

A New Dominant Party in India?

Putting the 2019 BJP Victory into Comparative and Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The 2019 Indian national election delivered a convincing victory to the BJP and, along with it, prognostications of future BJP election wins. The BJP's victory was certainly impressive, but does it portend a prolonged period of BJP rule at the national level? As of 2019, any predictions of the BJP's long-term dominance are premature. The election revealed that the BJP possesses relatively few of the party-system advantages common to other dominant parties around the world. Whereas a party is ideally situated to become dominant when it is large, enjoys a deep and broad base of support, and faces an opposition that is both fragmented and stigmatized, the BJP's main advantage lies in its relatively deep support base in its political strongholds. On other dimensions, the BJP has far less in common with other dominant parties.

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Alternation in power is one of democracy's hallmarks; incumbent parties lose power and other parties replace them. When the same party remains in power for a prolonged period of time, a democracy's health can suffer even if elections are freely and fairly conducted. Long-serving rulers can become complacent, if not downright corrupt, particularly if they sense little electoral threat from rival parties. Where access to state resources is politicized, the absence of alternation can durably marginalize citizens based on their political loyalties. Absent political turnover and proof of the incumbent's willingness to cede power, some may even doubt whether a country is truly democratic. For these reasons, dominant parties—political parties that achieve unusual longevity in power by repeatedly winning multiparty elections—have garnered considerable scholarly attention.

In India, the BJP's emphatic victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha election has raised questions about the BJP's potential to remain in power for years to come. The BJP benefits from a tremendously popular leader, possesses a formidable campaign machine, and is forging a new ideological consensus about what it means to be Indian. Meanwhile, the party's main national-level rival, Congress, has done little to reclaim its position as India's largest party. Is the BJP therefore a dominant party in the making? The comparative politics literature on dominant parties virtually always characterizes a party as dominant based on its longevity in power, typically defining a party as dominant if it holds power uninterruptedly for at least twenty years, implying five or more consecutive electoral victories.² With such a definition, one cannot

² Kenneth F. Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose: Mexico's Democratization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Beatriz Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Kharis Templeman, "The Origins of Dominant Parties" (paper presented at the Dominant-Party Systems Conference, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, May 9-10, 2014). Gary W. Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 328 requires a longer

classify a party as dominant until at least 20 years in power have elapsed. As such, the BJP cannot yet claim the mantle of a dominant party.

However, one can evaluate the BJP's prospects for achieving dominance. To do so, this article examines the BJP's two national-level election victories in 2014 and 2019 to explore whether the BJP possesses the structural party-system advantages common to dominant parties. For the most part, it does not. The BJP enjoys a fairly deep base of support in its strongholds. But, it is not a particularly large party, and its support base is relatively narrow; it does not face an unusually fragmented opposition (at least by Indian standards); and it cannot count on other parties in the legislature to keep it in power at all costs. As such, declaring the birth of a new dominant party in India is premature. Much about India's electoral politics would likely need to change for the BJP to remain in power through 2034 and therefore merit classification as a dominant party.

Aims and Scope

This article evaluates the BJP's prospects for achieving single-party dominance.³ This section details three important clarifications about what exactly this endeavor entails. First, consistent with the comparative politics literature, I define single-party dominance in terms of a party's longevity in power. Others have described the BJP as dominant because it is "the central pole around which politics in India revolves,"⁴ because it has created "a new ideological

period of time in office. Other definitions permit brief interregna in a party's rule. See, T.J. Pempel, ed., *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³ Throughout, I use the terms "dominant party" and "single-party dominance" interchangeably.

⁴ Milan Vaishnav, Milan, Jayaram Ravi, and Jamie Hinton, "Is the BJP India's New Hegemon?" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, October 8, 2018),

framework to India's democracy and public life in general"⁵ or some combination of these two.⁶ These characterizations refer to very different understandings of dominance and are entirely compatible with a party that fails to remain in power for a prolonged period of time. A party may be the main rival against whom all others compete and still periodically lose power (e.g., Ireland's Fianna Fáil).⁷ A party can also forge a new ideological consensus after only a few terms in office, as the Reagan Republicans and Thatcher's Conservative Party arguably did in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively. These other definitions of a dominant party undoubtedly merit attention but are not this article's focus. As such, this article's conclusions do not necessarily contradict findings based on research that employs a different understanding of what it means for a party to be dominant.

Second, the analysis below is not predictive. It advances an argument about whether the BJP's 2014 and 2019 victories resemble those of a would-be dominant party. The conclusions certainly suggest skepticism about the BJP's likelihood of achieving single-party dominance based on events to date. But, this article does not aim to predict the future. Party systems are dynamic, and the BJP could soon resemble other dominant parties and ultimately win multiple subsequent elections. Or, the BJP could beat the proverbial odds and win successive electoral victories despite possessing few of the characteristics that would make such an outcome especially likely.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/08/is-bjp-india-s-new-hegemon-pub-77406> (accessed June 13, 2019).

⁵ Suhas Palshikar, "Towards Hegemony: BJP Beyond Electoral Dominance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 53, no. 33 (2018): 36.

⁶ Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, "The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP's New Social Coalition in 2019," *Studies in Indian Politics* 7, no. 2 (2019): 131-148.

⁷ Fianna Fáil was Ireland's largest party for more than 70 years. But, it never served 20 uninterrupted years in power because it periodically lost power to coalitions of smaller parties.

Third, this article restricts its analysis mainly to electoral outcomes because these are the most immediate indicators of single-party dominance understood in terms of a party's longevity in power. The article does not explore the underlying causes of electoral outcomes or broader explanations for single-party dominance. Scholars have identified many explanations for single-party dominance, including ideological centrism, hegemony, or consensus⁸; access to patronage or state resources⁹; and skillful campaigning.¹⁰ Such explanations aim to account for a party's ability to win repeated elections. But, for the purposes of understanding whether the BJP (or any other party) is likely to become dominant, recent electoral outcomes provide the most proximate indicators of whether a party is likely to win future elections. To use a medical analogy, though knowing that a patient smokes certainly conveys information about his or her life expectancy, information about a patient's blood pressure and whether he or she suffers from cancer of emphysema are more immediately relevant for estimating a patient's likelihood of being alive in five or ten years.

