

India's Domestic Political Setting

Overview

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

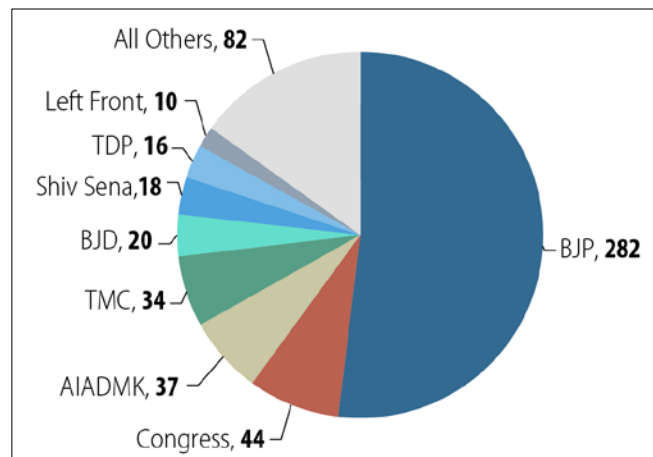
Elections to seat India's 16th Lok Sabha were held in April-May 2014, when the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP or "Indian Peoples Party") won a historic victory under then-Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP became the first party to attain a parliamentary majority since 1984. Prime Minister Modi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist who arose from humble social circumstances, ran a campaign emphasizing economic development and good governance, while largely omitting the sometimes strident Hindu majoritarian rhetoric he has issued in the past. The BJP, under then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, had led a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition in power from 1999-2004.

The previously incumbent Indian National Congress Party (hereinafter "Congress Party") and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition suffered a crushing defeat after ten years in power with Manmohan Singh in the top office. Congress, the party of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, dominated the country's politics from 1947-1977. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mohandas Gandhi), and her son, Rajiv, also served as prime minister; both were assassinated in office. The party's assumed prime ministerial candidate in 2014, Rajiv's son Rahul, oversaw the party's failure to win even the 10% of seats required to officially lead the Lok Sabha opposition.

The BJP and Congress Party are India's only truly national parties; as in the previous national election, they together won roughly half of all votes cast in 2014. The influence of regional and caste-based parties—although blunted by the

BJP's outright majority victory—remains an important variable in Indian politics. Such parties now hold more than 200 seats in parliament. Some 464 parties participated in the 2014 national election and 35 of those won representation. The 8 parties listed below account for 67% of the total vote and 85% of Lok Sabha seats (see Figure 1).

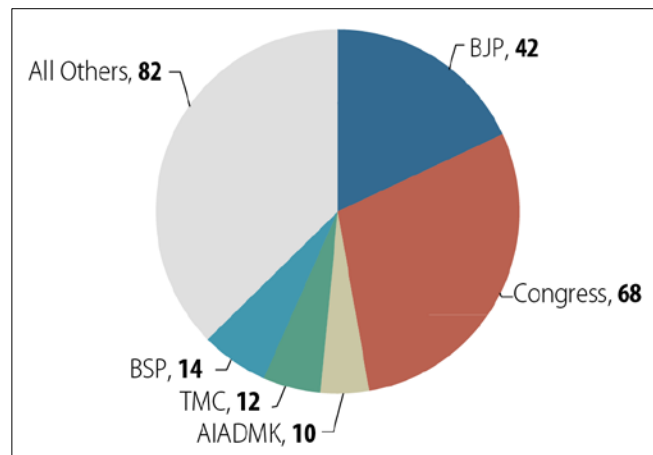
Figure 1. Major Party Representation in the Lok Sabha (543 Total Seats + 2 Appointed)



Source: Election Commission of India.

The BJP's governance agenda can be impeded in the Rajya Sabha, where the Congress Party holds a plurality of seats and can align with others to block certain legislation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Major Party Representation in the Rajya Sabha (233 Total Seats + 12 Appointed)



Source: Election Commission of India.

Key Government Officials

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi**—a longtime member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or “National Volunteer Organization”), a militant Hindu and social service group—was chief minister of the western state of Gujarat since 2001 before becoming India’s first-ever lower-caste prime minister. He also chairs the Planning Commission and heads the Department of Atomic Energy.

