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Challenges and Prospects for A United Opposition in the 2024 Lok Sabha Election in India: An Analytical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The 2014 Lok Sabha election in India saw the BJP winning majority of seats with a relatively low national vote share of 31%. The BJP won another majority victory in the next Lok Sabha election in 2019 improving its tally of seats, but its vote share remained well short of majority at about 38%. Since the 2019 election, the party has won many state assembly elections and further strengthened its position as the dominant party at the national level. As we approach the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the Congress, the principal opposition party, and several other parties have initiated a major effort to forge electoral alliances with an objective of defeating the BJP. Using constituency level data, this paper provides an analytical perspective on the prospects and challenges for a united opposition to succeed in their efforts to counter the BJP. It finds that even if the opposition parties can put up a united front, it will not be easy to defeat the BJP in most of the seats the party won in 2014 and 2019. The paper concludes that the opposition parties would need both a high degree of unity and coordination across many states, as well as a significant vote swing against the BJP to have any chance of defeating it in 2024. Thus, it is doubtful whether merely forming an anti-BJP alliance, without a credible alternative narrative and policy agenda, can yield substantial electoral benefits for the opposition.

Keywords: BJP; Constituency Level; Elections; Opposition Unity; Party System; India

INTRODUCTION

As we approach the 2024 Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian Parliament) election in India, many commentators and scholars have discussed whether the initiative by various opposition parties to forge alliances across the Indian states with an objective of defeating the BJP is likely to be successful¹⁻³. The main premise behind this initiative is that it would enable the opposition parties to put up a united challenge against the BJP by avoiding division of anti-BJP votes. However, the opposition parties face many hurdles including allocation of seats in different states due to a large number of divergent interests, weakness of the Congress in spearheading these efforts and contradictions inherent in the nature of party competition in many Indian states. For example, a regional party may not want to cede a large number of Lok Sabha seats to another party because

this would also impact its prospects in the state assembly elections. Existing analysis on this subject tends to stress the macro level picture at the national or the state level on the basis of political challenges of bringing together a large number of diverse parties to resolve these contradictions. This paper, on the other hand, focuses on the constituency level data and provides an analytical perspective on the challenges and prospects of a united opposition to defeat the BJP in the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha election.

More broadly, it stresses the importance of analysing constituency level data to understand the nature of electoral competition in India. The paper begins with a brief background on the evolution of the Indian party system, which is followed by a constituency level analysis to analyse the challenges and prospects of a united opposition to counter the BJP in 2024 Lok Sabha election. Next, it provides a discussion and implications of the analysis, and finally



presents a conclusion.

Evolution of the Indian party system

The Indian party system has gone through various phases after the country's independence from the British rule in 1947. It began with a phase of Congress' dominance during the first two decades after India's independence⁴. The Congress party was formed in 1885 and led India's independence movement against the British rule. After 1967, Congress's dominance declined due to various reasons including increased competition and emergence of anti-Congress alliances in many states although the party continued to be the principal national party in the country. The period after 1989 was marked by further decline in Congress' prospects, growing influence of regional parties in many states and the emergence of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) as the main challenger to the Congress at the national level^{5,6}. The BJP was formed in 1984 and was the successor party of the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, formed in 1951. The fragmentation of the Indian party system after 1989 also saw national and regional parties forging alliances to improve their electoral prospects and forming coalition governments at the centre and in many states^{7,8}.

The 2014 Lok Sabha election was an important milestone in Indian politics and the party system when, for the first time since 1984, a single party, in this instance the BJP, was able to win a majority of seats. It was also the first time that a party other than the Congress had achieved this feat. After BJP's victory in 2014, many opposition parties attempted a strategy to form alliances for the 2019 election with the aim to defeat the BJP. An important premise behind these efforts was that the BJP's victory in 2014 was achieved based on a relatively small (31%) percentage of votes and therefore, if the remaining 69% of the votes were consolidated in favour of a united opposition, the BJP could be defeated. However, these efforts were not particularly successful due to competing interests and demands of various opposition parties and the personal political ambitions of their leaders.