To further illustrate, one might argue that the BJP's emerging ideological hegemony could allow it to become dominant by helping it to win the allegiance of Indian voters. But, ideological hegemony and winning elections may not be perfectly correlated (just as not everyone who smokes gets lung cancer). The BJP could, in theory, establish a new ideological

⁸ Rajni Kothari, 1964. "The Congress 'System' in India." *Asian Survey* 4, no. 12 (1964): 1161–73; William H. Riker, "The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law: An Essay on the History of Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 76, no. 4 (1982): 753–66; Pempel, *Uncommon Democracies*; Palshikar, "Towards Hegemony."

⁹ Myron Weiner, *Party Building in a New Nation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Magaloni, *Voting for Autocracy*; Ethan Scheiner, *Democracy without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-Party Dominant State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Greene, *Why Dominant Parties Lose*.

¹⁰ Karen E. Ferree, *Framing the Race in South Africa: The Political Origins of Racial Census Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Prashant Jha, *How the BJP Wins: Inside India's Greatest Election Machine* (New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017).

hegemony while still losing power from time to time. Or, it could fail to establish long-term ideological hegemony but still become dominant. The more immediate indicators of the BJP's likelihood of remaining in power for years to come lie with recent election outcomes. If and when a party like the BJP becomes dominant, scholars can then search for the underlying causes of that dominance and determine whether factors such as ideological hegemony carry explanatory weight. Until then, though ideological hegemony could plausibly be an underlying cause of single-party dominance—just as smoking may be the underlying cause of a patient's death—numerous indicators (e.g., size of electoral support) speak far more directly to a party's prospects for future electoral victory.

Making a Dominant Party

Many parties win elections; some win a handful of consecutive elections; very few remain in power for 20 years or more.¹¹ Virtually all parties, even dominant ones, see their electoral fortunes vary over time. What separates a party that wins one or two elections from one that wins five or more consecutive elections is the ability to win elections even in the face of modest electoral setbacks. In the context of single-member district plurality (SMDP) electoral rules like India's, a party can achieve dominance through three routes: 1) winning big on its own, 2) winning less convincingly on its own against a divided opposition, or 3) failing to win on its own but constituting the only viable coalition head.

Winning Big

¹¹ Templeman, "The Origins of Dominant Parties."

First, a party can become dominant by repeatedly winning the allegiance of most voters. Naturally, parties winning larger vote shares are more likely to win legislative majorities. And, the larger a party's vote share in one election, the more support it can lose in future elections and still plausibly win a legislative majority. For instance, the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa and SWAPO in Namibia have achieved single-party dominance by repeatedly winning huge vote shares, often more than two-thirds of all votes cast. Consequently, even though the ANC's vote share has steadily declined since the early 2000s, it could shed electoral support and still win impressive legislative majorities. Other dominant parties, such as Canada's Liberal Party and Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) repeatedly came close to winning vote-share majorities, making it very difficult for opponents to defeat them. In short, a party winning large vote shares is more likely to achieve dominance than a smaller party.

When a party wins large vote shares—meaning a majority or near-majority of votes cast—it can win sizable vote shares (deep support) across most electoral districts (broad support). Broad electoral support allows a party to experience major setbacks in some places and still win a legislative majority. For instance, if a party suffers deep losses in 20% of seats, it can still win more than 50% of seats so long as it is competitive in the other 80% of the country. In contrast, a party that is only competitive in 60% of seats to begin with cannot suffer deep losses in 20% of seats and still hope to win a legislative majority. Deep support, in contrast, means that parties can suffer modest setbacks in many electoral districts and still potentially win those seats. If a party consistently wins 60% of the vote in most places, its vote share can decline across the board to 50% and it would still win most seats. But, if it starts out with only about 40% of the vote in most seats, then even modest declines in support could cause it to lose in many seats.

Whereas large parties can win both broad and deep support, as a party gets smaller, there is an increasing trade-off between broad and deep support. A party that wins, for example, 35% of the vote, can either win fairly shallow support across all electoral districts (e.g., 35% of the vote in all districts) or it can win much deeper support across far fewer seats (e.g. 65% of the vote in 40% of districts but only 15% of the vote in the remaining 60%). Neither depth nor breadth is intrinsically superior for winning elections. When support is deep but narrow, parties cannot afford to lose many of their normally safe seats and still retain a legislative majority. Alternatively, when support is broad but shallow, a party may be competitive in many places, but relatively small declines in support can rob a party of its legislative majority.

For parties that are not particularly large, the worst possibility is that support is neither particularly broad nor particularly deep. A party winning 35% of the national vote might win around 45% of the vote in three-fifths of seats and 20% of the vote in the remaining two-fifths. In this case, the party competing under SMDP rules is uncompetitive in a large chunk of seats but does not enjoy a particularly deep well of support in its strongholds. Thus, among those parties that are not especially large, those whose support bases exhibit either breadth or depth are far more likely to become dominant than those whose support bases exhibit neither.

