

Decoding Election Mandate 2024 and Party System Change in India

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Abstract

The poll prediction of General Elections 2024 was unanimous that incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led alliance will return to power in India. The verdict was a psephological surprise, as it failed to win a majority in lower house of parliament, while its arch rival, the Indian National Congress (Congress) did a turnaround by winning 40 seats more since 2019 national elections. The highlights include scaling down of 'Modi wave' (political phenomenon), resurgence of left-liberal party alliance, dip in women's representation in lower house of parliament and wrong forecasting by opinion polls. The mandate signals a political system change from BJP's one-party supremacy with full freedom to promote Hindutva agenda (right-wing ideology) to neo multi-partism with restricted dominance. It debunks the global north discourse of downside of Indian democracy and reveals the political maturity of citizens in delivering an electoral message for reduction of imperfections in democratic politics.

Keywords

Indian elections 2024, party system, political parties, BJP, congress, women's representation

Introduction

The General Elections 2024 was a crucial milestone in Indian electoral politics as the Congress-led parties wedded to centrist-left ideology (INDIA) mounted its stiffest challenge to dislodge the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shepherded right-wing alliance (NDA) from corridors of political power. The mother of all elections held in the backdrop of global narrative of 'democratic backsliding and electoral autocracy' in India created a 'legitimacy crisis and trust deficit'. The parties opposed to the incumbent political establishment raised question marks on integrity of Election Commission of India (ECI) and credibility of 'Electronic Voting Machines' in precise counting of votes, creating cobwebs in the minds of the citizens. The elections was a referendum on Narendra Modi (Modi) 2.0 government advocating the primacy of Hindus and good governance, strongly contested by INDIA bloc aggressively campaigning for saving constitution and democracy, with guarantees of welfarism and freebies from both sides. The electioneering started in right earnest, but turned divisive and communal as the political alliances resorted to fear mongering and dog

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whistling their caste-religious constituencies for mobilization of votes. The electoral discourse hit a new low due to insulting barbs, vicious sarcasms and anti-religious epithets. Despite the negative campaigning, it primarily remained a plebiscitary of brand Modi with collateral testing of ECI's legitimacy in conducting equitable elections and opinion polls in accurate political predictions.

The media exit polls were unanimous in forecasting the return of BJP-led political parties with a bigger mandate. The outcome was a 'Psephological shock', as the saffron party could not win a simple majority (272 out of 543 seats) in lower house of Indian parliament, while its main competitor, the Congress did an impressive rebound by adding more than 40 seats since the previous national elections in 2019. Apart from grand old party, regional parties that were in pre-poll alliance with it did well and gap between two political alliances narrowed down considerably. The parties that did not join any of the alliances lost badly with severe depletion of parliamentary representation and bargaining power. The BJP alliance managed to secure a comfortable majority and form government, but the saffron party numerically lost its political influence and became dependent on allies and amenable to democratic functioning. The grand old party failed in forming the government, but presented its success as an election victory and the mandate against the BJP. The analysis of election verdict in popular writings and academic articles include decline of Modi's winning charisma, diminution of BJP, rise of Rahul Gandhi as a strong leader and revival of Congress party. The discourse focused on return of party system to multi-party or continuation of BJP's one-party dominance based on electoral gains or losses by national and regional parties and changing political power dynamics.

Thus, it becomes pertinent to conduct a post-mortem analysis of the verdict to find out if key takeaways reported contain sufficient evidence of qualitative research or descriptive statistics. This article comprises of three major parts. The *first* part focuses on issue dimensions of Indian national elections 2024, seats won and lost, vote share change of main parties and key reasons that shaped the verdict. It will fathom causes for decrease in representation of women in lower house of parliament and future trends of feminization of Indian politics. The computation of the mandate will provide information trends for holistic analysis of political system and changing nature of interparty electoral competition and coalitional behaviour in postcolonial era. The *second* section will delve into the definitions of political parties, theorizations of party systems and contextualization of contemporary democratic politics. It will discuss structural peculiarities of 'one-party dominance' of Congress, recurring changes in competitive party system and BJP's policy oriented party system from 2014. It will use party institutionalization discourse and new behavioural research of competitive political parties to understand the functioning of Indian party systems and the electoral motivations of electorate and party leaders. The *final* part deals with the assessment of ECI in conducting free and fair elections and the politics to delegitimize its institutional credibility. It will find out reasons for erroneous political predictions by opinion polls, policy implications of elections results on major political parties and subaltern suggestions for correcting democratic digress in India.

