

Chhattisgarh: An Emphatic Win for the BJP

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The Bharatiya Janata Party's win in Chhattisgarh can be attributed to a positive appraisal by the voting populace of the state government's performance in the state.

For most observers of Chhattisgarh's politics, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) victory in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections was on anticipated lines. The party had returned to power in the assembly elections held in 2008 with a comfortable majority. While many expected the BJP to win a majority of the seats in the Lok Sabha poll, its bagging of all but one of the seats in the state established a spectacular winning record (Table 1). Though this was a national poll, the BJP in Chhattisgarh consciously focused on state-level issues. These included the record of the Raman Singh government in ushering in development and its successful efforts at counter-acting Naxalite¹ violence in the state. Its rival, the Congress adopted a different strategy. Its campaign highlighted national issues like the United Progressive Alliance's performance at the centre with state issues – widespread disturbance and violence in the state due to the Salwa Judum campaign and growing suicides by farmers – being pushed to the backburner. The results clearly indicate that the BJP led by Chief Minister Raman Singh was once again able to convince the voters that it was best suited for promoting and protecting the interests of Chhattisgarh.

This article aims at understanding and analysing the electoral outcome in the state based on aggregate election data from the National Election Study 2009 (NES 2009).² It will also try to explore

and showcase the factors that best explain the verdict in favour of the BJP in Chhattisgarh.

Summary of Election Verdict

Though the BJP's tally of seats in the Lok Sabha election was quite impressive, its vote share declined from 48% in 2004 to 45% this time around. The loss did not affect the party's prospects as the Congress also lost around 3% of its vote share from 40% in 2004 to 37%. This gave the BJP a decisive lead in the neat bipolar contest. The BJP's performance was better in the parliamentary constituencies in the Naxalite-affected regions³ of the state as it was able to win all the five seats and secure around 49% of the votes polled (Table 1). The vote share of the party in the region not affected by the Naxalite movement of the state was 42%, 7 percentage points lower than in Naxal-affected constituencies. The BJP also scored an emphatic and decisive victory in seats reserved for scheduled tribes (STs) winning all the five seats with an 11 percentage point lead in vote share over its main rival, the Congress.

One of the reasons that explains the comprehensive victory of the BJP was the failure of secular parties to stitch a pre-poll alliance in the state. If the Congress and the Bahujan Samaj Party had hypothetically contested the elections as allies, the arithmetic of numbers could have resulted in the alliance winning two additional seats, apart from the one seat already won by the Congress.⁴ This is based on the assumption that both the parties would have managed to successfully transfer their votes to each other. This still implies that an alliance of the prominent non-BJP parties may have reduced the share of seats won by the BJP, but would

Table 1: Summary of Results

	Total		Congress		BJP		BSP		Others	
	Seats	Turnout (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)
Entire state	11	55.3	1	37.3	10	45.0	0	4.5	0	13.1
Naxalite-affected seats	5	58.4	0	37	5	48.7	0	3.2	0	11.1
Other seats	6	52.9	1	37.6	5	42.0	0	5.6	0	14.8
General seats	6	54.6	1	39.0	5	44.0	0	2.2	0	14.8
ST reserved seats	4	58.3	0	36.6	4	47.6	0	3.5	0	12.2
SC reserved seat	1	48.6	0	36.6	1	41.0	0	23.9	0	6.0

Turnout: 55.3% Change in turnout as compared to 2004: + 3%.
Source: CSDS Data Unit.

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Table 2: High Levels of Satisfaction with BJP State Government (in %)

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No Opinion	Net Satisfaction Score
All respondents	72	9	19	+83
BJP voters	84	5	11	+79
Congress voters	66	14	20	+52
Voters of other parties	62	9	29	+53

Net Satisfaction score is defined as satisfied with state government minus dissatisfied. Chhattisgarh weighted sample: 617 cases.

Q: What is your assessment of the work done by the BJP government in Chhattisgarh in the last six months – would you say that you are satisfied or dissatisfied with it?

Source: National Election Study 2009.

Table 3: Government Handled the Naxalites in an Effective Way (in %)

	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
All respondents	32	18	50
BJP voters	39	18	43
Congress voters	26	16	58
Voters of other parties	29	18	53

Chhattisgarh weighted sample: 617 cases.

