

The parliamentary election in India, April–May 2009

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1. Context

The end of the term of Manmohan Singh's government necessitated the parliamentary election, which was held in five phases between 16 April and 13 May 2009. Singh (Congress Party) had led a coalition – the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) – for five years. The UPA was formed after the 2004 election, when the Congress Party emerged as the largest party but more than 100 seats short of a majority. Many smaller parties had joined the Congress alliance, such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The Communists, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and later the Samajwadi Party (SP) supported the Congress-led government but without joining the alliance. The support of smaller and regional parties, each representing a group – a caste, a region, or a state – had become crucial to forming a national government since 1996. Every government since then had been put together with the support of regional parties. In this context, one thing was certain even before the election was held: the post-election government would be a coalition.

When the election was called, the effects of the global economic slowdown had come to bear on India's economy. Singh's government was criticized for not reining in prices of essential food items and job losses; and economic growth had also slowed slightly in late 2008. Singh's government, however, had notable accomplishments. It oversaw unprecedented annual economic growth of over 8% GDP in its first four years; launched a programme that guaranteed 100 day's employment to the rural poor; wrote off some \$17 billion of farmers' debts; and concluded a nuclear agreement with the US to meet India's growing energy needs.¹ The employment programme and debt waivers were popular, although the opposition accused the UPA of corrupt implementation. But Singh also showed the electorate that the Congress Party could shepherd a fractious coalition to offer a stable government for a full term. Every pre-election opinion poll gave the Congress Party the

lead, and predicted a coalition government (Yadav, 2009a; TOI, 2009).²

2. Electoral system

Elections to the *Lok Sabha*, the lower house of the federal parliament, are held under majoritarian winner-takes-all electoral rules, with members elected from 543 single-member constituencies. A simple majority of 272 seats is needed to form a government. In the past, the electoral rules gave the bigger parties seat bonuses in parliament, but with the rise of regional parties – often stronger in India's component states than national parties – the bonus contracted. In the 1984, for instance, the Congress Party won 79% of the seats with 49% of the vote; by 2004, this seat bonus had disappeared – the Congress won 27% of the seats with as much of the popular vote.

Another feature of the electoral system is regional imbalance. The number of constituencies is determined by population size, which gives more seats to the populous poor northern states than the economically vibrant south. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the north has 120 seats in the *Lok Sabha*, whilst the four southern states – Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu – together have only 129 members. This imbalance propels regional parties like the SP of Uttar Pradesh to greater prominence in national politics. In the outgoing *Lok Sabha*, the SP was the fourth largest party, even though it won seats only in Uttar Pradesh.³

Voting in India has been electronic since 2002, which has helped eliminate miscast ballots. Previously, using ballot papers, the number of miscast ballots often exceeded the victory margins of some candidates. Voters now press a button against the candidate or symbol to record their vote.

3. Candidates and parties

At one level, the 2009 general election could be seen as a contest between parties and their prime ministerial

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¹ The agreement with the US almost brought down the Singh government in 2008, when the Communists withdrew its support, accusing the prime minister of steering India away from a neutral foreign policy.

² NDTV: <http://elections.ndtv.com/frmopinionpoll.aspx> (Accessed 15 April, 2009).

³ Of its 36 seats, 35 were in Uttar Pradesh; the remaining seat, in Uttarakhand, was part of Uttar Pradesh until 2000. The SP contested in 20 others states but nowhere did it get more than 3% of the vote.

candidates. Singh, the Congress Party's prime ministerial candidate, is a soft-spoken administrator, widely respected for unshackling the Indian economy. However, critics accuse him of being overly dependent on the Congress Party's president, Sonia Gandhi, for political survival. Singh has never been elected to the *Lok Sabha* (he is currently a member of the upper house).⁴ Lal Krishna Advani, the opposition *Bharatiya Janata Party's* (BJP) prime ministerial candidate, is a political veteran, who, along with the former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is credited with taking the BJP from the margins of Indian politics to its centre.⁵

The 2009 election, however, is best understood not as a single national contest but as some 20 contests, each played at state-level and shaped more by regional dynamics than by national trends. It was in the states that the national parties had to win, by adjusting their ideology, accommodating regional interests, befriending old foes, and forging new ties. The national party that managed to do this in most of the contests stood to win the most seats in the *Lok Sabha*.

