

The BJP's Performance in the Hindi Belt

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Executive Summary

The state election results in three states in North India should worry the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. An analysis of the vote share across the three states reveals that the party suffered substantial losses across constituencies and that it lost a substantial number of safe seats. Since it is crucial for the party to win a high number of seats in the Hindi heartland at the forthcoming national elections, the results suggest that the fight for 2019 is more open than previously thought, despite the fact that Narendra Modi's party remain the frontrunner.

On 11 December 2018, the results of the elections in five Indian states were declared. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) failed to win any of the states and, more significantly, lost to its main rival, the Congress party, in three of the states that it governed: Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. This should be a major cause of concern for the BJP, considering that the general elections are only six months ahead. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the detailed electoral results.

Table 1 – Chhattisgarh Election Results

Alliance	Party	Seats won	Seat change	Vote share	Vote Swing
-	INC	68	+29	43%	+2.57
-	BJP	15	-34	33%	-8.04
BSP+JCC (J)	BSP	2	+1	3.9%	-0.37
	JCC(J)	5	NA	7.6%	NA
-	Others	0	NA	12.5%	NA
Total		90		100	

Source: Election Commission of India. INC: Indian National Congress; BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party; BSP: Bahujan Samaj Party; JCC (J): Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (J).

Table 2 – Madhya Pradesh Election Results

Party	Seats won	Seat change	Vote share	Vote Swing
INC	114	+56	40.9%	+4.11
BJP	109	-56	41%	-4.19
BSP	2	-2	5%	-1.42
Others	5	NA	13.1%	NA
Total	230		100	

Source: Election Commission of India. SP: Samajwadi Party

Table 3 – Rajasthan Election Results

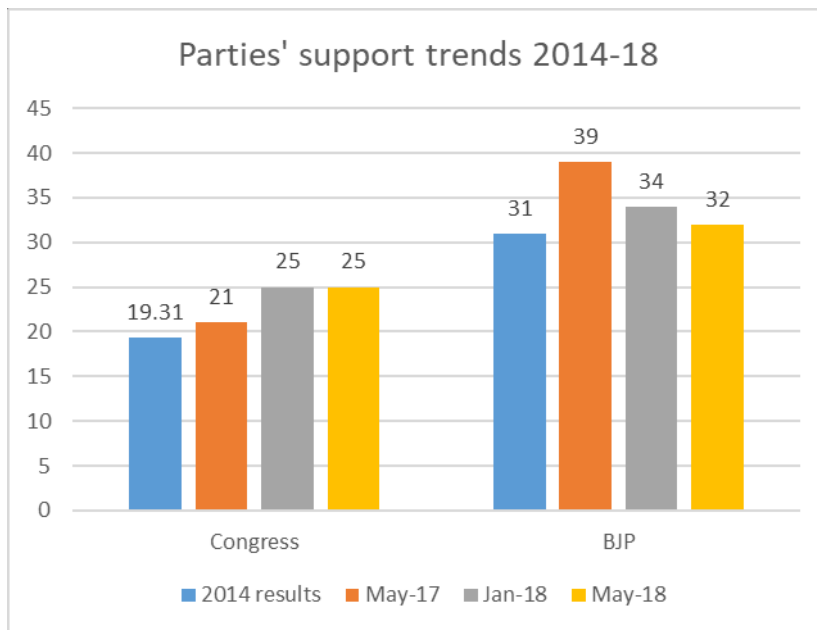
Party	Seats won	Seat change	Vote share	Vote Swing
INC	99	+78	39.3%	+6.23
BJP	73	-90	38.8%	-6.37
BSP	6	+3	4%	+0.63
Others	21	NA	17.9	NA
Total	199		100	

Source: Election Commission of India

The Congress won 54 per cent of the seats, up from 22 per cent it had won in 2013, while the BJP's tally plummeted from 72 per cent to 38 per cent. Across the three states, the BJP lost as many as 224 seats, 191 of which went to the Congress.

