

Verdict 2024 | Commentary

Political Pluralism: India's Party Politics Deliver Uneasy Win for BJP



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The parliamentary leader of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) Narendra Modi (centre), is sworn-in as the Prime Minister of India by President Droupadi Murmu (left) at the Rashtrapathi Bhavan in New Delhi, on June 09, 2024. The 73-year-old leader became the second Indian Prime Minister, after independent India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to retain power for a third term. Photo: AP

By all appearances, the 2024 general elections was projected – most of all by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), its allies, and significant sections of the telecast media – as one that would give the BJP an overwhelming majority. Results day on June 4, 2024, offered the party a weak victory. Without a majority on its own, the BJP sought the support of regional parties, its pre-poll allies from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), to form the government on June 9, 2024. The question before many, who were led by political rhetoric and pollsters, is: How did this happen?

*Long-time scholar on Indian politics, **Andrew Wyatt, Associate Professor of Politics, University of Bristol, U.K.**, argues that the verdict delivered by India's voters in 2024 is consistent with long-term trends in the country's politics; in particular, its embedded pluralisms across political strata – state, political entities, and individual aspirants to public office – make it “extremely hard for parties to dominate national and State politics”. Outside the political realm, the cultural and social pluralism in Indian society imposed electoral limits for the BJP's Hindu majoritarianism. The 2024 elections, he concludes, brought out the complexity of Indian politics in which it would be difficult for a single party or ideology to maintain long-term dominance.*

India's 64.2 crore voters delivered (for many) a surprising result in the just concluded 18th general elections¹. In a seven-phase poll, spread over India's sweltering summer months from mid-April to early June, they defied the common assumption that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was headed for an easy victory. My own interpretation is that the outcome² reflected longer term trends in Indian party politics which should prompt us to expect complexity and contingency. In other words, there are aspects of politics that are plural that make it exceedingly hard for parties to dominate national and State politics. My assessment is that the source of this pluralism is political and it is not necessarily normative or socially based pluralism. Rajeev Bhargava (2023) characterised the latter as 'broader, historical pluralism' or a 'pluralist imaginary'. I will return to his account later, after outlining *political* pluralism that is untidy, often unethical, and the unintended outcome of political interactions.

Political pluralism is apparent in politics that is complex, diverse, and with an absence of dominance. The state itself is internally divided; which is partly the outcome of well-defined and entrenched institutions. Politics is marked by competing interests seeking influence; so, political parties are under pressure from interest groups. Political parties are not monolithic entities. They are internally divided on the basis of ideology and personal ambitions. Members of Parliament often develop connections across party lines. This complexity means outcomes are contingent and not easy to predict. In the case of India, the signs of pluralism were commented on in early scholarship on Indian politics, including in books authored by Rajni Kothari (1970) and the Rudolphs (1987).

Political pluralism in India stems from the party system (Sridharan & Varshney 2001), the complex institutional structure of the Indian state (especially its federal aspect) (Varshney 1998), influential institutions (such as the Election Commission of India and the judiciary), and the social diversities that prevail along multiple planes. Voters are the bearers of multiple identities and the resulting cross-cutting cleavages means (national) political parties have to work hard to create a majority (Manor 2010).

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Dispersal of power

Party system changes in the 1980s presaged a distinctive period of national coalition politics, and minority governments, that lasted between 1989 and 2014. Coalitions and the proliferation of political parties obliged the sharing of power (Chiriyankandath 1997). Changes in party systems in the States that saw the rise of new parties and the decline of the Indian National Congress also contributed to the dispersal of power. Economic changes prompted the devolution of political power away from the Union government and the rise of new interests (Jenkins 1999; Chandra 2015). New regulatory bodies contributed to economic governance (Mukherji 2004). Another aspect of economic change was the diversification and changed character of the print and broadcast media. In the absence of a dominant party, various state institutions – including the Election Commission of India – had greater freedom to act (Manor 2010). Overall, the States became increasingly influential (Yadav & Palshikar 2008).

Political pluralism came under intense pressure after 2014, even though the NDA notionally formed a coalition government. The BJP was able to push forward a majoritarian agenda and reduce the representation of minorities (Adeney 2015). Power was re-concentrated in New Delhi and the Prime Minister's Office (Wyatt 2023). The personalisation of politics was pronounced (Jumle & Karthik KR 2024, Vittorini 2022). Independent institutions came under pressure as attempts were made to take control of economic policy (Echeverri-Gent, Sinha & Wyatt, 2021). The autonomy of State governments was encroached upon by an increasingly assertive Union government Kailash (2019). The governing regime at the centre encouraged exclusionary politics which was reflected in the combative tone of the BJP's 2019 election campaign (Jaffrelot 2017, Naseemullah & Chhibber 2024).