Analysis of general elections 2024 and emerging political trends

The General Elections 2024 was a record breaking electoral exercise in the world as 642 million people voted (out of 968 registered electorate) with around 15 million Indian government and security personnel employed to conduct it. The ECI introduced several novelties that included polling booths within 1.24 miles and home voting facilities for voters over 85 years and with disabilities. The formation of BJP 3.0 government ignited the debate about the political system ranging from returning to the system of collation politics, weakened dominance of saffron party and inaugural of new party system. The summarization of election verdict will provide answers if political party system (PPS) is gravitating towards a polity of decentralization with empowerment of regional

parties or is a continuation of centralization with limitations due to democratic checks and balances by state politics.

Issues in elections and summary of results

The issues in Indian elections are a bouquet of political, economic and cultural items and its resonance with voters varies nationally, provincially or locally. The issue are multilayered, but it operates at two levels. *One*-poll manifestos of political parties that are achievable and promises that are unattainable. *Two*, issue dimensions that the electorate considers important in shaping voting decisions, but not considered vital by parties. The national elections 2024 was an ideological clash of two competing meta-narratives, BJP's 'Bharat' as a civilizational nation with deep cultural roots in ancient India and Congress' idea of 'India' as a modern secular state. The vote maximization campaigns of the contesting alliances included development versus crony capitalism, non-appeasement versus majoritarianism, uniformity versus regimentation, dynasty versus dictatorship and corruption versus abuse of power (Suri et al., 2024). The BJP's campaign centred on the vision of 'Viksit Bharat' (developed India by 2047) and 'Modi Ki Guarantee' (empowerment of youth, women, farmers and marginalized communities). It focused on grand scheme of Hindutva like opening of Ram Temple in Ayodhya, revocation of Article 370 (special status to state of Jammu and Kashmir) and the citizenship amendment act. The Congress manifesto relied on 'Paanch Nyay' (five pillars of justice) that included justice to youth, farmers, women, labourers and jobs as per the share of population. It raised economic issues like unemployment, price rise, agrarian distress and legal guarantee of minimum support prices for farm produce.

The results show that BJP's vision and 5-year work performance did not resonate uniformly with the voters as it managed to win 240 seats, witnessing a steep fall of 63 seats since 2019 elections with loss of around 1% vote share. The decrease in the number of seats was primarily due to tactical alliances among its competitors in some Hindi heartland states rather than a significant loss of its electoral support base (Suri et al., 2024). It suffered the highest reduction of 29 seats and 8% vote share in Uttar Pradesh (UP), losing notable support base in 72 out of 75 parliamentary constituencies as compared with previous election. The INDIA bloc made huge inroads by scare mongering that saffron party will scrap existing reservations (affirmative action) for backward castes, schedules caste (Dalits) and scheduled tribes. The Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study 2024 data reveals that the alliance of Congress and regional party SP strongly polarized the votes of Muslims (92%), Yadavs (82%) and Non-Jatav Dalits (56%) that resulted in a substantial shift of BSP and BJP supporters in its favour (Beg et al., 2024). It lost seats in provinces due to causes like optics of unethical politics and engineering splits in two regional parties in Maharashtra, resentment of dominant castes and factionalism in Rajasthan and Haryana and populist leadership and sub nationalism in West Bengal. The saffron party's poor performance in bastion states of UP, Rajasthan and Haryana resulted in the loss of major chunk of 44 seats as compared with 2019 national elections.

Party Performance in National Elections.

