Assembly Poll Result Boosts Congress and Stings BJP

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Executive Summary

The results of the Assembly elections in five Indian states - Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh (MP), Rajasthan, Telangana and Mizoram – were announced on 11 December 2018. The Congress will form the government in the three Hindi heartland states – Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan – while two regional parties, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and the Mizo National Front (MNF), won resounding victories in Telangana and Mizoram respectively. The results were a blow to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was in power in Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan, and a huge boost for the Congress. The BJP still remains the frontrunner to form the central government in 2019. The recent Assembly elections have, however, given the opposition significant momentum and made the BJP's task that much more difficult in the 2019 general elections.

Introduction

The results of the Assembly elections in five Indian states were a setback to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a shot in the arm for the opposition Congress party. The Congress will form the government in the three Hindi heartland states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Rajasthan, where the BJP was the incumbent, while two regional parties, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and the Mizo National Front (MNF), won resounding victories in the states of Telangana and Mizoram respectively.[1] Though the scale and margin of the Congress victory differed in the three Hindi heartland states, the results hold importance for the coming general elections in 2019. It also represented a coming of age for Rahul Gandhi, who, in December, completed a year as the party president and has often been dismissed by his critics as a lightweight. Perhaps the most critical aspect of the Assembly poll results is its likely impact on the BJP's performance in the 2019 elections.

The BJP had won 62 of the 65 parliamentary seats from Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in the 2014 general elections. This represented 22 per cent of the 282 seats that the BJP had won in 2014. If the Assembly poll results were to be replicated in 2019, the BJP's seat tally would go down to 31 seats in these three states. While Assembly election results are not necessarily repeated in the general elections, the proximity of the Assembly polls to the 2019 elections is crucial as is the erosion of BJP votes across the board. Indeed, the past cycle of elections in these three states suggests that the party that does well in the Assembly polls carries forward the momentum to the general elections.
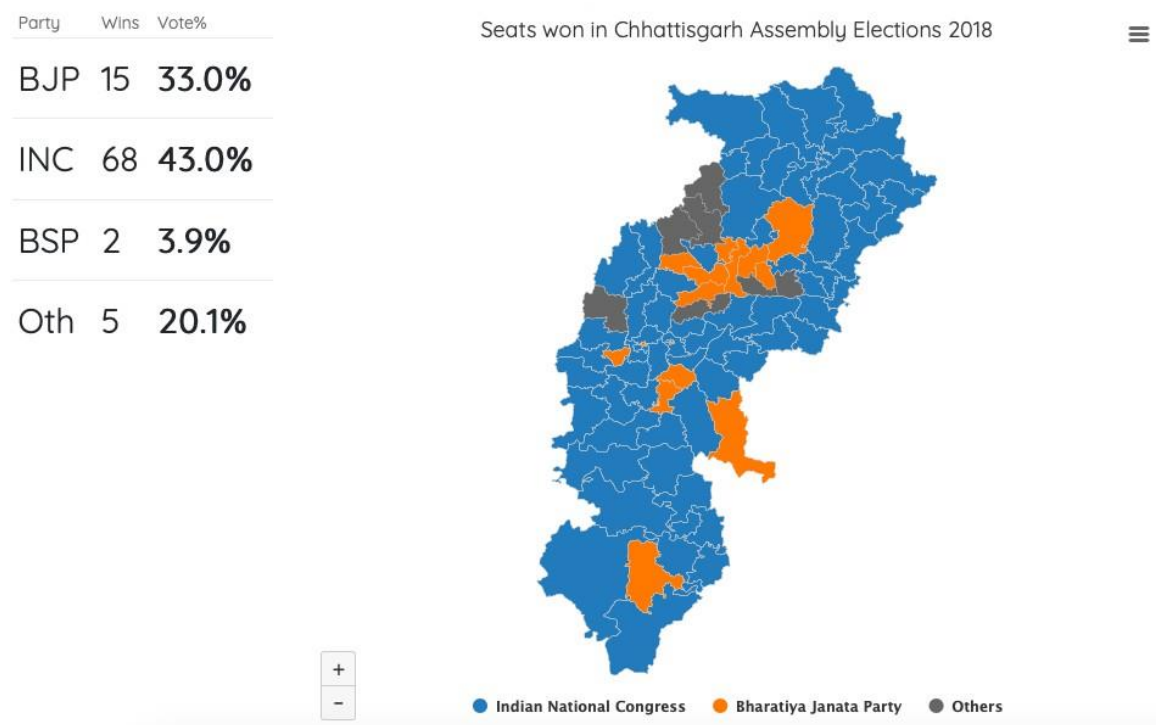
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[1] http://eciresults.nic.in/PartyWiseResult.htm.

