

Chhattisgarh 2008: Defeating Anti-Incumbency

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The Bharatiya Janata Party's triumph in the Chhattisgarh assembly election had a lot to do with the way in which the public perceived the gains of the Raman Singh government's social sector spending. The opposition Congress embarked on its campaign with the plank of anti-incumbency but forgot to factor in that there is a perceptible link between voter choice and satisfaction with performance.

The Chhattisgarh assembly election held in December 2008 saw the Raman Singh-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government return to power with a clear majority. The incumbent BJP government confidently contested the election on the slogans of "development" and "fight against the red terror". The BJP's main rival, the Congress, along with its ally, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), preferred the more usual anti-incumbency plank. The result showed that Raman Singh's development record was able to persuade the electorate to grant him another five-year term in the state. Even the state action against the Maoists in the southern tribal tracts garnered support but like in the last assembly election, the BJP had a very thin lead in terms of votes polled, though it won a comfortable majority. What makes it important is that the BJP won this election against many odds: the Congress-NCP alliance that threatened to turn the tide, widespread disturbances and violence due to the Salwa Judum, a state-sponsored vigilante movement against the Naxalites, farmers' suicides and the incumbency factor. The BJP was able to win 50 assembly seats, the same as it won in the 2003 election, with a little over 40% of the votes polled, improving its vote share by 1%. The faction-ridden Congress managed to improve its tally to 38, one more than what it won in 2003, and secured a little over 39% of the vote, 1% more than in 2003. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which had two seats in the 2003 assembly, again

won two seats but improved its vote share by around 2%.

The results clearly point out that the Raman Singh government's image among voters as a development-oriented administration enabled it to counter the logic of anti-incumbency and the impact of the Congress-NCP alliance. This was strongly so among the voters in urban areas of the state. But this alone would not have given the BJP a decisive victory, carrying the Bastar region in particular and the entire Naxalite-dominated region in general. The BJP presented itself as a strong force capable of countering the Naxalite "menace". While much of the focus of media was on the Salwa Judum areas (Konta, Bijapur and Dantewada constituencies in south Bastar), what was crucial was the areas¹ outside it. This was where the BJP scored an emphatic victory, backed by Gond adivasis in the south and by non-adivasis in the north.

A region-wise disaggregation of election results shows that the BJP swept south Chhattisgarh, winning 11 of the 13 seats in this region (Table 1, p 39). South Chhattisgarh, comprising Bastar, Kanker and Dantewada districts, has been the hub of the Salwa Judum,² a government-supported initiative against the Naxalites which, though started by Congress leader Mahendra Karma, has enjoyed the active support of the BJP government. The BJP fared well in the tribal regions and all the rural assembly constituencies of the state where the Naxalite influence was strong. It managed to win 21 of the 30 Naxalite rural assembly constituencies with a vote share of more than 42%. The ruling party also captured the support of urban voters, winning nine out of the 12 urban assembly seats with a vote share of more than 49%. In rural areas not affected by Naxalites, the Congress did better than the BJP, winning 26 of the 48 rural seats. In neighbouring

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Madhya Pradesh as well, the BJP dominated in the urban constituencies in the recently held assembly election. It is noteworthy that the BJP did rather less satisfactorily in rural areas in both states, though the Congress failed to take advantage of this.

Table 1: Summary of Election Verdict

	Total Seats	Voter Turnout (%)	Congress + NCP		BJP		BSP		Others	
			Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (%)
Entire state	90	70.6	38	39.1	50	40.3	2	6.1	0	14.4
North Chhattisgarh	34	72.0	15	38.2	18	38.2	1	6.3	0	17.4
Central Chhattisgarh	43	71.4	21	41.3	21	41.8	1	6.5	0	10.5
South Chhattisgarh	13	63.4	2	33.0	11	41.4	0	3.9	0	21.6
Urban seats ¹	12	63.3	3	40.1	9	49.5	0	2.4	0	7.9
Naxal-rural seats	30	70.5	9	35.5	21	42.0	0	3.3	0	19.2
Other rural seats	48	72.4	26	41.0	20	37.4	2	8.5	0	13.1
General seats	51	70.8	24	40.8	26	41.4	1	5.8	0	11.9
ST reserved seats	29	70.5	10	36.7	19	39.2	0	3.3	0	20.7
SC reserved seats	10	69.6	4	36.8	5	38.1	1	14.4	0	10.8
Tribal dominated seats ²	47	72.1	20	38.1	27	39.0	0	3.3	0	19.6
Others	43	69.1	18	40.2	23	41.7	2	9.0	0	9.1

All the classifications stand for post-delimited assembly constituencies.