Latent pluralism

Even so, I argue, India's political pluralism was not erased after 2014. This has become even clearer with the 2024 election outcome. The domain of party politics did not yield as much to BJP dominance as some have assumed. The BJP's share of the vote was sufficient to win majorities in 2014 (31.3 per cent) and 2019 (37.4 per cent)³ but securing roughly a third of votes is not a strong result. The BJP's majorities in the Lok Sabha in 2014 and 2019 were possible only because of its dependence on regional allies. The vote-share of regional parties was high in 2014, at 45 per cent (Tillin 2015). Another indicator of fragmentation is the total number of parties in the Lok Sabha. In 2014, the figure had fallen away from the record of 42 in 1998 to 35 (Diwakar 2015). However, it still reflected that the BJP's victory had not reversed all of the changes that occurred in the party system earlier. While some detected a Modi wave in 2014, which was followed by some success in subsequent elections to State Legislative Assemblies, the BJP proved unable to use these elections as a pathway to build dominance in the period until 2024. It followed from this that control of the Rajya Sabha eluded the party.

The 2024 general election confirms continuing evidence of pluralism in India's party politics. The BJP lost its majority and its vote share slipped back to 36.6 per cent although once again it was propped up by its allies. Despite a decline in the vote-share of regional parties since 2014 to 40 per cent, they still hold the balance of legislative power with 191 seats. A further seven seats were won by independents. The number of parties in the Lok Sabha increased to 42⁴. The remaining elections to State Legislative Assemblies, to be held later this year, will test the BJP again. Overall, elections in India have remained competitive and the tactics used by the BJP to gain an edge, again, reveal aspects of pluralism. Defectors have been welcomed into the party and

The verdict displays latent political pluralism. If the BJP depends on disparate interests, regional parties hold the legislative balance.

rewarded with nomination in large numbers since 2014 (Porecha & Sewari 2024; Rohmetra 2024). Defectors and independents have resources that political parties value: money, name recognition, and above all, local networks. Rewarding defectors with nominations reveal how political resources are dispersed at the district level of Indian politics. It also shows how the BJP is far from confident in its own capabilities.

Although I argue that there is evidence of political pluralism continuing after 2014, I want to emphasise that it is not an unalloyed good nor should we exaggerate its extent. Political pluralism is partly the consequence of ambition and political rivalry, and I leave it to others to outline normative variants of pluralist thinking (Bajpai 2022; Kaviraj 2021). Regarding the extent of political pluralism in India in 2024, I am not certain that a strong form of coalition power sharing will emerge in the current dispensation.

Electoral limits of Hindu nationalism

I close with some further reflection on the sources of political pluralism in India. There is a distinctive and people-oriented way of doing politics in India (Piliavsky 2015). Politicians are expected to recognise and respond to voters. They spend time and resources doing constituency work (Naseemullah 2021). Aspiring legislators develop local networks that parties find beneficial (Berenschot 2011). Yet parties struggle to capture these networks, they depend upon the individuals that generate them. Highly successful political entrepreneurs work within large networks and hold on to their resources when they switch parties. Party labels matter but everyday interactions between politicians and voters do not have to be narrowly ideological. In these circumstances, we can ask how far ordinary voters have been moved by the official promotion of Hindu nationalism since 2014. The modest electoral returns from the communal rhetoric of the last few months suggests limits to this project. It may also suggest, as Rajeev Bhargava (2023) implies, that pluralism in India

has a social and cultural basis among ordinary voters. More certainly, we can characterise Indian politics as a complex field of activity in which it is difficult for a single party or ideology to maintain dominance.

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Notes and References

Endnotes

1. **Chakrabarty, S. 2024.** [65.79% turnout in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, says Election Commission](https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/india-general-electon-2024-6579-turnout-in-2024-lok-sabha-polls-says-election-commission/article68259360.ece). *The Hindu*. June 07. [https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/india-general-electon-2024-6579-turnout-in-2024-lok-sabha-polls-says-election-commission/article68259360.ece]. [Return To text](#).
2. Along expected lines, the BJP emerged as the single largest party, albeit without a majority on its own and had to gain support from its pre-poll allies to form the government on June 9, 2024. [Return to Text](#).
3. **Ramani, S. 2019.** [Analysis: Highest-ever national vote share for the BJP](https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/analysis-highest-ever-national-vote-share-for-the-bjp/article62003609.ece). *The Hindu*. May 23. [https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/analysis-highest-ever-national-vote-share-for-the-bjp/article62003609.ece]. [Return to Text](#).

4. The Election Commission of India's figures show 41 parties. However, in Tamil Nadu's Namakkal constituency the Kongunadu Makkal Desiya Katchi (KMDK) contested under the symbol of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). This would take the number of parties in Parliament to (at least) 42. [Return to Text](#).

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