

The Hoover Institution's **Survey of India**

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Huntington Program on Strengthening US-India Relations



1. India's 2024 Election and the Renewal of Coalition Politics

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In this chapter I will attempt to analyze the implications of India's 2024 national election for Indian politics in the present and near future. Because the chapter was written in the immediate aftermath of the election, first it will be necessary to put this election in perspective. I will, therefore, first outline in the next section the evolution of India's party system in long-run historical perspective, describing the four main phases so far. Then I will describe the run-up to the 2024 electoral contest over the past two years since the formation of the principal opposition coalition, led by the Indian National Congress (Congress), that sought to defeat the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has been in office for two full (five-year) terms since 2014.¹

THE EVOLUTION OF INDIA'S PARTY SYSTEM AND RUN-UP TO THE 2024 ELECTION

After Independence in 1947, India adopted an essentially liberal-democratic constitution in 1950, with the usual democratic rights and freedoms for citizens, equal citizenship, and rights without discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth but with population-proportionate quotas in parliament, state legislative assemblies,

and government jobs for historically disadvantaged and discriminated-against groups like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The political system adopted was that of a federal parliamentary democracy based on elections to parliament and state legislatures every five years using the single-member district, simple-plurality system, in common parlance the first-past-the-post system.

Eighteen national elections have been held from 1952 to 2024 along with corresponding elections to the state legislatures that might or might not have coincided with national elections. The first-past-the-post federal system led to the evolution of the party system in the following four broad phases. The 2024 election was possibly the beginning of a new phase.

THE FIRST PHASE, 1952-67

This was the phase of the dominance of the Indian National Congress, the party that had spearheaded the Indian Independence Movement (hereinafter referred to as "Congress" or the "Congress party"). The Congress party, led before 1947 by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and a galaxy of other leaders, was a broad, inclusive, internally diverse but largely centrist umbrella party during this phase whereas the varied opposition parties,

the largest being the Communist Party, were much smaller and had significant bases only in one or a few states each. The other main opposition parties were the socialists, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (or BJS, a Hindu nationalist party and precursor of the BJP), and then-minor regional parties. Under the leadership of Nehru, India's first prime minister (1947–64), the Congress won two-thirds majorities based on only a plurality of the votes (percentages in the forties) against a diverse and divided opposition in the 1952, 1957, and 1962 elections. It also won similar plurality vote-based majorities (sometimes majority votes) and formed the government in all states except for a couple of state elections during this period when state assembly elections were held simultaneously with national elections.

THE SECOND PHASE, 1967-89

The second phase saw the gradual erosion of Congress hegemony and the rise of a range of opposition parties that began with the 1967 election. The Congress dropped to a low of 41 percent vote share and a bare majority of seats and lost power in eight of the then sixteen major states in the simultaneous assembly elections, leading to variegated opposition coalition governments in those states. During this phase, national elections seemed to follow the same pattern as in the earlier Congress-hegemonic phase; that is, seat majorities were won based on vote pluralities with vote shares in the forties. Thus, the Congress won majorities in the (early) 1971 elections and in 1980 and 1984 (with a three-quarters majority and a highest-ever 48 percent vote share) while the Janata Party, a unification of five opposition parties including Congress splinter groups, formed to oppose the suspension of democracy in the 1975–77 Emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, won a Congress-like victory in reverse, getting a majority based on 42 percent vote share.

However, Congress's reemergence was only the case in national elections. The real action in this

phase was in the states. During this phase the opposition space, state by state, began consolidating behind a single non-Congress opposition party that varied state by state, for both state assembly and parliamentary elections. This was due to the dynamic of Duverger's law playing itself out in a federal system. Duverger's law posits that in a first-past-the-post electoral system (i.e., a single-member district, simple-plurality system as used in the United Kingdom and the United States for legislative elections), parties getting below a certain varying threshold would receive disproportionately fewer seats and that voters would tend not to waste their votes on unviable challengers to the main party but would consolidate behind the most viable challenger, leading to two-party or bipolar systems (leading party versus a coalition, or two opposed coalitions). This phase saw Duverger's logic playing itself out in more and more states, leading to the emergence of two-party or bipolar party systems and thus laying the ground for state-level challenges to Congress dominance not only at the state level but potentially nationally by an opposing coalition.

Bipolar state-level party systems emerged for both state and national elections, principally of three types. It was Congress versus BJS (later BJP) from 1967 in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan; Congress versus the Left Front in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura; and Congress versus a regional party in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Andhra Pradesh, and Goa during this phase.

