

State Polls in India: A Dress Rehearsal for the 2019 General Elections?¹

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Executive Summary

Five Indian states have their elections between 12 November and 7 December 2018. The results for all the states will be declared on 11 December 2018. The poll-bound states are Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in north and central India, Telangana in south India and Mizoram in the northeast. The elections in the three states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are particularly important since, in the 2014 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had won 61 out of the combined 65 parliamentary seats in these states. All three states will also largely see a direct contest between the BJP and the Congress. Hence, the results are likely to provide indicators for the results in the 2019 general elections. Opinion polls predict that the BJP will be voted out in Rajasthan while the contests in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are likely to be close, with the BJP having a slight edge. The election in Telangana could also prove to be tight with the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi being challenged by an alliance of the Congress and the Telugu Desam Party. In Mizoram, the only northeastern state governed by the Congress, the regional Mizo National Front could be voted to power.

Introduction

Five Indian states are holding their Assembly elections from 12 November to 7 December 2018 with announcement of all results on 11 December 2018. The states going to the polls are Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in north and central India, Telangana in south India and Mizoram in the northeast. The set of Assembly elections, which is likely to be the last before next year's general elections, will provide important clues as to what might lie in store in 2019.

Of particular interests are the three contiguous Hindi heartland states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is currently in power. Notably, in the 2014 general elections, the BJP won 61 out of the combined 65 parliamentary seats in these states. All three states will also largely see a direct contest between the BJP and Congress with no big regional party in the fray. The three states will be a crucial test of whether the Congress will be able to mount a credible challenge in the general elections in 2019. For the BJP, the results will be an indicator of the level of anti-incumbency in the Hindi heartland as well as the personal popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

¹ India's next general elections are scheduled to be held in April or May 2019. They will be the largest electoral exercise in the world involving over 800 million eligible voters, who will decide the fate of the Narendra Modi government. Beginning September 2018, the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), will monitor and interpret the run up to the elections, the poll campaigns and the results. ISAS will publish a series of papers that will focus not only on the big picture, but also the important issues and themes underpinning the elections.

Rajasthan

Rajasthan has a fairly long history, going back to 1993, of the incumbent government being voted out. This election might be no different. All opinion polls seem to suggest that the ruling BJP government, headed by Vasundhara Raje, is likely to be voted out. According to one of the most recent opinion polls, conducted by ABP News-Lokniti CSDS in October 2018, the Congress is likely to win a majority with 110 seats in the 200-member Rajasthan Assembly compared to the BJP's 84 seats.² This would be quite a turnaround for the Congress, which won 21 seats in the 2013 Assembly elections compared to the BJP's 163, with a difference in vote share of 12 per cent (Figure 1). In terms of vote share, the opinion poll predicted 45 per cent for the Congress to the BJP's 41 per cent. Another recent opinion poll has predicted a resounding win for the Congress with 145 seats compared to the BJP's 45 seats.³ Two opinion polls, conducted earlier, had also given the Congress a comfortable winning margin.⁴

The primary reason for the BJP's predicted poor showing is the anti-incumbency sentiments against the government and the unpopularity of Raje. While two earlier opinion polls found that the Congress's Sachin Pilot, a former member of parliament and the party's state chief, was the most popular choice for Rajasthan chief minister. The most recent poll by ABP News-Lokniti CSDS found that the Congress's Ashok Gehlot, a former chief minister, is the most liked leader in the state after Modi. Two of the main reasons for the anti-incumbency are farmer distress and unemployment. Caste equations also seem to be against the BJP with the Rajputs, who constitute about seven per cent of Rajasthan's population and are traditional supporters of the BJP, being upset with the party over a range of issues. Indeed, Jaswant Singh, a former Union minister and a Rajput, was denied a BJP ticket in the 2014 general elections. His son, Manavendra Singh, quit the BJP in 2018 and has joined the Congress. He is contesting against Raje in the Jhalrapatan constituency, where Raje has been winning since 2003. There have been other BJP leaders, such as former Member of Parliament Harish Meena, who have joined the Congress and will contest the Assembly polls.

