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# **The BJP and State Politics in India: A Crashing Wave?**

**Analyzing the BJP Performance in Five State Elections**

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**Gilles VERNIERS**

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**Center for Asian Studies**

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## Executive Summary

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In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Narendra Modi, decisively won India's sixteenth General Elections. For the first time in thirty years, a party secured a single majority of seats in the lower house of parliament – the Lok Sabha (282 out of 543) – and for the first time since independence, that party wasn't the Congress. In the year that followed, the BJP successfully contested four state elections, in the states of Haryana and Jharkhand in October 2014, and in Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir in December 2014. It formed the government in the first three states and had to concede power to a regional party in the latter, despite a near clean-sweep in the region of Jammu.

The BJP's performance in the four state elections of 2014 bore remarkable resemblance to the previous General Elections. Its vote share surged everywhere, including in states where it had a weak presence. The surge in vote share credits the notion of a pro-BJP wave. Available survey data suggests that the party succeeded in consolidating its traditional support among the upper castes with support from voters from most segments of the electorate, except Muslims. Recent work also suggests that the BJP's victory partly relied on its capacity to attract new voters, particularly among the youth (Heath, 2015), and on its capacity to mobilize record numbers of voters in cities.

Calling these results a triumph for the BJP would be an exaggeration, however. As in 2014, the party benefited for the disproportionality effect of the electoral system. The combination of a First-past-the-post majority electoral system with a fragmented political landscape means that the distribution of votes among parties determines the conversion of votes into seats for the winner. The more dispersed the vote, the more disproportionate the conversion into seats.

In fact, the BJP's performance everywhere remains more or less in the bracket of 30% of the vote share. This serves as a reminder that there remains a large majority of voters that does not opt for the BJP but disperses its votes between various other parties. Moreover, the electoral cartography of the BJP's performance reveals that its victories are often limited to specific areas, or sub regions within states. This shows that the BJP still struggles to develop a "pan-state" presence.

This series of victories brutally stopped with the Delhi state elections, held in January 2015, where the Aam Admi Party (AAP – Party of the Common Man) – a two-year old party that had emerged

from the 2011 anti-corruption movement – won all but three of the 70 seats of the State Assembly. The Delhi elections made the demonstration that the BJP could be defeated in a bipolar fight, and in a campaign that was fought on the terrain of development, on which it is supposed to have a competitive advantage. Politically speaking, these elections were seen as the first stumble of what was previously considered an unstoppable victory machine.

Throughout these elections, The BJP followed a distinctive strategic blueprint, consisting of five essential elements.

- The first element is the shedding of pre-electoral alliances, a regular feature of Indian politics that aims at increasing the victory prospects of parties through pre-electoral seat-sharing agreements. Since the 2014 campaign, the BJP has left all its traditional allies and fought every election on its own.
- The second component of the BJP campaign has been the discarding of local party structures and organizations through the centralization of the campaign planning and strategy in the hands of the party high command.
- The third character of the BJP's strategy is the complete personalization of campaigns behind the personae of the Prime Minister, projected as a benevolent providential leader.
- The fourth distinct character of the BJP's campaign is that the classic tropes of the Hindu right-wing mobilization are still relied upon, but in a more cryptic, out-of-the-limelight manner. Caste also remains the main criteria for the selection of candidates. Religion, also, has remained a powerful vehicle of political mobilization.
- The fifth and final element of the BJP's strategy consists in appointing relatively unknown figures as Chief Ministers, who do not belong to the traditionally politically-dominant groups. The BJP thus aims at presenting itself as a disruptive political force, aiming at gathering the social bases that are either at odds with the local dominant groups, or in direct competition with them. The reality is more prosaic: to put it simply, the richer the voter, the more he/she tends to vote for the BJP.

In conclusion, the transformation brought by the 2014 General Elections and its repercussions in subsequent assembly elections are substantial but do not affect some of the fundamentals of Indian electoral politics. It is the division of the electorate and of the party system, along regional lines, caste lines and now more and more along class lines, that paves the road towards majorities. Single majorities are the outcome of a fragmented electorate. The main change is that the social groups and individuals that traditional politics had left aside for decades are now strongly supporting the BJP. These are large chunks of the electorate, composed of individuals

belonging to the middle categories – not among the poorest, not among the dominant castes – living essentially in towns and mid-size cities, yet too small and too geographically dispersed to matter on their own in the political arena.

At the time of writing of this paper, the Bihar State Assembly elections took place, in October and November 2015. The BJP lost resoundingly against a pre-electoral alliance of regional parties, joined by the Congress Party. The election was marked, as a contrast with the other elections described in this paper, by an overt communal campaign from the BJP. That departure from prior strategy cost it dear. The BJP lost 5% of the vote share compared to the 2014 General Elections and let its opponent win a solid two-thirds majority in the Assembly.

Thus, a first phase of the BJP ascension on the national scene has come to an end. Opposition parties have shown that the BJP could be defeated in different states (Delhi and Bihar) and in different manners – by the rise of a strong and unique contender like the AAP in Delhi, or by a defragmentation of the opposition through pre-electoral alliances. The next 18 months will be rough for the BJP, as future elections will take place in states dominated by strong regional parties. The Bihar elections have demonstrated that polarizing voters on religious lines can backfire, and that the climate of intolerance that has grown in the country can in effect be a nuisance to the government.

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# Introduction

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In May 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Narendra Modi, decisively won India's sixteenth General Elections. For the first time in thirty years, a party had secured a single majority of seats in the Lok Sabha (282 out of 543) and for the first time since independence, that party wasn't the Congress. The BJP wave – or the “Modi wave” as it came to be called – was characterized by a large victory in the Hindi Belt<sup>1</sup> and in Western India (240 out of 300 seats won) and by significant progress in states where it had no or little presence, notably in the south and the east<sup>2</sup>. The victory was largely attributed to the juggernaut campaign led by the then-Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, to his capacity to rally new voters and consolidate the traditional support base of the BJP among the upper castes and the lower Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Congress Party, which had been in power for ten years, suffered a strong anti-incumbency and, with 44 seats for 19% of vote share, was reduced to its historical minimum.

In the year that followed, the BJP successfully contested four state elections, in the states of Haryana and Jharkhand in October 2014, and in Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir in December 2014. It formed the government in the first three states and had to concede power to a regional party in the latter, despite a near clean-sweep in the region of Jammu. This series of victories brutally stopped with the Delhi State elections, held in January 2015, where a two-year old party that had emerged from the 2011 anti-corruption movement won all but three of the 70 seats in the State Assembly. The Delhi elections suddenly raised doubts about the BJP's capacity to sustain a chain of victories and about the foolproof character of its electoral strategy. Since then, the opposition has become more cohesive and combative, effectively obstructing the pace of governmental action and organizing alliances at the state level to counter the growth of the

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1. The Hindi Belt designates a group of largely Northern Hindi-speaking states, comprising Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

2. It did progress in other parts of the country where it is traditionally weak, but that yielded few seats (32 out of 218, essentially in Karnataka).



BJP. In all five of these elections, the Congress Party emerged as a non-contender, often hitting historically low scores. Barring Jammu & Kashmir and Delhi, state-based parties were reduced to distant seconds or thirds behind a BJP boosted by its May 2014 success and by the promises that carried it to power then.

Were these state elections victories a continuation of the “Modi wave” that caused the BJP’s triumph in 2014? Did the BJP’s defeat in the January 2015 Delhi elections mark the end of a “grace period” between voters and the BJP? What were the social bases of the BJP’s victories and did the party follow a uniform strategy to win these states? Also, how has the BJP transformed itself since the 16<sup>th</sup> General Elections and how has the political landscape evolved? Finally, what do these recent changes prefigure for the coming state elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Kerala?

Instead of commenting on each election separately, this article will analyze them transversally, around a limited number of questions. The first part will deal with a comparative analysis of recent state elections’ results and with a critical assessment of the BJP’s performances. Part two will analyze the strategies deployed by the BJP in the conduct of these elections, including matters of internal party organization. Part three will reflect on the political consequences of the recent state elections and on political transformations in India since May 2014. Part four will discuss the possible implications for upcoming elections.

# The BJP's performance in perspective

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## *A Chain of successes*

The BJP's performance in the four state elections of 2014 bore remarkable resemblance with the previous General Elections. Its vote share surged everywhere, including in states where it had a weak presence. It doubled its vote share in Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, tripled it in Haryana and maintained its 32% vote share in Delhi. As in 2014, the poor performance of the Congress combined with the dispersion of votes across state-based parties meant that the BJP could convert its vote share into large numbers of seats. It formed majority governments in three states, despite having earned a minority of votes in all of them<sup>3</sup>.