The Congress split of 1969 in which much of the organizational machinery went out of the party as well as the centralization of the party under Indira Gandhi and the suspension of annual intraparty elections and deliberations, which led to the exit of disgruntled factions as well as its failure to incorporate newly mobilized constituencies like farmers and intermediate castes in the northern states, all led to further erosion of Congress strength in more

and more states. The delinking of national and state assembly elections in more and more states after the midterm fall of coalition governments in 1969 in many states also helped the opposition as the focus was on state-level issues in standalone state elections. Congress predominance was also eroded by the emergence of a broad-front anti-Congress coalition of diverse opposition parties from 1967 at the state level, followed by the emergence of a national anti-Congress coalition—the Janata Party, technically a single unified party—before the post-Emergency 1977 election. This trend continued in the 1989 election when a Congress splinter group, the Janata Dal led by former Congress leader V. P. Singh, won that election in an alliance with both the BJP on the right and the Left Front. By 1990, the Congress was dominant in the old sense in only seven states, but that was soon to change.

THE THIRD PHASE, COALITION AND/OR MINORITY GOVERNMENTS, 1989–2014

The 1989 election saw the Congress losing to a broad preelectoral alliance, slipping to below a 40 percent vote share, and not getting a majority for the first time (except for the 1977 election on both measures). The next twenty-five years saw the continuation of the trend toward bipolar party systems at the state level in more and more states and, related to this, a quarter century of coalition and/or minority governments nationally with no single party getting a majority of seats.

Three megatrends were the highlights of this phase. First, the Congress vote share declined by about 20 percent, from 39.6 percent (1989) to 25.8 percent (1998), recovering to 28.6 percent (2009) before plunging again to 19.6 percent (2014). However, it remained the single largest party by vote share, losing that position in 2014 to the BJP. The Congress, despite a recovery enabling a minority coalition government led by it for two terms, 2004–14, also lost power in more and more states during this period to the BJP and regional parties.

Second, the BJP rose in vote share from 11 percent (1989), which it won due to its preelectoral alliances with the Janata Dal and some regional parties (the first time it had ever crossed the 10 percent mark), to 31 percent (2014), its gain over the period almost exactly the Congress's loss though the state-wise picture is more complex. And because its votes are more regionally concentrated in the northern, central, and western states, it was more easily able to convert votes to seats, winning the single largest number of seats in 1996, 1998, 1999, and 2014. Apart from growing on the basis of its Hindu-nationalist ideology, the BJP also spread its base across states and deepened its base within states by skillfully leveraging preelectoral alliances as well as governing coalitions.² Historically an upper-caste, urban, and middle-class party, it now sought to become a pan-Hindu umbrella party by expanding its appeal “downward” to the lower castes and classes and into rural areas and to the eastern and southern states where there were strong regional parties and either allying with them or eating into their bases. This phase also saw the emergence of BJP-led national governments for the first time in 1998–99 and 1999–2004, both led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, a relatively moderate figure.

Third, the quarter century of coalition and/or minority governments saw regional parties, and up to 2009 the Left parties, play an important role as members or supporters of coalition governments at the national level. Leveraging their state-level vote shares to become key players in alliances with either the Congress or the BJP, some regional parties at various times allied with both the Congress, their historical adversary, and the BJP.³ The combined vote share of non-Congress and non-BJP parties from 1989 to 2014 was in the range of 44 to 52 percent, although they never constituted a bloc. In each election several of them were allied with either the Congress or the BJP.

THE FOURTH PHASE, BJP MAJORITY GOVERNMENTS, 2014-24

The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition of eighteen parties won the 2014 election with the BJP getting a majority on its own of 282 seats (halfway mark 272/543) and with its allies winning 334 seats across 38.4 percent votes in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). This would appear to be the beginning of a fourth phase, that of majority governments of a single party except that it would now be of the BJP, not the Congress. The BJP got 31 percent votes, a huge 12 percent swing compared with 2009, and received 52 percent seats, the highest vote-seat conversion ratio in Indian national elections (1.65).⁴ This was the first time the BJP had crossed two hundred seats and 30 percent vote share. This was due to the geographically skewed nature of its victory, which consisted of a near-clean sweep in the Hindi-speaking states of north and central India and the western states of Gujarat and Maharashtra but with very few seats in the south and east, reflecting its historical strongholds and areas of weakness. This geographical skew was also reflected in the Rajya Sabha, where neither the BJP nor the NDA as a whole could attain a majority. The Congress party fell to its lowest-ever vote share (19.3 percent, the first time below 20 percent) and a mere forty-four seats.