Name of Party	Seats Won 2024	Seats Change Since 2019	Vote Share 2024	Vote Share Change Since 2019
BJP	240	-63	36	-1
Congress	99	+47	21	+2
Others	204	+16	42	-1

Source: Election Commission of India.
Total Seats: 543.

It made striking gains in Odisha, but could not win significantly in south India due to presence of strong regional satraps and citizens aversion for religious frenzy, though it saw an expansion of sizable saffron footprints. Its vote share in four out of the five southern states increased in percentage points that ranged from around 4 in Kerala, 8 in Tamil Nadu, 10 in Andhra Pradesh and 15 in Telangana.

The Congress did an impressive resurgence by winning 47 more seats and gaining 2% vote share since 2019, but failed to reach three-figure mark in parliament. The grand old party-led INDIA bloc fell short by 38 seats to form the government. The relative stagnation of saffron party's vote share, waning of Modi's popularity and the improvement in Rahul Gandhi's political image indicate that the Congress was quite successful in presenting the narratives of cultural pluralism, protecting democracy and saving the Indian Constitution. Its electoral impact did not matter much in West Bengal, played a second fiddle in UP and was one of the three parties in Maharashtra. However, in provinces of Rajasthan, Haryana and Karnataka it managed to wrest sizable seats from the BJP (Suri et al., 2024). The 'Band-Aid strategies' adopted for revival included Mallikarjun Kharge's election as Congress president and 'Bharat Jodo Yatras' (walkathons for voter outreach) by Rahul Gandhi (RG) (Rai and Chowdhury, 2024). The grand old party won 40 out of 105 parliamentary constituencies visited by RG during the walkathons with a winning strike rate of 38% as compared with 26% in the remaining seats. It provided political traction, but the institutional absence of Congress in several states impeded its efforts in dethroning BJP from Delhi. The provincial parties in UP, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh registered impressive victories, but the regional political outfits in Odisha, Telangana and Delhi fared poorly. Sixteen contestants not aligned to any alliance won, which included 10 from regional parties and 6 independents.

The euphoria of upsurge in electoral participation of women in last decade witnessed a slight dip as voters and election to parliament. Women beat their counterparts in voting in 19 of the 36 states and Union Territories in 2024, but their nationwide turnout was faintly lesser than men. The gender representation in parliament fell from 78 in 2019 to 74 due to lesser allotment of seats to women, exposing the patriarchal-anti-women mindset of Indian parties, barring All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal. The victory of 11 out of 12 women contestants from the TMC, a regional party demolishes the clichéd excuse of poor female 'winnability ratios' and paucity of right candidates. The mandatory reservation of women in law making bodies and ministerial positions is the only viable option for achieving gender parity and full feminization of Indian electoral politics.

Key determinants of the electoral verdict

The feeble electoral endorsement of BJP-led NDA and overall disapproval of Congress-led INDIA in 2024 elections are due to four reasons. *First*, 'Modi wave', a unique political phenomenon that helped BJP in winning several elections based on political charisma, social legitimacy and cultural nationalism, faced mild to moderate anti-incumbency and failed in reclaiming the full 'will of the majority' (Rai, 2019). Modi's charisma in state elections has been unidirectional that either resulted in victory or loss for the BJP, but never showed erratic impact. The popularity ratings of Modi as Prime Minister (PM) candidate (41%) is higher than RG (27%) by 14% (Shastri, 2024); however, he trails behind him in the state of UP by four percentage points. This makes it quite evident that a sizable section of the voters preferred RG due to anger against Modi that is traceable in culmination of Ram Jannabhoomi movement led by seers and Hindus. The over politicization of Ram Temple consecration in Ayodhya and its appropriation by Modi for electoral gains backfired

strongly in UP and moderately in other states. This factor in tandem with Modi's shrill and below the belt anti-Muslim rhetoric during election campaign led to a large number of voters who do not subscribe to hard-line Hindutva shifting their base to non-BJP parties, which resulted in saffron party's substantial loss of seats/votes. His leadership capital retained its winning formula pan India, but ebbed due to under currents in some states due to poor micro mismanagement, lack of coordination with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, its ideological parent and presence of powerful regional leaders. However, the presidentialization of election without the declaration of PM candidate by the opposition parties resulted in NDA scoring a hat trick win and forming the third edition of Modi government.