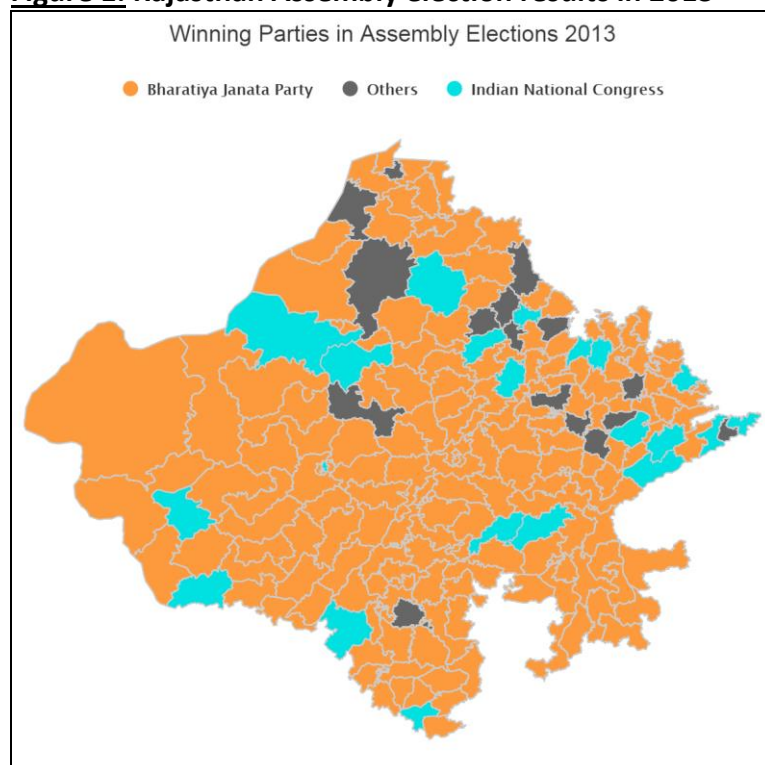
While the Congress is well placed in Rajasthan, some of the usual problems, such as factionalism, could hurt the party's prospects. As is its normal practice, the Congress has not declared a chief ministerial candidate. However, the two most likely candidates are Gehlot and Pilot, with the former holding the edge in the chief ministerial race. Gehlot and Pilot are contesting the Assembly elections from Sardarpura and Tonk constituencies respectively. Another factor that could come into play is the personal popularity of Modi in Rajasthan and the impact of his election campaigning.

² ABP News Bureau, "ABP News opinion predicts Congress' victory as anti-incumbency hits BJP hard in Rajasthan", *ABP Live* (8 November 2018), <https://www.abplive.in/india-news/rajasthan-assembly-election-2018-congress-victory-as-anti-incumbency-hits-bjp-hard-predicts-abp-news-opinion-poll-777880>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

³ PTI, "C-Voter opinion poll predicts Congress win in Rajasthan, and M.P., and close fight in Chhattisgarh", *The Hindu* (9 November 2018), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/c-voter-opinion-poll-predicts-congress-win-in-rajasthan-and-mp-close-fight-in-chhattisgarh/article25456637.ece>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

⁴ PTI, "Rajasthan Assembly elections: Opinion Polls predict victory for Congress", *LiveMint* (7 October 2018), <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/MIADu74YcLkLkPZtbKxmAL/Rajasthan-Assembly-elections-Opinion-polls-predict-victory.html>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

Figure 1: Rajasthan Assembly election results in 2013



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

Madhya Pradesh

The BJP and Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan have been in power in MP since 2003. In the coming election, Chouhan is likely to face his toughest contest ever. The ABP News-Lokniti CSDS survey predicts a narrow majority for the BJP in Madhya Pradesh with the BJP winning 116 seats in the 230-member Assembly compared to the Congress's 105 seats.⁵ According to the poll, only one percentage point separates the vote share of the two parties. This is in contrast to other surveys which have forecast a slim majority for the Congress.⁶ In 2013, the BJP had won convincingly with 165 seats compared to the Congress's 58 seats with a difference in vote share of eight per cent (Figure 2).

