

NOTA: NOT A DECISIVE FACTOR

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Ever since voters have been provided the 'None of the Above' (NOTA) option if they do not want to vote for any of the candidates in the fray, political parties now cite many voters having chosen NOTA as a reason for losing an election. This may be true in very close contest, when voters are in small numbers and the margin of victory and defeat is rather small. But overall, there has hardly been any election in India where NOTA has been instrumental in altering an electoral verdict.

In the recent round of elections to five State Assemblies (Telangana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Chhattisgarh), where the margin of votes between the main contenders, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was narrow—for example only 0.1% in Madhya Pradesh and about 0.5% in Rajasthan—the BJP cited NOTA voting as among the main reason for its defeat. However, had the Congress been in the BJP's position, it too would have blamed NOTA. Thus NOTA is a convenient political scapegoat. Even voters have started to believe that NOTA has become a very important factor in Indian elections.

In the recent State Assembly elections, the results indicate a decline in NOTA votes in four States, Telangana being the only exception. The decline was from 1.9% to 1.4% in Madhya Pradesh; 1.9% to 1.3% in Rajasthan; 3.0% to 1.9% in Chhattisgarh; and 0.6% to 0.4% in Mizoram. In Telangana, there was a marginal increase from 0.7% to 1.0%. The data show no bigger attraction for NOTA in these five States in the last five years. It is the same in States other than these five which have gone to the polls in recent years.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, only 1.08% voters opted for NOTA nationally. There was hardly any significant NOTA vote except in Puducherry where 3% voters opted for it and 2.8% in Meghalaya. In a number of States, the NOTA votes were in the range of 1-1.5% of the total votes polled. When the average size of a Lok Sabha constituency is about 27 lakh voters, it is difficult to imagine that a small percentage of votes could alter electoral outcomes in a large number of constituencies.

It is widely believed, and true to some extent, that NOTA could be a useful tool (such as in a local body election) if constituencies are smaller in size, with fewer voters. But this is still not seen as a viable option among voters even in a State Assembly election. The preference for NOTA in Assembly constituencies reflects the trend of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. An average Assembly constituency in a State in the Hindi heartland has about 4-5 lakh voters; a small number of voters opting for NOTA will hardly affect the overall electoral outcome. There may be instances of a significant number of constituencies where NOTA votes may be higher than the margin of victory, but, normally, such seats are also divided between various political parties in proportion to their share of victories.

There was such a situation in these Assembly elections. In Madhya Pradesh, there were at least 23 Assembly constituencies where NOTA votes were more than the margin of victory. Of these, 10 were won by the BJP while 12 went to the Congress. The Burhanpur Assembly seat was won by an independent. In Rajasthan, in the close contest between the Congress and the BJP in 16 Assembly seats, NOTA votes were higher than the victory margin, but these seats were evenly distributed between both parties. Of these 16 Assembly seats, eight went to the BJP and seven to the Congress. An independent candidate won the Marwar Junction seat by 251 votes. In Chhattisgarh, there were eight such Assembly seats, with three going to the BJP, two to the

Congress and three to the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh.

In the 2013 Assembly elections in Rajasthan, even when the BJP led the Congress by 12% votes there were 11 Assembly seats where NOTA votes were more than the victory margin (six went to the BJP, three to the Congress and two by National People's Party). It was not different in Madhya Pradesh in the same year when the BJP led the Congress by 8% votes . Of the 26 Assembly seats where NOTA votes were higher than the victory margin, 14 went to the BJP, 10 to the Congress, one to the Bahujan Samaj Party while the Sehore seat was won by an independent. Even in Chhattisgarh, that year, of the 15 Assembly seats where NOTA votes were more than the victory margin, eight went to the BJP and seven to the Congress. So can we say that NOTA is more important in these elections compared to the past?

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