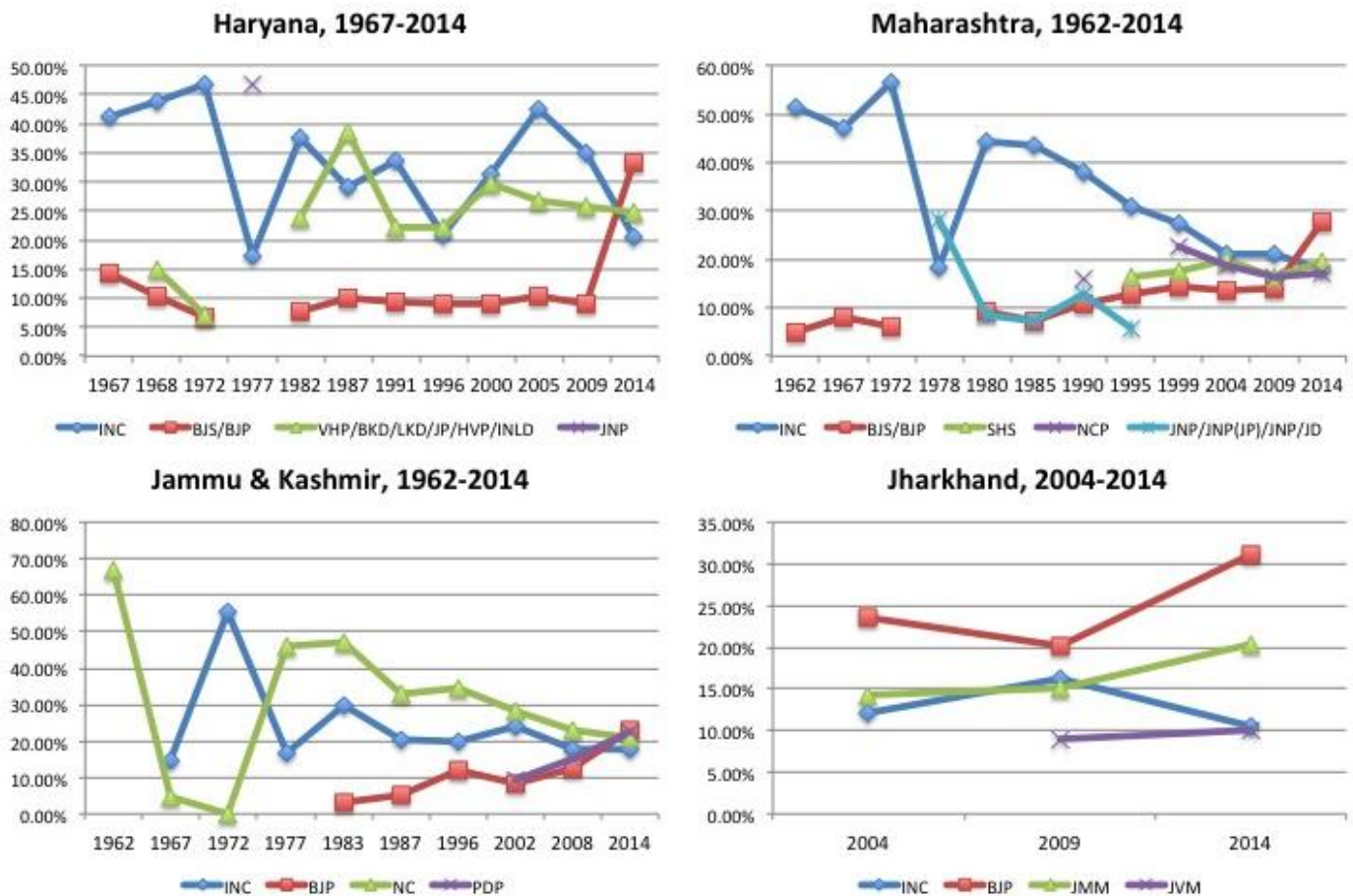
It formed a government alone in Haryana and Maharashtra for the first time<sup>4</sup>. In Jharkhand, the BJP fell short of a majority of seats but ultimately obtained it when six out of the eight representatives of the Jharkhand Vikas Morcha, a minor state-based party, defected to its ranks.

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3. The BJP in May 2014 obtained 52% of seats with 32% of vote share.

4. Though the Shiv Sena, a pro-Marathi regionalist and chauvinist party, ultimately joined the BJP, to consolidate the majority.

Graph 1: Main Parties' Vote Share Performance in Four State Elections



Source: Adapted from ECI Data.

A comparison of state-wise results between the 2014 General Elections and the recent state elections reveals that the BJP either maintained its vote share in Haryana and Maharashtra, or got a lower score. There was no vote share progression as such.

**Table 1: Comparative performance of the BJP and INC in 2014 General Elections and in Five State Elections**

	BJP		INC	
	GE 2014	SE 2014-15	GE 2014	SE 2014-15
<b>Haryana</b>	34.74% 7/10	33.2% 47/90	22.92% 1/10	20.3% 15/90
<b>Maharashtra</b>	27.37% 23/49	27.81% 121/289	18.16% 2	17.8% 42/289
<b>Jharkhand</b>	40.11% 12/14	31.26% 37/81	13.28% 0	10.5% 6/81
<b>J&amp;K</b>	32.36% 3/6	23% 25/87	22.86% 0	10.5% 12/87
<b>Delhi</b>	46.41% 7/7	32.78% 3/70	15.15% 0	10% 0/70

Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data.

The Congress, on the other hand, continues to slip downward, uniformly hitting historical lows. Both the BJP's progression and the Congress's decline are more spectacular if one compares the 2014/15 results to the preceding state elections.

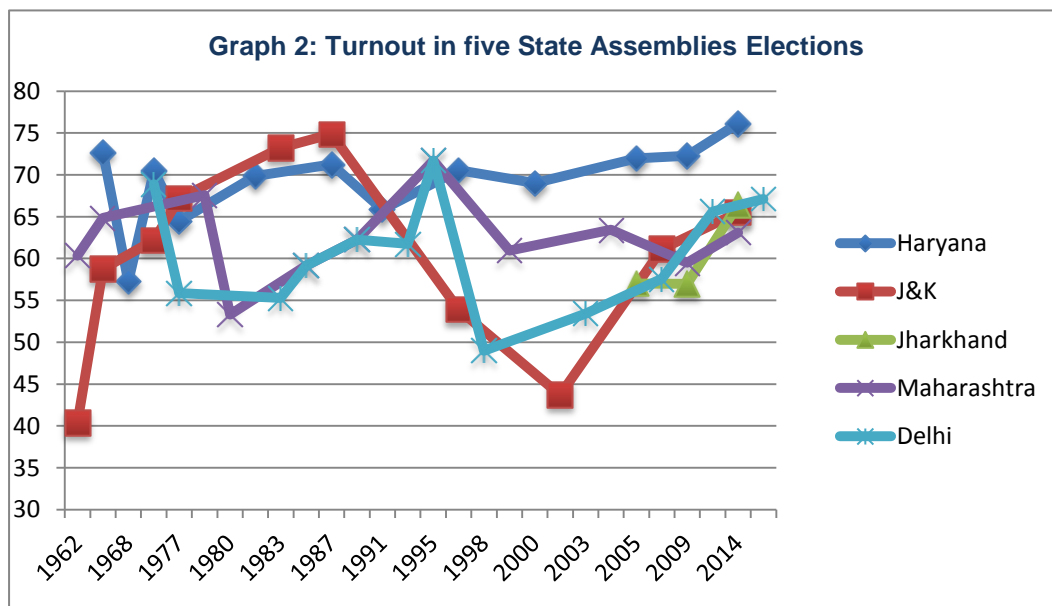
**Table 2: Comparative performance of the BJP and INC in Five State Elections**

	BJP		INC	
	2009-10	2014-15	2008-13	2014-15
<b>Haryana</b>	9.04% 4/90	33.2% 47/90	35.1% 40/90	20.3% 15/90
<b>Maharashtra</b>	14.02% 46/289	27.81% 121/289	21% 82/289	17.8% 42/289
<b>Jharkhand</b>	20.18% 18/81	31.26% 37/81	16.1% 36/81	10.5% 6/81
<b>J&amp;K</b>	12.45% 11/87	23% 25/87	17.8% 17/87	10.5% 12/87
<b>Delhi</b>	33.07% 31/70	32.78% 3/70	14% 8/70	10% 0/70

Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data.

The surge in vote share credits the notion of a pro-BJP wave. Available survey data suggests that the party succeeded in consolidating its traditional support among the upper castes with support from voters from most segments of the electorate, except Muslims<sup>5</sup>. Recent work also suggests that the BJP's victory partly lied on its capacity to attract new voters, particularly among the youth (Heath, 2015), and on its capacity to mobilize record numbers of voters in cities, who in the recent past have tended to stay at home on polling days.

