

Topic: First Among Unequals

Five Assembly elections in five different States cannot possibly have one running national theme. But when one of them is in **Uttar Pradesh**, with the largest electorate in the country by far, the debate inevitably moves to the possible pointers for the **2019 Lok Sabha election**. Even if the **Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand was expected**, the more than **three-fourths majority was a surprise** to supporters and detractors alike. Nearly three years after the Lok Sabha election, nothing much seems to have changed on the electoral ground. The biggest takeaway is that **Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains the pan-Indian face of the BJP**, and the combination of the promise of economic development and the propagation of a muscular nationalism is hard to beat. Those who thought that Mr. Modi's popularity had peaked in 2014 were probably right, but instead of a sharp decline from then on, his acceptance among voters seems to have reached a comfortable plateau.

In both **U.P. and Uttarakhand**, the **BJP's vote share dipped only marginally**, from **43.6% (together with smaller allies) in 2014 to 41.4% in the former**, and **from 55.9% to 46.5% in Uttarakhand**. In the absence of a united opposition, as in Bihar in 2015, the elections in both States were a stroll in the park. Any gains the Samajwadi Party and the Congress made through an alliance were lost because of the infighting in the SP, and owing to a slightly improved performance by the **Bahujan Samaj Party**, which at **22.2% polled 2.4% more of the total votes in 2017 over 2014** despite finishing a poor third. The SP leader and outgoing Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Akhilesh Yadav, did try to shed some of the anti-incumbency baggage by distancing himself from the old guard in the party, but in the process his party came across as a divided house. Voters quite rightly refused to buy into the narrative that the failures on the law and order front and the shortcomings in governance were entirely on account of an earlier generation of leaders. If he was attempting to appeal to the youth, projecting himself and Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi as the face of the campaign, he did not quite succeed in it. A grand alliance of the kind that saw the **BJP lose in Bihar would have had to include the BSP**, unthinkable though it is given the caste dynamics at play. But **BSP supremo Mayawati** did herself no favours by continuing to be averse to a pre-poll tie-up, while displaying an unseemly readiness to align after the election without any ideological compunctions. The BSP, which has allied with the SP and the BJP at different points, needs to reconsider this strategy if it wants to expand beyond its core Dalit constituency. The party may not have held much appeal for minorities, despite **fielding Muslims in about one-fourth** of the total seats. In the present political climate, in the absence of a Bihar-type grand alliance it would appear that the BJP's rivals can do little but hope that Prime Minister Modi squanders his goodwill over the next two years in a series of political missteps and administrative failures in delivering on promises.

If Uttarakhand, as in the case of Uttar Pradesh, stuck to the 2014 script, **Punjab voted very differently**. The BJP was only a junior partner in the alliance led by the Shiromani Akali Dal. Also, the alliance suffered greatly from the **anti-incumbency factor**, having completed two terms in office. Actually, **Punjab was more important for the Congress** than it was for the BJP. A loss to the emerging Aam Aadmi Party would have been disastrous, with long-term implications across the country. But the fact that the party held off the challenge from Arvind Kejriwal's party is in **no small measure thanks to Captain Amarinder Singh**, its chief ministerial candidate.

Topic
Introduction

In recent years, the Congress and the BJP have reversed their roles. The Congress, which once boasted of strong national leaders and little-known regional satraps, is now in a situation where it needs strong leaders at the State level to make up for Rahul Gandhi's relative lack of charismatic appeal at the national level. The Congress cannot afford to be in the hands of a small and insular coterie. If it is to replicate elsewhere its success in Punjab, the party needs to learn from Amarinder Singh, who was much more alive to the threat from the AAP than the national leadership was. As the BJP concentrates power in the hands of one person, a risky as well as undesirable approach to adopt for any party, the **Congress needs to do exactly the opposite**. No matter what it believes of itself, the **Congress is no longer the natural party** of government. It is the BJP that has emerged to occupy this space in the altered political environment. Whether the party likes it or not, the Congress will have to build a credible opposition to the BJP, little by little, State by State, instead of trying to pit Mr. Gandhi against the vastly more experienced Mr. Modi in what is clearly an unequal battle.

For the Congress, there is little comfort to be had in finishing as the **single largest party in Manipur and Goa**. Given that the BJP is in power at the Centre, the smaller parties might be more inclined to back a non-Congress government in the two States. Even if it does manage to form the government in one or both States, the Congress will find it difficult to ensure political stability. That the BJP was able to substantially increase its presence in Manipur is perhaps an indication of things to come in the rest of northeastern India. However, while it can claim it did well in Manipur despite finishing behind the Congress, the BJP will be hard put to explain its somewhat lacklustre performance in Goa, where it was in power and suffered a steep fall in votes in comparison to 2014.

But even if the Modi magic has its limits and cannot work at the same level everywhere, 2017 showed that 2014 was no flash in the pan. **The BJP is now the natural party of government**, and the performance of the Congress will depend on how well it is able to combine with other Opposition parties.

FAST FACTS

- **690 Assembly constituencies** went to polls in **UP, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur**.
- Of the 690 constituencies, **133 seats were reserved for Scheduled Caste** candidates and **23 seats for Scheduled Tribe** candidates.
- **16 crore registered voters were eligible** to vote in the Assembly elections in the five states.
- **1.85 lakh polling stations were set up** for the 16 crore registered voters who exercised their rights in these Assembly elections.
- **Rs 28 lakh was the limit of expenses** for candidates in UP, Uttarakhand and Punjab, while Rs 20 lakh was set as the limit in Goa and Manipur.
- To give more privacy to voters, the **height of the voting compartments** was increased by **30 inches** during these polls.

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