

Indian Elections 2009: A Prognosis of the Verdict

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The results to the 15th general elections for the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of India's parliament were announced on 16 and 17 May 2009. Subsequently, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), under the leadership of Dr Manmohan Singh, formed the government for its second successive tenure.

This paper analyses the outcomes of India's general elections by examining the performances of the different political parties in terms of seats won and votes obtained. It tries to identify the reasons behind the Congress winning far more seats than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by comparing their regional performances. It also analyses, in the same vein, the poor performance of the Left parties and the failure of the Third Front to make an impact in the elections.

Comparative Analysis of Party-wise Seats Won

The elections were held in 543 Parliamentary constituencies spread across 29 states and six Union Territories. The exercise involved 713.77 million voters determining the fate of 8,070 candidates. Table 1 shows the comparative performances of the major parties in terms of seats won in the 14th (2004) and 15th (2009) general elections.

The Congress improved its performance vastly in 2009 by winning 61 more seats. The BJP's tally reduced from 138 seats to 116, resulting in the loss of 22 seats. The biggest loser, however, was the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], whose seats reduced from 43 to 16. Three of the Congress's major allies, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Trinamool Congress (TC) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), belonging to the key states of Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Maharashtra respectively, either won more seats than in 2004 or retained those won the last time. The TC's performance was particularly impressive. By gaining 17 more seats, the TC, led by Ms Mamata Banerjee, severely damaged the Left parties in West Bengal. The DMK also conclusively retained its hold over the key southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Though the BJP lost 22 seats from its earlier tally of 138, one of its main allies, the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], put up a much improved performance. Led by Bihar's Chief Minister,

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Mr Nitish Kumar, the JD(U) expanded its presence considerably in Bihar. The JD(U)'s success came at the expense of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). The recent elections delivered a body blow to the erstwhile Minister of Railways and Chief Minister of Bihar, Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav, chief of the RJD. From being a core constituent of the previous Congress-led UPA government, the RJD has been relegated to the sidelines.

Table 1: Party-wise Seats (2004 and 2009)

	2004	2009	Gain/Loss
Congress	145	206	+61
DMK	16	18	+2
TC	2	19	+17
NCP	9	9	0
BJP	138	116	-22
JD(U)	8	20	+12
CPI	10	4	-6
CPI(M)	43	16	-27
BSP	19	21	+2
AIADMK	0	9	+9
TDP	5	6	+1
TRS	5	2	-3
SP	36	23	-13
RJD	24	4	-20

Source: Election Commission of India

Along with Mr Laloo Yadav, Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav, leader of the Samajwadi Party (SP) has also become relatively insignificant, with the SP's tally reducing by 13 seats. The SP, however, can draw solace from the fact that its key political rival, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Ms Mayawati Kumari, is no better off. The BSP was widely expected to be a critical force in the post-election government formation. However, by improving its position by merely two seats compared to 2004, the BSP has not been able to emerge as a decisive force.

The poor performances of the key members of the Third Front are evident in Table 1. The Left parties, the CPI(M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) suffered major losses in the

elections. Other members of the Third Front such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) and the Telengana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) did not win as many seats as expected. While the AIADMK, led by Ms J. Jayalalitha, remained far behind the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the TDP, led by Mr Chandrababu Naidu, along with its ally the TRS, were humbled by the Congress in Andhra Pradesh. Coupled with the hardly flattering performance by the BSP, the Third Front experiment has met a rather tame end.

Zone-wise Performance of Parties

North India

India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, sends 80 members to the Lok Sabha. The Congress improved its performance significantly in the state. Its tally went up to 21 seats in 2009 from only nine in 2004. Much of the gains of the Congress came at the expense of the SP, whose seats dropped from 36 to 23. The BSP improved its position marginally in Uttar Pradesh from 19 seats in the previous elections to 20 in 2009. The BJP's tally in the state remained at 10 seats. Thus, Uttar Pradesh appeared to have been split trilaterally between the Congress, the SP and the BSP. This has made the Congress a significant force in Uttar Pradesh after several years of almost insignificant political presence.

The Congress gained significantly in the elections at the expense of BJP in two other northern states, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. In Rajasthan, the Congress won 20 seats compared to only four in 2004. The BJP's seats in the state reduced from 21 in 2004 to four this year. The results are similar to those of the Rajasthan assembly elections held in December 2008, where the Congress swept the polls. In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress improved its tally from four seats in 2004 to 12 in 2009 while the BJP's seats reduced from 25 in 2004 to 16 in 2009.

