

BJP Bandwagon Heading for a Podium Finish in General Elections 2019

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By Praveen Rai

The elections to choose the next government in India has entered into the final lap, but it is still difficult to predict the pole position of political parties in the race. The response of the electorate inked by ECI on voting question ranged from vague replies to semi-bluffs, as they seem reluctant in disclosing their voting preferences. The silence of the voters, stage-managed party campaigns and agenda driven election stories and debates in media further complicates the assessment of political churnings. The audit of previous government's track record, popularity ratings of leadership and electoral impact of welfare schemes would be a better method in comprehending the electoral wind.

The **Lok Sabha** Elections in 2009 was an electoral competition mainly between the Congress and the BJP alliance. The Congress contested the elections on twin issues of good governance and able leadership of Manmohan-Sonia-Rahul troika. The ratings of Manmohan Singh as Prime Ministerial choice was 35 percent, while his main rival L K Advani was a preference of 21 percent Indians (CSDS survey). The direct distribution of incomes to rural poor through NREGA and Bharat Nirman, farm loan waiver and pro incumbency sentiments benefited the Congress, as it won 200plus seats in the elections. The gain by Congress was transient, as the UPA II government was embroiled in multiple crises like corruption scandals, policy paralysis and high inflation. It resulted in simultaneous electoral waves in the 2014 elections: one a powerful Modi wave that propelled the BJP to win a simple majority (282 out of 543 seats) in parliament. Two a strong anti-incumbency tide that decimated the Congress with its tally dipping below the 50-seat mark.

The recall of previous Lok Sabha elections reveals that good governance, strong leadership and 'welfarist' interventions generates pro-incumbency sentiments. The BJP led by Narendra Modi provided a stable government with his popularity soaring at 43 percent after the bombing of terrorist camps inside Pakistan (CSDS survey). The saffron government's welfare initiatives included 'Swacchh Bharat Abiyan', 'Ujwala Yojana', 'Ayushman Bharat' and complete electrification of the country. The comparative appraisal shows that the performance of NDA 2.0 is better than UPA I regime, but the dividends may not be commensurate in terms of political investments. The index of opposition unity against the BJP is high AS COMPARED TO WHAT THE Congress had to face in the 2009 elections. This election has a close semblance with 2009 hustings on the yardsticks of governance and leadership, which could result in a windfall gain for the BJP.

It thus becomes important to magnify the snapshot of political party competitions in different regions for assessment of leads in the elections. An overview based on indicators like first mover advantage, merits of poll narratives and alliance tractions will broadly reveal the mood of the voters.

Hindi Heartland States

The cow belt region of India has been the favourite hunting ground for the BJP in 2014 Lok Sabha elections as it won 190 out of the 225 parliamentary constituencies. The

Hindi heartland includes the states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan.

The BJP, which won 71 out of the 80 parliamentary seats in Uttar Pradesh in 2014, is facing a tough competition from SP-BSP-RLD alliance, as their combined vote share of 42.7 percent in earlier edition is a notch above the saffron party. The grand alliance has been mobilizing Muslim votes in addition to its caste support base of Yadavs, Jatavs and Jats, while the BJP consolidated its caste arithmetic of upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits communities. The **Congress** is fighting to retain its sway in Gandhi pocket boroughs and regain its toehold in the state. The tidal surge for SP-BSP-RLD combine is a hype due to three reasons: one the clarion call by Mayawati to the Muslims for not wasting their votes on Congress was a self-goal, as it helped the BJP in counter mobilizing the Hindu votes. Two the strategy of regional party combine to distance itself from the Congress was erroneous, as the grand old party seems to have dented their vote shares instead of BJP. Three the SP is no more a force majeure as Akhilesh Yadav has neither the organizational skills nor the charismatic appeal of Mulayam Singh Yadav to forge a winning caste-community calculus. In all probability, the BJP would lose more than 20 parliamentary constituencies (PCs) in this election.

The saffron party has entered into an alliance with Nitish Kumar's JD(U) and LJP led by Ram Vilas Paswan for offsetting its losses in Bihar (40 seats). As part of the seat sharing arrangement, the BJP and the JD (U) is contesting in 17 seats each, while its junior partner LJP is fighting in 6 seats. Their combined vote share in 2014 elections was around 55 percent, which even after substantial dent of Muslim votes of JD(U) will be enough to defeat the RJD-Congress-RSLP-HAM alliance. The RJD is severely handicapped by the imprisonment of Lalu Prasad Yadav and does not have a strategy to stop the saffron bandwagon in the state.

