

Lessons from a Congress victory

Since the the last decade of the 20th century, political competition in Rajasthan has attained a fair degree of stability, marked by a regular oscillation of political power between the Indian National [Congress](#) (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party ([BJP](#)). The outcome of the 15th Vidhan Sabha election in the state followed this pattern. The Congress is in the driver's seat once again and the BJP has suffered a major debacle, losing almost 100 constituencies over its tally of 163 seats in 2013. However, the BJP's loss is not completely the Congress's gain. Other political parties which have shown their influence are the BSP, CPM, the newly-formed Rashtriya Loktantrik Party and the Bharatiya Tribal Party. Rebels, mostly from the Congress, but also from the BJP, have won about a dozen seats.

If a comparison is made between the 2013 and 2018 verdicts, one can clearly infer that though the BJP has lost this time, its performance is not as poor as that of the Congress in 2013. There is not much difference between the two parties as far as the voteshare is concerned. The 2018 election has thus been a close contest. The outcome has surprised many because most pre-poll and exit poll surveys were predicting a comfortable victory for the Congress. Early this year, the BJP had suffered a severe drubbing in the by-elections for the Alwar and Ajmer Lok Sabha constituencies as well as the Mandalgarh assembly seat. There was a strong feeling of discontent with the BJP government led by Vasundhara Raje. This dissatisfaction itself was a result of perceived poor performance, a deteriorating law and order situation and corruption.

In many parts of the state, especially in north-west and central Rajasthan, the farmers were up in arms against the government. Unemployment, price rise and the inadequate delivery of essential services were regarded as major failures

of the government. In a pre-poll survey conducted by Lokniti-CSDS towards the end of November 2018, more than half the respondents said that the BJP government must not be given another chance. Faced with this widespread anti-incumbency, one expected a more comprehensive mandate for the Congress.

The Congress has won but even in its victory, the party must be thinking as to what prevented it from sweeping the polls despite the negative sentiment against the Raje government. To initiate the debate, a number of factors can be flagged to explain this lower-than-expected performance. Early on during the election process, the party could not work out a mutually agreeable alliance with the BSP. The half-hearted alliance with parties such as the Nationalist Congress Party, Rashtriya Lok Dal and the Janata Dal of Sharad Yadav carried no political salience. In fact, these tie-ups became a liability for the Congress, as the results have proved. The Congress stumbled once again with the delay in declaring its candidates. Once it finally did, there was an avalanche of disgruntled leaders who left the party on being denied a ticket. That their anger was justified is vindicated by the fact that many rebels have won. The Congress was also slow to declare its manifesto, which has not projected as to how the party differs from its principal rival. All this had an adverse impact on the party's campaign.

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One may even say that the focus of the Congress campaign was to denounce the misdeeds and non-performance of the Narendra Modi-led central government. In a lighter vein, people pointed out that the Congress is campaigning for the Lok Sabha election. But on a more serious note, it must also be pointed out that there is strong political affection for Narendra Modi among the voters of Rajasthan. Therefore, this strategy of targeting Modi and central government does not seem to have served the Congress well.

One final factor is the choice of the Congress to not declare

its chief ministerial candidate. This issue kept dogging the party all throughout the campaign. The BJP used the indecision to the hilt and the media never relaxed its sharp questions to both Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot. Both had rehearsed answers that appeared far from convincing. On the other hand, the BJP knowing full well the high degree of unhappiness with Vasundhara Raje still projected her as the potential chief minister. The question is: Did this strategy of the Congress to not project a leader help the party at the hustings? Not really. The Lokniti-CSDS survey not only gave Gehlot a formidable edge over Pilot but a substantial number of respondents observed that their vote for Congress depends upon Gehlot being projected as the CM candidate.

Notwithstanding the above, the Congress has won the elections. The party will have to take a call on the chief minister question. It has to keep local sentiments in mind while making a decision. The party also has to look ahead at the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. Although the “iron law of electoral democracy” in India does say that when two major elections are held at close intervals, the result of one impacts the outcome of the other, the Congress cannot take this for granted. Learning from the Vidhan Sabha elections, the party must make necessary amends in its strategies and programmes.

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