The Congress staged a strong turnaround in Punjab by winning eight seats compared to two in 2004. The combined seat tally of the BJP and its ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal, in Punjab reduced from 11 in 2004 to five. The Congress retained its hold over Haryana by winning nine seats this time as well. In the national capital region of Delhi, it won all seven seats, with the BJP being unable to retain even the solitary seat it won in 2004. The Delhi results were again similar to Rajasthan, with both reflecting the continuation of popular support for the Congress as seen in the respective assembly elections held in November-December 2008. In Jammu & Kashmir, the Congress and its ally, the Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, won five out of six seats.

East India

While the Congress increased its presence significantly, in terms of number of seats won, in most of the northern states, the situation was a little different in the east. In eastern India, the Congress and the UPA essentially benefitted from the state of West Bengal. In West Bengal, the TC and the Congress won 25 seats between them, compared to only seven in 2004. The gains came at the expense of both the CPI(M) and the CPI, whose combined tally reduced from 29 in 2004 to 11 in 2009.

In two other eastern states – Bihar and Orissa – neither the Congress nor its allies emerged in commanding positions. Bihar is one of the few states where the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) performed well. The BJP and its ally, the JD(U), bettered their combined

tally in the state from 11 in 2004 to 32 in 2009. The gains came at the expense of the RJD, whose tally has dropped from 22 in 2004 to only three in 2009. On the other hand, in Orissa, the Biju Janata Dal, the estranged ally of BJP, emerged as the most successful party by winning 14 seats. The Congress also won the largest number of seats (seven) in Assam, where the BJP improved its position from two seats in 2004 to four seats in 2009. The Congress emerged as the dominant party in the rest of the north-eastern states, except for Tripura, where the CPI(M) won both seats.

South India

All the southern states, except for Karnataka, brought considerable gains to the Congress and its allies. Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu saw the Congress and its allies successfully overcoming anti-incumbency sentiments. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress improved its tally from 29 seats in 2004 to 33 in 2009. The improved performance is notwithstanding the severing of ties with its erstwhile partner, the TRS. The Congress also obtained a convincing majority in the Andhra Pradesh assembly elections which were held simultaneously with the general elections.

Tamil Nadu saw the Congress and the DMK retaining their hold over the state by winning a total of 26 seats, the same as in 2004. The AIADMK won only nine seats. Evidently, anti-incumbency did not affect the prospects of the Congress and the DMK at all, against much expectation. However, the Congress's biggest incremental gains in the south came in Kerala. From not a single seat in the state in 2004, it won 13 seats in 2009. All the seats came at the expense of the CPI(M) and the CPI, whose combined tally shrunk from 15 in 2004 to four in 2009. The only southern state where the Congress did not make a dent is Karnataka. The BJP won 19 seats in the state, one more than it did in 2004. The Congress's tally in the state reduced from eight in 2004 to six this time around.

West India

Maharashtra was a keenly fought state in western India. One of the largest states in the country with 48 seats, it remains almost evenly split between the Congress, the BJP and their respective allies. The balance, however, tilted partially towards the Congress and its ally, the NCP, who won a total of 25 seats, three more than in 2004. The BJP and its ally, the Shiv Sena, won 20 seats, compared to 25 in 2004.

Gujarat is one of those few states where the BJP improved its position vis-à-vis 2004. The state is currently ruled by the BJP under Chief Minister Mr Narendra Modi. As in the case in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, anti-incumbency did not influence the mandate in Gujarat, with the BJP winning 15 seats compared to 14 in 2004. The Congress lost one seat to end at 11, compared to 12 in 2004.

Comparative Analysis of Party-wise Vote Shares

India's election results often do not indicate the equivalence between seats won and the share of votes obtained. The causality in this regard is not always linear in nature. The share of the votes of the different parties (as proportion of the total votes cast) can be taken as an indicator of the popular support enjoyed by the different parties. These shares are indicated in Table 2. Due to the lack of disaggregated data on vote shares of all recognised parties, Table 2 captures only five major parties.

The party-wise statistics on seats won (Table 1) show the widening gap between the Congress and the BJP in the recent elections. The same is revealed by the relative vote shares as well. While the share of the Congress in the total votes increased by 2.02 percent, the corresponding share for the BJP reduced by 3.36 percent. Since the loss in the BJP's vote share is more than the gain achieved by the Congress, it is clear that it is not only the Congress but the other parties as well which have made inroads into the BJP's vote bank. Deeper insights on this, however, require a closer constituency-based analysis.