The Congress Party had come to power this way in 2004; it hoped to do so again in 2009. It therefore allied with one-time regional rivals: with the *All India Trinamool Congress* (AITC) in West Bengal; the National Conference (NC) in Jammu and Kashmir; the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra; the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK) in Tamil Nadu; and the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha* in Jharkhand. It also kept open the possibility of post-election alliances, such as with the SP in Uttar Pradesh, and the *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) and the *Lok Jan Shakti Party* (LJSP) in Bihar.

The BJP also tried to hold together its coalition – the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) – but with less success. The NDA, formed in 1999, had helped Vajpayee (BJP) become prime minister, but subsequently the alliance had experienced erosion. Between 2002 and 2007, the NC, the LJSP, the DMK, and the AITC left the BJP to join the Congress alliance. Other allies – the *Biju Janata Dal* (BJD) of Orissa and the *Telugu Desam Party* (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh – severed ties with the BJP to ally with the Communists. The 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom leading to 2000 deaths in BJP-governed Gujarat; the violence against Christians by Hindu groups in Orissa; and, the attacks by Hindu vigilantes in BJP-ruled Karnataka – these made it difficult for such parties to ally with the BJP. Yet the BJP managed to retain the support of many regional parties: the *Shiv Sena* (SHS) in Maharashtra; the *Shiromani Akali Dal* (SAD) in Punjab; the *Janata Dal (United)* in Bihar; the *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP) in Assam; the *Gorkha Janmukti Morcha* (GJM) in West Bengal; *Rashtriya Lok Dal* (RLD) in Uttar Pradesh; and the *Indian National Lok Dal* (INLD) in Haryana.

Most such alliances were driven by the compulsions of regional politics. The TDP's main rival in Andhra Pradesh was the Congress Party, so it chose to ally with the BJP or the Communists. Due to regional rivalry, the DMK and the Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu joined rival national alliances. The same compulsion drove the RJD and the JD (U) in Bihar; the BSP and the SP in Uttar Pradesh; and the NC and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Communists forged a third alliance, called the Third Front. It included the TDP and *Telengana Rashtra Samiti* (TRS) in Andhra Pradesh, the BJD in Orissa, the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, and the *Janata Dal (Secular)* in Karnataka. The BSP in Uttar Pradesh showed some interest in the alliance, but chose to contest the election alone.

4. Election campaign

Two issues dominated the campaign: how to manage economic growth, and how to secure India from terrorism and extremism. The Congress-led UPA highlighted its major achievements, especially the rural employment programme and debt waivers for farmers, and promised to do more. In particular, Congress promised to implement a programme that would confer land-holding rights on forest-dwelling tribes and enact a right-to-food law. Congress also claimed it had the best economic team to handle the challenges faced by India. On security, the Congress alleged that the BJP's divisive politics weakened India's fight against terrorism, and promised to erase divisions in society. Prime Minister Singh, Sonia Gandhi, and her son, Rahul, campaigned throughout India for the Congress Party.

The BJP's campaign focused more on security issues, claiming that the Congress-led government had failed. The party pledged to remedy this under the strong leadership of Advani. If voted to power, the BJP promised to strengthen anti-terror laws, revamp intelligence gathering, and introduce national identity cards. The BJP party also alleged that some \$150 million of Indian money was illegally stashed away in foreign tax havens; the party promised to return the money to India and use it to boost public spending (*Bharatiya Janata Party*, 2009). Advani, and Narendra Modi, the chief minister of Gujarat and a rousing speaker, campaigned for the party. The most arresting campaign, however, was by Varun Gandhi, estranged cousin of Rahul Gandhi and the BJP candidate in Uttar Pradesh.⁶ Despite widespread reproach, the BJP supported Varun's candidature, giving the impression that the party was relapsing into Hindu chauvinism.

The Communists accused both alliances of enriching the wealthy at the expense of the poor. They promised to double public spending, strengthen government supply-chains for essential food items, and increase support prices for agricultural produce. They also claimed to combat religious and caste violence, end neo-liberal economic policies, and revoke India's strategic ties with the US.

⁴ State legislators elect members of the upper house.

⁵ In 1986, when Advani became the party's president, the BJP had two seats in the *Lok Sabha*; by 1991, the BJP had 120 seats. Many, however, attribute this growth to Advani's strident campaign to build a Hindu temple in Uttar Pradesh in place of an old Muslim mosque, which led to Hindu mobs pulling down the mosque and bloodbaths in 1992. See: *People's Democracy* (2004). Advani's rath yatra: Beware of the Communal Agenda. 14 March: http://pd.cpim.org/2004/0314/03142004_sitaram%20pc.htm (Accessed 1 June, 2009) (Venkatesan, 2004).

