

BJP SWEEPS STATE ELECTIONS: IMPLICATIONS AT LOCAL AND NATIONAL LEVEL

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



India recently announced the results of assembly elections in five key states - namely Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana, and Mizoram. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept in key Central Hindu states -- Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh; while the Indian National Congress (INC) could secure a majority only in Telangana. In Mizoram, the Zoram People's Movement (ZPM) defeated the incumbent Mizo National Front (MNF). After a shocking victory in the Karnataka elections in May 2023, INC was confident of keeping the hopes alive in all these states. Election surveys had also predicted that the INC was in a much better position than the BJP. Though the INC was seemingly able to surpass the BJP in the pre-poll narrative-building, the poll results announced on 3 December 2023 illustrated that the BJP remains unchallenged in key Indian states. The table below shows the latest election results in these states and a comparison with 2018:

State	Total Seats	2018 elections		Voter percentage		2023 Elections		Voter percentage	
		BJP	INC	BJP	INC	BJP	INC	BJP	INC
Rajasthan	199	73	99	38.08	39.03	115	69	41.69	39.53
Chhattisgarh	90	15	68	33.6	43.9	56	34	46	43
Madhya Pradesh	230	109	114	41.5	41.6	165	64	49	40
Telangana	119	1	19	6.98	28.7	08	64	14	39.3
Mizoram	40	1	5	30.3	8.1	02	01		

Overview of 2018 State Elections:

In the 2018 state assembly elections, INC had performed comparatively well in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. In Chhattisgarh, Bhupesh Baghel had announced the initiation of welfare schemes and targeted BJP's Raman Singh government and was able to get the majority votes.¹ In Rajasthan also, Ashok Gehlot capitalized on the public sentiment against BJP's Vasundhara Raje.² Similarly, Shivraj Singh Chouhan's government was accused of corruption by the INC in Madhya Pradesh. Although Congress was able to establish its own government, the party had to depend on independent MLAs. Later, Jyotiraditya Scindia - Congress MLA - defected from party leadership and joined the BJP. Subsequently, the INC government could not remain in office due to a vote of no-confidence, and the BJP brought Shivraj Singh Chouhan as its new Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. In Telangana, the local party Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) won the elections in 2018. BJP and INC could secure only one and 19 seats, respectively. Moreover, Mizoram National Front (MNF), a national and regional ally of the BJP established the government in Mizoram after the 2018 elections.

2023 State Elections

In the 2023 state assembly election campaigns, the INC's artful management of public welfare schemes resulted in building a narrative that the party would prevail in the elections. In contrast, the BJP was silently maneuvering in the states. The vote difference between the two parties in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh shows that this remarkable success was attributable to some out-of-the-box efforts by the BJP. In all these three major states, the BJP's main focus in election campaigns remained on highlighting INC's alleged corruption scandals and an instrumental

¹ Suneet Shukla, "After 15 years of BJP rule, Congress romps to victory: Focus on farmers, youth, women elad to win," *Firstpost*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/chhattisgarh-election-results-2018-after-15-years-of-bjp-rule-congress-romps-to-victory-focus-on-farmers-youth-women-lead-to-win-5712291.html>.

² Manoj Ahuja, "Stones thrown at Vasundhara Raje's Bus, BJP blames Congress for Attack," *Hindustan Times*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/stones-thrown-at-vasundhara-raje-s-bus-bjp-blames-congress-for-attack/story-ZR2rg61z1MhUYtZCvST4WL.html>.

use of communal politics. The vote difference in the major states shows that the public had no trust in INC's governments.³ Another important factor that outnumbered the INC vis-a-vis the BJP as a united front was the internal power tussle in the party. The BJP also did not announce any CM candidate prior to the elections, which underscored that the public mandate was given directly to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Implications of BJP's Victory in State Elections

The BJP's victory in these major states has local as well as national implications. Locally, throughout its governments, the BJP adopted the narrative of development alongside its communal campaign. The BJP has consistently tried to convince the general public that its primary objective is development. Therefore, people should not pay heed to BJP's communal politics. Infact, the BJP hides its communal agendas behind a development mask.⁴ Based on these features of legitimacy, the BJP further injects its primary focus on 'Hinduizing' India through the marginalization of other religious and social minorities. It is highly likely that the BJP may introduce new policies favouring the Hindu majority in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. State patronage of 'Hindutva' ideology will likely further marginalize the already marginalized minorities in these states, especially Muslims. In his book, "Being Muslim in Hindu India: A Critical View," Ziya Us Salam, an Indian journalist writes that under the BJP government, Muslims have been suffering political and socio-economic marginalization under the Modi regime. Declaring Muslims as aliens, Modi's India is heading in the direction of what Golwalkar, the RSS Chief from 1940 to 1973, had aimed.

