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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



State Election Results in India: Gains for the BJP and Regional Parties

Ronojoy Sen¹

The results of the elections in four States brought cheer to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is going to form the government in Assam for the first time. Regional parties too held their own in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal and the Left in Kerala. The results were a disappointment for the Congress as it was voted out of power in Assam and Kerala.

Introduction

The results of the elections in four states in India – Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Assam – which were announced on 19 May 2016 have come as a shot in the arm for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Government at the Centre. After heavy defeats in the States of Delhi and Bihar in 2015, the BJP has won, as part of a coalition with regional parties, a resounding electoral victory in the northeastern State of Assam. This would mark the first time that the BJP, which has historically been seen as a north

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and at the Asia Research Institute at the NUS. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper. He wishes to thank Mr Jayant Singh, Research Assistant at ISAS, for help in preparing the Tables.

Indian party, will form a government in eastern India. It might be noted that the BJP won 80% of its seats in the 2014 national elections from the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The party's leadership has touted its success in Assam as evidence of the BJP's expanding footprint across India. While the BJP's victory in Assam is significant, it would be misleading to see the results in the four States as merely a narrative of the BJP's expansion under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The current set of results will not also significantly help alter the composition of the Upper House of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) where the BJP does not have a majority.

The results in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where incumbent Chief Ministers Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee respectively returned to power, are proof of the continued resilience of regional parties. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]-led coalition's victory in Kerala also goes to show that the Left parties still have a presence, albeit a rapidly shrinking one, in India. Finally, the defeat of the Congress in Assam and Kerala, both States where it was heading the government, is increasing evidence of the decline of the party. But it is too early to write off the Congress as many have been doing in the aftermath of the results. Interestingly, the Congress had a better strike rate than the BJP in the 2016 State elections. Whereas the BJP contested 661 seats in the four States and won in 64, the Congress contested 344 seats and won 100. In the following sections the results in the four States are briefly analysed.

Tamil Nadu

The victory of AIADMK, led by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa, was historic since it was the first time since 1984 that a government has returned to power in Tamil Nadu. While exit polls had correctly predicted the results, though not the margins of victory, for the States of West Bengal, Kerala and Assam, for Tamil Nadu the polls were divided. The AIADMK however won fairly convincingly over its main regional rival the DMK, winning 134 of the 234 Assembly seats to the DMK's 89. However, the results mark a huge gain for DMK, which saw a sharp rise in its seat tally from 23 in 2011. It also

reinforced the bipolarity of politics in Tamil Nadu where the two Dravidian parties, AIADMK and DMK, dominate.

The primary reason for the AIADMK's success in winning a second term can be ascribed to the numerous welfare schemes floated by Jayalalithaa. These included a monthly quota of 20 kilograms of rice to voters for free, free uniforms to students in state-run schools, marriage assistance to families, mixers and grinders and even goats and cows to families living below the poverty line. While these schemes placed a sizeable burden on the State's exchequer, they helped Jayalalithaa retain her support base, particularly among women voters. Given the success of her populist policies, Jayalalithaa had included more freebies for voters, such as mobile phones, free laptops to students and waiver of all farm loans, in her party's election manifesto. She had also promised prohibition of alcohol if voted back, something that enhanced her support among women voters.

The AIADMK was also helped by the poor performance of a 'third' front led by the DMDK and comprising several smaller parties such as VCK, MDMK and the Communists. The front was unable to cut into the votes of AIADMK winning only 6% of the vote share and not a single seat. Even the leader of the DMDK, film star Vijayakanth, suffered a humiliating loss in his own constituency. So also the poor performance of the BJP, which contested alone and whose vote share dropped from 6% in the 2014 election to 3%, did little to dent the AIADMK's vote bank.

The DMK, which had allied with the Congress, did reasonably well considering its vote share had fallen to 24% in 2014. But even a significant 8% vote swing in its favour was not enough for the DMK to catch up with the AIADMK. According to the post-election survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti, the scales might have been tipped in the DMK's favour if it had entered into a broader alliance with smaller parties. The Congress performed marginally better than in 2014 but it was not substantial enough to change the overall result. One of the bright spots in the DMK's performance was the vigorous campaigning by the DMK supremo M Karunanidhi's son, M K Stalin, who will be looking to take up his nonagerian father's mantle both in the Assembly and in coming elections. Indeed, the CSDS-Lokniti findings seem to suggest that an ageing Karunanidhi's continued leadership of the DMK might be limiting the party's appeal.