It is worth noting that these elections took place in the context of a sharp increase of participation which, at 66.4% in 2014, was the highest turnout ever recorded for a national election. Turnout in the five post-2014 state elections have confirmed that trend.



Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data.

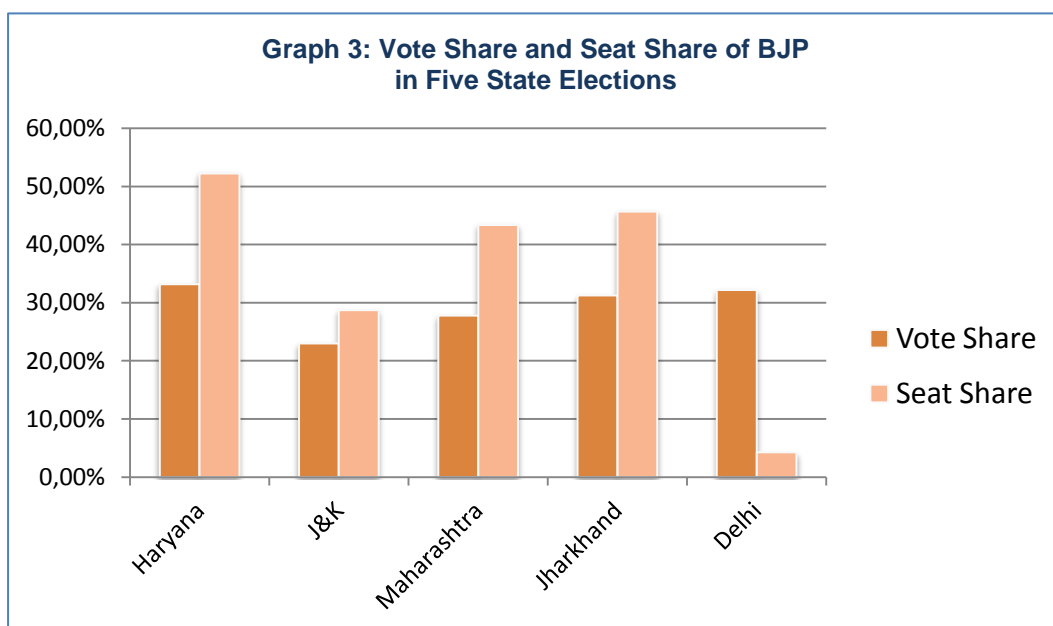
This, however, should not be read as the result of a popular wave in favor of a particular party. Such as it is, the increase in turnout predates the recent rise of the BJP and can be seen uniformly across states, regardless of the competition's configuration or who the main actors are. The rise in turnout is largely attributed to the Election Commission's cleaning of the electoral roll and to its voters' drive campaigns, particularly targeted towards women who now vote in the same proportion as men (Quraishi, 2014).

5. CSDS Lokniti National Election Survey, 2014.

## *The BJP, dominant but not hegemonic*

Calling these results a triumph for the BJP would nevertheless be an exaggeration. As in 2014, the party benefited for the disproportionality effect of the electoral system. The combination of a First-past-the-post majority electoral system with a fragmented political landscape means that the distribution of votes among parties determines the conversion of votes into seats for the winner. The more dispersed the vote, the more disproportionate the conversion into seats.

Thus, the dispersion of votes between Congress and other regional parties helped the BJP to get a disproportionate number of seats in the four state elections of 2014.



Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data.

This effect can go both ways. In Delhi, the BJP lost 28 seats between 2013 and 2015, despite maintaining its vote share. On the other hand, it could convert a minority of votes in Haryana (33.2%) into a majority of seats (52.2%), which it could not do in the three other states.

We then see that the BJP's performance everywhere remains more or less in the bracket of 30% of vote share, or, in other words, that the general interest catch-all campaign of the BJP can't go very far beyond the mark of 30% vote share. This serves as a reminder that there remains a large majority of voters that does not opt for the BJP but disperses its votes between various other parties.

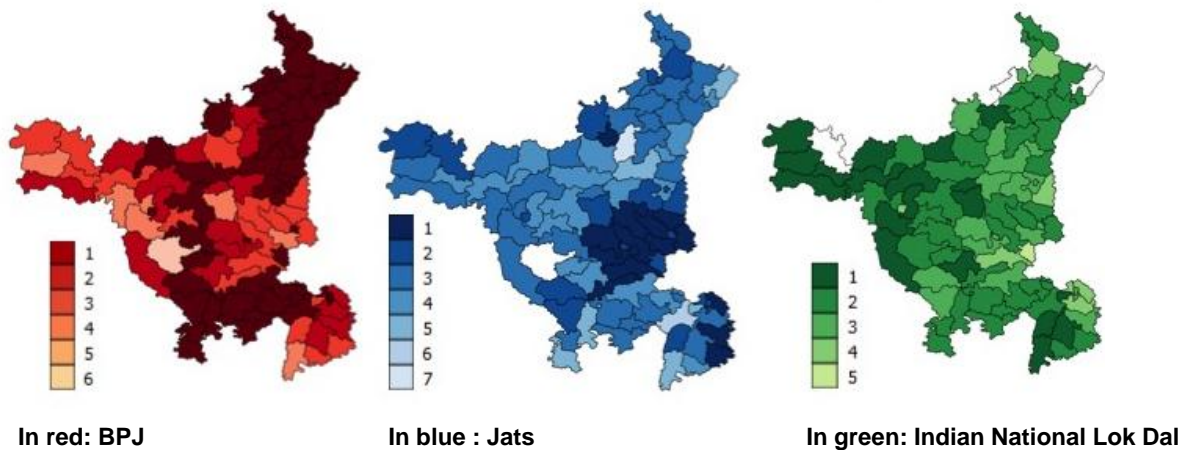
## Electoral cartography

The electoral cartography of the BJP's performance reveals that its victories are often limited to specific areas, or sub regions within states. It was mentioned earlier that the 2014 General Elections were won essentially in the Hindi Belt and in the Western States. But that does not mean that the BJP's performance was uniform or evenly distributed across sub-regions. There is a phenomenon of territorial concentration of electoral performance that is not often acknowledged and that calls for nuance when analysts or political actors talk about landslide, wave or sweeping victories.

In order to make sense, electoral cartography should be complemented by caste and general demographic as well as socio-economic cartography, which is difficult to do, notably owing to the absence of caste data in the latter case. One can, however, try to brush broad strokes.

In Haryana, the map reveals that the BJP swept seats in two broad sub-regions in the north and south. The middle part – largely dominated by Jats<sup>6</sup> loyal to the previous Chief Minister, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, remained with Congress, while the western districts of the state – strongholds of the Chautala family and also part of the Jat-dominated area – remained loyal to the Indian National Lok Dal.

**Map 1: Main Parties' Positions in Haryana State Assembly Elections, 2014**



Source: Gilles Verniers Indian Elections Data, Ashoka Center for Political Data Analysis. Done with QGIS.

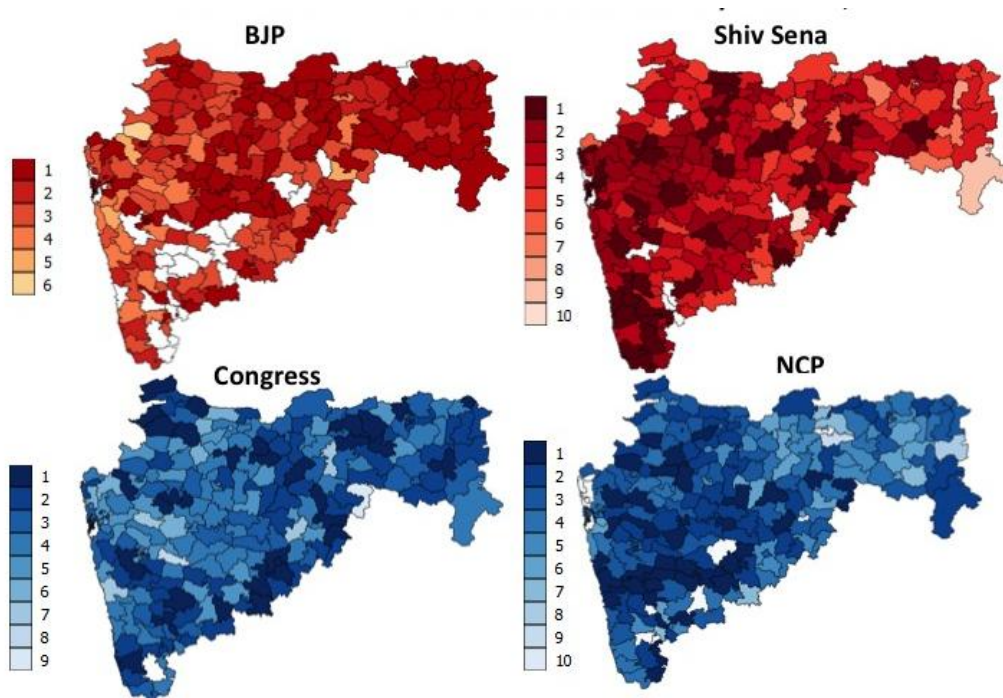
6. The Jats are a cluster of a predominantly agrarian landowning caste, present in the states of Haryana, Punjab and in Western Uttar Pradesh. They gained prominence in the 1960s following important agrarian transformations and have gradually become the dominant social, economic and political force in these regions.