This victory was repeated with greater success in 2019 when the BJP-led NDA coalition of nineteen parties won again and the BJP formed a majority government on its own but retained its allies in the council of ministers.⁵ The BJP won 37.4 percent of votes and 303 seats, and the NDA as a whole won 352 seats and 44.9 percent of votes. The geographical skew was less extreme in 2019. The BJP got most of the seats in Karnataka in the south, 18 out of 42 seats in West Bengal, and 9 out of 14 in Assam plus all the seats in three other small northeastern states, although this still did not enable the BJP or the NDA as a whole to attain a majority in the Rajya Sabha during this

second term. The Congress remained stuck at 19.7 percent of votes and marginally increased to 52 seats.

At first glance, the 2014 and 2019 elections would appear to have ended the quarter century (1989–2014) of coalition and/or minority governments and begun a phase of BJP majority governments and the end of the coalition era. However, on closer examination and retrospectively in the light of the 2024 election, discussed further below, this conclusion would be misleading. Coalition politics still remained relevant because these majorities were based on preelectoral coalitions. Of the BJP's 282 seats, a 10-seat majority, in 2014, 57 seats were won in states where preelectoral alliances were significant. And in 2019, of its 303 seats, a 31-seat majority, 42 seats were won in three states (Maharashtra, Bihar, and Punjab) where preelectoral coalitions were significant. So coalitions remained important despite BJP majorities.

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF POLITICS?

Did BJP majorities over two terms, 2014–24, change the nature of politics in India? This is a complex question and the answer is both yes and no. At a broad level, the Constitution and its basic structure remain intact as amendments need two-thirds majorities in both houses of parliament. Amendments affecting states' powers need half the state assemblies to approve them and then have to go through judicial review. The BJP governments, even if they had been inclined to make fundamental changes, did not have a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha even with allies and lacked a majority in the Rajya Sabha (upper house). The courts remain formally independent. Appointments are made by a collegium of the five senior-most judges who make appointments that the prime minister can only delay approval of

but not reject. The proposal, in 2015, to set up a National Judicial Appointments Commission that would have been weighted in favor of the executive was shot down by the Supreme Court on the grounds of maintaining judicial independence.

However, the Supreme Court during 2019–24 did rule in favor of the BJP’s positions in the Babri Masjid case, upholding the allotment of the site of the demolished mosque to the Hindu side for the construction of a Ram temple (dedicated to Rama, one of the most important deities in the Hindu pantheon) while allotting an alternative nearby site for the construction of a mosque. Also, in 2023 it upheld the 2019 abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution to remove the special autonomous status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. The Supreme Court also accepted the downgrading of the state from full statehood to the status of two Union Territories, for which there was no precedent, those of Jammu and Kashmir and a separate one of Ladakh.⁶ This was done without an elected state assembly in place and hence no consultation took place with the elected representatives of the people. This has implications for all other states and is controversial because it would appear to contradict the basic structure doctrine—that is, that the basic structure consisting of essential features, one of which is federalism as repeated by the court on many occasions, cannot be amended.

However, the Supreme Court did strike down, in early 2024, the opaque Electoral Bonds scheme begun with effect from 2018 under which parties could collect unlimited amounts without having to disclose donor identities and amounts, a scheme that overwhelmingly favored the ruling BJP. And the BJP did lose several state assembly elections during this decade and/or lost control of state governments even in its stronghold states in the Hindi belt and Maharashtra. Just before the 2024 election, the BJP had chief ministers in twelve out of twenty-eight states and was the

second most important party in the governments of two major states, Maharashtra and Bihar, but it cannot be said to have been hegemonic in India’s federal system. Hence, democracy and institutions cannot be said to have been entirely eroded as in electoral autocracies.

However, a number of developments, especially in the second term, 2014–19, have been, taken together, seen as evidence of democratic backsliding both by international democracy assessment agencies like Freedom House, the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), and V-Dem and by a range of domestic critics. Broadly speaking, the government has been considered to have weakened parliament and strengthened the executive, weakened and in some cases toppled state governments, used the tax-investigative and criminal-investigative agencies in a biased way overwhelmingly against the opposition, coerced the media into conformity and avoidance of criticism, and created a climate of fear for minorities, especially Muslims.

More specifically, during the second BJP term, Freedom House downgraded India from “fully free” to “partly free,” the EIU from a full democracy to a flawed democracy, and V-Dem from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy.⁷

The reasons for the downgrading and some examples given are as follows. The sixteenth (2014–19) and seventeenth (2019–24) Lok Sabhas spent less time in sittings, passed bills with less discussion, and saw fewer references to parliamentary committees, including passing over 80 percent of budgets without discussion. The role of the speaker was seen to be partisan and the seventeenth Lok Sabha failed to elect a deputy speaker through its term. In the final year before the 2024 election, in late 2023, 146 members of parliament (MPs), or most of the opposition, were suspended from parliament by the Speaker on grounds of disruption and vitally important bills were rammed through. In addition, an

opposition MP was expelled from membership in parliament on the grounds of a report by the Ethics Committee to which she was not adequately permitted to respond to the charges.