⁶ Varun promised bloodshed if the BJP came to power, but claimed he was misquoted. He was jailed, but later released on court guarantees, for the outburst.

In the constituencies, the rank and file of all the parties translated these national platforms and promises into a language that would resonate locally. This language was often informed by ethnic calculations, and delivered occasionally with intimidation and bribery.

5. Election results

Conduct of the election involved almost four million officials and two million security personnel, who administered the elections in some 830,000 polling stations to 710 million eligible voters. Some 43 million were first-time voters.⁷ Electors chose candidates from over 1000 political parties and independents.⁸

Overall, turnout was 58% – unchanged since the 1999 and 2004 elections. But the national average masks great variation among the states. In Manipur, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura in India's northeast, turnout averaged 84%; over 70% voted in West Bengal and in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. In contrast, fewer than 50% voted in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh. In Jammu and Kashmir, where secessionists had called for a boycott of the election, 40% voted – an increase of 5% percentage points since the 2004 election.

The results boosted the Congress Party: it won 61 more seats, taking its tally to 206. Most of Congress' allies, too, did well (see Table 1). The overall strength of the UPA now stands at 262, 10 seats short of an outright majority. In most states, the UPA either increased its tally of seats or retained the seats it held. In Delhi, Haryana, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand, it won most of the seats; in Assam, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, its tally increased. And in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, the UPA alliance retained most of its seats, overcoming the voters' proclivity to reject the incumbent party. The Congress Party's most notable gains were in Uttar Pradesh. Until 1989, the largest portion of Congress legislators came from the state, but thereafter the party there has been in decline – at one point failing to get a single candidate elected. But, at the 2009 election, Congress reversed its position; it won 21 seats and became the second largest parliamentary party in the state.⁹ Much of the credit for this performance has been attributed to Rahul Gandhi, who so pressed Congress that it contested the election without any UPA ally in the state.

The BJP won 22 seats fewer than in the 2004 election. With 116 seats, the party is at its lowest level of support in two decades. In most states, where the party was pitted directly against Congress, it lost: in Delhi, Haryana, and Uttarakhand, the BJP lost all its seats. Even in states where

⁷ General Elections, 2009: Schedule of Elections, Election Commission of India. See: <http://eci.nic.in/press/current/pn020309.pdf> (Accessed 5 April, 2009).

⁸ The Election Commission of India recognizes 40 parties. A party is recognized if it is registered with the Commission, has been active for five years, had a candidate elected to the *Lok Sabha* in 25 seats it contested or to win at least one in every 30 seats in a state assembly. See Election Commission of India: <http://eci.nic.in>. Given the electorate's size, elections in India are held in phases, enabling the Election Commission to move personnel around the country between the phases.

⁹ The SP, the largest party in the state, is just two seats ahead of Congress.

Table 1

Results of the 2009 parliamentary election in India.

Parties	Votes (%) ^a	Seats	Vote change (% points)	Seat change
<i>United Progressive Alliance</i>		262		+39
Congress Party	28.6	206	+2.0	+61
Trinamool Congress (AITC)	3.4	19	+1.4	+17
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	1.9	18	+0.1	+2
Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)	2.0	9	+0.3	0
National Conference (NC)	0.1	3	0	+1
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)	0.4	2	-0.1	-3
Muslim League	0.2	2	+0.1	+1
Other UPA members		3		+3
<i>National Democratic Alliance</i>		159		-30
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	18.8	116	-3.4	-22
Janata Dal (United)	1.6	20	-0.8	+12
Shiv Sena (SHS)	1.7	11	-0.1	-1
Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD)	0.5	5	-0.1	+2
Shromani Akali Dal (SAD)	0.9	4	+0.0	-4
Telengana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS)	0.6	2	0	-3
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	0.5	1	-0.1	-1
<i>Third Front</i>		77		
Communists	6.8 ^b	24	-0.3	-35
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	6.2	21	+0.8	+2
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	1.4	14	+0.1	+3
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	1.8	9	-0.4	+9
Telugu Desam Party (TDP)	1.5	6	-1.5	+1
Janata Dal (Secular)	0.9	3	-0.6	0
<i>Others</i>				
Samajwadi Party (SP)	3.4	23	-0.9	-13
Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)	1.3	4	-1.1	-20
Others	11.4	9	+4.7	-12
Independents	4.2	9	-0.1	4
Total seats		543		
Total eligible voters		710,074,177		
Total votes cast		414,913,023		
Turnout (%)		58.4		

Sources: Election Commission of India (<http://eciresults.nic.in>); Yadav (2009b).