A divided opposition in conjunction with Modi's popularity helped the BJP to achieve another majority victory in the 2019, improving both its tally of seats and vote share, which prompted suggestions that the BJP had emerged as the new dominant party^{9,10}. An all India post-2019 election survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) found that 46.5% of the respondents preferred Modi as India's Prime Minister¹¹. In the same survey, 41.2% of the respondent reported being 'particularly close' to the BJP followed by the Congress at 19.2%¹¹. Ziegfeld notes that the presence or absence of alliances in 2019 had a modest impact on the election outcome¹².

In the recent Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won majority of seats in 2014 (51.9%) and 2019 (55.8%) based on a relatively low vote share of 31.3% and 37.7% respectively. The Congress was the distant second party, securing 19.7% and 19.3%

vote share and a much lower 8.1% and 9.5% seat share, in 2014 and 2019 respectively. The balance of the votes and seats were secured by several other (mainly regional) parties, thus producing a national party system dominated by the BJP. The disproportionality between the vote and the seat share resulted in a substantial 'seat bonus' (seat share less vote share) for the BJP – 20.6% in 2014 and 18.1% in 2019, demonstrating the workings of the Single Member Plurality electoral system (SMPS) in India.

To counter a party in power or a dominant party, opposition parties have, on many occasions, formed alliances to minimise splitting of their votes. This means that parties in a pre-election alliance agree to contest elections only in certain seats with an aim to aggregate support behind the alliance candidate in a constituency, thereby maximising the likelihood of winning¹². The most prominent example of this was in the 1977 Lok Sabha election, where a large number of opposition parties amalgamated under a common party label (Janata Party/Bharatiya Lok Dal) to defeat the Congress, winning 41% of the votes and 54% of the seats. This also led to a substantial reduction in the effective number of parties (ENP), a key measure, which is calculated by weighing the contesting number of parties by their respective vote¹³. The ENP of 2.1 in 1977 has been the lowest during the Lok Sabha elections conducted in India since independence¹⁴. The emergence and success of the BJP in the 1990's has also been attributed, in part, to its pre-election alliances to counter the Congress¹⁵. Since the fragmentation of the Indian system after 1989, parties have increasingly resorted to forming pre-election alliances to improve their electoral prospects both in the national and state assembly elections, with coalition governments becoming the norm at the national level and in many states.

As we approach the 2024 Lok Sabha election, many opposition parties have again initiated efforts to form state by state alliances with an objective of having a united opposition candidate in most of the constituencies to defeat the BJP. This paper argues and provides evidence that the prospects and challenges of the opposition parties to succeed in this initiative need to be studied in light of the dynamics of constituency level electoral competition in India.

Constituency level analysis

Although understanding macro level trends, and the vote and seat share of parties at the national level as discussed in the previous sections is useful, this does not provide granular details about the nature of party competition at the constituency level, where elections are actually contested. For example, whilst the BJP secured an aggregate vote share of 31.0% and 37.7% in 2014 and 2019 respectively, its vote share varied considerably across various constituencies. Therefore, it is important to analyse constituency level data to assess the challenges and opportunities for a united opposition unity to succeed in defeating the BJP in the 2024



Lok Sabha election.

Index of Opposition Unity (IOU)

An 'Index of Opposition Unity' (IOU) has been formulated to represent the relative fragmentation of the opposition votes¹⁶. This is expressed as the ratio of vote share of the largest opposition party to the total vote share of all the opposition parties. Thus, a high value of IOU indicates greater opposition unity.

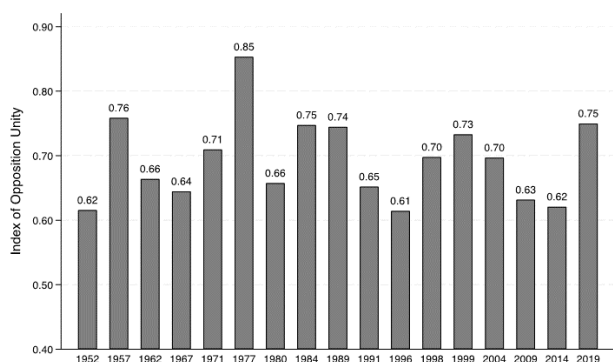


Fig. 1: Index of Opposition Unity at the constituency level – Lok Sabha elections.

