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Madhya Pradesh State Polls in India: ‘Anti-Incumbency’ No Longer Applies?

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Elections in Madhya Pradesh (MP), one of the five Indian states going to the polls in November and December 2013, test conventional wisdom about Indian state elections – that governments seldom get re-elected. “The anti-incumbency factor” has been a commonplace of Indian electoral analysis for thirty years. But over the past few years, incumbents with healthy records in office are winning re-election.

Madhya Pradesh’s Chief Minister from 2003, Shivraj Singh Chouhan from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is one of them, appearing reasonably well-placed to win a third term as the state went to the polls on 25 November. If opinion polls are to be believed, Chouhan, young by Indian political standards at 54, could very well succeed in joining the likes of Narendra Modi, Sheila Dikshit, Naveen Patnaik and Tarun Gogoi as a three-time chief minister. Surveys indicate that the BJP’s share in the 230-seat state Assembly may fall from its tally of 143 in 2008. But that might still not be enough for the Congress, which won 71 seats in the last election, to wrest power.

Two factors appear to explain why the “anti-incumbency factor” is no longer a plausible guide to the outcome of state elections. First, voters in Indian states have experienced significant social development in the past generation, and as a consequence, voters may have acquired greater independence and readiness to make judgements for themselves. Literacy in

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MP, for example, went from 45 per cent a generation ago to more than 70 per cent today. Similarly, women voters have increased from 560 per 1,000 men in the 1960s to 800 per 1,000 men in recent elections. Some of the more popular initiatives implemented by the BJP, such as the *Ladli Laxmi* and *Kanyadaan*, have been targeted at women, and there have been others, like a free pilgrimage scheme, that may have appealed especially to women. Voters, it appears, will endorse governments that have delivered at least some of the goods.

The Secret of Re-election

Earlier, analysts believed that a great many voters were guided simply by the instruction of social superiors and by affiliation to religion or caste. But that could be changing, at least in some contexts. A survey commissioned in Madhya Pradesh by the Election Commission of India and conducted by the Madhya Pradesh Directorate of Economics and Statistics across all the 230 constituencies found that an overwhelming majority of voters intended to vote on the basis of the quality of candidates and not on grounds of caste and religion.

That leads to the second element in the ability of state governments to get re-elected: an effective Chief Minister who strives for achievements and makes sure he or she gets credit for them. In Madhya Pradesh, this means Chouhan. A member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh since boyhood, Chouhan comes from a rural, farming background but has a university degree. He has been in and around politics from his teenage years and is said to have been imprisoned briefly for opposition to Indira Gandhi's "emergency" in 1975-7.

Chouhan's government has acquired a reputation for delivering services to significant numbers of people. As industrialist Anand Mahindra, speaking at the South Asian Diaspora Convention in Singapore organised by ISAS on 21 and 22 November 2013, pointed out, Madhya Pradesh has shown exceptional initiative in getting investments. Mahindra recalled that, unlike many chief ministers, Chouhan came to visit him at his office to encourage setting up of a factory, something that very few Indian CMs would do. Another remarkable example lay in the fact that by 2016 the Madhya Pradesh State Electricity Board might be one of the few state-run electricity boards to turn a profit. Most such boards drown in unpaid dues and red ink.

Chouhan has sometimes been touted as a future prime minister, particularly by factions of the BJP who oppose Gujarat's Chief Minister, Narendra Modi. Chouhan, however, proclaims that his interests lie in Madhya Pradesh and has maintained a modest national profile. In his home state, however, he is confident and widely known. He claimed he would easily win his own seat in the 2013 elections.

The Congress Strategy

The Congress Party, one of whose influential national secretaries, Digvijay Singh, was a Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh for ten years from 1993-2003, lost its hold in the state in

the first decade of the twenty-first century. In these 2013 elections, the party's opponents accused it of desperation – exemplified in a number of constituencies by its running of bogus candidates with the same names as those of the BJP incumbents. The hope – likely forlorn – was to confuse voters and reduce the BJP's tally. Indications, however, were that if such tactics worked once upon a time, they no longer were effective.

The Congress tried to create momentum by drafting Jyotiraditya Scindia, scion of the Gwalior princely family and a central minister, to head its campaign. While this might have improved the position of the Congress, it was unlikely to be enough to unseat the BJP. At least three factions within the Congress – aligned with Digvijay Singh, central minister Kamal Nath and former central minister Suresh Pachauri – diffused the party's efforts when they needed focus and unity if the party were to do well. The Digvijay Singh camp signalled an unmistakable presence by getting his son, Jaivardhan, nominated on the Congress ticket from the family stronghold in Raghogarh. And the late induction of Scindia into campaigning may have simply worsened the diffusion of effort.

Madhya Pradesh has 230 constituencies, more than 36 million enrolled voters and 54,000 polling stations. As Indians become ever more connected, elections are won by identifying one's supporters and ensuring they vote. (Voting is not compulsory, but turnout in 2008 was nearly 70 per cent of the electorate). To get sympathisers to vote requires organisation down to the level of the 54,000 polling stations. With mobile phones everywhere, an effective political machine can be kept informed, instructed and motivated. An incumbent government has advantages in being able to offer various forms of subtle support to party workers. Here, too, Chouhan's BJP, in spite of internal jealousies and factional clashes, has advantages that its opponents seemed incapable of matching.

Conclusion

On 25 November, around 71 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote, which was marginally higher than the voting percentage of around 69 in 2008.

State election results do not always prove a reliable predictor of elections to the national parliament, which are due before June next year. In the 2009 general elections, the Congress did reasonably well, winning 12 of MP's 29 seats; the BJP won 16; one went to the Bahujan Samaj Party. In an era where large numbers of motivated and connected workers seem essential to win elections, a sympathetic state government may have more means at its disposal to sweeten the lives of operatives. A weak showing by the Congress in the state elections could augur ill for its prospects in the national poll.

Table 1: Madhya Pradesh

Population, 2011 census	72,600,000
Electors, 2013	46,457,724
Literacy, 2011	70.6
Polling stations	53,896
Electors per polling station	860
Scheduled Tribe pop.	15,316,784
Scheduled Caste pop.	11,342,320
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	930
Urban population	20,060,000 (28%)

Table 2: Madhya Pradesh Elections, 2003 and 2008

	2003	2008
Seats in national parliament	29	29
Seats in state assembly	230	230
Won by BJP	173	143
Won by Congress	38	71
Voter turnout %	67.3	69.8
Seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes	47	47
Seats reserved for Scheduled Castes	35	35

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