Opposition Fragmentation

Second, a party can become dominant even if it is not large if it competes against a highly fragmented opposition. Dominant parties frequently face highly fragmented oppositions.¹² Under SMDP electoral rules, a fragmented opposition helps a dominant party to win legislative majorities by allowing the dominant party to suffer substantial declines in its popularity and still

¹² Pempel, *Uncommon Democracies*.

remain the largest party. Imagine a dominant party that sees its vote share decline in a constituency from 55% to 40%. If that 15% decline is divided equally among three much smaller opponents, then the dominant party will likely remain the largest party and win the seat. In contrast, if a similar decline occurs against a single opposition candidate, then the dominant party will lose the seat because its opponent now wins a majority of the constituency's vote. The Indian National Congress is a paradigmatic example of a party whose dominance relied on opposition fragmentation.¹³ The LDP in Japan also benefited tremendously from a divided opposition that was ill-suited to navigate the country's single nontransferable vote electoral system.¹⁴

Opposition fragmentation also matters because of how it influences the prospects for opposition coordination. When a dominant party faces many smaller opponents, the opposition can potentially undermine single-party dominance by forming election alliances in which they decide not to compete against one another. Instead, they divvy up the seats being contested such that only one opposition candidate contests in each seat.¹⁵ In this way, the opposition amasses most of its support behind one candidate in each constituency. But, coordination is often difficult to achieve. Indeed, in many countries, such as Canada or the United Kingdom, such coordination rarely occurs. Where parties are willing to coordinate, forming an alliance that includes all major opposition parties becomes more difficult as the number of opposition parties increases. Forming an alliance between two parties (when the dominant party's opposition is relatively less

¹³ Ashok K. Lahiri and Prannoy Roy, "Assessing Swings in Multi-Party Systems: The Indian Experience," *Electoral Studies* 3, no. 2 (1984): 171–89.

¹⁴ Cox, *Making Votes Count*, chapter 13.

¹⁵ Adam Ziegfeld and Maya Tudor, "How Opposition Parties Sustain Single-Party Dominance: Lessons from India," *Party Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 262–73.

fragmented) is far easier than forming an alliance among, say, six parties (when the opposition is highly fragmented).

Perpetual Coalition Head

Third, a party can become dominant even if it does not win legislative majorities on its own, so long as it is the only viable head of a coalition. When a party fails to win a majority of seats, other parties can potentially form a government without it, thereby keeping the would-be dominant party out of power. However, a party is particularly likely to become dominant even if it habitually fails to win a legislative majority on its own when it faces a major opponent that is so highly stigmatized that other political parties will support governments headed by the dominant party at all costs so as to keep the stigmatized party out of power.

This dynamic was long on display in Italy, where Christian Democracy (DC) repeatedly headed multiparty coalitions. Enough parties opposed the inclusion of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in power that they continually supported DC-led governments so as to keep the PCI out of government.¹⁶ Since the DC was the largest party in the legislature, forming a coalition without it was impossible if parties wished to exclude the PCI. In such a context, a party can become dominant because other parties see no choice but to support it as the head of government.

A variant of this argument focuses on an ideologically heterogeneous opposition. Large centrist parties can sometimes remain dominant because their opponents to the left and right

¹⁶ Ariel Levite and Sidney Tarrow, "The Legitimation of Excluded Parties in Dominant Party Systems: A Comparison of Israel and Italy," *Comparative Politics* 15, no. 3 (1983): 295–327.

prefer to keep the dominant party in power rather than ally with one another.¹⁷ According to this logic, parties are not necessarily viewed with great stigma so much as viewed as too extreme among those at the opposite end of the political spectrum. The Swedish Social Democrats exemplify this logic. The main party to its left was far too left-wing to consider governing with the bourgeois parties that opposed the Social Democrats on the right.

Indicators

These three paths to achieving dominance suggest five main indicators associated with single-party dominance. First, a large party (in terms of vote share) is more likely to achieve dominance than a smaller party because its support is both broad and deep. Second and third, among those parties that are not particularly large, those whose support bases exhibit either breadth or depth are far more likely to become dominant than those whose support bases are neither particularly deep nor broad. Fourth, a party is more likely to become dominant when it faces a highly fragmented opposition, both because dominant party losses may be dispersed across multiple opponents and because opposition coordination is more difficult to achieve. Fifth, a party is well positioned to become dominant when it is the only plausible head of a coalition government because a major rival carries considerable stigma or because its various opponents view each other as too ideologically extreme. The next three sections examine these five indicators, demonstrating that the BJP exhibits few of the structural party-system advantages associated with dominant parties.

Party Size

¹⁷ Riker, “The Two-Party System and Duverger’s Law”; Pempel, *Uncommon Democracies*; Magaloni, “Voting for Autocracy.”

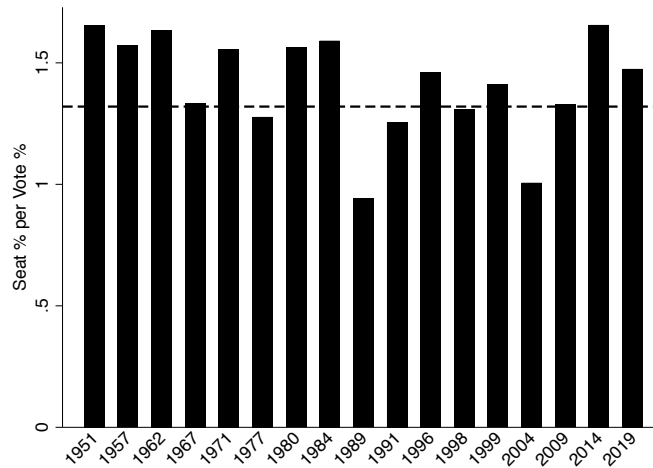
As of 2019, the BJP is considerably smaller than most of the world's other dominant parties in democracies, of which there have been between 21.¹⁸ Thirteen of these parties were, in every election that they won during their periods of dominance, larger than the BJP. For instance, Canada's Liberal Party won five successive elections from 1935 through 1953, never winning less than 40% of the vote (compared to the BJP's high of just under 38%). Another four parties on average won vote shares greater than the BJP's 2019 vote share. The remaining four parties became dominant by repeatedly heading coalition governments. Indeed, no dominant party in a democracy has ever won a legislative majority with a vote share lower than that which the BJP won in 2019. In other words, all parties that achieved dominance by winning legislative majorities (as opposed to heading multiparty coalitions) have been significantly larger than the BJP.