Q: Now I will read out some things to you about the Raman Singh government. Please tell me for each of them, if you agree or disagree. (Probe further whether R fully agrees or disagrees.)

The government handled the Naxalites in an effective way.

Source: National Election Study 2009.

have still ensured that the BJP secured a majority of the seats.

The verdict in favour of the BJP in Chhattisgarh could be attributed to the twin issues of effective leadership and satisfaction of the voters with the performance of the government (Table 2). Forty per cent of the voters preferred Raman Singh to lead the state. He was way ahead of his nearest rival, Ajit Jogi (of the Congress), by 20 percentage points. More than seven out of 10 voters expressed satisfaction with the performance of the BJP-run state government. More than 60% of the opposition party voters also reported being satisfied with the performance of the incumbent government in the state. This popularity of the BJP seems to be one variable that expresses the overall satisfaction with the government and the positive rating the government enjoys on issues of development. In a bipolar contest, this popularity was expected to be the main driving force behind votes for the ruling party (Joshi and Rai 2009).

The anti-Naxalite stance of Raman Singh's government and his support to Salwa Judum movement in Chhattisgarh created several controversies. There were allegations of widespread human rights violation by the members of the Salwa Judum⁵ and security forces in the state. On the government handling of the Naxalites it is important to note that a majority of the respondents preferred not to express an opinion on the issue. Table 3 shows that more people agree with the way the

government has handled the challenge than those who disagree. It is relevant to note that it was not merely the supporters of the BJP who felt that the government had initiated steps to check Naxalism, even the supporters of other parties took that stand. A survey done earlier during the assembly poll too showed that the respondents felt that the BJP had done better than the Congress in curbing Naxalite violence in Chhattisgarh (Joshi and Rai 2009).

On whether the problem of Naxalism needs to be responded to by making the police and security forces stronger, a majority of the respondents preferred not to take a stand on the issue. Among those who took a stand was a clear difference of opinion in the "affected areas" and other areas. In the Naxalite-affected areas, more respondents tended to believe that strengthening the security and police was an effective way of tackling the Naxalites as compared to those who disagreed (Table 4). In non-Naxalite affected areas the reverse was true. This is relevant in the light of the fact that the BJP (which has advocated strengthening of the security/policy measures to deal with the Naxalites) swept the constituencies affected by the Naxalite movement.

The increasing number of farmer suicides⁶ in Chhattisgarh was considered by many to be an important determinant of public attitude towards the ruling party in the state. The number of such suicides has increased substantially in Chhattisgarh as per government's records. NES 2009 data reveals that more than four out of every 10 voters did not agree that farmer suicides had increased during BJP's rule in the state. Though the voter choice is directly linked with the satisfaction with the government performance in objective terms, the subjective satisfaction derived from image management was crucial in negating facts like

increasing suicides, thus resulting in the party reaping rich electoral dividends.

Social Basis of Voting

NES 2009 permits an analysis of the pattern of voting according to the social background of the respondents. The positive image of Raman Singh's government appears to cut across castes (Table 5). The BJP enhanced its vote share in this election among the upper castes by 12% and among the lower Other Backward Classes (OBC) by 13 percentage points as compared to the assembly elections held last year. Adivasis are numerically the strongest community in Chhattisgarh making up nearly one-third of the states population.⁷ The adivasi votes were split between the BJP and the Congress with the BJP having the advantage. The BJP made a gain of 3 percentage points among the adivasis in this election as compared with the previous state assembly elections. Dalits make up 12% of the state population. The BJP appears to have lost support among the dalits as there was a 7 percentage point fall in the votes from this community as compared with the assembly elections last year. However the BJP compensated for the loss of dalit votes by increasing its vote share among upper castes and lower OBCs.

To conclude, we can say that in the backdrop of the re-election of the BJP government in the state, the outcome was not unexpected. Within a few months of the return of the Raman Singh government, voters were not likely to take a critical view of its performance. The overall impression that the BJP government in the state was driven by a development agenda

Table 4: Opinion on Whether "Problem of Naxalism Can Only be Solved by Making the Police and Security Forces Stronger..." (in %)

	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
All respondents	17	24	59
Naxalite-affected seats	23	19	58
Other seats	14	27	59

Q: Now I am going to read out to you two different statements about the Naxalites and the Salwa Judum. Please tell me whether you are satisfied with the first statement or the second.

