

## Maharashtra: The End of the Congress System?

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The 2014 verdict marked the demise of the Congress in Maharashtra as the Congress-NCP alliance in the state faced its worst ever defeat. Although already in a much dilapidated state, so far, the Congress and its allies were somehow able to retain their hold over the electoral politics in the state and the Congress had 'survived here amidst its nationwide decline' (Palshikar, Deshpande and Birmal, 2014). The massive victory of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 is likely to change the rules of the game and would loom large over the electoral fate of the Congress party in the state. Maharashtra was often known as the text book example of the working of the Congress system at the state level. Except for the brief interlude of 1995-1999 phase - when the BJP- Shiv Sena coalition was in power - the Congress party has so far been the only ruling party in Maharashtra. During the last decade or so the Congress space in the state has been shared by two parties - the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party and in that sense the Congress dominance was already compromised to a certain extent. However, the two Congress parties always worked in alliance and were successful in retaining power since 2004. The rival alliance of the BJP and Shiv Sena formed a weak oppositional force in the state's politics during all these years. The outcome of the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 seems to have completely reversed these political equations in the state and thus may mark the beginning of the end of the Congress system in Maharashtra's politics.

### The Verdict

The ruling alliance of the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) was nearly wiped out in elections this time when it could secure only six of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the state (Table 1). The rival 'grand alliance' (it was termed *Mahayuti* in Marathi) of the BJP, Shiv Sena and the other

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smaller parties like the Swabhimani Shetkari Paksha (literally, party of farmers with self- respect), Republican Party of India (Ramdas Athawale faction) and the Rashtriya Samaj Paksha clinched all the remaining seats and also claimed more than half of the vote share (over 51 percent) to emerge as outright winners. The Congress-NCP alliance had secured 25 seats and had a combined vote share of 39 percent in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. There was a modest decline in their vote share this time (34.7%, includes ally Bahujan Vikas Aghadi's vote). However, they lost 19 seats between 2009 and 2014 and it sealed their defeat. The BJP- Shiv Sena alliance on the other hand could add a whopping 16 percent votes and 22 more seats to their kitty since the last elections. The Lok Sabha elections in 2014 witnessed around a 10 percentage point increase in the voter turnout

Table 1  
Maharashtra: Lok Sabha Election Results 2014

Party/Alliance	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Seats change since 2009	Vote (%)	Vote change since 2009 (percentage points)
UPA	48	6	-20	34.70	-4.79
Congress	26	2	-15	18.13	-1.48
NCP	21	4	-4	15.97	-3.30
BVA	1	0	-1	0.60	0.00
NDA	48	42	21	51.30	13.66
BJP	24	23	14	27.32	9.15
Shiv Sena	20	18	7	20.63	3.63
SWP	2	1	0	2.27	0.97
RSPP	1	0	0	0.93	0.38
RPI (A)	1	0	0	0.15	-0.47
BSP	48	0	0	2.61	-2.22
AAP	48	0	0	2.24	2.24
MNS	10	0	0	1.45	-2.61
NOTA	48	0	0	0.89	0.89
Other Parties	695	0	-1	6.81	-7.18

ECI data compiled by the CSDS data unit

in the state in comparison with the previous elections. These votes appear to have directly benefitted the winning alliance this time.

The state unit of the BJP, that had gone weak due to internal rivalries among top leaders and due to significant losses in the most recent round of elections to local bodies (in 2012), could ride high on the 'Modi wave' and the party secured 23 out of 24 seats that it had contested. The revival of Shiv Sena was another big story in these elections in the state. In 2009, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena had played a spoilsport for the Shiv Sena by targeting Sena's vote base especially in the Mumbai-Thane region. The Shiv Sena could effectively neutralize the politics of the MNS in Mumbai this time and the saffron alliance could win all the six seats in the city. The MNS had claimed nearly one fifth of the votes in the Mumbai-Thane region in the previous Lok Sabha elections. This time the regional vote share of the party was considerably reduced at around five percent.

Along with the MNS, none of the non-Congress, non-BJP parties could make any impact on these elections in Maharashtra. The Aam Aadmi Party had Maharashtra on its radar because of the sustained presence of the social movements in the state's politics. Similarly, the BSP had influenced electoral outcomes, especially in the Vidarbha region in some of the previous elections in favour of the Congress alliance. These forces did not have any impact on the electoral outcome this time. In the earlier elections in 2009 the dispersal of anti Congress vote had benefitted the Congress-NCP alliance a great deal. Instead, the recent Lok Sabha election marked consolidation of BJP-Shiv Sena alliance across all the regions of the state.

