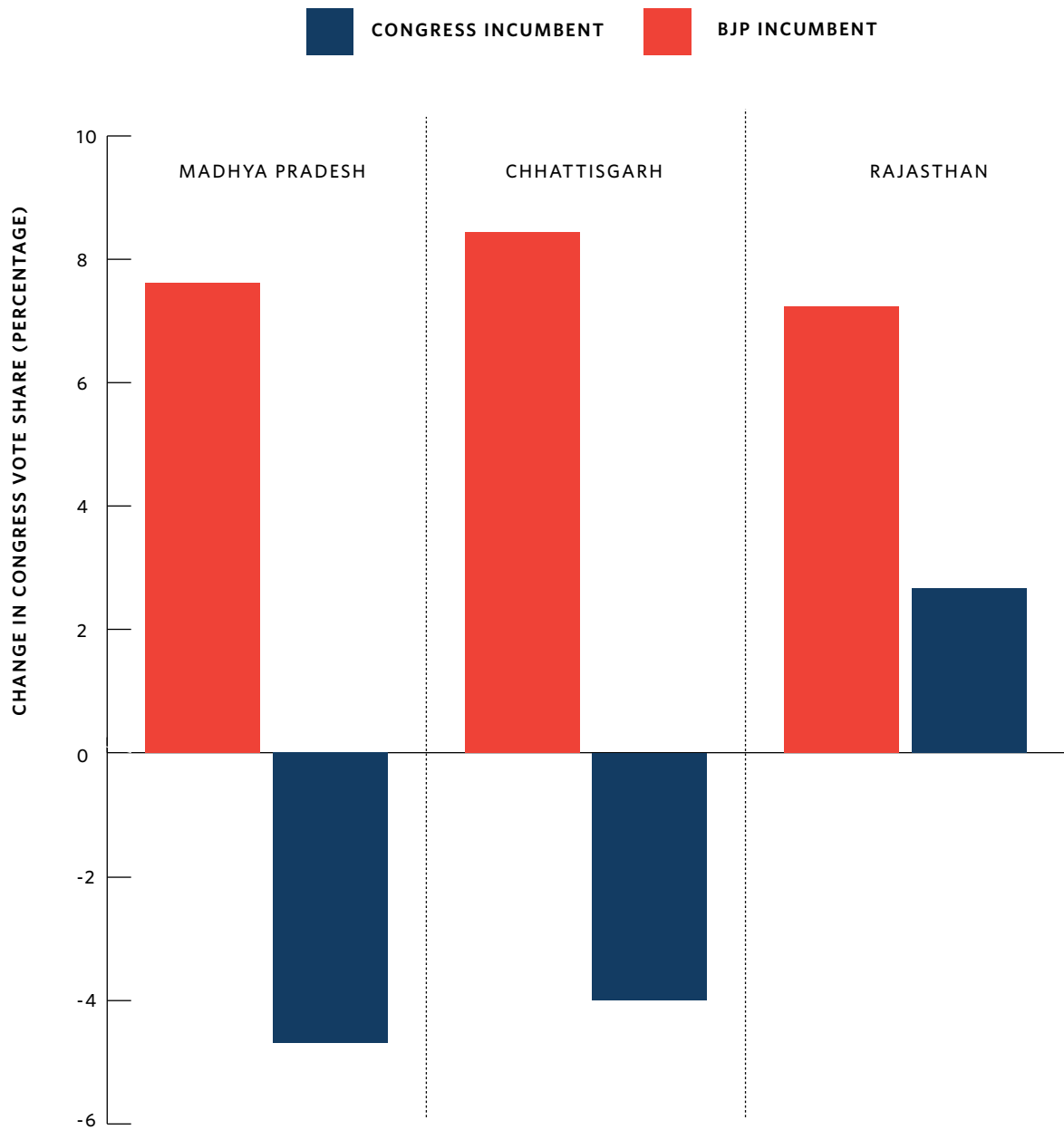
SOURCE: Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017, http://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/LokDhaba-Shiny/.

In the state of Tamil Nadu, where the BJP holds just one seat in parliament, the party struck up an alliance with a constellation of regional parties led by the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Despite heated rhetoric about an impending divorce with the BJP's longtime ally in Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena, the two set aside their differences and finalized their partnership for 2019. In some instances, the BJP went out of its way to placate allies by giving up seats it once held. In the state of Bihar, for instance, the BJP cemented an alliance with its on-again, off-again partner the Janata Dal (United) by giving it 17 seats (the BJP will contest another 17 and a smaller ally, the Lok Janshakti Party, or LJP, will contest another 6). In granting 17 seats to the JD(U), the BJP effectively pushed aside five of its own incumbent MPs. This gesture either signified goodwill or anticipated anti-incumbency sentiment.

Aside from constituent members of the two major alliances, a range of critical parties remain nonaligned. Parties such as the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha to the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) in Telangana and the opposition YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) in Andhra Pradesh have chosen not to join either the NDA or the UPA. These parties possess a variety of incentives to remain unaffiliated. For instance, if neither the Congress nor the BJP is in a commanding position to form a government, regional parties could band together in a "Third Front" to launch a bid at government formation. While such an alternative front would likely include the explicit or implicit backing of one of the two national parties, regional parties would remain in the driver's seat. Such Third Front governments have historical precedent: the Janata Dal–led National Front ruled India between 1989 and 1990 and the United Front formed two governments between 1996 and 1998. Remaining nonaligned also grants leverage during the government formation process. The seats won by nonaligned parties could be pivotal to constructing a majority, which allows them to name their price for coming on board—from special financial packages for their states to plum Cabinet portfolios.

ELEVENTH HOUR SURPRISE?

After all the ballots are counted, regional parties may still defect or change their coalition affiliation. For instance, although the BSP is running an explicitly anti-BJP campaign in Uttar Pradesh, it has struck postelection alliances before with the BJP. Especially since the party won no seats in 2014, it could be tempted by the offer of a seat at the high table this time around. Switching sides can be especially lucrative for parties from small states whose budgets rely heavily on central assistance; lining up on the "right" side could have significant fiscal implications for their states' resource allocations.

The BJP hopes that it will be able to construct a majority with its existing NDA partners. Congress leaders, meanwhile, admit the party has no shot of coming to power without manufacturing a significantly broader coalition than its current one. Many unaligned parties, in turn, are counting on an outcome where neither alliance earns a majority, allowing them to swoop in as decisive power brokers. Which side these parties will come down on is difficult to predict. In Indian politics, there are neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies; as one political analyst astutely noted: "It is possible for practically everyone to cohabit with practically anyone else in the pursuit of power."

For more on India's pre-election alliances, and how parties change electoral calculations by switching coalitions, please go to Carnegie's website and check out the digital feature.

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NOTES

1 All election data, unless otherwise noted, comes from Francesca R. Jensenius and Gilles Verniers, "Indian National Election and Candidates Database 1962 – Today," Trivedi Center for Political Data, 2017. The data can be accessed here: http://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/LokDhaba-Shiny/. Data on alliance arrangements in 2004, 2009, and 2014 comes from Lokniti-CSDS, "National Election Study 2004: An Introduction," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 51 (2004): 5373–5382; Lokniti-CSDS, "Statistics," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2009): 203–205; and Lokniti-CSDS, "Statistics: National Election Study 2014," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 39 (2014): 130–134.

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