The BJP in Pole Position for the 2024 General Elections

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Summary

The impressive victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the polls in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan indicates that the party could replicate its dominant performance from the 2019 general elections in the Hindi belt in 2024. Though the Congress won in Telangana, its poor show in the north has dealt a blow to efforts at opposition unity.

The results for the Assembly elections in five Indian states – Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Telangana – were announced on 3 and 4 December 2023. The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) convincing victories in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan – all of which were bipolar contests with the Congress – underlined the dominance of the party in the Hindi belt. For the Congress, the sole bright spot was the southern state of Telangana where it wrested power from the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), which had governed the state for two successive terms. In the northeastern state of Mizoram, voters rejected the established parties by giving a clear majority to the Zoram People's Movement, a political outfit formed in 2018, and relegating the ruling Mizo National Front to a distant second place.

The results in the four states, leaving aside Rajasthan which has a habit of voting out incumbents, had an element of surprise and none more so than Madhya Pradesh where the BJP was a multiple-term incumbent, and the electoral contest was expected to be close. However, the predictions proved to be way off the mark, with the BJP winning by a huge margin in Madhya Pradesh – 164 out of 230 seats with nearly 49 per cent of the vote share. The Congress was decimated, winning 65 seats and 40 per cent of the vote share.

With the BJP's win in Madhya Pradesh, the party has now been in power in the state since 2003, except for a brief 18-month period following the 2018 Assembly elections, raising comparisons to the party's dominance in Gujarat. Some of the factors behind the BJP's resounding win have been in evidence in other states – the party's well-oiled and funded election machinery; a broad coalition of voters; targeted welfare schemes, such as direct cash transfers to women, creating a class of *labarthi* (beneficiary) voters who identified with Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan; and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal popularity or what was being touted as 'Modi ki guarantee' in the absence of a BJP chief ministerial face. One of the outcomes of this outreach was that a majority of women voters voted for the BJP, tilting the balance in the party's favour. The Congress, in contrast, ran a lacklustre campaign, with party veteran Kamal Nath, who is neither charismatic nor popular, as its chief ministerial face. His emphasis on a 'soft Hindutva' also backfired and the Congress unsurprisingly failed to beat the BJP at its own game.

In Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, it was the Congress that was in power but failed to drive home the advantage of incumbency. Indeed, the Congress has an abysmal record of winning

elections as an incumbent, having last done so in 2013 in Meghalaya. While some surveys had found that Chhattisgarh's former Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel was popular in the state, the elections proved otherwise. One of the factors that went against the Congress and Baghel, who too peddled a soft Hindutva line, was the anger of the Adivasi or Scheduled Tribe (ST) voters who comprise a third of Chhattisgarh's population. Of the 29 seats reserved for the ST, the BJP won 17 seats, up from three in 2019, while the Congress fell from 25 to 11.

In Rajasthan, where the Congress was not expected to win, it did not do too badly. This was reflected in the Congress vote share of 40 per cent which was two percentage points less than that of the BJP but translated to a 46-seat lead for the BJP. Former Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot was personally popular as were his welfare schemes, but he came up against the 'revolving door' politics of the state. Factionalism within the party, especially the rival power centre around Sachin Pilot, also took its toll.

Amid the catastrophic results for the Congress in north India, the party's remarkable performance in Telangana, where it won a clear majority with 64 out of 119 seats has been somewhat eclipsed. The Congress engineered a turnaround in Telangana with a jump of 11 per cent in vote share and 45 seats, compared to 2018, with the ruling BRS seeing a corresponding decline of around 10 per cent and 49 seats. One of the factors behind the verdict was the perception of the BRS being corrupt and the inability to reach its welfare schemes to many voters. The Congress not only played up this perception but also put together a winning social coalition under the leadership of Revanth Reddy, who has been appointed the chief minister of Telangana.

The results in north India put the BJP in a strong position for the 2024 general elections. In the three states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the BJP had won 62 out of 65 Lok Sabha seats in the 2019 general elections, in direct contests with the Congress, despite performing poorly in the preceding 2018 Assembly elections. This time around, the BJP is on a stronger wicket. The results also underscored the north-south divide in Indian politics, with the BJP dominant in the Hindi belt, but unable to make significant inroads into south India. The Congress' win in Telangana was its second victory in 2023 in south India after Karnataka, and the BJP is currently not in power in any of the southern states. However, the Congress' setbacks in the north have dealt a blow to opposition unity and undermined the party's claim to be the axis of the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

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