

Looking Back and Ahead to India's Next General Election¹

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Executive Summary

India is likely to hold its next general election in early 2019. What can be said at this point is that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is likely to find it difficult to match its performance in 2014, where it won a majority in parliament on its own. However, the BJP would still be the frontrunner to form the next government by virtue of being the party with the greatest chance of winning the largest number of seats, even if it falls short of a majority.

Though the BJP won a clear majority on its own in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in 2014, the verdict was a skewed one. The BJP won 75 per cent of its seats from eight states in northern and western India, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Gujarat. Moreover, in these eight states, which account for 273 seats in the Lok Sabha, the BJP won 80 per cent of the seats.

Doing a repeat performance of 2014 in these eight states or bettering it in the next general election would be a tall order and, in some cases, numerically impossible due to anti-incumbency and voter dissatisfaction on different issues. Though the BJP will try and compensate by winning seats in states that are not its traditional strongholds, it might not prove to be enough. Anti-incumbency and the inability to deliver on key promises might catch up with the BJP government. The opposition parties could also work out tactical alliances at the state-level to hurt the BJP.

As in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be the BJP's most potent weapon in the next general election. While Modi might have lost some of his sheen since 2014, he still remains a vote catcher. However, more recent surveys show that Modi's popularity might have plateaued and could even be declining. There are four other factors that give the BJP an edge. One, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which provides the BJP a nation-wide pool of foot soldiers for campaigning. Two the party's aggressive use of social media and online tools to mobilise support. Three, the BJP is much better endowed than the other political

¹ India's next general elections are scheduled to be held in April or May 2019. It will be the largest electoral exercise in the world involving over 800 million eligible voters, who will decide the fate of the Narendra Modi government. Beginning September 2018, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), will monitor and interpret the run up to the elections, the poll campaigns and the results. ISAS will publish a series of papers that will focus not only on the big picture, but also the important issues and themes underpinning the 2019 elections.

parties. Four, there is little that binds the opposition together, apart from it being anti-BJP and anti-Modi.

Introduction

If things go according to schedule, India will hold its next general election in April or May 2019. Political parties in India are already in poll mode with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Amit Shah predicting at the party's national executive meeting that the BJP would return to power with a greater majority than in 2014.² While it is Shah's job to talk up his party's chances, how well do these claims hold up?

Predictions are hazardous for Indian elections, particularly with the polling dates yet to be announced but it could be reasonably said that the BJP is likely to find it difficult to better its 2014 performance. The reasons lie primarily in the nature of the 2014 verdict. The BJP performed far better than expected in several states, something which it is going to find difficult to match in the coming election. Though the BJP will try and compensate by winning seats in states that are not its traditional strongholds, it might not prove to be enough. Second, anti-incumbency and the inability to deliver on key promises might catch up with the BJP government. Third, the opposition parties could work out tactical alliances at the state-level to hurt the BJP. Finally, the BJP's strongest asset still remains Prime Minister Narendra Modi even though his popularity might have plateaued.