(a) Problem of Naxalism can only be solved by making the police and security forces stronger.

(b) The Naxal issue can be solved by negotiation and dialogue only, not by violence.

Source: National Election Study 2009; Weighted Data Sets.

Table 5: BJP Gains among Upper Castes, Lower OBC and Adivasis (in %)

	BJP Vote Share in 2009	Congress Vote Share in 2009	BJP Gain/Loss since Assembly Elections 2008
Upper castes	52	38	+12
Lower OBC	55	26	+18
Dalits	29	44	-7
Adivasis	43	40	+3

Source: National Election Study 2009.

Chhattisgarh weighted sample: 617 cases.

had a particular attraction for this backward state. Though a large number of respondents did not express opinion on matters related to the Naxalite issue, our study both now and in the assembly election indicated that a section of the public tends to favour the state government's policy of handling the Naxalite issue with a heavy hand. This too contributed to the comprehensive victory of the BJP in Lok Sabha elections from the state.

NOTES

- 1 Note that the terms "Naxal"/"Naxalite" are commonly used in Chhattisgarh to denote the Communist Party of India (Maoist). In official parlance elsewhere however, "Maoists" is the preferred term. This article stays true to the terminology used in Chhattisgarh.
- 2 National Election Study (NES) 2009 a post-poll survey was conducted by CSDS, Delhi. Six hundred and seventeen randomly selected respondents in Chhattisgarh spread across 60 locations (polling

stations) were interviewed using a standard-structured questionnaire. A multi-stage stratified random sample was drawn using the Probability Sampling method. The 60 locations were spread across 15 assembly segments and covered all the 11 parliamentary constituency of the state. The fieldwork was conducted after voting finished on the evening of 16 April 2009, and was completed by the evening of 22 April 2009.

- 3 Seven districts in Chhattisgarh are declared as Naxalite-affected districts by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Source: Annual Report 2005). The seven districts are as follows: Sarguja, Jashpur, Kanker, Kawardah, Rajnandgaon, Dantewada, and Bastar. On the basis of this five parliamentary constituencies of Sarguja, Raigarh, Rajnandgaon, Bastar and Kanker were classified as Naxal-affected seats.
- 4 The alliance could have won the Janjgir Champa and Durg (SC) parliamentary constituencies.
- 5 A fact-finding commission of the National Human Rights Commission of India appointed by the Supreme Court of India found that Salwa Judum was a "spontaneous reaction by the tribals to defend themselves against the reign of terror unleashed by the Naxalites." Bela Bhatia CSDS, Delhi in her paper "State Repression and the Context in Chhattisgarh" wrote, "Initially, the state tried to convince us that the Salwa Judum was popular dissent against Naxalites, but as stories began coming out, we realised that this was no spontaneous movement and was

orchestrated, planned, and funded by the state government, and fully supported by the union government", paper presented at "Democracy, Political Dissent, and Repressive Laws", proceedings of a PUCL-Karnataka Seminar held on 1 July 2007 in Bangalore.

- 6 According to the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) report of 2006, 1,483 farmers committed suicide in Chhattisgarh in that year. That is, four cases of suicide a day. NCRB put the number of farmer suicide cases in Chhattisgarh as the fourth highest in the country, behind only Maharashtra (4,453), Andhra Pradesh (2,607) and Karnataka (1,720). Even in terms of the Farmer Suicide Rate (FSR), which is calculated in terms of the number of suicide cases for every one-lakh farmers, Chhattisgarh's figures are high. The FSR put Kerala in the top spot with 142.9 cases for every one lakh farmers. Karnataka was second with 36.4 and Chhattisgarh was third with 33.7.
- 7 Source: Official web site of Chhattisgarh government - chhattisgarh.nic.in

REFERENCE

- Joshi, Dhananjai and Praveen Rai (2009): "Chhattisgarh 2008: Defeating Anti-Incumbency", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 7 February, Vol XLIV, No 6, pp 38-41.