

India's 18th Lok Sabha General Elections, 2024: A Study of Electoral Issues, Trends and Mandates

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ABSTRACT

After gaining independence from British rule, India decided to embrace democracy as its political system, and this was done by adopting, enacting, and giving to ourselves our new Constitution on November 26, 1949, and we started our democratic journey with a new Constitution that came into application on January 26, 1950. As per our constitutional collective resolution, the first Lok Sabha General Elections took place in 1952, and since then, Indian electoral politics has experienced continuity and change in the form of various issues, trends, and verdicts. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections from various perspectives. The verdict of the 18th Lok Sabha elections presents interesting and notable information about India's electoral politics and its political culture. Analysis of the poll verdict of the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections brings up many facts about the continuity and change of the electoral politics in India.

Keywords: Lok Sabha Elections 2024, BJP electoral performance, Opposition campaign strategies, Coalition government trends, Women political representation

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Introduction

Elections have immense importance in a democracy. In fact, elections are the soul of democracy. This means that we cannot even imagine democracy in the absence of elections. In simple words, it can be said that where there are no elections, there is no democracy. However, as important as it is to have elections, it is also important that the elections are conducted fairly and honestly. If elections are the criterion of democracy, then fair elections are the criterion of true democracy. Elections provide an opportunity for different sections and segments of society to influence the system and process of rulemaking or law-making in their favor. In democratic countries like India, elections are seen as an important tool to test the functioning and legitimacy of the political system. Elections ensure an opportunity for all interested citizens and groups to hold and control the levers of power and thereby make decisions. When seen from another perspective, elections expose many internal and subtle aspects of the political system of that particular time. Many underlying current suppressed characteristics of politicians and political parties come out in the open in the democratic system based on adult franchise under secret ballot, direct elections, individual freedom, and competitive party politics in the country. Keeping in view the cited facts, we can say that the study of elections in India is of special importance, as elections here are not seen as a mere ritual or symbolic exercise but as an effective tool for the recruitment of political elites and the political socialization of the masses.[1]

In a democracy, elections are a very important mechanism by which the citizens of the country not only choose their representatives but also replace the representatives who do not live up to the expectations of the public. However, this is possible only when the electoral process is free and fair, as provided by the Constitution of India. Under the constitutional arrangement, Article 324 of the Indian Constitution empowers the Election Commission of India (CI) to supervise, direct, and control all elections to the Parliament and State Legislatures and to the offices of President and Vice-President.[2] Given the large electoral base and security concerns, the general elections for 543 seats for the 18th Lok Sabha were held in 7 phases. According to the Election Commission of India, around 970 million people were eligible to vote in 2024, and the voter turnout was 65%, while in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 67% of voters exercised their franchise, which was the highest voter turnout ever.[3]

Objectives of Study

The main objective of this paper is to highlight and analyze the vibrant issues and factors that highly influenced the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections, 2024. Here, an attempt has been made to focus on the old and new trends that emerged in this election. The present paper analyses the leading issues and factors that led the BJP away from the majority, while it scored an amazing victory with more than the majority in the previous Lok Sabha election held in 2019. Through this paper, influential factors that reduced the electoral strength of the BJP and revived the opposition, too, will be found. This paper aims to present various electoral trends in the form of continuity and change, making a nuanced study of the mandate of the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections.

Methodology

This paper is mainly based on secondary sources of data collection such as reports from different newspapers and analysis by some political analysts, some websites, and media persons. However, I have tried to use some relevant data from primary sources like the website of the Election Commission of India, Manifestos of political parties, and survey of CSDS. I studied the reporting of media and social media, too. The approach of this paper is observational and analytical.

Manifesto Politics and Its Impact on Voters

Both the main rival political parties, Congress and BJP, released their manifestos to attract the support of the voters. These included several promises for the welfare of the people and the betterment of the country. The manifestos of BJP and Congress proved to be effective, if not completely, then at least partially. Some promises

of both parties influenced the voters in favor of the BJP, while some were in favor of the INDIA alliance, and thus a coalition government was formed. Key Highlights of the Manifestos of Congress and BJP are as follows.

Congress's Manifesto, 2024 (Nyay Sankalp Patra)

Congress had announced in its manifesto 10 promises of ensuring justice, which are as follows: social justice, youth justice, women justice, farmer justice, labor justice, constitutional justice, economic justice, state justice, defense justice, and environmental justice. Their nature and introduction are as follows.

Social Justice

For the last seven decades, the Congress Party has been raising its voice with the most fervor for the rights and rights of the backward, community, oppressed, and exploited groups of the society. Congress is constantly striving for their progress. But discrimination on the basis of caste is still the reality of our society. The population of the fourth caste, tribal, and tribal class countries is about 70%, but their participation in the Good Lion, Good Lord and Higher is very less. In any modern society, there should not be such inconvenience, discrimination, and lack of opportunity on the basis of birth. Some of the promises of Congress to ensure social justice included the following programs.

1. Congress will conduct a nationwide socio-economic caste census. Through this, Congress will find out the castes, sub-castes, and their socio-economic status. Based on the data obtained from the census, Congress will take positive steps to improve their condition.
2. The Congress Party will remove a cap of 50% on the benefits given to the General Category, Qatar Tribe, Other Tribe Category, and Poor Class.
3. Congress will apply the 10% reservation for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS) in education and organization to people of all castes and communities without any discrimination.
4. Congress will fill all the old vacant posts for Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Floor Category within 1 year.
5. Congress will give regular recruitment in government and public sector corporations.

Youth Justice

The Congress has stressed the issue of unemployment through its manifesto, stating that "The future lies in the youth of today." This is particularly relevant for a young nation like India, whose average age is only 28 years. Today, the youth of India are facing unemployment and frustration. The root cause of this is the massive unemployment, which is increasing every year under the BJP/NDA government. Congress will meet the aspirations of India's youth through a robust youth justice program. Following are some of the promises made by the Congress to ensure youth justice:

1. Congress will provide job opportunities to the youth.
2. Congress will set up fast-track courts to settle cases of paper leaks for job examinations and provide financial compensation to the victims.
3. Congress will fill about 30 lakh vacancies approved at various levels in the central government. Congress will determine that vacancies in panchayats and urban bodies will be filled according to a fixed timetable with the consent of the state governments.
4. Congress will replace the Apprenticeship Act, 1961 with the Right to Apprenticeship Act. This law will provide a one-year apprenticeship program in private and public sector companies for every diploma holder or college graduate below the age of 25 years. Under this law, every apprentice will be paid an honorarium of ₹1 lakh per year, which will be paid equally by the employer company and the government.
5. Congress will restructure the Fund of Funds scheme for startups and allocate 50% of the available funds, ₹5000 crore, equally across all districts of the country, as far as possible, to provide funds to youth below 40 years of age across the country to start their own businesses and grow them and create employment opportunities.

Education Justice

The Congress declared in its Nyay Sankalp Patra, i.e., manifesto, that "Education is essential for social upliftment and every student has the right to free, quality education provided by the government. Schools, colleges, and universities should be public institutions sustained primarily by government resources. The Congress also recognizes that private educational institutions play an important complementary role." To ensure justice in the field of education, the Congress made the following promises:

1. The Congress will amend the Act to make education from Class 1 to Class 12 free and compulsory in government schools.
2. The Congress will reconsider and amend the NEP in consultation with the state governments.
3. The Congress will end the practice of charging special fees for various purposes in government schools.
4. For greater equity, affordability, and transparency in school fees charged by private schools, the Congress will encourage state governments to set up fee regulation committees.
5. Congress will work with states to ensure that every class and every subject has a dedicated teacher. Each class should have a dedicated classroom.
6. Congress will expand the budget for basic education and increase government programs.
7. School and college curricula will emphasize the study of STEM subjects to develop scientific thinking.
8. Congress will discourage the use of teachers for non-teaching activities.
9. The RTE norm discouraging the appointment of contract teachers in regular vacancies will be implemented.

