

# What alliance politics means for 2024 polls

Two big alliances are squaring off in the next polls. But the dynamics of the two groups are very different, and it will impact their functioning and electoral prospects

Two big alliances are gearing to square off in 2024. Novel as the developments may be, the takeaways from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) meeting in New Delhi and the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) conclave in Bengaluru sum up the trajectory of Indian politics since 1952.

First, the tenor of these meetings succinctly captures the tectonic shift in India's political mosaic—the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the decline of the Congress. This was evident from the Prime Minister Narendra Modi-dominated National Democratic Alliance (NDA) meeting, creating a sharp contrast with the Opposition formation, where leaders from different parties shared the stage with the Congress, symbolising the diminution of the principal Opposition party. The emergence of a bi-nodal polity on the national stage indicates that despite the return of a single-party majority, coalitional arrangements will remain viable,

given our continental-sized polity with tremendous diversity.

Second, the BJP's dominance has ensured that there is space for only two nodes. The Third Front is effectively dead. There have been Third Front experiments in the past—such as the National Front (NF) after the 1989 elections, United Front (UF) after the 1996 elections, and a Third Front led by the CPI(M) in 2009. The fractured mandates of the 1989 and 1996 elections created opportunities for the NF (with the outside support of the BJP) and the UF (with the outside support of the Congress) for short periods of time. That time is gone.

Third, while the Congress has managed pre-poll arrangements in some states in the past, this is its first attempt to cobble together a pre-poll alliance at the national level. Pre-poll coalitions till 1989 were primarily anti-Congress in nature. The fragmentation of the party system and the BJP's search for allies to form a government led to the creation of the NDA in 1998. The Congress contested the 2004 election with some allies, but a national-level coalition in the form of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was a post-poll arrangement. While the BJP continues to remain the nucleus of the NDA, it has accumulated greater bargaining power with its geographical and social expansion post-2014. In that sense, the current NDA government is a surplus coalition, in

which the anchor party has the strength to form the government but has taken on board other partners. The reasons for the BJP's willingness to accommodate allies are fairly simple—to make up for the shortage of numbers in Rajya Sabha, and to have such parties (many of them small) bring in a chunk of votes in highly competitive seats.

Fourth, the weakening of the Congress has severely curtailed its negotiating power. Given the changed equation of these two anchor parties in their respective coalitions, it is entirely possible that the Congress contests the lowest number of Lok Sabha seats in its history in 2024. The Congress contested its lowest number of seats in 2004 (417) and second-lowest in 2019 (423). In 2004, the Congress was either a winner or runner-up in 216 seats, but this was only 263 in 2019—its lowest. The BJP first surpassed the Congress in terms of seats won in 1996, and votes in 1998; 2019 added another stat. The BJP contested more seats than the Congress for the first time, and this is likely to be repeated in 2024.

Fifth, political parties enter pre-election arrangements for vote-pooling and resource-pooling incentives, and post-election arrangements to share the spoils of power or safeguard their base from being poached. The stability of any coalition is thus determined by mutual interdependence. Past experiences indicate that coalitions



The dominance of the BJP has ensured that there is space for only two nodes in Indian politics. HT PHOTO

tions are more likely to win elections when their size (number of electorally viable parties) is large and when each partner can mobilise mutually exclusive yet significant social sections. However, alliances also bring negative externalities for partners. While competing for vote maximisation in the short-run, parties must cautiously tread in choosing partners as it could also lead to long-term losses. The growth of many state-level formations happened on the back of their alliances with the Congress—the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, for example. The BJP, on the other hand, has grown at the expense of its allies—the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam, the Lok Shakti in Karnataka, and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

Finally, India's experiments with coalition politics indicate a successful and stable alliance depends on three things—an anchor party, a unanimously chosen leader and some ideological congruence (or a common minimum programme). Each of these things is present in the current NDA,

while INDIA still needs to find its three ingredients. These are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for either the electoral success or longevity of a coalition, but they perform critical roles. The anchor party forms the nucleus of the alliance, exercises relatively greater influence in decision-making, including seat-sharing arrangements, and maintains a preeminent position in solving inter-party disputes. The presence of a unanimously chosen leader and common minimum programme not only helps in mobilising voters, but also minimises the possibility of leadership struggles.

The field for 2024 is set and narratives are being tested; however, the structure of political competition indicates that it is an open contest but with closed options. For now, no new political energies seem to be on the horizon, no new social configurations are being experimented on the ground, and no radical promise is being offered. In that sense, 2024 may be business as usual and not an election that sees critical realignments.

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