

Why Alliances could matter in India's General Election¹

Ronojoy Sen



Summary

In the run up to the Indian general election, scheduled to be held over April and May 2019, political parties are busy firming up alliances. Of the two national parties, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been much quicker off the blocks compared to the Indian National Congress. Part of the reason behind the BJP's urgency is the expectation that it might not be able to get a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament). The Congress, in contrast, has been bogged down by seat sharing details. Alliances have been struck by regional parties in several states, too, with the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party tie-up in Uttar Pradesh being the most significant.

Introduction

As India heads to general election in April-May 2019, both the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the opposition parties are busy firming up alliances. While the BJP seems to have got its act together, the Congress is yet to finalise its alliances. Though there has been much talk of the opposition forming a grand national alliance or *mahagatbandhan* to take on the ruling BJP, these efforts have been a non-starter with too many parties and leaders involved. The effective alliances are going to be at the state level. This paper looks at the state of play with regard to newly-formed alliances and their likely impact on the results of the general election. There are a few states where the two pan-Indian parties – the BJP and the Congress – will be involved in a direct contest and where alliances will not have a discernible impact. They include Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and a few other smaller states.

There are, however, several major states where post-2014 alliances, both between the Congress or BJP and regional parties as well as coalitions among regional parties, are likely to play a significant role. These states include Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, which have a combined 187 seats or over a third of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha or lower house of parliament.

¹ India's next general elections are scheduled to be held in April or May 2019. They 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 elections.

In some states, such as Maharashtra and Punjab, alliances that existed during the 2014 general elections have been revived. In Maharashtra, despite its frequent outbursts against the government, the Shiv Sena, one of the BJP's oldest allies, will contest the general elections together against most likely an alliance of Congress and the NCP, who were partners in 2014 too. The BJP and Shiv Sena have split the 48 seats in Maharashtra almost equally with a 25-23 seat-sharing plan while the Congress is reportedly contesting 26 seats and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) 22.² In 2014, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance had done exceedingly well winning 41 seats. In Punjab, the BJP, as in 2014, will contest the election with another trusted ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal. Unlike Maharashtra, though, the BJP will contest only three out of 13 seats in Punjab, giving the lion's share to its regional ally. In Assam, too, the BJP has patched up with its estranged ally, the Asom Gana Parishad, and will be contesting the general election together along with the Bodoland People's Front.³ In the rest of the Northeast, the BJP is backing several of the leading regional parties.

Let's look at each of the four major states, where new alliances – ones that had not been in existence in 2014 – have been or are in the process of being negotiated, in the run up to 2019 elections.

Uttar Pradesh (UP)

No discussion about the general election can avoid UP, which sends 80 MPs to parliament. UP becomes even more important for the BJP's prospects since the party won 71 seats or a quarter of its total tally in the Lok Sabha from the state. In 2014, UP saw a four-cornered contest between the BJP, the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress. The BJP also had seat sharing arrangements with two smaller parties, the Apna Dal and the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, with the former winning two seats.

The situation in 2019 is very different. The two principal regional parties in UP - the SP and the BSP - have already announced a pre-poll coalition where the SP will contest 37 seats and the BSP, 38. A smaller party, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), will contest three seats in western UP. Though the Congress is not part of the opposition alliance, the SP-BSP-RLD combine is not putting up candidates in the two Congress pocket boroughs of Amethi and Rae Bareilly, from where, in 2014, the Congress' Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi were elected respectively.

If the vote share of the SP and BSP in 2014 were to be added up, it would roughly be the same as the BJP's 43 per cent vote share. Although the BJP swept the 2017 UP Assembly polls winning 325 out of 403 seats, the BSP and SP's combined vote share of 44 per cent was higher than the BJP's 41 per cent. In 2017, though, the SP and the Congress contested the election together. If one goes by prior electoral performance alone, the SP-BSP coalition will pose a