State governors appointed by the central government were also seen to have played a partisan role in several opposition party-ruled states, including Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and West Bengal. State financial powers were sought to be eroded.

The tax-investigative agency (Enforcement Directorate [ED]) and the criminal-investigative agency (Central Bureau of Investigation [CBI]) have been extensively used and overwhelmingly against opposition politicians. It is alleged that several defections to the BJP have resulted from this pressure, in addition to financial inducements made possible by huge and opaque donations to the ruling party from corporate sources under the Electoral Bonds scheme legislated in 2017 and operative from January 2018. Donations to parties were made completely confidential, protecting donor identities and amounts with the erstwhile ceiling on corporate donations as a percentage of their net profits (earlier 7.5 percent) being removed. These would be administered only by the state-owned State Bank of India. Thus, this information would be accessible informally to the ruling party but not to the opposition and would also tend to deter donations to the opposition by donors afraid of annoying the ruling party.

The media, particularly television channels, have largely been conformist, not questioning or criticizing the government or ruling party. This is said to be at least partly because of pressure on media owners from the same agencies. There have been a record number of internet shutdowns in what are considered disturbed areas (parts of the country where normal life is affected by separatist, terrorist, or left-wing extremist activities) and also use of laws like the Information Technology Act of 2000 and the Information Technology (Intermediary

Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules of 2021 to pressure the online and social media to take down critical posts. The BBC was raided by tax authorities in 2023 after it screened a documentary critical of Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots in which around a thousand people, mostly Muslims, were killed (though the Supreme Court-ordered investigation exonerated him later). Civil society organizations, particularly foreign-affiliated ones and those investigating human rights, have been pressured, and Amnesty International and the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative have been forced to suspend operations.

On the treatment of minorities, an important criterion for democracy-rating bodies, the following observations can be made. Although there have been no major Hindu-Muslim riots except for the northeast Delhi riots of February 2020 in which fifty-three people were killed, there have been a large number of mob lynchings of Muslims, a new phenomenon, some of them linked to allegations of cow slaughter in violation of various state laws, as well as biased application of hate speech laws that are not enforced against people making hate speeches against Muslims, including those associated with the ruling party. This has been seen to have created a climate of fear among minorities in many states.

All in all, although V-Dem's electoral autocracy rating is an exaggeration since the BJP lost half the state assembly elections during its two terms in power and suffered a significant reverse in 2024, it can be said that there has been a slide toward illiberalism in terms of democratic freedoms.

All this is not to say that there was no progress on other fronts. India's economy continued to grow at a respectable rate, faster than the world average and thus raising its ranking by GDP size from tenth in 2011 to fifth in 2022. Despite the pandemic downturn, it bounced back as one of the fastest-growing large economies. There has

been significant progress on physical and digital infrastructure, as India attracts large inflows of foreign direct and portfolio investments, accumulating a large foreign exchange reserve in a world in which half the countries have needed emergency loans since the pandemic began in 2020. All this has added to India's geopolitical heft and to the support base of the ruling BJP despite uneven development, employment, and inequality issues, which contributed to a groundswell of discontent in parts of the electorate as the 2024 election approached. There is no space to get into four overlapping economic debates that have been going on about growth rates, employment, poverty, and inequality, as well as about the reliability of statistics. But growth patterns can be read to have both added to the BJP's base and contributed to its relative decline in 2024.

THE RUN-UP TO AND RESULTS OF THE 2024 ELECTION

The run-up to the 2024 election began as early as August 2022 with the start of the Congress's Bharat Jodo Yatra (Unite India Journey) undertaken by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. This was an attempt at mass contact and mobilization against the BJP in a south-to-north march across India. The five-month march and its associated public meetings and rallies were aimed at opposing the politics of fear and hate and policies that resulted in unemployment and inequality. The march saw the large-scale participation of both common people and some celebrities. Ending in January 2023, it helped create a diffuse oppositional groundswell that also sowed the seeds of a broad non-BJP coalition of diverse parties. Rahul Gandhi's public approval ratings rose sharply as a result of the Yatra.⁸ This was later followed by the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra (Unite India Justice Journey), a two-month sequel from January to March 2024, just before the election, from Manipur in the northeast to Mumbai in the west, also led by Rahul Gandhi.