^a Vote shares of the major parties are from the Election Commission website. Those of the smaller parties are from Yadav (2009b).

^b The vote share for the Communists includes those of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India.

the BJP was expected to do well, it barely improved its tally. For example, in Gujarat and in Karnataka, the party won just one seat more. Only in the smaller states of Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, and Jharkhand – all with fewer than 15 seats – did the party do well.

The Communists suffered their worst defeat since 1951. With just 24 seats, the Communists have 35 fewer seats than they won in 2004; for example, in West Bengal, a Communist citadel, they lost the 20 seats they held. Resentment against the Communists there has been growing recently, with the Communist government alienating many when it tried forcibly to evict peasants from their lands to industrialize.¹⁰ In Kerala, where the Communist's party secretary is being investigated for defrauding the state exchequer of \$20 million, the Communists lost

¹⁰ In one instance, the state police fired at and killed peasants resisting land reclamation.

15 of the seats they won in 2004. The Communists now have four seats.

The results hint at an increased support for the Congress Party nationally, but closer examination reveals a feeble national trend. Instead, national politics is still an aggregation of politics at the state level. One indication of this is the Congress Party's vote share: it increased less than two percentage points although the party contested 25 more seats. Further clues come from the states of the federation. The Congress retained its seats in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, but lost in neighbouring Orissa and Chhattisgarh to the BJD and the BJP. Likewise, the AITC (part of the Congress-led UPA) displaced the Communists in West Bengal, but failed to do so in nearby Tripura. This pattern suggests that state-level factors prevailed.

In the states, voters rewarded parties that seemed to offer stable, well-meaning governments; corrupt, inefficient, and divisive parties were rejected. This explains why Congress and its allies improved their tally in such states as Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal; and lost to well-regarded but opposition-ruled Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and Tripura. There is ample evidence of voters' distaste for divisive politics. Varun Gandhi's sinister campaign won him a seat from Uttar Pradesh with twice the votes of his nearest rival, but cost the BJP everywhere else in the state: the BJP's vote-share dropped by 5 points, and it finished fourth with 10 seats in the state, where, a decade ago, it held 60% of the seats. And, in Orissa, where Hindu vandals burned Christian homes and churches, the BJP failed to win a single seat.¹¹

There is no straightforward relation between a party's vote share and the number of seats it wins in a majoritarian winner-takes-all system. The relation is further clouded, if, as in India, many parties crowd the contests. The Congress Party won 61 more seats although its vote share increased by only two percentage points. Further, when a party's votes are aggregated from the constituencies to the state, and then to the national level, the changes in its vote share and its seat's tally may show great divergence. For example, the vote-share of the Communists declined only by one-third of a percentage point, but they lost 35 seats. See Table 1.

A further complexity arises from the fluidity of alliances in India. Hence, comparing the performance of the UPA or the NDA between 2004 and 2009 is demanding (see Table 1). The RJD and the LJP, which had been members of the UPA until 2009 – and still claim to be part of it – fought against the Congress Party in the 2009 election. The TRS left the UPA, initially to join the Communists but then shifted to the BJP as the election proceeded. The BJD left the NDA to join the Third Front just prior to the election. In Table 1, 2004 is the base year to calculate the change in the overall number of seats of an alliance. For instance, the UPA in 2004 included the RJD, LJP and the TRS, and had 223 seats.

Regardless of shifting alliances, the Congress Party's position in parliament is now more stable. With 61 more

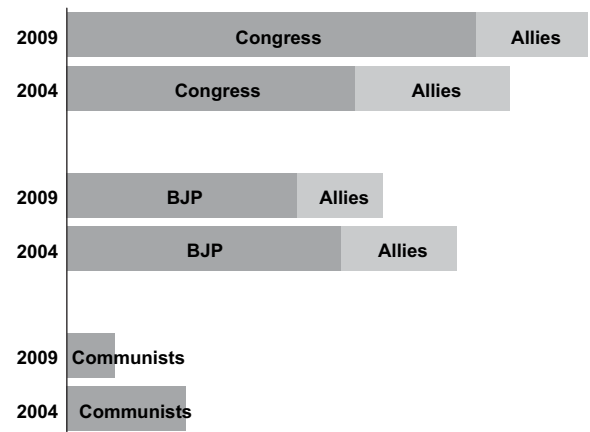


Fig. 1. Size of major blocs in the Indian parliament, 2009 and 2004. Source: Election Commission of India (<http://eciresults.nic.in>, <http://eci.nic.in>).

seats, the party has reduced its reliance on allies (see Fig. 1). This increased strength should help Congress to prevail over meddlesome allies to offer stable governance.