Chhattisgarh

Of the three Hindi belt states, the verdict in Chhattisgarh was perhaps the most surprising and one-sided. The Congress won 68 seats in the 90-member Chhattisgarh Assembly and 43 per cent of the vote share compared to the BJP's 15 seats and 33 per cent vote share (Figure 1). The BJP saw a dramatic decline of 8 per cent in its vote share from 2013 while the Congress saw an almost 3 per cent increase (Figure 2). The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)-Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (J) [JCC(J)] combine, which was expected to play a spoiler, won 5 seats and 8 per cent of the vote share.
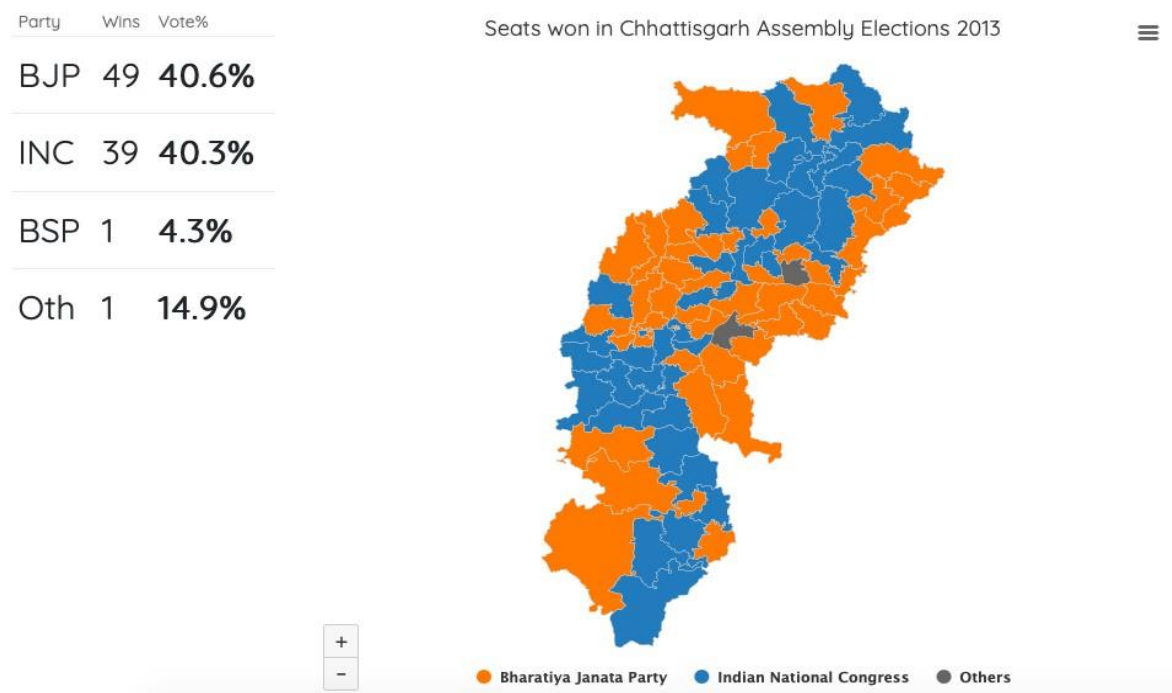
While anti-incumbency was a factor, with the BJP having ruled the state for three terms under Chief Minister Raman Singh, there were several other ingredients that led to the convincing Congress victory. Chief among these were agrarian distress and the perception that the BJP government has not done enough to ease the woes of farmers. In addition, the Congress did a remarkably good job of garnering Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) votes. Indeed, two of the prominent Congress leaders in the state, Bhupesh Baghel and Tamradhwaj Sahu, are OBCs belonging to the Kurmi and Sahu castes respectively. Importantly, the Kurmis and Sahus make up roughly 30 per cent of Chhattisgarh's population. Though there were fears that former Congressman and JCC(J) chief, Ajit Jogi, might pull votes away from the Congress, it seemed that his absence and less factionalism within the Chhattisgarh Congress, helped the party.

Figure 1: **Assembly election results in Chhattisgarh in 2018**

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	15	**33.0%**
INC	68	**43.0%**
BSP	2	**3.9%**
Oth	5	**20.1%**

Seats won in Chhattisgarh Assembly Elections 2018

● Indian National Congress ● Bharatiya Janata Party ● Others

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

Figure 2: Assembly election results in Chhattisgarh in 2013

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	49	**40.6%**
INC	39	**40.3%**
BSP	1	**4.3%**
Oth	1	**14.9%**

Seats won in Chhattisgarh Assembly Elections 2013

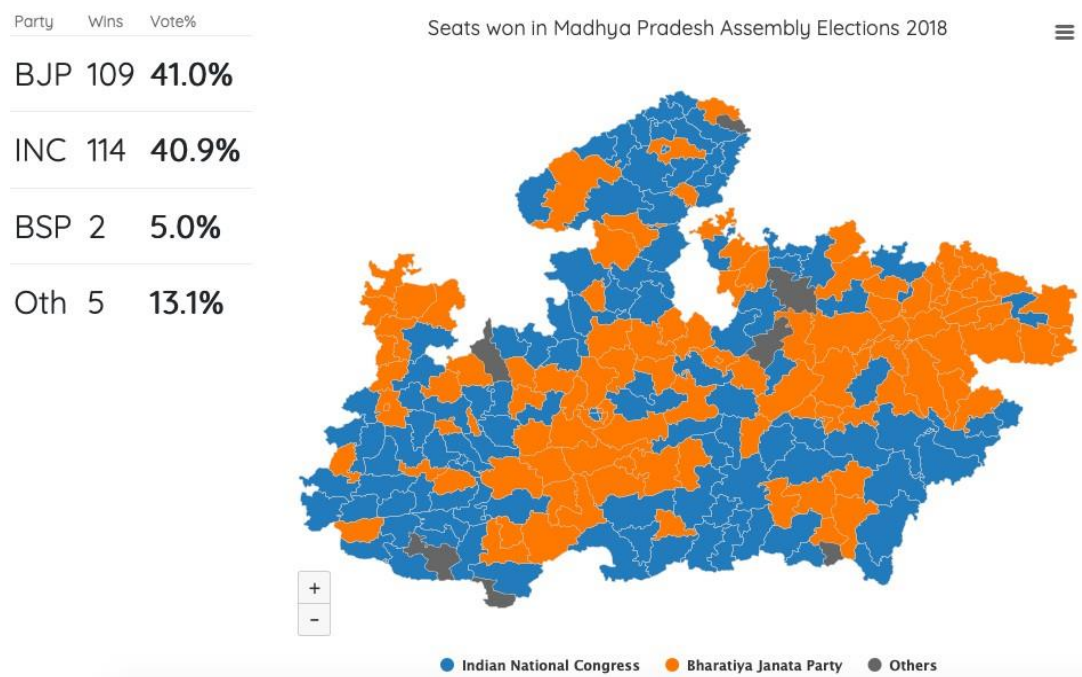● Bharatiya Janata Party   ● Indian National Congress   ● Others