As a three-term Chief Minister, Chouhan was bound to face anti-incumbency. Dissatisfaction is particularly high on unemployment and agricultural issues. Matters had been made worse for the BJP government due to a corruption scandal around the recruitment for government jobs and admission to medical colleges – popularly known as the Vyapam scam – which has

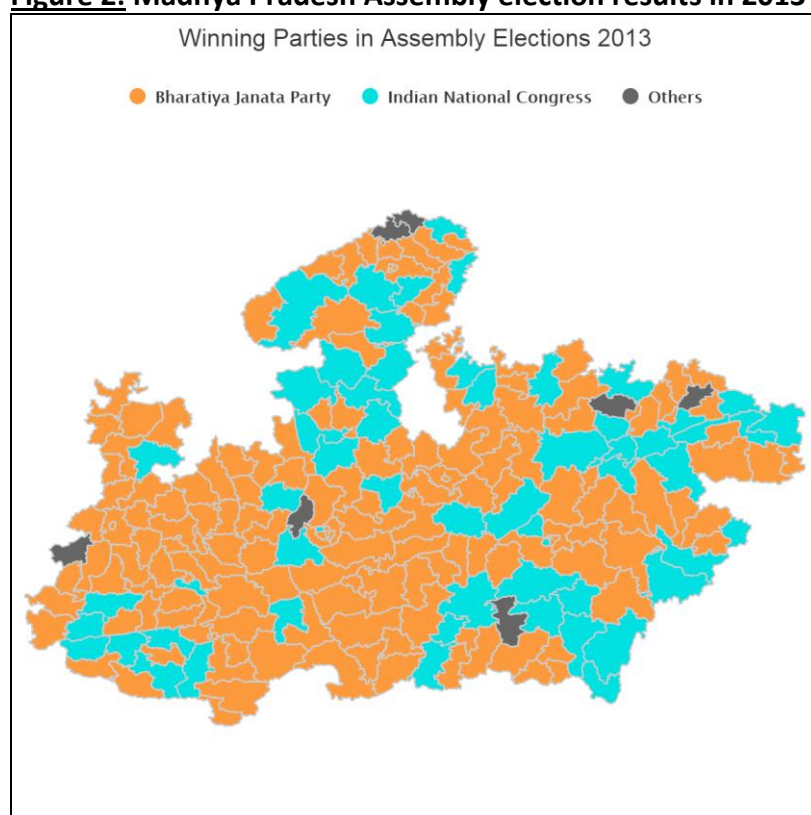
⁵ ABP News Bureau, "BJP projected to hold onto MP and Chhattisgarh, will lose grip on Rajasthan: ABP News-Lokniti CSDS Survey", *ABP Live* (8 November 2018), <https://www.abplive.in/election/bjp-projected-to-hold-onto-mp-chhattisgarh-will-lose-grip-on-rajasthan-abp-news-lokniti-csds-survey-777915>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

⁶ TNN, "Opinion polls projects Congress win in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh", *The Times of India* (7 October 2018), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/opinion-poll-projects-cong-win-in-mp-rajasthan-and-chhattisgarh/articleshow/66103908.cms>. Accessed on 17 November 2018. See also PTI, "C-Voter opinion poll predicts Congress win in Rajasthan, and M.P., and close fight in Chhattisgarh", *The Hindu* (9 November 2018), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/c-voter-opinion-poll-predicts-congress-win-in-rajasthan-and-mp-close-fight-in-chhattisgarh/article25456637.ece>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

tainted his government.⁷ However, Chouhan personally remains popular. According to most opinion polls, Chouhan remains the top pick for the chief minister post ahead, by a wide margin, of the Congress's two state leaders, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Kamal Nath.⁸

For the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, the problem, as in Rajasthan, is one of presenting a united front. Though Scindia is a more popular leader than Nath, the latter is the president of the Madhya Pradesh Congress. Besides, the inability to tie up with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which won four seats and six per cent of the vote share in 2013, is likely to hurt the Congress in some constituencies. In addition, groups like the Samanya Picchada Alpasankhyak Varg Adhikari Karmachari Sanstha, which has mobilised people around the issue of the dilution of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and has been registered as a political party by the Election Commission, could have some impact.