In 2014 elections, Madhya Pradesh witnessed a saffron wave, which enabled the BJP in winning 26 out of the 29 PCs, while the Congress flag was furled only in three seats. However, the BJP received a wake up call in 2018 assembly elections, as the Congress stormed into power by winning 114 out of the 230 assembly seats. The BJP missed the bus, but won in 109 constituencies with 41 percent vote share, 0.1 percentage points higher than the grand old party. The competition in this election will be mainly between the BJP and the Congress, but the BSP in alliance with the SP and the Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP) could be a spoiler in few constituencies. The Congress is relying on Modi government's failure in addressing agrarian distress and unemployment, while the BJP is banking on Modi magic and welfare schemes. The Congress entered the fray with an incumbency advantage, but it was neutralized by polarization of the elections

on religious lines. The BJP fielded Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, a key accused in 2008 Malegaon blast case from Bhopal seat against Digvijaya Singh of Congress. The poll discourse on 'Hindu Terror' (Coined by Congress) seems to have created a Hindu backlash against the grand old party. The increased voter turnout could be a vindication of RSS narrative of enhanced mobilization of Hindu votes to defeat the Congress and retain saffron stronghold in the state.

The BJP in partnership with Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) won all the 25 seats in Rajasthan in 2014 elections with an impressive 56 percent vote share. However, the saffron party suffered a shock defeat in 2018 state elections, as the Congress won 100 out of the 200 assembly seats and formed the government. The BJP contested the election on muscular nationalism and Modi's report card, while the poll discourse of the Congress focussed on partial relief to farmers through loan waiver and its promise of minimum income guarantee to the poorest and annual farmer's budget. The BJP will continue its dominance with a loss of few seats due to two reasons: One the anger of voters was directed against the BJP chief minister Vasundhara Raje for her multiple political mishmash, rather than BJP. Her relocation from the state has quelled the anger against the saffron party. Two the elevation of Ashok Gehlot as the Chief Minister has created divisions in Congress state unit, as the Gujjar community is peeved for overlooking the candidature of its leader Sachin Pilot.

The BJP swept the elections in tribal dominated states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in 2014 elections by bagging 22 out of the 25 parliamentary constituencies. The BJP suffered one of its worst electoral defeats in Chhattisgarh as the Congress returned back to power with a thumping majority in state elections 2018. It won 68 out of the 90 assembly seats with the promise of waiving farm loans and empowering the backward and tribal segments in the state. The Congress has gained the trust of the voters by procuring paddy on central MSP with add-on bonus from state treasuries and its propagation of NYAY scheme among the poorest citizens. In Jharkhand, the BJP is facing an uphill task in retaining a dozen seats against the strong rainbow alliance of Congress, JMM (P) led by Babulal Marandi, JMM and the RJD. The BJP has allied with the All Jharkhand Student's Union (AJSU) led by Sudesh Mahto, but its anti tribal laws and regulation coupled with a non-tribal chief minister will reduce its tally in the state. The BJP tally in the states of Uttarakhand, Delhi, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh would be more or less the same as in Lok Sabha elections 2014. The saffron party may retain all the seven seats in Delhi due to fragmentation of votes between the Congress and

AAP, while in Haryana, the bifurcation in Jat (27 percent of the populace) dominated INLD, will make its task easier.

South Indian States

The south Indian states barring Karnataka has been the Achilles heel of the BJP, as even at the peak of saffron wave in 2014 it could win only 21 out of the 112 seats located in the five states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

In 2014 elections, Andhra Pradesh witnessed a three cornered contest between TDP-BJP alliance the Congress party and the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) led by **YS Jagan Mohan Reddy**. The TDP alliance supported by actor Pawan Kalyan won 17 out of the 26 seats (TDP 15, BJP 2), the YSRCP won 8 seats, while the Congress failed to open its account. The election in the state spanned out as a multi-party competition between the TDP, YSRCP, JSP, BJP and the Congress, but the main contestants were the TDP and the YSRCP. Chandrababu Naidu's dream of being a kingmaker in Delhi was dashed after it quit the NDA and JSPs refusal to join hands with him. The TDP is banking on direct transfer schemes to women in self-help groups, unemployed graduates and increased pension to retired citizens. Chandrababu Naidu, fearing an impending defeat joined the chorus of political parties on the issue of EVM malfunctioning and went overboard by stating that it can be manipulated. He also categorically stated that he is not in the race for prime minister, which is an indirect vindication of the fact that he is foreseeing a major loss. The YRSCP seems all set to take the political mantle from the TDP.

