

# Elections, Politics and Public: How the Southern States in India React?

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## Abstract

In a democracy, elections are the best barometers to check the public aspirations about the political process. It is a sharp measurement of party performance in the system and is a signal for the political parties to review and renovate their commitments. India, being the largest democracy in the world, has the best track record of free and fair elections that ensured smooth power transitions in the society. In the case of UP elections 2022, it has clearly spelt a mandate in the state in favour of the ruling party. But how it will be reflected in national politics and the politics of other states is a matter of serious discussion. The status of southern states is very significant in this context as these states has followed a pattern generally distinct from the national politics.

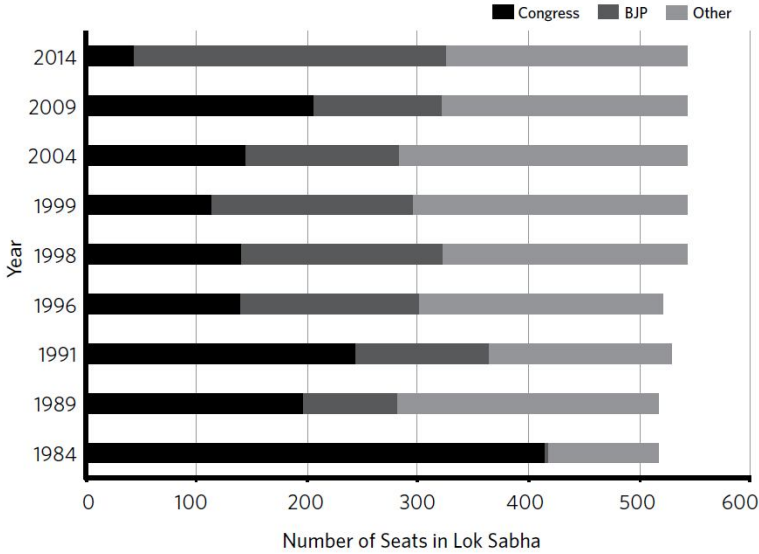
**Key Words:** Elections, India, Regional parties, South India.

## Introduction

One of the major political identity of India is its thriving and vibrant electoral democracy. Instead of large diversities and social and economic imbalances, the country has fought together for democratic paradigm that established the individual roles of citizen in politics. The constitutional system of the country has given a strong foundation for the electoral participation of each and every citizen by incorporating provisions for universal adult franchise. The introduction of universal adult franchise was one of the greatest and daring experiments in the history of the world. It was daring because the system was introduced at a period when 84% of Indians were illiterate and equal number in poverty living in an unequal society fractured by a caste-based hierarchical system. The Constitution created a solid institutional framework for democracy and established strong social foundations for the operation of new political culture. The statistics of Indian elections may be mind boggling. There are around 914 million electors

on the Electoral Roll of India, as on 2022. 600 million voters polled their votes in 2019 Indian General elections. The general elections to the Indian Parliament can be rightly described as the biggest humanly managed event in the world<sup>1</sup>.

Fig 1-Seats won by major political parties in Lok Sabha elections 1984-2014



( Source: Election Commission of India data)

Ever since Modi became prime minister on 26 May 2014, the BJP has been working like a well-oiled electoral machine. It has won one state election after another and is dominating the national discourse like no other party has done in recent memory(Misra, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. In 2017 BJP formed government in Goa and Manipur despite not being the single largest party and came to power in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh<sup>3</sup>.

The BJP has been able to expand its political base in the country because of various factors including superior electoral strategies, planning, hard work, and a voter outreach programme that was far better than those of its rivals. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah, the party devised electoral strategies taking into account micro details of caste, sub-castes, religious compositions and other specialities of the constituencies while selecting party candidates(Vaishnav, 2015).

## The Indian electoral game

Elections are rational procedures by which competing candidates for public offices present themselves to the electorate as the persons best able to execute a set of proposals for future developments. Consequently, members of the electorate rationally weigh the truthfulness of all the information received, the desirability and feasibility of the respective proposals of each of the candidates, and cast their votes accordingly. Elections are the testing ground of democratic culture and practice (Huat, 2007) .