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

Madhya Pradesh

The election in Madhya Pradesh was the closest among the five states. Both the Congress and the BJP won 41 per cent of the vote share each with the Congress winning 114 seats compared to the BJP's 109 (Figure 3). Though the Congress fell just short of a majority in the 230-member Assembly, it was able to form government with support from the BSP.
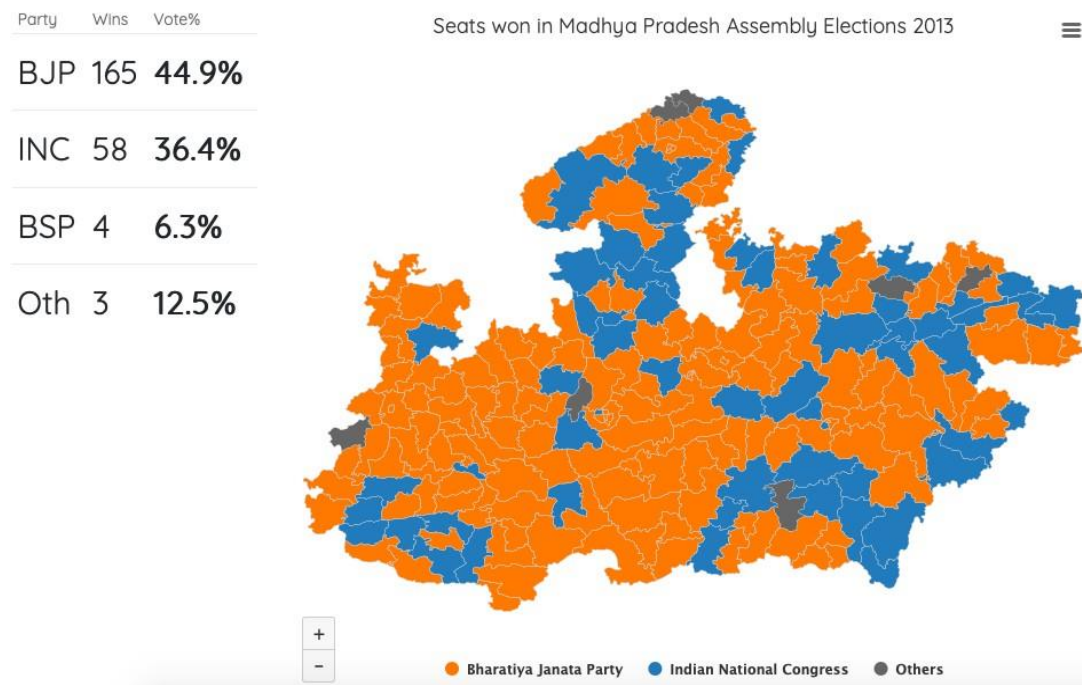
As in Chhattisgarh, anti-incumbency was a factor in MP, with the BJP having ruled the state for three terms under Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. So too was farmer distress. The Congress' campaign promise of a loan waiver to farmers of up to Rs 2 lakh (SGD 3,828) seemed to have gone down well with rural voters. The Congress manifesto also took a leaf out of the BJP's playbook and reached out to Hindu voters by making promises, such as setting up of cow shelters (*gaushalas*) in every village. This had led to charges that the Congress is peddling a 'soft Hindutva' line, but it possibly helped the party shed the perception of being too pro-minority. Finally, the party used the discontent over the alleged dilution of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act to its advantage. Unlike in Chhattisgarh, the absence of a pre-poll coalition hampered the Congress' chances of getting a clear majority. In at least 10 constituencies, the BSP's vote share seems to have been the difference between a Congress and a BJP victory. The presence of two Congress leaders with chief ministerial ambitions, Jyotiraditya Scindia and Kamal Nath, also likely dented the Congress's seat tally. Following the election, the Congress high command selected Nath as the chief minister of MP.