6. Aftermath

As the shape of the new *Lok Sabha* became clear, many smaller parties gravitated towards the Congress Party to give it support. These include the BSP and the JD (S) that broke away from the Third Front, and the RJD and the SP of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The Congress now has the support of 323 legislators in parliament.

Singh was sworn in as the prime minister on 22 May, 2009. Singh's new term is historic: the first prime minister since Jawaharlal Nehru to resume office after serving a five-year term. A leadership change in the Congress Party is likely in the next five years, however. Singh, now 76, is unlikely to lead the Congress Party in the next election. Congress is already grooming a crop of young leaders, with Rahul Gandhi at the forefront.¹²

The BJP, too, will have to elect a new leader before the next election. Advani continues to lead the opposition but, at 81, he is unlikely to be the party's prime ministerial candidate at the next election. Unlike the Congress, the BJP's line of succession is less clear. The party could turn to its chauvinist roots, given that a less divisive campaign this time had not done the party much good. Then the party could turn to Modi in Gujarat, which would drive away some of BJP's allies. Or it could opt for a leader from Uttar Pradesh to revive its strength there. Having chosen a younger leadership three years ago, the Communists now have to reflect on how to retain their traditional supporters as they seek wider appeal.

Thus, in the next few years, Indian politics will see younger leaders in its two largest parties. In a country where some 60% of the population is under 30, this seems appropriate. The more pressing challenge for the Congress-led government is to sustain economic growth and make it more equitable, and to provide security from terrorists and extremists. Singh has

¹¹ The BJP had won seven out of the nine seats it contested in 2004 in Orissa. Its vote share in the 2009 election dropped 2.4 points although it contested 11 more seats.

¹² Singh wishes to bring Gandhi into the cabinet, but Gandhi has for now decided to focus on building the party's strength.

retained most of the ministers from the outgoing cabinet, signalling a degree of continuity, and promised to tackle the other things that seems to continue in India forever: poverty, ill health, and illiteracy. Given its improved mandate and with depleted rivals, the Congress Party can no longer add administrative inertia as the cost of coalition politics.

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Presidential and parliamentary elections in Malawi, May 2009

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On 19 May 2009, Malawi held its fourth multiparty presidential and parliamentary elections, which were hailed domestically and internationally as largely free and fair. As the presidential candidate of the newly formed Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika was re-elected, and, for the first time in Malawi's multiparty era, a single party won a majority of seats in parliament. Because the majority party is also the president's party, Malawi's fourth term of democracy will begin with another first: a united executive and legislature.

1. Background

Malawi has a strong presidential system of government. The president is elected by a plurality rule and, similar to most African states, the Malawian president controls a disproportionate share of power *vis-à-vis* the legislature (National Assembly) in running the business of government.² The president appoints the cabinet without confirmation by the legislature, regardless of the seat distribution in parliament.³ Furthermore, the president sets the

legislative agenda in parliament, has extensive budgetary powers, and determines the parliamentary calendar. Winning the presidency in Malawi brings remarkable power.

From colonial independence in 1964 until 1994, "President for Life" Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP) – membership in which was compulsory for all Malawians – ruled Malawi under a hybrid form of personalistic rule and one-party dictatorship. During the 1992–1994 transition to multiparty politics, two main pressure groups opposing Dr. Banda's authoritarian rule emerged: the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the southerner⁴ Bakili Muluzi; and the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), led by the northerner, Chakufwa Chihana. Dr. Banda was an ethnic Chewa from the central region and was perceived to have carried out policies benefiting only those in his region (Vail and White, 1989). The salience of ethno-regionalism, rooted in both the colonial era and in Dr. Banda's regime (Kaspin, 1995), was reinforced during the last 15 years of multiparty democracy as presidential candidates garnered overwhelming support from their home region.

Bakili Muluzi (UDF) won the presidency for Malawi's first two democratic terms, but his attempts to amend the constitution for an open term or a third term failed in 2002 and 2003, respectively. Muluzi's successor as the UDF nominee, Mutharika, was elected in 2004. Despite being handpicked, the signs quickly became clear that Mutharika

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² Parliament includes both the National Assembly and the President.

³ Many other appointments, such as the Chief Justice, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the Inspector General of Police, do require parliamentary confirmation. MPs may serve as ministers without losing their parliamentary seats.

⁴ Malawi is divided into three regions: north, center, and south.