However, the major development in the run-up to the 2024 election, starting as early as June 2023, was the formation of a broad, multiparty opposition coalition in which the Congress was the leading and central party, if not the formal lead party, called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or INDIA. The INDIA at the time of the 2024 election consisted of a diverse array of forty-one parties, united on a broad anti-BJP platform emphasizing the inclusive and federal character of India and pitching for left-of-center policies, in some ways a coalition of the disadvantaged. Despite being a diverse and unwieldy alliance, it managed to negotiate seat-sharing arrangements among its member parties in most states, although not everywhere. Seat-sharing arrangements are those in which allied parties agree to contest only some seats each in a state, leaving other seats for partners, thus enabling vote pooling to try to defeat an opposed party.

The ruling BJP, despite enjoying a majority, also put together, state by state, a large NDA alliance consisting of twenty-five allies including some major regional parties (see table 1.1). Its campaign emphasized India's economic growth and welfare programs, its growing global recognition, Modi's leadership, the construction and consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya on the site of the demolished sixteenth-century Babri Masjid (mosque), as well as both direct and dog-whistled hate speech against Muslims.

The main features of the results of the 2024 election are the following. First, the BJP contested 441 seats, four more than in 2019, and its allies another 100, or 541 for the NDA. The Congress contested 328 seats, while its allies contested most of the rest. In an election with 66 percent turnout, the BJP lost 0.8 percent vote share (36.6 percent compared with 37.4 percent in 2019) but fell 63 seats from a majority on its own of 303 (halfway mark 272 out of 543) to 240 seats necessitating the formation of a coalition government. The NDA won 293 seats, or 53 won by BJP allies. The Congress

TABLE 1.1 THE BJP-LED NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE IN 2024

Party	State/UT	Seats contested	Total contested	Seats won	Total won
Bharatiya Janata Party	Uttar Pradesh	75 [2]	441 [3]	33	240
	West Bengal	42		12	
	Madhya Pradesh	29		29	
	Maharashtra	28		9	
	Gujarat	26		25	
	Karnataka	25		17	
	Rajasthan	25		14	
	Tamil Nadu	23		0	
	Odisha	21		20	
	Bihar	17		12	
	Telangana	17		8	
	Kerala	16		1	
	Jharkhand	13		8	
	Punjab	13		0	
	Assam	11		9	
	Chhattisgarh	11		10	
	Haryana	10		5	
	Delhi	7		7	
	Andhra Pradesh	6		3	
	Uttarakhand	5		5	
	Himachal Pradesh	4		4	
	Arunachal Pradesh	2		2	
	Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu	2		1	
	Goa	2		1	
	Jammu and Kashmir	2		2	
	Tripura	2		2	
	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1		1	
	Chandigarh	1		0	
	Ladakh	1		0	
	Manipur	1		0	
	Mizoram	1		0	

(continued)

TABLE 1.1 (Continued)

Party	State/UT	Seats contested	Total contested	Seats won	Total won
	Puducherry	1		0	
	Sikkim	1		0	
Telugu Desam Party	Andhra Pradesh	17		16	
Janata Dal (United)	Bihar	16		12	
Shiv Sena	Maharashtra	15		7	
Pattali Makkal Katchi	Tamil Nadu	10		0	
Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas Paswan)	Bihar	5		5	
Nationalist Congress Party	Maharashtra	4	5	1	1
	Lakshadweep	1		0	
Bharath Dharma Jana Sena	Kerala	4		0	

gained slightly from 19.5 percent in 2019 to 21.2 percent but jumping from 52 seats to 99 seats. The INDIA won 234 seats including three allies winning in double digits: the Samajwadi Party of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, 37 seats; the Trinamool Congress of West Bengal, 29 seats; and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) of Tamil Nadu, 22 seats (see table 1.2). The state-wise pattern varied considerably, but the BJP suffered reverses in several of its stronghold states. It lost most of the seats in Uttar Pradesh and several seats in Rajasthan, Haryana, Karnataka, West Bengal, and Maharashtra while making gains in Odisha and Telangana as well as winning a seat in Kerala for the first time. Although on the whole its wins were by smaller margins than in 2019, the BJP has largely retained its base including crossing the 10 percent vote share mark in all major states now, including in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Second, postelection survey data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)/Lokniti Survey indicate that two broad

developments are in progress. The first is a consolidation of a pro-Hindu nationalist ideological constituency that has grown since 2014 and 2019 despite still being a minority opinion/attitude among Hindus nationally, extending into disadvantaged sections like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The second is the growth of a very diffuse non-Hindu or not-as-yet Hindu nationalist majority of Hindus primarily concerned about economic issues like unemployment and inflation. An emblematic indicator of the latter phenomenon is the BJP's losses in the Faizabad constituency where the Ram temple was consecrated by Modi, and in Banswara where hate speech against Muslims was used.

