

Can Ashok Gehlot run a good govt and yet lose elections?

The big question in Rajasthan

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One thing is certain about the last-over electoral thriller in Rajasthan. If it is mainly a vote on the performance of the state government, Congress could break a three-decade-old iron law of anti-incumbency in this state. But if the voters are driven more by hyperlocal considerations, the BJP could come back to power. At this stage, it is safe to say what the verdict won't be like. It won't be the resounding victory that CM Ashok Gehlot and his government's popularity might warrant. Nor would it be a drubbing of the kind that the Congress faced after his previous two terms.

Any serious analysis of this election must begin by acknowledging that there is no anti-incumbency against the state government. Even a casual traveller moving across any part of Rajasthan would bring home this ground truth. Traditional BJP voters admit it too: "*Kaam to kiya hai* (The government has indeed worked)" before asserting, "*Lekin Rajasthan mein sarkar to palategi* (But in Rajasthan, the government will change for sure)". Very few people speak ill of Gehlot, who is seen as a trustworthy and pro-people leader. The CM's rivalry with Sachin Pilot is not at the top of peoples' minds.

Data confirms it

Opinion poll evidence confirms this impression. Recent surveys by both [CSDS](#) and [CVoter](#), (both of which put the BJP ahead in the electoral race) found that over 7 out of 10 respondents expressed satisfaction with the Gehlot government's performance. This rating is the best ever recorded in the state, going by the past data available on the [CSDS-Lokniti website](#). In an October-end survey by CSDS, a massive 71 per cent said that they were satisfied (fully or somewhat) with the Gehlot government's work, against 24 per cent who expressed moderate or complete dissatisfaction. Compare this with Vasundhara Raje's ratings back in [2018](#): 52 per cent satisfied against 46 per cent dissatisfied.

If we go for a more nuanced indicator of 'net satisfaction' (difference between those 'fully satisfied' and 'fully dissatisfied'), the contrast is even more glaring: Gehlot government at +29 percentage points (43 per cent fully satisfied minus 14 per cent fully dissatisfied) versus Raje government at -3 points.

Table 1 shows that this Gehlot government's ratings are better than those of his own government in 2013 and 2003, Raje's government in 2008, and even Bhairon Singh Shekhawat's BJP government in [1998](#).

This assessment is reflected in the voters' assessment based on specific aspects of governance mentioned in Table 2. In each of these, with the partial exception of 'condition of roads', the incumbent does well and better than the previous BJP government.

In fact, the Gehlot government is the second-most positively-assessed incumbent state government in India in recent times. Among the 14 assembly election surveys conducted by CSDS since 2019, only Delhi in 2020 recorded 'full satisfaction' with the incumbent state government (52 per cent), which was higher than the current figure (43 per cent) for Rajasthan. Gehlot government's ratings are better than those of the incumbents in Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and West Bengal that were voted back to power.

A track record that stood out

This perception is not without basis. In the past two years, the Gehlot government has launched a slew of welfare and policy initiatives that stand out in the entire country. These include 100 units of free domestic electricity per month, with 2,000 units free for farmers, cooking gas cylinders at a subsidised rate of Rs 500, ration packets (with dal, masala, cooking oil, and sugar) for NFSA (National Food Security Act) beneficiaries, free smartphones for women, work under urban and rural employment guarantee schemes, old age pension at Rs 1,000 a month, cattle insurance scheme, and Rs 10 lakh accidental insurance coverage. Add to this the Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana, which actually delivered health insurance coverage of Rs 25 lakh per annum for every family. This was backed by a Right to Health Act and an impressive track record of work during the Covid pandemic, especially the Bhilwara Model.

The government created several new districts in March 2023, taking the number from 31 to 53. Unlike in the past, Gehlot ensured that these policies were well-advertised and cleverly integrated into the Mehengai Raahat Camps launched across Rajasthan in April.