¹ Urban seats are those with more than 50% urban population (Census 2001); ² More than 20% tribal population (Census 2001).

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

In other words, there were three kinds of electoral competitions in the state: in urban constituencies, in Naxalite-influenced rural constituencies and in other rural constituencies. The BJP won hands down in the first two kinds of electoral contests while the Congress had an upper hand in the rural constituencies where the Naxalites were present. Thus the Congress suffered for overlooking these two special areas and contesting throughout the state on a uniform plank.

A Narrow Victory for the BJP

This leads us to our operational hypothesis that the state government's development and governance record, its initiatives vis-à-vis the Naxalites and its ability to meet electoral promises by providing adequate fiscal space helped beat the anti-incumbency factor in the state. The focus was more on the performance of the state government and satisfaction of the people with governance and development for two reasons: first, electoral politics in Indian states have been characterised by less volatility than in the 1970s,³ and second, by and large, less volatile states also experience less of an anti-incumbent swing, but the correlation is not perfect, which indicates that electoral volatility cannot be reduced to simply anti-incumbency (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2008).

Since the characteristics of electoral volatility in Indian states since the 1990s have been relatively consistent or declining (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2008), the hypothesis is that the administrative performance of the Raman Singh-led BJP government with exercise of adequate

fiscal space, resulting in their voting back the incumbent party for another term in office. Factors such as lack of anti-incumbency, lower levels of volatility, adequate fiscal space and "good governance" seem to have been the crucial determinants in deciding how Chhattisgarh voted in this election. This article is based on an in-depth analysis of the 2008 assembly election, using an extensive descriptive and inferential statistical analysis of public opinion on performance of the state government, besides other issues such as Naxalite/state violence and public-state relations. The main data source for the analysis is the Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study – 2008,⁴ a post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi.

Governments that are unable to provide services to the public because of financial constraints (fiscal space) suffer at the polls and are more likely to lose power, a factor that has resulted in low incumbency success rates in India (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2008).

"Fiscal space" has been defined as the room in a government's budget that allows it to provide resources for a desired purpose without jeopardising the sustainability of its financial position or the stability of the economy (Heller 2005). When a government exercises the fiscal space available to it to provide services to its citizens, the incumbent party is returned to power, because voters recognise that the degree to which a particular constituency (partisan or geographic) is targeted with these

services is a function of the support it provided the incumbent party or coalition of parties. Voters support parties in expectation of continually benefiting from state expenditure on public services. When states lack the fiscal space necessary to provide public services, voters have little reason to reward parties with their continued support and become open to alternative appeals (Chhibber and Nooruddin 2008). The BJP regime in the state presided over a lot of development projects and this saw an increase in social sector spending. In Chhattisgarh, from 2003 to 2008, while the non-plan expenditure increased only by 28%, plan expenditure (social sector spending) increased by 61%.⁵ Thus adequate fiscal space provided

Table 2: High Levels of Satisfaction with BJP Government of Chhattisgarh

	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	No Opinion	N	Net Satisfaction Score
All respondents	73	14	13	1,108	+69
Congress + NCP voters	57	26	17	427	+31
BJP voters	87	3	10	446	+84
BSP voters	74	11	15	69	+63
Voters of other parties	75	14	11	166	+61

Table is statistically significant @ p. value < .001.

"Net Satisfaction score" is defined as satisfied with state government minus dissatisfied.

Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

Table 3.1: Performance on Basic Amenities and Services

Those Who Say That under BJP Rule...	Improved	No Difference	Deteriorated	No Opinion
Condition of roads	66	23	6	5
Electricity supply	45	35	10	10
Educational facilities	43	34	6	17
Healthcare facilities	30	44	12	14
Condition of farmers	30	35	16	19
Irrigation facilities	22	40	19	19
Law and order	22	41	12	25

Table 3.2: Corruption, Inflation and Employment

Those Who Say That under BJP Rule...	Increased	Same As Before	Decreased	No Opinion
Corruption	19	16	14	51
Employment opportunities	40	34	10	16
Inflation	77	14	5	4

Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

by Raman Singh's government to the people could have been an important reason for them voting the incumbent regime back to power. However, this alone does

Table 4: Which Party Is Better?