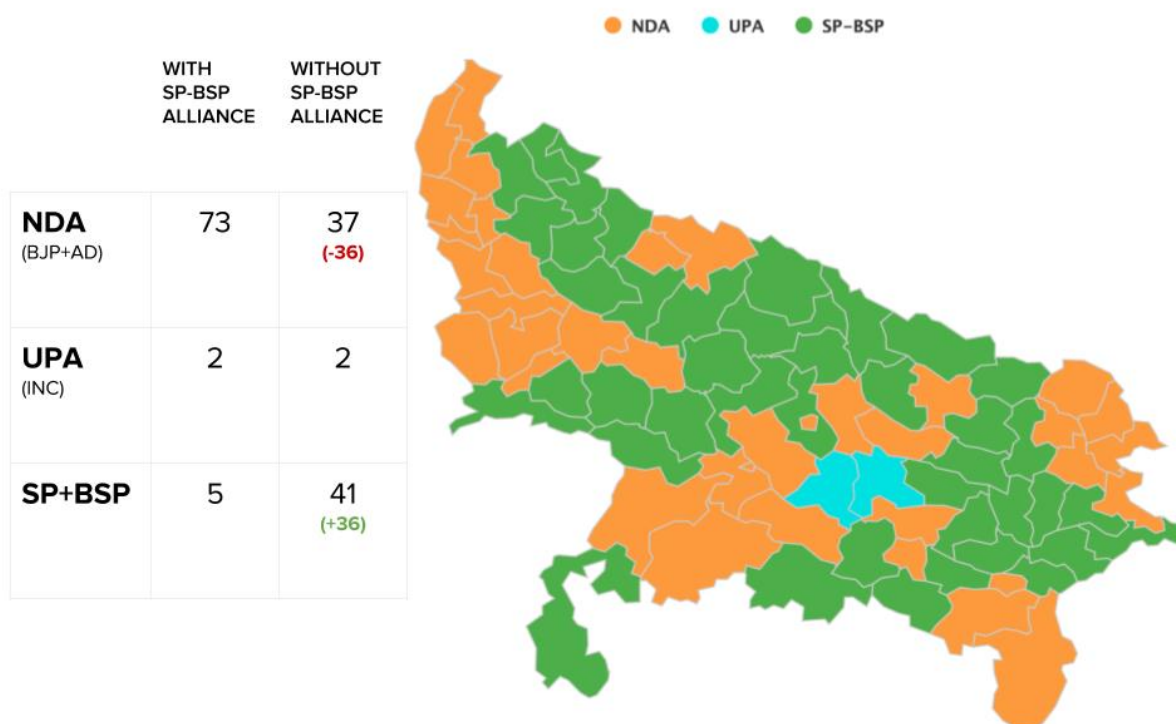
² Sunil Prabhu, "Congress, Sharad Pawar's party finalise seat-sharing formula for Lok Sabha elections", *NDTV* (10 March 2019), <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lok-sabha-elections-2019-congress-and-sharad-pawars-party-finalise-seat-sharing-formula-say-sources-2005575>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

³ Special Correspondent, "2019 Lok Sabha Election: BJP-AGP alliance back on track in Assam", *The Hindu* (13 March 2019), <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/2019-lok-sabha-polls-bjp-agp-alliance-back-on-track-in-assam/article26518890.ece>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

formidable challenge to the BJP. Using the 2014 vote share as a yardstick, the SP-BSP combine could gain as many as 36 seats in 2019 (See Figure 1). If the vote share of the SP and the BSP in the 2017 Assembly election were to be extrapolated to Lok Sabha seats, the alliance would gain 42 seats. Some analysts have suggested that the BJP could lose as many as 50 seats in UP due to the SP-BSP alliance.⁴ The potential impact of the SP-BSP alliance in UP was foreshadowed in two by-elections in 2018. In the Lok Sabha constituencies of Gorakhpur and Phulpur, the SP backed by the BSP defeated the ruling BJP convincingly. The BJP’s loss in the Gorakhpur constituency, which was vacated by Yogi Adityanath after he was appointed the Chief Minister of UP in 2017, was particularly significant. It must be noted though that bypolls, which are fought on local issues and do not usually have high voter turnout, are not always good indicators for the general elections.

Figure 1: Projected seat share for UP

General Election Results in Uttar Pradesh with the same voteshares as the 2014 elections, but with an alliance between Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party



Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

However, merely adding up vote shares of past elections does not always give a true picture. There are several other factors that need to be taken into account. First, there is no guarantee that the votes for the SP and the BSP will transfer to the other as smoothly as it did

⁴ Yogendra Yadav, “Why the BJP is staring at a loss of 100 seats from 2014 tally”, *The Print* (9 November 2019), <https://theprint.in/opinion/hindi-heartland-holds-key-to-bjp-2019-electoral-fortunes-once-again/147096/>. Accessed on 14 March 2019.

