

Look beyond lazy explanations on 2023 election outcome—changes and shift everyone missed

Based on the post-poll survey by Lokniti-CSDS, we can now bust some of the popular myths around the 2023 assembly elections and say what did not work—and why Congress has reasons to worry.

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Election analysts must listen to cricket commentary. That might save them from some elementary analytical follies. No serious sports commentator would ever say that the winning side got everything right: batting, bowling, fielding, captaincy, and luck! Unless it happens to be one of the rare matches when this miracle actually happens.

If you go by the media commentary on elections, however, this seems to be the standard template of every TV discussion (and unfortunately a lot of print reporting and analysis too). Let us call it the ‘Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar’ model of analysis. The assumption is that whoever won the election must have run a good government with the best schemes and a perfect leader. The loser must have suffered from “anti-incumbency”, the one-word magic that explains everything. The winner must have run a great campaign, all its strategies must have worked perfectly, and everything that the loser tried must have bombed. The idea that the final outcome is a net result of multiple factors, many of which weigh in different directions, that the winner may have failed in some respects and the loser may have got a few things right, is still alien to election commentaries.

Now, the noise of the counting day has subsided. Election results have been analysed. We also have the advantage of data from the reputed post-poll survey by Lokniti-CSDS, based on face-to-face and at-home interviews with respondents randomly selected from the voters’ list, presented in The Hindu [Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana]. (One technical clarification: although the Lokniti survey seriously under-estimated the BJP’s vote share in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh – they were spot on in the other two states – it should not affect their analysis, as the data was weighted by actual vote shares.) So, we can now bust some of the popular myths around these elections and say what did not work.

Not as simple as pro- or anti-incumbency

First of all, these elections were not a mandate on the incumbent governments—or, to be more precise, a raging anger against the chief minister. The government was not the primary driving force in any of the states where the ruling party was defeated. The fact is that each one of the governments that went to polls enjoyed high approval from the public, higher than that of the state governments that have been re-elected in recent times (Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa, etc.). If anything, the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh, which recorded the lowest level of satisfaction among four major states, returned to power with the highest margin. All the four sitting CMs were more popular than their rivals.

So, a simple and general pro- or anti-incumbent sentiment does not explain these outcomes. Three things seem to matter here. One, generic schemes yield less dividends than targeted schemes. Take two popular schemes with high impact: Rayathu Bandhu in Telangana (80% beneficiaries) and Chiranjeevi Swasthya Bima Yojana in Rajasthan (58%). Among the beneficiaries of Chiranjeevi, the Congress has a tiny lead of four percentage points, while the BRS actually trailed the Congress by two points among the Rayathu Bandhu beneficiaries.

Two, packaging and marketing of governmental schemes as party handouts makes a difference. Despite much better publicity this time, many of the welfare measures initiated by the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan were seen as gifts from Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP is miles ahead of the Congress in this respect. Among the women who received Ladli Bahan Yojana money, the BJP's lead was six percentage points.

Three, more than an assessment of the past work, voters were driven by what they expect in the next term. The voters are willing to back a viable alternative that can take forward the good work of its predecessor. At least in Rajasthan and Telangana, the dominant mood was: yes, he did good work, but it's time for change.

Winner campaigned better? Not quite

These elections also refute the lazy assumption that the winning party must have campaigned and managed the election better. We know that the BJP in general is better organised, runs better campaigns, and has a big edge in campaign funding and polling booth management. But this has become a constant in India's electoral politics over the past decade.

And yet, in relative terms, the Congress did a better job of canvassing and polling booth management in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh this year than in the previous elections. The Lokniti-CSDS survey shows that the Congress outdid the BJP (and BRS) in door-to-door canvassing and social media outreach in Rajasthan and Telangana.

Factional fight is another lazy explanation that misconstrues a political constant into a variable. While the BJP ran its Madhya Pradesh election with a clear strategy and focus, this was not true in Rajasthan, where its factional battle was more pronounced than that of the Congress. The Madhya Pradesh Congress was undoubtedly less divided this time than the previous election.

Finally, the election in Telangana assures us that while money power is essential in politics, it is not sufficient. The BRS was unmatched in this respect, but the party's legendary resources could not prevent its rout in its strongholds.

The BJP's victory in the three Hindi states appears to be driven by some less noticed factors that should worry its opponents more than what was discussed in TV debates.

Class and caste changes debates missed

There is a subtle change in social basis of party preference in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, and a dramatic shift in Chhattisgarh, while the political shift in Telangana cannot be mapped on to caste-community layout. And no, it is not the famous women voters in Madhya Pradesh. The claim looked suspicious as the turnout among women did not register any change in this election. The Lokniti survey conclusively busts this myth. The BJP enjoyed a greater lead over the Congress among men than among

women. Nor is there a big change in the rural urban dynamic: the BJP's lead over the Congress in urban areas has increased slightly.