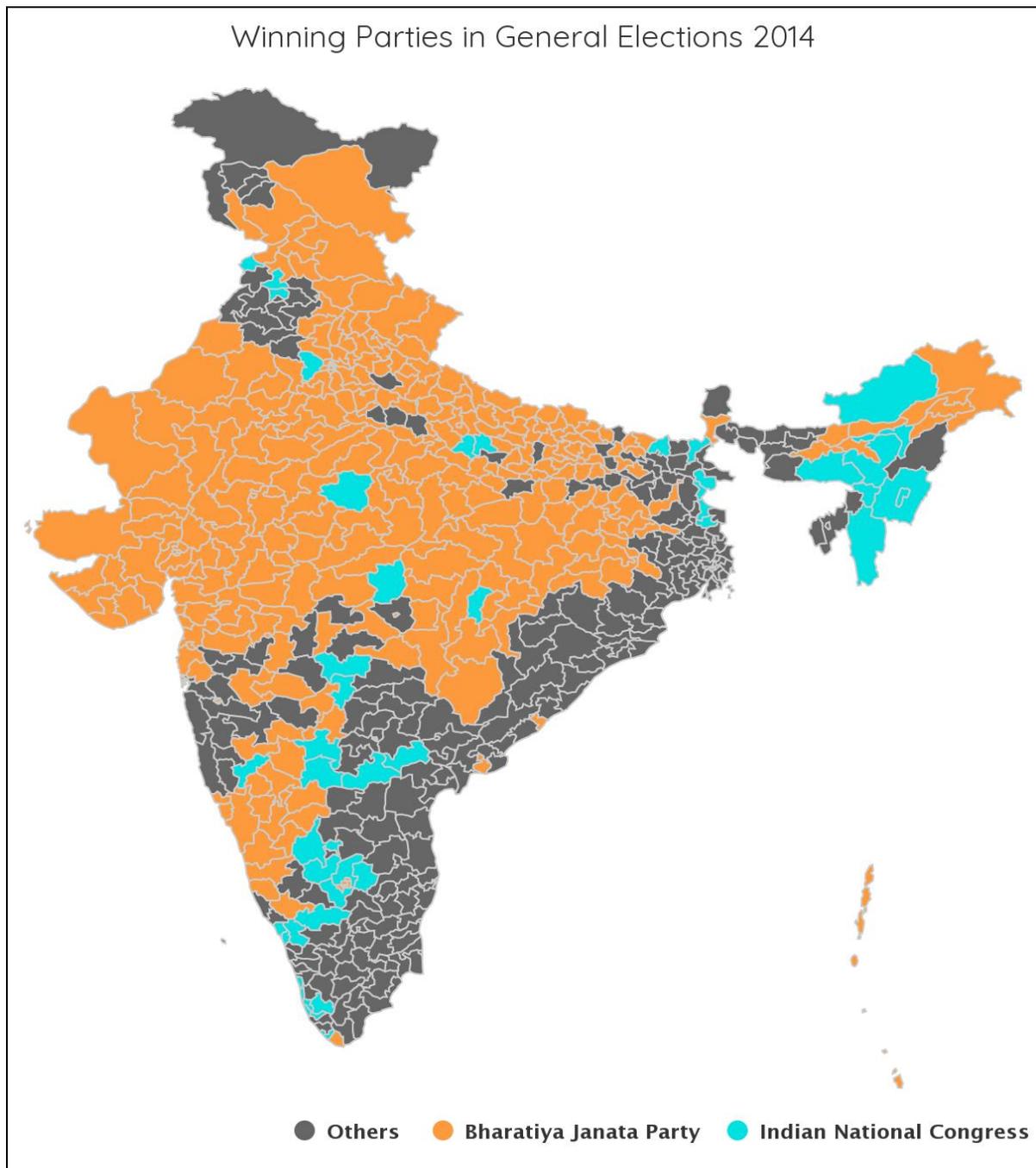
The 2014 Verdict

Though the BJP won a clear majority on its own in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in 2014, the verdict was a skewed one. The BJP won 216 of its 282 seats, or 75 per cent of its tally, from eight states in northern and western India, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Gujarat (Figure 1). Moreover, in these eight states, which account for 273 seats, the BJP won 80 per cent of the seats. The 'concentrated' nature of the BJP's victory was one of the reasons why the party was able to get a majority though it won 31 per cent of the total vote share. It should also be noted that the BJP had a very high 'strike rate' – the proportion of seats won to those contested – in the northern and western states. In six of these states – Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat – the BJP's strike rate was 91 per cent.³

² "In 2019, BJP will return to power with a majority bigger than 2014: Amit Shah at national executive meet", *The Indian Express*, 8 September 2018. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-national-amit-shah-executive-meeting-begins-oil-prices-upcoming-polls-5346307/>. Accessed on 20 September 2018.

³ Neelanjan Sircar, 'The Numbers Game: An Analysis of the 2014 General Election', *India in Transition*, Center for the Advanced Study of India, 16 June 2014.

Figure 1: Winning Parties in General Elections 2014



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

Doing a repeat performance of 2014 or bettering it in the next general election would be a tall order and, in some cases, numerically impossible due to anti-incumbency and voter dissatisfaction on different issues. For instance, in Gujarat and Rajasthan, the BJP won all the 51 seats in the Sabha (Lower House) in 2014, an achievement that the BJP is unlikely to achieve. Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the BJP won 37 of the 40 seats, something it will find difficult to match or surpass. Finally, it won 71 seats – nearly a quarter of its total tally in the Lok Sabha – out of 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh. Again, this is a result that is unlikely to be bettered.

To make up for the possible losses in the eight northern and western states, the BJP will look to win seats in states and regions where it has traditionally not done well. The BJP has been focusing in two states in particular – West Bengal and Odisha – as well as the northeast states. The northeast sends a combined 25 members of parliament (MPs) to the Lok Sabha, with Assam alone accounting for 14 seats. In 2014, the BJP won eight seats on its own from the northeast. The party's inroads into the region – where it has formed the government in the last four years either on its own or in an alliance in six northeastern states – means that the BJP, along with its allies, can hope to win a majority of the seats in the northeast in the next general election. However, West Bengal and Odisha pose a different set of challenges where strong regional parties – the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) respectively – are in power. In 2014, the TMC won 34 out of West Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats, while in Odisha, the BJD swept 20 out of the 21 seats. In 2014, the BJP won only two seats in West Bengal and one in Odisha. However, in both states, the BJP has, over the past four years, improved to become the second largest party, relegating the Left Front in West Bengal and the Congress in Odisha to third place. Anti-incumbency against the BJD, which is into its fourth term in Odisha, and the TMC, which is in its second term in West Bengal, combined with the BJP's aggressive campaigning, could yield some seats in these two states. However, the BJP's gains in West Bengal, Odisha and the northeast are unlikely to offset the possible losses in northern and western India.