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10. Congress will increase the number of Kendriya Vidyalayas, Navodaya Vidyalayas, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas in consultation with state governments. Congress will restore the autonomy of colleges and universities. Higher educational institutions will have academic freedom and will be encouraged to promote experimentation, innovation, and research. Congress will protect and preserve the freedom of expression of students in accordance with the law and give the right to an elected student union.

Women Justice

The Congress, in its manifesto, acknowledged that historically, women have been discriminated against and suffered great disadvantages. The Congress pledges to remove discrimination against women and to uphold and advance the rights of women. The following are some of the promises announced by the Congress for women's empowerment.

1. The Constitutional (106th) Amendment Act is a symbol of the BJP's betrayal of women. The Amendment Act contains devious provisions that will allow the reservation of seats in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies to be implemented only after 2029. The Congress will remove these devious provisions and implement the Amendment Act immediately. One-third of the reservation for women will be implemented in those state assemblies that will be elected in the 2025 assembly elections.
2. The Congress will reserve half (50%) of the central government jobs for women from 2025.
3. Congress will ensure that more women are appointed to high positions, such as judges, government secretaries, high-ranking police officers, law officers, and board directors.
4. All laws will be examined for gender discrimination and bias. Offending provisions will be removed or amended in the first year of the Congress government.
5. Congress will ensure that the principle of "equal work, equal pay" is implemented to prevent discrimination in the pay of women.
6. The central government's contribution to the salaries of frontline health workers (such as ASHA, Anganwadi, mid-day meal cooks, etc.) will be doubled.

Economic Justice

Through its manifesto, the Congress outlined its economic policy, saying that Economic justice is as important as political and social justice. The Congress's economic policy has evolved over time. In 1991, the Congress ushered in the liberalization era and moved the country toward an open, free, and competitive economy. India has benefited tremendously from this. Huge wealth was created, new businesses were started, entrepreneurial opportunities were created, a huge middle class was created, millions of jobs were created, large-scale innovation was seen in the field of education and health, and exports increased significantly. Crores of people were lifted out of poverty. The Congress reiterated its commitment to an open economy in which economic growth will be driven by the private sector but there will also be a strong public sector.

Constitutional Justice

While talking about constitutional justice, Congress emphasized on saving democracy, removing fear, and restoring freedom. Through its manifesto, Congress promised that Congress would free the people from fear. Congress promised to restore freedom of speech and expression along with freedom of media because, according to Congress, freedom of media and expression ended during the rule of BJP or Narendra Modi.
Source: Congress's Manifesto[4]

BJP's Manifesto, 2024 (Sankalp Patra)

BJP, through its Manifesto, promised many schemes, some of which are mentioned below:

- We will continue to provide free ration for the next 5 years under PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.
- We will expand our efforts to protect the garib ki thali by becoming Atmanirbhar in the production of pulses, edible oils, and vegetables.
- We will continue to provide free health treatment by strengthening Ayushman Bharat and other such initiatives.
- We will now further expand the PM Awas Yojana to ensure every garib parivar has access to quality housing.
- We will ensure clean drinking water, Har Ghar Nal se Jal for all households in villages, towns, and cities. We will extensively use technology to reduce the wastage of water.
- We have successfully provided houses to many slum dwellers. We will scale it up by making new policies to construct houses on slum land, so low-income families can be rehabilitated into high-quality houses.
- We will continue PM Ujjwala Yojana and expand this program.
- We will provide free electricity to poor households under PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana.
- We will expand Bharat's top-tier startup ecosystem to tier-2 and tier-3 cities. Further, we will transform Bharat into a global center for high-quality services, including tourism, to generate high value and diverse employment opportunities nationwide.
- We will continue to expand the Ayushman Arogya Mandir network for our middle-class families to ensure accessible, high-quality healthcare services.
- We will elevate the quality of education by expanding top educational institutions and upgrading universities to global standards. We will introduce more IITs, IIMs, AIIMS, and other such institutes. We will launch internship programs to blend academic and practical skills.
- We will focus on the modern road network, enhance rail and metro connectivity with new-age trains and expanded networks, develop comprehensive EV

charging stations, construct new airports, and advance our telecom infrastructure with affordable 5G and innovative 6G technology, promoting ease of living for middle-class families.
- We have empowered one crore rural women to become Lakhpati Didis. We will now empower three crore rural women to become Lakhpati Didis.
- We will empower women Self-Help Groups (SHGS) with the skills and tools in key service sectors like IT, healthcare, education, retail, and tourism with the aim of increasing their income.
- We will ensure the development of infrastructure such as working women's hostels, creches, etc., with the specific focus on locations near industrial and commercial centers to facilitate increased participation of women in the workforce.

Source: BJP MANIFESTO[5]

Election Campaign: A Witness to Unhealthy and Bitter Rivalry

Slogans That Influenced Voters

Undoubtedly, an election campaign is the backbone of the electoral process in a democracy, and it plays a vital role in influencing the voters' behavior and determining the election results. However, election campaigns should be healthy and free from any kind of animosity. However, like in the past, during the election campaigns for the 18th Lok Sabha elections, there was a clear glimpse of animosity, bitterness, and unhealthy rivalry among the rival political parties and leaders. The Lok Sabha Election 2024 campaign reverberated with divisive slogans, inflammatory claims, and vicious personal attacks, and it became clear that no line of indecency would be left uncrossed by political leaders in their relentless quest for power. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in Banswada, Rajasthan, on April 21, accused the Indian National Congress of intending to distribute the country's wealth to "infiltrators" and those with more children.

BJP leader and Assam's CM Himanta Biswa Sarma on April 16 called Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi "Amul babies," reducing political debate to name-calling and distracting from substantive policy discussions. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi in Lucknow on May 10 referred to Narendra Modi as a "puppet king" controlled by "tempo billionaires," implying that the Prime Minister serves the interests of the wealthy rather than the public. Such accusations undermine the credibility of democratic leadership and foster distrust among citizens. Congress leader Jairam Ramesh in Jaipur on April 23 criticized Modi's language, suggesting he is a "Vish Guru" (poisonous teacher) rather than a "Vishwa Guru" (world teacher). Such personal attacks divert attention from substantive policy discussions and reduce the campaign to a series of insults.[6]

However, the BJP and its most influential star campaigner, PM Narendra Modi, started the election campaign with the slogan "***Abki Baar Chaar So Paar***," which means we will cross 400 Lok Sabha seats and get a massive majority this time. This slogan was propagated by the BJP to counter the *Mahagathbandhan* or alliance of the opposition parties who named this alliance INDIA.

Another major slogan of the BJP was "***Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai***," which means everything is possible with Narendra Modi as he is a very charismatic leader. This slogan was mainly associated with the consecration of the idol of Ram Lalla in the marvelously constructed Ram Mandir in Ayodhya (UP). This slogan was mainly associated with the economic condition of India, as India has been the fastest-growing major economy in the world for the last 10 years. However, with the tagline '25 justices', which resonates with the key promises social, economic, and political justice to all but especially SCs, STs, and OBCs. Rahul also promised a guaranteed income scheme that would make poor women lakhpatis, i.e. owners of ₹1 lakh per year.

Save Constitution

Opposition parties, mainly the Congress and Samajwadi Party, projected the BJP and PM Narendra Modi as anti-democracy and anti-Constitution. Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav, MK Stalin, Mamata Banerjee, Arvind Kejriwal, etc., called upon the people to save the Indian Constitution and democracy in their election rallies. Opposition leaders, mainly Rahul Gandhi, kept a copy of the Indian Constitution with him and showed it to the voters during the entire campaign.

The opposition especially propagated that Narendra Modi does not believe in the Constitution of India and wants to change the current Constitution of India, for which the BJP is demanding 400+ seats. If the BJP wins this election with a huge majority, it will replace the Indian Constitution with its own new Constitution, and if this happens, reservation for SC, ST, and OBC will end. The opposite parties told people that the Indian Constitution was in danger and persuaded them to vote for the INDIA alliance to save the Constitution. In fact, this campaign of the opposition proved to be effective, especially in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Haryana, where the BJP got a major setback.

