

15TH LOK SABHA ELECTIONS IN INDIA

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Introduction

India, the largest democracy in the world, held its 15th Lok Sabha Elections from April 16 to May 13, 2009 in which 714 ¹ million people were eligible to cast their vote. Contrary to the expectations, UPA, led by the Congress Party, bagged 261 seats in the Lok Sabha and placed itself in a very strong position to form the new government. Having resumed his office, Mr. Manmohan Singh became the first Indian Prime Minister to be re-elected after completing a full term for the first time in 47 years. The last Prime Minister to be re-elected was Jawaharlal Nehru, in 1962.²

Congress, which showed the best results by any individual party in nearly two decades, reaped the reward for good governance, dramatic economic growth during its last term and a series of high-profile pro-poor programs. The results show a kind of respect and acknowledgement of the policies launched by Manmohan Singh. Indian voters have made it clear that they are keen to continue their journey on the road which the Congress along with its allies in the last five years has taken India on. This is also evident by the fact that encouraged by the prospect of a stable government, the Indian stock market began to climb upwards as soon as the results were announced.³

For Congress to get re-elected at a time when the global recession has hit India hard with its industrial production dropping into negative growth-exports were down 33% and rural consumer prices up almost 10 per cent⁴-is remarkable. It regained its vote share while campaigning in its traditional areas of strength and securing the support of those who were opposed to communalism or caste-ism. As a matter of fact, parties based along the lines of caste have suffered a distinct setback. The results show the Congress's dominance in most states barring Gujarat and Karnataka.⁵ Congress is being praised for showing good results in UP but equally important is the fact that it crossed the 10 per cent⁶ threshold in Bihar and did much better than expected in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra

Furthermore, it is also appreciable that almost all parties including the BJP conceded defeat without levelling allegations of any wrongdoings and the verdict has been accepted without any fuss. BJP has pledged that it would serve India as a responsible opposition whereas; other parties have also assured Congress of their support to UPA government.

From the perspective of Indian electorate, a vote for Congress indeed meant a vote in favour of secularism and progress. Despite its failures to combat poverty and inequality, people have reposed their faith in Congress and the abilities of Dr. Manmohan Singh.

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Issues raised by during election campaign

The Bharatiya Janata Party's election campaign took off making a case for a "strong" versus "weak" leader. The very first "approved" party slogan was: *mazboot neta, nirnayak sarkar* — strong leader, decisive government.⁷ Mr. Advani projected Manmohan Singh as a "nikamma" (incompetent) Prime Minister, "weakest Prime Minister" and subservient to the Congress President Sonia Gandhi.⁸ Advani also termed Manmohan as "a remote-controlled Prime Minister"⁹ forcing Manmohan Singh to reply that it was Advani who played a "prominent role" in the Babri Masjid demolition, presided over Gujarat riots and failed to prevent terror attacks on the Parliament and the Red Fort as Home Minister.¹⁰ He further added that "I owe it to myself and the people of India to show where the shoe pinches. Enough is enough".¹¹ Furthermore, Sonia Gandhi also blamed that it was actually Mr. Advani who was a "slave of RSS".¹²

The issue of terrorism remained in the forefront throughout the election campaign. Mr. Advani criticized UPA government for scrapping the Prevention of Terrorism Act. He further blamed that the mastermind behind the Parliament attack was sentenced to death by the Supreme Court but the UPA government failed to carry out his execution and described it as vote bank politics being adopted by the UPA Government fearing that the party might lose the minority votes. BJP also lashed out at Pakistan for allegedly supporting militants in Jammu and Kashmir and termed terrorism, especially the Mumbai terror attacks, as a proxy war launched by Pakistan to demoralise India. He said the UPA Government had refused to understand this despite the efforts made by the BJP for the last 10 years to make it understand this reality. Mr. Advani charged that the UPA government had failed on all fronts: in preventing infiltration of terrorists from Bangladesh; terrorism from Pakistan; and Naxelite activities in various States.

Mr. Advani suggested that there was no way of overcoming the menace of terrorism unless the Government and people developed an attitude of zero tolerance. He urged the people to vote for the BJP as it was the only party that had a true secular outlook and will crush terror at its roots to ensure rapid development of the nation. Mr. Advani was of the opinion that if the National Democratic Alliance were to form a government after the Lok Sabha election, work would begin on a project to give a multipurpose national identity card to every citizen.¹³ This was especially important as the number of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in India ran into millions.

