INDIAN STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

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Event Summary

Thursday, 13 December 2018

Seligman Library, LSE

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Event Summary Workshop by the LSE South Asia Centre

Indian State Assembly Elections: An Analysis of the Results
Thursday, 13 December 2018, 2 pm – 4 pm
Seligman Library, 6th Floor, Old Building, LSE

Participants present:

James Manor, Emeritus Professor, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, School of Advanced Study
Louise Tillin, Lecturer and Deputy Director of the India Institute, King's College London
James Chiriyankandath, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies,

VIA VIDEO LINK

Philip K. Oldenburg, Adjunct Associate Professor of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Columbia University
Milan Vaishnav, Director and Senior Fellow, South Asia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Gilles Verniers, Co-Director of the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, and Associate Professor of Political Science, Ashoka University
Dr. S.Y. Quraishi, Former Chief Election Commissioner of India

CHAIR

Mukulika Banerjee, Director, South Asia Centre, and Associate Professor of Anthropology, LSE

This event summary was written by Manjari Sahary and edited by Christopher Finnigan. Photo credits: Christopher Finnigan

Introduction

In November and December 2018, legislative assembly elections were held in five states of India – Mizoram, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. After the election results were announced, the LSE South Asia Centre hosted a workshop that brought together esteemed analysts of Indian elections for the purpose of producing a multifaceted analysis of the results. Mukulika Banerjee, Director of the South Asia Centre and convenor of the workshop, kicked off this exercise in collective meaning-making by asserting the importance of analysing the election results closely. Not only are the five states politically significant in and of themselves, she said, but the election results for these states also serve as some indication of what we can expect during the 2019 general elections, considered to be one of the most crucial elections in India's history. This, she stated, is what makes it imperative that we discuss these results with those who know best how to read them by getting both electoral as well as non-electoral information to bear on them. Banerjee then outlined the format of the workshop: for each state, masters students from LSE would present relevant background information on the election in that state, following which the analysts would share their comments on the election's results.

Mizoram

Sanat Sogani (MSc in Political Theory) began the series of presentations by describing the election in Mizoram. Out of 40 seats, the Mizo National Front (MNF) won 26 (21 more than it had last time) and emerged as the clear victor. The Congress suffered a proportionate loss in its seat holdings, getting only 5 seats (29 less than last time), making this the party's worst performance in Mizoram to date. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won its first and only seat in the state, while independent candidates won a total of 8 seats (7 more than last time).

Sogani pointed out that in Mizoram, the MNF and the Congress have been in power for alternate tenures since the state's creation in 1989, and now the trend seems to have continued with the MNF coming back to power after 10 years. He further noted that Mizoram was the only North-Eastern state in which the Congress had a significant presence, which it has now lost with these elections. He wondered whether the Congress's loss can be attributed to the general anti-incumbency trend in the state or if there is something more to the loss. He also brought to notice that the victorious MNF was a founding member of the BJP-led North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) but explicitly distanced itself from the coalition this time around.

The Congress and the MNF's policies, Sogani said, did not differ that markedly except on the issue of prohibition of alcohol. It was under the last Congress government that Mizoram's first liquor store was opened in 2015, while the MNF said that if re-elected, it would reinstate the complete ban on liquor on religious as well as health grounds. It was, however, the BJP that made special appeals to minority Bru, Hindu and Buddhist communities in several places, but this did not translate into results. Sogani questioned why this may have been the case. He added that it is believed that the BJP's nation-wide Hindutva rhetoric worked against them in Mizoram, as the state has an 87% Christian-majority population. Mizoram, he said, is now the only North-Eastern state in which the BJP has no role to play in forming the government. Additionally, he sought an explanation for the sudden surge in the popularity of independent candidates, who had the highest vote share in 8 out of 40 constituencies and the second-highest vote share in 11 of them. Finally, an overview of Mizoram's assembly revealed that 36 of the 40 MLAs were crorepatis (6 more than there were last time), 2 had

criminal cases against them, and no woman was elected despite the state's positive sex ratio, which is much higher than the national average.