Dictatorship and Danger to Democracy

The Congress, Samajwadi Party, Aam Aadmi Party, TMC, Sharad Pawar's NCP, Shiv Sena of Uddhav Thakre, RJD, etc. attacked the Modi government and leveled it as a dictatorial government. The leaders of the INDIA coalition also campaigned on the Modi government for using ED, CBI, Income Tax Department, and Election Commission to crush opposition leaders. Opposition leaders presented the Modi government as dictatorial and dangerous for democracy. The electoral campaign seemed to be turned into a bitter political rivalry between both alliances.

Fractured Verdict: A Case of Electoral Change

The counting of votes was held on 4 June 2024, but we got surprising results. From the point of view of Opinion and Exit, the mandate was unexpected as all these polls had predicted for the majority of the BJP itself. Some of the Exit polls gave 300+ seats to the BJP, and there was no current against the BJP. However, the BJP could not succeed in achieving the verdict in its

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favor as it had done consecutively in 2014 and 2019. However, the NDA, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party, managed to win the elections. However, the BJP itself failed to achieve a clear majority on its own. The BJP became the single largest party in the house and obtained 240 seats, which is 63 seats less than the 303 seats achieved by the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha General Elections. With its alliance, partners NDA succeeded in winning a total of 293 seats only.

Though the BJP could not get a majority, it was historical that the BJP became the single largest party consecutively for the third time to the Lok Sabha—India's lower house of Parliament. Modi became the only Indian Prime Minister in history whose government was sworn in as the Prime Minister for a third tenure. This trend shows continuity as far as leadership is concerned. Modi has equaled the record of Jawaharlal Nehru, who remained PM of India from 1947 to 1964 and won the first three Lok Sabha elections held in 1952, 1957, and 1962. As far as the vote share of the BJP is concerned, it reduced in this election to 36.56%.

The Congress, headed by Mallikarjun Kharge, went in the 18th Lok Sabha election as a leading partner of the INDIA alliance. This election brought improvement to the Congress as compared to the previous Lok Sabha election. Rahul Gandhi competed in two constituencies, Wayanad (Kerala) and Raebareli (UP), but he registered remarkable victories in both constituencies. The Congress succeeded in winning its conventional seat Amethi too, which Rahul had lost in 2019 against Smriti Irani. Amethi has been a conventional seat for the Congress as Rahul, his mother (Sonia Gandhi), his father (Rajiv Gandhi), and his uncle (Sanjay Gandhi) have continued to win it for decades. The Congress registered success in winning 99 seats. It is gainful for the Congress as it could win 52 seats only in the 2019 Lok Sabha General Elections. It is also important for the Congress to be in a position to grab the post of leader of the opposition (LOP). The Congress remained deprived even from the post of LOP two times in 2014 and 2019 consecutively as it could not secure a minimum of 10% (54 seats) of the total seats (543) in the lower house, which is a requirement as per our democratic convention for becoming a LOP. Its vote share also increased in this election, and it is 21.19%.

It was BSP that faced total failure in this election. BSP could not open its account, and its vote share also toppled 9.39%, even in Uttar Pradesh. Most of the candidates got security forfeited. It is the worst electoral performance of BSP since 1989. However, it got 10 seats in 2019 when it enter into an alliance with SP in Uttar Pradesh.

Samajwadi Party (SP), being a partner of the INDIA alliance, was in the electoral fray in alliance with the Congress. SP, under the leadership of Akhilesh Yadav, intended to present a tough challenge to the BJP and PM Narendra Modi. SP, along with the Congress, aired the issues of social justice and danger to the Indian Constitution and succeeded in securing 37 seats, whereas it could win 5 in the previous election. A coalition of SP and the Congress proved fruitful. AITC, too, performed in an amazing way, scoring 29 seats, 7 more than 22 seats achieved in 2019. AAP, which was part of the INDIA alliance, won 3 seats.

Some state parties performed well. DMK secured 22 seats, and YSRCP obtained just 4 seats. Other parties like TDP, JDU, SHS (UBT), and NCP, led by Sharad Pawar, also performed well in this election, and NCP (SP) won 8 seats. TDP achieved 16 seats and became kingmaker along with JDU of Nitish Kumar. JD(U) secured victory in 12 seats. However, both TDP and JDU were coalition partners of the NDA led by the BJP. SHS (UBT), which fought this election after a split with Eknath Shinde, won 9 seats, whereas Shinde led SHS to win 7 seats. LJPRV of Chirag Paswan, too, won 5 seats in Bihar. RLD of Jayant Chaudhari won 2 seats. Here, it is clear that JDU, SHS, NCP, RLD, LJPRV, etc., were in the electoral fray as part of the NDA. RJD and CPI(M) won 4 seats each. IUML and JMM got 3 seats each. JD(S), Janasena Party, CPI(ML)(L), VCK, CPI, and JKN each won 2 seats. 17 seats were secured by other small parties. ASPKR of Chandrashekhar Azad was the new party that succeeded in opening its account and won 1 seat from Uttar Pradesh. Some political analysts are observing ASPKR as an alternative to BSP. Independent candidates won 7 seats.

According to the Election Commission of India, the percentage of NOTA votes polled across India this time was 0.99. This was 0.07% less than the 1.06% recorded in 2019. In the northeast, however, the NOTA votes increased from an average of 0.71% in 2019 to 0.81% in 2024.[7] The following table will help you to understand the electoral performance of national and other influential political parties (Table 1).

Young Voters in the 18th Lok Sabha Election

The BJP maintains an advantage among young voters. While the BJP was able to maintain its youth support

Table 1 | Electoral performance of political parties in 2024 lok sabha general elections

Sr. No.	Party	Seats	Vote%
1.	BJP	240	36.56
2.	INC	99	21.19
3.	SP	37	4.58
4.	AITC	29	4.37
5.	DMK	22	1.82
6.	TDP	16	1.98
7.	JD(U)	12	1.25
8.	SHS (UBT)	9	1.48
9.	NCP (SP)	8	0.92
10.	SSH	7	1.15
11.	LJPRV	5	0.44
12.	YSRCP	4	2.06
13.	RJD	4	1.57
14.	CPI (M)	4	1.76
15.	IUML	3	0.27
16.	AAP	3	1.11
17.	BSP	0	2.04
18.	Other parties	34	–
19.	Ind.	7	–
	Total	543	–

Source: Election Commission of India

without receiving a strong dent, the Congress and its allies have made notable gains among young voters. More importantly, while the share of the Congress and its allies among voters of different age groups is rather flat, in the case of the BJP, it declines with higher age, meaning that the BJP continues to attract voters of younger age more than the elderly.[8]

Vibrant Issues

Nationalism Versus Constitutionalism

The electoral fight began with the issues of Nationalism and Constitutionalism. On the one hand, the BJP and PM Modi were focusing on nationalism, while on the other, the opposition parties and their leaders, mainly Rahul, were talking about the Indian Constitution. The Congress and Rahul made the Constitution of India a burning issue and said that the BJP does not believe in the Constitution of India and will change the Constitution if it comes to power. Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday hit back at the opposition's repeated allegations that the BJP wants to change the Constitution. Prime Minister Modi said that his government respects the Constitution and that Babasaheb Ambedkar will not be able to abolish it now. Addressing an election rally, PM Modi alleged that the Congress is standing with anti-national forces.[9]

Social Justice and Caste Census

Opposition parties and their leaders, especially Rahul Gandhi, Akhilesh Yadav, and Tejashwi Yadav, raised the issues of social justice and focused on the caste census to ensure this. Rahul Gandhi insisted upon the need for an x-ray of the Indian society to know the real status of the Indian masses, who possessed what and how. This move seemed to work, and it helped the opposition parties improve their electoral tally in the 18th Lok Sabha election. The Congress mentioned this in its manifesto, too. The Congress issued Nyay Patra promising some schemes and policies.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, while speaking in Gujarat, said that if his party comes to power, it will conduct caste-wise census and economic survey across the country on a priority basis. Its objective is to increase the participation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and the poor of the general category. Addressing an election rally in Gujarat's Patan, he said that the BJP and RSS have planned to change the Constitution if they win the elections. 90% of the country's population belongs to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and Other Backward Class communities, but you will not find their representation in corporate, media, private hospitals, private universities, or government bureaucracy. We will first conduct caste-wise census and economic survey after coming to power. Rahul also accused the ruling BJP and RSS of planning to change the Constitution. He claimed that the current government is also against the reservation system. He said that BJP leaders are saying that they will change the Constitution.[10]

