

The BJP Wins the Semi-final: Impressive Gains in State Elections

Vinod Rai

Summary

The elections in India in November 2023, widely believed to be the semi-final before the general elections next year, saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gain firm control in the Hindi heartland. The BJP bucked anti-incumbency and retained power in Madhya Pradesh and managed to wrest power, with substantial margins, in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Telangana witnessed the unseating of the regional party in favour of the Congress. Mizoram saw a new party gain power.

The elections results in five Indian states, where polling took place last month, have given a big ‘thumbs-up’ to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The elections, which were widely believed to be a bellwether or semi-final before the 2024 general elections, reflected the total dominance of the BJP in the northern states. The BJP bucked anti-incumbency in Madhya Pradesh and displaced the Congress in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Whilst exit polls predicted a neck-to-neck race in Rajasthan, a state which traditionally rotates parties at each election, the unseating of the Congress in Chhattisgarh was a big surprise.

In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP won 163 seats as against 66 by the Congress. Since 1993, Rajasthan had traditionally been changing governments every five years. This pattern has continued, with the BJP winning 115 seats as against 69 by the Congress. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP bagged 54 seats against 35 by the Congress. In Telangana, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) lost power after 10 years – it won only 39 seats as against 64 by the Congress. K Chandrashekar Rao, two-time chief minister, who had spearheaded the movement for a separate Telangana state, was ousted. In Mizoram, the Zoram People’s Movement, a party led by Lalduhoma, a former police officer, emerged as the winner, displacing the Mizo National Front, led by the Zoramthanga, who also lost his seat. The BJP improved its vote share by over seven per cent in Madhya Pradesh, around three per cent in Rajasthan and over 13 per cent in Chhattisgarh.

The results indicate a very clear regional divide, with the BJP consolidating its hold in states on the north of the Vindhyas, otherwise referred to as the Hindi heartland. The results also indicate the futility of [‘INDIA’ \(Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance\)](#), which was launched with much fanfare but has shown no promising signs.

The BJP, which was off the starting block much before the announcement of the poll dates, crafted its strategy specific to each state and constituency. The early announcement of its candidates helped it to contain any rebels within the party and it banked on the nationwide charisma of the prime minister to lead its campaign. The party did not appear to have much faith in *revdis* or ‘freebies’ and concentrated on consolidating the women votes. The scheme which appears to have gained popular appeal among women is the [ladli-behna](#) (dear sister)

scheme announced in January 2023 in Madhya Pradesh. This entitles women aged between 21 to 60 years with an annual family income below ₹250,000 (S\$4,021) to receive ₹1,250 (S\$20) per month. The scheme is targetted to ensure the economic independence of women with continuous improvement in their health and nutrition level and strengthening their role in family decision making. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP announced ₹1,000 (S\$17) per month and LPG cylinders at subsidised rates which resonated very well with the women voters. Basically, the BJP built its entire poll strategy around the slogan 'Modi's guarantee', which highlighted the over promise and under delivery of the Congress in the states where they are the government. The BJP established credibility with the masses by projecting the track record of the central government led by Modi.

The BJP was able to counter the caste pitch, which was commenced by the opposition, with Rahul Gandhi assuring a caste census, as undertaken in Bihar. The tribal outreach by the BJP and mitigating fears among the higher caste groups of increased reservation helped garner the Hindu votes. The pitch for winning trust by announcing free rations for the poor for the next five years had a huge positive effect, as these rations have actually reached the targetted beneficiaries. The BJP did well by identifying, much in advance, seats in which its position was vulnerable, fielded its heavy weight leaders and announced their candidature well in advance to give them time to familiarise themselves with the constituency and electorate. Twelve of the 21 members of parliament fielded in the four states won. These winning members will have to give up one of their seats within 14 days of the declaration of result. The wins by the BJP will help them to buttress their strength in the Rajya Sabha or the Upper House of Parliament, as 19 seats spread across Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana and Maharashtra will fall vacant next year. The BRS will be a loser since three of its members will be completing their term next year and the party will be able to support the successful election of only one person.

The BJP's core strength is its ideological base, combined with a very strong central leadership, and it has been able to reinvent itself by factoring ground realities. This has helped it to consistently increase its vote share. The party has shown alacrity in responding to prevailing political factors in states, such as acknowledging the leadership of Shivraj Chouhan in Madhya Pradesh and Vasundhara Raje in Rajasthan and weaving the electoral narrative around them. This has paid dividends. The party also scores repeatedly due to its robust organisational strength. This quality has helped it to outmatch regional parties in certain states such as Uttar Pradesh. The big test will be its capacity to win the same number of seats as it has now in the Lok Sabha from Bihar, in the 2024 general elections.

.....

Mr Vinod Rai is a Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Comptroller and Auditor General of India. He can be contacted at isasvr@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.