Tamil Nadu National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 and 2016 (at the time results were declared). Source: Election Commission of India

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly	2016 Assembly
Total Seats	39	234	234
AIADMK	37 (45% of vote)	150 (38%)	132 (41%)
DMK	0 (24% of vote)	23 (22%)	89 (32%)
BJP	1 (6% of vote)	0 (2%)	0 (3%)
Congress	0 (4% of vote)	5 (9%)	8 (6%)
DMDK	0 (5% of vote)	29 (8%)	0 (2%)

West Bengal

That the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee would return to power in West Bengal was never in doubt. An alliance of the CPI(M)-led Left Front and the Congress had threatened to run the TMC close. But the TMC surprised many by the convincing margin of its victory, winning 211 seats and 45% of the vote share compared to the alliance's 76 seats and 39%.

The TMC victory was built on voter satisfaction with the government's investment in infrastructure. Roads and bridges had been built, more people had access to water and electricity and there was some improvement in the state-run health system. This, along with schemes like subsidised rice and free bicycles for students, had meant that poor voters were solidly behind the TMC. Muslim voters, who constitute 27% of West Bengal's population, were appeased by stipends to imams and muezzins and scholarships to students. The backing of the poor and the Muslims for the TMC has been validated by CSDS-Lokniti. The survey also shows that 'development' and not corruption, which had become an issue after some TMC leaders were caught in a sting video taking bribes and an earlier chit fund scam, was upper most in voter's minds.

It was, however, the TMC's exceptional performance in urban areas, where discontent with the government seemed to have been strongest, that carried the party over the 200-seat mark. The TMC won all 11 seats in Kolkata including the ones where sting-tainted candidates were contesting. One of the reasons for the TMC's sweep in Kolkata was

the unknown Opposition alliance candidates pitted against TMC heavyweights. The moving force behind the TMC's strong performance was Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee herself. She ran a hectic campaign holding some 200 rallies over the course of two months, making the 2016 election a referendum on herself.

On paper, the Left-Congress alliance had seemed formidable. It had roughly the same share of the vote as the TMC in the 2014 national elections. It was, however, undone by several factors. First, the alliance did not have a face with statewide acceptability. Even its chief ministerial candidate, Surjya Kanta Mishra, could not win from his own constituency. Second, unlike Bihar, where the combination of the Janata Dal (United) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal worked well, there wasn't a smooth transfer of votes between the Congress and the Left. Third, the people of West Bengal have not forgiven the Left Front for the stagnation it inflicted on the State, especially during the last two decades of its rule. This was reflected in the decline of the Left Front's vote from 30% in 2014 to 27% in 2016, even as the Congress marginally increased its vote share.

The third player in the State, the BJP, has some reason for satisfaction. The party had increased its vote share in West Bengal from 4% in the 2011 Assembly elections to 17% in the national elections. The BJP's vote share fell in 2016 to 10% but it still won three seats, an improvement from 2011. Its ally, the Gorkha Janamukti Manch, won another three seats. But importantly, according to CSDS-Lokniti, the additional votes that had gone to the BJP in 2014 did not entirely benefit the opposition alliance.

West Bengal National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 and 2016 (at the time results were declared)

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly	2016 Assembly
Total Seats	42	294	294
Trinamool Congress	34 (40% of vote)	184 (39%)	211 (45%)
Left Front	2 (30% of vote)	62 (40%)	33 (27%)
Congress	4 (10% of vote)	42 (9%)	44 (12%)
BJP	2 (17% of vote)	0 (4%)	3 (10%)

Assam

While the BJP was expected to win in Assam, its victory was far bigger than anticipated. One of the reasons for the convincing win was the tactical alliance that the BJP had drawn up with two regional parties, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF). The BJP had seen a three-fold rise in its vote share in Assam in the recent past from 11% in the 2011 elections to 37% in 2014. In the 2016 elections, the success of the BJP-led alliance was illustrated by the fact that it obtained 42% of the vote share and 86 seats. Despite the BJP having contested 90 out of 126 Assembly seats, it won 60 seats and 30% of the vote share. In sharp contrast, the Congress, which had governed Assam for three successive terms under Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, saw its seat tally plummet to 26 and the regional party All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) to 13.