Figure 2: Madhya Pradesh Assembly election results in 2013



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

Chhattisgarh

As in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, which has been ruled by the BJP since 2003, is likely to see a close contest. In 2013, the gap between the vote share of the BJP and Congress was less

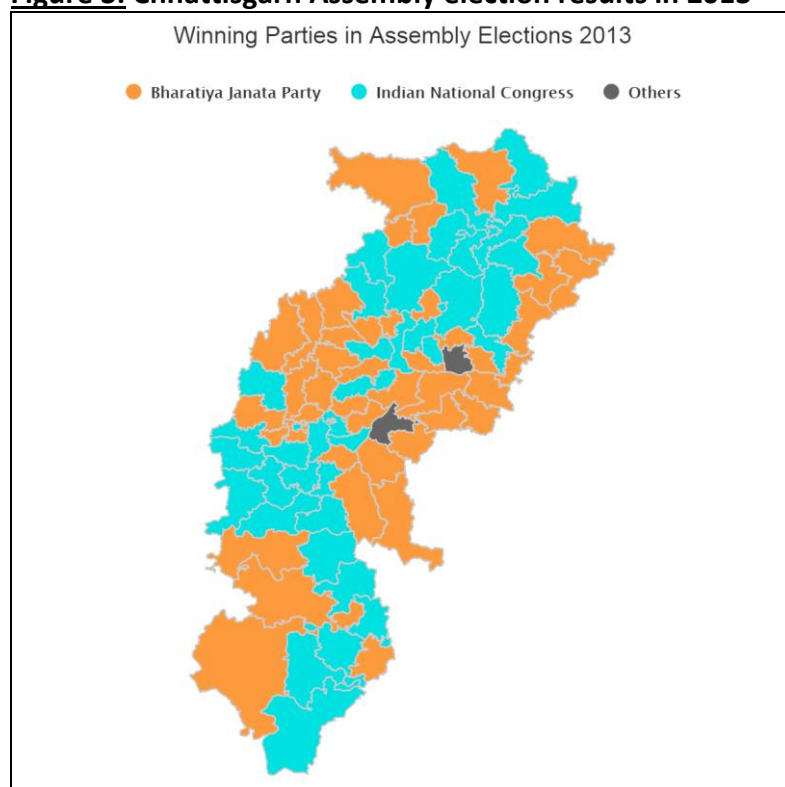
⁷ HT Correspondent, "Rigged exam to mysterious death of suspects: What is MP's Vyapam scam", *The Hindustan Times* (31 October 2017). <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rigged-exams-to-mysterious-deaths-of-suspects-what-is-mp-s-vyapam-scam/story-yEFjRpxAUJI1KZFQBbi7PJ.html>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

⁸ Ajit Kumar Jha, "Mood Swings", *India Today* (29 September 2018), <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20181008-mood-swings-1350000-2018-09-29>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

than one per cent though the difference in seats was 10 (Figure 3). Most recent opinion polls have, however, forecast a win for the BJP government headed by Raman Singh though they differ on the margin of victory. The gap between the BJP and Congress had widened over the past few weeks with a third political combination, the BSP and the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (JCC) alliance, entering the fray. The JCC, led by a former chief minister and Congressman, Ajit Jogi, is likely to split the opposition vote and hurt the Congress in the constituencies reserved for the Scheduled Tribes.

The BJP's prospects have also been boosted in Chhattisgarh due to the personal popularity of Raman Singh. Indeed, according to the opinion polls, Bhupesh Baghel, the president of the Congress in Chhattisgarh, trails Singh by a long margin as does Jogi. Violence is also expected cast a shadow on the Chhattisgarh polls with attacks by Maoists before the first phase of elections in the state was held on 12 November 2018. The Maoist-affected constituencies in Bastar and Rajnandgaon districts, where elections were conducted in the first phase, are critical to the Congress's fortunes since it won 12 of the 18 seats there in 2013. Despite the violence, voter turnout at over 70 per cent was high in the first phase.⁹