A government with such a track record and popularity should not lose an election, provided the people vote on its performance. That looks like a big ask in Rajasthan this time. There are two competing levels – national and local – both of which could pose a serious challenge to the Congress. As per the Lokniti-CSDS survey, 55 per cent were fully satisfied with the Modi government at the Centre, 12 points higher than the Gehlot government in the state. Yet, unlike 2013, the BJP has not succeeded in turning this state election into a referendum on Modi.

Localisation makes Congress suffer

A greater challenge to the Congress comes from the prospects of the election turning hyperlocal. Everyone acknowledges that there has been a strong anti-incumbency against the ruling party's MLAs. But the CM has got his party to retain four-fifths of the sitting MLAs, presumably to reward them for their loyalty during the Sachin Pilot rebellion. This has helped him contain the number of serious rebels to around 15, less than the 28 rebels last time and also the 25 rebels of the BJP this time.

Localisation of the election hurts the Congress in multiple ways. If the voters go by the incumbent MLAs' record, the Congress suffers. If they go by the caste-community of the candidate, it dilutes the party's attempt to create a state-wide coalition of the socially marginalised. The Lokniti-CSDS survey shows that the Congress does not maintain its usual dominance among Dalit and Adivasi voters crucial to its social coalition.

Localisation of elections makes smaller players decisive. Although Rajasthan looks like a classic bipolar contest, the combined vote share of the Congress and the BJP has been below 80 per cent in the last six assembly elections in the state. Smaller parties and independents account for around 20-30 per cent of the votes. In 2018, non-Congress, non-BJP candidates had won as many as 27 seats and there was a total of 69 seats where the effective number of parties based on vote shares secured was 3 or more. This time, too, the contest appears triangular or multipolar in at least one-third of the constituencies.

This puts a premium on rebel management and alliance building with smaller forces. This time, the Congress could have tied up with the Bhartiya Adivasi Party that matters in at least 17 constituencies in Udaipur, Dungarpur, Banswara, and Pratapgarh districts and the CPI(M) that can make a critical difference in more than 10 seats in the north-eastern belt of Ganganagar, Hanumangarh, Churu, and Sikar. But Gehlot's preference for internal accommodation left no room for this critical alliance.

Advantage BJP

In addition to the localisation factor, there are two structural issues that Gehlot is up against – one, of course, is the oscillation of power every five years, and the second, the organisational advantage that the BJP seems to have over the Congress. In the last 20 years, when the BJP has lost (2008 and 2018), it hasn't lost all that badly, and on the two occasions it has won (2003 and 2013), it has won big. For the Congress, it has been the reverse. Its two victories have been close affairs and its two defeats have been massive. The floor level, therefore, appears to be higher for the BJP than the Congress.

The BJP stands to benefit from all this, though it does not have much to show for its record in the opposition. The BJP has highlighted the exam paper leaks, high rate of unemployment, and has charged the Gehlot government with promoting *gundagardi* that made women insecure. The CSDS survey shows a clear edge to the BJP among youth and women. But the party has not been able to project a single face for the CM, given the central leadership's desire to sideline Raje.

In desperation, it has also resorted to last-minute polarisation tactics. On the whole, and rather uncharacteristically, the party's campaign has lacked any thrust and punch. Ask any BJP supporter why they would vote for the party and they would fall back upon some bland statement about changing the government every five years. The Congress has held the narrative advantage, as it unrolled seven election guarantees over and above the schemes it has already implemented. Its manifesto has something for everyone.

Yet, the polls do not predict a Congress victory. Of the 13 surveys carried out in the state since July, 11 predicted a victory for the BJP, and only two lesser-known agencies gave the advantage to the incumbent Congress party. Most polls have recorded a 3-4 percentage point lead for the BJP. This gap is nearly within the margin of error and is not unassailable, especially in view of the reports of the Congress picking up during the last phase of the campaign. The election appears open to all three outcomes: A clear majority for the BJP, a near majority for the Congress, and a truly hung assembly with about 20 'others'. In case of a hung assembly, it would be another test of Gehlot's famous political management.

That may be a dramatic finale to an election that has Ashok Gehlot written all over it, an election that is his last opportunity to prove that he is not someone who runs a good government and yet manages to lose elections.