The CSDS/Lokniti data showed that 22 percent of all respondents (which included about 20 percent non-Hindu minorities), or roughly about a quarter of Hindus if one assumes minorities would not favor this response, felt that the most important achievement of the government was the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Nineteen percent

TABLE 1.2 THE CONGRESS-LED INDIA IN 2024

Party		Lok Sabha	Base
AAP	Aam Aadmi Party	3	National Party
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	4	National Party
INC	Indian National Congress	99	National Party
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	22	Puducherry, Tamil Nadu
AITC	All India Trinamool Congress	29	West Bengal, Meghalaya
SHS(UBT)	Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)	9	Maharashtra
SP	Samajwadi Party	37	Uttar Pradesh
NCP(SP)	Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar)	8	Maharashtra, Kerala
IUML	Indian Union Muslim League	3	Kerala and Tamil Nadu
JKNC	Jammu and Kashmir National Conference	2	Jammu and Kashmir
CPI	Communist Party of India	2	Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Manipur
JMM	Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	3	Jharkhand
KEC(M)	Kerala Congress (M)	0	Kerala
VCK	Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi	2	Tamil Nadu
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party	1	Kerala
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal	4	Bihar, Jharkhand
MDMK	Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	1	Tamil Nadu
CPI(ML) L	Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation	2	Bihar
PWPI	Peasants and Workers Party of India	—	Maharashtra
AIFB	All India Forward Bloc	—	West Bengal
PDP	Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party	—	Jammu and Kashmir
MMK	Manithaneya Makkal Katchi	—	Tamil Nadu
KMDK	Kongunadu Makkal Desia Katchi	—	Tamil Nadu
RD	Raijor Dal	0	Assam
AJP	Assam Jatiya Parishad	0	Assam
APHCL	All Party Hill Leaders Conference	0	Assam
AGM	Anchalik Gana Morcha	0	Assam
VBA	Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi	0	Maharashtra
BGPM	Bharatiya Gorkha Prajatantrik Morcha	0	West Bengal
MNM	Makkal Needhi Maiam	—	Tamil Nadu
ISF	Indian Secular Front	0	West Bengal

(continued)

TABLE 1.2 (Continued)

Party		Lok Sabha	Base
GFP	Goa Forward Party	—	Goa
ZNP	Zoram Nationalist Party	—	Mizoram
MPC	Mizoram People’s Conference	—	Mizoram
MD	Mahan Dal	—	Uttar Pradesh
RLP	Rashtriya Loktantrik Party	1	Rajasthan
HP	Hamro Party		
PLP	Purvanchal Lok Parishad	0	Assam
JDA	Jatiya Dal Assam	0	Assam
SGP	Samajwadi Ganrajya Party	0	Maharashtra
INL	Indian National League	—	
INDIA	Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance	234	INDIA

fully and 31 percent somewhat agreed that in a democracy the will of the majority *community* must prevail (emphasis added). Of the 45 percent that felt close to a political party, 43 percent felt close to the BJP, or about a fifth of Hindus by the above assumptions. Twenty percent fully agreed and 30 percent somewhat agreed that minorities should adopt the customs of the majority. From these responses it appears that some 20 to 30 percent of Hindus nationally are very roughly in agreement with Hindu nationalist majoritarian attitudes.

On the other hand, 38 percent fully and 36 percent somewhat agreed that government should treat minorities in the same way as it treats the majority. And 34 percent fully and 36 percent somewhat agreed that even if not liked by the majority, the government should protect minority interests; only 6 percent fully and 14 percent somewhat disagreed with this. Even if responses by about 20 percent of respondents belonging to minorities are factored in,

it appears that a large majority of Hindus nationally still hold accommodative attitudes to minorities.⁹

Third, the key development that will shape politics is the emergence of a coalition government in which the BJP is dependent on its allies for a majority, which I discuss in the next section.

INDIA’S FIRST SURPLUS MAJORITY COALITION WITHOUT A MAJORITY PARTY

The new BJP-led NDA government of 2024 is the first of its kind in India. It is a surplus majority coalition without a majority party, that is, a coalition in which there are parties in the council of ministers that are not necessary for a majority, hence the term “surplus majority,” sometimes just called a surplus majority coalition. This is different from a surplus majority coalition with a majority party, like the 2014 and 2019 governments, often called an

oversized coalition. This is significant since each type of coalition has its own dynamics. I elaborate below.

When no single party gets a parliamentary majority in an election, or loses a majority due to a split, there are two solutions. One is to form a single-party minority government dependent on external support from other parties that might be preelectoral and/or postelectoral allies. In the Indian case, the two instances of single-party minority governments were the Chandra Shekhar government (1990–91) and the Congress government (1991–96). The other solution when no single party has a majority is to form a coalition government of two or more parties. At this point let me define for clarity what the literature means by a coalition government: it counts member parties of the executive coalition—those in the council of ministers—as the coalition and not the broader legislative coalition of supporting parties, pre- or postelectoral, which stay out of the ministry but offer external support to enable a majority in the legislature even if the coalition were part of a preelectoral alliance (e.g., the Telugu Desam Party [TDP] stayed out of the BJP-led NDA government of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 1999–2004, but offered outside support).