Tamil Nadu is the only state south of Vindhya where the BJP can extend its influence by piggy riding on the shoulders of Dravidian parties. In 2014 elections, the AIADMK led Jayalalitha swept the elections by winning 37 out of the 39 seats, the BJP and the PMK won in two PCs, while the DMK and the Congress drew a blank. The passing away of Dravidian icons, Jayalalitha and Karunanidhi in 2017-18 created space for new political actors to occupy centre stage in Tamil politics. The DMK led by M K Stalin had an early advantage as it stitched an alliance with the Congress and host of smaller parties. The BJP joined hands with AIADMK and host of parties with influence in different regions of the state. The two major alliances in the state is challenged by actor Kamal Haasan's Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM) and AMMK led by TTV Dhinakaran, who quit the AIADMK with a section of state legislators. The DMK led alliance seems to be ahead in the battle of ballots but it may not be able to sweep the elections, as the

AIADMK led allies could use their pockets of influence to win a significant number of seats.

In 2014 election, the BJP riding high on Modi wave won 17 out of the 28 seats in Karnataka, the Congress won 8 and the JD(S) led by HD Kumaraswamy managed to win two seats. The state election in 2018 was once again a battle between the three parties that resulted in a hung assembly, with BJP emerging as the single largest party. The Congress-JD(S) formed an alliance government in the state and jointly contested the Lok Sabha election against the BJP. The fault lines in the alliance became evident as both Congress and JD(S) blamed each other for not transferring their votes in the elections. The alliance traction will decide if the BJP loses or gains a few seats.

The BJP is not expecting major gains in Telangana, as the Telangana Rashtra Samiti led by K Chandrashekhara Rao (KCR) is still in honeymoon period of state election win, and will sweep the elections. In Kerala, the saffron party is hoping to capitalize on the Sabarimala temple agitation to win Pathanamthitta and Thrissur seats and could wrest the Thiruvananthapuram seat from two-time Congress MP, Shashi Tharoor.

Eastern and North Eastern States

The ten states in east and northeast region accounts for 88 seats in the lower house of Parliament. The BJP won 11 out of the 88 seats located in West Bengal and Odisha in east and Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim in North-east India.

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) led by Mamata Banerjee swept the 2014 Elections in West Bengal by winning 34 out of the 42 seats; the Congress won 4 and the Left Front and BJP 2 seats each. In 2014, the BJP made inroads in Bengal with 17 percent votes which triggered violent clashes with TMC cadres that resulted in the death of scores of saffron sympathisers in the state. The 2016 state election that followed was a triangular contest between TMC, Congress-Left Front alliance and the BJP-Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) combine. TMC warded off the challenge from two alliances and won 211 out of the 294 assembly seats with a five percent jump in vote share (45 per cent) since 2014 polls. The failure of the Congress-Left Front alliance in regaining its lost ground provided the BJP an opening to position itself as the principal opponent of TMC. The BJP maneuvered its way into the Bengal by the policy of 'Slice and Dice' that

involved poaching of political cadres and heavy weights from TMC, Congress and the Left parties.

The BJP has set a target of 22 seats and is primarily banking on the support of Hindu middle class and on the support of the Scheduled Tribes and Dalits(24 percent population), while the TMC is relying mainly on the rural poor and the working class apart from the Muslims (27 percent) and Dalits to win 35 plus seats. The poll discourse gravitated from real issues to personal attacks between Modi and Mamta, which resulted in escalation of poll violence. The high voter turnout in Bengal is a testimony of TMC ceding space to BJP, but Mamta Banerjee's domination will continue in Bengal politics. The BJP will certainly improve its tally of seats since 2014, but it remains to be seen if it could cross the double-digit figure in the state.