While these numbers should worry the BJP, the available opinion polls suggest that Modi's party is still the front-runner for the 2019 elections and that the Congress party still lags far behind. According to successive rounds of the 'Mood of the Nation' (MOTN) surveys conducted by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), the Congress party has hardly bridged the gap with the BJP (Figure 1). Taking into account the allies of the two major parties, the latest round of the MOTN survey shows that the distance between the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is still quite large: 37 and 31 per cent of the voting intentions, respectively.

Figure 1 – BJP and Congress popularity 2014-18



Source: Lokniti website: <http://www.lokniti.org>; Election Commission of India.

Nevertheless, the elections in the three Hindi belt states should be a serious cause for concern for the BJP, mainly because it is crucial for the party to retain a high number of seats from this region if it wants to have a chance to remain in power. In 2014, the saffron party won 190 out of its total tally of 282 seats from this region. The three Hindi belt states that went to poll show that it is unlikely that the party will be able to repeat this impressive performance. In fact, an analysis of the vote share in the three states suggests that, if voters vote in the same way at the general elections – and historically they largely did – the BJP's seats from these states will be cut in half, from 62 to 31.

Such a crush in the seat share at the national elections is probably an overestimate of two main reasons. First, Modi is the most popular leader in the country and his charisma will play a role in a national election. The overall vote share of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan is very close to that of the Congress and the 'Modi factor' could tilt the balance in favour of the saffron party. Second, the results in these three states were largely driven by regional factors. Furthermore, in two states (Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh) the BJP had been ruling for the past 15 years and anti-incumbency feelings against the state governments certainly played a role. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect that the BJP will suffer significant losses in these three states: historically, when national elections are held within a year from the state elections, the result tend to coincide.

The MOTN survey also shows that the mood has changed more broadly across north India. In May 2018, only 39 per cent of the respondents from this region supported the NDA/BJP, down from 45 per cent in January 2018. Furthermore, the result of the state elections in Gujarat held in late 2017 – when the Congress reduced quite significantly the gap with the BJP – suggests that it is very unlikely that the saffron party will be able to replicate its 2014 performance,

when it bagged all 26 seats. In Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP won 71 out of 80 seats in 2014, the party is also unlikely to win a comparable number of seats, especially if arch-rivals the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) will reach a seat sharing agreement in order not to disperse the anti-BJP vote (as they did for a round of by-elections held in 2018).

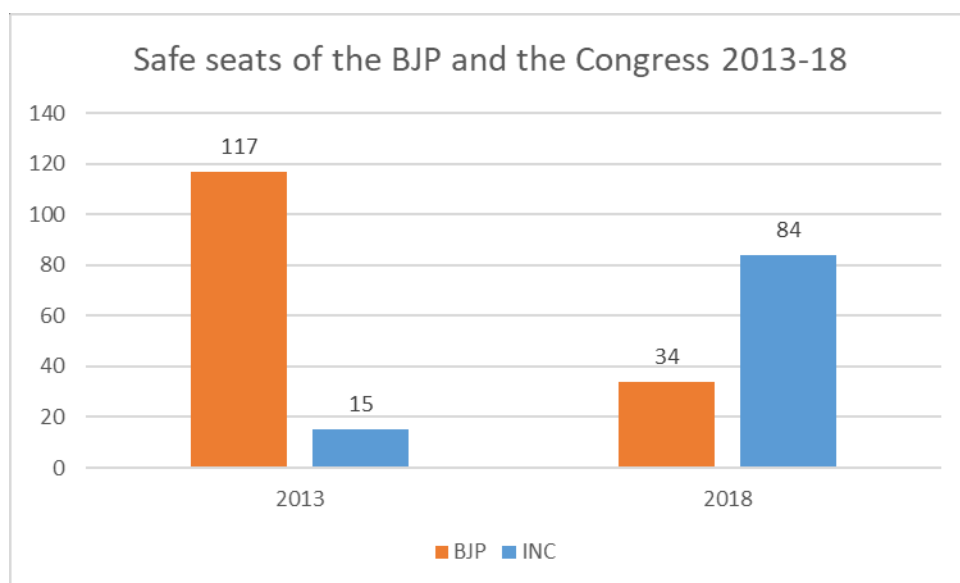
This means that the BJP will have to make up for losses in the Hindi belt, with gains elsewhere. The party has made significant inroads in the northeastern states – which elect 24 Members of Parliament – and less dramatic, but probably significant gains in Odisha and, to a lesser extent, West Bengal. But in the southern states, it is still a marginal player, outside of Karnataka. Even there, the state elections held in early 2018 suggest that the BJP is unlikely to win as many seats as it did in 2014, when it won 17 out of 28 seats. The emergence and consolidation of an alliance between the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular), means that in 2019 the anti-BJP vote will not get dispersed to the same extent as it did in 2014, affecting the BJP's ability to convert votes into seats.