The BJP performed better in some of the more urbanized districts, where land-generated wealth and industrialization have boosted the size of the middle class and transformed the landholding rural elites into a new class of capitalist investors. The local caste equations – the Jat vote being divided between three parties in different areas – also contributed to the cantonment of the BJP in the south and in the north of the state.

In Maharashtra, the BJP's performance is concentrated in the state's hinterland – the Vidharba region and the Nagpur area, which are traditionally conservative, pro-BJP regions. The southern districts remained a stronghold of Sharad Pawar's National Congress Party and the remaining part of the coastal and central districts remained highly competitive, with Congress resisting in some dispersed pockets and the Shiv Sena scoring beyond its traditional coastal concentration.

**Map 2: Main Parties' Position in Maharashtra State Assembly Elections, 2014**



Source: Gilles Verniers Indian Elections Data, Ashoka Center for Political Data Analysis. Done with QGIS.

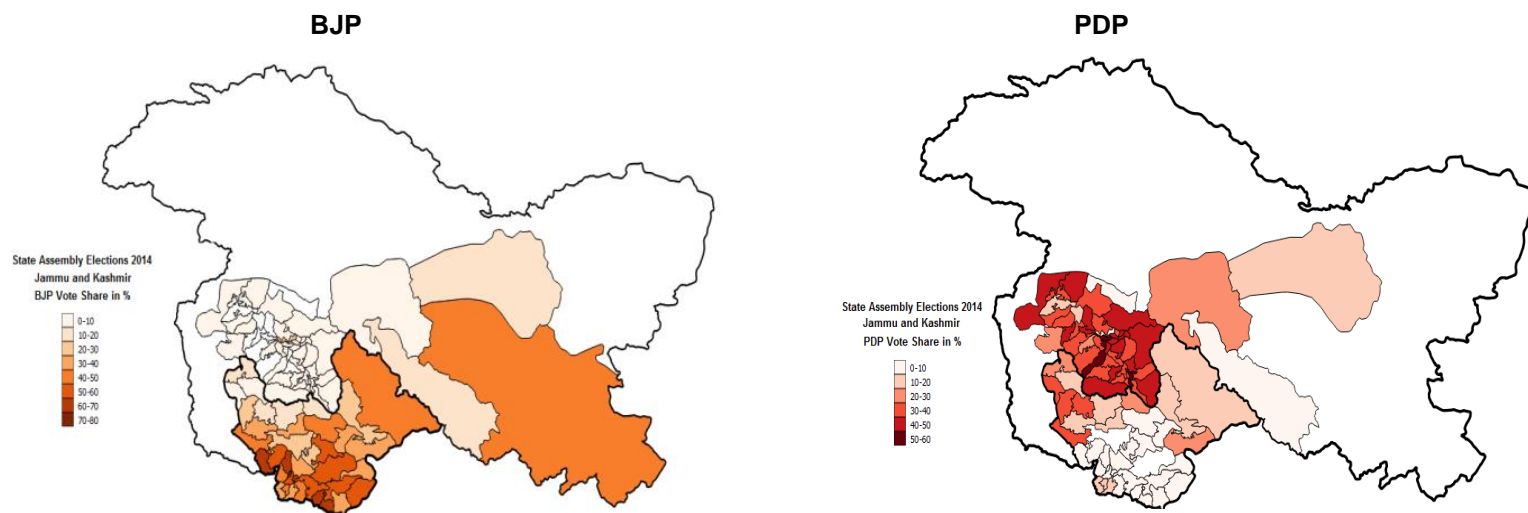
The Shiv Sena emerged as a Mumbai-based party, then grew essentially in coastal Maharashtra, a sub-region far richer and more developed than the rural hinterland, and usually more competitive. For twenty-five years, it contested in an alliance with the BJP, with which they had some sort of a territorial complementarity. The break-up of the alliance with the BJP led the Shiv Sena to field far more



candidates than in previous elections. However, that did not change the geography of the party by much, barring a few good performances in various constituencies located in central Maharashtra.

This pattern of sub-regional concentration is even stronger in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, divided in three sub-regions – The Valley in the north, predominantly Muslim and including the capital, Srinagar, the Jammu District in the south, predominantly Hindu, and the region of Ladakh, a vast, largely deserted, predominantly Buddhist area in the east. The BJP scored 23% overall in the state but those votes were concentrated in Jammu, where it won 40,7% of the votes polled. By contrast, all the BJP candidates fielded in the Valley lost their deposit, aggregating only 3, 5% of the votes.

**Map 3: Vote Share Performance of BJP and PDP in Jammu & Kashmir State Assembly Elections, 2014**



Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data. Using QGIS.

The People's Democratic Party, a regional party created by Mehbooba Mufti in 1999 to advocate self-rule for Kashmir, swept the Valley and made inroads in half a dozen seats of Jammu. The factors leading to the sub-regional limitations of the BJP vary from one state to another. In Jammu & Kashmir, the rift is clearly religious, the BJP being unable to win votes in Muslim dominated areas.

The factors explaining this territorial concentration of parties are many and it is beyond the scope of this paper to demonstrate their impact. One can mention demographic variations, socio-economic variables, the impact of legacy and the presence of strong party-territory linkages, nourished by patronage, such as in the

districts of South Maharashtra, where the leadership and cadre of the National Congress Party of Sharad Pawar is deeply enmeshed with the sugar industry. Very often, the degree to which parties are embedded within local economic structures accounts for their success and longevity.

This exercise, however, shows that the BJP still struggles to develop a “pan-state” presence and therefore struggles to go beyond the mark of 30% of vote share, which, in the right circumstances, can be converted into a majority of seats.

### ***The Delhi defeat, a turning point?***

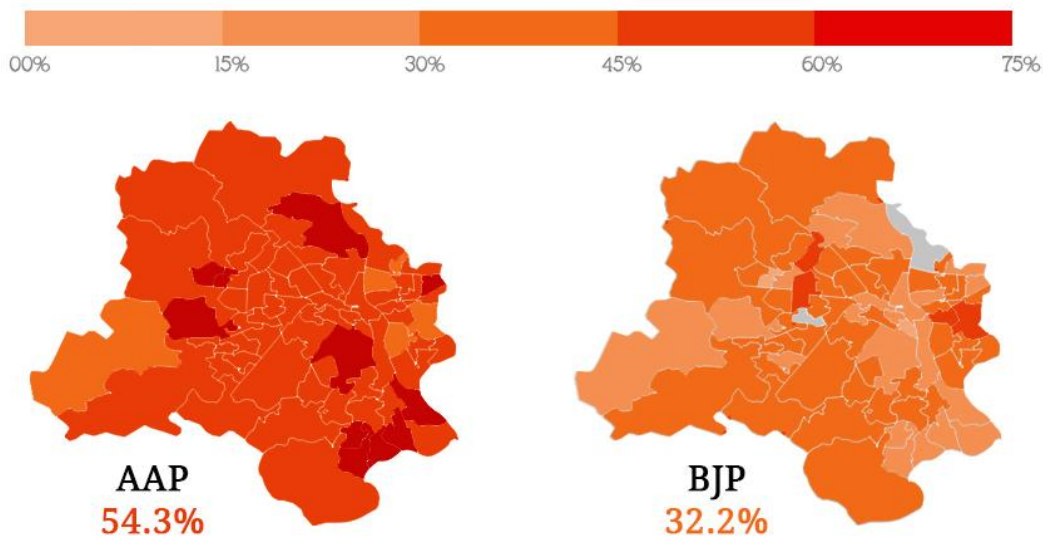
All appeared well for the BJP until the Delhi elections, in which the BJP was reduced to a distant runner-up, 22% of vote share behind the winner and enough representatives – three – to fill an auto-rickshaw. This election was initially presented as a duel between two strong personalities – Narendra Modi for the BJP and Arvind Kejriwal, former Chief Minister of Delhi and leader of a two-year old formation, the Aam Admi Party (“Party of the Common Man”), or AAP.

The AAP had won the previous elections in 2013, but with a minority government. The Chief Minister resigned after 49 days, when he could not pass the Lokpal Bill (an ombudsman reform) in the Assembly. The BJP later won the general elections in Delhi in a landslide, grabbing the capital’s seven seats, defeating both an AAP still on its knees after the resignation of Arvind Kejriwal, and a comatose Congress.

