

Elections in the Hindi belt – Why the BJP should be worried

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Summary

The state elections held in three north Indian states in late 2018 resulted in severe defeat for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. Particularly concerning for the BJP is the rather steep decline of the party's vote share across the three states.

State Elections

The state elections in the three Hindi belt states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan was reason for the Congress Party to smile for the first time since Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. All of these three states were governed by the BJP and, now, will be ruled by the Congress, which secured a surprising and resounding victory in Chhattisgarh and fell just short of an absolute majority in the other two states. In both cases, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has extended support to the Congress, paving the way for the formation of the government.

In the three states, the Congress won 54 per cent of the seats (up from 22 per cent it had won in 2013), while the BJP's tally plummeted from 72 to 38 per cent. Across the three states, the BJP lost as many as 224 seats, 191 of which to the Congress. In the 2014 national elections, the BJP had won as many as 62 (out of 65) seats from these three states. If the voting pattern holds in the next general election, only less than six months away, the BJP would secure only 31 seats from these states. This is turn could have dramatic repercussions in the other northern states, where the BJP won the overwhelming majority of its seats in 2014.

More than the loss in terms of seat share – if less than 5000 voters had preferred the BJP over the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the former would have had an absolute majority of the seats – what should worry the BJP is the loss of vote share. The saffron party's vote share declined by 8 percentage points in Chhattisgarh; 4.2 percentage points in Madhya Pradesh; and 6.3 percentage points in Rajasthan.

This loss of popularity is reflected across constituencies in the three states. First, the BJP lost 23 out of 24 of the seats that it had won with very low margins in 2013 (less than 2,500 votes), while the Congress managed to retain half of these highly competitive seats. Second, the average margin of victory of the BJP declined by as much as 25 per cent, whereas the Congress's average margin increased by over 45 per cent. This means that even the seats that the BJP managed to win or retain are much more at risk than its rival's.

Concerns for the BJP

Third – and this should be the biggest concern for the BJP – the party lost as many as 40 per cent of the seats that it had won with very high margins in 2013 (more than 25,000 votes). The Congress, on the contrary, lost only 13 per cent of these safe seats. Significantly, out of the total 280 seats that the Congress won, 84 (or 30 per cent) have margins higher than 25,000 votes. The BJP's proportion of these seats plummeted from 31 to 17 per cent.

The loss of a substantial number of safe seats should worry the BJP for two reasons. First, the high number of seats won with high margins in 2014 – 194 out of 282 seats had margins higher than 180,000 votes – is perhaps the single most important reason why, despite the recent setback, the BJP remains the frontrunner for the 2019 elections. However, the results in these three states show that dramatic swings of votes can in fact occur within an electoral cycle. The 37 safe seats that the BJP lost to the Congress in the three Hindi belt states had been won with an average margin of 34,164 votes in 2013; five years later, the Congress won these very seats with an average margin of 17,599 votes. And the safe seats that the BJP managed to retain (71), saw the average margin of victory to crush from over 40,000 votes, to 18,500. If these results are replicated in 2019, a good proportion of seats that look very safe on paper, might not be so in reality.

Second, the BJP won an overwhelming majority of its seats from the Hindi belt states – 190 out of 282. While the results in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were largely driven by local factors, they are nevertheless an indication that the mood has changed quite significantly since 2014, when Modi swept North India. To make up for probable losses in this region – and in Gujarat, where it is unlikely that the BJP will replicate its 2014 performance, when it bagged all 26 seats from the state – the BJP will have to win elsewhere. The BJP has made significant inroads in the north-eastern states – which elect 24 Members of Parliament – and less dramatic, but probably significant gains in Odisha and, to a lesser extent, West Bengal. But it largely still lacks support in the southern states, where the BJP remains a marginal player outside of Karnataka. In other words, the BJP has to retain a high number of seats in the Hindi belt in order to remain in power. The elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan show that even safe seats might not be that safe after all.

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