In response, the Congress charged BJP with practicing the politics of divisiveness and discord. The party successfully projected the idea that terrorism can only be fought by people that stand united and not by people divided by religion. Congress stressed that religious polarization, intrinsic to the BJP, severely erodes the nation's capacity to combat terrorism.

Mr. Advani also insisted that the new government that comes to power after the Lok Sabha elections should be above "dynasticism and courtier culture".¹⁴ Mr. Advani said that the National Democratic Alliance alone could give able governance to tackle recession that was bound to damage India's economy further in the coming days. The prices of all essential commodities were skyrocketing and because of wrong policies, the livelihood of the common man was in jeopardy. Moreover, around ten million people are

expected to lose their jobs in the future. If the BJP was voted to power, it would take care of the middle class, the poor and the downtrodden, he said.

In an effort to corner the ruling establishment, BJP in the middle of the campaign focused on the question of bringing back the black money stashed in Swiss Bank accounts by some influential Indians. However, this issue was initially raised by left leaning parties and also found mention in the CPI-M's manifesto. Leftist parties immediately pointed out BJP's double standard on the issue when it showed how previous NDA governments opened up new routes to stash away black money in foreign banks.¹⁵ Congress, playing its card safely, pledged to take steps to recover smuggled money.

BSP leader Ms. Mayawati brought into focus the economic disparities in the country and blamed it on the Congress rule since independence. She also claimed that her party does not run on the money received from rich industrialists but on the basis of donations collected by party workers throughout the country. She also promised to ensure reservation for the economically deprived within the upper castes.

Plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka was the central issue in Tamil Nadu. Different political parties accused one another for shedding false tears and promised to make efforts to ease the situation in northern Sri Lanka. Jayalalithaa, General Secretary of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, observed a fast and blamed Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi and the Union government for remaining a "mute spectator"¹⁶ to the killing of the Tamils. DMK leader and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu joined the race and also observed fast and insisted that the UPA government should exert its pressure on the Sri Lankan government to halt its military operation.¹⁷ Advani also charged that UPA was guilty of not protecting the interests and welfare of innocent Tamils in Sri Lanka.¹⁸

Demands for separate Telangana and Gorakhaland, also surfaced during the election campaign with BJP making promise that it "will examine the demand for Telangana and the demand of the Darjeeling hills will be considered sympathetically".¹⁹ Telangana Rashtra Samiti President K. Chandrasekhara Rao also ruled out any alliance with the Congress accusing it of betraying the Telangana people on the separate state issue whereas the NDA had promised to carve out Telangana from the existing Andhra Pradesh within 100 days of forming the government at the Centre.²⁰ To counter BJP on the issue, Sonia Gandhi also pointed out that the Congress had no ideological problems in creation of a separate Telangana State but certain issues and concerns had to be addressed first.²¹

Unemployment was yet another issue. Pointing out that the UPA had made unemployment a major campaign issue in 2004 and promised the creation of 10 million jobs every year, the BJP said that "Instead of creating 1 crore jobs, the economic downturn has led to a loss of 1.5 crore jobs."²² Party spokesperson Siddharth Nath Singh also added that "by the time elections are over, another crore jobs would be lost".²³

Reasons for Congress Victory

A- Achievements of the UPA government 2004-2009

Some of the land mark achievements which Congress claims to have achieved were as follows:

- The Right to Information Act, 2005 which empowered the people to monitor government spending and demand responsiveness and accountability from public officials at all levels.²⁴
- National Rural Employment Guarantee Act²⁵ was implemented in all districts to provide rural households the legal right to demand employment and made the Government accountable to guaranteeing 100 days of employment to any rural household whose adult members were willing to do unskilled manual work. The focus was on productive works that helped to revive the natural resource base of rural economy, like water conservation, plantation, and land development so that durable assets were created along with wage employment.
- In its manifesto, Congress took pride in providing relief to farmers and their families by increasing the MSP and procurement prices; waiving loans to the tune of Rs. 65,000 crores; increasing three-fold credit from banks and reducing interest rates on crop loans; and by extending irrigation facilities.²⁶
- National Rural Health Mission was launched on 12th April, 2005²⁷ for a period of seven years to improve the quality and accessibility of primary health care in rural areas.
- Enacted Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill, 2006²⁸, which sought to empower traditional forest-dwelling communities by giving them security of tenure, access to minor forest produce and a stake in the presentation of natural spaces. The bill vested forest rights and occupation of forest land in forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers. It also provided reservations for Other Backward Class (OBC) students in all professional institutions.
- A new momentum was imparted to the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan for primary education. A cooked mid-day meal scheme was also introduced in all primary schools that feeds 15 crore²⁹ children every day.
- UPA takes credit for delivering five years of record economic growth which enabled an unprecedented step-up in government spending particularly on education and health; agriculture, rural development, infrastructure like power and railways and municipal services in towns and cities.
- The Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM)³⁰ was initiated with an outlay of Rs.1 lakh crore in 63 cities for upgrading infrastructure and for providing basic services to the urban poor.
- UPA government earned for India a new respect and stature internationally. Civil nuclear agreements were entered into with many countries Furthermore; the campaign led by the Congress President resulted in the declaration of Gandhi Jayanti as International Day of Non-Violence by the United Nations.³¹
- The UPA government also takes credit for strengthening the country's capacity and capability to deal with both external and internal security challenges. New battalions were raised and new hubs for anti-terrorist forces created across the country.