There are four types of coalitions in the international experience. First, the minimal-winning coalition, which India has not had yet, is a type of coalition that has only the minimum number of parties needed to attain a parliamentary majority, with no redundant surplus parties that are not needed for a majority, thus making each coalition partner pivotal since the exit of even one means loss of majority. This is based on the assumption of parties being office/power-seeking; a redundant party means sharing power with an unnecessary partner reducing the power shares of existing partners. However, this view tends to ignore policy-seeking motivations; additional partners might enable broader consensus building to enable legislative changes toward policies that

parties seek and hence could incentivize expanding the coalition, though it would mean sharing power with more partners. India has not had a minimal-winning coalition government.

Second, there are surplus majority coalitions with no party having a majority. What this means is that while no single party has a majority, the largest party puts together a coalition ministry that has a surplus majority, that is, has parties over and above those needed for a parliamentary majority or, in other words, redundant partners. This is usually because of preelectoral alliances for which there are strong incentives in a first-past-the-post electoral system where vote aggregation through such alliances is very helpful in getting the single largest number of votes in constituencies needed for winning seats. In a federal system this incentivizes state-level alliances. This, in a federal first-past-the-post electoral system with multiple parties, leads to diverse preelectoral coalitions on a state-by-state seat-sharing basis in which the incentive to band together against the largest party leads parties to de-emphasize ideological and policy differences. Examples are the anti-Congress alliances of the 1960s and 1970s that included parties of the left and the right (including at one time an Akali Dal-Jana Sangh-Communist Party of India [CPI(M)] government in Punjab) and the 1989 seat-sharing arrangement in which V. P. Singh's Janata Dal was supported by both the BJP and the Left.

Third, there are surplus majority coalitions with a majority party, called oversized coalitions, for example, the BJP-led NDA coalitions in 2014 and 2019 in which the BJP won a majority on its own (see table 1.3) but kept its preelectoral coalition partners in the ministry (executive coalition). This type of oversized coalition existed in West Bengal for several terms during the erstwhile Left Front governments when the CPI(M) kept its preelectoral coalition partners in the ministry even though it had a majority on its own. Oversized coalitions, like surplus majority coalitions, reflect the need for preelectoral alliances

TABLE 1.3 THE CONGRESS-LED UNITED PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE AND THE BJP-LED NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC ALLIANCE IN 2014 AND 2019

2014	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share	NDA	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share	Left	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share
UPA	540	59	23%	NDA	540	335	38%	Left	210	12	5%
Congress	464	44	19%	BJP	428	282	31%	CPI	67	1	1%
NCP	22	5	1%	SHS	20	18	2%	CPI(M)	93	9	3%
RJD	28	4	1%	TDP	30	16	3%	Other parties	50	2	<1%
Other parties	26	6	<1%	LJP	7	6	<1%				
				SAD	10	4	1%				
				Other parties	45	9	<1%				

2019	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share	NDA	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share	Left Front	Seats contested	Seats won	Vote share
UPA	525	91	27%	NDA	541	352	45%	Left Front	152	1	2%
Congress	421	52	20%	BJP	436	303	37%	CPI	46	0	<1%
DMK	23	23	2%	SHS	23	18	2%	CPI(M)	66	1	2%
NCP	19	4	1%	JD(U)	17	16	1%	Other parties	40	0	<0.1%
IUML	3	3	<1%	AIADMK	21	1	1%				
Other parties	59	9	<1%	LJP	6	6	<1%				
				SAD	10	2	<1%				
				Other parties	28	6	<1%				

Note: Party abbreviations not provided in tables 1.1 and 1.2 are offered below:

NCP = Nationalist Congress Party SAD = Shiromani Akali Dal
 BJP = Bharatiya Janat Party JD(U) = Janata Dal (United)
 TDP = Telugu Desam Party AIADMK = All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
 LJP = Lok Janshakti Party

as well as the anticipation that such allies will be needed for future elections and hence need to be accommodated.

Fourth, there are minority coalitions in which the parties in the ministry fall short of a majority and depend on outside support from a wider legislative coalition, pre- and/or postelectoral.