Figure 3: Assembly election results in Madhya Pradesh in 2018

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	109	**41.0%**
INC	114	**40.9%**
BSP	2	**5.0%**
Oth	5	**13.1%**

Seats won in Madhya Pradesh Assembly Elections 2018

● Indian National Congress ● Bharatiya Janata Party ● Others

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

Figure 4: Assembly election results in Madhya Pradesh in 2013

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	165	**44.9%**
INC	58	**36.4%**
BSP	4	**6.3%**
Oth	3	**12.5%**

Seats won in Madhya Pradesh Assembly Elections 2013

● Bharatiya Janata Party ● Indian National Congress ● Others

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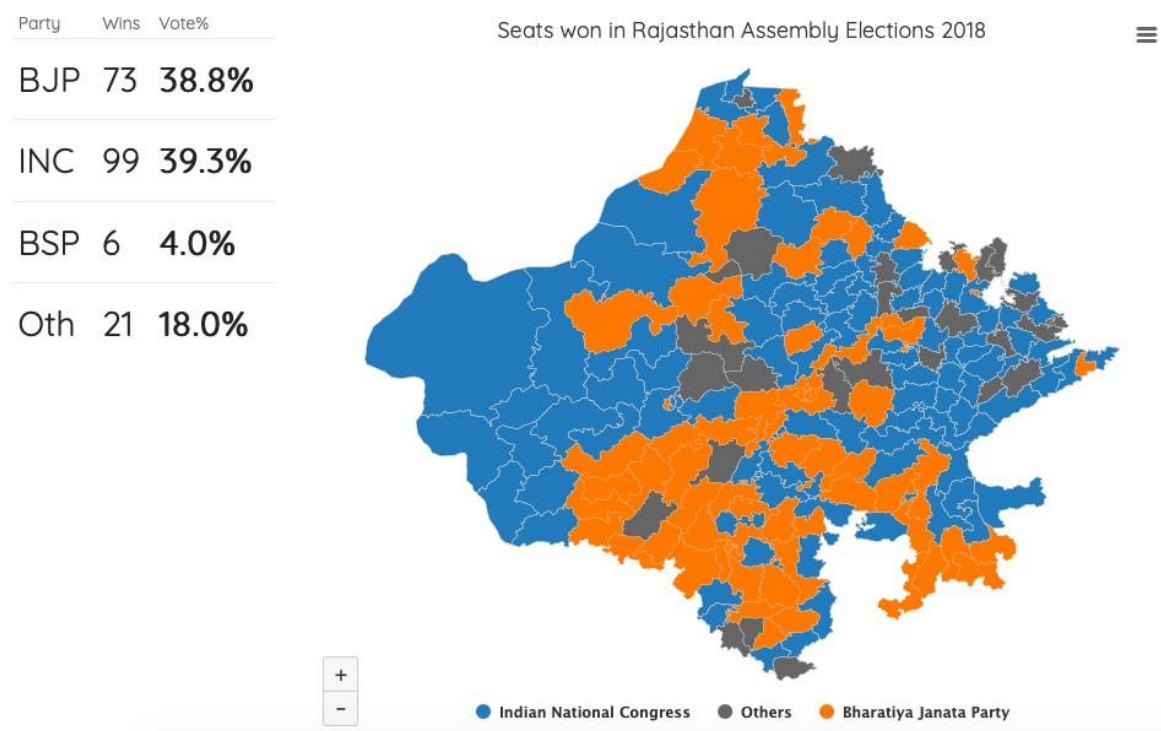
Rajasthan

Rajasthan was the only state where the Congress was expected to win comfortably. Though Rajasthan conformed to its two-decade history of voting out the incumbent government, the Congress barely managed a majority. The Congress won 99 seats in the 200-member

