

Can the BJP lose the 2019 Elections? ¹

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Summary

For the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to lose the next Indian general elections, it will have to forfeit a huge number of votes in a high number of constituencies. For this to happen, there must be a huge vote swing in favour of the opposition parties. However, opinion polls seem to suggest that this is extremely unlikely to happen. At this stage, the BJP seems to be looking at a second term in power, albeit with a reduced majority.

Introduction

That the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the frontrunner for the Indian general elections, due in spring 2019, is something that few would call into question. For the opposition to have a chance to oust the government, it will need to secure a huge swing of votes in its favour and make sure that the anti-BJP vote is not dispersed. In other words, it will need to form a series of state-level coalitions and hope that a massive number of voters that had chosen the BJP in 2014 will change their mind. How many votes would the BJP need to forfeit in order to lose the elections?

Average Waste of Votes

In 2014, 323 seats that were won by a given party in 2009 switched to another party. These seats had been won in 2009 by an average margin of 65,298 votes. The author will call this figure the ‘average waste of votes’ (AWV) as it represents the average number of votes that a party forfeited in any given seat between the two elections. This can be seen as a realistic number of votes that a party can lose in any given seat in an election which results in a change of government (like the one in 2014).

If one thinks of seats that were won by a margin which was lower than the AWV as ‘at risk’ seats, then the BJP has 43 seats that would fall into this category. A majority of these (20) are in the Hindi belt (nine in Uttar Pradesh; six in Bihar; two each in Rajasthan and Jharkhand; and one each in Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand and Delhi). If we use the AWV for the 2004 elections (57,022 votes) – a more ‘normal’ election compared to that in 2014, when, for the first time in 30 years, a single party won an absolute majority – then the ‘at risk’ seats of the BJP are 34. Considering that the BJP won 282 seats in 2014 – ten more than the absolute majority – even losing all the ‘at risk’ seats will still put it in a

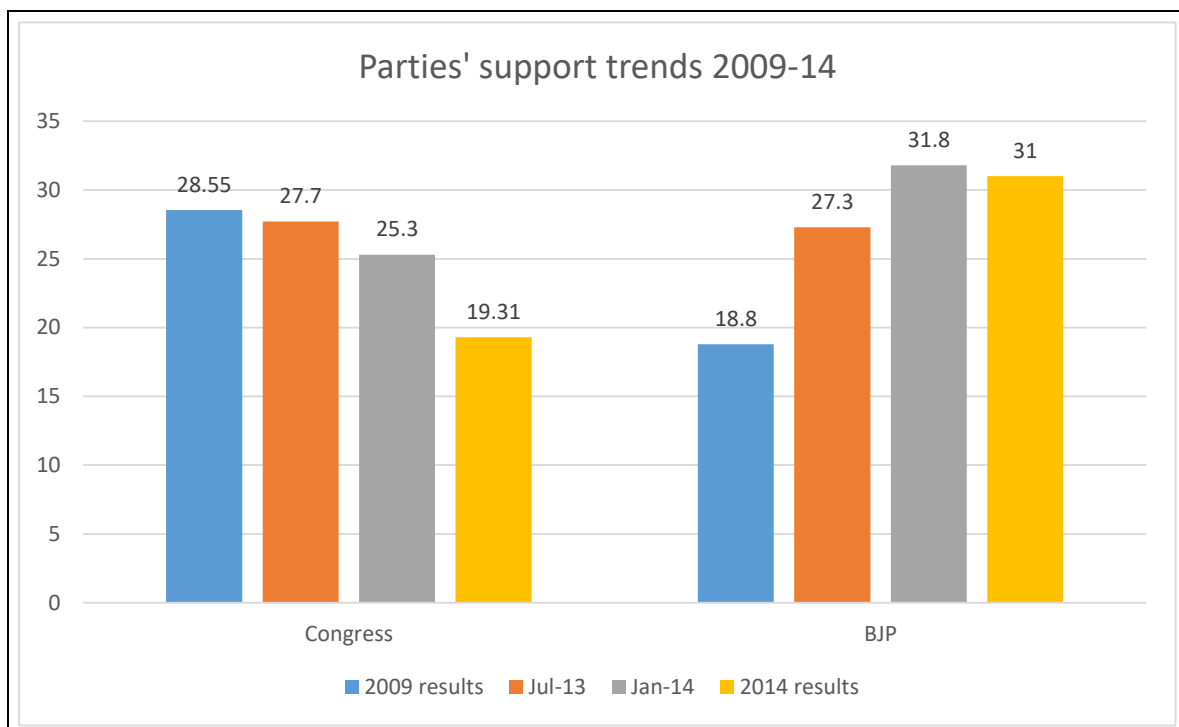
¹ India’s next general elections are scheduled to be held in mid-2019. It will be the largest electoral exercise in the world involving over 800 million eligible voters, who will decide the fate of the Narendra Modi government. Beginning September 2018, at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, 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.

rather conformable position to form a coalition government. In other words, for the BJP to lose a significant number of seats, the AWV of the BJP will have to be much higher than in previous elections, which resulted in a change of the government. If the BJP wins less than 200 seats, which might still be enough for it to succeed in forming a coalition government, it will mean that the AWV will be as high as 108,000 votes. This is very unlikely to happen.