Issue of Reservation

Reservation, too, emerged as an influential issue in the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections. The issue of reservation heated up before the third phase of the Lok Sabha elections. The Congress and Rahul made reservation an issue and said that the BJP would abolish the reservation provisions if it came to power. The BJP, too, put in all its strength to counter the Congress' attack of changing the Constitution and ending SC, ST, and OBC reservations. The party has fielded former UP DGP and MP Brijlal. Brijlal called the Congress and other opposition parties opposed to the deprived, reservation, Babasaheb Ambedkar, and the Constitution. Citing a letter written by the then PM Jawaharlal Nehru to all the chief ministers in 1961, he said that the Congress had not liked reservation since the beginning. Brijlal called the allegation of changing the Constitution against the BJP a rumor and said that the Congress has made the most changes in the Constitution. The BJP also tried to communalize the issue of reservation. Brijlal further said that the Congress reduced the OBC quota in Andhra Pradesh and gave reservations to Muslims. Similarly, in Karnataka too, the OBC reservation was snatched away and given to Muslims.[11]

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra

Rahul Gandhi had begun reaching the masses much earlier in the Lok Sabha elections, organizing, firstly, Bharat Jodo Yatra and, later on, Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. His 5-month long Kanniyakumari-to-Srinagar Bharat Jodo Yatra from September 2022 to January 2023, and its second edition, the Manipur-Mumbai Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra from January to March 2024, not only allowed the Congress to connect with the people but also helped revive the organizational machinery in states.[12] This really proved to be an influential factor in the 18th Lok Sabha elections. These efforts of Rahul improved his image as a political leader, and this benefited the Congress and INDIA alliance, too.

Ambiguity of the Opposition's PM Candidate

The BJP made the ambiguity of the opposition's PM candidate a big issue. The BJP campaigned that the opposition was leaderless and that there was no certainty about who would be the prime ministerial candidate from the opposition. However, the opposition INDIA alliance had many leaders, such as Rahul, Kharge, and Mamta, but they failed to propose anyone as PM candidate.

JP Nadda and Amit Shah taunted and asked in a questioning manner whether, if INDIA wins, he will become the PM for 1 year each. He further asked whether, after Sharad Pawar, Lalu, Stalin, and Mamta, Rahul would become PM for the remaining time. While telling the reality of the INDIA alliance, the Home Minister said that it is not going to happen that INDIA wins, but if they win, then who will be the face of the Prime Minister? Will they be made PM for 1 year each? 1 year Sharad Pawar, 1 year Lalu, 1 year Stalin, 1 year Mamta, and whatever time is left, Rahul Baba will be made the Prime Minister. Can such a leadership strengthen the country?[13]

Modi Factor

No doubt that PM Narendra Modi seemed like an undefeatable face before the electoral fight, and the

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opposition could not give an all-accepted name who could become the face of the PM candidate against Narendra Modi. The BJP presented PM Narendra Modi as a strong and able leader with the ability to lead the country. Modi really emerged as a winnable factor, and the BJP was confident it would secure a huge victory under the leadership of Mr. Modi. The BJP tried to present Modi's leadership as an opportunity for the people who will get an opportunity to endorse Prime Minister Modi's leadership, decisiveness, integrity, and performance. Amit Shah attacked the opposition's nepotism and corruption in election rallies in Bihar. He said that PM Modi's victory is certain. Making him a PM for the third time means ending casteism, nepotism, and corruption in Bihar and starting politics based on merit. Narendra Modi proved to be a crucial factor in saving the BJP from going under 200 seats.

Consecration or Prana Pratishtha in Rama Mandir at Ayodhya

At the beginning of the year 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi performed the Pran Pratishtha of the idol of Ram Lalla in the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. The Prime Minister of the country spent several hours in this program organized on January 22 this year (2024) and performed Puja in the Vedic way. The BJP celebrated the event of Prana Pratishtha as the most important event of the country with great enthusiasm throughout the country and encouraged people to celebrate it. In a way, a second Diwali was celebrated across the country. Many people of the Hindu community hoisted the flag of Shri Ram on their homes and decorated the houses with *diyas* (earthen lamps) at night. People who were openly and unofficially interested in religion were also shown the dream of establishing Rama Rajya in the country.

A huge budget had been spent by the UP government on the development and renovation of Ayodhya. The BJP presented it all as their dedication to Lord Rama and Hindutva. They tried to gain electoral mileage, converting it all into an election issue. The slogan, "***Jo Ram ko laye hain, hum unko layenge***," was raised by the BJP and its supporters. In this way, there was continuity as far as the issue of Ram Mandir was concerned. However, this issue did not seem to influence voters, and this can be seen as a change in electoral politics.

Communal Factor and Its Impact

Religion is not only an important factor in Indian politics, but its impact has also been enhanced during the elections over the last three decades.

In the election's first phase, communal factors remained dormant, but they resurfaced in the second phase. PM Modi brought up the Mangal Sutra, cautioning Hindu women to protect it from Muslims, and advised them not to vote for the INDIA alliance. Instead, he urged them to support the BJP in safeguarding their Mangal Sutras and property. In Kolhapur, PM Modi stated that the opposition alliance INDI honored those who disrespected *Sanatana*.

DMK leaders had called *Sanatana* dengue-malaria, but the INDI alliance invited them to Maharashtra and honored them. It is worth noting that Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin's son Udhayanidhi had compared *Sanatana Dharma* to dengue-malaria and talked about eradicating it. Modi made a big issue of the Congress not participating in the Prana Pratishtha of Ram Mandir and quipped that Ansari, who fought against Ram Mandir, came to the Prana Pratishtha program, but the Congressmen did not. He linked this to the insult of Lord Ram.[14]

In this election, the main focus was on Hindu voters. The BJP always presented itself as the interest articulators of Hindus, but the Congress, too, tried to use a soft Hindutva strategy to attract Hindu voters. However, the results from Uttar Pradesh, mainly from Ayodhya, Chitrakoot, and Varanasi, show the failure of the *Hindutva* factor. The BJP faced a shocking drubbing from the people of Ayodhya itself, where the Ram Mandir issue was vibrant. Ayodhya seemed to go with the new slogan of SP, "***Abki bar na Mathura Kashi, hume chahiye Avdhesh Pasi***." the BJP lost not only Faizabad Lok Sabha seat but also faced defeat in all constituencies adjacent to Ayodhya.

Really, it was a big blow to the BJP and the politics of *Hindutva*. In the Varanasi constituency, too, Narendra Modi had to struggle for victory. His margin of victory was reduced dramatically compared with the previous Lok Sabha election of 2019. This also put a dent in the image of PM Modi. The Hindutva factor seemed ineffective, and the Hindu population gave priority to caste issues. On the other hand, Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, particularly, voted tactically to defeat the BJP, with many supporting the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress despite these parties offering fewer tickets to Muslim candidates. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) attempted to forge a Dalit-Muslim alliance by giving over 30 tickets to Muslim candidates, but the Muslim community's primary focus was on defeating the BJP rather than securing representation. BSP gave more than 30 tickets to Muslim candidates to make the Dalit-Muslim equation. However, the Muslim community focused on defeating the BJP rather than getting representation and due share in the Lok Sabha. With this point of view, they voted to SP and the Congress, which gave nominal tickets to the Muslim community. Mamta Banerji of AITC raised the issue of UCC and alleged that the BJP could use UCC to get political mileage. She said UCC is nothing more than a political statement. It will not be beneficial for Hindus.