In the southern states, except Karnataka, the BJP has traditionally had little success. In Karnataka, the BJP won 17 out of 28 seats in 2014, a performance it might find difficult to better, given that the Congress is now in power in the state as part of a coalition with the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)]. In the rest of the southern states – Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh – the BJP won a mere five seats in 2014. Though the BJP's ally in Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam (TDP), is estranged at the moment, the BJP could hope to strike a deal with the TDP's rival, the YSR Congress. However, past experience suggests that the BJP's best bet would be to strike post-poll alliances with the regional parties in the south.

In Tamil Nadu, where politics is in a state of flux with two rival state leaders, J Jayalalithaa and M Karunanidhi having died in quick succession, the BJP could hope to have an alliance with either the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. There are a few wild cards in Tamil Nadu with at least two prominent film stars, Rajnikanth and Kamal Haasan, having expressed political ambitions but not yet spelt out their electoral plans. However, any gains for the BJP in Tamil Nadu are likely to come through its alliance partners rather than from the BJP itself.

In Telangana, the ruling Telangana Rashtriya Samithi (TRS) remains strong. The TRS chief and Telangana Chief Minister, K Chandrasekhar Rao, dissolved the state Assembly on 8 September 2018, eight months before its term ends, and has called for an early election. If he had not done so, the Assembly election in Telangana would most likely have been held along with the general election. Rao's calculation is that delinking the Assembly election

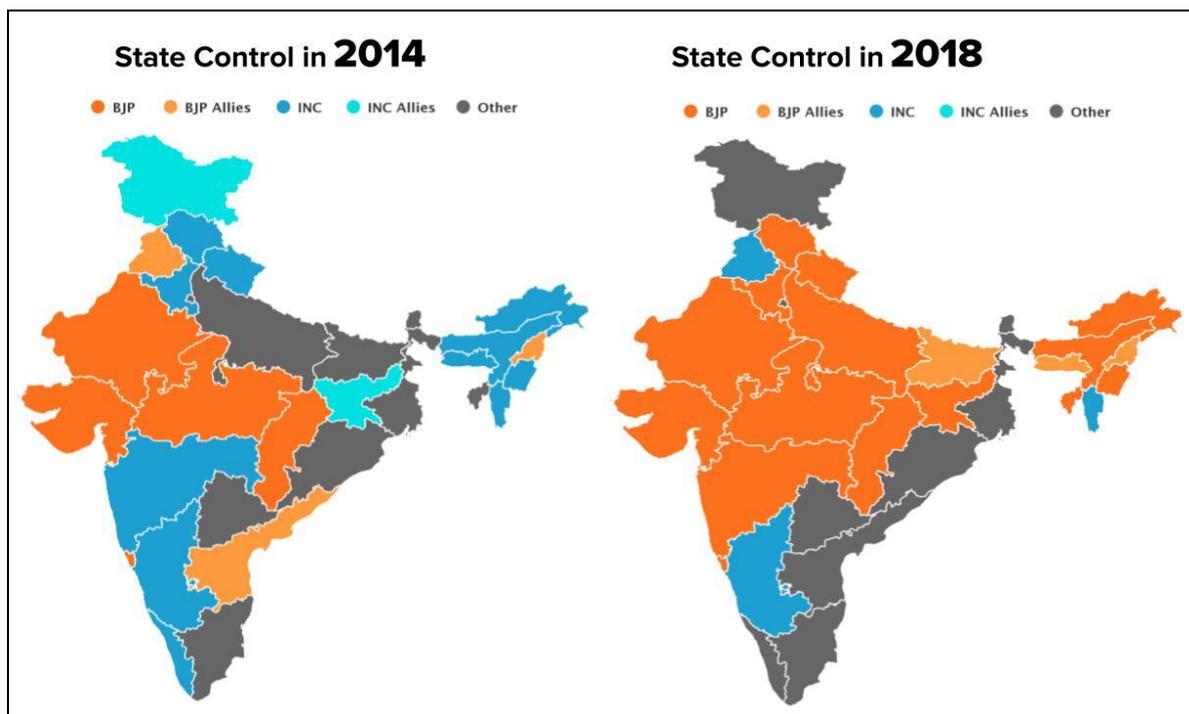
from general election would yield electoral gains. However, despite talk to the contrary, the TRS might be open to an alliance with the BJP subsequent to the general election.⁴

In Kerala, the BJP has steadily increased its vote share from 10 per cent in 2014 to 15 per cent in the 2016 Assembly elections, but the Congress and the Left Front are powerful players in the state. Thus, the BJP is unlikely to have much electoral success in Kerala in the next general election.

Assembly Elections, Anti-incumbency and Voter Sentiments

Since the 2014 general election, the BJP has dramatically expanded its footprint across India. As of now, the BJP and its allies run 20 of India's 29 states which means that the party governs nearly three quarters of India's population and a majority of India's big states (Figure 2).