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷.

Figure 1 shows that the average IOU at the constituency level for the Lok Sabha elections during 1952-2019 ranged between 0.61 and 0.85. During the phase of Congress' dominance, the IOU remained between a narrow range of 0.62-0.66 (ignoring the 1957 election) indicating a relatively fragmented opposition. 1977 saw the IOU reaching its highest level of 0.85 when a large number of opposition parties amalgamated to defeat the Congress. This was followed by a steep decline in IOU in 1980 to 0.66 with the Congress returning to power, but it increased to a relatively high level of 0.75 in 1984 election which saw Congress securing a major victory in the aftermath of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. With the advent of coalition politics in India in the 1990s, the IOU fell in 1991 to 0.65 and 0.61 in 1996 before rising again within a narrow range of 0.70-0.73 in the next three elections during 1998-2004, as coalition governments became the norm at the national level. However, the IOU fell again in 2009 to one of its lowest levels at 0.63.

In 2014, when the BJP won a majority of seats, the IOU remained around the same level as in 2009 but rose substantially to 0.75 in 2019. This was mainly because of the anti-BJP alliances in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, which led to aggregation of most of the non-BJP votes behind a single candidate in each constituency¹⁸. The average IOU for the constituencies won by the BJP was 0.64 in 2014 but rose to about 0.80 in 2019. Despite the increase in IOU, the BJP

increased its tally of seats and vote share in the 2019 election. Chhibber notes that the IOU has many limitations, and it does not provide insights into the relative importance of the strength of the winning party versus the split in opposition votes in determining the election outcome¹⁹. Thus, whilst IOU is a useful measure, it cannot fully assess the prospects of the winning party.

BJP's winning vote share

Figure 2 provides the distribution (histogram) of the BJP's vote share in the constituencies it won in the 2014 (282) and 2019 (303) Lok Sabha elections. As can be seen, in 2014, the BJP won most of its constituencies with vote share ranging from 40%-60%. In 2019, the distribution of the winning vote share for the BJP shifted towards the right with a higher number of constituencies won by vote share in the range of 40%-60% and a significant number being won by more than 60% vote share. Further, in 2014 there were a substantial number of constituencies, which were won by the BJP by less than 40% of votes, which is not the case in 2019 indicating a consolidation of votes in favour of the BJP.

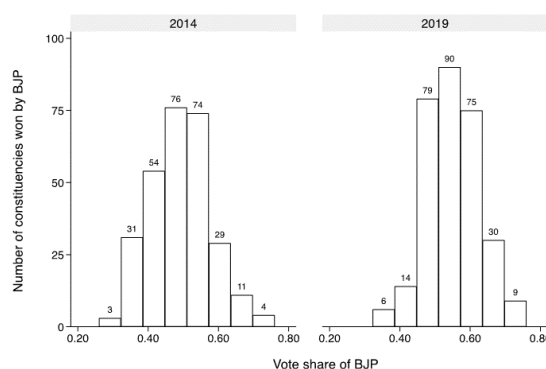


Fig. 2: Distribution of the BJP's vote share at the constituency level in Lok Sabha elections.

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷.

Figures 3 and 4 provide the distribution of the BJP's vote at the constituency level in different states in the 2014 and 2019 elections.

Figure 3 reinforces the point that the BJP won most of its seats in 2014 by winning 40%-60% of the votes in many states. In Gujarat and to a lesser extent, Madhya Pradesh, the BJP also won a significant number of seats by a vote share greater than 60%. On the other hand, in Uttar Pradesh, the state with the largest number of seats in Lok Sabha, and to some extent in Bihar, the party won a significant number of seats with a vote share of less than 40%.