Criteria	BJP	Congress	No Opinion	Net Advantage BJP
Overall development of the state	51	28	21	+23
Welfare of the poor	49	26	25	+23
Welfare of women	41	23	36	+18
Curbing corruption	31	18	51	+13
Response to Naxalites	29	16	55	+13

Net Advantage BJP is defined as perception of BJP as a better party minus Congress.
Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

Table 5: Performance under Raman Singh Government

	Agree	Disagree	No Opinion
Farmer suicides have increased	12	35	53
State's resources have been wrongly given to foreign companies	15	23	62

Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

Table 6: Perception on Schemes: State or Central Government Scheme

	Central Government	State Government	Can't Say	Not Heard
Farmers' loan waiver	20	30	18	32
NREGA	23	36	20	21

Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

not explain the BJP's victory, and other determinants of why the people voted in favour of it need to be analysed.

The anti-Naxalite stance of the BJP government and its support for the Salwa Judum movement in Chhattisgarh was mired in controversy with allegations by human rights organisations that people had been abused by the movement's activists and government security forces. The survey tried to probe public opinion on this issue in Naxalite-affected areas but 55% to 69% of the respondents (depending on the question) did not express an opinion.

Public Opinion on the Government and Naxalites in Chhattisgarh:

It is clear that popular sentiment was in the favour of Raman Singh government. But the question is whether this sentiment was a result of the government's handling of the Naxalite movement or whether its performance in other areas played a major role. The survey reveals that voters in Chhattisgarh were highly satisfied with the performance of the BJP government – 73% of the electorate expressed satisfaction with the party's performance in the state. Around 40% reported full satisfaction with the state government. A majority of respondents

supporting all parties, including the Congress and the BSP, reported being satisfied with the performance of the BJP government (see Table 2, p 39). This was an interesting finding because it is unusual for supporters of the main opposition parties to report that they are satisfied with the performance of the ruling party.

Overall Satisfaction with State Government: More than seven out of 10 voters in the state seemed to be satisfied with the overall performance of the state government at the macro level, and this seems to have translated into votes for BJP. The Raman Singh government scored highly on parameters of governance like improving the condition of roads, electricity supply and educational facilities (Tables 3.1 and 3.2, p 39).

If we compare public opinion on the condition of roads in the state during Raman Singh's government with the previous Ajit Jogi government, we find that 66% voters said the condition of roads improved during the BJP's rule. Only 49% said they improved during the time of the previous Congress government. Similarly, a significant section of the voters assessed the government's performance as satisfactory on governance indicators like healthcare facilities, condition of farmers, irrigation facilities and law and order. The only red lines on the government's report card were on the issues of controlling prices and corruption. More than seven out of 10 voters were of the opinion that inflation had increased during Raman Singh's tenure and two out of 10 thought that corruption had increased. Thus the overall performance of Raman Singh's government based on governance assessment both at the macro and micro levels was fairly rated by the state's voters.

Assessment of the BJP Government's Performance in Last Five Years: Apart from getting feedback from the voters on satisfaction levels with the state government's performance, the survey asked

them to comparatively assess and rate which party, the Congress or the BJP, was better on issues such as overall development of the state, curbing corruption, welfare of women and the poor, and responding to the Naxalite movement (Table 4). On all these, the BJP was rated better than the Congress. On the overall development of the state, the BJP was perceived to be better than the Congress by 23 percentage points. Public opinion was that since the BJP came to power in 2003, farmers' suicides had fallen, and the allegation that state resources had been squandered on foreign companies was baseless (Table 5). This popularity of the BJP seemed to be one variable that expressed the overall satisfaction with the government and the positive rating the government enjoyed on issues of development. In a bipolar contest, this popularity became the main driving force behind votes for the ruling party.

Comparison of the Congress and the BJP: Who Is Better?:

This popularity of the BJP also helped it cash in on some of the schemes introduced by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance at the centre. Popular initiatives such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the waiver of loans to farmers were by and large perceived to be schemes of the state government. In voters' perception, the credit for both these central government schemes went to the state government (Table 6). This finding suggests that the BJP has developed a popular image that might not always coincide with what exists on the ground level.