Table 2: Party-wise Vote Shares (in %)

	2004	2009	Gain/Loss
Congress	26.53	28.55	+2.02
BJP	22.16	18.8	-3.36
CPI	1.41	1.43	+0.02
CPI(M)	5.66	5.33	-0.33
BSP	5.33	6.17	+0.84
Others	38.91	39.73	0.82

Source: Election Commission of India

From an all-India perspective, apart from the Congress, the BSP's vote share increased by 0.84 percent. A comparison of the increase in the vote shares and the additional seats won throws up divergent conclusions. A 2.02 percent increase in the vote share resulted in 61 additional seats for the Congress. This implies that every one percent increase in vote share produced roughly 30 additional seats for the party. By the same logic, a 0.84 percent increase in the vote share should have led to an extra 25 seats for the BSP. However, it only won two extra seats.

The difference can probably be explained by the Congress being the second largest party (in terms of the number of votes) in 2004 for most of the 'new' seats it won this time. Arithmetically, it was able to emerge victorious in all these seats on the basis of an average increase of 0.03 percent (the ratio of the extra vote share and the extra seats won) in its votes. It clearly did not require a substantially large increase in votes to win these seats as it was probably already a close second.

However, the BSP was probably not the second-largest party for most of the seats that it contested. Thus, while more people certainly voted for BSP this time, such votes did not result in it winning more seats. More votes probably helped it become the second-largest party in many of the seats it contested by narrowing the margin of votes vis-à-vis the winning

party. These hypotheses, however, can only be verified after the detailed constituency-wise data on vote shares becomes available.

It is also important to note the rising vote share of the 'others'. These include all the allies of the Congress and the BJP. The higher vote share of this block is primarily on the account of the strong show put up by the Congress' allies such as the TC and the DMK. However, one must also note the combined share of the CPI and the CPI(M) which showed a marginal loss of 0.31 percent. Thus, while the seat-wise performance showed a marked reduction in the seats won by these two parties (Table 1), the vote share did not reflect an equivalent decline (Table 2). These two parties lost most of their seats in Kerala and West Bengal to the Congress and the TC. In both states, the Congress and the TC were the second highest parties in almost all the seats that the CPI and the CPI(M) won in 2004 but lost this time. A more detailed analysis is likely to reveal that the votes separating the highest and the second highest parties in many of these seats were not too large in 2004. As a result, the Congress and the TC were able to turn the tide this time with relatively small incremental gains in vote shares while the overall vote shares of the Left parties remained more or less unchanged.

Voter Turnouts

The all-India average voter turnout at 58.43 percent was slightly higher than 58.07 percent in 2004. However, the turnouts were distinctly different across the country and ranged from a low of 39.9 percent in Jammu & Kashmir to a high of 90.99 percent in Nagaland.

There were more voters in India's south and east than in the north and the west in 2004. This time too, the same trend prevailed. The turnouts in all four southern states – Andhra Pradesh (72.36 percent), Tamil Nadu (72.57 percent), Karnataka (63.33 percent) and Kerala (73.35 percent) – were higher than the national average. Similarly in the east, Assam (69.58 percent), Orissa (65.34 percent) and West Bengal (80.07 percent) had higher turnouts than the national average. The turnout in Bihar, however, was at a much lower 44.84 percent.

In the north and the west, the voter turnout was much lower than the national average. This could have been on the account of the elections being held in the peak summer months of April-May and the onset of high temperatures in north India. It is interesting to note that a high voter turnout was not necessarily a mandate of anti-incumbency. While high turnouts in Kerala and West Bengal produced large votes against the CPI(M) and the CPI, in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Orissa, the voters supported the incumbent parties.

The Final Outcome

The Congress-led UPA emerged victorious in the 15th general elections. The BJP-led NDA continues to remain in the opposition. The elections have put the Congress in a much more commanding position compared to 2004. The number of seats separating the ruling-combine and the opposition increased significantly, putting the UPA in a far greater position of strength in the parliament.

The UPA's strength also emanates from its 'independence' from the Left parties as well as from demanding allies such as the RJD. The sharp shrinkage in the number of seats won by the Left has ended the political ambitions of the Third Front for the time being. At the same time, several regional parties and their respective leaders have been marginalised in India's

15th Lok Sabha. Among the regional parties that have gained significantly are the TC and the DMK.

It would, however, be erroneous to write off the regional parties and their influence on India's politics. The vote shares clearly show that some of these parties are steadily enlarging their vote banks. Arithmetically, of course, their vote banks are still much smaller than those of the Congress and the BJP. However, they are becoming increasingly important in deciding the outcomes in multi-cornered contests. Their significance in this regard is likely to enhance in the future.

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