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Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

Notes on recent elections

The 16th general election in India, April–May 2014



Rekha Diwakar*

Department of Politics, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9SP, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 July 2014

Received in revised form 8 November 2014

Accepted 9 November 2014

Available online 20 November 2014

1. Introduction

At the time of India's independence in 1947, few expected it to survive as a democracy due to the presence of an ethnically diverse, and largely poor and illiterate population. However, India has survived as a functioning democracy, and successfully held 16 general (parliamentary) elections to democratically elect its national governments.¹ The 16th general election was announced on 5th March 2014 to elect the members of the *Lok Sabha* – lower house of the Indian Parliament and the principal legislative body. The Congress-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) coalition government had been in power since 2004, but struggled due to issues of corruption, indecision and lack of good governance in its second term after the 2009 election.

The 2014 election was held amidst a slowing Indian economy, high inflation, and the perception of 'policy paralysis' and administrative inertia on the part of the UPA government. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was criticised by the opposition parties for being a weak and indecisive leader, who did not wield much power within his cabinet. He was also blamed for ineffective supervision over his ministers that led to the financial scandals

relating to the allocation of 2G spectrum and coal blocks.^{2,3} In response to these allegations, Congress stressed its track record of providing a stable government within a diverse coalition, and pursuing pro-poor welfare policies.

The Congress party had enjoyed unshared governmental power at the national level and in most of the states in the first two decades of India's independence. Thereafter, although its dominance declined, it continued to be the principal national party during the 1970s and the 1980s. The *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP), currently the main challenger to the Congress, was formed in 1980 and is seen as a Hindu nationalist party. It won only 2 *Lok Sabha* seats in the 1984 election, but emerged as the single largest party in the 1999 election, and formed the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government. Since the 1990s, the Indian party system witnessed

² The 2G spectrum scandal involved the granting of mobile licences by India's Department of Telecom (during the tenure of A. Raja as Telecom Minister) in 2008. In 2010, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India reported large scale irregularities in the allocation process for these licences. Subsequently, in 2012, these licences were cancelled by the Supreme Court of India.

³ The coal blocks scandal concerned the Indian government's allocation of coal blocks for mining. In 2012, a report by the CAG suggested that during 2004–2009, the allocation had been done in an arbitrary manner, causing extensive financial loss to the exchequer. In 2014, the Supreme Court of India cancelled almost all coal blocks allotted since 1993, most of which were allocated during the Congress-led UPA regime.

* Tel.: +44 1273 678 496.

E-mail address: r.diwakar@sussex.ac.uk.

¹ Similarly, elections have also been regularly conducted to elect governments at the state level in India.

fragmentation due to the emergence of identity politics, and the growing importance of regional and state parties (Ziegfeld, 2012). This led to an era of coalition governments in India, which have often included a large number of ideologically diverse parties, making these coalitions unstable and unwieldy.

The Congress-led UPA government first came to power after the 2004 election, when Congress emerged as the largest party, but needed support from its alliance partners and other regional parties to form a coalition government. In the 2009 election, the Congress continued to lead UPA, and entered into an electoral alliance with many regional parties including *All India Trinamool Congress* (AITC), *National Conference* (NC), *Nationalist Congress Party* (NCP), *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* (JMM) and *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK). It also received issue-based support from few other parties, including *Samajwadi Party* (SP), *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) and *Lok Jan Shakti Party* (LJP). Since the 1999 election, BJP has also pursued a coalition building strategy through the formation of NDA, which helped it to form and run a coalition national government between 1999 and 2004.

The trends in the Indian party system witnessed in the last two decades continued in the 2014 election, whereby the two main national parties – the Congress and the BJP contested to win a majority for their respective alliances – the UPA and the NDA. The 2014 general election was seen as one of the more significant ones in the recent memory, where a clear and decisive result would create space for increased political stability, while a fractured mandate would usher in another era of instability and opportunistic politics in India.

2. Electoral process and system

Indian elections are a mammoth exercise due to a large and geographically dispersed electorate. The 2014 election involved 464 political parties, over 8000 candidates and a total electorate of 834.1 million spread over the 28 Indian states and 7 centrally administered Union Territories. The election was conducted in 9 phases, between 7th April and 12th May, using 930,000 polling stations and 1.7 million electronic machines (EVMs), making it the longest and the most expensive in the country's history.⁴ Remarkably, the results were declared soon after, on 16th May due to the use of EVMs.⁵

India follows the 'Single Member Plurality System' (SMPS), also known as the 'First Past the Post' (FPTP) system, to elect the members of the *Lok Sabha*. Under SMPS, the candidate receiving plurality or the highest number of votes wins the election in a constituency. In the Indian case, a party or an alliance needs to win in 272 out of 543 *Lok Sabha* constituencies in order to form the national government. SMPS tends to produce disproportionality

between votes and seats, and has often favoured larger parties in India. For example in the 1984 election, Congress received 49% of the votes but won a much higher 79% of the seats. However, since the 1990s, this gap has narrowed due to the rise of regional parties; in the 2009 election, Congress won 29% of votes and 38% of seats.

The Election Commission of India also provides for a 'Model Code of Conduct', which details how political parties and candidates should conduct themselves during the election campaign. A key electoral reform introduced in the 2014 election was the availability of 'NOTA' (Not any of the above) option for the voters on the EVMs. However, since NOTA votes are not taken into account for calculating valid votes, this option did not affect the election results.

3. Parties, candidates and electoral competition

In the 2014 election, the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA were the two alliances competing to form the national government.⁶ Some regional and state level parties decided to fight the election on their own. These included *Janata Dal* (United) – JD (U) in Bihar, AITC in Bengal, *All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (ADMK) in Tamil Nadu, *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) and SP in Uttar Pradesh and *Biju Janata Dal* (BJD) in Orissa. A new challenger to the mainstream political parties in this election was the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) – 'common man's party'. It emerged as a political party from the anti-corruption civil society movement of 2012, and fought its first election for the Delhi state assembly in 2013. It achieved spectacular success winning 28 of the 70 seats, and formed a minority government in the state of Delhi with the support of Congress. However, Arvind Kejriwal, AAP chief resigned after only 49 days in power as Delhi's Chief Minister, alleging non-cooperation from Congress and BJP in the state assembly. For the 2014 general election, AAP decided to contest in 432 constituencies of the total 543, hoping to replicate its success at the national level.

The key leadership contest was between the Congress's Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi of the BJP. Although UPA did not project Rahul Gandhi as its prime ministerial candidate, he led the Congress' campaign and was the de-facto frontrunner for this position, in case UPA were to win the election. Modi was chosen as the prime ministerial candidate for the NDA in September 2013 amidst much controversy. One of BJP's oldest allies – JD (U), decided to leave NDA as a result, and within BJP too, there were some voices of dissent including from senior BJP leader, L.K. Advani, who later gave in to the party's decision. Rahul Gandhi, son of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, was seen to have a privileged background, being from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty which has given India three prime ministers. He was also seen as being an inexperienced and a reluctant politician. Narendra Modi on the other hand was projected as a charismatic leader who rose from humble origins to become the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, and was credited by many for effective governance and

⁴ Election Commission of India: http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/GE2014/ge.html and Press Information Bureau, Government of India: <http://pib.nic.in/elections2014/elemain.aspx> (accessed 5 July 2014).

⁵ EVMs were first used in the 2004 general election. As per the Election Commission of India, through the use of EVMs election result in a constituency can be declared within 2–3 hours of polling, as compared to 30–40 hours on an average in a paper ballot system.

⁶ The composition of these alliances has not remained the same, and parties have often joined and left because of opportunistic rather than ideological reasons.

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