Figure 2: State Control in 2014 and 2018



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

While incumbency bestows a set of advantages, especially control of the state machinery and funds, it comes with its own set of problems. Scholars such as Nirmala Ravishankar have studied the effects of incumbency and concluded that MPs affiliated to the ruling party at

⁴ "No alliance with BJP, says KCR after dissolving Telangana assembly", Srinivasa Rao Apparasu, *Hindustan Times*, 6 September 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/no-alliance-with-bjp-says-kcr-after-dissolving-telangana-assembly/story-yKYrzeadTbj88arGWcKtJM.html> Accessed on 20 September 2018.

the Centre have a slightly lower chance of getting re-elected than MPs from other parties. However, more important is the impact of possible anti-incumbency against the BJP in states where they are in power. Studies have shown that the longer the gap between the state and national election, the greater its adverse impact on the ruling party.⁵ Hence, in states such as Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand, where the BJP has been in power for over three years, the party will have its task cut out. In contrast, the Congress has formed government in states such as Punjab and Karnataka in the last two years and is likely to face less anti-incumbency sentiments in these states. In those states that are scheduled to hold elections by end-2018, such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the results are likely to have a strong impact on the general election. If the results in these three states go against the BJP, as opinion polls are predicting, that will mean further bad news for the party.⁶

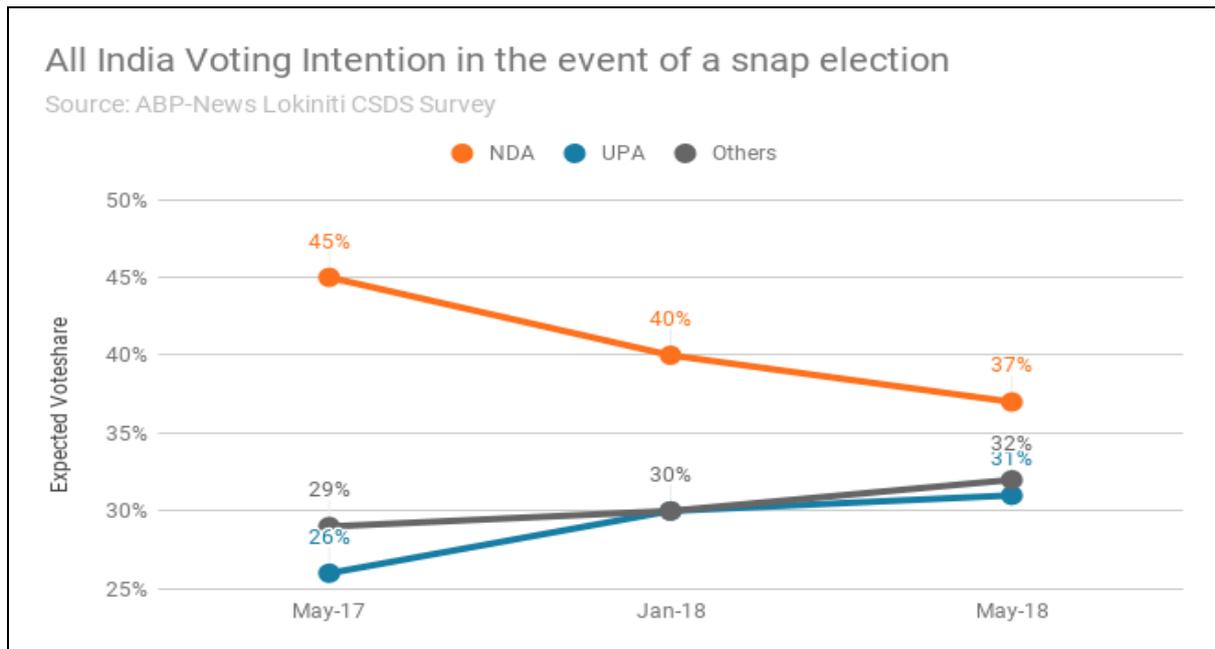
Going beyond the issue of who is running the government in the states, anti-incumbency against the central government, judged by voter dissatisfaction, seems to be growing. According to the Lokniti-CSDS 'Mood of the Nation' survey in May 2018, only 32 per cent of the respondents said they would vote for the BJP, down from 39 per cent a year earlier (Figure 3). The respondents believe that the lack of jobs is the biggest problem, with 57 per cent of them saying it has become "more difficult" to find a job. Over 50 per cent of the respondents also said that Modi has failed to deliver on his electoral promise of *acche din* (good days). The change in the voters' mood has been confirmed by a Pew Research Center survey which reported that, in 2018, 56 per cent of the respondents in India said that the economic situation in their country was "good" compared to 83 per cent in 2017.⁷

⁵ Nirmala Ravishankar, 'The Cost of Ruling: Anti-incumbency in Elections,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44:10, 7 March 2009. Also see Milan Vaishnav and Matthew Lillehaugen, 'Incumbency in India: More Curse Than Blessing?' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 August 2018.