Assembly with 39 per cent of the vote share whereas the BJP won 73 seats with a roughly similar vote share (Figure 5). However, there was a 6 per cent swing in favour of the Congress compared to 2013 and a similar swing away from the BJP (Figure 6). The BSP won 6 seats and 13 independents, by far the highest among all the five states that went to elections, were victorious too. Most of the independent candidates, who were elected, were rebel Congressmen, which dented the Congress's seat tally.
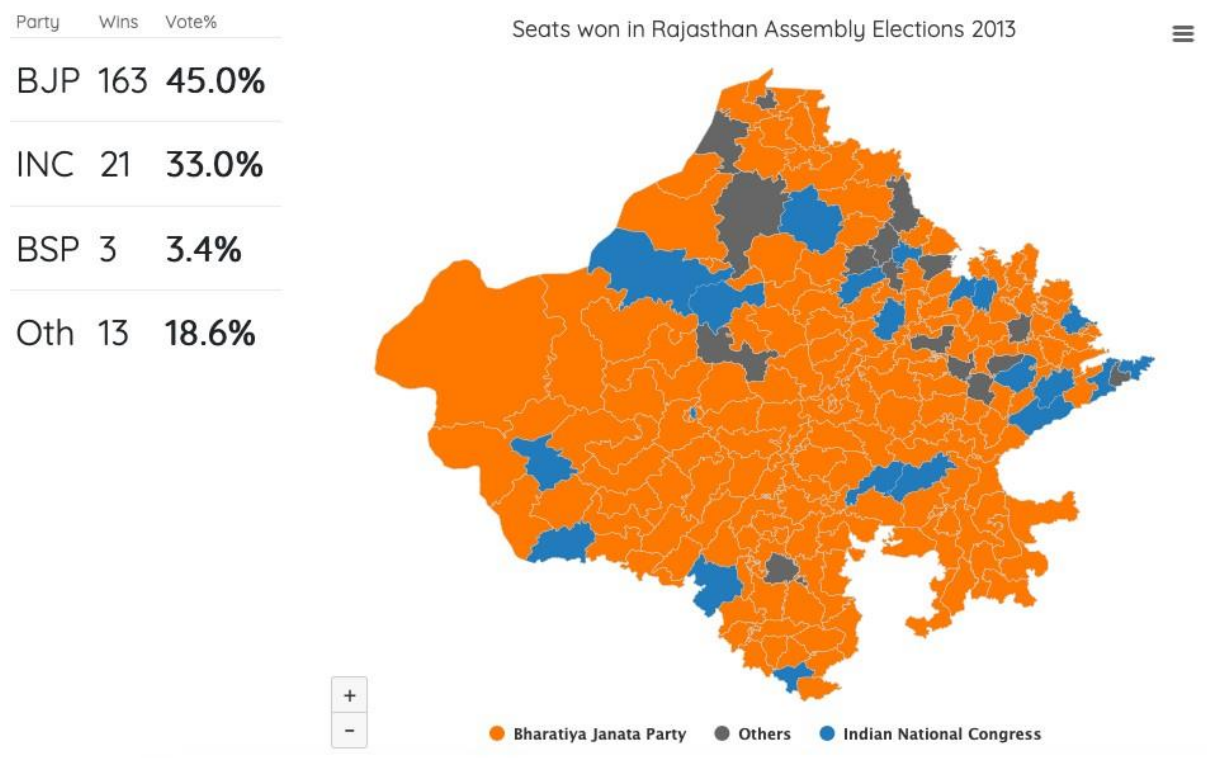
As in MP and Chhattisgarh, rural distress was a factor in the BJP's defeat. The Congress had in its election manifesto promised to waive farm loans within 10 days of assuming office. Lack of jobs was another factor with the Congress promising to give Rs 3,500 (SGD 67) as unemployment allowance to the educated unemployed. While these campaign promises and the unpopularity of CM Vasundahara Raje helped the Congress, the infighting between the two factions led by Pilot and Gehlot, both of whom contested the election and won, hurt its seat tally. The acrimony between the two factions was also evident following the election result, when the Congress had to decide on who to appoint chief minister. Eventually, the Congress struck a compromise by appointing Gehlot as chief minister and Pilot as his deputy.

Figure 5: Assembly election results in Rajasthan in 2018

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	73	38.8%
INC	99	39.3%
BSP	6	4.0%
Oth	21	18.0%

Seats won in Rajasthan Assembly Elections 2018

● Indian National Congress   ● Others   ● Bharatiya Janata Party

Source: Loki.ai

<u>Figure 6:</u> Assembly election results in Rajasthan in 2013

Party	Wins	Vote%
BJP	163	**45.0%**
INC	21	**33.0%**
BSP	3	**3.4%**
Oth	13	**18.6%**

Seats won in Rajasthan Assembly Elections 2013

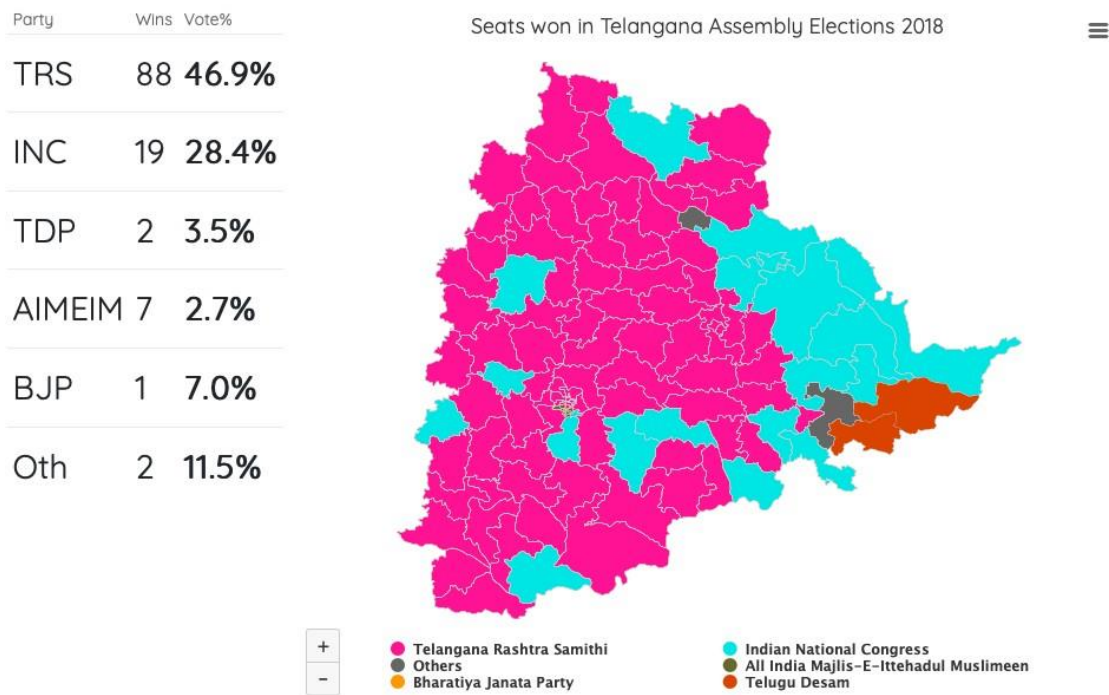● Bharatiya Janata Party   ● Others   ● Indian National Congress