As the reified, importable machinery of democracy, the general election thus constitutes for the ruling elite both a symbol of respectability in the global arena, and a periodic nuisance/opportunity for change, depending on whether you are in power or in the opposition. Even pre-modern enthusiasms and loyalties can no longer be accessed except through this machinery. The dance of power must be danced around it. ( Prasad, 2007)

Elections in India have become a necessary ingredient of the democratic process. Throughout the years parties played an immense role as mediating agencies in bringing about democratic transformation of this country in a relatively peaceful manner, in a relatively short span of time, and under conditions that were considered not very conducive for democratic development. They were instrumental in taking governments closer to the people. Today, all parties contest elections in the name of securing the common good. They maintain that they are committed to protect and promote the interests of the poor, marginalized and the socially disadvantaged. Parties have exhibited a good deal of ideological flexibility. This has been the strength as well as weakness of parties. All parties profess adherence to some kind of egalitarian, secular, socialist and democratic principles. The representative character of parties also has increased over time. They drew more and more sections of society into the arena of politics. The test of the reliability of a political party is usually elections and political parties in India contributed considerably for making elections free and fair.

The evolution party system in India after Independence can be divided into five phases; 1, period of Congress consolidation and dominance (1952-67) 2, consolidation of opposition parties and emergence of multi-party system (1967-89) 3, period of flux (1989-98); 4, shaping of coalitional party system (1998-2015) and 5, The BJP era. Most

discussions on political parties in India start with the emergence of the Congress dominance during the 1950s and its breakdown during the 60s and 70s. During this period the congress party acted as dominant party and acquired legitimacy through its tradition of national movement. With Indian partition, the main rival to the Congress, the Muslim League, was removed from the electoral scene to a large extent.

Electoral politics that replaced the politics of freedom struggle had severely restricted the space available to non-Congress parties. The small parties were also suffering from structural deficiencies, which made them non entity. They were further rendered feeble under the first past the post electoral system followed in India. It enabled the Congress to gain two thirds majority in the legislatures. During this time Congress enjoyed exclusive control over governmental power at the Centre and in most of the States. Neither the pre-Independence non-Congress parties nor the newly emerged parties could present a viable alternative to the Congress.

The consolidation of the Congress and the weak opposition led to a belief that the Congress system was invincible. However new opposition parties began to emerge in the 1950s and 1960s. Several leaders within the Congress, who were either disgruntled with the policies of the party or denied access to power went out of it and formed separate parties . Although the Congress retained power at the Union level in the 1967 elections, the party citadels began crumbling in several States. Opposition parties forged alliances and formed governments in eight major Indian States. For the first time since independence the Congress suffered massive defections, as the Congress leaders who were dissatisfied have other parties to look to. It is in this background Rajni Kothari spoke of the dominant party model giving way to a more differentiated structure of party competition. Morris-Jones (1978) joined Kothari when he observed that the new situation brought a number of opposition parties fully into the market place, and competition that had previously occurred within the Congress was now brought into the realm of inter-party conflict.

The agitations led by Jayaprakash Narayan, the imposition of Emergency, and finally the formation of the Janata party in 1977 brought far-reaching changes in the structure of party competition. The Janata party came through the merger of different parties. The emergence of a viable non-Congress party and its capturing of power at the Centre raised the hope of a two-party system taking shape. But this experiment soon fizzled out with leadership quarrels in the Janata party. After a gap of nine years the non-Congress parties once again

came to power in 1989, under the banner of National Front. However, the Janata and National Front experiments proved that it was possible to displace the Congress if the non-Congress parties could come together.