⁶ "ABP News-CVoter Survey Predicts BJP Loss in MP, Raj & Chhattisgarh", Kabir Upmanyu, *The Quint*, 13 August 2018. <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/abp-cvoter-survey-congress-majority-mp-rajasthan> Accessed on 19 September 2018. At the time of writing, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had tied up with the Ajit Jogi-led Janta Congress Chhattisgarh in the Chhattisgarh Assembly election and had decided to contest alone in Madhya Pradesh. In both states, the BSP has a small presence and could swing the verdict in some constituencies.

⁷ "The current economic mood", Bruce Stokes, *Pew Research Center*, 18 September 2018. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/09/18/the-current-economic-mood/> Accessed on 20 September 2018.

Figure 3: All India Voting Intention in the event of a Snap Election



Source: Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Mood of the Nation Survey.

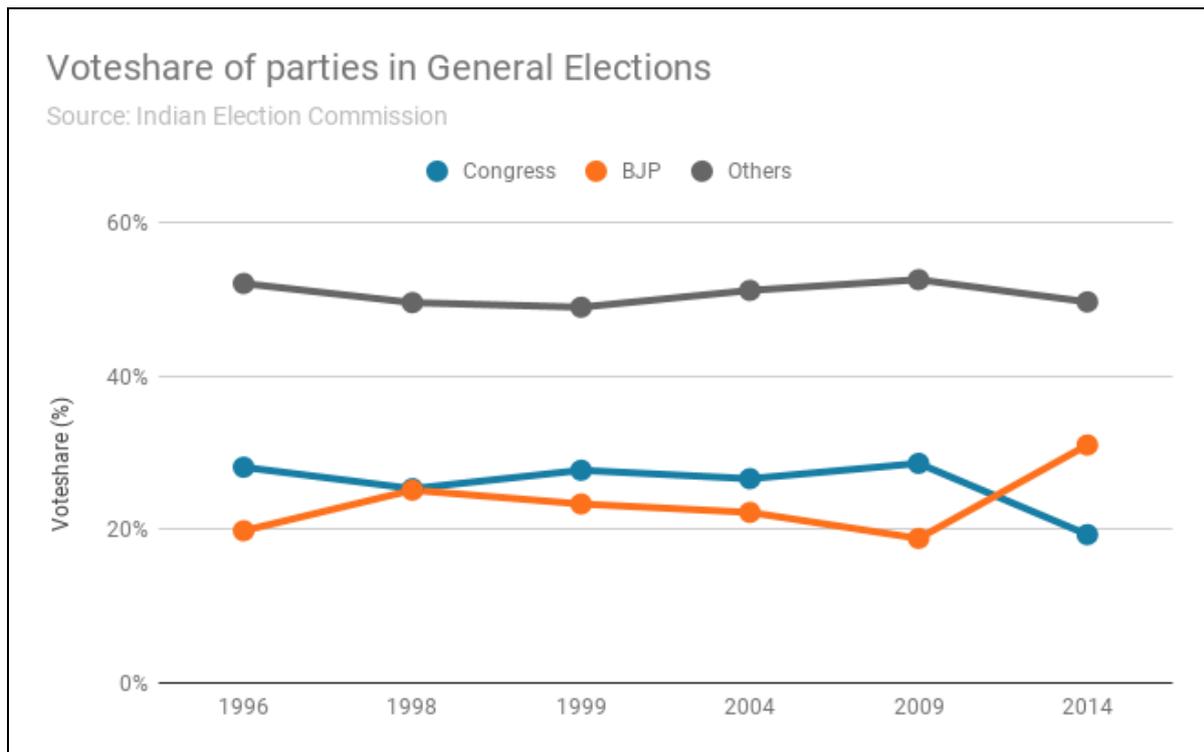
The sharpest fall in voter support for the BJP, according to the Lokniti-CSDS survey, is among the middle and lower class voters. Support for the BJP among traders and farmers has also eroded since the implementation of the nation-wide Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017. Whereas nearly a quarter of respondents were unhappy with the GST in January 2018, this figure had climbed to 42 per cent in May 2018. Another segment where the BJP is losing popularity is the Scheduled Castes (SC) or the Dalits. Only 22 per cent of the SC respondents said they would vote for the BJP in May 2018 compared to 33 per cent a year ago, in the wake of violence against the Dalits and talk of a dilution of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

The Opposition Strategy and Regional Parties

The Congress had its worst-ever showing in the 2014 general elections. Though the BJP has since 2014 talked about a Congress-*mukt* (Congress-free) India, the Congress remains a threat in some states. While the Congress is currently in power in only two big states, Punjab and Karnataka, it is likely to be competitive in states where it will be, by and large, directly pitted against the BJP and where the BJP has been in power for over three years. These states include Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and, to a lesser extent, Gujarat, the home state of Modi.