### Region wise Trends

As shown in table 2 the saffron alliance reclaimed the Vidarbha region in these elections. In 2009, the Congress alliance had a significant presence especially in the east Vidarbha region as it won five out six seats there. This time, both in the east and the west Vidarbha the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance emerged as a clear winner. East Vidarbha witnessed a considerable rise of almost 20 percentage points in the vote share of the BJP-Shiv Sena combine. Surprisingly, it had similarly massive gains of votes (an increase of 21

percentage points since 2009) in the western Maharashtra region which is typically seen as a bastion of the Nationalist Congress Party. Even this time, the only success for the NCP (4 seats) could come from this region. However, the saffron alliance could win all the remaining 8 seats from Western Maharashtra and the Congress could win none. The Congress alliance also lost around ten percent of its vote share in this region if compared with Lok Sabha elections in 2009. On the one hand the loss may be accounted to the dissent among the sugar cane growing farmers in this region that culminated in the formation of the Swabhimani Shetkari Paksha as a new political platform. This new party was part of the grand alliance of the BJP-Shiv Sena. Secondly, the Congress-NCP alliance also suffered a great deal due to internal in-fighting among its political workers. The saffron alliance on the other hand benefitted when a prominent NCP leader crossed over to it and could win the elections as a BJP candidate. This was not an isolated case where the BJP-Shiv Sena could win the LS seat by offering candidature to the former Congress/ NCP bigwigs and was repeated in a few more constituencies in north Maharashtra and the Marathwada region. It contributed to the defeat of the two Congress parties and the only accidental successes for the Congress party came from the Marathwada region where it could secure two seats.

Table 2  
Maharashtra Lok Sabha Elections 2014 - Region wise Outcome

Region	Total seats	Turnout (%)	Congress+		BJP+	
			Seats won	Vote %	Seats won	Vote %
North Maharashtra	06	61.6	00	33.7	06	56.6
Vidarbha	10	63.2	00	31.6	10	49.7
Marathwada	08	64.5	02	39.1	06	51.0
Mumbai Thane	10	51.6	00	29.3	10	55.0
Western Maharashtra	11	62.3	04	40.1	07	48.8
Konkan	03	63.4	00	30.1	03	45.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>60.5</b>	<b>06</b>	<b>34.7</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>51.3</b>

*ECI data compiled by the CSDS data unit*

### Support for Modi

The victory of the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance can be explained at two levels. At one level, it can be seen as a part of the national mood this time which combined the anti Congress feeling with the Modi euphoria. The Congress-NCP alliance was in power in the state consecutively for three terms. The long tenure of the government and its record of ineffective governance, charges of corruption etc. actually provided enough reasons for the anti incumbency feeling among voters. However, both in 2009 Lok Sabha and assembly elections as well as the pre-election voter studies in 2014 do not record any sharp anti- state government feeling among the voters of the state. With the only exception of Assembly elections in 2004, more voters were satisfied than dissatisfied with the performance of the state government in all the earlier round of elections. And in that sense the anti Congress verdict this time may be seen as more in tune with the national mood against the Congress and in favour of the BJP. As per the pre election survey of the NES 2014, 33 percent voters in Maharashtra expressed their complete dissatisfaction with the performance of the Congress led UPA government at the centre. Another 13 percent were somewhat dissatisfied. Hardly ten percent voters reported that they were benefited by any of the flagship schemes of the UPA government. And nearly half of the voters felt that the Congress NCP led state government should not get another chance to rule after the assembly elections in 2014.

More importantly, the current round of elections saw a clear consolidation of support for Modi's leadership in Maharashtra. More than 43 percent respondents preferred Modi as the future Prime Minister. Completely in tune with the all India average figures on questions related to leadership, more than 20 percent voters in Maharashtra prefer Narendra Modi as a more capable leader than any other on several indicators ranging from controlling price rise to one who would help betterment of Muslims. The Congress leaders like Sonia and Rahul Gandhi as well as popular state leaders like Sharad Pawar were preferred by far less number of respondents. In that sense, like in many other states, the leadership factor must have contributed a great deal to the BJP Shiv Sena victory in

### Maharashtra.

It appears that the support for BJP's leadership was smoothly translated into the support for the party as many voters in Maharashtra preferred the BJP over the Congress on many counts. Table 3 shows how, for the voters in Maharashtra, the BJP fares well over the Congress on issues related to better administration, good leadership, national security and taking care of religious sentiments. In yet another question, 19 per cent voters consider the BJP as a party that raised issues and problems that they thought were important whereas only 9 percent gave this credit to the Congress. The Congress was mostly identified as a party offering gifts and freebies. However, as mentioned earlier, people also reported that the benefits of the welfare schemes of the Congress did not reach them. In other words, both in terms of leadership and party preferences, Maharashtra seems to have followed the all India trends during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

Table 3  
BJP Better Than the Congress

	Those who said...	
	Congress %	BJP %
Party better for administration	16	29
Takes care of religious sentiments	15	27
Better for national security	15	29
Good leadership	14	29
Offers gifts/ freebies	15	14

Source: NES 2014, post poll survey data compiled by the Lokniti CSDS data unit; Sample size: 1790.

