

HOW WILL THE FIVE STATE ELECTIONS INFLUENCE NATIONAL POLITICS?

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

*In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, [Assembly elections are due in five States: Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa](#). In a conversation moderated by **Varghese George, Yamini Aiyar** and **Manish Tiwari** discuss the national implications of these Assembly elections. Edited excerpts:*

Manish Tiwari: Incumbents are always on the defensive because people have high expectations. Not only the general public, but party workers also become very ambitious and also anxious. All the incumbent governments are facing a lot of challenges because they are unable to fulfil not just the general public's expectations but also of the party cadre. In U.P., Brahmins are said to be unhappy with the BJP and now the OBC [Other Backward Classes] leaders are also leaving in herds. In Punjab, the Congress removed Amarinder Singh unceremoniously from chief ministership, and that has put a lot of strain on the party structure. In Uttarakhand, the BJP, which changed its leadership twice, faces similar challenges. In Goa too, if we look at MLAs and party leaders leaving the BJP, it appears that the ship is going to sink. The Congress has an uphill task and the BJP has the maximum stability only in Manipur.

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Yamini Aiyar: This is the million-dollar question that is linked to your previous question on incumbents. These questions confront the incumbents. There is economic distress as a consequence of COVID-19. The farm laws exposed how we think about the challenge of agrarian reforms, the role of the farmer, the farmers' political capacity to mobilise in some ways. The farm laws and the agitation brought the farmer to the centre of the political debate. And this creates its own challenges for the incumbents. In U.P., the BJP has a 'double engine' growth narrative. There is a distinction that the voter is increasingly making between national elections and State elections and that is very sharp in U.P. The Congress in Punjab is in a better position to handle the farm question, but it has not articulated an alternative. Are there alternative narratives to the options available for agricultural reforms? We are walking into an election with significant fault-lines in society, economy and politics. I think a lot will depend on the extent to which political parties are able to provide voters with alternatives.

Yamini Aiyar: Oh, I think you're absolutely you've hit the nail on the head. Despite the voters coming out to vote against the backdrop of significant challenges that they are confronting, they are going to be confronting an election campaign and potentially even making electoral decisions on the back of an emotive campaign. I think of this as an ideological election. After all, U.P. in particular is the site of much of the ideological contestation that India has experienced, and it's continuing to unfold and unravel in many different ways. Among the economic challenges, the issues of policy, welfare are all going to be part of the election narrative. These are at the heart of the debates that we are having as a nation and are therefore naturally going to shape how the voter is going to choose to vote. What I do want to emphasise also is that, in many State elections, and we've seen this template play out, especially after 2019, State-level Opposition parties have sound a template that works at the State level that effectively manages to, in some senses, blunt the overall national popularity of the BJP. And that template is very much about local issues, local governance and regional identity rather than an articulation of an alternative ideological narrative to what the BJP is presenting. And to my mind, that is ultimately

at the heart of the challenge. Is the Arposition going to be able to present a viable, logical alternative?

Manish Tiwari: The Hindutva card has been successful for a long time. But this time, it is going to be a test for Hindutva. The BJP has got such a majority after a long time on the plank of Hindutva, which it doesn't hesitate to showcase. Look at the Kashi project, that is how they are playing the Hindu card. Now, the question is, how long or how far will it work. Swami Prasad Maurya defected from the BJP. This is a kind of test case. The BJP has been claiming to be a party of the OBCs — now, managing the OBC claim and Hindutva together appears to be difficult. Swami Prasad Maurya claimed, while leaving the party, that he helped the BJP come back from its 14-year vanvaas. If the OBCs stop subscribing to Hindutva, it will very difficult for the party to remain in power in most of the places.

The dystopic reality of a Hindutva state

Manish Tiwari: The challenge had already become apparent when Shivraj Singh did not win the majority in Madhya Pradesh. In Bihar, the BJP's win was marginal. The national leadership of the BJP claims to have more support of the OBCs but the fact is that the BJP's regional leadership is not so and this is the reason that the BJP is facing a serious challenge of keeping the OBC base intact in the name of Hindutva.

The Hindu vote, an emerging ethnocracy

To bring together all the OBCs in the name of Hindutva does not always work because ultimately, society is much more diverse and segregated. The kind of exodus that the BJP is seeing in U.P., if it continues, it will spiral in other States too.

Manish Tiwari: Dalits as a category is also not monolithic. A large section of non-Jatav Dalits in U.P. were already voting for the BJP. Now, the young among the Dalit supporters of the BSP are looking for political options. They aren't going to vote for the BSP when it's not a winnable option. My take is that the BSP, this time, would come down to a single digit in vote percentage in U.P.

Mayawati's strange inertia

In Punjab, by picking Charanjit Singh Channi as the first Dalit Chief Minister of Punjab, the Congress is not just addressing a large section of Punjab population of Dalits but also their counterparts in different States. I have been speaking to a lot of them. Many are happy supporting the Congress even though they know that the Congress will not win.

Yamini Aiyar: There's no doubt that AAP has energy around it, and in Punjab in particular. AAP is certainly seen as a significant political opposition to the Congress. And it has been able to keep that momentum going. The AAP has also been able to build on what it did in Delhi, of governance and welfare that is local and responsive to voter demands. But it doesn't add up to an effective challenge to the BJP at the national level. The BJP has very effectively been able to bundle in elements of what have been part and parcel of Indian elections and the voter-politician compact, particularly welfare and aspects of governance (along with its ideology). And you will see pockets of good governance and significant pockets of weak governance across the country. A national-level challenge to the BJP doesn't exist, which the governance narrative, the welfare narrative is not collectively able to articulate effectively.

Kejriwal comes out with AAP's 'Punjab Model', promises justice in sacrilege cases

Yamini Aiyar: Elections are always a test of democracy. Even though the Indian voter stands up to this test effectively by coming out in great enthusiasm and casting her vote, politicians never come out with flying colors. We have long struggled with challenges of campaign finance and the quality of campaign. In the last few years, the challenges have been exacerbated because of the combination of centralisation of financing, the role of the media, and the ability of money and media to come together. And the weakness of institutions in ensuring fairness and equity and following rules have all come to further undermine the sanctity of the electoral process, even though the voter is coming out now in even more enthusiasm than the past to cast her vote. I think what is going to be particularly unique about this election is, in many ways similar to the elections of April and May last year, the voter is going to be asked to cast their vote against the backdrop of a raging pandemic.

The democratic backsliding of India

Manish Tiwari: It definitely looks like it but the reality is not always what it looks like. We were all doubting whether the elections would be held or the government would impose presidential rule in the States for a few months in the name of COVID-19, but the Election Commission announced the elections. It has announced a lot of restrictions regarding rallies and campaigning. Yes, the ruling party has the advantage in the form of a largely favourable media, but ultimately the people of the country have their own minds. Even today, there are so many checks and controls.

Yamini Aiyar is Chief Executive, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi; Manish Tiwari is Director, Institute for Governance, Policies and Politics, New Delhi

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India has a unique opportunity to develop and grow richer before ageing sets in

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