B- Other Factors

- The Indian National Congress was the only party that combined experience and youth. Congress fielded many young and fresh faces. Eight of the ten first time candidates picked by Rahul Gandhi from the Indian Youth Congress (IYC) or National Students Union of India (NSUI) have won in Uttar Pradesh.³²
- The Indian National Congress's secular and liberal nationalism had an equal place for each and every Indian. It was an inclusive vision. Unlike the BJP's narrow and communal nationalism which denied equality and equal rights to large sections of society.
- Congress's manifesto, focusing and projecting itself as a social democratic party working to uplift the condition of "am admi" or common man, also played a crucial role. By emphasizing this agenda, Rahul Gandhi successfully revived Congress in UP where it had no party machinery and its cadres were demoralized. Congress's win of 21 of 80 Lok Sabha seats clearly states the transformation in UP's electoral landscape since Mayawati took power in 2007. In 2007 Assembly polls, People of UP voted for Mayawati in hope of efficient governance but Mayawati ended up glorifying herself by spending a huge amount of money on erecting her statues. It also fielded candidates with not so clean record. In such circumstances, people found Congress as their best option.
- The party has been rewarded for its inclusive pluralism and pursuit of Left-of-Centre policies through the NREGA, loan waiver for farmers in distress and Right to Information Act. Among these, NREGA which gave employment to around 45 million families (one-fourth of all Indian households)³³ is probably the most important reason for this astounding victory. It created much needed employment and income raising opportunities for the poor. The success of the loan waiver scheme can be gauged from the fact that 3.68 crore³⁴ farmer-families have benefited from it. It contributed to the promotion of the idea of a caring state that is redistributing resources towards the needy. The Indian National Congress also pledged to extend interest relief to all farmers who repay bank loans on schedule.
- Another factor is the shift of the Muslim vote towards the Congress in the Hindi heartland in general and particularly in Uttar Pradesh. Muslims community was disappointed with the parties it supported in the past two decades, including the Lalu Prasad-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Mulayam Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party (S.P.) and the Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).
- Relentless election campaign by Rahul Gandhi was yet another factor. He addressed over 106 rallies covering as many as 230 constituencies,³⁵ across India and expressed his desire to usher in a new brand of democratic politics by promoting a new generation of future leaders chosen through internal elections and talent hunt. Rahul Gandhi was instrumental in mobilising the youth of the country as 65% of the electorate in the country is now less than 38 years of age³⁶ and they relate to his ideas for the future of India.. He travelled extensively and stayed at the homes of Dalit families in an effort to connect himself with the "aam admi".
- Personal image of Dr. Manmohan Singh is yet another factor. Manmohan Singh has earned the reputation of being the "Mr Clean's Mr Clean"³⁷ in India's murky politics. From a voters point of view, three qualities required in a leader i.e. honesty, competence and modesty were all present in Manmohan Singh. He is

considered as the most qualified and far-thinking leader. He is regarded as one of the few intellectuals in Indian politics who is able to think strategically. It was under Manmohan Singh that India witnessed its two great periods. The first was his five years as finance minister (1991-1996) when he began liberalising economy. Second period was 2004-2009 when India became the second fastest growing economy in the world, reducing poverty at the rate of one percent³⁸ a year. Despite the problems which the Indian economy has started feeling in the past couple of months, Manmohan Singh is seen as a person who is most capable to deal with it.

- The Indian National Congress's commitment to enact along the lines of NREGA, a National Food Security Act that would guarantee access to sufficient food for all people, particularly the most vulnerable sections of society also played a role in Congress's resounding victory.

Factors leading to BJP debacle

Election results clearly show that people have rejected BJP's politics of exclusion, divisiveness and ethnic hatred thereby rejecting its claim to be a "natural"³⁹ party of governance on a par with Congress. The message for BJP is loud and clear – politics in its narrow form, whether religious or caste based, devoid of substantive social and economic agendas, is not acceptable to the masses.

