

# LESSONS FROM THE 2023 ASSEMBLY POLLS FOR THE 2024 LOK SABHA BATTLE

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'While the BJP's win in these three States is quite significant, historical evidence that the party which wins these three States goes on to win the Lok Sabha election is mixed' | Photo Credit: ANI

Election results in the three Hindi heartland States of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh are being widely celebrated in ruling circles as a resounding semi-final victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Prime Minister Narendra Modi termed it a "hat trick" and claimed it to be the harbinger of another "hat trick in 2024".

While the BJP's win in these three States is quite significant, historical evidence that the party which wins these three States goes on to win the Lok Sabha election is mixed. The BJP won the 2014 Lok Sabha election after its victory in the 2013 Assembly elections in these States, but it lost to the Congress in these States in 2018, yet won the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Two decades ago, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee had launched the "India Shining" campaign after similar victories in the Assembly elections in 2003, only to lose the Lok Sabha elections in 2004.

So, there is certainly no "guarantee" of a BJP win here. Much will depend on how the Congress and other Opposition parties analyse the results and the lessons they draw from the defeat to strategise for 2024.

Many in the Opposition camp have, however, turned despondent because their expectations were raised by multiple exit polls predicting a smooth win for the Congress in Chhattisgarh and much closer contests in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. While most exit polls accurately predicted the Congress's impressive victory in Telangana, with even one getting the win by the Zoram People's Movement's (ZPM) win in Mizoram right, why did most exit polls fail to predict the outcomes in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan?

The reason can be found in the different voting trends underlying the verdict in the various poll-bound States in 2023. In Telangana, there was an over 9% point swing away from the incumbent Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) compared to its vote share in 2018, which translated into a loss of over 20 lakh votes and 49 seats. The Congress increased its vote share by 11% points and gained 45 seats from 2018.

In Mizoram, the ZPM gained 19 seats more in 2023 than its 2018 tally to secure a majority with a 15% point swing in its favour. The incumbent Mizo National Front (MNF) lost 2.6% points in vote share and 16 seats compared to 2018, while the Congress lost over 9% points in vote share and four seats.

Compared to this, the incumbent Congress governments of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh witnessed negative swings of 0.3% and 0.8%, respectively. This is why the anti-incumbency against the BRS regime in Telangana was clearly discernible, while that against the State governments of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh was not very evident.

In Madhya Pradesh, where it was in the opposition, the Congress's vote share eroded by around 0.5% points. Such a small erosion in the Congress's vote share, however, translated into significant losses in Assembly seats across the three States.

That is because the BJP succeeded in increasing its vote shares by 7.6% points in Madhya Pradesh, 2.4% points in Rajasthan and a very significant 13.3% points in Chhattisgarh. Even in Telangana, where it finished third, the BJP's vote share increased by 7% points.

The BJP managed to attract more votes from smaller parties and independents than by denting the Congress's vote share. For instance, the vote share of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) eroded in Madhya Pradesh by 1.6% points, Rajasthan by 2.3% points, Chhattisgarh by 1.8% points and Telangana by 0.7% points. Similar declines can be seen in the vote share of other smaller parties and independents in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana. This includes the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (JCC) which had won five seats with a 7.6% vote share in 2018 in alliance with the BSP, but drew a blank in 2023.

Converting this round of Assembly polls into a prequel of the Lok Sabha election, with the Prime Minister leading the BJP's campaign and national issues dominating the electoral discourse rather than State-specific ones, helped the BJP in this endeavour. In Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, the BJP's vote shares both in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections were considerably above its Assembly election vote shares in 2013 and 2018, respectively. The BJP's vote share in 2019 in these three States was 17%-19% higher than that of 2018. This is the so-called "Modi effect".

Conversely, the Congress's vote share has tended to be significantly lower in the Lok Sabha elections compared to the Assembly elections. The vote shares of Others/Independents, however, have fluctuated even more widely than that of the Congress. In the 2023 Assembly polls, while the Congress retained much of its electoral base in the three heartland States at the 2018 level, the BJP increased its vote shares significantly by squeezing the vote shares of Others/Independents in all three States to their lowest levels since 2013. This has been the key to the BJP's success.

The Congress and the other Opposition parties can work on three strategic electoral goals before the Lok Sabha elections in order to prevent a repeat.

First, the Congress must try to consolidate its base in these three heartland States through an effective ideological campaign — not only on government schemes and electoral promises but also on a range of constitutional values that are now at stake. The effort should be to ensure that every section of the electorate that voted for the Congress in 2023 votes for it again in 2024.

Second, the Congress and other Opposition parties in the INDIA formation should finalise their seat sharing arrangements without further delay and formulate a common programme which can provide a progressive, socially just, equitable and substantive alternative to the policies of the

present regime. Both the Congress as well as the stronger regional parties in INDIA ought to display a spirit of accommodation and unity of purpose, the absence of which was evident during the recent Assembly poll campaigns.

Finally, serious efforts must be made to further broaden the INDIA coalition by identifying and reaching out to more potential allies. The BSP's inclusion can certainly add value, given the recent Assembly poll experience. Outreach could also be made to smaller State-level parties for inclusion in State-specific INDIA blocs in order to take on the BJP's formidable electoral and propaganda machine.

Engagement with parties such as the ZPM, the Bharat Adivasi Party, the Gondwana Gantantra Party and others, that have made a mark in this round of Assembly elections, as also with similar parties in other States, is imperative. This can contribute to a diverse, motivated and grassroots-level coalition in the run-up to the national elections.

Prasenjit Bose is an economist and activist

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