Much to everyone’s surprise, the AAP was practically resurrected on the eve of the January 2015 state elections and demonstrated that it could still mobilize thousands of volunteers across caste and class lines to hold an efficient and convincing door-to-door campaign, which led to a stunning victory.

Not only did the AAP win 67 of the 70 seats of the Assembly, but it did so with the highest vote share ever recorded in the capital, nearly evenly distributed across the territory. The AAP registered its highest vote share in some of the poorest constituencies of the city – including many of the reserved seats – but also scored high in the posh seats of South Delhi and in Central Delhi, which hosts a large population working in the state and central government bureaucracy.

**Map 4: Spatial Distribution of Vote Share in Delhi Elections – 2015**



Source: Adapted from ECI Data by Ashoka University Political Data Center.

The near collapse of the Congress, which was reduced to 10% of the vote share, had turned this election into a bipolar fight between the AAP and the BJP.

Despite the quasi-uniform spread of the vote share, there was a class angle to the AAP's victory. It found its support massively among the lower classes, in tune with its anti daily-style corruption campaign and pro-poor stances. It also found traction amongst the middle class and the upper classes that resisted the appeals of the BJP. In addition, the AAP siphoned the Muslim vote that traditionally goes to Congress.

On the other side, the BJP's campaign was marred with difficulties. The party President's practice to centralize ticket distribution, to poach other parties' candidates and to discard local leadership met for the first time serious resistance from local cadres, which translated into lack of enthusiasm for mobilization. The reports of the early success of the AAP's campaign, which mobilized on local economic issues and was drawing large crowds in its rallies, sent the signal that it would be a much stronger opponent than the dying Congress it contested against in other states.

Sensing these difficulties, the party chose to field a Chief Ministerial candidate, contrary to its usual practice of keeping the designation of the executive's head until after the polls. Dr. Kiran Bedi, a former Director General of the Police and a figure of the same anti-corruption movement Arvind Kejriwal emerged from, was parachuted into the campaign a few weeks before the poll, much to

the surprise and dismay of the BJP's local bosses. Kiran Bedi was a popular figure but a newcomer to electoral politics. She had a history of blasting national parties, Congress and BJP alike, and found herself now at the head of the national party in power at the Center. Her rigid style, commanding and uncompromising, did not go well with the necessity to accommodate party cadres. As a result, the BJP could not contain the rise of the AAP, despite maintaining its past state election vote share.

The result was analysed as a defeat of the BJP's strategy – and of its chief strategist Amit Shah. It was also seen as a personal defeat of Kiran Bedi, who could not emulate the sympathy wave that Arvind Kejriwal created, and as a personal defeat of the Prime Minister, who contrary to the preceding state elections, engaged himself half-heartedly in the campaign.

Would these elections constitute a turning point? Electorally speaking, no. Delhi elections are specific. The capital has a history of being not politically aligned with the party at the Center and besides, the presence of the AAP, a local party, makes these elections a further outlier. However, these elections – and the AAP – made the demonstration that the BJP could be defeated in a bipolar fight, and in a campaign that was fought on the terrain of development, on which it is supposed to have a competitive advantage. The Delhi elections also demonstrated the limits of an electoral strategy consisting in imposing centralized control over candidate selection, bulldozing the party's internal organizations, ignoring factions and fielding namesake candidates meant to contest on behalf of the leading figure of the party.

Politically speaking, these elections were seen as the first stumble of what was previously considered an unstoppable victory machine. Since the Delhi elections, the opposition found its voice in Parliament, effectively obstructing the legislative process in the two sessions that followed. Parts of the press also started to more openly criticize the Prime Minister and his government, denouncing the over-centralization of power in the hands of the Prime Minister's Office, the undemocratic rule of Amit Shah over the party structure, the silence of the executive vis-à-vis the multiplying public expressions of intolerance of members of the majority or members of parent organizations of the Sangh Parivar<sup>7</sup>. The defeat sent a signal to all that the BJP could be defeated, within a year of having decisively won at the Center.

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7. The term "Sangh Parivar" designates the family of organizations constitutive of the Hindu nationalist movement. It includes parties, other political organizations, unions and militant outfits.

# Analyzing the BJP's strategy: a co-existence of old and new registers of electoral mobilization

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Throughout these elections, the BJP followed a distinctive strategic blueprint, consisting of five essential elements.

## The shedding of pre-electoral alliances

The first element is the shedding of pre-electoral alliances, a regular feature of Indian politics that aims at increasing the victory prospects of parties through pre-electoral seat-sharing agreements. The practice is ancient in India, but was institutionalized in the late 1990s, when the “everyone for themselves” strategy led to impossible government formations and unstable majorities. Alliances and seat-sharing agreements were crucial to the emergence of the BJP in several states and on the national scene, where it could finally topple the Congress and the third front coalition by creating its own large National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1998.

Since the 2014 campaign, the BJP has left all its traditional allies and fought every election on its own. In Haryana, that meant leaving the old alliance with Om Prakash Chautala's Indian National Lok Dal and the more recent alliance with Kuldeep Bishnoi's Haryana Janhit Congress.

In Maharashtra, the BJP discarded a 25 year-old alliance with the Shiv Sena, a chauvinistic regional party (with whom they patched up post-election, the BJP being short of MLAs -- Members of Legislative Assembly -- to obtain a majority of seats in the State Assembly).

In Kashmir, the BJP did not engage into conversations with any party for possible alliances<sup>8</sup>.

In Jharkhand, the Congress, the BJP and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) all contested separately. The BJP, however, tied up with a non-effective micro-party, the AJSU, dropping its former ally, Babulal Marandi's JVM(P).

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8. Former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's National Conference was previously in an alliance with the BJP, from the late 1990s to 2002.

The BJP was not the only party to follow that route. The Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra also contested separately. The National Conference, previously in a ruling alliance with the Congress in Kashmir, also went to the polls on its own. The fragmentation of the political space due to the split of traditional alliances greatly helped the BJP to obtain its majorities.

This clearly marks a departure from past trends and reveals that after nearly twenty years of coalition politics, national parties are once again eager to rule alone. Parties engage in pre-poll agreements when they sense or aim for post-poll coalitions. Pre-poll alliances also make sense when different parties target different and specific segments of the electorate, largely defined along caste. An alliance helps parties to broaden their base without having to dilute their core support.

In recent years, parties have developed more inclusive stances, seeking the support of voters across caste lines, often at the cost of diluting these parties' core support (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2012). Targeting a wide audience gives dominant parties the prospect of turning minorities of votes into majorities of seats. In that context, seat-sharing agreements are seen as potentially limiting the growth of parties.

### **The strong centralization of the campaign's planning and strategy**

The second component of the BJP campaign has been the discarding of local party structures and organizations, through the centralization of the campaign's planning and strategy with the party high command, headed by the party's president, and the Prime Minister's henchman, Amit Shah. Centralization is a common feature of political parties in India, but generally the ticket distribution exercise consists of creating balances between castes and factional representation. In the case of the BJP, the practice has been a brutal top-down imposition of the high command's wishes. It was also the occasion for the party and its many professional private sector consultants to display their scientific acumen through the elaboration of a rational foolproof ticket allocation method.

Local party structures were hardly consulted for the distribution of tickets, which is traditionally a means for local leaders to measure their influence within the party. In fact, the party high command took the opportunity of these elections to discard the deadwood – putting aside all aspiring candidates with a history of losing – and to side-line local leaders. Instead, they proceeded to make cold calculations to determine the profile of the ideal candidate, who favorably matched local caste demographics. The strategy would occasionally lead to poaching other parties' candidates.



## The personalization of the campaign behind the personae of the Prime Minister

The third character of the BJP's strategy is the complete personalization of the campaign behind the personae of the Prime Minister, projected as a benevolent providential leader who, strong from his experience of steering India's fastest-growing state for thirteen years, would apply his mind to do the same at the national level, disregarding special interests, be they of caste, region or corporation. The theme "minimal government, maximal governance" of the 2014 General Elections was rolled-out in as many versions in the following state elections. Under the advice of (sometimes foreign) advertising and PR firms, state elections were transformed into personal referenda or approval exercises for the Prime Minister. This was encapsulated by the slogan *Chalo chale, Modi ke saath* (Let's go with Modi), coined by the firms Soho Square and Ogilvy and Mathers. The Prime Minister campaigned extensively in these elections, appearing in 27 rallies in Maharashtra alone, 10 in Haryana, 4 in Jammu & Kashmir. This strategy was also meant to compensate the fact that the BJP did not have many recognizable faces in these states. For Maharashtra and Haryana alone, Narendra Modi's speeches were relayed in rural areas through twenty thousand digital vans and pick-up trucks carrying large flat screens<sup>9</sup>.