in Gorakhpur and Phulpur. The core support base of the two parties – Jatav Dalits, the caste to which BSP supremo Mayawati belongs, for the BSP and the Yadavs for the SP – have had a long history of antagonism. The alliance might end up sending confusing signals to their supporters. Many of the local party leaders, too, will be denied tickets resulting in a certain degree of disaffection. A splinter group, the Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party (Lohia), led by SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav's brother Shivpal Yadav, is putting up candidates for the general election and could eat into the SP's vote. The BJP too has been cashing in on the discontent by engineering defections from the BSP, SP, RLD and Congress with as many as 28 leaders from opposition parties joining the BJP over the last month.⁵ Second, the extent of caste consolidation will be important. In the 2014 election, the BJP, traditionally regarded as an upper caste party, got substantial Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Dalit support with 27 per cent of Yadavs and 18 per cent of Jatavs voting for it.⁶ The BJP is unlikely to get a similar response in 2019, particularly from the Dalits who have been disaffected with the party for various reasons. Third, the issue of farmer distress has taken on dangerous proportions for the BJP, not just in UP but in most states. In the last round of Assembly elections held in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the BJP did poorly in rural constituencies. Fourth, anti-incumbency could well be a factor in UP. The Adityanath-led BJP government in UP has now been in power for two years and there is a likelihood of the BJP facing anti-incumbency sentiments. Fifth, Modi still remains popular in UP and is seen as the only viable prime ministerial candidate, in contrast to BSP's Mayawati and SP's Akhilesh Yadav who are viewed as state-level leaders. Finally, the Congress, which won only 7 per cent of the vote share and two seats in 2014, has turned to Priyanka Gandhi to give the party a boost in eastern UP. While Priyanka might not be able to revive a moribund Congress, the party could wean away votes from the SP-BSP combine.

Bihar

Bihar, with 40 seats, sends the second highest number of MPs to parliament from the Hindi heartland. For 2019, the BJP has firmed up an alliance with the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, as well as Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party (LJP), which was in place in 2014. Nitish, who had fought the 2014 elections on his own, but the 2015 Assembly polls as part of a grand alliance with the RJD and Congress, controversially crossed over to the BJP's side in 2017. As part of the seat-sharing deal, the BJP and JD(U) will contest 17 seats each leaving the remaining six seats to the LJP.

The Congress, in contrast, is yet to stitch together an alliance in Bihar. It is in talks with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) as well as smaller parties like the Hindustan Awam Morcha and the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), which was with the BJP in 2014. The talks have foundered on the distribution of seats. It might be noted that the RJD has been considerably weakened since its founder Lalu Yadav was put behind bars in 2018 on corruption charges

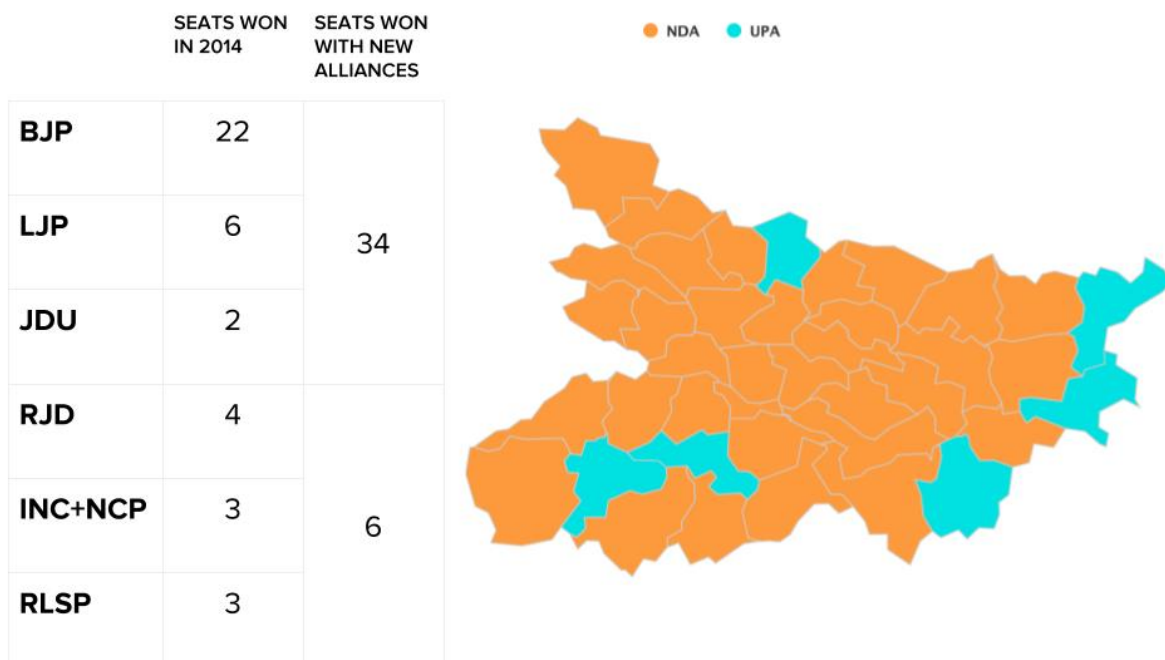
⁵ Raghavi Sharma, 'In Uttar Pradesh, defections to BJP have weakened the Opposition's alliance', *The Wire* (15 March 2019), <https://thewire.in/politics/uttar-pradesh-bjp-defections-bsp>. Accessed on 15 March 2019.