Caste Factor

Caste has been a pivotal driving force in India's electoral politics since the 1950s. It has influenced politics and elections positively and negatively. Paul Brass has observed that "The role of caste in elections is easily the most discussed aspect of contemporary Indian political behaviour." Another stalwart political scholar, Rajni Kothari, too, has observed the serious impact of caste on politics and vice versa. According to him, "The alleged casteism in politics is thus no more and no less than the politicisation of caste... Politicians mobilise caste groupings and identities in order to organise their own power." According to Christophe Jaffrelot, "caste is the mosaic of Indian politics." Yogendra Yadav has defined

the interaction of castes in politics in the form of a democratic upsurge. He underlines that with the breakdown of the Congress system and the rise of regional parties, the role of caste in politics has become ever-dominant.

Continuity has been observed in the 18th Lok Sabha elections, too, as far as the caste factor was concerned. The caste card seemed to be used to polarize particular communities since the beginning of the electoral campaign. Both the main parties, the BJP and the Congress, tried their best to create caste equations. Both focused on getting the support of backward castes by making alliances with OBC leaders and their parties. The BJP was confident about the voters of forward castes but additionally it aligned with Om Prakash Rajbhar, Nitish Kumar, and Jayant Chaudhary to make better caste equations. Additionally, the BJP had already made an alliance with Sanjay Nishad and Anupriya Patel in Uttar Pradesh. The caste factor was used by the opposition, too, in the name of social justice.

Opposition parties promised to ensure social justice by giving due share in resources. Rahul Gandhi talked about social justice and the sharing of resources saying, "***Jitni Jiski Aabadi utni uski Hissedari***." It means that all people would get their share in resources, education, employment, etc., as per their population. In 2019, many Dalits and OBCs, too, voted for the BJP. Shah went past Mandal politics, managing to subsume previously antagonistic castes and sub-castes into a broad Hindutva identity. And as the BJP increased its depth, it expanded its breadth as well.

In the 2024 Indian general elections, Dalits and OBCs appeared to shift their support to the INDIA alliance, as evident from the electoral performance of the Congress and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. This shift was largely driven by concerns over social justice and the threat to the Indian Constitution.

Although the BJP experienced a slight decline in support among OBCs and Dalits, it still managed to secure a significant portion of their votes. The table below illustrates the caste-based voting patterns and support for the two alliances led by the BJP and the Congress, the leading coalition partners of NDA and INDIA, respectively (Table 2).

CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that in a tough contest, almost bipolar, the BJP somehow managed to retain its carefully nurtured constituency of voters—upper caste Hindus, OBCs, and tribal people, and to a lesser extent, Dalits, mainly non-Yadavs. However, a slight tilt of these social groups toward the opposition weakened the party's prospects in some key states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra. However, as before, the majority of the Hindu upper castes (53%) continued to support the BJP, though a small section also appeared to move toward the opposition. About 49% of Hindu OBCs (especially non-Yadav OBCs) and 48% Hindu tribal voters supported the BJP overwhelmingly. Among Dalits, 31% voted for the BJP. As far as the Congress and opposition parties were concerned, they succeeded in winning the support of 14% upper Hindus, 20% OBCs, 23% Hindu Adivasis and more than 50% Dalits. This shows that the party's Hindutva-driven subaltern outreach at the grassroots level and beneficial schemes like free ration worked well at the national level, and the BJP managed to avoid an embarrassing defeat.

Issues of Public Concern and Their Impact Over Electoral Mandate

Inflation, unemployment, education, security, better law and justice system, health facilities, poverty alleviation, issues related to farmers and laborers, economic development, corruption, electricity, roads, better water arrangements, etc., are indeed issues of public concern. However, for the last few years, these issues seem to be lagging behind in playing a significant role in determining the results of elections. According to Shiv Kant Sharma, former editor of BBC Hindi, the issues of inflation and unemployment may not be decisive in themselves, but they are directly related to improving life, so they are always discussed.

Many figures are being thrown around about inflation, unemployment, poverty, and the status of the rupee. If there was an autonomous data institution, its figures could have become the basis for a balanced discussion. Is free rationing a sign of people's poverty or a justified use of government-purchased grain under the MSP system? Has the rupee fallen more or less compared to the UPA government? Has the standard of living of the people improved or fallen? Did the lack of agricultural reform benefit the farmers and the country or harm them? There are many such issues that help create a perception of life improvement and play a decisive role in elections.[15] Possibly, these

Table 2 | Vote by caste and communities (%)

	Congress	Change over from 2019	Congress allies	Change over from 2019	BJP	Change over from 2019	BJP allies	Change over from 2019
Hindu upper caste	14	2	7	1	53	0	7	−1
Hindu upper OBCs	20	5	15	6	39	−2	9	−2
Hindu lower OBC	18	3	7	4	49	1	9	−1
Hindu Dalits	19	−1	13	8	31	−3	5	−2
Hindu Adivasis	23	−8	8	2	48	5	3	1
Muslims	38	5	27	15	8	−1	2	1
Christians	25	−14	7	1	14	3	14	9
Sikh	30	−9	2	1	10	−1	1	−19
Other Minorities	19	6	12	5	31	−1	14	10

Note: The AAP is the Congress's ally only in Gujarat, Haryana, and Delhi, and TMC is only in UP
Source: CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey: The three main takeaways, The Hindu, June 07, 2024

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issues also had some impact on this Lok Sabha election, if not decisive.

Other Relevant Factors Preventing the BJP from Majority

From the point of view of the BJP's unexpected performance, it can be said that there were many such factors that proved harmful to the BJP. Overconfidence was one of the reasons responsible for the reduction in seats of the BJP. According to Vikas Saraswat, a senior columnist, bad ticket distribution, import of external leaders, ignoring old cadre leaders, and the increasing tendency of high command in the BJP, etc., were the key factors due to which the BJP missed the majority. It seemed as if the mistake of 2004's 'India Shining' slogan was being repeated.

Shifting Loyalties (Defections)

Each and every election brings an opportunity for selfish politicians to shift their loyalty from one party to another. 18th Lok Sabha General Elections, too, could not remain far from this trend. This means that continuity was observed regarding the trend of defections. Many leaders of opposition parties joined the BJP right before the election. Leading the pack of defectors on the eve of the Lok Sabha elections (2024), many sitting lawmakers (Members of Parliament and State Assemblies) defected to the BJP, the Congress, and other parties. The eminent party-shifting politicians and party spokespersons included Arjun Modhwadia, former state party chief of the Congress from Gujarat; Ashok Chavhan, the former Congress MP and chief minister of Maharashtra; Birendra Singh and his son Vrijendra Singh from Haryana; etc. Many the Congress spokespersons, such as Gaurav Vallabh, Rohan Gupta, and Radhika Khera, joined the BJP. Many of these were given party tickets to contest the Lok Sabha election by the political parties. The BJP extended party tickets to 34 candidates[16] who joined it from other parties. The following table sheds light on the key defectors (Table 3).

Dynastic Factor and Its Impact on Political Parties

The 18th Lok Sabha elections saw a familiar trend: many state-level party leaders giving their family members a chance to contest. This highlights the significant role of dynastic politics in India, where family ties often influence candidate selection. The reliance on dynastic culture raises questions about the fairness and transparency of political parties' selection processes. Interestingly, despite this trend, many candidates from prominent political families faced defeat across India. This phenomenon is not unique to one party; almost all parties, including national and regional ones, have relied on dynastic politics to some extent. In fact, data suggests that 30% of Lok Sabha MPs belong to political families, with some states like Punjab having as high as 62% dynastic representation. The prevalence of dynastic politics in India has sparked debates about its implications for democracy and representation. While some argue that it ensures continuity and stability, others see it as a hindrance to merit-based representation and a perpetuation of entrenched power structures.