These are average figures and it is, of course, possible that many seats that were won in 2014 with high margins, will be lost anyway. In 2014, as many as 130 seats (across parties), which had a higher margin of victory than the 2009 AWV, were lost to another party including 68 seats out of 89 held by the then-single largest party, the Indian National Congress.

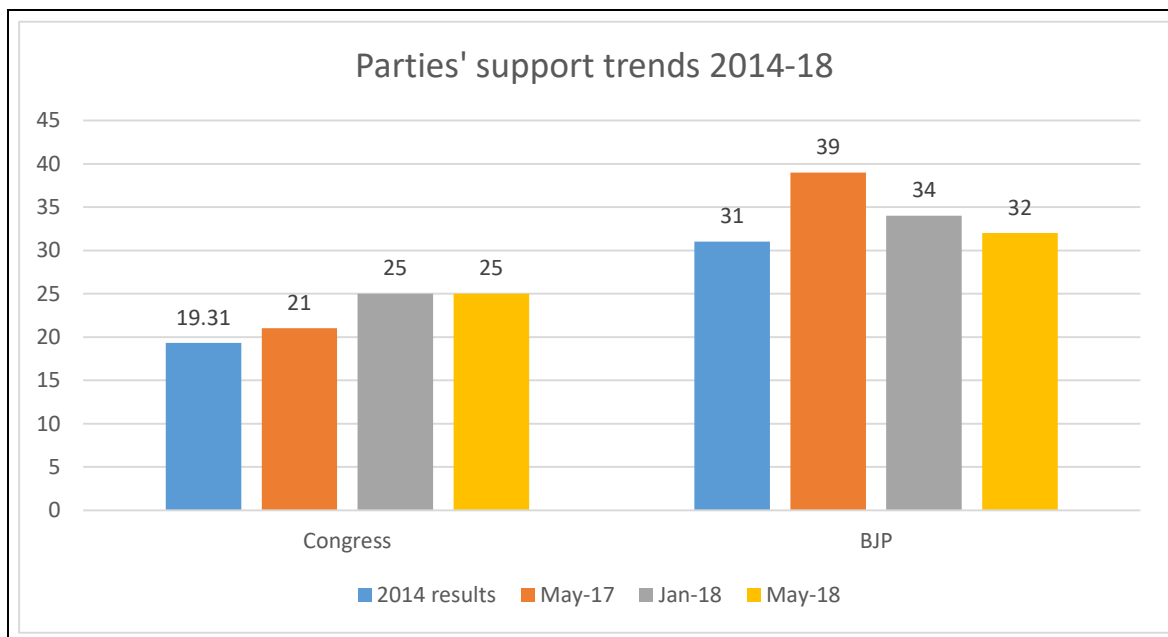
This is to say that it is theoretically possible for a party to lose a substantial number of seats, which were previously won with big margins. However, the BJP today is in a radically different situation compared to the Congress in 2014 for two main reasons. First, the BJP in 2014 won a much larger number of seats with high margins - 239 seats with margins higher than the AWV, including 72 with more than 250,000 votes, compared to just four for the Congress in 2009. Second, the Congress lost so many seats that it had secured with big margins because of the quite unprecedented swing of votes in favour of the BJP. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate just how dramatic the swing was.

Figure 1: Largest parties' support trends, 2009-14



Source: Actual results are taken from the Election Commission website: <https://eci.nic.in/>. The July 2013 and January 2014 data are taken from the Centre for the Study of Developing Society 'Election Trackers' study, available at: <http://www.lokniti.org/>.

Figure 2: Largest parties' support trends 2014-18



Source: Actual results are taken from the Election Commission website: <https://eci.nic.in/>. The May 2017, January 2018 and May 2018 data are taken from the Centre for the Study of Developing Society 'Election Trackers' study, available at: <http://www.lokniti.org/>.

The Congress party lost almost 10 percentage points of vote share between 2009 and 2014 while the BJP gained more than 12 percentage points. The situation is radically different today. According to opinion polls, the BJP still enjoys a vote share that is slightly higher than its 2014 result. Although the trend is unfavourable to the BJP – its popularity declined quite remarkably between May 2017 and May 2018, while the Congress's support increased substantially – the saffron party still enjoys a quite comfortable margin over its largest competitor. At this stage, data just do not show a scenario where the swing of votes away from the BJP will be such to make the party lose a substantial number of seats.

Conclusion

It is very hard not to predict a second term for the BJP, which, however, will most probably have to rely on coalition partners to form a government. This will bring India's party system back to its 'normal' post-1989 phase and confirm the abnormality of the 2014 elections in India's recent electoral history.

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