India's Domestic Political Setting

Overview

India, the world's most populous country, 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. 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 powers over the prime minister or cabinet. Lok Sabha and state legislators are elected to five-year terms. Rajya Sabha members are elected by state assemblies to six-year terms; 12 are appointed by the president.

India's most recent national election to seat the country's 18th Lok Sabha was held in spring 2024. The incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, or "Indian Peoples Party") won a plurality victory of 240 seats under its leader, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. Hundreds of millions across the country voted to keep the popular prime minister in power for a third term, but the BJP's failure to secure a majority was widely viewed as a surprise setback for Modi and the party. The 73-year-old Modi, a self-avowed Hindu nationalist, for the first time in his political career will oversee a coalition government: the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) currently holds 293 seats, or 54% of the chamber. (See CRS In Focus IF12686, *India's 2024 National Election*.)
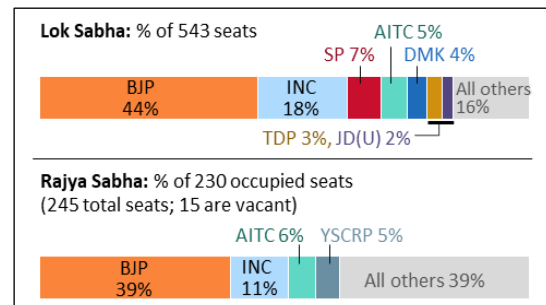
Many analysts described the campaign run by Modi and the BJP as divisive. While he and his party have long sought to emphasize economic development and good governance, their record over 10 years in office is a mixed one. The government has invested in infrastructure upgrades, and generally strong economic growth has lifted many millions lifted out of poverty. Yet India continues to suffer from growing inequality, and high rates of unemployment and inflation. Observers also express concerns that Hindu religious majoritarianism threatens the status and rights of India's minority communities.

The Indian National Congress (INC or "Congress Party") of India's first PM, Jawaharlal Nehru, dominated India's politics for the first 50 years of independence, but suffered two consecutive national-level routs in 2014 and 2019. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, and her son, Rajiv, also served as prime minister; both were assassinated in office. The party, now fronted by Rajiv's son, Rahul, resurged in 2024, nearly doubling its seat count to 99. The INC-led opposition Indian National Developmental Inclusive

Alliance, or "INDIA," won 234 Lok Sabha seats, or 43% of the chamber, and Rahul Gandhi was elected Leader of the Opposition. The Lok Sabha's third-largest party, the Samajwadi Party, won 37 seats in its base in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, illuminating the BJP's setbacks in the "Hindi belt."

The BJP and Congress are, in practice, India's only genuinely national parties. In the 2024 election they together won more than half of all votes cast nationally, as in 2019, with the BJP's share steady at 37% of the estimated 640 million votes cast (to Congress's 21%; turnout was again about 67%). The influence of regional and caste-based (often "family-run") parties—dormant after two consecutive BJP majority victories—returned in 2024 as a crucial variable in Indian politics. Such parties hold roughly one-third of all Lok Sabha seats. In 2024, more than 8,300 candidates and 744 parties vied for Lok Sabha seats; 41 of those parties took at least one seat. The seven parties listed below account for 84% of Lok Sabha seats. The NDA'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 Positions in India's 18th Lok Sabha

Source: Election Commission of India; Rajya Sabha website.

Key Government Officials

Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** was chief minister (CM) 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. The Tamil Nadu native 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 intelligence officer from Kerala who served as Director of the Intelligence Bureau after a decade running its operations wing.

President **Droupadi Murmu,** a former governor of Jharkhand, is the second woman and first member of a tribal community to hold the office.

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 240 Lok Sabha seats with 37% of the popular vote in 2024.

Indian National Congress (INC or Congress Party) is generally regarded as a populist, center-left party, although an INC-led government presided over significant economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, is a top-ranking INC strategist, and their son, Rahul, served as party president from 2017 to 2022; he will formally lead the Lok Sabha opposition in 2024. The INDIA coalition-leading INC won 99 Lok Sabha seats with 21% of the 2024 vote.

Samajwadi Party (SP) of **Uttar Pradesh** is secular and socialist, led by Akhilesh Yadav, a former state CM and son of a former defense minister. Traditionally popular among lower-caste and Muslim communities, the INDIA member won 37 Lok Sabha seats with 4.6% of the 2024 vote.

All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), a professedly secular party that broke away from the INC in 1998, wins its support in **West Bengal**, where party leader Mamata Banerjee is also chief minister. An INDIA member, the party won 29 Lok Sabha seats with 4.4% of the 2024 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 INDIA member won 22 Lok Sabha seats in 2024.

Telugu Desam Party (TDP) is an **Andhra Pradesh**-based, ethnic Telugu party led by state Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, who was in 2024 named leader of the NDA coalition. The party won 16 Lok Sabha seats in 2024.

Janata Dal (United) (JDU), a secularist, social democratic party from **Bihar**, is led by state Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who aligned with the BJP until 2022, became a founding member of the INDIA alliance, then rejoined the NDA in early 2024. The JDU later won 12 Lok Sabha seats.

Others: The Uttar Pradesh-based Bahujan Samaj Party of Mayawati—herself a four-time former chief minister—garnered over 15 million votes, but failed to win any of the 79 seats it contested. In Tamil Nadu, the regional All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, an erstwhile BJP ally, received more than 20% of the state's votes, but won none of its 38 Lok Sabha seats. The relatively young Aam Aadmi Party of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal contested more seats in northern India than in previous elections, but was swept 7-0 by the BJP in the National Capital Territory; the party won three Lok Sabha seats from Punjab in 2024.

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.

Just under half of Indians live in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, West Bengal, and Madhya Pradesh. Three of these have BJP chief ministers. In 2021 state elections in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's AITC survived a historic BJP surge to win reelection as the state assembly's majority party. Uttar Pradesh, considered an electoral bellwether with more than 230 million citizens, held elections in 2022. These brought a repeat win for the BJP under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a Hindutva firebrand and potential future prime ministerial candidate. In 2023, Congress ousted an incumbent BJP government in Karnataka, in India's relatively prosperous south. However, later that year, state elections saw the BJP expand its majority in Madhya Pradesh while displacing Congress Party governments in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In 2024, BJP-ally TDP dominated Andhra Pradesh's state assembly election to unseat a nonaligned party, and the BJP ended the 24-year-long rule of another nonaligned party in Odisha.

The nationally ruling BJP is now in power in 13 Indian states, with NDA-allied chief ministers seated in another 5. The Congress Party controls three state governments; its INDIA allies lead six others. Just one state (tiny Mizoram) is run by a party 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 relatively diminished Congress.

K. Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs

IF10298

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.