The 1980s was a period of great flux. It saw the emergence of more and more new parties. Several National and regional parties were born as the Janata party began to fall apart. Some old parties took new name, such as the BJP (formed in 1980), which began to gain strength as the major opposition to the Congress at the national level and in some States. The Bahujan Samaj Party began to take shape in the North as the representative of the dalits. New regional parties sprouted, developed and captured power in States. As a result of reconfiguration of politics numerous small parties began to gain strength or emerge. The regional parties gained a voice in national politics. They demanded for a more federal government and more autonomy to the States. As people at all levels of society became increasingly aware of the logic of electoral politics, a new awakening occurred among the great mass of India's voters.

This period of flux also saw a decline in the capacity of institutions to respond to pressures from society. This decay affected most political parties. The awakening of the electorate and the decay of parties combined to generate two major tendencies: (i) the way the elections were won or lost. and (ii) growing divergence between the logic of politics at the national level and the logic of politics in various State-level arenas. Thus this period was marked by greater competition among parties and also by greater instability within many parties. It was a time characterized by abundant alternation between parties in power at the State and national levels.

The growth of the BJP after 1989 and its coming to power in 1998 marked a turning point in the history of party politics in the country. The rapid expansion in the electoral support for the BJP and sudden increase in the number of its MPs in the Parliament, and its ability to forge alliances with several parties to come to power marked the party politics of the 1990s. It inaugurated the emergence of bipolarities in the States and at the Centre. While in the States it is in the form of a competition between two parties or between two competing alliances, at the national level it was mainly a competition between competing alliances. As the BJP gained strength, the effort by the Janata Dal and other regional parties of the United Front to work with the third alternative proved to be in vain. The tri-nodal party system that raised hopes in the 1990s got slowly melted away.

The current phase of party politics in India is characterised with an evident upper hand to BJP in the centre and in most of the state. In the 2014 general election, the party won an outright majority in parliament . This was followed by landslide victory in the following assembly elections in many states. The 2014 was repeated with better margins in 2019 . As of September 2022, 12 states have Chief Ministers from the BJP. In 5 other states and in the Union Territory of Puducherry, it participates in the government as the junior partner in the ruling alliance with other members of the National Democratic Alliance.

**Table 1:** Electoral Dominance of the BJP

Item	2014	2019
No. of seats contested	428	436
No. of seats won	282	303
Vote share (in %)	31	37.4
Vote share in contested seats (in %)	39.6	46.1
Number of seats BJP won with more than 50% votes)	136	224
Median victory margin in contested seats (percentage points)	16.6	19.7

*Source:*Chhibber & Verma, 2019

## The Politics of South

Typically the politics of South India is dominated by strong regional parties. The state of Karnataka provides an exception to this general rule. The national political parties such as the Indian National Congress (INC) or Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) usually forges electoral alliances with the regional parties and the alliances shares power on the basis of mutually agreed terms. Another notable ingredient of South Indian politics is the significant role played by a combination of factors which mainly include caste, language and ethnicity. It should also be mentioned that the religion plays only a secondary role in South Politics. Some of the regional parties in these states had evident influence in national politics also.

**Table-2:** Seat share of Major Political Parties in Vidhan Sabha Elections Karnataka (2004-2018)

Sl No	Year	BJP	Congress	JD(S)
1	2004	79	65	58
2	2008	110	80	28
3	2013	40	122	40
4	2018	104	80	38

*Source :* Election Commission of India data

The seat share and vote share of various major political parties in Karnataka shows a general trend of alignment of state politics with national politics. In 2018 BJP emerged as the single largest party with 104 seats in a 224-member assembly while polling 36.2 percent votes. However, it failed to form the government as the Congress and JD(S) joined hands to claim a majority.

In the case of Andhra Pradesh in 1953, the Indian National Congress ruled the state till 1980's and won every elections during these 30 years period. The monopoly of Congress was hit with the emergence of Telugu Desam Party (TDP) by NT Rama Rao. Since then, both the TDP and the Congress have dominated Andhra politics, with either party coming to power. In Uttarandhra and Telangana regions Naxalism is a serious political issue which is also a determining factor in electoral outcomes.

The state of Telengana was carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014. The formation of the new state was fuelled by the Telangana movement organised by Telangana Praja Samiti. After the creation of the new state BJP gained a significant role in Telangana politics . They won 4 Loksabha seats in the 2019 General Elections.

