

India Elections 2019: The Farmers' Vote for the BJP

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Summary

With a significant agrarian community, the farmers' vote was crucial to the 2019 Indian General Elections. However, despite distress in the farming community, the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed to increase its mandate, with this divergence in expectations explained through the different perceptions of the state and central governments among the farming community.

Introduction

The 2019 Indian General Elections was amidst severe farmers' distress. The latter issue seemed to have a significant impact towards the series of State Legislative Assembly elections held in late 2018, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) suffered serious defeats in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan to the opposition Congress Party. Most analysts predicted that rural distress would have a significant impact on the national elections held from April-May 2019 as well. However, using post-poll data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in New Delhi, it is evident that the perceptions of the electorate, and especially farmers, towards both the state and central governments has had an impact and perhaps resulted in the outcome of the 2019 Indian General Elections.

Hindi Heartlands

The Congress Party performed poorly in the three Hindi heartland states where it had won the state elections in late 2018, securing only three seats in these three states and six seats in the 10 Hindi heartland states in total.¹

Both the BJP and the Congress tried to respond to farmers' distress by introducing policies at the national and state levels, respectively. In February 2019, the BJP government introduced the PM Kisan scheme, a cash transfer programme for small farmers worth 6,000 rupees (SGD 118) per farmer per year. The Congress introduced a loan waiver scheme in all three states shortly after forming the state governments. The PM Kisan scheme, which was introduced at a rather politically timely juncture by the BJP earlier in 2019 has been met with lower levels of implementation in Congress-led states and hence, has likely had limited impact on the farmers in these states. The Congress' loan waiver scheme, which was central to its election campaign in 2018 as well as in 2019 in these states, has also begun implementation in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. As such, the sentiments and perceptions of the Hindi Heartland states towards the state and central governments, especially the three states

¹ These are Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh and National Capital Territory of Delhi.

with Congress-led state assemblies, can be seen as an important factor for the 2019 Indian General Elections and will be explored further below.

According to CSDS data, in Madhya Pradesh, where the Congress won 114 seats at the 2018 elections, it was found that while satisfaction with Modi's central government was at 38 per cent, the Kamal Nath-led state government was found to only have 29 per cent satisfaction, which is 9 per cent lower than Shivraj Singh Chouhan's state government five years [earlier](#). The low level of satisfaction towards the state government could be due to the lack of implementation of the PM Kisan scheme in the state despite the implementation of the loan waiver scheme. Moreover, while 27 per cent of farmers polled had claimed to have benefitted from the scheme, 67 per cent of the polled had not; and unsurprisingly, the satisfaction of the state government in the former group was 39 per cent higher than that of the latter [group](#).

In Rajasthan, the Congress saw an especially sharp decline of vote share among the Jats, which is traditionally an agricultural community, since the 2018 state elections from 30 per cent to 13 per cent. This is in stark contrast to the BJP's increase from 26 per cent to [85 per cent](#). While Jats do not represent the entire farming community in Rajasthan, the sharp decline in vote share among the Jats is a stark indicator of their perceptions towards the state government. It can also be noted that in Rajasthan, while 35 per cent of the farmers reported having benefitted from the loan waivers promised by the Congress-led state [government](#), the blame on the state government towards the lack of beneficiaries of the PM Kisan scheme could also have caused a large swing in votes among the agriculturally-dependent Jats and farmers at large in Rajasthan.

Unlike the aforementioned Hindi Heartland states, sentiments in Chhattisgarh showed that there is a high level of satisfaction with the Congress state government, despite the low reach of the loan waiver scheme – less than 20 per cent of the respondents having benefitted from [it](#). Despite this, it can be seen that the BJP managed to increase its vote share by over [17 percentage points](#).

Conclusion

Despite the large swathes of unrest among farmers leading up to the 2019 Indian General Elections, the expected anti-incumbency against the BJP did not materialise. In the three states where the Congress had managed to win a majority in the 2018 State Legislative Assembly elections, the perceptions of the farmers and electorate at large in these states tend to hold the Congress-led state governments in lower regard than BJP's central government. In fact, farmers in general were satisfied with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) central government, with 68 per cent [satisfaction](#). Modi's popularity also contributed to the positive perception of the central government, with one in three of BJP's voters indicating their preference to vote for another party if not for their prime ministerial [candidate](#).

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