Does this mean that the BJP, a party that rose in national politics through violent religious mobilization and through the stigmatization of the country's largest minority, has shed its old skin to wear a new one? Not quite.

## The use of the Hindu right-wing mobilization's classic tropes

The fourth distinct character of the BJP's campaign is that the classic tropes of the Hindu right-wing mobilization are still relied upon, but in a more cryptic, out-of-the-limelight manner. Caste also remains the main criteria for the selection of candidates, the electoral map being divided into "sociologically homogeneous zones" (that is to say, caste-wise) and candidates picked accordingly.

Religion, also, remained a powerful vehicle of political mobilization. Just as the North India campaign in 2014 had been preceded by violent communal riots in Muzaffarnagar a year before the polls, many of the 2014 and 2015 state elections were similarly preceded by virulent campaigns led either by BJP local figures or by sister organizations of the Sangh Parivar. The *Ghar Vapsi* campaign (literally the home-coming of Muslims and other non-Hindus to

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9. See <[www.livemint.com](http://www.livemint.com)>.

Hinduism in public ceremonies) in the fall of 2014; the unleashing of Yogi Adityanath, a firebrand hindu nationalist Member of Parliament from Eastern Uttar Pradesh who, in a speech in his constituency in April 2014, warned Muslims that Hindus would unbury and rape dead Muslim women, or advocated that the cow be declared *Rashtra Mata* (Mother of the Nation); the attacks of churches in Delhi in December 2014; the leak to a national newspaper of the religion demographic figures from the latest 2011 census days before the Delhi polls; and the many verbal and physical attacks against authors, artists or academics – these are as many signals sent to the ideological core support base of the BJP, creating a climate of intolerance.

One cannot link all these events and declarations to a particular political party or particular right-wing organization, and it would be erroneous to do so. But the silence of the government on the subject and the many signals sent by its members on the ground have created a space for the expression of such opinions and has emboldened those who hold the view that India ought to belong to Hindus and that all other religions should be confined to the invisibility of the private sphere.

Thus, the old and the new registers of electoral mobilization co-exist, far from the claim that the BJP is now heading towards entirely new forms of mobilization and agenda. While the Prime Minister leads a massive public campaign on the themes of development and inclusion – topics that speak to voters across castes and particularly among the many groups that are not represented otherwise by strong parties – the party and its sister organizations plant the seeds of division of the electorate ahead of the elections, along caste and religious lines, with the objective of converting their vote share into majorities of seats.

## The appointment of relatively unknown figures as Chief Ministers

The fifth and final element of the BJP's strategy consists of appointing relatively unknown figures as Chief Ministers, who do not belong to the traditionally politically dominant groups. In Haryana, a state politically dominated by the Jats, the BJP leadership appointed Manohar Lal Khattar, a first-time Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) and life-long member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu Nationalist organization from which the BJP emerged historically. A Punjabi Khatri<sup>10</sup>, he is the first non-Jat Chief Minister in Haryana since Bhajan Lal – a Bishnoi<sup>11</sup> – in 1991<sup>12</sup>. He occupied a

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10. Khatri are an upper caste traditionally involved with trade. They are found mostly among Hindus and Sikhs, and also among Muslims.

11. The Bishnois are the members of a religious group founded in Rajasthan by Guru Jambheshwar, a local ruler, in the region of Bikaner, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. They are traditionally associated with the protection of the environment.



role of party strategist for state elections and had worked in the past with Narendra Modi on the 1996 Haryana state elections. Modi appointed him as campaign planner for subsequent elections.

In Maharashtra, the BJP high command picked Devendra Fadnavis, a four-time MLA and former mayor of Nagpur. An RSS Pracharak (*volunteer*), he rose within the party through its youth wing. Although the Nagpur seat is symbolically and politically important - the city hosts the national headquarters of the RSS - Devendra Fadnavis was never a regional leader of the party, never led a faction (factions were organized around more senior leaders such as the late Gopinath Munde or Eknath Khadse). In a state dominated by Marathas, which hold 40% of the seats of the state assembly since the creation of the state in 1960 (Jaffrelot, 2009), Devendra Fadnavis is only its second Brahmin Chief Minister<sup>13</sup>.

In Chhattisgarh, a state that has known ten Chief Ministers in its fourteen years of existence<sup>14</sup>, the BJP picked Raghubar Das, a first-generation politician, former Tata Steel employee, five-time MLA of the steel-town of Jamshedpur and deputy Chief Minister in the 2009 Shibu Soren government. A Teli by caste<sup>15</sup>, he was earlier on handpicked by Amit Shah, who made him party Vice-President, bypassing many senior party bosses. He is the first non-tribal Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh.

These three choices indicate that the BJP does not wish to align itself with the traditional power brokers of these states, usually represented by strong regional parties, and that it seeks to build support among the majority voters belonging to non-dominant groups.

These choices also indicate that the BJP picks its chief ministerial candidates within the cadre of the party or within the RSS ranks, but not among the existing pool of regional leaders. Very much like the Congress, the BJP grows defiant of autonomous regional leadership, which could brew future revolt or rivalry.

Moreover, Raghubar Das and Manohar Lal Khattar are both from humble backgrounds, sons of labourers and the latter also the son of a migrant from pre-independence Pakistan. These profiles contrast with local party bosses who tend to have a more elite background and are usually more embedded with corporate interests. This fits well with the narrative that the Prime Minister works for the benefit of lower classes, while enabling him to appoint party apparatchiks who have already demonstrated their loyalty to him and who don't draw their legitimacy from any particular local faction.

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12. Since the first elections in 1966, Haryana has been ruled for 34 years by six different Jat Chief Ministers.

13. Since 1960, Maharashtra has been ruled by 14 Marathas Chief Ministers over 46 years.

14. Chhattisgarh has had nine governments and three stints of President's Rule since 2000.

15. Telis are OBCs. It is the same caste as the Prime Minister.

The BJP thus aims at presenting itself as a disruptive political force, cut from the past and forward-looking, aiming at gathering the social bases that are either at odds with the local dominant groups, or in direct competition with them.

The reality is more prosaic and reveals that the “old thinking” has not disappeared, far from it. Survey data reveal that if the BJP attracts votes from across caste lines, it does so across a class divide. To put it simply, the richer the voter, the more he/she tends to vote for the BJP. The two groups in which the BJP goes beyond that class logic are the upper castes and the non-dominant OBCs, two groups at the heart of a de facto caste-based electoral strategy.

# The political consequences of state elections

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State elections matter for at least three reasons. First of all, since the progressive liberalization of the economy and the process of political and administrative decentralization started in the early 1990s, states have gained considerable autonomy vis-à-vis the Center, notably in the domain of economic policy. Over the years, states have been recipients of a greater share of national fiscal resources, which gave them more power and more room for policy maneuver.

Second, regional governments are instrumental for the implementation of most Central government policies and schemes. In the current configuration, states are run by powerful executives that tend to centralize powers, at the expense of the separation of powers. State assemblies are either ineffective or irrelevant to law-making or to the formulation of regulations. State bureaucracies are more often than not placed under the control or interference of the executive branch, controlled by political parties that are themselves controlled by centralizing political figures. Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, Naveen Patnaik in Odisha, the Yadav family in Uttar Pradesh are all different versions of the same principle of concentration, personalization and instrumentalisation of executive power.