Second, the BJP's leadership led by Modi plebeianized public communication in educating the citizenry, conveying new government ideas, enlisting support for welfare policies, strengthening social solidarity with party ideology and maximizing electoral participation of beneficiaries. It created a patron-client relationship that involved giving state benefits to people with returns in terms of votes and moving the paradigm of politics from democratic stakeholders to welfare scheme beneficiaries. The reputational capital accumulated by the BJP enabled it to undertake welfare mobilization and emerge as single largest party, but it did not receive the expected quid pro quo votes to win a clear majority. It paid heavy price for 'Taken-for-granted support' of beneficiary class and forgetting multiple identities and volatile nature of Indian electorate. The caste group identity of voters trumped their religious affiliations in states with strong social justice narrative and spoiled the BJP's plan to win yet another majority of its own.

Third, the 'Index of Opposition Unity' of INDIA bloc was the strongest as it got caste arithmetic and alliance chemistry right that resulted in maximum transfer of votes to each other at ground zero. The reason for success of Congress-led alliance vindicates Duverger's hypothesis that solid and homogeneous coalitions may provide a multi-party system a close resemblance to a two-party system and make the opposition more coherent, moderate and distinct (Duverger, 1951). The Congress alliance weaved a winning narrative based on promise of social justice and easing economic hardship of citizens through welfarism, but it could not cross the electoral threshold required for a doing a full political comeback. *Finally*, the bloodline leadership of RG failed twice in winning national elections, but the party continued to repose faith in him. A political dynasty denotes a family that retains political power in one elective position for successive generations or intergenerational leadership in political parties (Albert et al., 2015). The dynastic inheritance maybe a powerful source of strength for the heir, but it continues to remain illegitimate and shamefaced (Das et al., 2023; Dumont, 1980). The Congress neutralized the negativities of dynasticism by presentation of RGs personal qualities, connect with people and playing down inherited family legacies, but his PM candidature was not acceptable to majority of electorate.

These four crucial reasons in combination with other factors shaped the national mandate for continuation of BJP's primacy in party politics. The current political system is gradually changing that needs contextualization in the history of party system to unearth new characteristics and framework of party politics.

Changing nature of PPS and party dominance

The study of political parties and party system has been a major thrust area of political science with scholarly definitions of parties and theorizations of competitive party politics. The role and relevance of parties and political system witnessed realignments due to several waves of democracy across the globe. As a result, objectives, electoral goals and policy commitments of parties changed

over a period of time and developed country-specific peculiarities that need a deeper study and separate conceptualization.

Definition of parties and political system

The literature on definition of political party is vast, but those based on core characteristics differential are included for brevity. The objective of a party is acquisition of social 'power', influencing a communal action that always mean 'a societalization'. The party actions work towards a goal in a planned manner (Weber, 1968). A simple majority, single ballot system favours two-party system, while a simple-majority system with second ballot and proportional representation favour multi-partism (Duverger, 1951). Parties are products of societies and functions like structuring vote choice, conducting government and perform collective actions like socialization, recruitment, communication, interest articulation and aggregation (Almond and Powell, 1978; Epstein, 1967). However, the composition, style of functioning and the goals of parties differs in political systems like secular democracies, religious republics and electoral autocracies. Parties need to strike a fine balance between short-term incentives to change policies and long-term inducements to send a clear ideological signal to voters of their earlier commitments (Downs, 1957). The party leaders need to be responsive to members and activists and incentivize parties to mobilize core voters for party competition (Adams et al., 2005). The biggest problem faced by parties in democracies is to accord primacy to ideological long-term policies or election winning. If they change policies to suit floating voters, they risk losing traditional support base, but if they continue to adhere to core agenda, it may lead to electoral drubbing.