With the BJP winning a second consecutive term, it is interesting to analyse the demographic patterns of voting in this election. The post-poll survey provides a

Table 7: Vote by Caste/Community

	Congress +NCP	BJP	BSP	Others	N
Upper caste	30	40	3	27	113
Yadav	25	59	7	9	109
Kurmi	46	43	0	11	66
Other OBC	33	37	6	24	242
Dalit	34	36	17	13	146
Gond	30	64	-	6	67
Other adivasis	54	32	4	10	311
Others	36	42	9	13	53

N denotes number.
Table is statistically significant @ p. value < .001.
Source: CSDS Chhattisgarh Assembly Election Study, Post-Poll – 2008, weighted data set (Un-weighted n=1249).

snapshot of the voting pattern of electors from different castes and communities (Table 7, p 40). Adivasis are numerically the strongest community in Chhattisgarh, comprising 32% of the state's population. Bastar district has a 70% tribal population, constituting 27% of the total tribal population of the state.⁶ More than 20% of the Gond tribals are inhabitants of Bastar district. Table 7 shows that more than six out of 10 voters from the dominant Gond community voted for the BJP. With en bloc voting by the most dominant community in the district, the BJP swept the election in Bastar, winning all the six seats in it. However, among other adivasi communities, the Congress was the popular choice of the 54% of the voters.

Dalits comprise 12% of the population in the state. Dalit votes seemed to be almost equally split between the BJP and the Congress, with the BSP failing to win a major slice. The BJP had 36% support among the dalits whereas the Congress had 34%. Though high on expectations, the BSP could manage to get only 17% of the dalit votes in the state. Of the 10 seats reserved for dalits in the state, the BJP won five, the Congress four and the BSP one. Among the other backward classes in the state, the BJP received more support from the Yadav community, with 59% voting for it. The Congress had more support among the Kurmi community, capturing 46%. The BJP had the larger support of upper-caste voters compared with the Congress and other parties in the state. More than four out of 10 upper-caste voters reported voting for the BJP. Thus the voting pattern reveals that in this election the BJP had the support of voters that cut across castes and communities. Though, of course, support for it was somewhat weaker among the dalits and non-Gond adivasis. Thus the support base of the BJP may be described as upper castes, Yadavs and adivasis.

To conclude, it can be said that public opinion believed that the state government had performed in delivering basic goods and services by exercising adequate fiscal space to the people in Chhattisgarh. This, along with a general sense of satisfaction with the way the state government handled the Naxalite issue, led to a positive image for the BJP that helped beat the

anti-incumbency factor. This cautions us that incumbency need not always be a liability; that there is a perceptible link between voter choice and satisfaction with performance and that apart from performance in objective terms, the subjective factor of satisfaction derived from image management can be an important player in the shaping of electoral fortunes. As a footnote, it may be added that this analysis is based on a clear-cut bi-party competition and how factors of image and anti-incumbency would unfold in a multiparty contest is another matter.

NOTES

- Seven districts in Chhattisgarh have been declared as Naxal-affected districts by the Ministry of Home Affairs (Source Annual Report 2005). They are: Sarguja, Jashpur, Kanker, Kawardah, Rajnandgaon, Dantewada and Bastar. On the basis of this, 31 assembly constituencies are classified as being in Naxal-affected areas.
- A fact-finding commission of the National Human Rights Commission of India appointed by the Supreme Court found out that the Salwa Judum was a "spontaneous reaction" by the tribals to defend themselves against the "reign of terror unleashed by the Naxalites". Bela Bhatia of the CSDS, Delhi, in her paper "State Repression and the Context in Chhattisgarh", says, "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." Presented at "Democracy, Political Dissent, and Repressive Laws" at the APUCI-Karnataka Seminar held on 1 July 2007 in Bangalore.
- Electoral volatility is defined as the "net electoral change between two consecutive elections" (Bartolini and Mair 1990). Aggregate levels of electoral volatility, measured as the net change in vote shares for parties competing in the elections, are used as a convenient proxy for the cumulation of individual vote shifts.
- In Chhattisgarh, 1,249 randomly selected respondents spread across 80 locations (polling stations) were interviewed using a standard-structured questionnaire. A multi-stage stratified random sample was drawn using the probability proportionate to size (PPS) sampling method. The 80 locations were spread across 20 assembly constituencies of the state. The fieldwork was conducted after polling ended but before the counting began: for Phase I from 16 to 20 November and for Phase II from 21 to 25 November 2008.
- Figures have been computed from the Annual Budget of Chhattisgarh for the relevant years.
- Source: Official web site of the Chhattisgarh government - chhattisgarh.nic.in.

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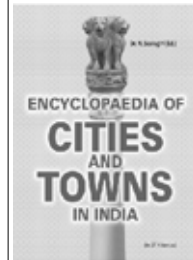
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