Lessons from the Assembly polls for the 2024 battle

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?

Results show different voting trends
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

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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.

Lok Sabha and Assembly vote share
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.

Electoral goals for the Opposition
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.

MP Index reduction under the NDA is flawed

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Samuel Johnson, a profound literary critic and essayist, wrote, "Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable, and others extremely difficult." In sharp contrast, conventional measures of poverty in terms of income are limited and narrowly focused on scarcity of resources to eke out a bare subsistence. But there is much more to poverty than a bare subsistence, as emphasised by Johnson and others.

Nobel Laurate Amartya Sen pioneered a rich, innovative and broader perspective on well-being, focusing on capabilities and functionings. While capabilities are abilities to do this or that in a free and fair environment, functionings reflect achievements. An ability to live a healthy life, for example, is not necessarily related to affluence as it could result in obesity and vulnerability to non-communicable diseases. Achievements such as being healthy, on the other hand, require a nourishing diet and physical exercise. Professor Sen has, however, resisted aggregation of concepts such as capabilities into an overall measure of well-being as he believes that each capability is important in itself.

The MPI story

Unfortunately, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) seized upon capabilities to construct an overall measure of human development with uniform weights of the three components: health, education and standard of living and their sub-indices. Following this methodology, NITI Aayog and the UNDP released recently a National Multidimensional Poverty Index/MPI: A Progress Review 2023, also replicated in the UNDP Report, Making Our Future: New Directions for Human Development in Asia and the Pacific, released on November 7, 2023 . Hence, these reports suffer from the same flaws as the UNDP human development index: aggregation with uniform weighting. But, the MPI story is further distorted, as elaborated on below.

Astonishingly, the MPI 2023 estimates show a near-halving of India's national MPI value and a decline from 24.85% to 14.96% between 2015-16 and 2019-21. This reduction of 9.89 percentage points implies that about 135.5 million people have exited poverty between 2015-16 and 2019-21.

The Multi dimensional Poverty Index exaggerates the National Democratic Alliance's success in fighting deprivation

Besides, the intensity of poverty, which measures the average deprivation among the people living in multidimensional poverty, reduced from 47.14% to 44.39%.

But these estimates – especially the rapid reductions in MPI – cannot be taken at face value for various reasons. Indeed, these are misleading and ill-informed. First, the MPI relies upon National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4 and 5, which are not detailed enough for its estimation. Moreover, NFHS 5 is blocked as its estimate of open defecation contradicted exaggerated official claim of its complete elimination. In fact, an eminent demographer, who led NFHS 5 was suspended. Intriguingly, while the survey was blocked for its alleged unreliability, NITI Aayog and the UNDP had no qualms about using it. Ideally, NFHS 4 and 5 should have been combined with the 75th Round of the NSS on household consumption expenditure. Unfortunately, this was abandoned too, as leaked poverty estimates indicated a rise.

What casts further doubts is the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Millions lost their livelihoods, thousands died in reverse migration and from a lack of access to vaccines and medical care. In fact, as a consequence of this epidemic, there was a huge economic shock from which the Indian economy has been struggling to recover. To illustrate, GDP growth has declined from 8% in 2015-16 to 3.78 % in 2019-20 and slumped -6.60 in 2020-21, as also per capita income. Not just bare subsistence turned into a daunting challenge for millions but, equally seriously, public funding for maintenance and expansion of health and education and social safety nets suffered an irreparable blow.

Focus on covariates

Our recent analysis focuses on covariates of the MPI that include per capita state income, its square, share of criminals among State MPs, share of urban population, and health and education expenditure and unobserved state fixed effects (e.g., how progressive a State is). If we compare elasticities of MPI with respect to each covariate (i.e., proportionate change in MPI due to a proportionate change in a covariate such as State per capita income), the largest reduction in MPI is due to higher State per capita income.

But since income decreased drastically, MPI spiked. The next in order of importance is urban location. A 1% increase in urban location results in a 0.90% increase in MPI. This is not surprising as rural-urban migration is associated with growth of slums and sub-human living conditions. However, reverse migration during COVID-19 may explain why the effect on MPI is less than proportionate. Both health care and education expenditure are associated with lower MPI – the elasticity of the latter is higher (in absolute value), implying that a 1% increase in the latter reduces MPI more than the same increase in the former. As State-level estimates suggest a decline in educational expenditure, a rise in MPI is likely. Although State-level health expenditure rose to combat COVID-19, it fell far short of what was needed. If the share of Members of Parliament with criminal cases in total State MPs exceeded 20%, the higher was the MPI. This is not surprising as criminal Members of the Legislative Assembly and MPs are notoriously corrupt and siphon-off funds allocated for social safety nets and area development programmes. Indeed, what is alarming is their rising share – 24% of the winners in the Lok Sabha election in 2004 had a criminal background; it rose to 30% in the 2009 general election, 34% in the 2014 election, and 43% in the 2019 election.

If we go by our estimates of MPI, the reduction between 2015 and 2019-21 is considerably lower than the official estimate: 4.7 percentage points compared with 9.89 percentage points. Our selective review of MPI estimates shows that poverty rose in India's most populous State, Uttar Pradesh, by over seven percentage points. Of the States that went to the elections in November (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan and Telangana),we find that the MPI fell in Chhattisgarh (by over six percentage points), in Rajasthan (by two percentage points) and, most strikingly, in Madhya Pradesh (by about eight percentage points).

In conclusion, not only does the MPI exaggerate the NDA's success in fighting deprivation but also perhaps more seriously obfuscates conventional measures of it which may unravel a contradictory story of poverty.

The views are personal