The political parties in India after freedom from British rule particularly the Congress inherited the legacy of people's movement and nationalist fervour and functioned democratically with the sole focus of participation in nation building. After end of Congress dominance, they developed normal characteristics of party outfits, but turned into partially bureaucratic institutions that functions in between the elections. Their basis of structural organization is collective leadership that is accountable to party members and function on rational-legal authority in consonance with written rules and traditional procedures (Rai, 2023). They mobilize votes based on political ideology and public policies through electoral campaigns to acquire the will of the majority and articulate their veritable interests. However, barring a few national parties, most of them are family-run parochial establishments promoting dynasticism based on ethnicity-caste identity with regionalized political dominance. Their core objectives are in tandem with rational choice theories of either being a vote or office or policy seeking or combination of one and more aims. Parties either seek office by winning elections or form coalitions for power sharing and policy seeking, participating for furthering their ideological agenda.

A PPS is a set of two or more parties that interact in patterned ways with regularities in distribution of electoral support, continuity and institutionalization (Sartori, 1976). The scholarship on party systems uses two distinct strands of structural characteristics to classify PPS. Some focused on number of parties in elections, volatility of party systems and electorates and extent of nationalization or regionalization (Casal and Enyedi, 2016; Golosov, 2010; Hicken and Kuhonta, 2015; Mair, 1997). Others studied PPS by analysing the relationship between the government and opposition, parties' power-sharing dynamics and representation (Gandhi, 2008; King et al., 1990). The characterization of a multi-party representative system by a social-choice mechanism aggregates individual preferences in pre-electoral, elections, coalition formation and legislation stages (Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988). In multi-party systems, some parties are more sensitive to trade-off between electoral and partisan goals than the others

(Meguid, 2005). Larger main parties that seek to control the government care more about votes and office than do smaller niche parties that mainly care about policy goals (Ezrow et al., 2011). A model of party competition in which parties are policy-motivated, care indirectly about winning as it allows implementing policies and are uncertain of median voter's views (Roemer, 1997, 2001). Party leaders prioritize electoral goals when the electoral costs and benefits are especially clear to them, but they prioritize partisan goals when they are uncertain about costs and benefits. Uncertainty makes party leaders more willing to rely on preferred policies that are also vote winners (Lindvall et al., 2023; Schofield and Sened, 2006; Wlezien, 1995). The political parties use the outcome of the most recent election to learn about the median voter's ideological position and adjust their policies according to it in the left–right spectrum. The ideological distance between the parties tends to increase if the previous election did not reveal adequate information about the location of the median voter's views.

The party system after India's Independence was a single party dominance popularly known as the Congress system. *One-party dominance* is a party system midway between pluralism and single-party system, but the competing parts play rather dissimilar roles. It consists of a *party of consensus* and *parties of pressure* that function on the margin. A number of opposition parties existed, but the Congress was the chief party representing a historical consensus, internalizing political competition and enjoying a continuing basis of support (Duverger, 1951; Kothari, 1964). The one-party dominance in the 1950s is suited for the special period of postcolonial growth, but one that would transform into a more 'normal' party system later on (Kothari, 1964). The prophecy turned true as after 1967 national elections the grand old party continued to rule, but lost its overwhelming superiority and paved the way for a normal electoral politics.

Transformation of competitive party systems

The democratic politics in India witnessed four phases of PPS between 1947 and 2014. The elements used to classify the system included the dominance of a party or alliance based on the number of seats won in parliament and state assemblies. In the first PPS, Congress dominated both national and provincial elections, from the first elections of 1952 to 1967. The second PPS from 1967 to 1989 saw the prevalence of Congress party at Centre (except 1975–77) and rise of opposition political outfits, particularly at state level. In the third PPS, multi-partisan cooperation enters an era of coalition, in which no party could govern India on its own electoral strength due to deepening fragmentation of party system and the electorate (Yadav, 1999). The return of the BJP as a dominant party in 2014 and its all India expansion marks the beginning of a new electoral system—fourth party system (Vaishnav and Hinton, 2019). The 2024 verdict seems to curtail BJP's dominance in India, but many attributes of fourth party system remain intact as it remains a system-defining party, single largest party in lower and upper houses of parliament and several state assemblies (Vaishnav and Mallory, 2024). The classification of PPS in India into four distinct types seems naïve as BJP's dominance in Indian politics between 2014 and 2024 is akin to the second political system under Indira Gandhi-led Congress between 1971 and 1984 that dominated the lower and upper houses of the parliament and provincial politics. Both systems witnessed over centralization of political power under the leadership of Indira Gandhi and Modi that transcended the party structure and won successive elections based on overwhelming charisma and welfarism. The ascendancy of saffron party in 2014 led to ideological change from left-centre to right wing, but its classification as the fourth party system seems arbitrary, as basic elements of party structuring remained more or less the same as the second PPS.