Figure 4 shows that in 2019, the distribution of share of votes in the constituencies BJP won, has shifted towards the right for almost all states and the party won most of its



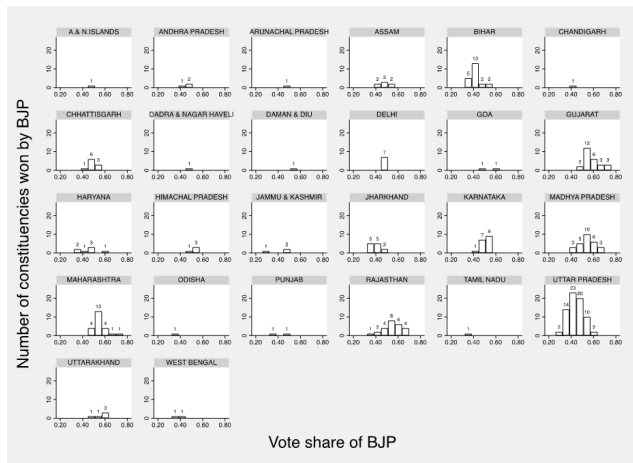


Fig. 3: BJP's vote share at the constituency level by state in the 2014 Lok Sabha election **Source:** Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports ¹⁷

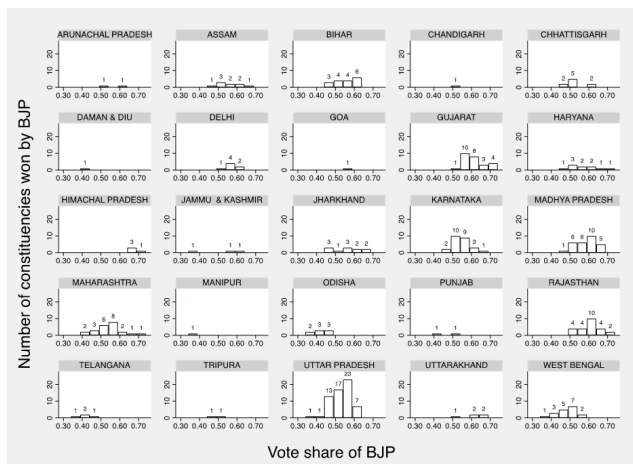


Fig. 4: BJP's vote share at the constituency level by state in the 2019 Lok Sabha election **Source:** Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports ¹⁷

seats by vote share of 50%-60%. Although the party won in few constituencies with less than 50% vote share in Uttar Pradesh, most of its wins in the state were secured with vote share of greater than 50%. In West Bengal, where the BJP was able to improve its tally of seats in 2019, the party won 9 seats with a vote share greater than 50%, and the same number with a vote share less than 50%.

Tables 1 and 2 provide a more precise picture of the distribution of seats won by the BJP categorised by vote share in 2014 and 2019 elections respectively.

Table 1 shows that the average vote share of the BJP in all the 282 constituencies it won in 2014 was 49%. Looking at some of the larger states, BJP's average vote share in 2014 at the constituency level was much higher in Gujarat

(59%), Uttarakhand (56%), Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan (all 55%) than the overall average, whilst its vote share was much lower than the overall average in several other states: Odisha (34%), Tamil Nadu (38%), West Bengal (40%), Punjab (41%), Jharkhand and Jammu & Kashmir (both 41%), Bihar (42%) and Uttar Pradesh (44%). The BJP won 129 of its 282 seats (45.8%) with a vote share greater than 50%, of which 29 were won with greater than 60% vote share. The party won 153 seats (54.2%) with vote share of less than 50%, most of these being won by a vote share of 40%-50%. In Uttar Pradesh, the party won 18 of the 71 with a relatively low vote share of 30-40%. Only in Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP won one of its three seats with less than 30% of votes.

Table 2 shows the distribution of vote share in the seats the BJP won in the 2019 election. The BJP's average vote share in 303 constituencies it won increased from 49% in 2014 to 55% in 2019. In terms of the trends in larger states, BJP's average vote share at the constituency level in 2019 was much higher than the overall average in the states of Himachal Pradesh (69%), Gujarat and Uttarakhand (both 62%) and Rajasthan (61%). In many states, the party's vote share at the constituency level was still higher than 50% but closer to the overall average of 55%. These included Haryana (58%), Madhya Pradesh (58%), Bihar and Jharkhand (both 56%), Assam and Karnataka (55%), Uttar Pradesh (53%) and Chhattisgarh (52%). Only in few states, the average vote share of the BJP was below 50%. These included West Bengal (48%), Punjab (47%), Odisha (42%) and Telangana (41%). These trends meant that in aggregate, the BJP won a sizeable i.e. 217 of 303 or 71.6% of seats with a vote share greater than 50%, of which 92 (30% of the total seats) were won with greater than 60% vote share. It won 58 (19.1%) seats with vote share 45%-50%, 21 (6.9%) seats with vote share 40%-45% and only 7 seats (2.3%) with vote share of 30%-40%. So, in total the party won only 86 seats with less than 50% vote share, and it is important to focus on these more competitive constituencies to assess the prospects of a united opposition.

