



Signals from States

Results for 4 Assembly elections cast a light on political strategies and voter behaviour

The results of four State Assembly elections conducted alongside the Lok Sabha polls hold important political signals. Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh elected new Assemblies along with their Lok Sabha members. In Odisha, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has won a fifth consecutive term, leading his Biju Janata Dal to a sweeping victory, while in Sikkim, Pawan Kumar Chamling, the longest serving CM in India, will be bowing out after his Sikkim Democratic Front lost to the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha. Mr. Chamling became CM in 1994. The BJP won the Assembly election in Arunachal Pradesh – though this serves as a reminder of the curious ways in which the party has expanded its footprint in the Northeast. The Assembly election in 2014 was won by the Congress and Pema Khandu, the current Chief Minister, was a Congress MLA then. He became CM in 2016, shifted to the People's Party of Arunachal as its leader, and then moved to the BJP, where he still remains. The BJP's acquisitive approach to politics in general has been effective in the Northeast. Now, the SKM in Sikkim might ally with the party. The spectacular victory of the YSR Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh, in turn, is a reminder of the Congress's persistent mishandling of the State since the abrupt death in an accident of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, the party's then CM, better known as YSR, in 2009.

YSR had helped the Congress win more than three dozen Lok Sabha members from the undivided State in 2004 and 2009, the single biggest contingent for the party from any State and which powered the UPA-1 and UPA-2 in Parliament. Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, YSR's son, sought the top post in the State after his father's death, but the Congress high command, which has a high tolerance for demands of offsprings of party leaders, raised the bar in this instance. Mr. Reddy launched his regional outfit, the YSRCP, cleaned out the Congress, which was reeling under the adverse after-effects of the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, and has now won decisively across regions of the State nine years later. In Odisha, Mr. Patnaik's victory in the Assembly was overwhelming but the BJP, which has won eight of the 21 Lok Sabha seats from the State, is sitting in the wings, having displaced the Congress as the principal Opposition party. The results in Odisha are also indicative of a new political trend whereby voters differentiate between the State and national elections. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, States that chose the Congress over the BJP in Assembly elections only months ago, swung right back to the saffron party in the Lok Sabha polls. In Odisha, even with both elections being held simultaneously, this demarcation is stark, though the BJD still got more seats than the BJP. In Mr. Reddy's case, he swept the Lok Sabha polls too, indicating that a hard-working regional leader with effective political messaging can resist top-down hyper-nationalism.

Full circle

How the kilogram has come to be defined, once again, in terms of universal constants

As of May 20, the kilogram joined a bunch of other units – second, metre, ampere, kelvin, mole and candela – that will no longer be compared with physical objects as standards of reference. The change comes after nearly 130 years: in 1889 a platinum-iridium cylinder was used to define how much mass one kilogram represented. Now, a more abstract definition of the kilogram has been adopted in terms of fundamental constants, namely, the Planck's constant h , and the metre and second which already have been defined in terms of universal constants such as the speed of light. With this redefinition, the range of universality of the measurement has been extended in an unprecedented way. Earlier, if a mass had to be verified to match with a standard kilogram, it would be placed on one of the pans of a common balance, while the prototype would have to be placed in the other pan – and mass would be measured against mass. Now, by using a Kibble balance, which balances mass against electromagnetic force, to measure the mass of an unknown piece, the very methodology of verification has been altered. The constants involved are known precisely and are universal numbers. Hence, whether the mass is measured on earth or, say, on the moon, it can be determined with precision.

This is the culmination of a series of historical changes, which are also described by Richard S. Davis et al in their 2016 article in the journal *Metrologia*. Originally the definition of mass was in terms of what was then thought of as a universal physical constant. In 1791, 1 kg was defined as the mass of one litre of distilled water at its melting point. Thus, the density of water was the physical constant on which this definition hinged. In 1799, the kilogram came to be defined using a cylinder of platinum – the first time an artefact was used for this purpose. But it was also defined as equivalent to the mass of one litre of distilled water at atmospheric pressure and at about 4 degrees Celsius, the temperature at which water has the maximum density. This was done away with in 1889 when the community adopted the International Prototype of the Kilogram – a cylinder made of an alloy that's 90% platinum and 10% iridium. The reference to the 'physical constant', i.e. mass of one litre of water, was abandoned. Now, as a culmination of this historical process, we come back full circle and find that the kilogram is defined again in terms of a fundamental physical constant – the Planck's constant. Planck's constant is a robust number to match. Not until the art of travelling at relativistic speeds, close to the speed of light, is mastered, will we have to redefine these abstract definitions. Until then, it looks like metrologists are on a stable berth.