The greater threat to the BJP will, however, be posed by the regional parties and their ability to combine to fight the BJP. One of the constant factors in Indian general elections over the past two decades has been the vote share of regional parties, which has hovered around the 50 per cent mark (Figure 4). The next general election is unlikely to be different.

Figure 4: Vote Share of the Parties in General Elections

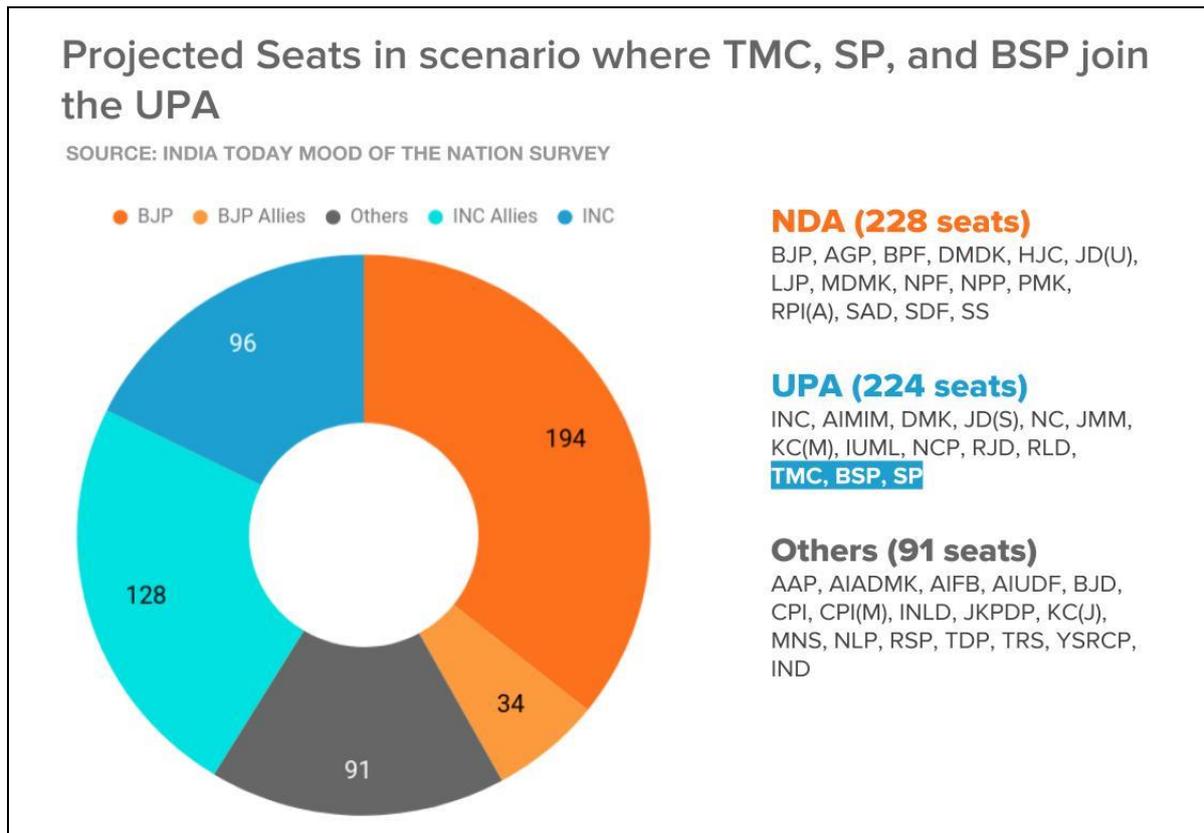


Source: Election Commission of India.

There has been much talk over the past few months of a grand Congress-led opposition alliance taking on a BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). While the composition of potential alliances is still hazy, an opinion poll has come up with possible scenarios depending on different electoral formations.⁸ According to one scenario, where the Congress and the BJP contest the election with the same set of allies as in 2014, the Congress alliance, or the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), is predicted to win 122 seats compared to the NDA's 281. However, if the Congress alliance includes regional parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the TMC, then its predicted tally goes up dramatically to 224 seats, only four less than the NDA (Figure 5). Both alliances would then need to get other parties on board to form the government. Even in this scenario, the Congress is predicted to get below 100 seats, making the opposition coalition an inherently unstable one and less attractive to potential allies post-election.

⁸ "A clash of coalitions", Ajit Kumar Jha, *India Today*, 20 August 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/mood-of-the-nation/story/20180827-a-clash-of-coalitions-1315668-2018-08-18> Accessed on 16 September 2018.

Figure 5: Projected Seats in Scenario where TMC, SP and BSP join the UPA



Source: India Today Mood of the Nation Survey.