Nagayama diagram

Nagayama diagram is a useful tool to visualise how competitive the party system is at the constituency level²⁰. It plots the vote share of the winning party (V_1) against the vote share (V_2) of the runner-up party, which are enclosed within a triangle bound between the two lines characterised by $V_1 - V_2 = 0$ and $V_1 + V_2 = 1$. An analytical method of further segmenting the different areas of the Nagayama diagram, using the parameter z ($0 \leq z \leq 0.5$) has been used to show the nature of competition at the constituency level, and one can change the value of z to operationalise the meaning of a competitive district²⁰.

Figure 5 plots Nagayama diagram for the 86 constituencies, where the BJP won with less than 50% vote share in 2019, and where the opposition could, in theory, gain from consolidating its vote in favour of a single opposition

Table 1: Seats won by BJP by vote share at the constituency level in the 2014 Lok Sabha election

State	Average vote share	Number of seats won by the BJP (Grouped by BJP's vote share)						Total seats won
		>60%	50-60%	45-50%	40-45%	30-40%	<30%	
A. & N. Islands	0.48	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Andhra Pradesh	0.48	-	-	2	1	-	-	3
Arunachal Pradesh	0.50	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Assam	0.48	-	3	2	1	1	-	7
Bihar	0.42	-	2	2	11	7	-	22
Chandigarh	0.42	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Chhattisgarh	0.49	-	4	4	2	-	-	10
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	0.49	-	-	1	-	-	-	1
Daman & Diu	0.54	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Delhi	0.46	-	-	4	3	-	-	7
Goa	0.54	-	1	1	-	-	-	2
Gujarat	0.59	8	17	1	-	-	-	26
Haryana	0.45	-	1	3	-	3	-	7
Himachal Pradesh	0.53	-	3	1	-	-	-	4
Jammu & Kashmir	0.41	-	-	2	-	-	1	3
Jharkhand	0.41	-	-	2	5	5	-	12
Karnataka	0.51	-	12	4	1	-	-	17
Madhya Pradesh	0.55	7	12	4	4	-	-	27
Maharashtra	0.55	4	16	3	-	-	-	23
Odisha	0.34	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Punjab	0.41	-	-	1	-	1	-	2
Rajasthan	0.55	9	9	4	2	1	-	25
Tamil Nadu	0.38	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Uttar Pradesh	0.44	1	15	15	22	18	-	71
Uttarakhand	0.56	-	4	1	-	-	-	5
West Bengal	0.40	-	-	-	1	1	-	2
Total	0.49	29	100	59	54	39	1	282
% of seats won		10.3%	35.5%	20.9%	19.1%	13.8%	0.4%	100%

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

candidate in 2024. This is based on the value of the parameter $z = 0.20$, which is plausible since 80 percent vote share for the top two parties can be seen as a reasonable depiction of a two party competition or dominance²⁰. Based on this segmentation, area with competitive constituencies is given by $H + A + F + G$ and the area representing constituencies with limited third-party strength is given by $H + A + B + C$ ²⁰.

It shows that these constituencies lie in segments H, G or E. The constituencies falling under segment H are characterised by limited minor party strength and political competitiveness among the top two parties, which means close competition between the BJP and the runner-up party,

which provides some scope for a united opposition to defeat the BJP. Similarly, segment E represents constituencies where the BJP and the runner up party are in competition with other parties, but the united opposition will have limited prospects where the BJP share lies close to 50%. However, the opposition may benefit from coming together where BJP's vote share starts to decline below 50%, which based on a visual examination appears to be the case in only a few constituencies. The area in segment G represents multi-party competition and here again a united opposition can benefit in constituencies where the vote share of the BJP and the runner-up party lie in the range of 40-50%. In segment