Relevantly, soon after the BJP's electoral victory in Rajasthan, its MLA Balmukund Acharya forcefully shut down meat shops, which is a glaring example of the deplorable future of the Muslim community in these states.⁵

Moreover, there is a lot of speculation that if the BJP is sweeping in these major states, there is no significant challenge to stop it from winning the *Lok Sabha* elections in 2024. This BJP victory must have demoralized the INC and significantly damaged the INC's narrative that Modi's popularity has receded after two consecutive terms. However, one should not forget that in Indian politics,

³ Deepanshu Mohan, "Three Things BJP's Definitive Victory in the Assembly Elections Tells us," *The Wire*, December 3, 2023, <https://thewire.in/politics/three-things-bjps-definitive-victory-in-the-assembly-elections-tells-us>.

⁴ "Modi Government Hiding Communal Agenda Behind Development Mask," NTV, November 14, 2015, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/modi-government-hiding-communal-agenda-behind-developments-mask-sonia-gandhi-1243373>.

⁵ "BJP MLA who shut down meat shops a Day after election win apologises," *The Wire*, December 6, 2023, <https://thewire.in/communalism/rajasthan-bjp-mla-who-shut-down-meat-shops-a-day-after-election-win-apologises>.

anticipating the results of general elections based on legislative assembly elections is a hazardous proposition. For example, in 2018, the BJP lost in the major states including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, but outperformed the INC in these states during the general elections of 2019.⁶

That said, the BJP's victory in the *Vidhan Sabha* elections would seem to be a prelude to the 18th Lok Sabha elections. BJP appears to be in a comfortable position due to various factors. Firstly, there is no strong opposition to the BJP. The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) itself has internal leadership tussles as have been observed recently between INC and the Samajwadi Party.⁷ As far as Congress is concerned, Rahul Gandhi lacks the charisma that PM Modi has. Observers also count lack of a "positive agenda" (other than anti-Modi rhetoric) and "dynastic politics" among key shortcomings of the Congress Party. Secondly, the BJP has more forcefully projected its welfare policies, and infrastructural development projects than of INC. Alongside in its electoral campaigns, the BJP also effectively employed communal politics for reinsuring its electoral prospects and eventual success. For instance, PM Modi will attend the *Ram* Temple inauguration ceremony in January 2024, which is largely seen as part of his electoral calculations for the next general elections. In the recent election campaigns, Congress tried to employ 'Soft *Hindutva*' in some places to seek public attention, but could not find traction in the electoral landscape of India. Thirdly, the BJP has been able to seek crucial support from Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the Extreme Backward Classes (EBCs). In 2019, it was able to secure 41 percent of OBC's and 48 percent of EBC's votes. Fourthly, the foreign policy issues including India's enhanced global profile would also be used by the BJP to its advantage in the upcoming *Lok Sabha* elections. Alongwith its development narrative, as well as holding of SCO and G20 summits, the BJP has made Indians believe that India is the leader of the 'Global South' while shaking hands and having eye-to-eye contact with the major powers of the world. These dynamics appear to have shaped a more favourable environment for BJP, for the *Lok Sabha* elections.