No easy solutions for the Congress

Its defeat now is far more consequential than it was in 2014; and it does not have the luxury of time

ZOYA HASAN

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi stormed to power in 2014, the Congress was reduced to 44 seats in the Lok Sabha. In 2019, the Congress has suffered another colossal defeat. It won 52 seats, still not enough to claim the post of the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. This dismal result shows that the revival of the once-dominant powerhouse isn't happening any time soon.

Mr. Modi's re-election with an even larger majority sanctifies the structural shift to the right and the BJP's overarching dominance of the political system – that's why the Congress's spectacular defeat in this election is far more consequential than it was in 2014. The Modi landslide in 2019 is not based on any pretence of development, but on the basis of Hindutva consolidation and majoritarian triumphalism. The divide-and-rule strategy has succeeded in securing an unprecedented electoral endorsement for Hindu nationalism as large numbers voted for the BJP as the party that best represents, protects and propagates Hindu interests and rejected the pluralistic vision of India.

About Rahul Gandhi

Congress president Rahul Gandhi put up a spirited fight but it was not good enough to slow down the Modi juggernaut. The Congress campaign was well-crafted and well-supported by a progressive manifesto promising jobs and a minimum income, but it just didn't appeal to voters. Many strategic and tactical reasons will be given for the Congress's failure; yet, we must begin by noting that the odds were heavily stacked in the BJP's favour: the government's use of instruments of state power, its money power and the media's

building of the Modi cult.

The 2019 outcome was powered by a hyper-nationalist agenda and Mr. Modi's strong advocacy of it. This election was all about the political persona of Mr. Modi and what he symbolised: a strongman standing against a divided Opposition. Mr. Gandhi is a genial and affable figure, but that seems to put him at a disadvantage when pitted against Mr. Modi's muscular leadership in 'new India'. The Congress made a strategic mistake when it decided to focus its attack entirely on Mr. Modi. Many voters had said that although they felt that the BJP had not delivered on its promises, they would vote for him because they believe a strong decisive leadership can solve India's numerous problems.

Mr. Gandhi appeared to see the danger of personalising the campaign, but even then he persisted in repeating the slogan 'chowkidar chor hai' to dent Mr. Modi's image as a scrupulously honest leader, rather than remake his message. In almost every speech he would begin and conclude with the Rafale issue. But it didn't excite anyone except possibly the committed Congress voters attending his rallies.

The real gains for the Congress would have come from disappointment in the Modi government's economic performance and policies, but the BJP shrewdly sidestepped its governance record by diverting to a three-point campaign of nationalism (national security, Pakistan and terrorism), Hindutva (Hindus everywhere, minorities nowhere) and anti-corruption (blasting the Congress's record, ignoring its own). Mr. Modi did not run on his track record but on teaching Pakistan a lesson. He has been re-elected on this plank. The economic downturn and shrinking employment opportunities didn't matter in this election.

After the Pulwama terrorist at-



tack and India's response with the Balakot airstrikes, the BJP mixed nationalism, which completely derailed the Opposition as Mr. Modi used this narrative to project himself as the strong leader of a 'maza-boot sarkar (solid government)'. The Congress couldn't counter this narrative. It tried to change the subject by returning the focus to people's issues. The Nyauntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) income guarantee proposal was part of this attempt, but it came too late and the party didn't carry it to the people. Consequently, NYAY did not become a talking point in the campaign; it did not even figure prominently in Mr. Gandhi's speeches.

Throughout the election campaign, Mr. Modi relentlessly attacked the Congress; in fact, he reserved his munitions for the Congress and generally spared other Opposition parties. In response to this ceaseless attack, amplified by the mainstream media, the Congress leadership came off looking timorous and defensive. The Congress did not counter him. It did not list the achievements of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or previous Congress governments.

Mr. Gandhi said the right things but often did not connect with the voters, perhaps because he did not address them in an idiom or vocabulary that resonated. The failure of Mr. Gandhi and his sister

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, whose last-minute induction in the campaign made no impact, is obvious. Apart from the leadership crisis, two other issues are important. These pertain to the Congress's ideology and organisation.

Ideology-lite

During the past five years, secularism has been pushed to the margins of Indian politics, and the Congress did not strongly defend secular nationalism. The party remained inexplicably silent on subjects ranging from secularism to the rights of minorities, to name just two of the most important ones. Mr. Gandhi chose to embark on a series of visits to Hindu temples but his party didn't care to make a distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, which is a political ideology and a political project. The Congress could not harvest electoral dividends from this competitive wooing of the Hindu vote because people chose the more strident option.