Given the state of flux in Indian politics, it makes more sense to look at state-level alliances rather than at the national picture. In some states, such as Odisha, there will be a direct contest between the BJP and a regional party, the BJD, with other players, like the Congress, a distant third. In other states, such as Punjab and Maharashtra, the BJP is expected to contest with a pre-poll arrangement with its long-time allies, the Akali Dal and the Shiv Sena, respectively. It might be noted that while the Shiv Sena is the BJP's oldest ally, the relationship between the two parties has been rocky in recent times. The Shiv Sena had even put up a candidate against the BJP in a by-election for the Palghar constituency in Maharashtra in 2018 and it is likely to bargain hard for seats in the general election.⁹ In Bihar, the BJP-Janata Dal (United) alliance has already said that it would contest the next general election together.¹⁰ However, in Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha, the most by a long distance from any state, opposition unity could be a game changer.

⁹ "Electoral tie-up with BJP? Shiv Sena continues to play hardball", Abhiram Ghadyalpatil, *Livemint*, 11 June 2018. <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/pnH5b5pRvG6PpeRFhPhb31/Electoral-tieup-with-BJP-Shiv-Sena-continues-to-play-hardb.html> Accessed on 16 September 2018.

¹⁰ "BJP, JD(U) finalise seat-sharing in Bihar for 2019 polls: Nitish Kumar lets saffron party be bigger partner with 20 seats, keeps 12 for self", *Firstpost*, 30 August 2018. <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/bjp-jdu-finalise-seat-sharing-in-bihar-for-2019-polls-nitish-kumar-lets-saffron-party-be-bigger-partner-with-20-seats-keeps-12-for-self-5078211.html> Accessed on 16 September 2018.

There are already signs of an incipient alliance in Uttar Pradesh between the two major regional parties, the SP and the BSP, which had won a combined vote share roughly similar to the BJP in the 2014 general election. In the 2016 Assembly election, where the BJP had won a landslide victory, the SP's and the BSP's combined vote share at 50 per cent was nine percentage points above the BJP. In a series of by-elections held in Uttar Pradesh in 2018, the opposition had united to hand the BJP heavy defeats. Of particular note was the BJP's loss in March 2018 in Gorakhpur, which was vacated by Yogi Adityanath when he was appointed the state's chief minister, to a SP candidate backed by the BSP. If the SP and the BSP, along with other smaller parties such as the Rashtriya Lok Dal, contest the general elections together, it is likely to seriously dent the BJP's tally in Uttar Pradesh. While an alliance makes sense for the BSP and the SP, given their complementary support base, it will not be easy though for the two parties to reach an understanding on seat-sharing.¹¹ The BSP chief Mayawati will not only bargain hard for seats, but the party cadre might also find it difficult to work together at the constituency level.

In states like Maharashtra and Karnataka, where the Congress has influence, an alliance between the Congress and a regional party is likely to hurt the BJP. In Karnataka, the Congress has combined with JD(S) to form the government. Indeed, a pooling of the votes obtained by Congress and the JD(S) in the 2018 Assembly election, when projected for the general election, would result in the combine win of 22 out of 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka. Similarly, in Maharashtra, an alliance between the Congress and the NCP is likely to pose a challenge to the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, given that the BJP is also likely to face anti-incumbency in the state.

The BJP's Trump Cards

As in 2014, Modi will be the BJP's most potent weapon in the next general election. While Modi might have lost some of his sheen since 2014, he still remains a vote catcher. This has been shown in recent state elections, such as Gujarat and Karnataka, where his campaigning during the final stages gave the BJP an edge. A survey done by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that nearly nine out of 10 Indians held a favourable view of Modi.¹² This is perhaps one of the reasons why the BJP has been strongly pushing for simultaneous general and Assembly elections, which would enable the party to try and make the elections a 'presidential' one.¹³

However, more recent surveys show that Modi's popularity might have plateaued and could even be declining. According to the Lokniti-CSDS survey, in May 2018, Modi was the preferred choice of 34 per cent of the respondents, ahead of the next best choice, Rahul