⁶ A.K. Verma, "Third Democratic Upsurge in Uttar Pradesh", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 December 2016.

However, even if the Congress stitches together an alliance in Bihar, previous electoral performance suggests that the BJP-led alliance, which included the RSLP, could marginally improve on its 2014 performance where it won 31 seats (See Figure 2). The combined vote share of the BJP, JD(U) and LJP in 2014 comfortably outstrips the Congress' and RJD's vote share. Whereas the opposition seems disunited and in disarray, Nitish and the BJP could feel some effects on anti-incumbency though.

Figure 2: Projected seat share for Bihar

General Election Results in Bihar with the same voteshares as the 2014 elections, but with BJP+JDU+LJP and INC+RJD+RLSP+NCP Alliances



Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

Tamil Nadu

Unlike in Bihar, the battle lines are already drawn between two competing alliances in Tamil Nadu. The state, which has seen the deaths of two of its tallest leaders – the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)'s Jayalalithaa and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)'s Karunanidhi in the last three years – has seen a re-alignment of political forces. The BJP, which has been unable to make inroads into Tamil Nadu, has for the first time since 2004 tied up with the AIADMK in a pre-poll alliance. A weakened and faction-ridden AIADMK had been nudging closer to the BJP since Jayalalithaa's death in 2016. As part of the seat-sharing arrangement, the ruling AIADMK will contest 21 out of Tamil Nadu's 39 Lok Sabha seats whereas the BJP will contest five. The rest of the seats will be contested by smaller parties such as the Pattali Makkal Katchi and the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam, led by film actor Vijayakant. The AIADMK, which had swept the 2014 elections by winning 37 seats under

Jayalalithaa, is bound to lose seats in 2019. Whether the AIADMK's alliance with the BJP can stem its losses remains to be seen.

The DMK, which was part of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) till 2013, has tied up with its former ally. The DMK has been fairly generous in allotting nine seats to the Congress and another 10 to smaller outfits, such as the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi and the Left parties. The DMK will contest the remaining 20 seats. With the leadership mantle of the DMK having passed to Stalin, it will be his first real electoral test since the 2016 Assembly election where the DMK was bested by the AIADMK. However, the DMK did much better than in the 2014 national elections by narrowing the gap in vote share with the AIADMK to 1 per cent.

The presence of an AIADMK breakaway faction, the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam led by TTV Dhinakaran, could queer the pitch for the AIADMK alliance. Dhinakaran, who defeated the official AIADMK candidate in the R.K. Nagar Assembly constituency bypoll in 2017, might not be able to win any seats on his own but he is capable of hurting the AIADMK. Kamal Haasan's recently formed party, Makkal Needhi Maiam, is also planning to contest all seats, but is unlikely to poll a significant number of votes.

Karnataka

Karnataka, which sends 28 MPs to parliament, is another state where a newly-formed alliance could change the picture from 2014. The Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] formed the government in the state after the 2018 Assembly elections by cobbling together a post-poll alliance. The two parties have decided to continue with the alliance for the 2019 general election. Reports suggest that that Congress will contest 20 seats and the JD(S) eight.⁷