Nevertheless, despite winning only about 38% of the vote in 2019 and 31% in 2014,¹⁹ the BJP still won legislative majorities in 2014 and 2019. SMDP electoral typically exaggerate the largest party's legislative support relative to its popular support, providing it with a seat-share "bonus." This "bonus" results from the largest party winning seats where it garners only a plurality, not majority, of the vote. When a party wins many seats with far less than a majority of the vote, it can win a legislative majority with a surprisingly small share of the vote. Indeed, for relatively small would-be dominant parties, legislative majorities are only attainable when they benefit from a sizable "bonus" in the translation of votes into seats.

¹⁸ Adam Ziegfeld, "Varieties of Electoral Dominance" (Unpublished manuscript, Temple University, 2019). Table A1 lists the post-World War II dominant parties in democracies.

¹⁹ Throughout, I exclude votes for "None of the Above" (NOTA) in vote-share calculations because the NOTA option was not available prior to the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The 2019 figure does not include the results from Vellore Constituency, where the initial election was countermanded.

Figure 1. Vote Share to Seat Share Conversion among Winning Parties (1951-2019)



With slightly less than 38% of the vote in 2019, the BJP could win a legislative majority only if its seat share dramatically exceeded its vote share. A legislative majority on about 38% of the vote requires a party to secure 1.32% of Lok Sabha seats for every 1% of the popular vote that it wins. Figure 1 presents the share of seats won for every percentage of the vote won by the party winning the most seats in each Lok Sabha election. The dashed horizontal line indicates 1.32, the rate at which the BJP needed to translate votes into seats to win a legislative majority on 38% of the vote. By historical standards in India, the ratio of vote share to seat share required for a BJP victory in 2019 is hardly unprecedented. Equally, however, it is hardly guaranteed. On five occasions, the leading seat-winner translated its votes into seats less efficiently than this (1977, 1989, 1991, 1998, 2004) and with almost exactly that level of efficiency on two more occasions (1967 and 2009).

With less than 38% of the vote, the BJP’s legislative majority is vulnerable to relatively modest shifts in the distribution of its support. Even with an identical vote share, it could lose many seats if its votes were distributed differently across seats. To illustrate, imagine that the BJP won exactly as many votes as it did in 2019 but fared noticeably worse in Uttar Pradesh and

noticeably better in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. More specifically, suppose that the BJP won three-quarters of the votes in Uttar Pradesh that it actually won (or about 38% of the statewide vote) and it instead won those votes in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.²⁰ Calculating results based on these hypothetical vote shares, the BJP would win only ten seats in Uttar Pradesh (instead of 62) and eight seats in Kerala and one in Andhra Pradesh (as opposed to zero in both states), for a net loss of 38 seats. With this hypothetical distribution of votes—identical to the *total* vote share that the BJP actually won—the BJP would have fallen just shy of a legislative majority. This thought experiment highlights how little the distribution of a party’s votes needs to change to greatly influence the translation of votes into seats when a party is not especially large. At its current size, the BJP must win a sizeable seat-share bonus to win a legislative majority making its legislative majority vulnerable to shifts in support that diminish the efficiency with which it translates votes into seats.

Breadth of Support

Given its size, the BJP cannot win support that is both wide and deep. To date, has it enjoyed a broad support base? Not especially. Though the BJP expanded its footprint across India in the 2019 election, it is still uncompetitive in a fair number of seats. Figure 2 presents the “reach” across India for the largest seat-winner in each election. A party’s reach is the share of

²⁰ To simulate this outcome, I subtract the same number of votes from each seat that the BJP contested in Uttar Pradesh and reallocate them to the candidate in each seat from the Mahagathbandhan (or Grand Alliance, comprising the Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, and Rashtriya Lok Dal). I then take the number of votes lost in Uttar Pradesh and redistribute them equally across the seats that the BJP contested in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, taking away those votes from the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh and the United Democratic Front candidates in Kerala.

legislative seats where it wins more than 25% of the vote *and* comes in at least second place.²¹

As Figure 2 shows, the BJP's reach across India is very low compared to the period before 1989. Congress' reach during its period of dominance typically exceeded 90%, while the BJP's has never exceeded 70%. Even with its expansion across India, the BJP must win a very large portion of the seats in which it is competitive to secure a legislative majority. The party cannot experience setbacks in strongholds and still hope to win a legislative majority on its own.

Figure 2. Winning Party's Reach Across India (1951-2019)



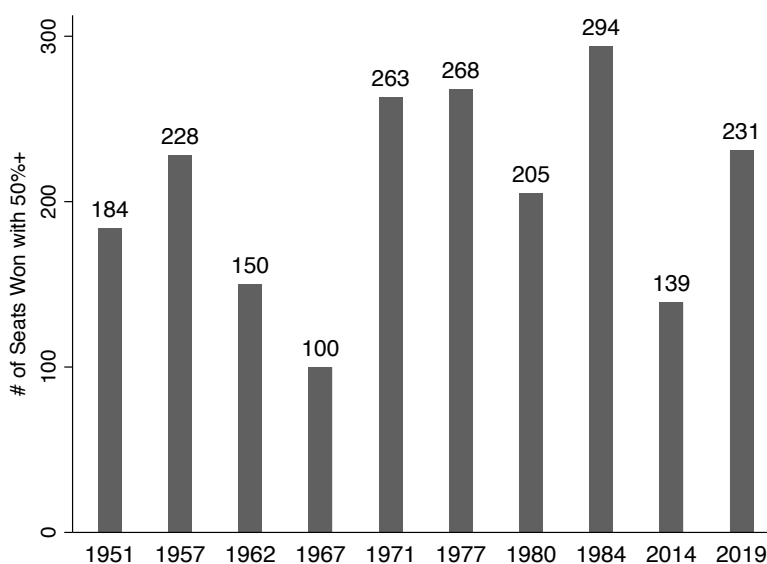
Depth of Support

Though the BJP's support is not especially wide, it is relatively deep, particularly in 2019, when it won a majority of the vote in almost 43% of seats. Because most constituencies feature many candidates—even if most of them win tiny vote shares—the BJP can lose support in many of these constituencies and still plausibly win them. Figure 3 presents the number of seats won with more than 50% of the constituency-level vote for each party winning a Lok Sabha

