



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 28 states and 8 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 assemblies to six-year terms; 12 are appointed by the president.

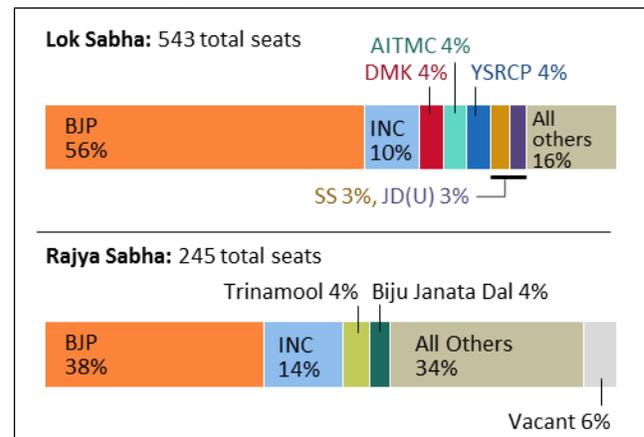
Elections to seat India’s 17th Lok Sabha were held in April-May 2019, when the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, or “Indian Peoples Party”) won a sweeping and repeat victory under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In 2014, the BJP had become the first party to attain a parliamentary majority after 30 years of coalition governments, and it was able to expand that majority in 2019 to become the first party to win consecutive majorities since 1971. Modi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist, ran a campaign seen as divisive by many analysts. While he and his party have long sought to emphasize development and good governance, eight years in office have brought a mixed record on those accounts, and the 2019 election cycle (and a key 2022 state election in Uttar Pradesh) revolved around nationalism and religion, with growing concerns among many observers that strident Hindu majoritarianism represents a threat both to India’s religious minorities and to the country’s syncretic traditions. Still, hundreds of millions across the country voted to keep the remarkably popular prime minister in power for another term. The BJP, under then-Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, previously had led a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition in power from 1999 to 2004.

The Indian National Congress Party (hereinafter “Congress Party”) and its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition, in power from 2004-2014 with Manmohan Singh in the top office, suffered a second consecutive electoral rout in 2019. The party of India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, Congress had dominated the country’s politics from 1947 to 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 and 2019, Rajiv’s son, Rahul, again oversaw a

failure to win even the 10% of seats required to officially lead the Lok Sabha opposition.

The BJP and Congress are, in practice, India’s only genuinely national parties. In the 2009 and 2014 elections they together won roughly half of all votes cast nationally, but in 2019 the BJP boosted its share to nearly 38% of the estimated 600 million votes cast (to Congress’s 20%; turnout was a record 67%). The influence of regional and caste-based (and often “family-run”) parties—although blunted by two consecutive BJP majority victories—remains a crucial variable in Indian politics. Such parties hold roughly one-third of all Lok Sabha seats. In 2019, more than 8,000 candidates and hundreds of parties vied for parliament seats; 33 of those parties won at least one seat. The seven parties listed below account for 84% of Lok Sabha seats. The BJP’s economic reform agenda can be impeded in the Rajya Sabha, where opposition parties can align to block certain nonrevenue legislation (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Party Representation in India’s Parliament



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

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 lifelong member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or “National Volunteer Organization”; see below).

Defense Minister **Rajnath Singh**, who took the defense portfolio in 2019, was home minister from 2014 to 2019, BJP president during the 2014 campaign, and has served as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, as well as in the cabinet of the BJP-led government from 1999 to 2004.

Home Minister **Amit Shah**, a top Modi lieutenant from Gujarat and also a longtime RSS member, took his portfolio in 2019 and, in 2021, became the country’s first Minister of Cooperation. He was BJP party president for 2014-2020.

Finance Minister **Nirmala Sitharaman**, India's first-ever female finance minister, is also Minister for Corporate Affairs. She is a Tamil Nadu native and was the BJP's national spokeswoman before serving as India's first female defense minister from 2017 to 2019.

External Affairs Minister **Subrahmanyam Jaishankar** was foreign secretary from 2015 to 2018 and has served as India's Ambassador to both the United States and China. He became India's first-ever career diplomat to hold the MEA portfolio after joining the BJP in 2019.

Commerce and Industry Minister **Piyush Goyal**, a former investment banker and BJP stalwart from Maharashtra, has also led the consumer affairs ministry since 2020, and added the textiles ministry portfolio in 2021.

National Security Advisor **Ajit Doval**, who took the post in 2014, is a former police officer and veteran intelligence officer from Kerala who served as Director of the Intelligence Bureau from 2004 to 2005 after a decade running its operations wing.

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

Leading Parties

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) arose 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 after 1998. The NDA-leading BJP won 303 Lok Sabha seats with 38% of the popular vote in 2019.

Indian National Congress is generally regarded as a populist, center-left party, although a Congress-led government presided over significant economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, is UPA chairwoman and their son, Rahul, serves as party president; both offered to resign in the wake of historic electoral defeats in 2014 and 2019. The UPA-leading Congress Party won 52 Lok Sabha seats with 20% of the 2019 vote.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) is a **Tamil Nadu**-based party led by former Chennai mayor M.K. Stalin. Social democratic with a mostly ethnic Tamil constituency, the UPA member won 23 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC), a professedly secular party, wins its support in **West Bengal**, where party leader Mamata Banerjee is also chief minister. The AITMC, a UPA member from 2004 to 2012, won 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

YSR Congress (YSRCP) was founded in 2011 by Jaganmohan Reddy, the son of a former **Andhra Pradesh** chief minister, after an acrimonious split with Congress. It now dominates the state assembly and won 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Shiv Sena is a vociferously Hindu nationalist, ethnic Marathi party based in **Maharashtra** that had long aligned itself with the BJP at the national level, but split away to join the national opposition in 2019. The now-UPA member won 18 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Janata Dal (United) (JDU), a secularist, social democratic party with its main votebank in **Bihar**, is led by state Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who aligned the party with the BJP in 2017, then ended the alliance in mid-2022. The JDU won 16 Lok Sabha seats in 2019.

Others: Two major regional parties, Uttar Pradesh's Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party, were bitter rivals that struck a rare alliance to compete with the BJP in 2019. They garnered a combined 47% of the state's total votes, but won a disproportionately low 15 of the state's 80 Lok Sabha seats. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu, the regional All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), an NDA member, received nearly 19% of the state's votes while winning one of the state's 38 Lok Sabha seats.

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 assemblies and their chief ministers with exclusive powers over 66 "items," including public order, law enforcement, health care, and power, communication, and transportation networks.

Nearly half of Indians live in only five states—Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. Three of these have BJP chief ministers. Uttar Pradesh, with more than 200 million citizens, was among five states holding elections in 2022. These were widely previewed as a referendum on the central government's performance to date, and they brought a second sweeping win for the BJP, which took two-thirds of Uttar Pradesh's assembly seats (with 41% of the vote) under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a Hindutva firebrand. Bihar and West Bengal have non-NDA chief ministers; in 2021 state elections in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress survived a historic BJP surge to win reelection as the state assembly's majority party.

The ruling BJP is now in power in 12 Indian states, with NDA-allied chief ministers in another 3. After losing in Punjab in 2022, the Congress Party controls two state governments, with UPA allies leading three others. Six states, including Bihar, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh, are run by parties independent of either national coalition. Steadily broadening its state assembly presence in recent years—which directly translates to increased presence in the Rajya Sabha—the BJP now accounts for more than one-third of the country's state legislators, as compared to under one-fifth for the declining Congress.

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IF10298

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