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

Telangana

In Telangana, the incumbent TRS and Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao was always the frontrunner. However, the resounding verdict in TRS's favour surprised many analysts. The TRS bucked the anti-incumbency trend in the other states, winning 88 seats in the 119-member Assembly and 47 per cent of the vote share, which was 13 per cent more than its vote share in 2013 (Figures 7 and 8). The 'Prajakutami' alliance between the Congress, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and two smaller parties, was a distant second with 21 seats and 33 per cent of the vote share. The BJP won only 1 seat, down from the 5 seats it had won in 2013, and the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul Muslimeen won 7 seats, which was a repeat of its 2013 performance.
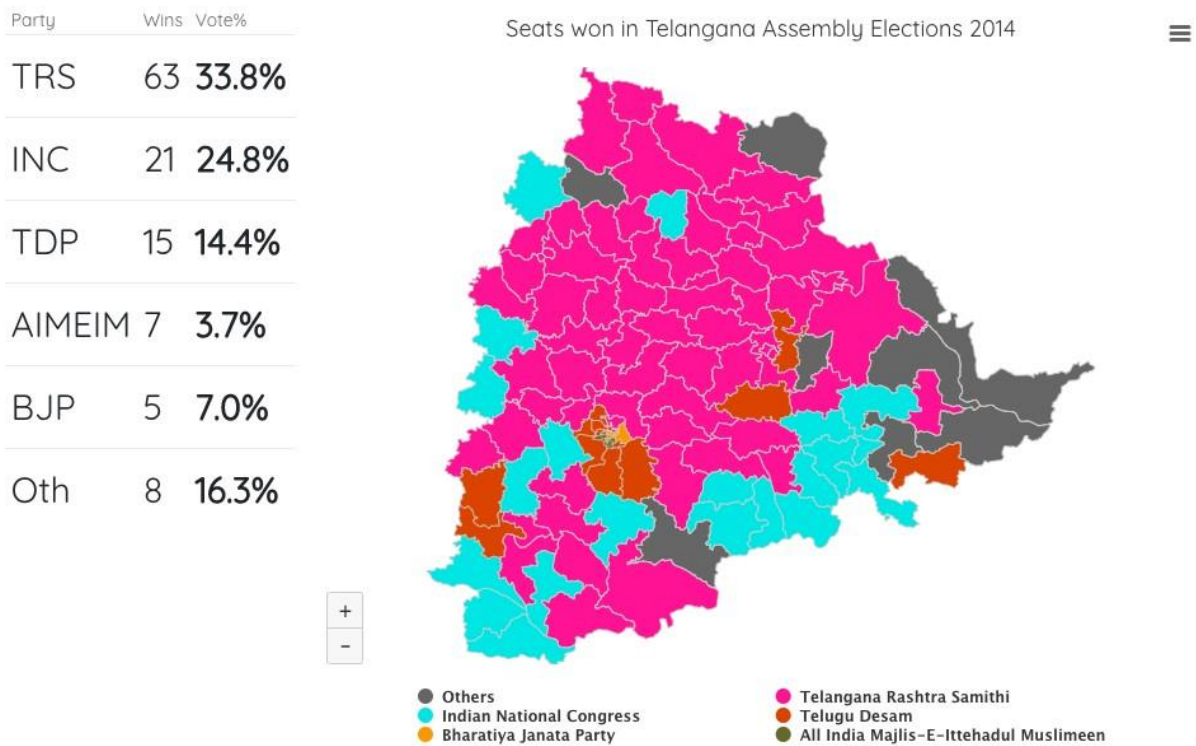
The TRS victory was fashioned on three elements. First, Rao's move to dissolve the state Assembly and delink the state polls from the general elections turned out to be a masterstroke. Second, the TRS, during its four-year tenure, had rolled out a host of welfare and populist schemes to entice voters. Third, Rao also played up identity politics and his government regularly donated money to Hindu temples as well as conducted public prayers (*yagnas*). He made no bones about following astrology and numerology with the time of his swearing-in on 13 December too being held at an 'auspicious' moment.

Figure 7: Assembly election results in Telangana in 2018

Party	Wins	Vote%
TRS	88	**46.9%**
INC	19	**28.4%**
TDP	2	**3.5%**
AIMEIM	7	**2.7%**
BJP	1	**7.0%**
Oth	2	**11.5%**

Seats won in Telangana Assembly Elections 2018

- Telangana Rashtra Samithi
- Indian National Congress
- Others
- All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen
- Bharatiya Janata Party
- Telugu Desam

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

Figure 8: Assembly election results in Telangana in 2013

Party	Wins	Vote%
TRS	63	**33.8%**
INC	21	**24.8%**
TDP	15	**14.4%**
AIMEIM	7	**3.7%**
BJP	5	**7.0%**
Oth	8	**16.3%**