Table 3 | Key party shifting politicians

Politicians	From	To
Milind Deora	INC	BJP
Ashok Chavan	INC	BJP
Arjun Modhwadia	INC	BJP
Baba Siddiki	INC	BJP
Jagadish Shettar	INC	BJP
Praneet Kaur	INC	BJP
Suresh Pachori	INC	BJP
Vijender Singh	INC	BJP
Naveen Jindal	INC	BJP
Gaurav Vallabh	INC	BJP
Brindra Singh	BJP	INC
Rahul Keshwan	BJP	INC
Ashok Tanwar	AAP	BJP
Kunwar Danish Ali	BSP	INC
Ritesh Pandey.	BSP	BJP

Source: Table created by the author

Response of National Parties, Mainly the BJP and the Congress, to Dynastic Factor

The BJP has highlighted that the Congress Party has relied on Nehru's dynasty for leadership since India's independence. During the election campaign, its leaders attacked the nepotism and dynastic politics of the Congress. However, the BJP, too, has not been much behind the dynastic approach in politics and used the dynastic card by alliancing with dynastic parties and fielding family members of its senior party leaders in the 18th Lok Sabha election, too. The Congress has alleged hypocrisy by the BJP, claiming that the BJP itself forms alliances with dynasty-based parties such as Om Prakash Rajbhar, Jayant Chaudhari, and Anupriya Patel in Uttar Pradesh, and that family relatives of senior BJP leaders such as Rajnath Singh and Sushma Swaraj have been accommodated in politics. The BJP also accommodated other family members of senior leaders of the BJP. The BJP's Menka Gandhi and her son Varun Gandhi, too, belong to dynastic politics. However, the BJP did not field Varun Gandhi in this election. Incidentally, Pankaja Munde, Poonam Mahajan, and Heena Gavit are three dynast leaders of the BJP from Maharashtra who are daughters of top BJP leaders. Anurag Thakur, a member of Lok Sabha and the son of BJP leader Prem Kumar Dhumal, also represents dynastic politics.

Response of Other Parties to Dynastic Factor

Other smaller and regional parties such as the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, Lok Jan Sakti Party Ramvilas Paswan, DMK, RJD, RLD, Shiv Sena, NCP, Shiromani Akali Dal, Biju Janata Dal, and Samajwadi Party, which participated in the 18th Lok Sabha election have higher densities of dynasty-derived candidates and elected representatives in recent years. The BJP targeted the Congress in the 2024 elections, too, for alleged nepotism and a family dynasty for leadership. The Congress, too, could not get rid of the dynastic culture, and it distributed tickets to the relatives of several of the Congress leaders. Congress chief Rahul Gandhi contested Lok Sabha elections from two seats—Raebareli (Uttar Pradesh) and Wayanad (Kerala).

The trend of dynastic politics influenced the Samajwadi Party more than others. Candidates for Lok Sabha polls declared by the Samajwadi Party included the names of party president Akhilesh Yadav, Dimple Yadav, Dharmender Yadav, Akshay Yadav, and Aditya Yadav. Akhilesh himself was in the fray from the Kannauj constituency, and his wife, Dimple Yadav, contested from Mainpuri. Mulayam Singh Yadav's nephew Dharmendra Yadav also had been fielded from Azamgarh. Akshay Yadav, son of Ram Gopal Yadav, was made party candidate from Firozabad. Aditya Yadav, who is Shivpal Yadav's son, also was in the electoral fray from Budaun. Akhilesh Yadav, his wife Dimple Yadav, and brothers Dharmendra Yadav, Akshay Yadav, and Aditya Yadav, all five family members succeed in reaching the Lok Sabha. This was a very surprising trend in Indian democracy when five family members belonging to a similar party got elected to the Lok Sabha.

NCP Chief Sharad Pawar's daughter, Supriya Sule, contested the election from the Baramati seat, which she had already represented and scored a victory. RJD's Lalu Yadav's daughter, Misa Bharti, contested the Lok Sabha election from the Pataliputra seat against her uncle Ram Kripal Yadav, fielded by the BJP. Ram Vilas Paswan's son, Chirag Paswan, kept the reserved Hajipur seat for himself. In Karnataka, it is former PM HD Deve Gowda and his son and grandsons were in the electoral fray. Deve Gowda's grandson Prajwal Revanna was in controversy for being alleged in a sex scandal.

As far as Haryana is concerned, dynastic elements were prevalent in this Lok Sabha elections, too. Some cases have been tracked here. The Congress fielded Deepender Singh Hooda, son of the influential leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda, from Rohtak parliamentary constituency. The BJP, too, did not seem to compromise with dynastic politics and fielded Naveen Jindal from the Kurukshetra constituency, who is the son of former Congress leader OP Jindal. Rao Inderjit Singh, too, belongs to the famous dynasty of Haryana, and he was given a ticket by the BJP from Gurugram.

Boost to the Trend of Coalition Government and Culture of Consensus

The 2024 Indian general elections have reinforced the trend of coalition governments and fostered a culture of consensus. The results indicate a shift toward collaborative politics, where parties are increasingly willing to put aside differences and work together to achieve common goals. This development has significant implications for India's democratic landscape, as it promotes:

- Increased representation and inclusivity
- More effective governance through collective decision-making
- Reduced polarization and conflict
- Enhanced political stability

The BJP performed well compared to other political parties but could not achieve a majority on its own. It won 240 seats only, 32 seats lesser than the magic figure (272). No doubt that this election seemed to revive the era of coalition politics that was in existence from 1989 successively till 2014. This election will revive the culture of consensus, too. This is a remarkable change and trend that emerged in this election. However, the last two governments were also coalition governments, but they were nominal forms of coalition governments. The alliance partners were not so influential in stopping the BJP and Modi government from making any crucial or controversial decision. Under an actual coalition, each partner is important, and the core party or leading party has to depend on its partners for big decisions.

This Lok Sabha election revived the real alliance politics and coalition government, as the BJP could not score a majority. Under this coalition government, the BJP will not be in a position to implement its own electoral agenda. This is a significant trend that emerged from the 18th Lok Sabha General Elections. It has given a boost to the alliance politics and coalition government, which seemed to dwindle consecutively in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha General Elections.

However, this election was fought by the BJP and the Congress with different alliances. NDA, as an alliance, was successful in getting 293 seats. However, two partners of the NDA alliance, Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu, are not considered to be very reliable partners, who can also turn toward the INDIA alliance in the future at any time. Nitish Kumar has done this many times earlier. The Congress-led INDIA alliance currently has achieved only 234 seats.

Now, the key to the power will be in the hands of Chandrababu Naidu, Nitish Kumar, and Chirag Paswan, whose parties have secured 16, 12, and 5 seats, respectively. Now, it will also be interesting to see how much Nitish Kumar will be able to take forward the issue of social justice, which was his main emphasis in the last few months and by conducting a caste-based survey in Bihar, he increased the reservation for Dalits and backward classes. However, the Patna High Court has suspended the Nitish government's decision.

The Prime Minister will not be as strong as he was during the last two governments from 2014 to 2024. The new government and its PM will be in a dependent position, and he will have to run the government only with the consent of the coalition partners. In the true sense, this will be a cabinet government because now the power will not lie solely with the Prime Minister but with the cabinet. In fact, this is the parliamentary system of governance in which the cabinet is answerable to the Parliament, and the President works on the written advice of the cabinet.

In other words, the position of the Prime Minister in the coalition government is not that of a boss but that of a coordinator, that is, first among equals. In the true sense, this is the democratic system in which no one imposes his/her will on others, but decisions are taken by consensus. The emergence of coalition governments and consensus-driven politics underscores the

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maturity of India's democracy, where diverse parties can come together to serve the nation's interests.

Women's Representation in the 18th Lok Sabha Election

It has been observed that women's electoral participation and representation have not been satisfactory in India since 1952, when the first Lok Sabha general election was held. This trend still remains unchanged. Due to male dominance, women remained lagged behind in connection with electoral representation. They have been politically underprivileged even after more than 75 years since independence has passed out. Electoral data since 1952 shows that the political plight of women has not been satisfactory, and their role in electoral politics has been very minimal. In the 16th Lok Sabha elections, a record 61 (11%) women candidates were elected. The 17th Lok Sabha election brought an improvement over the 16th Lok Sabha in terms of women's representation, and 78 women candidates were elected in 2019, which was 14.36% of the strength of the lower house. The following table sheds light on women's participation and representation in the 18th Lok Sabha elections (Table 4).