Banerjee then opened the analysts' discussion by stating that Mizoram is an example of the success of democratic processes despite a serious history of violence and separatist movements. Gurharpal Singh (SOAS) questioned this, saying that perhaps success in the North East is relative as periodic violence still breaks out from time to time. Louise Tillin, (King's), highlighted that this is the first time since independence that the Congress does not have a single government in the North East. This particular story, she said, is not good for the Congress even though it may have resurged in the Hindi heartland. In Mizoram as well as in Telangana, regional parties have consolidated their position in opposition to the Congress, not the BJP, and these will be potential BJP allies in 2019. Banerjee reminded the gathering that the gains-through-allies story might be incorrect, since, as Sogani had previously stated, the MNF distanced itself from the BJP in Mizoram. James Chiriyankandath (Institute of Commonwealth Studies) commented on the issue of alcohol prohibition, saying that in Mizoram,

as in Meghalaya, there is a lot of politics that goes on in non-conformist churches that dominate the Christian community there. That is where the alcohol issue would have played a big part because its non-consumption is such a major plank of the religion, especially in these churches.

Telangana

Shivani Mangal (MSc in Social Policy) and Hamza Farooqui (MSc in Sociology) presented on the elections in Telangana – the second legislative assembly election in the state's history since its creation in 2014 – where there was a significant increase in voter turnout (from 68.9% in 2013 to 73.2% in 2018). 75% of the constituents in rural areas cast their vote, while only 52% of the constituents from greater Hyderabad did so. The results were as follows: of the 119 seats being contested, the incumbent Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) won 88 (25 more than it won last time) and formed the government with KC Rao at its head as Chief Minister for the second time. The Congress came in second place, with 19 seats (2 less than last time). The biggest decline, however, was experienced by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which only got 2 seats (13 less than last time), still unable to gain control of the newly-formed state despite its status as the party in power in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh. The

the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) experienced no change in its seat-holdings, winning 7 seats in both 2013 and 2018), the BJP got only 1 seat (4 less than last time), making its presence even more minimal than before, and others got 2 seats (6 less than last time).

Mangal and Farooqui mentioned the major issues during the election, beginning with agrarian unrest – a nation-wide issue. This did not, however, hurt the TRS as it improved on rural infrastructure and implemented welfare policies, promising to extend even more financial support to farmers if re-elected, particularly in the form of further compensation and loan waivers. Unemployment was another pertinent issue, since Telangana has the 3rd highest level of unemployment in the country. The TRS promised unemployment allowance for youth, which the Congress challenged, questioning KC Rao on how many jobs his government had created during his term, but to no avail. The role of Muslim voters was also significant, as there is a substantial Muslim population in Telangana. KC Rao campaigned extensively in Muslim constituencies, speaking in Urdu to appeal to Muslim voters in addition to having taken on welfare schemes for Muslims. This seems to have paid off, as TRS got most of the votes of the Muslim population in Telangana. The impact

of early elections was also noted, as this allowed the TRS to separate the national election discourse from the local election discourse, thereby writing Modi out of the narrative. Lastly, Mangal and Farooqui remarked that 94% of the MLAs elected from the TRS are crorepatis, allowing for further reflections on the relationship between wealth and electoral success.

Milan Vaishnav (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) suggested that between now and the general elections, the BJP is going to strengthen its "look east" policies, trying to compensate for the losses in the Hindi belt. Responding to Manor's comments, he said that if the YSRCP does do well, it would be fatal for the party to tie up with the BJP before the elections, but the possibility of a post-poll alliance remains.

Vaishnav also suggested that the BJP could emerge as an existential threat to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha, which would also affect the prospect of alliances. Banerjee corroborated this hypothesis, saying that the BJP had tended to win elections in which it was not the incumbent but the challenger. Tillin said that another dynamic that will become important next year is the extent to which regional parties succeed in defining the 2019 elections as region/regionalist vs. centre/nationalist elections. She concluded her analysis by

asking to what extent does the regionalist angle complicate the willingness of regional parties to align themselves with the BJP and, to some extent, the Congress.