In Odisha, the BJD led by Naveen Patnaik not only kept the 'Modi wave' at bay, but also swept the 2014 elections by winning 20 out of the 21 parliamentary seats with 45 percent vote share. The BJP won a single seat with 22 percent votes, while the Congress with a higher vote share (26 percent) failed to open its account. The BJP witnessed a groundswell in 2017 Panchayat and municipal elections and won 297 seats, an impressive gain of 261 seats since 2012 polls. The BJD held on to its tally of 2012 local polls and the seats wrested by BJP were from Congress camp. The BJD is facing strong anti-incumbency current due to corruption charges against its leadership and cadres and may lose a significant number of seats to the BJP.

The BJP in 2014 General elections won seven seats in Assam and one in Arunachal Pradesh, while its allies Naga People's Front, National Peoples' Party and the Sikkim Democratic Front won one seat each. The NDA tally was 11 out of the 25 seats in North-eastern states. The saffron party has stitched a rainbow alliance with Asom Gana Parishad and Bodoland Peoples Front in Assam, Indigenous Peoples Front of Tripura in Tripura, National People's Party in Meghalaya, Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party in Nagaland and the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha in Sikkim. Since all the states in the region are ruled by the BJP and its alliance partners, the NDA may win more than 20 seats in this election.

States in Western India

The western states comprising of Maharashtra, Gujarat and Goa account for 74 PCs in India. The **BJP** in alliance with Shiv Sena won a landslide victory in General elections

2014 by winning 71 out of the 76 seats. In Maharashtra, the BJP-Shiv Sena combine swept the polls by winning 43 (BJP 23, SHS 20) out of the 48 seats, while the Congress-NCP could win five seats. The political partnership between the BJP and the Shiv Sena has been quite tumultuous with frequent break ups before they joined hands to contest against the Congress-NCP combine. The secular alliance took a long time in announcing the seat sharing deal, providing the saffron allies an advantage in the elections. The agrarian distress in the state further worsened during BJP rule leading to several protest rallies by the farmers, which culminated in the long Kisan March to Mumbai. The agitation ended after chief minister Devendra Fadnavis met them and agreed to waive off farm loans. The state faced a series of severe droughts that adversely affecting the rural economy with state schemes providing temporary relief. The upper hand of saffron alliance in the contest took a hit after the first phase of elections, as Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray held a series of rallies asking the electorate to vote against the BJP, indirectly helping the cause of Congress-NCP alliance. The BJP-Shiv Sena combine will lose seats in double digits, but would continue to hold its sway in the state.

The 2014, elections in Gujarat were people's endorsement of Narendra Modi's candidature for Prime Minister, as the BJP bagged all the 26 seats in the state. The state elections held in 2017 witnessed a comeback by Congress, as it won 77 out of the 182 seats, a gain of 16 seats from previous election. However, the saffron party won the state election with a slender margin (99 seats), but its votes share is still eight percent higher than the Congress. The grand old party lost its momentum gained in run up to Lok Sabha elections, as 5 MLAs from Saurashtra-Kutch region deserted the party and joined the BJP. The Congress campaign received a shot in the arm when Hardik Patel, the leader of dominant Patidar community (12 percent population) joined the party, but it received a jolt as Supreme Court barred him from contesting the elections. The problems for the Congress further amplified when Alpesh Thakore, leader of Thakore caste (8 percent) deserted the party. The BJP is hoping a repeat of 2014 elections on the plank of Modi's Gujarati pride, swing of Patidar voters due to proposed reservation and Amit Shah's poll pitch from Gandhinagar seat. In neighbouring Goa, the demise of charismatic Manohar Parrikar opens up the electoral race for the Congress and AAP, but BJP may once clinch both the Lok Sabha seats.

The BJP-Akali Dal alliance may hold on to its tally of 2014 elections in Punjab due to self-inflicted damages by Congress and the collapse of AAP unit in the state. The

saffron party may retain all the three seats in Jammu, while its tally in union territories would remain more or less the same.

To conclude, the dis-aggregation of political leads in different regions of India tosses up two election outcome scenarios: One in a conventional election, the BJP alliance may shed a sizable number of seats in Hindi heartland and western states. However, its electoral losses may be offset by significant gains in eastern and northeast states with electoral accretions in southern states. The BJP alliance is heading for podium finish in 2019 elections, but if it falls short of the magic number, it may seek additional support from YSRCP or TRS in government formation. Two in a Modi wave election, the saffron combine will hit through the roof with 350 plus seats in lower house of Indian parliament with more muscles in NDA 3.0 government.

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