As compared to the 17th Lok Sabha general election, women's representation has dwindled in the 18th Lok Sabha, as despite a greater push for women's participation in electoral politics, of the total elected members in the 18th Lok Sabha, just 13.6% or 74 MPs are women, which are four less than the women members got elected in the previous year. Women candidates like Selja Kumari, Kangana Ranaut, Hema Malini, and Dimple Yadav were significant winners in this election. A total of 797 women contested the Lok Sabha elections.[14]

The nomination of women as party candidates in India's 2024 Lok Sabha elections reflects a discriminatory attitude among political parties. Here are the key statistics:

- BJP: 69 (16%) women candidates out of 440
- Congress: 41 (13%) women candidates out of 327
- Women's Representation in 18th Lok Sabha: 74 women members, accounting for 13.6% of the total strength
- Partywise Women's Representation:
- BJP: 31 women
- Congress: 13 women
- AITC: 11 women
- SP: 5 women
- other parties: 15

Table 4 | Women in 18th lok sabha

Women vote%	65.55
Total women candidates	797
Seats having women candidates	390
Seats with no women candidates	152
Winner women	**74**
Representation%	13.6

Source: Indian Express dated 30 December, 2024 (indianexpress.com)

Table 5 | Partywise women candidates

Party	Candidates	Winners
BJP	69	31
INC	41	13
AITC	11	11
SP	DNA**	5
DMK	DNA	3
JD U	DNA	2
LJPRV	DNA	2

Source: TOI, What 2024 Lok Sabha elections tell about women representation in Indian politics, June 19, 2024

**DNA = Data Not Available

The remaining 15 women candidates have been elected from other parties. In fact, this is a matter of great concern as this figure is much less than the 33% representation that women activists have been demanding for a long time. In this regard, the Constitution (One Hundred and Sixth Amendment) Act, popularly known as the Women's Reservation Bill, 2023 (Nari Shakti Vandan Act), was passed by the Parliament during a special session. However, despite the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill, political parties are not taking women's political representation as a serious issue. This is the reason why political parties did not field more women candidates in this election (Table 5).

This shows that political parties are not enthusiastic about women's participation and representation in law-making bodies, and they keep postponing it. Actually, this is the anti-women attitude and undemocratic mindset of Indian political parties, which should end as soon as possible so that women can get their much-awaited representation in the Parliament and state assemblies.

Revival of the LOP

One important change and democratic trend that emerged from this mandate is that the Lok Sabha has gotten an LOP after 10 years, which will really strengthen India's parliamentary democracy. Because, in the last 10 years, the opposition had become very weak, especially the Congress Party, after being in power from 2004 to 2014 as a major component of the UPA, could win only 44 and 52 seats, respectively, in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections due to the Narendra Modi wave. As a result, from 2014 to 2024, there was no party in the country that had obtained 10% of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha.

According to parliamentary conventions, the number of members from a party should be enough to constitute the quorum, i.e., 10% of the total members in the house, to be recognized as an opposition party in the house. However, no party could fulfill that criteria. In other words, to become the LOP in the Lok Sabha, a party has to win at least 54 seats. Lok Sabha remained without LOP for a decade.

This was really a very unhealthy trend for Indian democracy. In a parliamentary democracy, there is a huge

significance of LOP, without whom a strong and balanced democracy cannot be expected. The opposition party under LOP plays an essential role in maintaining checks and balances by keeping control over the government and the ruling party. However, this election revived the LOP in the Lok Sabha as the Congress Party achieved 99 seats, which is enough to be recognized as an opposition party.

Unenthusiastic and Apathetic Participation of Voters

The election campaign for the 18th general election of the Lok Sabha, which began on April 19, in seven phases, concluded on June 1, 2024, the results of which came out on June 4. This election showed another trend of unenthusiastic and apathetic participation of voters. People participated in the biggest festival of democracy, but the participation of voters was not encouraging. The average voting percentage across the country was 65, which was less than the last Lok Sabha election. This means that about 35% of the voters stayed away from the election. This led to the indifference or empathy of voters toward the election. However, there were some special reasons for this indifference or apathy, one of which seems to be the main one, and that is the disillusionment of voters with politicians.

Voters have been looking forward to electing their representatives with great hope and expectation. However, perhaps the performance of the governments and public representatives has not been so effective and solid that it encourages them to vote. Governments are not able to live up to the aspirations of the people. In such a situation, the public seems to feel cheated. Because leaders and parties make countless promises to the public, but no decisive role is played in fulfilling those promises. In every election, people are shown big dreams, and politicians are very skilled in this, but no special strategies are made to make the dreams come true. In the name of public welfare, people's hearts are won by giving free rations, some units of free electricity, toilets, etc. Almost all parties do not take care of education, better health facilities, employment, etc. This is the reason why people do not come out of their homes in large numbers to vote.

Concluding Comments

The 18th Lok Sabha general election of 2024 has been recorded as remarkable in the political and electoral history of India for different factors and trends. This election will be known for its peculiar continuity and tremendous changes.

First of all, the BJP emerged as the single largest political party, but it could not achieve a majority on its own. It won 240 seats only, which is 32 seats less than the magic figure (272). However, as of now, this election seems to revive the era of coalition politics that was in existence since 1989 successively till 2014. This is a remarkable change that emerged during this election. However, the last two governments were also coalition governments, but they were nominal or centripetal forms of coalition governments, whereas Indian electoral politics was in the grip of the centrifugal form of coalition politics from 1989 to 2014. Under a centrifugal coalition, each partner was important, and the core party or leading party was dependent on its partners. This Lok Sabha election revived the trend of real coalition politics and government, as the BJP could not score a majority. Under this coalition government, the BJP will not be in a position to implement its own electoral agenda, unlike it did during the 17th Lok Sabha.

Change has been noticed regarding burning issues, too. The Constitution of India emerged as the most vital and decisive issue and factor, which dashed the hopes of the BJP and prevented it from securing a majority. The issue of development and welfare of vulnerable sections of the society, such as the poor, the downtrodden, the backward, and women, too, seemed not to work for the BJP in an expected way. It has become very clear that now a large section of people has emerged who not only have great faith in the Indian Constitution but also consider it above the religious books and they cannot accept any assault on it.

The caste factor influenced this election, unlike the past two elections. It means that this election shows that the caste factor cannot thoroughly disappear from the electoral scene. Most of the political parties kept caste in consideration while distributing tickets to the candidates. Political parties fully attempted to do social engineering to ensure their victory. However, except for the BJP, social engineering in all parties seemed to work particularly in northern India. Voters, too, seemed to vote on caste line.

Another point of discussion is whether there was a polarization of votes on the basis of religion in this election also. It can be obviously said that the polarization issue cannot be thoroughly ruled out in the electoral politics of India. However, in this election, the trend of reverse polarization was observed. Muslims seemed polarized against the BJP. They silently and tactfully voted in favor of the INDIA alliance, mainly in Uttar Pradesh.

BSP supremo Mayawati tried to gain electoral gain by fielding Muslim candidates more than other political parties. During her rallies, she seemed to appeal to Muslims not to divide their votes against the BJP. The BJP mainly focused on Hindutva and Hindu voters. Like the past Lok Sabha elections, it seemed to ignore Muslims as it did not field Muslims as its party candidate.

Other parties, mainly the Congress and SP, seemed under pressure of Hindutva and had to take shelter of soft Hindutva. In the last two elections a different type of trend seemed to emerge. The BJP highly criticized the Congress for Muslim appeasement. That was the reason that the Congress and other political parties could not openly raise minority mainly Muslim issues. The core issues like Kashmir issue and Article 370 that were part of the BJP's manifesto have been almost settled down by Modi government. Issue of Ram Mandir also had been resolved.

The BJP propagated it as its success and capability and tried to cash its contribution toward solution of

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these issues in this election. Beside it, the BJP prepared its electoral pitch to bat by producing new issues like CAA and NRC. Muslims are protesting these issues with tooth and nail. Recently, these issues had thrust Delhi into communal riots, too, and about 50 people had become victim. However, these issues could not get momentum in favor of the BJP. The issue of Constitution changing proved more effective over all issues raised by the BJP.

A united opposition, along with issues like inflation, unemployment, expensive higher education, social justice, OBC empowerment through caste census, danger to the Constitution and democracy, etc., proved favorable for the opposition parties. However, the opposition could not dethrone Narendra Modi, but they succeeded in compelling Narendra Modi and the BJP to run a coalition government.