Chhattisgarh

Kunal Joshi (Master of Public Administration) presented information on the election in Chhattisgarh. Here, the contest was mainly between the BJP (led by the incumbent Chief Minister Raman Singh), the Congress (led by Tamradhwaj Sahu, representative of the Sahu community, and Bhupesh Bhagel, representative of the Kurmi community), the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (JCC) and its allies – the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) – led by Ajit Jogi, who, although from the OBC community, was believed to be helping the BJP. Out of 90 seats, the Congress won 68 (29 more than last time), the BJP won 15 (34 less than last time), the JCC+ won 7 (6 more than last time), while others did not get any seat (1 less than last time).

Joshi said that the biggest factor that affected poll outcomes was anti-incumbency faced by the BJP, resulting in the downward swing in its seat share and an upward swing in that of the Congress. Farmers' distress also played a role in determining the results. Chhattisgarh is the rice bowl of India and Raman Singh used to be known as the "chawal baba" (rice man) of the state, but it was the Congress's policies that focused on farmers' plight the most, promising loan waivers to distressed farmers. In addition to this, the SC, ST and OBC vote was key in ensuring the Congress's victory. 39 out of the 90 seats were SC/ST-majority constituencies, of which the Congress won 30, and the OBC community constitutes 52% of the Congress's voter base. Women's votes made a difference too: in 24 of 90 constituencies, women voters recorded more votes than men voters, and out of these 24, the Congress won 22. It is being said that this is because of the ban on alcohol proposed by the Congress. Finally, the NOTA vote was a major determining factor in the Chhattisgarh elections. 2% of the votes were NOTA votes, which is the highest proportion of NOTA votes across the five state assembly elections. The vote was especially popular in southern parts of Chhattisgarh, where people were unhappy with both the BJP and the Congress's handling of Naxalite issues.

Tillin began her analysis by emphasising that this was an election in which the Congress had successfully allowed a new leadership to emerge after having struggled with the loss of their senior leadership in a 2013 attack in Bastar district of Chhattisgarh. This seems to have given the party the space to get rid of some of the unhelpful characters in it, and this showed in its skilful management of this election and the party discipline it displayed. The Congress seems to have developed a strategy for managing elections at the local level with local leaders in different regions of the state being given a fair bit of autonomy. There has also been a clear targeting of the Sahus alongside attempts to retain as much of the Kurmi vote as possible – a move that seems to have paid off. It is said that Rahul Gandhi's strategy for moderning the Congress Party by allowing for new leadership has been tried most extensively in Chhattisgarh, even more so than in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Banerjee reported that activist friends on the ground were saying that this is an anti-BJP vote, not a pro-Congress one; in other words, people only voted for the Congress because they wanted to punish the BJP. Vaishnav reminded the group that it just so happened that there were fewer Congress incumbents in Chhattisgarh than there were BJP incumbents, which makes BJP the party that

stood to lose the most. Tillin remarked that in 2008 and 2013, the vote and seat shares of the Congress and BJP were a lot closer. Anti-incumbency, she said, is a Chhattisgarh story anyway that has been amplified this year.

Gilles Verniers, (Ashoka University) asked Tillin about the failure of the BJP's Chhattisgarh model. He said that Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are two states that have had a long-standing BJP leadership with two very different models of government. In Chhattisgarh, the BJP succeeded in increasing state capacity and improving service delivery – something it failed to do in Madhya Pradesh – but still lost the election in the former. How can we make sense of this? Tillin responded by citing Neelanjan Sircar (Ashoka University) saying that the BJP had maintained itself in Madhya Pradesh by strengthening its caste patronage networks. In Chhattisgarh, on the other hand, while Raman Singh did not do away with these networks, his formula of governance interrupted the electoral logic of clientelism to improve service delivery, especially in tribal-dominated regions. It is interesting to think about what will be the new formula of electoral politics that replaces that.