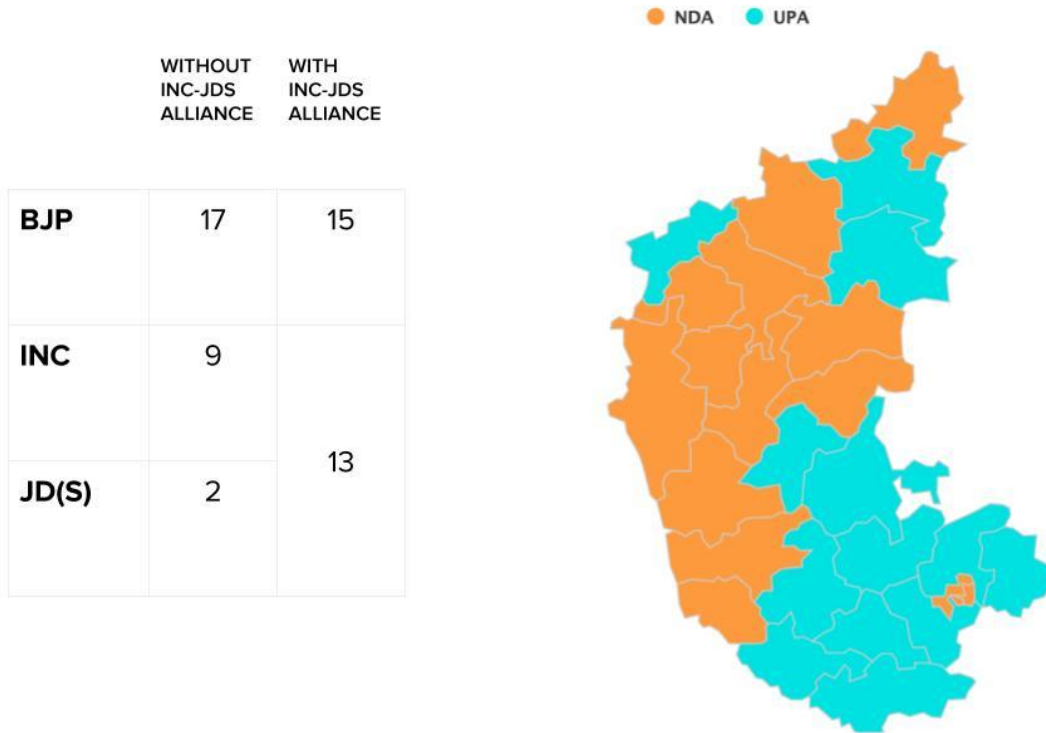
Going by the 2018 Assembly election result, the Congress-JD(S) alliance does not bode well for the BJP. In 2018, the combined vote share of the Congress and JD(S) was 54 per cent compared to the BJP's 36 per cent. The same numbers projected for the general election would result in the Congress-JD(S) combine winning 22 out of 28 seats in Karnataka. This would reverse the 2014 verdict where the BJP had won 17 seats to the Congress' nine (See Figure 3). While Assembly polls results are not necessarily replicated in national polls, the proximity of the Assembly election to the general election will have a bearing on the outcome in 2019. However, despite the BJP's lower vote share in Karnataka, the concentrated nature of its support base allows it to win more seats than it normally would have.

Karnataka is important to the BJP not just for the sizeable number of MPs it sends to parliament. Karnataka is also the only state in South India where the BJP has had a significant presence. If the BJP's numbers go down in Karnataka, it is unlikely to make up for it in the other southern states where it is a marginal player.

⁷Karnataka correspondent, "Congress-JD(S) reach seat-sharing pact in Karnataka", *The Hindu* (13 March 2019), <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/congress-jds-reach-seat-sharing-pact-in-karnataka/article26523745.ece> Accessed on 14 March 2019.

Figure 3: Projected seat share for Karnataka

General Election Results in Karnataka with the same voteshares as the 2014 elections, but with an alliance between Congress and Janata Dal (Secular)



Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai Research

Conclusion

Before the 2014 verdict, where the BJP won a slim single party majority, coalitions at the centre with strong regional parties had been the norm for well over two decades. With the BJP’s seat tally expected to fall below its 2014 numbers, regional parties could once again play a crucial role. Indeed, even in 2014, the regional parties had won nearly 50 per cent of the vote share. That the BJP is alive to this possibility is evident from its openness in tying up new alliances or reviving old ties. Some undecided regional parties have patched up with the BJP following the Indian government’s air strike in Pakistan in end-February 2019, which is seen as boosting the BJP’s electoral prospects. If short of numbers, the BJP will also look at post-poll alliances with parties such as the Telangana Rashtra Samithi in Telangana and the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh.

The Congress has been less successful in firming up alliances with many of its proposed tie-ups stuck on seat sharing. In addition to the states mentioned above, in Jharkhand, which has 13 Lok Sabha seats, the Congress has tied up with Jharkhand Mukti Morcha but the seat sharing had not been finalised at the time of writing. In West Bengal, too, the Congress is in talks with the Left parties to make it a three-cornered contest with the ruling Trinamul Congress and BJP. However, in the two southern states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the Congress is going to contest on its own after having parted ways with the TDP, with whom it

contested the Telangana Assembly polls in 2018. The possibility of an alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi did not also work out. In the run up to the election, the BJP has thus far proved to be more adept at sewing up alliances than the Congress.

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Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at ISAS. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The visuals and graphics in this paper have been created by Loki.ai. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.