Figure 3: Chhattisgarh Assembly election results in 2013



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

Telangana

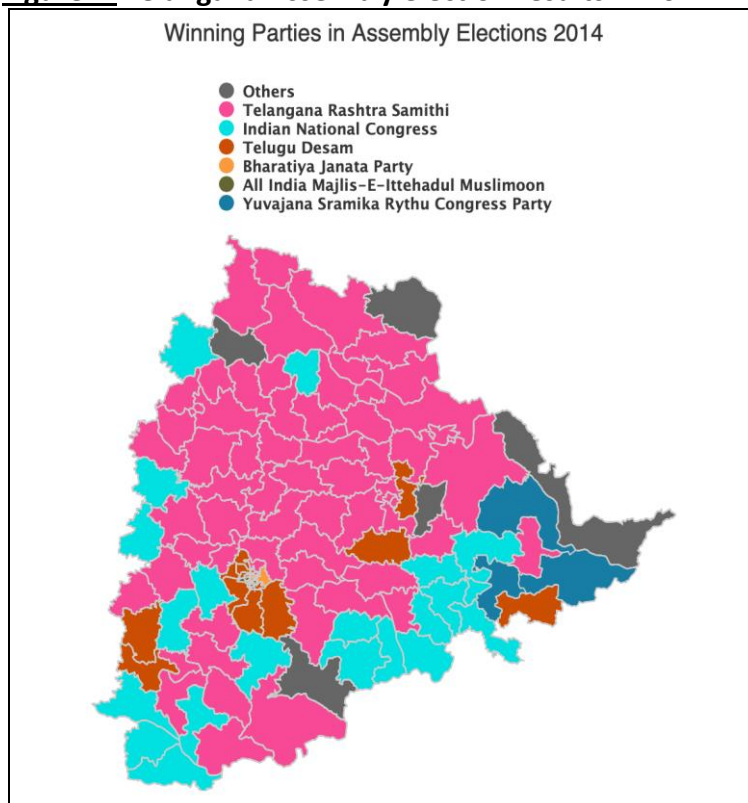
The state of Telangana, which was carved out of Andhra Pradesh in 2014, held its first Assembly election the same year concurrently with the general elections. The Telangana

⁹ PTI, "70% turnout in first phase of Chhattisgarh polls: Election Commission", *The Times of India* (12 November 2018), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/voting-in-first-phase-of-chhattisgarh-assembly-election-ends/articleshow/66591670.cms>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

Rashtra Samithi (TRS), which had been at the forefront of the agitation for the new state, won the 2014 Assembly elections under the leadership of K Chandrasekhara Rao, who is also Telangana's first Chief Minister. Though the TRS had initially won 63 seats in the 119-member Assembly, defections from the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Congress, which won 15 seats and 21 respectively, swelled the TRS's numbers in the Assembly to 90 (Figure 4).¹⁰ However, in order to avoid simultaneous polls with the national elections, Rao dissolved the state Assembly in September 2018, calling for early elections. Rao's calculation was that an early election would not only catch the opposition by surprise, but also avoid the state polls getting linked to national elections. The TRS could also be a potential ally of the BJP following the 2019 general election if the BJP falls short of a majority.

Early predictions had suggested that Rao's move to bring forward the Assembly polls might have been a master stroke and that he would win the elections convincingly. However, an alliance between the Congress, the TDP and two smaller parties seems to have changed the ground situation. The TDP president, N Chandrababu Naidu, is using the alliance with the Congress in Telangana to project a broader anti-BJP front in the 2019 general elections. The BJP and the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen, which won five and seven seats respectively in 2013, will contest on their own. In fact, a recent opinion poll has forecast a slim victory for the Congress-TDP alliance. Even if that does not happen, the race to form the government has considerably tightened in Telangana.