Classification of Indian Political Party System.

National Election Year	Total Seats in Lower House of Indian Parliament	Leading Party	Seats Won	Vote Share (in percent)
One-Party Dominance				
1952	401	Congress	364	45.0
1957	403	Congress	371	47.8
1962	494	Congress	361	44.7
1967	520	Congress	283	40.8
Congress Dominance				
1971	518	Congress	362	43.7
1977	543	Janata Party	295	41.3
1980	543	Congress	353	42.7
1984	543	Congress	415	48.1
1989	543	Congress	197	39.5
Multi-Party Cooperation				
1991	543	Congress	244	36.4
1996	543	BJP	161	20.2
1998	543	BJP	182	25.6
1999	543	BJP	182	23.7
2004	543	Congress	145	26.5
2009	543	Congress	206	28.6
BJP Dominance				
2014	543	BJP	282	31.0
2019	543	BJP	303	37.3
2024	543	BJP	240	36.5

Source: Election Commission of India.

The political system post General elections 2024 signals the beginning of a neo party system, as BJP alliance's dominant style of functioning and gradual fragmentation of opposition coalition signals the institutionalization of new polity that is substantially different from earlier systems. The contours of prevailing Indian competitive party system vindicates Duverger's theory that it is possible to achieve a stable, well-organized political system like the two-party one, where in place of two large unified parties, there are two 'federations of parties'. The formation of a stable alliance, going into the elections on a clear platform and applying them in government, brings the multi-party system close to the two-party system (Duverger, 1951). The BJP-led NDA alliance somewhat succeeded in stabilizing its partnerships and working in unison in parliament. The electoral competition and hunt for votes to secure instant victories drives parties to relax their ideological agenda and turn into 'catch-all-parties'. It signals the decline of meaningful opposition in party systems as ideology becomes irrelevant for structuring political difference across major parties (Kirchhmer, 1966). The dilution of ideology by Congress for pre-election alliances resulted in winning more seats and political strength, but frittering of unity after the hustings tilted the political system towards one-sided dominance of saffron allies. The failure of INDIA bloc to unite on important issues seems to deny it the advantages of a strong opposition. Thus, the polity after the initial euphoria of electoral surge by the opposition parties in India is witnessing a multi-party alliance with slight truncation of BJP's dominance almost similar to its earlier phase of one-party dominance political system.

The evolving PPS in contemporary India seems quite closer to collation era of multiple parties as well as the BJP supremacy system of the last decade. It thus becomes relevant to dig deeper and find out if it is a replication of earlier systems or beginning of new one with inter change of pre-existing classificatory norms. The answer to this question lies in rational choice tradition of distinguishing office and policy seeking competitive party behaviour. The coalition government in the second PPS has traits of office-seeking parties that include non-competitive multi-party polity, unpredictable electoral systems and spatially constrained inter-party bargaining. Office-seeking parties' maximize control over political benefits that refers to private goods bestowed on recipients of government and public office appointments (Strom, 1990). Parties maximize coalition payoffs by its control of elected office through negotiations for distribution of cabinet ministries and of government bodies and offices. However, the ascendancy of BJP-led alliance in 2024, apart from vote maximization and office seeking are mainly policy-seeking parties with large policy influence differentials relative to office benefit. Policy seeking is concerned about government portfolios, as well as about the ideological disposition of the coalition (Budge and Laver, 1986). It maximizes its effect on public policy and coalition parties are 'connected' or close to each other in policy orientation (Axelrod, 1970). The BJP monopolizes bargaining power and holds all the important ministries that include finance, external affairs, home and defence that have the highest status and payoffs, crucial votes in policy decisions at cabinet meetings and bureaucratic control over right-wing policy outputs. The BJP-commanded political partnership is different from earlier multi-party alliances in terms of policy maximization and payoffs.