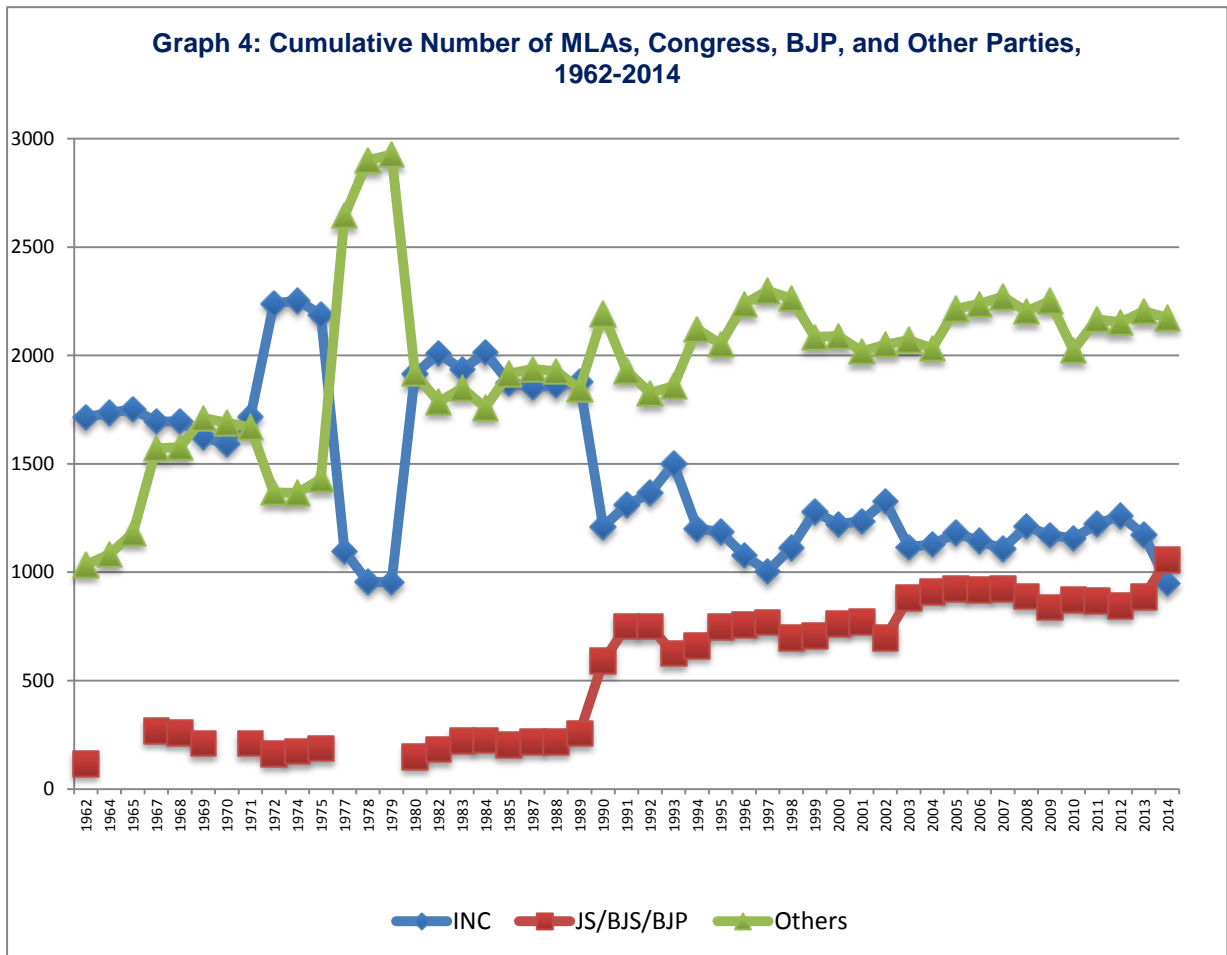
In many ways, the current configuration of power concentration by the Prime Minister in Delhi signifies a regionalization of national politics, rather than an odd case of individual's authoritarianism. Who is in control of state governments is therefore vital for the Center and its policy ambitions.

Third, the weight of parties in regional assemblies determines their share of seats in the Rajya Sabha, or upper house of parliament. Despite its majority in the Lok Sabha, the BJP is in a minority in the Rajya Sabha, with 48 seats out of 240 (the Congress has 68). This situation enables the opposition to effectively block or considerably delay the adoption of some of the government's key legislative projects<sup>16</sup>.

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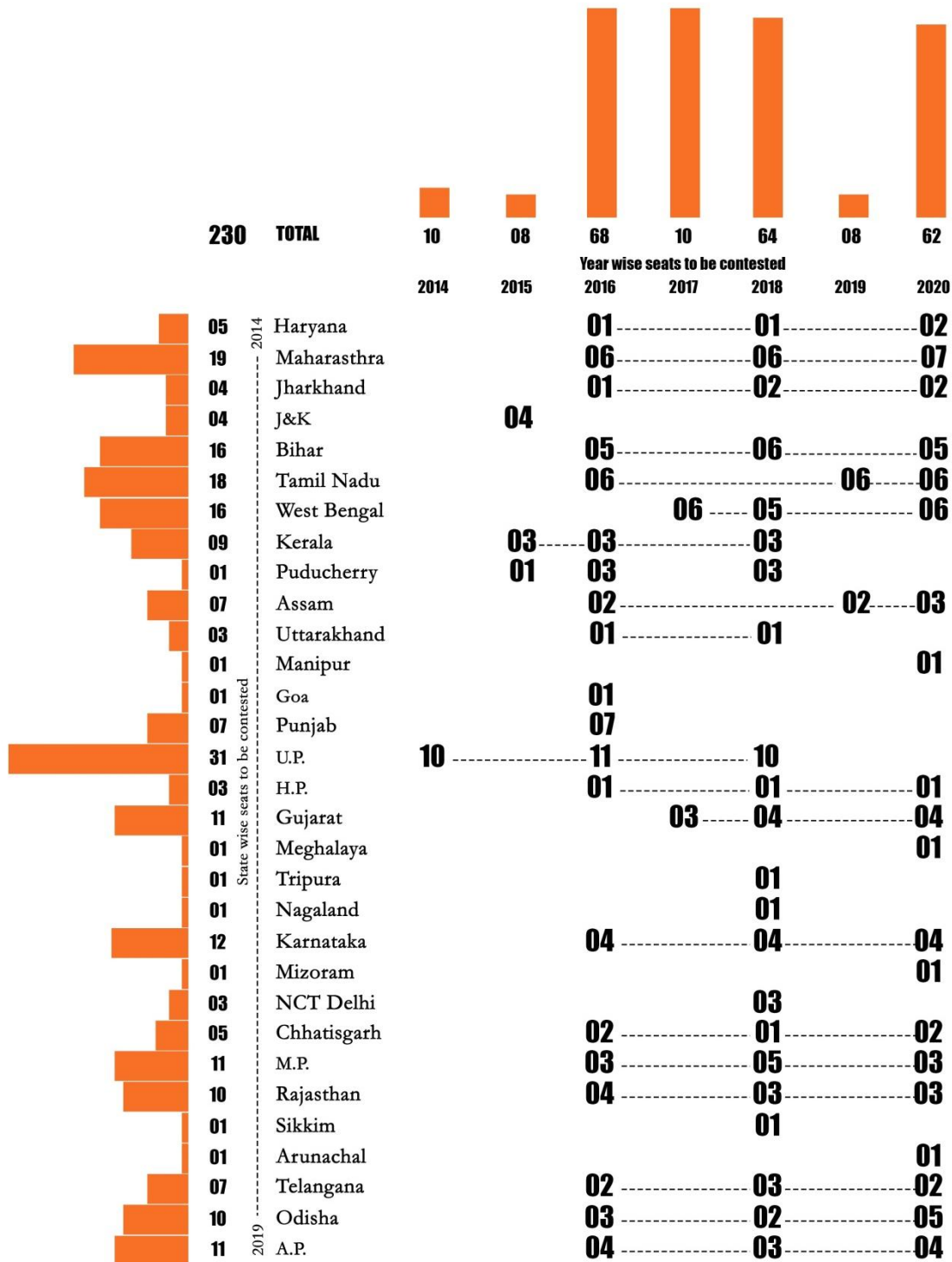
16. In the Monsoon session of 2015, the Government failed to introduce yet another ordinance extension for its project of amending the Land Acquisition Act, in face of the frontal opposition in Parliament, and also due to mounting disagreement about the bill within its own ranks.

In 2014, the BJP outnumbered the Congress in terms of MLAs for the first time, which in due time will give it an edge over its rival in the Rajya Sabha. That being said, regional parties taken together remain largely ahead, preventing any national party of a possible majority in the upper house.



Further, the members' renewal system of the Rajya Sabha ensures that today's gains are only tomorrow's benefits. The House renews its members by thirds every two years, which creates a delay for the gains obtained in state elections. It can take up to six years before a win in a State Assembly converts into Rajya Sabha seats. In the current context, even if the BJP should win every single state election during its current mandate, it would not reap the benefits before 2018, as illustrated in table 3.

Table 3: State and Year Wise Rajya Sabha Renewable Calendar



Source: Adapted from Rajya Sabha Secretariat by Ashoka University Political Data Center.

Another range of consequences is that the strategy of elevating relative newcomers to responsibilities also included the appointment of figures that were in phase with the conservative base of the party. As mentioned earlier, both Manohar Lal Khattar and Devendra Fadnavis are members of the RSS. Since their nominations, both have been engaged in a sort of conservative competition – banning books, the trade and consumption of beef or imposing meat bans weeks before and after a Jain festival. The latter has revived a colonial-era anti-sedition law to quash dissenting voices while the former made a self-proclaimed god man – Baba Ramdev – brand ambassador of the state – with Minister-like attributes including high-level police protection, as well as public funds to help him develop his business interests in the state. This, added to the unhidden coordination meeting that took place in September 2015 in Delhi between the main members of the central government and the RSS top leadership, indicate that the BJP never loses an eye towards its conservative base, or move astray from the Hindu right conservative socio-cultural agenda. The ties between BJP government and the RSS aren't new but this was the first time that a large number of Cabinet ministers reported on their actions and policy plans to the RSS top brass in such an open manner<sup>17</sup>. This meeting questioned the autonomy of the government vis-à-vis a non-public social and political organization.