Table 2: Seats won by BJP seats by vote share at the constituency level in the 2019 Lok Sabha election

State	Average vote share	Number of seats won by the BJP (Grouped by BJP's vote share)						Total seats won
		>60%	50-60%	45-50%	40-45%	30-40%	<30%	
Arunachal Pradesh	0.58	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
Assam	0.55	3	4	1	1	-	-	9
Bihar	0.56	6	8	3	-	-	-	17
Chandigarh	0.51	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Chhattisgarh	0.52	2	3	4	-	-	-	9
Daman & Diu	0.43	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Delhi	0.56	2	5	-	-	-	-	7
Goa	0.57	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
Gujarat	0.62	15	11	-	-	-	-	26
Haryana	0.58	4	5	1	-	-	-	10
Himachal Pradesh	0.69	4	-	-	-	-	-	4
Jammu & Kashmir	0.51	1	1	-	-	1	-	3
Jharkhand	0.56	4	4	2	1	-	-	11
Karnataka	0.55	4	15	5	1	-	-	25
Madhya Pradesh	0.58	15	10	3	-	-	-	28
Maharashtra	0.54	4	10	7	2	-	-	23
Manipur	0.35	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Odisha	0.42	-	-	2	4	2	-	8
Punjab	0.47	-	1	-	1	-	-	2
Rajasthan	0.61	16	7	1	-	-	-	24
Telangana	0.41	-	-	-	3	1	-	4
Tripura	0.49	-	1	1	-	-	-	2
Uttar Pradesh	0.53	7	31	21	2	1	-	62
Uttarakhand	0.62	4	1	-	-	-	-	5
West Bengal	0.48	-	5	7	5	1	-	18
Total	0.55	92	125	58	21	7	-	303
% of seats won		30.3%	41.3%	19.1%	6.9%	2.3%	0%	100%

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

G, where the BJP's vote share is greater than 40% and that of the runner-up party less than 40%, there would be limited advantage for the opposition parties to come together to defeat the BJP.

Winning margin and the number of contesting parties

Another useful way to assess the nature of competitiveness at the constituency level is by analysing the BJP's winning margin (over the runner-up party) in the 86 constituencies won by the BJP with less than 50% vote share. Figure 6 shows that in 39 of these constituencies BJP's winning margin was less than 5%, whilst in 32 constituencies, BJP's winning margin was higher (5%-10%), which were therefore less competitive. In the balance 15 constituencies, BJP's victory margin was in the range of 10%-25%. Thus, it can be argued that the 39 constituencies where the contest was

close (winning margin of BJP being less than 5%) offer best prospects for a united opposition to succeed. Another 32 constituencies where the BJP's winning margin was 5%-10% may also provide some scope for a united opposition to succeed against the BJP.

In addition to the vote share of the winning party, another factor to consider when assessing competitiveness is the number of contesting parties in a constituency. Table 3 shows that in the 86 constituencies where the BJP won with less than 50% vote share in 2019, the number of contesting parties tended to be higher where the BJP's winning share was also relatively high i.e. 45%-50% and 40%-45% and lower where its vote share was in the range 30%-40%. On this basis, only in the 7 constituencies where BJP's vote share is less than 40%, there is a better scope for the opposition parties to unite behind a single candidate, due to relatively lower number of



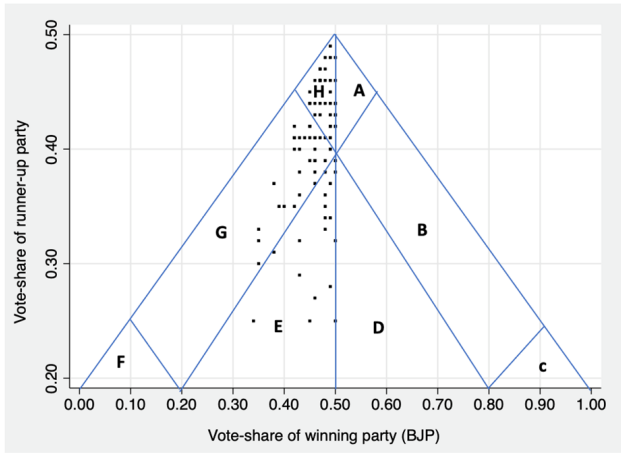


Fig. 5: Nagayama diagram - constituencies won by BJP with <50% vote share in 2019 election **Source:** Based on data collated by author from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