Lastly, it is noticeable that there is no representative of the Muslim community in Lok Sabha from the BJP, the leading ruling party. This is really a matter of concern from the point of view of minorities. An equality-based society cannot be ruled out and replaced in a country full of diversity. No doubt, the Modi government, in the future, will have to face a new challenge in the form of strong opposition. However, no doubt that still Narendra Modi is the most attractive and reliable face for people, and they prefer him to others. There were many issues that influenced the electoral behavior of voters.

However, the opposition block led by the Congress tried to turn the fight in its own favor by tossing issues like social justice through caste census and the Constitution of India. Nitish Kumar–led JDU-RJD government in Bihar had taken the lead in the fight for social justice, initiating a caste survey that revealed astonishing caste data regarding OBCs. The survey showed that OBCs make up 63% of Bihar's population. On the basis of this caste survey, Nitish Kumar–led Bihar government has made provisions for 75% reservation in the state. There is a clear increase in the reservation of OBCs and SCs. After that, the caste census became a vibrant political issue in Indian politics. However, Nitish Kumar shifted his loyalty again in favor of the BJP and joined NDA. Therefore, this issue could not become a decisive electoral issue in Bihar. The BJP succeeded in neutralizing it with the help of Nitish Kumar, and it did not harm the BJP more.

Another significant factor was alliance politics. On the one hand, the Congress added more allies to give a strong fight to the BJP and Narendra Modi. For this purpose, with the efforts of Nitish Kumar and others, the INDIA alliance was founded by 26 political parties. However, it had many weaknesses. Its first weakness was that it lacked a strong and all-accepted face. Another big weakness is that all affluent leaders of its member parties were ambitious for the post of Prime Minister.

As far as the BJP is concerned, it seemed committed to victory, and it, too, had enlarged its alliance, with the NDA adding 38 political parties to it. The strength of the BJP and NDA is that they had a credible and performing face as Narendra Modi. The BJP was in the fray along with slogans such as "Modi hai to Mumkin hai, Modi ki Guarantee, Sabka Sath Sabka Vikas Sabka Vishwas," etc. The BJP and Narendra Modi made full efforts to gain political dividends of Rama Mandir, which was opened for devotees in January 2024, with the deletion of Article 370, which the Supreme Court, too, has justified, and the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill.

In brief, it can be said that the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 were very interesting indeed as far as continuity and changes were concerned. However, the mandate did not seem in favor of the BJP, and the opposition parties and political analysts had expected a weak government during the 18th Lok Sabha. However, today's BJP is different and being run by Modi and Shah. The BJP had indicated by re-choosing Narendra Modi as PM, grabbing the all-important posts of CCS, and re-electing Om Birla as Speaker of Lok Sabha that it would try to run the government as per its will. In the present scenario, this is not looking at the NDA government; it is looking completely at the BJP's majority government. The BJP seems to thoroughly manage all the partners of NDA, and these partner parties, too, look to be in the surrendered mode. In this way, the chances of confrontation between the BJP and the opposition parties seem certain. The BJP, too, does not seem to bow to the pressure of strong opposition.

As far as the meaning of the mandate the 18th Lok Sabha general election is concerned, it is not very important which party has won or lost in this Lok Sabha election. The important thing is that democracy and the Constitution have definitely won. In democracy, it is very important to have a strong opposition as a strong opposition is the protection shield of democracy and the Constitution. Now, it is not certain whether the government will be formed by the NDA or India, but the opposition will definitely remain strong, forcing the incoming government to work within the constitutional parameters. This is democracy in the true sense. The incoming coalition government may not be very stable, but it will definitely prove to be very responsible.

Victory and defeat are an integral part of elections under a democratic system. It is hoped that all of the elected and defeated will play an important role in further strengthening Indian democracy. This is the identity of a healthy democracy. It is hoped that the newly elected NDA government will take India's development journey forward by giving priority to public interest. This government will try to take concrete steps to establish socio-economic democracy in the country in accordance with the spirit of the Indian Constitution, and the opposition, which appears strong this time, will work to create positive pressure on the government to move forward in the right direction that will lead the country to progress, prosperity, and peace, which Indian people expect indeed.

Suggestions

On the basis of the above study, the following suggestions can be made to make Indian democracy more participatory, inclusive, vibrant, and successful. These

can make voters ready to come out of their homes in large numbers to vote enthusiastically.

The apathy of voters toward the electoral process is of grave concern, and it was mainly because of the disillusionment of a large number of voters with the non-serious behavior of politicians and political parties. All parties seem equal to the people. People do not find a huge difference among the political parties. Almost all political parties lack clear cut ideology and internal democracy. They are equally good and equally bad. All are opportunists and seem to compromise for political and electoral advantages. All parties used to accommodate corrupt leaders with criminal charges. This is the need of the hour: parties should have internal democracies and clarity in their ideologies so that people can make a difference in parties and get motivated to vote enthusiastically to elect good leaders and parties. All parties should promote good human beings in politics and give tickets to the people with honest and clean images.

No doubt, voters have great hopes and expectations from their representatives. However, the performances of the governments and public representatives have not been so effective and solid that the voters can be encouraged to vote enthusiastically. To attract voters to the elections, governments need to live up to the aspirations of the people so that the voters may have an interest in participating in the election process. Leaders and parties have been used to making countless promises to the public, but they have not taken concrete and decisive steps to fulfill those promises. Parties should not show big dreams to the people that cannot be fulfilled.

Politicians should make serious efforts and use special strategies to make promises come true. To impress voters, ruling parties need to take concrete steps for the true development of the people and the country rather than just giving free ration, some units of free electricity, free bus journeys, toilets, etc., in the name of public welfare. Poverty eradication, better education, better health facilities, employment, security, justice, good governance, better law and order, development, etc., must be given priority by the leaders and parties.

There are some flaws, too, in the election process throughout the country, such as long queues of voters at polling stations. This is due to the assignment of so many votes to a polling station of somewhere more than 1500. This also works as a hurdle to attract voters to the polling station. An ideal polling station should contain 500–700 voters so that voters may vote easily. Political parties try to fool people by announcing popular schemes, and people find themselves being cheated. There is no effective and efficient mechanism to prevent this. ECI and the Supreme Court should frame concrete guidelines in this regard. The election code of conduct is often ignored and violated by the contestants and political parties. ECI should not only take strict action against the offenders transparently and honestly, but it should also seem to do so. It will not only preserve Indian democracy but also encourage voters to come forward and use their right to vote.

Poverty, too, is a big obstacle to enthusiastic voting. Many poor people prefer to go to work rather than vote. The government should make better arrangements so that people may come out of poverty and play a significant part in Indian democracy as voters. Many rich people, too, do not like to participate in the electoral process as voters. They prefer to live in their houses on polling day or go on a picnic despite going to vote. Therefore, casting a vote should be made mandatory so that no voter may remain apathetic from voting without any genuine reason.

The dynastic nature of Indian politics makes a question mark on our democracy. Political parties should discourage dynastic politics and prefer cadre workers rather than heirs of political leaders while distributing electoral tickets. Only those relatives of politicians who have a long experience as a party worker should be given chances.

The Election Commission of India should encourage voters to participate in elections through awareness campaigns and drives that engage school and college students. Special classes should be conducted, and awareness rallies should be organized to awaken people about the importance of the right to vote and the role of voters in a democracy. The representation of women in Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas is very pathetic, and this should be improved by implementing the 33% Women's Reservation Bill or the Nari Shakti Vandan Act, which was recently passed by the Parliament, as soon as possible. This will surely prove to be helpful in making Indian democracy more participatory and inclusive.

Running a coalition government requires certain principles known as coalition dharma, which should be followed faithfully by all coalition partners, mainly the leading partner. All coalition partners have to run the government in the public interest by adopting a common minimum program and avoiding controversial issues. The biggest party has to work by consensus instead of acting arbitrarily. Only then will the government be able to complete its term, and the country can also avoid elections for the next 5 years. Otherwise, the country may also have to face mid-term elections that will not be in the best interests of our economy.

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