BJP received severe setbacks in UP, Rajasthan, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab and Haryana. It is only Gujrat, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka where BJP could retain its power base. However, even in Gujrat where Narendra Modi anticipated that it would win at least 20 seats, BJP lost its vote share by one per cent and won 15 of 26⁴⁰ seats-only one more than in 2004. In Chhatisgarh, it conceded three seats to the Congress which was only 1 of 11 in 2004. On the whole BJP lost 22 seats and 3.4 per cent points in votes nationally.⁴¹

Personal attacks on Manmohan Singh did not serve BJP's purpose. On the contrary, it backfired when Manmohan Singh along with Sonia and Rahul Gandhi reminded Advani of Ayodhya and Kandahar episode. The onslaught on Manmohan Singh did not go well with the public as it has great respect for him. With the election results, Advani's (projected as "iron Man") prime ministerial ambitions have also been laid to rest.

It is generally said that the road to New Delhi goes from Lucknow. BJP ignored the state of Uttar Pradesh for a long time. On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi, who has emerged as the main strategist for Congress, worked relentlessly for the past five years and his new strategy to go all alone in UP paid off heavily.

The reported communal remarks by Varun Gandhi, BJP's candidate from Pilibhit, at several rallies in his constituency certainly served to push back Mr. Advani's attempt to present the BJP as the true secular party. It decided not to drop Varun Gandhi despite repeated requests from the Chief election commissioner as well as within the party itself. Its support to Varun Gandhi was certainly a source of concern for a large segment of society i.e. Muslims and moderate Hindus. On the other hand, Congress decision to drop Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar was seen as a positive step and has been rewarded

with additional seats in Punjab. BJP was seen as a party encouraging abuse of religious minorities and thus not fit to be a party of governance.

Projection of Mr. Modi as Prime Ministerial candidate mid-way through the campaign that too at the time when supreme court asked a special investigation team working under its supervision to look into Mr. Modi's role in the 2002 Gujrat riots⁴² proved to be another disaster for BJP.

It is also argued that BJP could not present itself as a constructive opposition during the first tenure of UPA government. It adopted an obstructionist role in the parliament as it opposed policies of government just for the sake of opposition. They opposed the nuclear deal and just a few days before polling, Advani's changing stance and saying that his government would not scrap the deal was not seen in good light by the public. Similarly, it is argued that after the Parliament attack in 2001, the Congress lent full support to the NDA government to fight terrorism but after Mumbai attacks the BJP kept on criticising the UPA government for its failure to stop the attacks.

BJP's leaning on hindutva and anti minority communal stances forced its old allies like the All- India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and Telugu Desam Party refuse to return to NDA.⁴³ The end of the alliance with the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa after their seat-sharing talks failed also came as a big blow. In a situation where victory or defeat is caused by a narrow margin of seats, the end of the alliance made a difference of 14⁴⁴ seats.

Some Analysts are of the opinion that BJP has lost touch with on-ground realities in many parts of the country particularly with urban Middle India. In many cities and states, BJP lacked suitable candidates. Congress won due to the experience and ability of Dr. Manmohan Singh and energetic election campaign of Rahul Gandhi whereas, BJP lacked both.

Third Front

The humiliating defeat which the CPI-(M) led Third Front had to suffer sends yet another message. Its Lok Sabha strength has been reduced by 60 per cent to only 24 seats which is its lowest ever tally.⁴⁵ The Third Front has been punished for following neo-liberal policies, particularly in West Bengal and taking conservative positions on many issues.

Dubbed as a "recipe for chaos"⁴⁶, by the Congress in its manifesto, the main reason for the failure of the third front was the lack of ideological and political cohesion. It was perhaps seen by people as a group of opportunist parties who have come together to get a share in government. Third Front had neither vision nor consistency and clarity which can be gauged by the fact that even H.D. Deve Gowda, who launched the Front's inaugural rally, joined the Congress-led ruling coalition.⁴⁷ CPI (M) which led the third front openly admitted that the Third Front lacked credibility and was not viable.⁴⁸ Calling the leaders who formed the Third Front as "architects of political instability,"⁴⁹ BJP National General Secretary Arun Jaitley said the desire for political stability was evident among voters as all the key allies of the Third Front had suffered a major setback in

polls in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu or Kerala. The antipathy towards the Third Front got converted into gains for the UPA, he said.