Karnataka is a state which shows a different political orientation among the states in South India. The state has a long tradition of aligning with national parties .The growth of regional political, parties in the state is comparatively less stronger if not weak. Many observes that the Congress has been far more successful in Karnataka than it has been in national politics. National polititical parties such as the BJP have experienced comparatively more success in Karnataka than they have in other states of South India. Language activism is high in the state and organisations like the Karnataka Rakshana Vedike and the Kannada Chaluvali Vatal Paksha often launchagitations for protecting the interests of Kannada.

In the 2018 state assembly elections Yedyurappa led BJP, won 104 seats out of 224, followed by INC 78, JD(S)37.

The state of Kerala is a classical example for Coalition politics. Two major political alliances: the United Democratic Front (UDF — led by the Indian National Congress), the Left Democratic Front (LDF — led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)) alternating to power. Kerala is one of the problem states for BJP. The party hasnot been able to get a foothold here, despite the state having a majority (56%) Hindu population. One big hurdle has been the social DNA of Kerala, the huge influence of the Left parties and the fact that religious minorities make up some 44% of the population (Christians 18% and Muslims 26%). But with PM Narendra Modis efforts on providing good governance, a section of the minorities have started aligning with the BJP<sup>4</sup>.

The state of Tamil Nadu has exercised a dominant impact on the national politics of the country. In the initial days of independence Indian National Congress had an upper hand in the politics of the state. Later in the late 1960s the political influence shifted towards Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. The shift in political power in Tamil Nadu was due to the rise of Dravidan Nationalism. The imposition of Hindi on non-Hindi speaking areas of India has often been a contentious issue in Tamil Nadu. In 1972, a split in the DMK which resulted in the formation of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam led by MG Ramachandran. Since then, the two major Dravidian parties DMK headed by Karunanidhi and ADMK led by Jayalailtha alternate to power. The death of Jayalaltha was a blow to ADMK and the party soon lost power.

Table 3 The vote share of Major parties Lokh Sabha Elections in South India (2014-2019)

Sl No	State	BJP (2014) Number of seats won in brackets	Congress (2014)	BJP (2019)	Congress (2019)
1	Karnataka	43.37 (17)	40.8(9)	51.38(25)	31.88(1)
2	Tamil Nadu	5.56(1)	4.3(0)	3.66(0)	12.76(8)
3	Andhra	8.52 (1)	11.5(0)	0.96(0)	1.29(0)
4	Kerala	10.45 (0)	31.1(8)	12.93(0)	37.27(15)

*Source:* Various reports of Election Commission of India



The table shows there is no consistent pattern of electoral behaviour in southern states particularly in favour of national parties. In the state of Karnataka and Kerala, the BJP has an evident increase in vote share, but this pattern is not evident in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh<sup>55</sup>. The bifurcation of the state of Andhra Pradesh had significant impacts on the electoral hopes of BJP. It was the BJP, which first adopted the Telangana resolution at Kakinada in 1996 and the Congress was the last political party to agree for the bifurcation.

The South India remains a problem area for the BJP and the party has to go extra miles to establish its success story in this part of India. There are many reasons for the low acceptance of the party in the region. To understand this, Andhra Pradesh's politics gives a fine example. Historically, Congress had a stronghold in the state after AP's formation in 1956. There was Janata Party which existed and was the opposition party in the state led by Jaipal Reddy, Venkaiah Naidu, etc until TDP's entry. But, in the 1980s when India was witnessing the rise of regional parties, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) was formed on an anti-Congress plank and the sentiment of "atmagauravam" (self-respect of the Telugus). Due to NTR's popularity and crowd-pulling capacity, the party won the people's mandate and continued to strengthen its position in the state as one of the major parties. Since then, the Telugu politics witnessed Congress and TDP as two principal parties in the state while BJP almost, allied with the TDP. The same scenario is evident in Tamil Nadu where personality factors matters much in politics. The MGR era and Jayalalitha era gives best examples for this. In the case of Kerala, the politics shifts between two coalition groups led by CPM and Congress. The minor parties also have clear voice in power sharing. A third alternative is a long term possibility but not an impossibility. Unlike North India, regional parties have had their stronghold in the South. There is also an impression in the South that BJP is a North-based party, focussed on the Hindi-speaking belt. In fact BJP has to catch up the politics of south which is different from politics in the North due to multiple factors such as political modernisation and high social and political aspiration of the citizen.