Seats won in Telangana Assembly Elections 2014

- Others
- Telangana Rashtra Samithi
- Indian National Congress
- Telugu Desam
- Bharatiya Janata Party
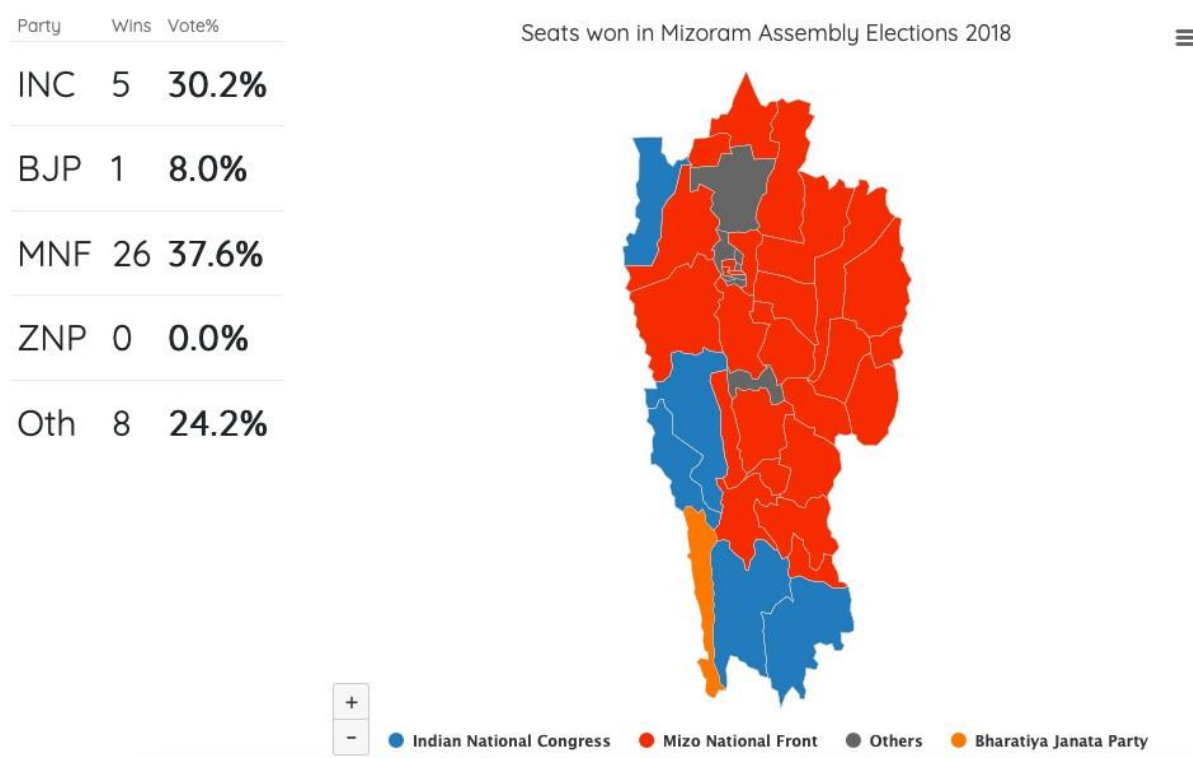- All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen

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

Mizoram

Mizoram, the only state in North-eastern India held by the Congress, voted the regional Mizo National Front (MNF) to power. While the Congress government, headed by Chief Minister Lal Thanhawla was facing severe anti-incumbency, the scale of the MNF victory was somewhat unexpected. The MNF won 26 seats in the 40-member Assembly and nearly 38 per cent of the vote share while the Congress could only manage 5 seats and 30 per cent of the vote share (Figure 9). Compared to 2013, there was a swing of 9 per cent in the MNF's favour and a huge 14 per cent away from the Congress (Figure 10). Such was the anti-incumbency sentiments against the two-term Congress government that Lal Thanhawla himself lost from both the seats he contested.