²¹ In the 1951 and 1957, India elected some of its legislators in double-member districts (and, in 1951, had one triple-member district). For these seats, a party's candidate is competitive if he or she won more than 12.5% of the vote and came in fourth place or better.

majority.²² The BJP's 2019 legislative majority compares favorably in terms of the number of seats won with a majority of the constituency-level vote in that it equals or exceeds the number of seats that Congress won with a majority of the constituency-level vote in five of the seven elections in which Congress won a legislative majority. Of course, in 2014, the BJP won many fewer seats with constituency-level majorities. So, from the vantage point of 2019, the BJP can weather minor setbacks in a healthy number of seats and still plausibly win most of them. Moving forward, the question is whether it can cobble together a legislative majority by winning enough seats where it does not enjoy such deep support.

Figure 3. Seats Won with 50%+ among Parties with Lok Sabha Majorities



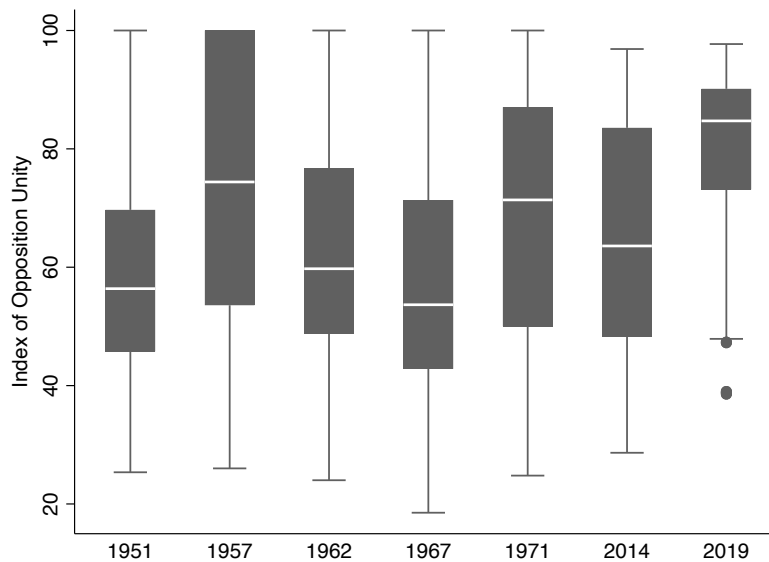
Opposition Fragmentation

Even if a party wins fairly unremarkable vote shares, it can still win legislative majorities if it faces many opponents who divide up the remaining vote. In India, where party systems vary

²² For the double-member seats elected in 1951 and 1957 (and the lone triple-member seat in 1951), seats are included if the party won more than 25% of the vote. Winning 25% does not guarantee victory in those seats (like 50% does in a single-member district) but still implies a fairly deep well of support.

markedly from state to state, party system fragmentation matters most at the constituency and state levels, rather than at the national level. Constituency-level opposition fragmentation indicates how small a vote share the dominant party can garner and still win a seat. If the opposition vote is highly fragmented across many competitors, a party can win very modest vote shares and still win a seat. If it faces just one or two main competitors, it must win a larger vote share to win a seat. Meanwhile, state-level fragmentation matters because it shapes the ease with which opposition parties can cooperate against a would-be dominant party. Coordinating to form an opposition pre-election alliance that effectively aggregates most of the opposition vote is much easier with few parties than with many parties or where independent candidates frequently win large vote shares.

Figure 4. Constituency-Level Index of Opposition Unity



Looking first at the constituency level, the BJP faced an opposition in 2014 that was about as fragmented as during the Congress-dominant period. But, the BJP faced a far less fragmented opposition in 2019. Figure 4 presents a series of box plots depicting the constituency-level Index of Opposition Unity (IOU) in seats won by the winning party in the

Congress-dominant period (1951-71) and in the two most recent Lok Sabha elections (2014, 2019).²³ The IOU measures the share of the opposition vote won by the largest opposition party.²⁴ The white horizontal line in each boxplot indicates the median IOU in constituencies won by Congress (1951-71) or the BJP (2014-19). The top and bottom of the gray boxes indicate the IOU values for the 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively, with the whiskers indicating the range into which nearly all observations fall. During the Congress-dominant period, the median IOU ranged between about 54% and 74% but was well quite low—below 60%—in three elections (1951, 1962, 1967). In 2014, the figure for the BJP was about 64%, but in 2019 it was about 85%, higher than any election during the Congress-dominant period. Although levels of opposition fragmentation in 2014 largely resembled those under Congress dominance, the BJP in 2019 faced a far less fragmented opposition at the constituency level.

Next, turning to the state-level, the BJP usually faces a comparatively consolidated opposition at the state-level. In India's first five elections, Congress was one of the two leading parties in all large states (except for Tamil Nadu in 1971). In the 1951-52 election, Congress' largest opponent in every one of India's large states won less than 30% of the vote. In 1957 and 1962, only one state had an opposition party winning more than 30%, and in both 1967 and 1971, Congress faced a sizable opposition party winning more than 30% of the vote in just four states. Meanwhile, in many states the largest opposition party won less than 15% of the vote. Opposition coordination in these states was therefore quite difficult to achieve because of the large number of parties and independent candidates needed to form a comprehensive anti-Congress alliance. Table A2 in the online appendix lists all large states by the size of their largest

²³ The plots for 1951 and 1957 only include single-member districts.