Figure 4: Telangana Assembly election results in 2014



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

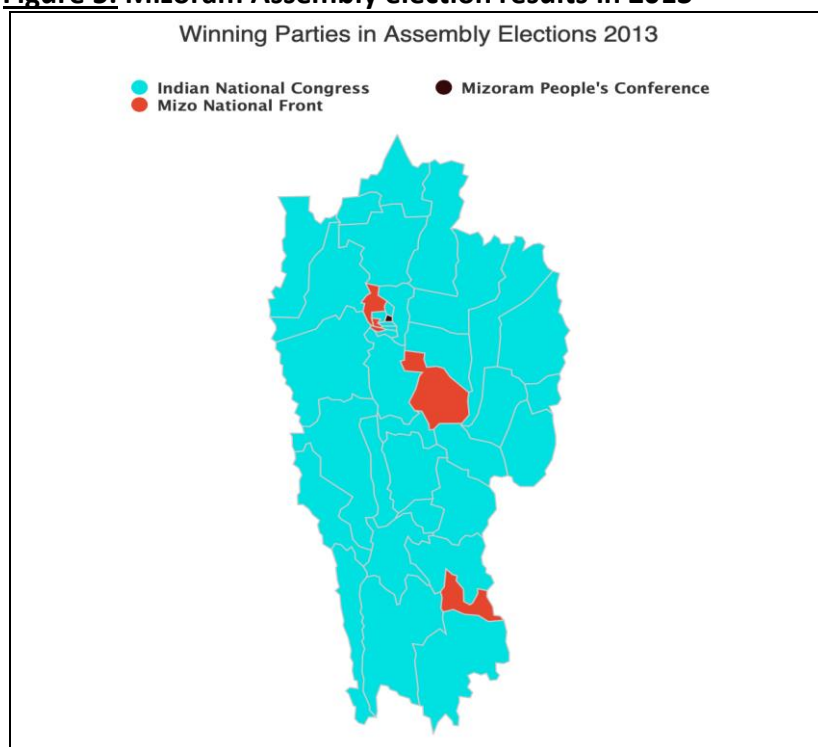
¹⁰ N. Rahul, "12 TDP MLAs merged with TRS", *The Hindu* (11 March 2016), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/telangana/12-tdp-mlas-merged-with-trs/article8341018.ece>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

Mizoram

Mizoram is the smallest of the states going to the polls and is also the only one in Northeast India ruled by the Congress. Over the past four years, the BJP has formed the government either on its own or in an alliance in six northeastern states. It would hope to do the same in Mizoram where the Christians constitute 87 per cent of the population. Though the BJP won less than one per cent of the vote share in 2013, it would like to use the regional Mizo National Front (MNF), which had won five seats in 2013, to come to power in Mizoram (Figure 5). The MNF is part of the North East Democratic Alliance, a BJP-led forum of non-Congress parties in the Northeast. The MNF has, however, not gone in for a pre-poll alliance with the BJP and is contesting the election on its own. The MNF president and former Mizoram Chief Minister, Zoramthanga, has also denied that his party is in “secret talks” with the BJP.¹¹

A recent opinion poll has predicted a hung House in Mizoram with the MNF winning 17 seats in the 40-member Assembly and the Congress, which had won 34 seats and 45 per cent of the vote share in 2013, falling to 12 seats.¹² According to the poll, the rest of the seats will be won by smaller regional parties. This scenario will make it difficult for the Congress and Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla to retain power.

Figure 5: Mizoram Assembly election results in 2013



Source: Author's calculation based on data from the Election Commission of India.

¹¹ Abhishek Saha, “Modi is a good PM for India. But in Mizoram, BJP has no place,” says MNF President Zoramthanga”, *The Indian Express* (15 November 2018), <https://indianexpress.com/elections/mizoram-election-constituencies-list-2018/modi-is-a-good-pm-for-india-but-in-mizoram-bjp-has-no-place-says-mnf-president-zoramthanga-5446923/>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

¹² PTI, “C-Voter opinion poll predicts Congress win in Rajasthan, and M.P., and close fight in Chhattisgarh”, *The Hindu* (9 November 2018), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/c-voter-opinion-poll-predicts-congress-win-in-rajasthan-and-mp-close-fight-in-chhattisgarh/article25456637.ece>. Accessed on 17 November 2018.

Conclusion

The set of five Assembly elections will provide a test of the BJP's popularity, particularly in the Hindi heartland, as well as give an indication of Modi's popularity at the fag-end of his five-year tenure as prime minister. The polls will also serve to gauge whether the Congress can provide a serious fight in the 2019 general elections. The Telangana Assembly elections will be a test too of the Congress's ability to form alliances with regional parties in 2019. While Assembly polls are not always reliable indicators of success in the general elections, the proximity of these polls to the general elections give them added significance. Whichever party does well in the elections in the five poll-bound states is likely to carry forward the momentum in that particular state to 2019.

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