The conversation moved on to mistaken opinion polls. Verniers answered by saying that most of the agencies that conduct opinion polls are bad at doing so; there exists a new political economy of polling by private actors who simply do not apply strong scientific criteria in terms of methodology. It is also quite well known by now that parties can buy favourable results in opinion polls. Verniers' response was that we have been fooling ourselves in thinking that if we ask people who they are going to vote for, we will receive truthful answers from them. Banerjee added that when there is an incumbent government that is scary, the voters say what they think they should be said. This is why ballots need to be kept a complete secret. Chiriyankandath shared that when canvassing, one ought to never believe someone's claim about whom they're going to vote for. Instead, one should look at how they say it and that determines what he puts on the canvas.

Rajasthan

Dhruva Mathur (MSc in Political Economy of Late Development) and Sumer Sharma (MSc in Political Sociology) set the tone for their presentation on Rajasthan by stating that elections in the state have always been a bipolar contest between the BJP and the Congress, with the party in government alternating every five years. This year, of the 200 seats in Rajasthan, 199 went to poll and the majority mark was 100 seats. The Congress and its allies met this mark, winning exactly 100 seats (79 more than last time). The BJP, on the other hand, suffered a big loss at 73 seats (90 less than last time). The less significant BSP won 6 seats (3 more than last time) and independent 'rebel' candidates, born of internal tussles in the two major parties, won 20 seats in total, thereby taking away some of the parties' share of votes.

As evinced by the results, the BJP experienced massive anti-incumbency this election due to a number of policies that it adopted, which alienated its constituents. This includes the Padmavati controversy, during which the BJP government of Rajasthan adopted a relatively liberal stance, thereby alienating the aggrieved Rajputs. There was also a tussle between Vasundhara Raje, the

incumbent Chief Minister, and Amit Shah, party president, regarding the appointment of the BJP state unit chief for Rajasthan, through which Raje became estranged from the Jat community and other powerful groups in the state. The popularity of the BJP was also potentially hurt by the agrarian crisis, although Raje did take steps to address this, including farm loan waivers.

The Congress, in comparison, had a low seat-base; it was faced with the task of climbing up from the 21 seats it secured in the last election, and so it was difficult for it to move too much further ahead. This election does not seem to have been a pro-Congress one per se, since its victory has been fairly small given all the missteps taken by the BJP in Rajasthan. This may have been, in part, due to the internal conflict between Sachin Pilot and Ashok Gehlot, framed as a competition between the younger guns and the older guards of the Congress. The party also had a limited spending capacity in comparison to that of the BJP, and therefore spent far less on the election than the incumbents.

Mathur and Sharma also mentioned that voter turnout had fallen by 1.02% and attempted to make sense of why this may have happened. They hypothesised that some people decided to surrender their vote by not showing up, particularly BJP voters from south-western Rajasthan (there is an overlap between areas that are the BJP's strongholds and those with low

turnouts), thereby accounting for not just the low voter turnout but also the drastic reduction in the BJP's votes. Moreover, this reduction was witnessed particularly in rural areas; by contrast, in urban centres, the difference between the BJP and Congress's vote shares was considerably smaller, since the Congress is not a party that caters to the urban class as much. Drawing attention to Sircar's analysis, Mathur and Sharma clarified that one could not say with certainty that it was the agrarian crisis that had hurt the BJP's rural vote share: employment in several of the rural areas was dominated by non-agricultural vocations, and yet, a fall in the BJP's votes had been observed there.

Elaborating on the money question, Banerjee said that 95% of the money through electoral bonds had gone to the BJP, and it had still not won the election. Vaishnav added that the issue of political finances was central to the tussle at the RBI, since corporates in Bombay and elsewhere are upset with the RBI. They are telling the government that if you want funding for your election campaigns, you must do us favours first, which include slowing down and rescheduling debt repayment and increasing the limits on lending by public sector banks. Getting the RBI off corporates' backs in exchange for election funding is a clear case of quid pro quo.