²⁴ Calculating the effective number of parties among opposition parties yields the same set of conclusions, as does including all constituencies (not just the ones won by the winning party) or including constituencies in which the winning party either won or was competitive.

opposition party during the period of Congress dominance and in the most recent two national elections.

By comparison, in states where the BJP was one of the two leading parties in 2014 and 2019, it frequently faced an opposition party winning more than 30% of the vote—in seven states in 2014 and eight in 2019. Meanwhile, its largest rival virtually never won less than 15% of the vote. All told, whereas Congress habitually faced state-level oppositions that were badly fragmented, the BJP seldom does, making the BJP far more vulnerable than Congress to the formation of opposition election alliances. Indeed, the IOU at the constituency level increased in 2019 largely because of anti-BJP alliances in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka that amassed most of the non-BJP vote behind a single candidate in each constituency. Such cooperation was undoubtedly facilitated by the modest number of large non-BJP parties in both states.

Stigmatized Opponents

Even if a party cannot win a legislative majority on its own, it can still remain dominant as the head of a coalition. A party is especially likely to remain in power as the head of a coalition if no alternative coalition can form without it because one of the major legislative parties is viewed by other parties as too stigmatized or too extreme. So long as Congress remains the BJP's largest opponent, opposition governments will be difficult to form if too many parties are unyieldingly opposed to governing with Congress. If few parties are willing to ally with Congress, then the BJP would be virtually guaranteed to head future coalition governments.

Given Congress' ability to form coalition governments in 2004 and 2009, recent history suggests that Congress is not the kind of stigmatized opponent that would make the formation of BJP-led coalitions all but inevitable. However, to thoroughly examine this question, I consider

the 42 parties other than Congress and the BJP that won more than 0.1% of the vote in the 2019 election. Together, these parties won 37% of the vote in 2019, or about 87% of votes that did not go to either the BJP or Congress.²⁵ Of these 42, 26 parties are former or current Congress allies—parties that have explicitly governed with Congress either at the state or national level, pledged outside support to a Congress-led national government, or formed a pre-election alliance in state or national elections. Another three parties have not yet allied with Congress but would almost certainly be willing to do so. The Aam Aadmi Party engaged in lengthy, if ultimately unsuccessful, talks with Congress to form an election alliance in Delhi and Punjab for the 2019 Lok Sabha election; the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation) is a far-left grouping unlikely to allow a BJP-led government to come to power if there were another alternative; and the All India United Democratic Front, a Muslim-dominated party in Assam, would almost certainly prefer to see Congress in power at the Centre. Another six parties are new and have allied with neither the BJP nor Congress, making it impossible to know whether they would support a Congress-led national government in the future.

Thus, of the 42 parties, only seven have aligned with the BJP but never with Congress. Four of these are relatively new parties (e.g., Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam, Apna Dal (Sonelal)). The fact that they have not allied with Congress to date does not necessarily mean that they would not do so under the right circumstances. At best, there are three parties on which the BJP can count to never ally with Congress: Asom Gana (AGP) in Assam, Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha, and Akali Dal in Punjab. However, even counting on these three parties is uncertain. The AGP and BJD long shunned alliances with Congress because Congress was their

²⁵ The remaining vote went to independents (2.7%) and parties winning less than 0.1% of the vote (also, 2.7%). A full list of the 42 parties and explanations for how I code them can be found in Table A3 in the online appendix.

main state-level opponent. Now that the AGP is very weak in Assam and the BJP is the BJD's main rival, Congress may be an increasingly attractive ally. In the end, the Akali Dal is arguably the only steadfast ally that the BJP can count on to never ally with Congress.

The vanishingly small number of parties that are steadfastly opposed to allying with Congress does not, of course, mean that the BJP cannot form coalition governments if it falls short of a majority. It could. The point is that the BJP does not enjoy a particular advantage in coalition formation that many other dominant parties elsewhere in the world have enjoyed thanks to the stigma attached to one of their main opponents. In India, an alternative coalition without the BJP can certainly take shape. Just as opposition parties in India made strange bedfellows in the 1960s and 1970s to dislodge Congress from power, many parties may be willing to go to great lengths to keep the BJP in power as illustrated by the formation of a state government in Maharashtra in late 2019 that included the Congress, the NCP, and the BJP's erstwhile ally, the Shiv Sena.

Even if Congress is not a stigmatized opponent with whom other parties would refuse to ally, might the BJP constitute the kind of centrist party whose opponents are too ideologically heterogeneous to cooperate with one another? Although this type of argument was originally made, in part, to explain Congress dominance in India,²⁶ it never found much empirical support. Parties to Congress' left and right formed both pre-election alliances and post-election coalition governments during the period of Congress dominance. More recently, an argument in this vein is also unlikely to hold with respect to the BJP. Chhibber and Verma have argued that Congress and the BJP have staked out distinct positions on the role of the state and protection of

²⁶ Riker, "The Two-Party System and Duverger's Law."

minorities.²⁷ In this sense, neither party could rightly be classified as centrist. Furthermore, few parties sit to the BJP's right, while many parties either sit to its left or fail to take clear ideological positions. Thus, the BJP cannot expect to remain in power because its opponents find each other too ideologically distant to unite against it. All told, unlike some other dominant parties, the BJP cannot depend on stigmatized or ideologically heterogeneous opponents to ensure that it is the only plausible head of a coalition government.