Moreover, these state election results have also further illustrated the North-South divide in Indian politics. As the BJP announces Vishnu Deo Sai as Chhattisgarh CM, and Mohan Yadav as Madhya Pradesh CM, the map below shows the BJP's electoral acceptance across India and clearly depicts

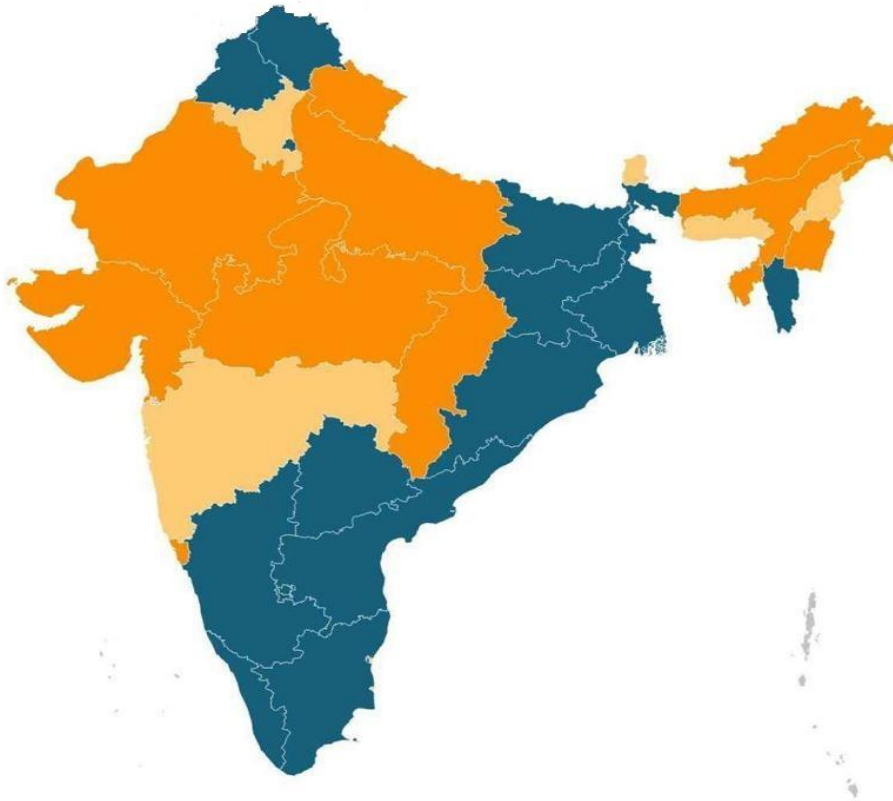
⁶ In Madhya Pradesh, in the start, Congress had won the elections and was able to make the government, but later Jyotaditya Scindia, a Congress MLA, took 22 others also along to the BJP and revolted against his party. This led BJP to establish its government in Madhya Pradesh later on.

⁷ "Omar Abdullah Voices Concerns Over Internal Strife in INDIA Alliance, says all is not well," Telegraph India, October 30, 2023, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/omar-abdullah-voices-concerns-over-internal-strife-in-india-alliance-says-all-is-not-well/cid/1976471>.

the North-South divide that is manifested in electoral politics of India, with the BJP holding sway in the North – the so-called “Hindi belt.”

Break up of State Assemblies

■ BJP in coalition ■ BJP in majority ■ No Assembly ■ Non-BJP government



Source: Scroll India/Shoaib Daniyal, modified by author

Conclusion

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it is safer to claim that the BJP’s support base has further improved as compared to the state elections of 2018. Resultantly, the BJP seems to be in a formidable position at the national level. The five states contribute 83 of the total seats in the *Lok Sabha* – Chattisgarh 11, Madhya Pradesh 29, Mizoram 1, Rajasthan 25, and Telangana 17. And the three major states – Chattisgarh, MP, and Rajasthan – contribute 65 seats. In the 2019 *Lok Sabha* elections, BJP secured 28 seats in Madhya Pradesh, 24 in Rajasthan, and 9 in Chhattisgarh. In total, it

secured 61 seats out of 65.⁸ So, if INC aims to effectively challenge the BJP as the leading opposition party, firstly it has to adopt a different approach to unify and strengthen the “INDIA” alliance. Secondly, the Party has to employ a narrative that persuasively calls out the BJP’s approach of conflating development and communalism for electoral dividends. Unless the Congress Party and the combined opposition fundamentally revamp their outlook and strategy, the BJP appears to be in a much stronger position for the *Lok Sabha* elections and sweep the polls for the third consecutive time.

⁸ M.K. Venu, “Congress has no Option but to Recover in the Heartland States in 2024,” *The Wire*, October 5, 2023, <https://thewire.in/politics/congress-has-no-option-but-to-recover-in-heartland-states-in-2024>.