

# ISAS Insights

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## **India's State Elections: A BJP Sweep and New Politics of Urban India**

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The results of four state elections, announced on 8 December 2013, emphasise demographic and social changes that are affecting India more rapidly and profoundly than at any time since independence in 1947. They also foretell very deep problems for the Congress Party which leads India's coalition government and which must go to the polls before May next year. It's only in the small Northeast state of Mizoram, where the results were announced on December 9, that the Congress managed its sole victory.

The Congress lost heavily in the states of Rajasthan, the National Capital Territory of Delhi and Madhya Pradesh. It also lost in the sparsely populated, resource-rich state of Chhattisgarh, noted for its large indigenous (or "tribal") population and a troublesome Maoist-inspired insurgency, though the contest was closer there. The winner in all four states was the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), though it fell short of an outright majority in Delhi.

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## **The Delhi Surprise**

These results were not entirely a surprise but the margin of the defeat of the Congress in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi was. The real story of the set of elections was the stunning performance of the new Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) (the Common Man's Party) in Delhi where it won 28 of the 70 seats and won nearly 30 per cent of the votes, emerging as the main opposition. The AAP's performance was capped by a thumping victory of over 25,000 votes for its Indian Institute of Technology-trained, former revenue service officer leader, Arvind Kejriwal, over Delhi's three-time Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit. A re-election in Delhi is now a distinct possibility with the BJP not having the numbers to form a government and the AAP adamant that it won't tie up with either the Congress or the BJP.

The Congress defeats were predicted. Of greater long-term significance was the voter turnout of well over 70 per cent of the electorate in three states. Even in cynical, bourgeois Delhi, where turnouts are usually low, there was a remarkably high turnout of 67 per cent. Only 58 per cent of Delhi voters went to the polls at the previous elections in 2008.

The higher turnouts result from more efficient, computer-driven administration, the coming to maturity of India's "demographic dividend," growing urbanisation and the ready communication capacity that most Indians now have.

While everybody was talking about the popular disgust with corruption and traditional parties, many seemed to have underestimated the innovative campaign methods of AAP which reached out to voters through an army of volunteers, many of them students and professionals. It also raised funds from ordinary citizens, many of whom contributed money from outside India. Yet another mistake made by many analysts was dismissing the AAP as a party that would attract only middle class voters. In fact, it won votes in middle class colonies as well as the poorer slums and resettlement colonies. Such was the strength of the AAP brand that candidates lacking any political experience, such as an unemployed youth, an unknown cricket coach and a bodybuilder, won seats. But whether the AAP experiment can be replicated in other parts of urban India remains to be seen. In the coming general elections, however, it is unlikely AAP will have the organisational muscle to spread outside of Delhi.

## **The Changes in India**

AAP benefitted from the changes that have occurred in India over the past decade or so. India has made progress in networking computers and putting them to work at administrative tasks. Electoral rolls have been cleaned up. Where once the same person might have appeared on the roll under two or three variations of his or her name, all at the same address, computer-based electoral lists now allow such anomalies to be quickly detected and investigated. Where ten years ago, for example, a constituency of 100,000 might have had 10,000 duplicate names or mistaken identities, these lists now can be verified and 90,000 genuine voters identified. By this method alone “voter turnout” improves. (65 voters out of 90 is 72 per cent; 65 voters out of 100 is 65 per cent).

This more switched-on India makes for more efficient administration in some areas of life and leads to more demanding citizens. People ask: if some of a citizen’s questions are capable of quick resolution, why not others? And the country is urbanising fast. In the 2001-2011 decade, it added more urban people (91 million) than rural people (90 million). Today, India is close to one-third urban and growing rapidly.

India is also younger and more literate than it is has ever been. The much talked-about “demographic dividend” – a vast cohort of people in their most productive years – means that close to 15 per cent of voters are estimated to be in the 18-23-year-old bracket. Most of them too are literate. Though primary schools in many states may be woeful, India’s literacy rate now is more than 75 per cent. Voting for the first time, this young cohort brings energy, curiosity and willingness to go to the polling booths; perhaps too they bring a spark of idealism.

In Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, overall literacy increased by close to 40 per cent in the decade prior to 2011. Literacy among women in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh is 60 per cent, and even in Rajasthan more than half of women are literate.

More women tend to vote than men. Literacy is one reason for higher female turnouts. So are deeply felt grievances about lack of personal safety and of basic amenities like clean water and effective toilets. Many women are also connected to wider networks than ever before. The cheap mobile means that even poor women may have access to a phone. Such ease of communication is a blessing and a curse for politicians. It means that a candidate can be in ready touch with most voters. Once upon a time, in many constituencies local big shots told underlings how to vote. Now, however, as urbanisation burgeons, voters are more independent, and supporters have to be identified as individuals and encouraged to go to the polls.

Voting is not compulsory and is first-past-the-post: whoever gets more votes than the next-best candidate wins. Connecting with your supporters and chivvying them to vote are crucial aspects of effective campaigning.