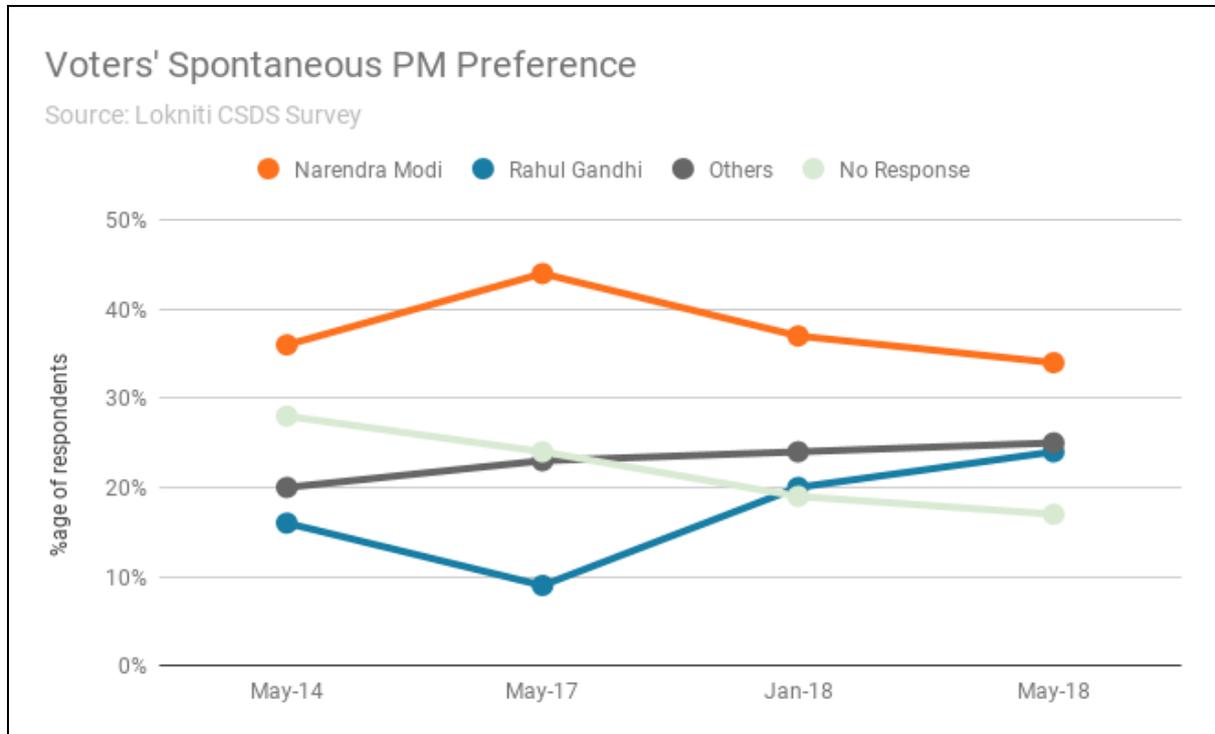
¹¹ "Want 'respectable share of seats' for any alliance, says Mayawati", *Times of India*, 16 September 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/want-respectable-share-of-seats-for-any-alliance-says-mayawati/articleshows/65828373.cms> Accessed on 18 September 2018.

¹² "Three Years In, Modi Remains Very Popular", Bruce Stokes, Dorothy Manevich and Hanyu Chwe, *Pew Research Center*, 15 November 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/11/15/india-modi-remains-very-popular-three-years-in/> Accessed on 17 September 2018.

¹³ "BJP for simultaneous polls, says nation can't be in election mode always", *Times of India*, 13 August 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-mulls-assembly-polls-in-party-ruled-states-with-lok-sabha-elections/articleshow/65390728.cms> Accessed on 19 September 2018.

Gandhi, by 10 percentage points (Figure 6). However, the survey also points out that Modi's popularity had dropped 10 points from 2017 whereas Rahul, who has been far more visible over the last year, has gained significantly during the same period.

Figure 6: Voters spontaneous reference



Source: Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Mood of the Nation Survey.

Along with Modi as its chief election mascot, the BJP also boasts of a formidable election machinery, headed by Shah. Shah's no-hold-barred approach to elections and politics has paid electoral dividends for the BJP since 2014. It has also alienated allies such as Chandrababu Naidu of the TDP. There are three other factors that give the BJP an edge over its rivals. One is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which provides the BJP a nation-wide pool of foot soldiers for campaigning. Two is the party's aggressive use of social media and online tools to mobilise support,¹⁴ which it had pioneered in 2014 and the other parties and now scrambling to catch up with. Three, the BJP is much better endowed than the other political parties, raising four times the funds than the Congress in the 2016-17 financial year.¹⁵

¹⁴ "Amit Shah arms BJP's cyber warriors in Pune with aggressive social media strategy", Yogesh Joshi, *Hindustan Times*, 9 July 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/pune-news/amit-shah-arms-bjp-s-cyber-warriors-in-pune-with-aggressive-social-media-strategy/story-UepKDHxXmAqVdt3n0GLecO.html> Accessed on 20 September 2018.

¹⁵ "India's Opposition Party Is Running Out of Cash", Bibhudatta Pradhan, Archana Chaudhary and Abhijit Roy Chowdhury, *Bloomberg*, 23 May 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-22/empty-coffers-hinder-india-congress-party-s-plans-to-topple-modi> Accessed on 18 September 2018.

Conclusion

If India's next general election is held as expected in early 2019, there is still enough time for the government to announce populist measures and hunt for electoral allies. The latter applies to opposition parties too which are busy trying to firm up alliances. What can be said at this point is that the BJP is likely to find it difficult to match its performance of 2014. However, the BJP would still be the frontrunner to form the government by virtue of being the party most likely to have the largest number of seats, even if it falls short of a majority. The Congress and some opposition parties have realised that joining hands is the only way to stop the BJP from returning to power. However, the weakness of the opposition alliance, whichever way it shapes up, is that the Congress is not likely to have the required number of seats to make it a stable anchor. At the same time, there is little that binds the opposition together, apart from them being anti-BJP and anti-Modi. All this though will make for a competitive general election, contrary to what the BJP might be hoping for.

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