Besides, and critically, the Congress lacks an organisation; it failed to rebuild its organisation during UPA rule (2004-14) and it failed to push this process during its years in opposition (2014-19). The BJP, in contrast, has a well-oiled political machine at its disposal. It is also closely connected to a network of Hindu religious organisations that spring into action in every election and provide vast numbers of volunteers for campaigning and booth management. The nationwide branches of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliated organisations clearly helped the BJP to build a second Modi wave.

Complicating the Congress's hopes of returning to its old strength is that its decline has coincided with the rise of smaller regional parties, most of which are breakaways from the Congress. These parties are fighting intense-

ly for a larger share of the political pie. The Congress has drawn a zero in its erstwhile bastion of undivided Andhra Pradesh, where it won a sizeable proportion of seats in 2009. As Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy gets ready to take over as the next Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, the Congress leadership must be ruing its decision to deny him the CM's post a decade ago, leading to a bitter estrangement.

The Congress has lost Maharashtra, done poorly in Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – which means it lacks the geographical base of a pan-India party. The BJP has decisively reversed the trend of the 2018 Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where it had lost to the Congress, and has now surged ahead in these crucial States. Punjab and Kerala are the only two big States which continue to lean towards the Congress.

Ability to retain supporters

The Congress now lacks a distinct social base, and its ability to retain its supporters is dwindling. To regain its influence, it needs to decentralise and build broad-based social coalitions at the State level. The party's decline is not irreversible. But in the long road ahead, it has to figure out what it actually stands for, and what it will take to stand up to Mr. Modi's BJP. The real key to rejuvenation lies in mass contact, a distinctive and far-savvier campaign on an egalitarian platform and the leadership's ability to communicate this to the people – rather than depending on the eternal verities (and varieties) of dynastic leadership.

The Congress does not have the luxury of time; it must start today.

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The NDA has its task cut out

It must improve conditions of supply and facilitate the move away from agricultural jobs to raise farmer incomes

ASHIMA GOYAL

Indian voters have shown remarkable maturity and thoughtfulness in delivering a stable government at the Centre. They realise the necessity of a stable government, and so often vote differently in national and State elections. Forecasts of political and economic instability made in 2014, when the macro economy was vulnerable, proved incorrect. Similar forecasts were made this year, based on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance's losses in the Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan Assembly elections. The pundits should bow to the greater wisdom of the people – in this election, the BJP has swept the same States.

The Congress underestimated the voters' continuing need for good governance. The Congress did not choose dynamic Chief Ministers when it had the option. It also underestimated the voters' need for a positive narrative. Talking of slow job growth and farmer distress did not work. The Nyauntam Aay Yojana scheme (the Congress's proposed social welfare programme) was not acceptable as a substitute for jobs.

On the other hand, the BJP promised to improve ease of living,

beyond just the ease of doing business, and strengthen the self-respect and ability of the average citizen to do more, which is exactly the right approach for an aspirational India.

Bringing life to poll promises

There was fear of competitive populism in the event of a weak government being elected at the Centre. Now the BJP will hopefully focus, as promised in its manifesto, on infrastructure, housing, technology, health, education, water, the environment, and facilitate the move away from agricultural jobs to raise farmer incomes. Only 23% of rural income now comes from farming, and there is a major ongoing shift to add value in agriculture. Apart from this, administrative reforms should be the focus. There are police and judicial reforms on the anvil. Well-targeted direct benefit transfers will efficiently deliver relief to the really distressed at low cost.

And what about the economy? The slow growth of jobs was largely due to strict monetary and credit policies that started in 2011. International monetary theories were not adapted as required in the Indian context. The inherited non-performing assets (NPA) burden dragged on. Since major loans



had gone to private business, a bankruptcy regime had to be put in place, to prevent the entire burden of resolution from falling on tax payers.

But today, with some clean-up, inflation is below the target set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). There is still stress in the non-banking financial companies (NBFC) sector. The government must move fast to nip this in the bud and support growth.

Private investment growth has stagnated since 2011. There was a brief recovery of animal spirits after the last election, but high real interest rates and the asset quality review made bank lending to firms negative and squeezed out the revival. Something similar should not happen this time. Policymak-

ers may believe that private investment will revive now and foreign money will pour in. But the latest data show a fall in private investment as real interest rates have risen and liquidity remains tight. There are also external shocks from the global slowdown and trade wars.

A wider tax base

Although the RBI is now keeping short-term liquidity in surplus, banks scarred by a long battle with NPAs are just parking them with the RBI instead of increasing lending. If the share of durable liquidity is increased, it will encourage banks to lend and also bring down market rates. Despite RBI permissions, banks are not lending to NBFCs, since they are afraid of having to make provisions. A full recapitalisation of banks, possible now with bankruptcy and governance reforms in place, will increase their confidence.