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17. "Top BJP Members Attend RSS Meet, opposition questions govt's accountability", *Indian Express*, 3 September 2015, available at: <<http://indianexpress.com>>.

## Learning Political lessons and future Assembly elections

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The eventful year of 2014 and the Delhi elections indicate significant political evolutions in Indian politics. The emergence of the BJP as a dominant political force means that the onus of coalition politics has shifted towards a quest for single majorities, a stance at odds with the coalition *dharma* (duty or in this case obedience to the necessity of building alliances) that defined Indian politics over the past twenty years.

In the same vein and more so than before, elections are fought around individuals and generic issues. Electoral campaigns are heavily personalized, focusing on party leaders portrayed as providential figures. This is certainly not new and one could mobilize the memories of Indira Gandhi, her son Rajiv, the providential V.P. Singh who tried to “cleanse” the political system, and earlier on the rallying political figures of Jayaprakash Narayan and Mahatma Gandhi. The difference today is that television, the web and social media amplify manifold – or provide opportunities to amplify manifold – the personalization of politics. The professionalization of electoral campaigns, the hiring of private sector consultants across the board, the development of rapid poll surveys and micro targeting of voters, all techniques imported from recent American elections, have given a more presidential tone to national elections, and transformed state elections into referenda about individuals.

Following the old adage that nothing succeeds like success, parties other than the BJP have started emulating its strategy. Thus, the Bihar elections of October-November 2015 were presented as a confrontation of individuals – Narendra Modi on one hand, Nitish Kumar and Laloo Prasad on the other. The latter two took stock of the BJP’s campaign theme and mobilized on the topics of governance, performance and inclusive development. They also professionalized their campaign in a similar fashion as the BJP<sup>18</sup>. In the process, the BJP lost some of its distinctiveness.

Parties have also learned the lesson from Delhi, which is that the BJP can be defeated if the fragmentation of the political space is tamed. The Delhi elections were bipolar by absence of the Congress,

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18. In fact, one of the key architects of the 2014 Modi campaign, Prashant Kishor, head of the CAG (Citizens for Accountable Governance) has shifted to Nitish Kumar to organize his campaign, involving micro-targeting, digital vans and panel pre-tested campaign slogans.

a shadow of its old self. Opposition parties in Bihar came in a grand coalition fighting the polls together, as a front, reminiscent of the Janata Parivar front of opposition parties that defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress after the emergency in 1977. This Janata 2.0, as it defined itself, proved to be a major obstacle for the BJP, which was forced to also take allies where it could – three small parties that did not represent a credible challenge to any component of the grand alliance, except in a few seats<sup>19</sup>.

**Table 4: Vote Share and Number of Seats of Main Parties in Bihar in the 2014 General Elections**

	BJP	LJP	BJP+LJP	RJD	JD(U)	RJD+JD(U)	INC
<b>Vote Share</b>	29.07	6.33	35.40	19.92	15.61	35.54	8.33
<b>Seats (total 40)</b>	21	6	27	4	2	6	2

Source: Adapted from ECI, Ashoka Centre for Political Data.

In the 2014 general elections, the combined vote share of the two main regional parties – Rashtriya Janata Dal and Janata Dal (United) – outpolled the BJP, or equaled the BJP's combined vote share with its ally, the Lok Jan Shakti Party. The RJD and the JD(U) were not allies then and we cannot say how they would have fared as allies, but both arguably brought together on the table above a third of the electorate. The addition of the Congress – a spent force in the state otherwise – in the alliance gave potentially a boost to the RJD-JD(U) alliance.

One could not predict the outcome judging from strategies alone. No one really knew how voters would respond to these and to parties' appeals. But the RJD-JD(U) strategy reveals that opposition parties have integrated the necessity to work together if they are to defeat the BJP. They may not have much in common and may have fought each other in the past – or still do – but they do share a distaste for dominance from the Center, be it of the Congress or of the BJP variety.

The unknown variable at the moment is the Congress Party. Still stunned by its defeat, it has regained some voice only recently, in the Monsoon session of Parliament, in which 44 MPs succeeded in jam-locking the functioning of Parliament for a full session. The

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19. This alliance comprises Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Jan Shakti Party, already a BJP ally in the 2014 General Elections, the Hindustani Awam Morcha, a makeshift of political parties aimed at giving a breathing space to the former Bihar Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi, appointed and then dismissed by Nitish Kumar, and the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party, a Kushwaha outfit created in 2013 and led by Upendra Kushwaha, currently a Minister of State in the Modi cabinet.



strategy as of now is to take more time to reorganize the party, find the ideas that will enable it once more to mobilize voters, and to throw support behind whoever may be in a position to defeat the BJP in the meantime. Going alone in the Haryana, Maharashtra, Jammu & Kashmir and Jharkhand poll has been disastrous for the party. They now nourish the hope that in a not-too-distant future, they may be able to place themselves at the Center of a grand non-BJP coalition.

The state elections that will follow in 2016 take place in states where the BJP has been growing in the recent years – Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala – but not to the point that it yields yet any significant number of seats. The State election in Assam, in 2016, might be more promising, as the BJP scored 36.5% of the vote share in 2014, again in a context of intense communalization of the local political life<sup>20</sup>. In none of these states does the BJP have recognizable leaders, which will probably lead the party to keep playing the Modi card. But should this card be less and less effective to gather votes – almost inevitability for a government that has now passed its period of grace – it is likely to create more and more tensions and difficulties at the Centre, progressively reinforcing the opposition.

The 2014 General Elections had shown that in aggregate, regional parties resisted well to the BJP wave and showed resilience in terms of vote share (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2015). It is likely that the turn of the tide currently carrying the BJP to power will come from them.

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20. The 2014 elections in Assam were marked – and preceded by – numerous communal incidents opposing Hindus and Muslims. Around 30 people died in various riots during the campaign itself. The Bangladeshi migrant issues, the Bodo tribes autonomist struggle, the aggressive assertion of the BJP and of the United Democratic Front – a local Muslim party led by a businessman – form a potent explosive mix that vitiates the social and political climate in the state.

## Conclusion

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The transformation brought by the 2014 General Elections and its repercussions in subsequent assembly elections are substantial but do not affect some of the fundamentals of Indian electoral politics. It is the division of the electorate and of the party system, along regional lines, caste lines and now more and more along class lines, that paves the road towards majorities. Single majorities are the outcome of a fragmented electorate and if the 2014 General Elections showed that the BJP's victory did not amount to the nationalization of politics – or at least not without strong caveats – the results of recent state elections have shown that the progression of the BJP was both limited socially – the party still struggles to go much beyond the bar of 30% vote share – and geographically – being usually constrained in particular sub regions of the states where it contests.

The new forms of political mobilization – technology at the service of campaigns on development – have not substituted themselves to the old tropes of electoral mobilization. Caste politics remains explicit and prevalent at the state level and local power equations between caste groups often determine the outcome of the election. Yet again, small numbers can create huge differences.

The main change is that the social groups and individuals that traditional politics had left aside for decades are now strongly supporting the BJP. These are large chunks of the electorate, composed of individuals belonging to the middle categories – not among the poorest, not among the dominant castes – living essentially in towns and mid-size cities, yet too small and too geographically dispersed to matter on their own in the political arena. These “leftover voters” have been swayed by the BJP's promise to pay them attention and to deliver on its economic promises, and they will be the first to run away should it fail to meet their expectations.

At the time of writing of this paper, the Bihar State Assembly elections took place, in October and November 2015. The BJP lost resoundingly against a pre-electoral alliance of regional parties, joined by the Congress Party. The election was marked, in contrast with the other elections described in this paper, by an overt communal campaign from the BJP that tried to impress upon voters the issues of cow protection, beef eating, and the scare of expansion of the affirmative action policies to Muslims. That departure from its prior strategy cost it dearly. The BJP lost 5% of the vote share compared to the 2014 General Elections and let its opponent win a solid two-thirds majority in the Assembly.

Thus, a first phase of the BJP ascension on the national scene has come to an end. Opposition parties have shown that the BJP could be defeated in different states (Delhi and Bihar) and in different manners – by the rise of a strong and unique contender like the AAP in Delhi, or by a defragmentation of the opposition through pre-electoral alliances. The next 18 months will be rough for the BJP, as future elections will take place in states dominated by strong regional parties. The Bihar elections have demonstrated that polarizing voters along religious lines can backfire, and that the climate of intolerance that has grown in the country can in effect be a nuisance to the government. How will the BJP react – concentrate on its base by further radicalizing its discourse, or reach out to moderates by tempering its tone and focusing on fixing a fledgling economy – is the question to which response will shape the course that India will take in the year to come.

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