## Conclusions

The politics of South India has a different track which is mainly dominated by local interests and regional issues. However the national political scenario also has clear impacts on the state politics. In the years following independence, the South Indian states have moved to a distinct pattern of electoral behaviour based on the local conditions.

These states have their own autonomous cultures which are clearly distinct from each other and this diversity is also reflected in their politics. For example a state like Kerala experimented with coalition politics since 1980's and has a unique pattern of replacing each coalition in alternative years. On the other hand the electoral results in Tamil Nadu shows certain levels of consistency for a considerable period of time. However these autonomous politics in southern states is facing a shift with the changing political equations in the central government. National parties, particularly BJP has increased their vote bank in the south and many of the local parties are facing existential crises. The present study shows that this crisis is well captured by BJP in most of these states. It can be ascertained that the electoral result in UP 2022 has an evident impact on the politics of South India. But this need not result in a radical power shift in all states. For the time being, the only assumption is that there is a shift towards a new politics and political alliances. In the long run this may create new political equations in South India. In the electoral politics of India it is also observed that apart from mobilisation in the name of primordial identities, there has also been a change in a few mainstream political parties in their political organisation and their reliance on various mechanisms. For instance, some major political parties did not rely on their conventional 'Workers Conferences' or 'Delegate Conferences' to understand the pulse of the masses. Rather they roped in PR agencies, event managers, their own IT Cells and corporate media for the mobilisation of the common masses (Kumar, 2022). This new mode of mobilization is crucial for electoral victory for any political party in the forth coming general elections. The individual voters who do not have much access to traditional communication channels may consume political propaganda in variety of ways. That may vary from personality to religion and customs (Kammerer Jr & Michelson, 2022). The success of BJP in the elections can be attributed to the use of multiple channels of communication to the electorate. An individual voter is provided with enough political consumables either in the form of services or in the form of symbols that makes the political identification an easy task for the party. In this connection the UP elections 2022 is also a manual for the use of electoral communications for political parties. Good economics can make for good politics in India (Vaishnav, 2015). While parochial considerations have long been thought to play a central role in shaping voters' choices, evidence from UP elections suggests that macroeconomic realities are increasingly relevant.

## End Notes

- [1] [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/CountryQuickLink/779\\_Election\\_in\\_India\\_article\\_-\\_S.Y.Quraishi\\_\\_1\\_.doc](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/CountryQuickLink/779_Election_in_India_article_-_S.Y.Quraishi__1_.doc), Accessed on 18-09-2022
- [2] In 2018, the BJP registered a landmark victory in Tripura, ending 25 years of CPI(M) rule by winning 35 seats in a 60-member assembly and polling 43.0 percent votes. In 2016, the BJP won the Assam elections and formed its own government for the first time in the state
- [3] The party wrested power from the Congress in Himachal Pradesh by winning 44 seats, out of 68, with a vote share of 48.8 percent. In Uttarakhand, it won 57 of 70 seats with a 46.5 vote share.
- [4] The RSS and allied organisations are working on new strategies in Kerala. We have introduced multilevel platforms, PR exercises and high-voltage campaigns, See, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/the-bjp-s-plan-c-to-capture-kerala-1884389-2021-12-05>, Accessed on 10-10-2022
- [5] The bifurcation of the state of Andhra Pradesh had significant impacts on the electoral hopes of BJP. It was the BJP, which first adopted the Telangana resolution at Kakinada in 1996 and the Congress was the last political party to agree for the bifurcation

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