### Erosion of Congress Support Base

At the second level and within a more state specific context, the BJP-Shiv Sena victory in Maharashtra is hugely supported by a drift of voters towards them across different social sections (Table 4). The BJP-Shiv Sena voter is still likely to come more from the young, more educated, middle and higher middle classes and also most importantly from those who are highly exposed to media. However, this time, even the lower classes and those with lower

level of education seem to have voted for the BJP-Shiv Sena in large numbers. Around a quarter of Dalit voters had supported the saffron alliance in the previous Lok Sabha elections in 2009 where as this time more than half of the Dalit voters (56 percent) prefer them. Their support among the rural voters has jumped up from 38 to 53 percent in 2014. Strictly speaking, in terms of social support, the Congress and the NCP could compete with the saffron alliance only among the non literates and among those who are not at all exposed to media. Otherwise, even among the elderly and the poor the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance enjoys a much enhanced support this time. More men than women tend to support the BJP-Sena; however, the gender advantage among women for the Congress party is neutralized.

Fragmentation of the Maratha vote has been a big story of Maharashtra elections throughout the past decade. The story is complete with more than half of the Maratha- Kunbi voters supporting the BJP-Shiv Sena rather than the Congress-NCP alliance. This trend was obvious even in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections when 49 percent of the Maratha-Kunbis had preferred the BJP-Shiv Sena over the Congress- NCP. This time there is a consolidation of the Maratha support for the saffron alliance and there is also an interesting mix of caste and class factors in this trend. As shown in Table 5, the class character of the Maratha- Kunbi vote does not operate much at the obvious level of rich and poor Marathas but more in terms of their occupations and location. Marathas having access to urban and non-agricultural resources seem to have favoured the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance more than the rural, agriculturist Marathas. This pattern jells well with the overall nature of social support to the saffron alliance from the privileged groups. In the current round of elections, the internal divisions of Maratha-Kunbi vote did not play much role since it was a one sided election. However, these trends revealed in the NES 2014 data would be more useful pointers for the later elections in the state, more immediately in analysing the forthcoming assembly elections.

It is not much surprising that more than 70 percent of the upper caste voters rally behind the BJP-Shiv Sena. However, this time, the OBCs have also hugely supported the alliance as nearly 60 percent of them vote for the

BJP Shiv Sena. Their support to the saffron alliance has significantly increased from 47 percent in 2009. The Adivasi vote is almost equally divided between the two alliances and that had an added advantage for the BJP alliance. Among the major Dalit communities in the state, only the neo Buddhists or the ex-Mahars seem to have favoured the Congress led front in a major way. However, there is a clear division even among these votes and the rest of the Dalit communities have definitely supported the Sena BJP over the Congress NCP front. The Congress retains its support only among the Muslims who constitute around ten percent of the state's population.

**Table 4**  
**Maharashtra Lok Sabha Elections 2014: Who Voted Whom?**

Social group	Congress-NCP+%	BJP-Shiv Sena+%
Rural	39	53
Urban	30	49
Upper castes	13	71
Marathas	39	52
OBCs	23	60
Dalits	33	56
Adivasis	46	44
Muslims	86	05
Poor	35	49
Rich	36	53
Upto 25	33	58
Above 45	35	47
Non literates	42	44
College and above	30	52
No media exposure	45	46

*Source:* NES 2014, post poll survey data compiled by the Lokniti CSDS data unit; Sample size: 1790. Congress-NCP+ includes Congress, NCP and BVA; BJP-Shiv Sena+ includes BJP, Shiv Sena, RPI(A), Swabhimani Paksha and Rashtriya Samaj Paksha.

Table 5

## Internal Divisions Among Maratha Kunbis

Social group	Congress-NCP+ %	BJP-Shiv Sena+ %
Agriculturist Maratha-Kunbis	40	52
Maratha-Kunbis in non- agricultural occupations	33	46
Rich Maratha-Kunbis	44	43
Poor Maratha- Kunbis	40	39
Rural Maratha- Kunbis	42	48
Urban Maratha-Kunbis	25	51

Source: NES 2014; Sample size: 1790.

This kind of a complete erosion of the social support base for the Congress party in Maharashtra perhaps constitutes the most serious aspect of its electoral defeat this time and also underlines the long term challenges for the party. Till 2009, the Congress party had a relatively better stable social support base compared to any other party in the state. The NES data for the recent round of elections shows a drastic decline in this support for the Congress and underlines its failure to represent even the disadvantaged sections that have been traditionally supporting it. With social sections moving away from the party and with the BJP Shiv Sena alliance establishing decisive control over 244 (out of 288) assembly constituencies in the state, even the short term electoral prospects for the two Congress parties in the upcoming assembly elections become bleak. Perhaps the only hope that these parties may have is about the changing nature of electoral arithmetic from national to state level elections. Elections in the past have shown that people vote differently in the national and regional / local elections. Besides the nature of electoral competition also changes a great deal as local power equations become more prominent in the assembly elections. It also leads to dispersal of votes and results in substantial loss of votes for both the main political alliances of the state. These arithmetic and political possibilities may help the two Congress parties to keep alive their hope in the upcoming round of assembly elections but it does not change the reality of their inability to

represent the important social sections of the state. Since the Congress system of the past has always been about the party's capabilities to accommodate and represent diverse social interests; the near complete erosion of the Congress' support base marks a beginning of the end of the Congress system.

## References

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