Looking Forward

The preceding analysis evaluated the BJP's prospects for achieving single-party dominance, *given the current state of its electoral support*. If the 2019 election represents a high-water mark for BJP support, then it is unlikely to become a dominant party. Its support base is not large enough, its opposition not fragmented enough, and its opponents not stigmatized or ideologically diverse enough to make it particularly easy for the BJP to remain in power for multiple successive elections. Put another way, in comparison to other dominant parties, the BJP does not win exceedingly large vote shares like the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP); its opposition is not as hopelessly fragmented and uncoordinated as Congress' was in India or the LDP's was in Japan; and it does not face a stigmatized opponent like Israel's Mapai did or an ideologically divided opposition that was unwilling to cooperate, like Sweden's Social Democrats.

If, however, the BJP is still on an upward electoral trajectory, it may soon be a party whose size is comparable to most other dominant parties and sufficient to help it win multiple

²⁷ Pradeep K. Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

successive elections. Indeed, optimists about the BJP's future have much to point to. Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains highly popular, even in spite of the slowing economy; the party boasts an impressive campaign machinery that has already engineered breakthrough in states where it has historically been weak (e.g., Odisha and West Bengal); and until protests erupted over the Citizenship Amendment Act in late 2019, the party's moves to pursue an aggressive Hindu nationalist agenda had met with little resistance and may even have enhanced the party's popularity. Perhaps most importantly, Congress shows little signs of revival. Absent a resurgent Congress, the BJP can count on winning a large swathe of seats in states defined by Congress-BJP competition. If Congress cannot claim the mantle of opposition leader, rivalries among regional parties might frustrate their ability to effectively counter the BJP and form an alternative electoral front or coalition government. Finally, the BJP could do what many other dominant parties have done to maintain their hold on power: resort to increasingly authoritarian tactics. Should the BJP further muzzle the press, weaken the judiciary, and intervene in the affairs of opposition-run states (as Congress certainly did during its period of dominance), the BJP could bolster its dominant position by creating a playing field that is, in effect, no longer level.

On the other side of the ledger, however, a number of factors suggest a far less rosy picture for the BJP future electoral expansion. First, elections in India have long exhibited considerable volatility. As rapid as the BJP's rise has been, an equally rapid decline is hardly out of the question. As recently as 2009, the BJP's prospects for regaining national-level power appeared dim. A venerable literature in political science on the costs of ruling argues that parties frequently lose support the longer they are in office, as they fail to keep promises or live up to their supporters' hopes. This line of thinking suggests a baseline expectation that a ruling party's

support is likely to decrease over time, not increase, particularly against the backdrop of a rapidly slowing economy.

Second, the BJP's heavy reliance on Modi as a vote-winner in national elections may ultimately be a long-term liability. A common feature of dominant parties in democracies is their independence from any single leader; they endure leadership successions and still win elections. For instance, the ANC remained dominant even after Nelson Mandela retired from politics. If the BJP's current and future success are largely thanks to Narendra Modi, then becoming a dominant party could depend crucially not only on his enduring popularity but also on his continued good health well into old age.

Third, a close look at India's states reveals that the BJP may have few places to grow. In a number of states, the BJP has little room for upward movement because it has already won extraordinarily high levels of support (e.g., Gujarat, Rajasthan). Meanwhile, the BJP has failed to establish strong followings in much of South India, even under seemingly favorable conditions: Congress' collapse in Andhra Pradesh, the deaths of DMK leader M. Karunanidhi and AIADMK leader J. Jayalithaa in Tamil Nadu, and the Sabarimala controversy in Kerala. The BJP may also be hard pressed to increase seat shares in states like Bihar, Maharashtra, and Punjab, where prior victories have depended on alliances with other parties. Thus, although the BJP may have room to grow in theory, in practice there may be relatively few places where the party can reasonably expect to expand. The BJP's unexpectedly poor performances in post-Lok Sabha state elections in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Jharkhand also suggests that the party is not invulnerable, even in places where it performed exceptionally well in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Ultimately, predicting the future is a fraught enterprise. The unexpected frequently intervenes. With a healthy dose of good luck, the BJP could manage to remain in power for years to come in its current state. If it does so, it will likely be thanks to the high levels of support that it enjoys in some of its stronghold states. Alternatively, if the BJP can continue to expand its electoral base, the opposition finds itself in greater disarray or increasingly stigmatized, or if the BJP adopts increasingly authoritarian strategies, then the BJP's prospects for achieving long-term dominance would undoubtedly improve. However, the party currently possesses relatively few of the party-system advantages that have allowed other dominant parties to weather electoral setbacks and still win election after election. Though few observers would probably bet against a BJP win in the next Lok Sabha election, the BJP's victory in 2019 is hardly sufficient to proclaim with any degree of certainty the arrival of a new dominant party in India.

Online Appendix

Table A1. Dominant Parties in Democracies

Country	Acronym	
Antigua & Barbuda	Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party (ABLP)	1981-2004
Australia	Liberal Party of Australia (LP)	1949-72
Austria (1)	Austrian People's Party (ÖVP)	1945-70
Austria (2)	Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ)	1970-2000
Belgium	Christian People's Party (CVP)	1979-99
Botswana	Botswana Democratic Party (BDP)	1966-
Canada	Liberal Party of Canada (LP)	1935-57
Gambia	People's Progressive Party (PPP)	1965-94
Guyana	People's Progressive Party (PPP)	1992-2015
India	Indian National Congress (INC)	1947-77
Israel	Worker's Party of the Land of Israel (Mapai)/Israeli Labor Party	1948-77
Italy	Christian Democracy (DC)	1948-81
Japan	Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)	1954-93
Liechtenstein	Progressive Citizens' Party (FBP)	1928-70
Luxembourg	Christian Social People's Party (CSV)	1945-74, 1979-2013
Namibia	South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO)	1990-
South Africa	African National Congress (ANC)	1994-
Samoa	Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP)	1988-
Sweden	Social Democratic Workers' Party of Sweden (SAP)	1936-76
Trinidad & Tobago	People's National Movement (PNM)	1962-86
West Germany	Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)	1949-69