URBAN SEATS: 60%+ URBAN POPULATION

VOTE SHARE

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023	AIMIM 2018	AIMIM 2023
RAJASTHAN	39.7%	40.7%	43.8%	49.6%	--	--	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	40.7%	39.4%	46.0%	52.6%	--	--	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	45.0%	35.0%	42.4%	57.8%	--	--	--	--
TELANGANA	25.7%	29.2%	13.3%	20.5%	41.2%	37.3%	11.8%	7.4%

SEATS WON

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023	AIMIM 2018	AIMIM 2023
RAJASTHAN	10	7	13	16	--	--	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	13	6	16	24	--	--	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	7	1	3	9	--	--	--	--
TELANGANA	3	7	1	2	22	18	7	7

MP GENDER DIVIDE

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023
MEN	39	38	40	50
WOMEN	43	43	42	47

The real action is in the class and caste dynamic where the Congress has not built upon its profile as a party of the 'bottom half of the social pyramid' in these states. True, it has secured more than a proportionate share of votes among the SC, ST, Muslims, and the poor. Unsurprisingly, there has been a consolidation of Congress votes among the Muslims, reaching a saturation point in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, but not in Telangana. Same is the story of Hindu upper caste mobilisation in favour of the BJP, even in Telangana. Among the poorest, the Congress consolidated its lead in Rajasthan, caught up with the BRS in Telangana, and maintained a lead in Madhya Pradesh.

The same pattern holds for the Congress' edge among Dalits and Adivasis. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, new Adivasi politics, represented by forces like Bharatiya Adivasi Party, is eating into the dominance of both the big parties. The Congress could not build upon its base among the bottom of the pyramid, except in Rajasthan, but it did not lose it either, except in Chhattisgarh, where there is a dramatic shift of the poor and Adivasis towards the BJP.

ADIVASI

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	41	35	40	30	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	40	51	30	39	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	47	42	25	46	--	--
TELANGANA	42	45	6	6	43	44

In Telangana, 2023 figures are average of two ST categories shared by CSDS, hence not exact

MUSLIM

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	62	90	14	5	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	52	85	15	8	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	41	53	5	27	--	--
TELANGANA	33	32	1	2	33	35

POOREST

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	40	45	41	36	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	44	47	34	41	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	43	40	34	50	--	--
TELANGANA	31	42	6	12	50	41

The most significant change—the one that should worry the Congress most—is the BJP’s dominance among the OBCs in all the three Hindi states that have not experienced full-fledged Mandal politics. The BJP’s lead over the Congress in this most populous social group is more than its state average everywhere. And in every state, the BJP has expanded its lead dramatically over the last election. This despite the Congress’ avowed pro-OBC position on the caste census issue and both its sitting CMs coming from this category. The BJP’s version of accommodative Mandalisation, where smaller OBC communities are targeted, granted symbolic concessions and adjusted into upper caste dominance, seems to be more effective than the more radical Bihar model that the Congress has espoused of late.

UPPER CASTE

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	35	32	50	61	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	33	21	58	74	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	34	39	49	54	--	--
TELANGANA	40	40	9	19	43	36

In Telangana, 2023 figures are average of two upper-caste categories shared by CSDS, hence not exact

OTHER BACKWARD CLASS

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	36	33	40	45	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	41	35	48	55	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	42	39	42	49	--	--
TELANGANA	28	44	9	14	50	38

In Telangana, 2023 figures are average of four OBC categories shared by CSDS, hence not exact

SCHEDULED CASTES

	INC 2018	INC 2023	BJP 2018	BJP 2023	BRS 2018	BRS 2023
RAJASTHAN	39	48	34	33	--	--
MADHYA PRADESH	49	45	33	33	--	--
CHHATTISGARH	42	48	25	39	--	--
TELANGANA	30	38	4	8	53	41

A bigger worry for Congress, other parties

Finally, there appears to be a subtler but deeper shift in the voting consideration. In the 1970s and 1980s, Indians voted in the Vidhan Sabha elections as if they were electing their PM. In the 1990s and early 2000s Indians voted in the Lok Sabha elections as if they were electing their CM. Since then, we have witnessed 'ticket splitting': voters discriminate between the two elections and vote differently in the national and state elections.

There appears to be another shift in that story since the Uttar Pradesh assembly election in 2022. The Central government's rating appears to be more of a factor in the state assembly elections than has been the case so far, even during the Modi era. It is hard to find decisive evidence for this, but the closest proxy is the much touted 'Modi factor'. Lokniti-CSDS surveys confirm that while the state governments were popular, the ratings for the Modi government were higher than the state governments. A large proportion of voters say they would not have voted for the BJP but for PM Modi.

These two factors — social engineering and re-emergence of national government as the principal arena of politics — along with a shift in the ideological spectrum may have raised the BJP's base vote to a higher level than before. This enabled the party to neutralise the popularity of the Congress governments and emerge victorious despite an indifferent campaign in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. This silent change may have helped counter the fatigue with the BJP government in Madhya Pradesh and rise to an unprecedented level that is otherwise inexplicable.

Looking ahead, the Congress' amazing turnaround in Telangana may have been overshadowed by its avoidable losses in the three states. But seen in terms of parliamentary seats, it is not an irreversible loss. If the same pattern is repeated in the Lok Sabha, the Congress may actually gain 22 seats compared to its complete rout in these states in 2019. But if this outcome points to a deeper social realignment and political reorientation, then the Congress and the entire opposition need to go back to the drawing board.