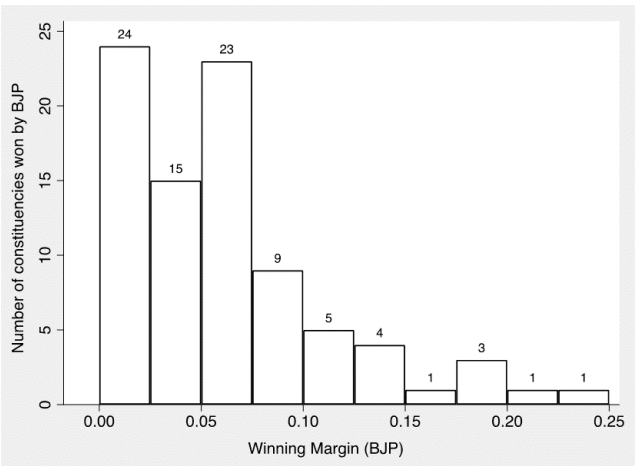


Fig. 6: Winning margin in constituencies where BJP won with <50% vote share in 2019 **Source:** Based on data collated by author from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

contesting parties. Further, of the 86 target constituencies where the BJP won with a vote share of less than 50%, 61 had greater than 10 average contesting parties. This suggests that a united opposition is likely to have lower prospects in these constituencies because of a large number of contesting parties. Overall, this does not paint a very positive picture for opposition unity.

Further, it is useful to study the combined effect of the number of contesting parties and BJP's victory margin to analyse how this would impact the prospects of a united opposition. Table 4 shows the number of contesting parties in the constituencies won by the BJP with less than 50% vote share and where its winning margin was less than 10%. In theory, these 71 constituencies are the ones the

opposition needs to focus on when considering its strategy to consolidate its vote. However, as Table 4 shows, the number of contesting parties in these constituencies across different BJP's vote share categories was relatively high. This means even in these more competitive 71 constituencies, the opposition will still face a major challenge of reducing the number of contesting parties to avoid wastage of anti-BJP votes.

Table 5 shows that the highest number of these constituencies are in Uttar Pradesh (21) and West Bengal (11), where having a united front is more likely to produce results for the opposition. However, there are many states in this list where opposition unity may not provide any incremental benefit for the opposition where the contest is already mainly between the BJP and a single opposition party or where the regional party may be less agreeable to join an anti-BJP pre-election alliance.

Table 5: Constituencies (by state) won by BJP with <50% vote share and winning margin <10% in 2019

State	Number of constituencies
Uttar Pradesh	21
West Bengal	11
Odisha	7
Karnataka	6
Chhattisgarh	4
Maharashtra	4
Telangana	4
Jharkhand	3
Madhya Pradesh	3
Assam	2
Bihar	2
Haryana	1
Jammu & Kashmir	1
Manipur	1
Punjab	1
Total	71

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In summary, the analysis presented in this paper shows that compared to 2014, the BJP was able to win a higher number of constituencies in the 2019 Lok Sabha election by vote share in the range of 40%-60% and a significantly higher number with vote share of more than 60%. At a high level, this analysis reveals that a united opposition is likely to have better scope to win against the BJP in 2024 only in 86 constituencies which the BJP won by less than 50% vote share in 2019. Therefore, in theory, it may be possible for the opposition to improve its prospects of



Table 3: Number of contesting parties in constituencies where BJP won with <50% vote share in 2019

BJP'S vote share	Number of contesting parties					Number of constituencies
	<=5	6-10	11-15	16-20	>20	
45-50%	-	15	27	10	6	58
40-45%	1	6	10	2	2	21
30-40%	1	2	3	1	-	7
Number of constituencies	2	23	40	13	8	86

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

Table 4: Contesting parties in constituencies won by BJP (<50% vote share, winning margin<10%), 2019

