



## 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 3 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.

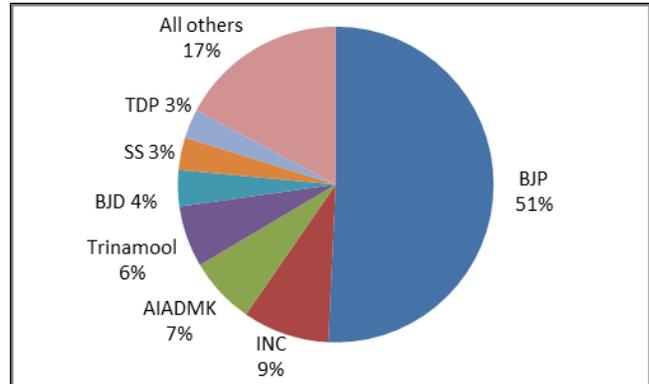
Elections to seat India's 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha were held in April-May 2014, when the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP or "Indian Peoples Party") won a historic victory under then-Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP became the first party to attain a parliamentary majority since 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 presumed 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

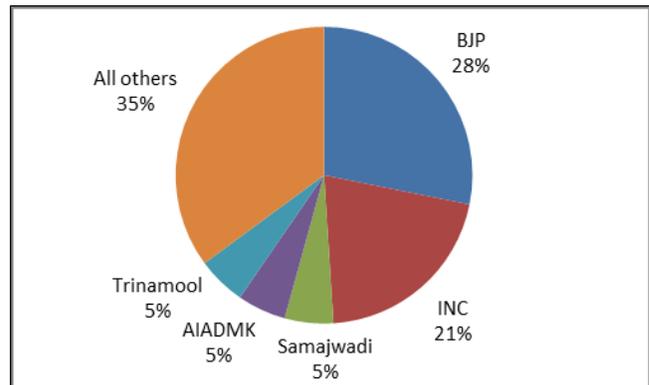
the 2014 national election and 35 of those won seats. The 8 parties listed below account for 67% of the total vote and 85% of Lok Sabha seats (see **Figure 1**).

**Figure 1. Major Party Representation in the Lok Sabha**  
(543 total seats + 2 appointed)



The BJP's governance agenda can be impeded in the Rajya Sabha, where opposition parties can align to block certain legislation (see **Figure 2**).

**Figure 2. Major Party Representation in the Rajya Sabha**  
(233 total seats + 12 appointed)



### Key Government Officials

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** was Chief Minister of the economically dynamic and relatively developed western state of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 before becoming India's first-ever lower-caste prime minister. He is a longtime member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or "National Volunteer Organization"; see below).

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 Harayana, has won seven parliamentary elections and was Leader of the Opposition in the 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha.

Finance 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.

Commerce and Industry Minister **Suresh Prabhu**, a Shiv Sena member from Maharashtra until 2014, led the railways ministry until his September 2017 appointment.

Defense Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman**, a Tamil Nadu native, served as BJP national spokeswoman and minister of state before becoming India's second-ever female defense minister in September 2017.

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

President **Ram Nath Kovind**, a former BJP Rajya Sabha member from Uttar Pradesh, became head of state in July 2017.

## Leading Parties

**Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** was born in 1980 as the political wing of the RSS, a militant Hindu nationalist and social service group itself founded in 1925 and progenitor of dozens of affiliated organizations (the “Sangh parivar”). The BJP 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 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 with 19.1% of the 2014 vote.

**All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)** is a **Tamil Nadu**-based party led by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa until her 2016 death. It is populist with a mostly ethnic Tamil constituency. A BJP ally, the AIADMK won 37 Lok Sabha seats 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 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 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 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 2014. TDP won 16 Lok Sabha seats 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 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, more than 4% of the total.

## Federal System and State Elections

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.

A majority of Indians live in only six states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh, with more than 200 million citizens, was among five states holding elections in early 2017; these were widely previewed as being a referendum on the central government's performance to date. The Uttar Pradesh results brought a sweeping win for the BJP, which ousted the incumbent Samajwadi Party to take more than three-quarters of state assembly seats—the largest majority for any party in the key state since 1980.

Also winning control of governments in Manipur, Uttarakhand, and Tripura, the BJP is now in power in 15 of India's 29 states, with allied party chief ministers in another 7. The Congress Party controls six state governments after taking Punjab in 2017. Steadily broadening its state-level presence in recent years, the BJP now accounts for about one-third of all of the country's state legislators, as compared to one-fifth for the declining Congress.

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