A new approach applies general equation to 'multidimensional space' framework (Sartori, 1976) and introduces four indices of party systems for measurement: democratic-authoritarian, religious-secular, left-right economic and inclusive-exclusive (Angiolillo and Wiebrecht, 2023). The application of this approach to the current unfolding PPS reveals increased democratization, diminishment of religiosity and lessening of exclusionary politics. The supremacy of the BJP (82% seats) in the alliance may potentially produce a novel multi-party system, 'One Party Domination-Multi Partisanship'. This is different from earlier versions in which principal parties had fewer seats in the parliament, restricted say in decision-making and minimum advantage in implementing ideological policies. The PPS look like a hybrid of one-party dominance and multi-party partnership that retains the defining characteristics and motivations of both systems, but is different and unique from the earlier or existing versions. Since the BJP party system seems to be nurturing elements from several one-criterion coalition models, the new developing PPS needs checks to confirm self-perpetuity robustness of coalition, policy agreements of partner parties and manageability of bargaining over office and policy payoffs.

Conclusion – implications on Indian democracy

To conclude, the ECI, which conducted the largest democratic exercise in the world, received widespread criticisms for soft handling complaints of hate speeches, lack of pro-activeness and functioning independently. Despite pressure and legal censures, it came out in flying colours with ascription of public trust and confidence for conducting free and fair elections. It regained legitimacy, acquired and exercised in accordance with constitutional laws and appreciation by citizens. It debunked the democratic digress conspiracy theories of institutional breakdowns due to governmental interference and regained its lost glory. The exit polls once again missed the bull's eye in forecasting the election mandate correctly. The reasons include first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system, multi-party election competition, high volatility of parties and electorate, media's ideological bias, statistical rebalancing and 'fear of reprisal' due to politically surcharged situation. The flaws in the FPTP system make it quite cumbersome to convert vote share into seats and lead to

inaccuracies. The wide gap between seat predictions and election outcome sends a message to the opinion polling industry to change and include new research methods and digital technologies to make it foolproof and relevant in public domain.

The election verdict provides a subaltern understanding of democracy, recommending the BJP to curb authoritarian tendencies and accommodate political voices of all hues. It mandates the saffron party to extend olive branch to parties opposed to it and build consensus for democratic governance. The message to non-BJP parties is to avoid blanket opposition to the government, frequent disruptions of parliament, play a constructive role in nation building and improvement of India's standings in world order. The electoral space of opposition parties has expanded and it is the most appropriate time to do a rebound by reinventing-rewriting their political playbook for aspirational India. The fading of Modi wave in this round of elections is neither a political novelty nor permanent feature, as in the last decade it saw several electoral crests and troughs in provincial elections. It failed in more than one occasions due to anti-incumbency against the BJP's state governments-candidates or strong regional parties based on identity politics and parochial governance. However, Modi magic has the penchant for defying electoral gravity, relegitimizing BJP after defeats and regaining its lost political capital. The victory of saffron party in the state elections in Maharashtra and Haryana 6 months after the national elections proves that the thesis of decline of Modi way, diminishing returns of BJP, emergence of Rahul Gandhi as a national alternative and revival of Congress does not hold much water and needs further academic reinvestigations and working theorizations.

The urgent task cut out for the BJP is to look deeper into world discourse of India becoming an 'Illiberal Democracy', rectify imperfections and promote democracy in foreign policy. It needs to frame a global south alternative to western worldview of democracy on urgent basis with indigenous research tools to measure multiculturalism, autonomy of state institutions and legitimate political dissent. Perfect democracy is a utopian idea, as democratic countries have different kinds of shortcomings, but India can find a place in the sun by becoming a '*Democracy with Minimum Imperfections*'.

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