

ISAS Brief

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State Assembly election results in India: Dispelling the many commonly-held notions of Indian elections

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The recent assembly elections, dubbed by many as the ‘semifinals’ of the 2009 Lok Sabha polls, in five states – Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Rajasthan – sprung many surprises. The Congress Party won three states and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) two. To many observers, the results came as a surprise, perhaps including the Congress Party, considering that the elections in Rajasthan and Delhi were held in the aftermath of the Mumbai terrorist attack.

The state assembly election results challenged many commonly-held assumptions. Firstly, the re-election of BJP governments in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh and the Congress Party in New Delhi once again falsified the notion of anti-incumbency. For the BJP governments in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, their victory takes them into a second term while for the Congress Party, its victory in Delhi ensured a third term. The Chief Ministers of all these states – Sheila Dixit (Delhi), Raman Singh (Chhattisgarh) and Shivraj Singh Chauhan (Madhya Pradesh) – fought mainly on the plank of development. In fact, Dixit had to contend with the burden of the Congress government’s failure at the central level, which included the issues of inflation and terrorism. To make things worse for her, voting in Delhi took place three days after the rampage in Mumbai. Many expected this to dent Dixit’s otherwise bright chances, especially after the aggressive ad campaign by the BJP and Congress-bashing for being too soft on terror. Yet she managed to win convincingly.

Secondly, high polling in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Delhi did not go against the incumbent as had been expected. The three states had approximately 60 percent polling, and in all these states, the sitting governments did well. It was only Rajasthan where high polling actually resulted in the incumbent government being voted out of power. Vandita Mishra, writing for *The Indian Express*, remarked, “Anti-incumbency is not an iron law of nature. Incumbency can be a good thing and people will turn out in large numbers to vote for a party in government again if it is seen to have delivered.”

Thirdly, none of the so called ‘star campaigners’ from Delhi or other states can really take the credit for their party’s victory. Ultimately, the issue of development played a key role in the electoral outcomes of Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Pankaj Vohra, a

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columnist for *The Hindustan Times*, aptly remarked, “The results prove that wherever the Chief Ministers could project positive achievements and development activities of their governments, their parties won.”

Fourthly, while these assembly elections, in no way, indicate the fact that the Congress Party’s handling of security issues is par excellence, the three-two elections result definitely shows that people are equally disgruntled with the BJP and do not really feel that the latter has a magic wand to solve issues such as terrorism. Mishra stated that, “Terror – or how safe we are – is certainly an issue, and given the attacks in Delhi, Jaipur and then Mumbai, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was on the defensive. But the BJP’s formulation of the issue failed to strike a credible chord. Its campaign that the UPA was ‘soft on terror’ didn’t translate into ‘we know how to keep you safe’. Its ‘blood-stain’ ad asking for votes even as the siege was on in Mumbai put off many voters.”

In fact, interestingly according to Vohra, many believe that in spite of it being soft on terror, Congress is still looked at as being a more nationalistic party. According to him, “For the common man, the Congress had won the 1965 and 1971 wars against Pakistan and its governance generates a greater sense of assurance than the jingoistic stance of the BJP”. Apart from this, terrorism in many ways is looked at as a war on the nation and the people generally back the government of the day. A *Times of India* editorial stated that, “Significantly, Rajasthan and Delhi voted after the Mumbai carnage and both opted for the Congress. In these states, the BJP ran an aggressive campaign on terrorism and even took out advertisements against the Congress style of governance. That strategy may have backfired. Sure, terrorism is a major concern but people seem to have refused to read party politics into it. They recognise terrorism, especially the kind witnessed in Mumbai, as a war waged on the nation.”

If one were to look at the lessons for the BJP and the Congress Party, rather than bringing cheer to either camp, the elections brought to the fore the lack of leadership at the national level, more so in the case of the BJP. The Congress Party too faces the same problem to a degree. These elections, to some degree, obliterated that problem because, in spite of facing incumbency of 10 years in Delhi, the terrorist attacks and the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Congress Party managed to triumph. Similarly, in Rajasthan, in spite of not having a leader to take on Vasundhara Raje Scindia, the Congress Party managed to win. The BJP, with L. K. Advani as its prime ministerial candidate, on the other hand, tried hard to play up the issue of terrorism and inflation and projected Gujarat’s Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, as its ‘star campaigner’. Modi, thought to be prime minister material, failed in the national capital, which provides a good measure of the nation’s mood. In politics, a week is a long time and anything can happen. The state elections proved just that – the BJP needs a re-think on not only its handling of sensitive issues such as terrorism but also the choice of ‘star campaigners’.

As far as the Congress Party is concerned, Dixit’s re-election, losses in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and a not very convincing victory in Rajasthan should teach the party something about projecting a leader. While in Delhi, the party did more or less project Dixit as the leader, it did not do so in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The BJP played up this issue, with Advani remarking during the election campaign that, “Have you seen a cricket team saying it will decide the name of its captain after the match is over? The same is the case with the Congress”. It is time the party projected a leader for 2009 so that the country knows who is captaining the Congress.

It would be incorrect to dub the current assembly results as an indicator of what will happen in the general elections in 2009. In December 2003, the BJP emerged victorious in three assembly elections and yet lost the Lok Sabha polls. Only one thing can be said clearly though – in spite of failures on many fronts, the Congress Party has been able to win three states. This means that the BJP has more to worry about than the Congress Party has to celebrate. While in the Congress, it is reticent to project a leader, the BJP miscalculates. The general election of 2009 will show us which will prove to be less harmful.

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