There is another important aspect. Voters can cast their ballots only at the polling station nearest to their registered address. A polling station serves fewer than 1,000 people. Madhya Pradesh, for example, had 54,000 polling stations for this election – close to 250 polling stations in every constituency.

Canny candidates realise that they need a “booth captain” for every polling station, a motivated supporter who knows the local voters and can persuade those who are sympathetic to come to the polls. Mobile phones enable such networks to be created and coordinated, though they do not guarantee motivated workers at the business end of the phone.

## **Looking Ahead to 2014**

The dispiriting result for the Congress in the four big state elections reflects some of these social and demographic changes. A more urban and atomised, yet networked, electorate has greater expectations of governments, more opportunity to learn about scandals and better access to alternative possibilities. It also shows that the Congress lacks credible state-level leaders who can draw votes. Many believe that the late induction of leaders such as Jyotiraditya Scindia in Madhya Pradesh hurt the Congress’ chances.

A party in power at the state level is likely to have a political machine – those “booth captains” mentioned earlier – to deploy in support of candidates for the national parliament when the time comes. That means a better system for getting its message to voters and for inducing sympathisers to vote.

This could mean an advantage for BJP for the national elections which will be held by May 2014. After these state elections, the Congress is in power in the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra in the west, Haryana in the north, and Assam, the only state in the Northeast with a sizeable number of seats. The hold in Kerala is slender, and Andhra Pradesh is in turmoil over a proposed division into two states. Haryana sends only 10 members to the national parliament.

The BJP, on the other hand, will be comfortably in power in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Gujarat and Goa. Regional parties rule Tamil Nadu, Odisha,

Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, West Bengal and Jammu and Kashmir. The smaller states in the Northeast have hardly any seats in parliament to make a big difference.

Momentum is with the BJP going into the national polls. But it must be noted that the results in the four states (leaving aside tiny Mizoram) might not be a good predictor for the national elections since they account for only 13 per cent of the seats in the lower house of Parliament. Moreover, besides Delhi, the fight in the three other states was a direct contest between the BJP and Congress whereas in most of the bigger states the contests will be multi-cornered with strong regional parties. The BJP is already pinning its success in the state elections on the sustained campaigning by their prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. It is of course difficult to ascertain precisely what impact Modi had on voters. While the BJP victories in the four states were expected due to a combination of strong chief ministers and voter exasperation with the Congress, the BJP leaders are pointing to the huge margin of victory in three states as a sign of Modi's magic. On the other hand, the strong AAP performance in Delhi showed that the BJP will find it difficult in states where it does not have credible local leaders. The BJP cannot bank only on the Modi factor. If, as seems likely, the BJP emerges as the largest single party after next year's general elections, it will have to depend on alliances with regional parties to form government. The decisions of those parties, some of whom are wary of Modi, will hold the key to the formation of India's next national government.

**Table 1: National Capital Territory of Delhi, State Elections, 2003, 2008 and 2013 and National Elections, 2004 and 2009**

	<b>2003 State</b>	<b>2004 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2008 State</b>	<b>2009 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2013 State</b>
Total seats	70	7	70	7	<b>70</b>
Won by BJP	20	1	23	0	<b>32</b>
Won by Congress	47	6	43	7	<b>8</b>
Aam Aadmi Party	-	-	-	-	<b>28</b>
Voter turnout	53%	47%	58%	52%	<b>67%</b>

**Table 2: Rajasthan State Elections, 2003, 2008 and 2013 and National Elections, 2004 and 2009**

	<b>2003 State</b>	<b>2004 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2008 State</b>	<b>2009 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2013 State</b>
Total seats	200	25	200	25	<b>200</b>
Won by BJP	120	21	78	4	<b>162</b>
Won by Congress	56	4	96	20	<b>21</b>
Voter turnout	67%	50%	66%	49%	<b>75%</b>

**Table 3: Chhattisgarh State Elections, 2003, 2008 and 2013 and National Elections, 2004 and 2009**

	<b>2003 State</b>	<b>2004 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2008 State</b>	<b>2009 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2013 State</b>
Total seats	90	11	90	11	<b>90</b>
Won by BJP	50	10	50	10	<b>49</b>
Won by Congress	37	1	38	1	<b>39</b>
Voter turnout	71%	52%	71%	58%	<b>77%</b>

**Table 4: Madhya Pradesh State Elections, 2003, 2008 and 2013 and National Elections, 2004 and 2009**

	<b>2003 State</b>	<b>2004 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2008 State</b>	<b>2009 Lok Sabha</b>	<b>2013 State</b>
Total seats	230	29	230	29	<b>230</b>
Won by BJP	173	25	143	16	<b>165</b>
Won by Congress	38	4	71	12	<b>58</b>
Voter turnout	67%	48%	70%	51%	<b>73%</b>

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