

The BJP in Rural Areas: Insights from the 2014 Elections

Diego Maiorano



Summary

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) performed exceptionally well at the 2014 general elections in areas with a large proportion of voters who depend directly on agriculture. However, the rural economy is in a deep crisis, five years after the BJP was voted into power. Millions of farmers took to the streets in recent years, expressing deep agrarian distress. Having won a high number of seats in rural areas, the BJP has a lot to lose and very little to gain at the forthcoming general elections.

One of the underlying questions at the forthcoming Indian elections – which will take place between 11 April and 19 May 2019 – is how rural areas will vote, against the context of a severe agrarian crisis. Agricultural GDP growth during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's term has decelerated sharply compared to the previous five years – from an average of 4.3 per cent per year to just 2.9 per cent. Prices of several agricultural commodities tanked in the wake of the demonetisation policy in November 2016, which overnight devalued 86 per cent of the country's cash, on which agricultural markets heavily depends – turning into deflation for food items in December 2018. This has severely eroded, if not completely vanished, farmers' income and profitability. It is not a coincidence that the last five years saw large scale farmers' protests across the country and in the national capital.

Furthermore, real wages in the agricultural sector grew by a mere 0.5 per cent per year in real terms during Modi's tenure, as compared with 6.7 per cent during the preceding government. The demand for jobs under the country's largest rural workfare programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), shot up to an all-time high in 2018/19.

How rural distress will play out when the elections begin is difficult to predict. In this article, we will look at how the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) performed in rural areas over the past two elections, with the aim of understanding what the party has to lose and gain.

Let's start with the BJP's strike rate, which is the proportion of seats that the party won, out of the total it contested. Overall, the BJP's strike rate skyrocketed between 2009 and 2014: from 26.7 per cent, to 65.7 per cent. This is the key reason behind the BJP's exceptional performance in 2014 - namely its ability to convert votes into seats effectively.

When we look at constituencies with a large share of people who are directly dependent on agriculture, the performance of the BJP is equally spectacular. We define a constituency as 'agricultural' if the percentage of the workers in that constituency is higher than the median (which is 28.94 per cent).¹ In these constituencies, the BJP's strike rate went up from 33.6

¹ The data on constituency-level cultivators and agricultural workers was provided by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University.

per cent in 2009, to 70.1 per cent in 2014. Overall, in 2014, the BJP retained 64 out of the 73 agricultural seats that it had won five years earlier and brought its total agricultural seats tally to 136 – nearly half of its total seats (282). The party also increased significantly the margin of victory in these constituencies. In 2009, the average margin of victory in agricultural seats was 58,425 votes. In 2014, it increased more than threefold to 184,062 – higher than its average margin of victory nationally.

If we look at the 12 states where the BJP won 85 per cent of its total seats,² the BJP's strike rate in agricultural constituencies is even higher – above 80 per cent in as many as nine states and between 45 and 50 per cent in the remaining three (Assam, Bihar and Karnataka). In five states (Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarkhand) the BJP actually won all the agricultural constituencies.

Therefore the BJP has room to improve its 2014 performance only in a handful of states. Among these, Assam is problematic because of the widespread protests against the BJP-sponsored Citizenship bill. In Karnataka, the ruling Congress-led coalition, although deeply divided, might still benefit from the 'honeymoon' period since the 2018 state elections. In Bihar, the BJP could bag on current Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's enduring popularity and expand its agricultural seats' tally. The BJP might also win a few agricultural seats in states where it was a marginal player in 2014 like Odisha and West Bengal. But, overall, it is clear that the BJP has a lot to lose and very little to gain in areas with a large share of agricultural workers.

The agricultural crisis that has engulfed large parts of the country over the last few years might therefore be an important element at the forthcoming elections, also considering that Modi had been voted into power in 2014 also on the basis of highly unrealistic promises, such as that of doubling farmers' income by 2022. For that to happen, according to a government-appointed committee, the agricultural sector should have grown more than three times faster than it actually did during Modi's term.

Of course, the economic situation is only one amongst many reasons that determine people's vote – and often not the most important one. Modi still is the most popular leader in the country – by far – and has an overwhelming advantage over his competitors in terms of funding, media support and the ability to share the narrative. Even in agricultural constituencies, the extremely high margin of victory with which his party won in these seats, means that the odds are still in his favour – notwithstanding the rural distress.

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Dr Diego Maiorano is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at dmaiorano@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

² Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarkhand.