

India's 2026 State Elections: Upsets in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal

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Summary

Of the four states that went to elections in April 2026, the results in Assam and Kerala were largely predictable. The verdicts in West Bengal, where the Bharatiya Janata Party won a landslide victory against the three-term Trinamool Congress government, and the emergence of a new force in the shape of film star Chandrasekaran Joseph Vijay in Tamil Nadu were the real highlights.

The four Indian states that went to the polls in April 2026 produced contrasting results. While the Assam and Kerala election results were mostly predictable, the outcomes in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were quite extraordinary. In Assam, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) returned for a third successive term with a landslide victory, while in Kerala, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) comfortably defeated the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF). In Tamil Nadu, hardly anyone betted on film star-turned-politician Chandrasekaran Joseph Vijay's party, the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), winning more than a handful of seats. However, not only did the TVK nearly win a majority on its own, but it also relegated the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) to a distant second. In West Bengal, there was a strong undercurrent of anti-incumbency against the three-term Trinamool Congress (TMC) government. However, few foresaw the scale of the BJP's victory.

Assam

Heading into the polls, the Assam election was the most predictable with the BJP widely expected to return for a third term. Not only did the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance return to power, but it also did so on an overwhelming mandate, winning 92 of the 126 seats in the assembly. The win was powered to a great extent by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma who has been a master strategist for the BJP ever since he defected from the Congress in 2015. He has also been a polarising figure consolidating the Hindu vote in Assam and calling out Muslims, who comprise around a third of the state's population.

The main opposition party, the Congress, suffered a decisive defeat, with the party's state chief, Gaurav Gogoi, losing the Jorhat seat. The scale of the BJP's victory was further amplified by the delimitation exercise in 2023, which many saw as having worked to the party's advantage.

Kerala

In the politics of alternation that characterises Kerala, the LDF bucked the trend and won the election in 2021. However, in this election, the Congress-led UDF, which was seen to have an edge before polling, won 97 of the 140 assembly seats compared to 35 seats by the LDF.

Though the UDF achieved a comfortable majority, the choice of chief minister might prove to be more challenging. The frontrunners are the All India Congress Committee general secretary K C Venugopal, leader of the opposition V D Satheesan and senior leader Ramesh Chennithala.

The BJP, which did not win a single seat in 2021, made some gains, winning three seats and around 10 per cent of the vote share in this election. One of the seats won by the BJP was the Nemon seat in Thiruvananthapuram parliamentary constituency where the BJP state president and former Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar emerged victorious over former education minister V Sivankutty of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Tamil Nadu

The TVK and Vijay's performance in Tamil Nadu was nothing short of stunning. There is little precedent for a fledgling political outfit, floated by someone who was an outsider to formal politics, to form the government in its very first election. Having won 108 seats, 10 short of a majority in the 234-member Tamil Nadu assembly, and 35 per cent of the vote share, Vijay and the TVK are on the cusp of forming the government.

Vijay's electoral success, largely due to younger voters and women backing him in huge numbers, upended the bipolar dominance of the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the alternation of power between the two. The ruling DMK won 59 seats, down 74 from 2021, with outgoing Chief Minister M K Stalin losing in Kolathur constituency. The AIADMK won 47 seats. The BJP, which fought the polls in alliance with the AIADMK, secured one seat.

West Bengal

West Bengal was one state that the BJP was extremely focused on winning ever since it came to power at the centre in 2014. That desire was fulfilled when the BJP won a landslide victory against the ruling TMC and three-term Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, winning 207 of the 294 assembly seats. The primary reasons for the TMC's heavy defeat were anti-incumbency, which had built up around corruption, both at the party's higher levels and among the cadre, law and order issues and the state's economic stagnation.

The Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision too played a role in the TMC's defeat. The 2.7 million voters, who were struck off the rolls due to 'logical discrepancies', were disproportionately Muslims who usually support the TMC. The Muslim vote too had fractured and some of it went to the smaller parties. Alongside the resentment of the voters against the incumbent, the BJP ran an organised and targeted campaign that resulted in a massive consolidation of the Hindu vote in its favour.

Conclusion

On the national front, the elections have not only resulted in the BJP attaining its long-term goal of winning West Bengal but also taking control of eastern India, in addition to most of the northern and western states. The LDF's loss in Kerala means that for the first time in

India there is not a single state being governed by the Left parties. The results in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu were a blow to established regional parties and a further sign of centralisation, which are likely to have adverse effects on India's federal structure. The outcome in West Bengal was also evidence of massive Hindu consolidation behind the BJP, which makes it very difficult for the opposition to mount a challenge in other states.

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