Forceful Acquisition of farmland for industrial projects under Special Economic Zones (SEZ) also backfired in West Bengal against CPI (M). It was perceived that lands in Nandigram and Signur were being taken away from the poor in order to create jobs for the middle class. Similarly, In UP, Mayawati who is known for fondness for her statues, has spent huge amount of money on erecting memorials dedicated to her self but has done little for people.

Learning its lessons from the election outcome, parties of the third front need to rethink their policies and return to the grassroots again.

Conclusion

The result of the 15th Lok Sabha election has come as a surprise. Prior to the results, the main perception was about a hopelessly hung Parliament. Even the Congress, which has now formed its new government, had shared this view and tried its best to woo new allies for a post-poll scenario and went to the extent of approaching Nitish Kumar of Janata Dal (United),⁵⁰ which has been a consistent partner in the NDA for the past decade and a half. The UPA's tally of 262 seats, with the Congress itself accounting for 206 of them as compared to 145 seats in 2004⁵¹ leaving a huge gap between it and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the virtual decimation of the non-Congress, non-BJP formation led by the Left parties, underscore this mandate. The NDA got only 157 seats, with the BJP's own score being 116 as compared to 138 in the previous election.⁵² While the non-Congress, non-BJP formation of third front was reduced to 72.⁵³ The Fourth Front, which sought to develop a separate political identity in order to enhance its bargaining power with the Congress and the UPA in a post-poll situation, was also brought down, to just 27 seats.⁵⁴

Most of the parties including Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with its 21 and Samajwadi Party (SP) with 23 seats⁵⁵, the two bitter rivals in UP which fought elections against Congress have pledged their support in an effort to strengthen secular forces and to keep BJP out. Besides, RJD with four MPs and JD(S) with three MPs have also announced to support Congress-led UPA government.

Indian electorate, showing a great deal of maturity, has realized that Prosperity is impossible without peace therefore; sectarian politics whether based on community or caste have been replaced by the clear understanding that peace is non-negotiable. BJP has been rejected by the people as it could not offer anything beyond its communal agenda and rightwing economic policies which the people had already rejected in 2004. People had rejected its claim of providing good governance and defending national security. What people saw in the election campaign was the recurrence of communal rhetoric and inclination for communalising all problems including terrorism. The Congress gained more support among the minorities who were keen to ensure that the BJP does not make a comeback. It benefited also from the concern of the people that the country should face the threat of terrorism with unity.

Indian electorate expects its government to address its aspirations and that too in a time of recession. India is already facing the shocks of global economic recession which is having a direct bearing on the people's livelihood and well being. Congress will have to address this issue on priority basis.

Manmohan Singh's second term is being widely interpreted as a mandate for change in the style of government that places efficiency and progressive policies at the top of its list of priorities. Manmohan's hands have been strengthened by this mandate unlike 2004 where Congress at 145 seats in Lok Sabha had to depend on its allies and handed over to them some of the most important ministries. By giving a strong mandate, people have actually demanded that underperforming ministries should be streamlined. The new Council of Ministers is a blend of senior and experienced politicians and the many young faces with the External Affairs Minister S.M.Krishna being the oldest Minister (77) whereas, Agatha Sangma (28), is the youngest.⁵⁶ All eyes are now on how this team fulfills promises it made to people during the election campaign.

The new government will also have to ensure the restoration of autonomy of the governing institutions such as Election Commission, Central Bureau of Investigation and Central Vigilance Commission. People voted for those who they thought were at least trying to deliver something real.

To run a coalition at the centre is about give and take between the dominant party and its various allies. Policy making and the rule of law becomes very difficult if the policy and mandate is fractured making it very difficult for the coalition leader to keep every party in government in its place. In this regard, Trinamool Congress's demand for president's rule in West Bengal and fresh assembly elections in the state⁵⁷ is one such example. UPA government will have to make sure that it does not succumb to such pressures and ensure smooth functioning of state governments and institutions.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's offer to BJP the post of deputy Lok Sabha speaker⁵⁸ to the opposition is another positive step on the part of UPA government. As per rule, the post of Deputy Speaker is given to the main opposition party. However, in 2004, BJP passed on the post to its key NDA ally Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD).⁵⁹ Manmohan's offer reflects an intention that the government would like to take everyone on board.

The mandate given to Congress is indeed its best chance to fully regain its lost glory and secure its future. This is only possible if Congress recognises the challenge of really delivering to the poor and meets the expectations of people who have voted them to power. Steps like making public investments in industry, agriculture and services, providing education and health services and create jobs would ensure that Congress is on the right path.

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