The Zoram People's Movement, an alliance of regional outfits, won 8 seats and raised expectations in future of a non-Congress, non-MNF front in the state. The BJP, which has been making steady inroads into the Northeast, won only 1 seat, but significantly its vote share jumped to 8 per cent from less than 1 per cent in 2013.
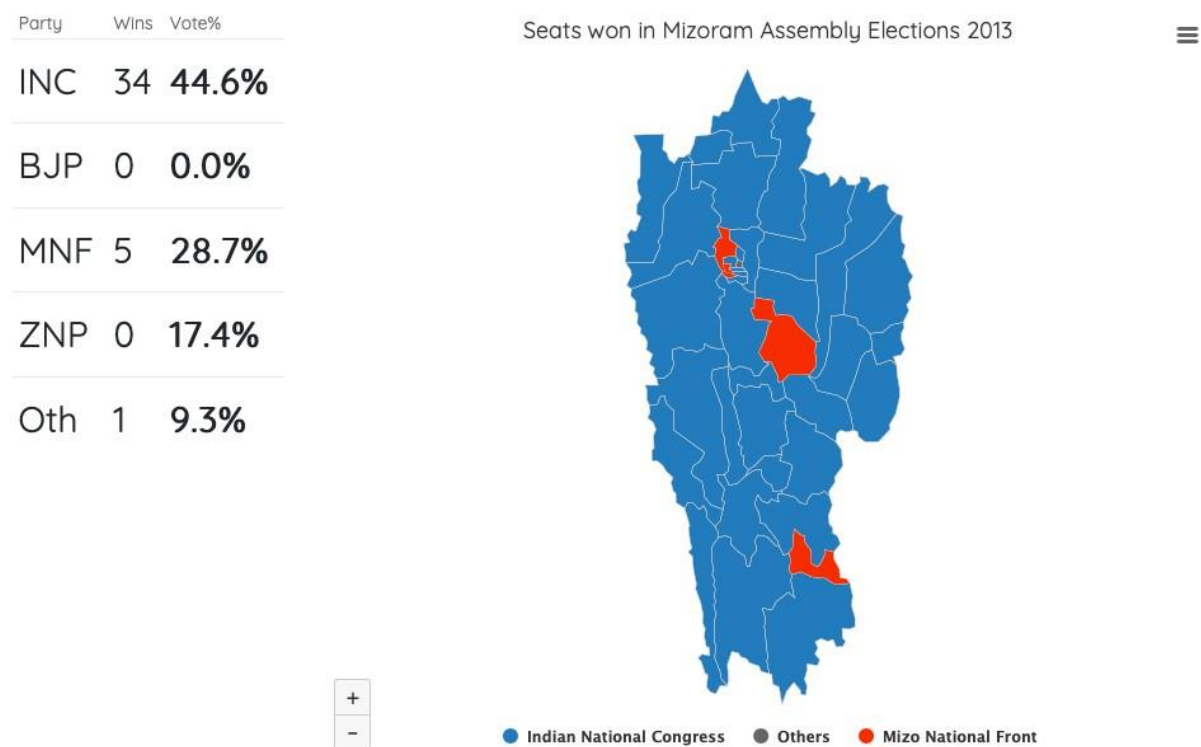
Figure 9: **Assembly election results in Mizoram in 2018**

Party	Wins	Vote%
INC	5	30.2%
BJP	1	8.0%
MNF	26	37.6%
ZNP	0	0.0%
Oth	8	24.2%

Seats won in Mizoram Assembly Elections 2018

● Indian National Congress ● Mizo National Front ● Others ● Bharatiya Janata Party

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

Figure 10: Assembly election results in Mizoram in 2013

Party	Wins	Vote%
INC	34	44.6%
BJP	0	0.0%
MNF	5	28.7%
ZNP	0	17.4%
Oth	1	9.3%

Seats won in Mizoram Assembly Elections 2013

● Indian National Congress ● Others ● Mizo National Front

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

Conclusion

Looking ahead to the 2019 general elections, there are a few important takeaways from the Assembly poll results. First, though the results in Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan augur well for the Congress, the party is organisationally weak in most of the other Hindi heartland states, including Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, where it is unlikely to win even a handful of seats. Outside the heartland, the Congress performed poorly in Telangana and Mizoram going to show that the Congress and Rahul Gandhi have a long way to go. Besides, unlike the three Hindi belt states where elections were just held, there are hardly any big states where the Congress and the BJP will be locked in a bipolar contest. So the regional parties, such as the BSP and the Samajwadi Party, are likely to be the greater beneficiaries of the loss of support for the BJP in the Hindi heartland. However, the Congress' strong showing will make it a more credible fulcrum in 2019 for the opposition parties. Second, for the BJP, the erosion of support in Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan cut across the rural-urban divide, caste and class given that agrarian distress and unemployment were two of the burning issues. The BJP was particularly hit hard in rural and reserved constituencies. This will be a cause for worry for the BJP in 2019. Third, while Modi still remains very popular, his ability to swing elections is under scrutiny. Though he addressed 30-odd rallies in the three Hindi heartland states, the BJP's success in those constituencies was mixed. Modi, who benefited from being the challenger in 2014, has to now face the problems that come with incumbency. Fourth, the tenor of the BJP's 2019 campaign will be decided by what lessons

Modi and BJP president Amit Shah draw from the current results. The BJP's poll campaign in the three Hindi heartland states saw a distinct rise in the pitch for Hindu nationalism with UP's divisive Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath campaigning prominently for the BJP and an escalation in personal attacks. Arguably, both did not have a dramatic impact on the party's electoral fortunes. Whether the BJP will continue ratcheting up the rhetoric on Hindu nationalism or highlight development and governance, as it did in the 2014 general election, remains to be seen. The party though might find itself in a corner given its poor record on alleviating rural distress and in creating jobs. It is likely that the government will make big-ticket announcements on the agrarian sector in its final annual budget before the 2019 elections.

The results of the Assembly elections, particularly in the three Hindi belt states, has opened up the field for 2019. The BJP will try and compensate for its probable losses in the Hindi heartland with additional seats from eastern India and the Northeast, but that might not prove to be enough. It will also be looking to reach out to regional parties as possible allies, both before and after the 2019 elections. For the Congress, the Assembly poll results firmed up its role as the anchor for opposition politics. But it too needs to stitch together state-level alliances with regional parties if it is to significantly increase its seat tally from 2014.

Given its formidable election machinery, considerable financial resources and Modi's continuing popularity, the BJP still remains the frontrunner to form the government in 2019. The recent Assembly elections have, however, given the opposition significant momentum and made the BJP's task that much more difficult. 10

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