Banerjee suggested that presumably, the 95% of the money that went to the BJP through electoral bonds is, in light of these elections, likely to be slightly more widely spread going forward. Vaishnav, however, stated that he was doubtful of this. Businesses will hedge their bets more than they had been doing until now, he said, but using electoral bonds to fund opposition parties is a difficult prospect, since information about whom the money is going to is known by the regulator (and we now know that the regulator is being run by the BJP government in Delhi). Corporates might, then, choose to give money to parties through a route other than electoral bonds.

Verniers brought to notice that of the 108 incumbent MLAs that re-ran the election in Rajasthan, only 48 were re-elected. In Madhya Pradesh, the swing in seats was even more pronounced: of 230 incumbent MLAs, only 32 were re-elected of which only 23 were BJP members. In terms of caste representation, there had been continuity of old trends. Only a handful of castes are politically significant and well represented (for example Rajputs, Baniyas, Jats), and the

reason for such stability in caste representation is that these groups have almost equal representation between the Congress and the BJP. In Madhya Pradesh, too, you have the same story, with the only difference being that here, the OBC landscape is far more fragmented than in Rajasthan. Based on this, it seems to make little difference which party wins the election, since the caste of the MLAs remains largely unchanged, suggesting extraordinary social stability in both states. Additionally, in both Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the representation of women has decreased. Lastly, Verniers stated that the performance of the Congress has been commendable in this series of elections, and that not having won these states decisively actually poses a chance for the Congress to strike necessary alliances. Had the Congress swept these states, it could have become complacent vis-à-vis alliance-formation.

Madhya Pradesh

Mangal and Farooqui introduced the election in Madhya Pradesh, which had the highest voter turnout till date (74.05%) as a contest between the two major political parties – the Congress and the BJP – for 230 seats. Of these seats, BJP

got 109 (56 less than last time), while the Congress got 114 (56 more than last time). The number of independent candidates also rose from 2 to 5.

The major issues during these elections included Rahul Gandhi's campaign in Madhya Pradesh, as part of which he asserted his Hindu identity by visiting six prominent temples that covered half the total number of voters. Apart from this, he also visited masjids and gurudwaras as well as covered places that were Muslim- and tribal-dominated. Although the Vyapam scam was initially an issue to which Rahul Gandhi drew the public's attention, saying that the incumbent Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's family had been involved, Gandhi did not continue to apply pressure on this nerve. Instead, it was the agrarian crisis that had the bigger impact. In Madhya Pradesh, agricultural areas show a significant drop in vote share, but disenchantment with the BJP was not limited to agriculture, since the party's urban vote share fell as well (from 90% to 50%). Anti-incumbency proved to be an important force in the state: of the 47 MLAs from the BJP who sought re-election, only 23 won, and the number was small in the Congress as well. Anti-incumbency did, however, have a greater impact on the BJP because it had more to lose than the Congress.

In terms of representation, majority of the castes represented in Madhya Pradesh's assembly are upper castes, with about the same amount of representation between SCs, STs, and OBCs. The dominance of crorepatis across the two parties has continued: 78% of the BJP MLAs and (85 out of 109) and 76% of the Congress MLAs (87 out of 114) in power are crorepatis. Several MLAs had criminal cases against them as well: 28% of the elected BJP MLAs (31 out of 109) and 47% of elected Congress MLAs (54 out of 114) have criminal cases pending against them.

Mangal and Farooqui said that it is interesting to note that the BJP, despite losing, has a higher vote share than the Congress, which means that while there are more people who voted for the BJP, more seats went to the Congress, thereby bringing a Congress government to power. Additionally, they said that the Congress is taking its time in deciding who will be the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh – Kamal Nath or Jyotiraditya Scindia – because it does not want a violent situation on its hands like had been the case in Rajasthan.

Banerjee began the analysts' discussion by noting that although the party that spends the most money does not win elections, there are clearly a lot of rich people winning them.