The Indian record on types of coalition governments formed is as follows. There have been twelve coalition governments since 1977. Of these, none have been the classic minimal-winning coalitions in which each party is pivotal for a majority. Eight have been minority coalitions in which the executive coalition forming the ministry has needed external support for a majority. These were the Charan Singh government (1979), which included All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Janata Dal-led National Front government of V. P. Singh, the United Front governments of Deve Gowda and I. K. Gujral, the BJP-led NDA governments of 1998–99 and 1999–2004, the Congress-led governments of 2004–09 and 2009–14. Three have been oversized coalitions with a majority party. These were the Janata Party, 1977–79, technically a single unified party with a majority, with a separate coalition partner in the Akali Dal, and the two BJP-led NDA governments of 2014–19.

There has not been, until 2024, a surplus coalition without a majority party, a configuration that has just happened. Although such a coalition is less stable than an oversized coalition, it is more stable than a minimal-winning coalition in which each partner is pivotal or a minority coalition. However, in the Indian case, three minority coalitions—NDA (1999–2004), United Progressive Alliance (UPA) I and II—lasted full terms owing to at least partial lock-in effects on supporting parties because of state-level alliances and/or the main national opposition party being the

ideological adversary of the supporting party (e.g., the Left while supporting UPA I to keep out the BJP) or its main state-level adversary (e.g., TDP while supporting NDA, 1999–2004, to keep out its state-level rival, Congress).

The power dynamics in a surplus majority coalition favor the dominant party because usually no single partner is pivotal for a majority. In the present case, the largest party has 240 seats and can achieve the majority mark of 272 with the three largest allies having 16, 12, and 7 seats, the rest being a surplus majority that offers an insurance policy in case some ally or allies quit. The executive coalition (total of BJP plus nine allies in the ministry) is 287 and with the other five NDA partners is 293. Assuming at least partial lock-in effects for the above-described reasons on the smaller allies and taking 293 as the effective coalition, no ally is pivotal. To deprive the coalition of a majority of 272, it would need the exit of at least two allies, given that the four largest partners have 16, 12, 7, and 5 seats, the rest being twos and ones. This would require considerable coordination in the normal course, including factoring in state-level repercussions, unless some serious crisis arises, which precipitates broad disenchantment among the allies. However, the dominant party will also have to tread carefully in such a power configuration so as not to precipitate such disenchantment.

So as of early July 2024, a month after the results, the BJP seems to have asserted its dominance in the coalition government formed, retaining all the major portfolios—finance, home, defense, and external affairs—and including ideologically important ones like education and culture as well as dominating the cabinet and the wider Council of Ministers. It is too early to say how politics will play out over the whole term and whether this coalition will see stronger checks and balances on its exercise of power.

NOTES

1. For a detailed analysis of the evolution of the Indian party system and coalition politics, see Eswaran Sridharan, "Coalition Politics in India," in *Oxford Handbook of Indian Politics*, ed. Šumit Ganguly and Eswaran Sridharan (Oxford University Press, 2024).
2. For the early but critical phase of the BJP's expansion, see Eswaran Sridharan, "Coalition Strategies and the BJP's Expansion, 1989–2004," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 43, no. 2 (July 2005): 194–221.
3. For coalition politics in the post-1989 period, see Sanjay Ruparelia, *Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India* (Oxford University Press, 2015); Eswaran Sridharan, "Why Are Multi-party Minority Governments Viable in India? Theory and Comparison," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (July 2012).
4. For detailed analyses of the 2014 election that brought a BJP majority government to power for the first time, see Eswaran Sridharan, "India's Watershed Vote: Behind Modi's Victory," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 4 (October 2014): 20–33; Eswaran Sridharan, "Class Voting in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections: The Growing Size and Importance of the Middle Classes," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 39 (September 27, 2014): 72–76.
5. For a detailed analysis of the 2019 election in which the BJP returned to power with an enhanced majority, see Eswaran Sridharan, "Understanding Voting Patterns by Class in the 2019 Indian Election," *Indian Politics and Policy* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2020).
6. Union Territories are directly ruled by the Central, that is, federal, government.
7. See Freedom House, *Freedom in the World*, various years, 2020 to 2023, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world>; Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Democracy Index*, various years, 2020 to 2023, <https://www.eiu.com>; University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report*, various years, 2020 to 2023, <https://www.v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>.
8. See NDTV, "Public Opinion: Rahul Gandhi's Popularity Up After Bharat Jodo Yatra, PM Still Supreme," updated May 23, 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/ndtv-public-opinion-rahul-gandhis-popularity-up-after-bharat-jodo-yatra-pm-narendra-modi-still-supreme-4060232>.
9. Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Lokniti, *Social and Political Barometer: Postpoll Study 2024–Survey Findings*, 2024, https://www.lokniti.org/media/PDF-upload/1718435207_67606300_download_report.pdf.