The RBI does not want to open a special liquidity window to NBFCs because of credit risk. It believes weaker NBFCs should be allowed to exit. But NBFCs were financing consumption growth and real estate, which are slowing, creating systemic risk, against which the RBI has to act. Even stronger NBFCs, in the current environ-

ment, are choosing to sit on a fat liquidity cushion rather than lend. If an RBI liquidity window is made available against collateral with high rates, it may not be used much, but fear of liquidity shortage would disappear, allowing NBFC lending to revive. This is required also because fiscal space, though it is there, is limited. Demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) have increased the tax base, reducing rampant tax evasion. Despite simplifications and tax cuts, the tax base is expected to raise more revenue post-elections. Unspent government cash balances will be spent as the spending slowdown is reversed. Money from completed schemes can be reallocated.

Humility should come with strength. After an exceptionally bitter election season, the NDA will hopefully follow a constructive and inclusive agenda and encourage moderate progressive stances. Institutions are the backbone of any economy and must be strengthened. The people know the government took difficult decisions to clean up the system, and chose to give it a second chance. It is time to meet their expectations.

Ashima Goyal is on the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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The 2019 mandate

The larger-than-life Narendra Modi, carefully projected and presented to the electorate, was also made possible by the willing contributions of government institutions and machinery. With the economics and logistics well taken care of, the Hindu nationalistic agenda (with Pulwama and Balakot) made for a perfect elixir that the huge population was willing to drink. That the failures of demonetisation and GST, the unprecedented unemployment rate, agrarian distress and other grave issues made no change in the perspective of the voter can be attributed to Mr. Modi's narrative focussed only on two major issues: Hindu nationalism and national security. The fragmented Opposition only aided the BJP victory. The brazen nomination of

the candidate from Bhopal and her victory gives credence to the view that the BJP is treading the path of Hindutva quite unabashedly. It is odd that inclusive development did not matter for large sections of the electorate which is rejoicing in the victory. I only hope that Modi 2.0 will have a different perspective (Editorial, "For a rediscovery of India", May 24). Most importantly, it is time the Opposition pondered over its shortcomings and faces the electorate with a concrete and plausible alternative five years from now.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,
Coimbatore

■ As far as the failure of the Congress and the rest of the Opposition is concerned, it was known that in the absence of a healthy understanding among themselves, they would lose.

Each party was ambitious, failed to be accommodative and take quick decisions for proper seat-adjustments.

This exposed them as incapable and at sixes and sevens. Narendra Modi and his party should follow constitutional goals and ensure peace and prosperity.

B.M. BALIGA,
Bengaluru

■ The election result marks an inflection point in the history of independent India. It was with great fanfare and hope that India had set forth on its own constitutional journey, clearly separating the state from any religion, but decades later, we have willingly blurred those boundaries with our mandate. Mr. Modi will be steering India at a crucial time in its developmental trajectory, when the world situation itself is in a state of great flux. The Indian voice since Independence – of soft

power, non-violence and standing up for a just and equitable world order – is more relevant today than ever before. This is what earned us the goodwill of the international community. One hopes that these values are not eroded amid the charged emotions holding sway now. The absence of a credible and robust Opposition is a matter of great concern. The issues that figured during campaigning do not die with the results of 2019. These are bound to resurface sooner rather than later. I hope that India survives the next five years without any major social dysfunctions.

ROSEN BRAR,
Patiala, Punjab

■ The massive victory was definitely built on polarisation, though the non-existence of a viable political alternative was of great help. There is an element of truth in calling

the pole leader of the BJP as a divider. Hopefully, this remains a temporary poll strategy. The new government should regain the trust of the minorities. Otherwise it will definitely lead to the decay of this wonderful civilisation of ours which thrives on tolerance and which takes pride in inclusiveness, which is so crucial for the progress of such a diverse country.

VENKATA RAMANA N.K.,
Narsapur, W. Godavari, Andhra Pradesh

■ The BJP won the political battle hands down but has still to fight the economic battle. The brute majority it has won will leave the Opposition nonplussed. The theme of 2019 was only nationalism. However nationalism alone cannot extricate people from poverty, unemployment and agrarian distress, to name a few issues.

For Mr. Modi, it is a case of uneasy lies the head that

wears a crown. Interestingly, the election was on the Modi aura and is likely to lull many into complacency hoping that the Modi magic shall save them again. So why deliver? This is not good for democracy.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,
Noida

■ The shocking defeat of the Indian National Congress has put a huge question mark on the very future of the grand old party at the national level. Both the national and State leadership of the party need to be replaced. Tough decisions need to be taken, fresh young blood infused and a comprehensive plan formulated to lead the party to gradual recovery. Cliched terms such as 'self introspection' will no longer work, else it will be the same disastrous story in 2024.

A. MOHAN,
Chennai

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