Table A2. States by Size of the Largest Opposition Party

Election	Size of Largest Non-Congress Party			Congress Not a Leading Party
	<15%	15-30%	>30%	
1951	Bombay, Madhya Bharat, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Punjab, Rajasthan, Saurashtra, Travancore Cochin, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal	Assam, Bihar, Hyderabad, Mysore, Orissa, Vindhya Pradesh		
1957	Andhra Pradesh, Bombay, Madras, Rajasthan	Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Mysore, Orissa, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal	Kerala	
1962	Maharashtra, Mysore, Punjab	Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Madras, Orissa, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal	Kerala	
1967	Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Maharashtra, Mysore	Bihar, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal	Gujarat, Madras, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa	
1971	Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh	Kerala, Mysore, Orissa, Rajasthan	Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, West Bengal	Tamil Nadu

Election	Size of Largest Non-BJP Party			BJP Not a Leading Party
	<15%	15-30%	>30%	
2014	Jharkhand	Bihar, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh	Assam, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan	Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Odisha, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal
2019		Bihar, Delhi, Haryana, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh	Assam, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, West Bengal	Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana

Table A1 indicates the size of the opposition to Congress in Lok Sabha elections from 1951-2 through 1971 and to the BJP in 2014 and 2019 in large states. States are categorized based on the size of their largest non-Congress or non-BJP opposition party and whether that party wins less than 15% of the vote, 15-30% of the vote, or more than 30% of the vote. States included in these columns are those where Congress was one of the two leading parties (1951/52-1971) or where the BJP was one of the two leading parties (2014, 2019). Only states sending six or more MPs to the Lok Sabha are included in the table.

Table A3. Parties Discussed in Analysis of Opposition Stigma

Party	Acronym	Notes
<i>Current/recent Congress allies</i>		
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	AIADMK	Pre-election ally in Tamil Nadu 2001
All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen	AIMIM	UPA member until 2012
All India Trinamool Congress	AITC	Pre-election ally in West Bengal 2011
Bahujan Samaj Party	BSP	Offered outside support UPA governments
Communist Party of India	CPI	Pre-election ally in West Bengal 2016
Communist Party of India (Marxist)	CPI(M)	Pre-election ally in West Bengal 2016
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	DMK	Current ally in Tamil Nadu
Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular)	HAM(S)	Current ally in Bihar
Indian Union Muslim League	IUML	Current ally in Kerala
Janata Dal (Secular)	JD(S)	Current ally in Karnataka
Janata Dal (United)	JD(U)	Pre-election ally in Bihar 2015
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	JMM	Current ally in Jharkhand
Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (Prajantrik)	JVM(P)	Former ally in Jharkhand
Lok Jan Shakti Party	LJSP	Pre-election ally in Bihar 2005
Nationalist Congress Party	NCP	Current ally in Maharashtra
Pattali Makkal Katchi	PMK	Pre-election ally in Tamil Nadu 2011
Rashtriya Janata Dal	RJD	Current ally in Bihar
Rashtriya Lok Dal	RLD	Pre-election ally in Uttar Pradesh 2012
Rashtriya Lok Samta Party	RLSP	Current ally in Bihar
Revolutionary Socialist Party	RSP	Current ally in Kerala
Samajwadi Party	SP	Pre-election ally in Uttar Pradesh 2017
Shiv Sena	SHS	Current ally in Maharashtra
Swabhimani Paksha	SWP	Current ally in Maharashtra
Telangana Rashtra Samithi	TRS	Pre-election ally in Andhra Pradesh 2004

Telugu Desam	TDP	Pre-election ally in Telangana 2018
Vikassheel Insaan Party	VIP	Pre-election ally in Lok Sabha 2019 election (Bihar)
<hr/> <i>Likely Congress ally</i> <hr/>		
Aam Aadmi Party	AAP	Engaged in talks to form a pre-election alliance in Lok Sabha 2019 (Delhi)
All India United Democratic Front	AIUDF	Has a predominantly Muslim support base; likely to want to keep the BJP out of power
Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (Liberation)	CPI(ML)(L)	Strongly secular; likely to want to keep the BJP out of power
<hr/> <i>New party, never allied with INC or BJP</i> <hr/>		
Janasena Party	JSP	Founded 2014; allied with BSP, CPI, CPI(M)
Jannayak Janta Party	JJP	Founded 2018; allied with AAP and BSP
Makkal Needhi Maiam	MNM	Founded 2018; no major-party allies
Naam Tamilar Katchi	NTK	Founded 2009; no major-party allies
Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi	VBA	Founded 2018; allied with AIMIM
Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party	YSRCP	Founded 2011; no major-party allies
<hr/> <i>Never allied Congress, only allied with the BJP</i> <hr/>		
AJSU Party	AJSUP	Has never allied with Congress; but not a consistent ally of the BJP either; a relatively new party founded in 2014
Apna Dal (Sonelal)	AD(S)	New party; founded 2016
Asom Gana Parishad	AGP	Never a Congress ally; sometimes a BJP ally, but the AGP is no longer Congress' primary opponent in Assam
Biju Janata Dal	BJD	Never a Congress ally; formerly a BJP ally, but now the BJP is the BJD's main opponent in Odisha
Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam	DMDK	Never a Congress ally, but alliance formation may be driven more by the choice of Tamil Nadu allies (e.g., AIADMK, DMK) and less by national allies (e.g., BJP, INC)

Rashtriya Loktantrik Party	RLP	New party; founded 2018
Shiromani Akali Dal	SAD	Never allied with Congress in state or national elections despite being a relatively old party; consistent BJP ally

Table A3 lists all parties other than the BJP and Congress winning more than 0.1% of the vote in the 2019 Lok Sabha election (based on all votes cast other than those for “None of the Above.” The table describe each party’s most recent history or likelihood of allying with Congress. Note that a “current” ally refers to current as of December 2019.