BJP'S vote share	Number of contesting parties					Number of constituencies
	<=5	6-10	11-15	16-20	>20	
45-50%	-	11	23	7	5	46
40-45%	-	5	9	2	2	18
30-40%	1	2	3	1	-	7
Number of constituencies	1	18	35	10	7	71

Source: Calculated by the author based on data from the Election Commission of India Statistical Reports¹⁷

winning in these constituencies just by fielding a common candidate. A deeper analysis reveals that even within these 86 constituencies, there are additional factors to consider i.e., BJP's margin of victory and the number of contesting parties. Specifically, it would be difficult for a united opposition to take on BJP in constituencies where the margin of victory for BJP was high in 2019, say greater than 10%. On this basis, it can be argued that of these 86 constituencies, the best chances for the opposition unity are likely to be in the 71 constituencies where the BJP's winning margin was less than 10%. However, the opposition parties would have a lower prospect of agreeing a common opposition candidate even in these 71 constituencies where there are a large number of contesting parties. 52 of these 71 constituencies had on an average of greater than 10 contesting parties thus making the prospect of achieving opposition unity a challenging proposition.

Overall, the analysis presented in the paper suggests that the opposition parties' plans to counter the BJP in 2024 mainly by forming alliances and fielding a common opposition candidate appears to be simplistic given the nature of party competition at the constituency level. This is because the national vote share of the BJP is not indicative of its electoral strength in the 2014 and 2019 elections at the constituency level. Instead, the BJP's vote share and its margin of victory in the constituencies it won, better reflect its electoral support. Further, the high number of contesting parties, which are typical in Indian elections is another obstacle to avoid splitting of votes and lowering the effective winning threshold for the BJP. It is also worth noting that BJP's victories in the 2014 and 2019 elections were achieved mainly due to its performance in specific states (in Hindi heartland and western parts) of the country, which

has helped the party to gain from a relatively concentrated voter base benefitting from the SMPS. The electoral system also helped the BJP in achieving a high seat bonus in the context of high disproportionality between votes and seats. Therefore, whilst the opposition parties' plans may look workable in theory, they face formidable challenges to counter the BJP in 2024.

The paper's findings and analysis are mainly based on the BJP's performance in the 2019 election and assesses the likelihood of the opposition winning back some of the 303 seats the party won. This is a reasonable approach considering Modi's popularity at the national level and the results of the latest assembly elections, which indicate that the BJP has momentum going into the 2024 election². Further, BJP's tally of 303 in 2019 included 248 seat (88%) it retained, 34 it lost (12%) from the 2014 elections, and 55 new seats it gained in 2019. This shows a high retention rate, and the party's ability to make inroads into new states and constituencies.

Further, in addition to the arithmetic of winning an election, which seems to be the focus of the opposition parties so far, they will also need to develop some degree of consistency in their messaging and policies to be offered to the electorate. In 1977, the opposition parties amalgamated and fought under a common party label against the Congress in a political environment that was far more conducive (due to imposition of national emergency during 1975-1977) to mobilising public opinion in their favour. However, the current situation is different especially since there are no plans for the opposition to contest under a common party label, and it is also unclear whether the opposition parties will be able to come to an agreement on seat sharing due to various competing interests and contradictions. Further,



many parties, although not directly supporting the BJP, may want to remain neutral until the election results are known. This paper's aim is not to delve into the political aspects of the 2024 election, but these factors highlight additional challenges for the opposition parties to counter the BJP.

CONCLUSION

It remains unclear if the opposition parties can forge an effective pre-election alliance for the 2024 Lok Sabha election against the BJP. However, even if the opposition parties can succeed in agreeing such an alliance, it will still not be easy to defeat the BJP in most of the seats because of the party's high vote share and margin of victory in a large number of constituencies it won, especially in 2019. Therefore, to succeed, the opposition parties would need both a high degree of unity and coordination across many states, as well as a significant vote swing against the BJP. It is therefore doubtful whether merely forming an anti-BJP alliance, without a credible alternative narrative and policy agenda can yield substantial electoral benefits for the opposition. More broadly, this paper stresses the importance of constituency level analysis to understand the nature of party competition in a polity, since this is the level at which elections are contested. This is especially important in India due to large variations in the parties' national and constituency level vote shares, and a significant disproportionality between votes and seats under SMPS.

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