Besides a strategic choice of allies, what worked in the BJP's favour was, as the CSDS-Lokniti survey shows, an unprecedented Hindu consolidation behind the BJP and its allies. This was in part due to the BJP's strong rhetoric on illegal migration and its campaign promise to free Assam of Bangladeshi migrants if voted to power. The polarisation seemed to have worked for the BJP. According to the survey, 65% of Assam's Hindu population voted for the BJP and its allies and 58% for the BJP alone. A similar consolidation did not happen for the Muslims, who constitute 34% of Assam's population, the highest number for an Indian State outside of Jammu and Kashmir. The Muslim vote, according to CSDS-Lokniti, was divided between the Congress and the AIUDF. Finally, the BJP's strategy, which differed from Bihar, of choosing a chief ministerial candidate in former Union minister Sarbananda Sonowal paid rich dividends.

The Congress not only suffered from anti-incumbency but also from the loss of important leaders, particularly Himanta Biswa Sarma who was once seen as a successor to Gogoi, to the BJP. Sarma was a key strategist for the BJP in the 2016 election. Not only did he win from the constituency where he contested, but six Congress members who left along with him and contested on a BJP ticket also won. The other player in the elections, the AIUDF, which primarily banks on Muslim support, did not do as well as in 2014. There were some who felt that the Congress might have done better if it had

tied up with the AIUDF, but the CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that the Congress might have not even got the share of the Hindu vote that it did if it allied with the AIUDF.

Assam National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 and 2016 (at the time results were declared)

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly	2016 Assembly
Total Seats	14	126	126
Congress	3 (30% of vote)	79 (39%)	26 (31%)
BJP	7 (37% of vote)	5 (11%)	60 (30%)
AGP	0 (4% of vote)	9 (16%)	14 (8%)
AIUDF	3 (15% of vote)	18 (13%)	13 (13%)
BPF	0 (2% of vote)	12 (6%)	12 (4%)

Kerala

Kerala followed the usual pattern of alternating between the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) with the incumbent UDF losing to the LDF. The difference in 2016 was the unusually high margin of victory for the LDF, which won 44% of the vote share and 91 seats compared to the UDF's 37% and 47 seats. What had been a narrow gap between the two fronts in 2014 had widened to a significant 7% in 2016. While, according to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, the UDF government got fairly high ratings from voters on governance, it was badly hit by corruption scandals and negative media coverage during the last year of its tenure. The survey results show that 54% of the respondents believed that corruption charges against the outgoing Chief Minister Oomen Chandy, in relation to a solar panel scam, were true. Unlike in West Bengal, corruption charges against the government seemed to have played a role in the Kerala verdict. This was possibly because the voters in Kerala have much higher literacy levels and greater exposure to the media than West Bengal voters.

The other critical element of the Kerala verdict was the performance of the BJP which won a seat in the State Assembly for the first time ever. Unlike in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, where the party got a lower vote share than in 2014, in Kerala the BJP marginally increased its vote share in 2016. It also found an ally in the Bharatiya

Dharma Jana Sangh, which claims to represent the backward-caste Ezhavas who make up nearly half the state's Hindu population. According to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, the BJP did not get as many Ezhava votes as expected. However, the survey reports that the BJP did attract a large chunk of the upper caste Nair vote, which would otherwise have gone to the UDF. The BJP also won a small but significant share of the Christian vote, which again probably ate into the UDF's vote bank.

The growth of the BJP in Kerala could have long-term repercussions. While it affected the UDF's chances in the 2016 election, in future elections it could draw a significant Ezhava vote, which usually goes to the LDF. The BJP is nowhere near the point where it could think of becoming a contender for power in Kerala, but the 2016 result does have the makings of the BJP becoming a third force in the State.

Kerala National Elections, 2014, and State Elections, 2011 (at the time results were declared).

	2014 Lok Sabha	2011 Assembly	2016 Assembly
Total Seats	20	140	140
UDF	12 (42% of vote)	72 (46%)	47 (37%)
LDF	8 (40% of vote)	68 (45%)	91 (44%)
BJP	0 (10% of vote)	0 (6%)	1 (11%)

Conclusion

There is a tendency to view results in State elections in India as a pointer to the national elections. But it must be noted that the national elections, scheduled for 2019, are three years away. Besides, voters in India often tend to vote very differently in State and national elections. One thing is for certain though. Even as the Congress is yet to recover from its debacle in 2014 and the BJP extends its reach beyond the Hindi heartland, the regional parties, which combine strong leadership and populist policies, continue to hold their own in several States. In 2014, the regional parties, including the Left which is now confined to Kerala and West Bengal, won nearly 50% of the vote share. The vote share of the regional parties is likely to remain the same or even go up in 2019.

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