Home Minister **Rajnath Singh** was BJP president during the 2014 campaign and has served both as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and as Minister of Agriculture in the previous BJP-led government.

External Affairs Minister and Overseas Indian Affairs Minister **Sushma Swaraj**, a BJP stalwart from Haryana, has won seven parliamentary elections and was Leader of the Opposition in the 15th Lok Sabha.

Finance Minister, Defense Minister, and Corporate Affairs Minister **Arun Jaitley**, an eminent corporate lawyer from Punjab and former BJP national spokesman, was Minister of Law and Justice in the previous BJP-led government.

National Security Advisor **Ajit Kumar Doval** is a veteran intelligence officer from Kerala who served as Director of the Intelligence Bureau from 2004-2005.

Speaker of the Lok Sabha **Sumitra Mahajan**, a BJP loyalist from Madhya Pradesh, is that body’s longest-serving female member, having won eight elections.

President **Pranab Mukherjee**, India’s chief of state, is a Congress Party stalwart who successively served as Minister of Defense, External Affairs, and Finance in the Manmohan Singh government.

Leading Parties

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), born as the political wing of the RSS, advocates Hindu nationalism (“Hindutva”) and is right-leaning on social policy with a generally more pro-business outlook than others, although it is also home to “*swadeshi*” (self-sufficiency) sentiments. The party emerged as the only national-level competitor for the Indian National Congress in recent decades. The BJP won 282 Lok Sabha seats (52%) with 31% of the popular vote in 2014.

Indian National Congress is generally considered to be a populist, secularist, and left-leaning party, although a Congress Party-led government did preside over significant economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Rajiv Gandhi’s widow, Sonia, is party president and their son, Rahul, serves as party vice president. Both offered to resign in the wake of 2014’s historic electoral defeat. The party won 44 Lok Sabha seats (8%) with 19.1% of the 2014 vote.

All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) is a **Tamil Nadu**-based party led by state Chief Minister Jayalithaa. It is populist with a mostly ethnic Tamil constituency. An NDA member, the AIADMK won 37 Lok Sabha seats (7%) with 3.3% of the 2014 vote.

All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), a professedly secular party, wins its support in **West Bengal**, where party leader Mamata Banerjee is also chief minister. The TMC was a member of the Congress-led UPA from 2004-2012. It won 34 Lok Sabha seats (6%) with 3.8% of the 2014 vote.

Biju Janata Dal (BJD), an electoral ally of the BJP in the recent past, but also professedly secular in outlook, dominated the vote in the **Odisha** state under the leadership of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. The BJD won 20 Lok Sabha seats (4%) with 1.7% of the 2014 vote.

Shiv Sena is a vociferously Hindu nationalist, ethnic Marathi party based in **Maharashtra** that has long aligned itself with the BJP at the national level. It won 18 Lok Sabha seats (3%) with 1.9% of the 2014 vote.

Telugu Desam Party (TDP), created to serve the Telugu-speakers of **Andhra Pradesh**, dominated 2014’s state-level election, making its leader, N. Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of “rump” Andhra Pradesh, which was bifurcated to create the new state of Telangana in June 2014. TDP won 16 Lok Sabha seats (3%) with 2.5% of the 2014 vote.

Left Front, a coalition of four communist parties led by the Communist Party of India–Marxist, finds most of its votebank in West Bengal and Kerala. A non-coalition UPA supporter from 2004-2008, the Left Front has suffered three major electoral setbacks since 2009. This coalition won 10 Lok Sabha seats (2%) with 3.4% of the 2014 vote.

Others: Three major regional parties—the Janata Dal (United) of Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh’s Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—were almost completely submerged by the “Modi wave” in 2014, winning only three, five, and zero Lok Sabha seats, respectively. The BSP did not win a single seat despite garnering about 23 million votes, fully 4.1% of the total.

India’s Federal System

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

More than half of all Indians live in only six states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh. Of these, only the last has a BJP government. Maharashtra has a Congress Party chief minister and the others are run by state-based parties. The Congress Party includes 12 current chief ministers. The BJP is in power in five states and its NDA allies run another four. The Congress Party accounts for 27% of all of the country’s state legislators, as compared to 21% for the BJP.

Sources: Election Commission of India, Indian government agencies, and party websites.

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