In short, the gains that the BJP can realistically make outside of north and west India are limited and might not compensate for a dramatic loss of seats in the Hindi belt. For this reason, it is crucial for Modi's party to retain a high number of seats from the region.

The state elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan offer some insights into how worried the BJP should be. A key reason why the BJP should feel relatively confident about its electoral prospects is the high number of seats (129 out of 282) that it won with very high margins of victory (more than 180,000 votes). Data trends suggest that these seats are pretty safe and that such a massive swing of votes between one election and the following one are not common.

However, the results of the elections in the Hindi belt somewhat question this assumption. A safe seat at the state level can be considered one won by more than 25,000 votes. The BJP had won as many as 117 seats with such high margins in 2013. Five years later, the party lost as many as 40 per cent of them to the opposition. The Congress retained 87 per cent of its safe seats in the three states. Also, the proportion of the BJP's safe seats plummeted, while that of the Congress skyrocketed (Figure 2).

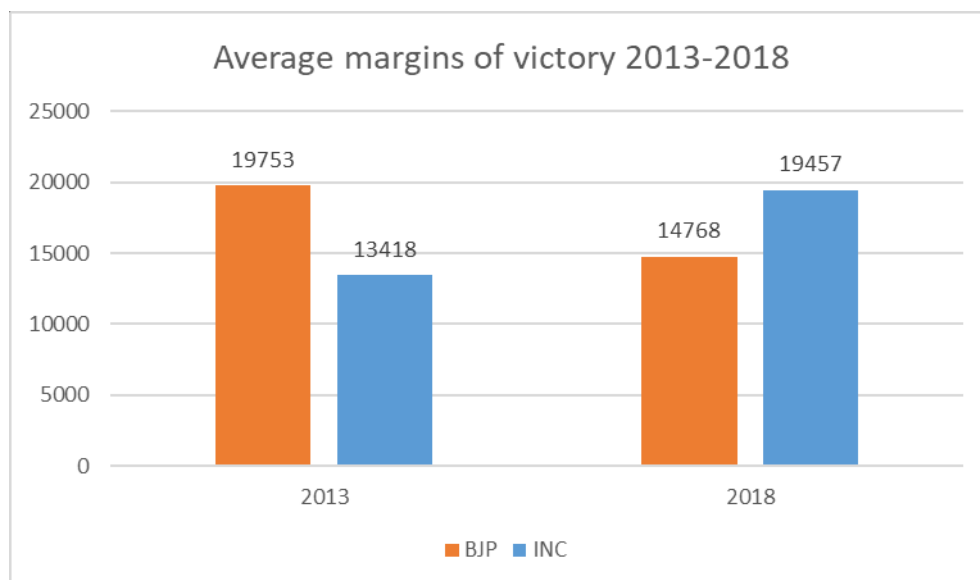
Figure 2 – Congress and BJP’s safe seats in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh



Source: Author calculations based on Election commission of India data.

Average margins of victory followed a similar trend: the average Congress seat was won by margins that are 31 per cent higher than the average BJP seat. In 2013, the situation was exactly the opposite, when the BJP average margin was 32 per cent higher than that of the Congress (Figure 3).

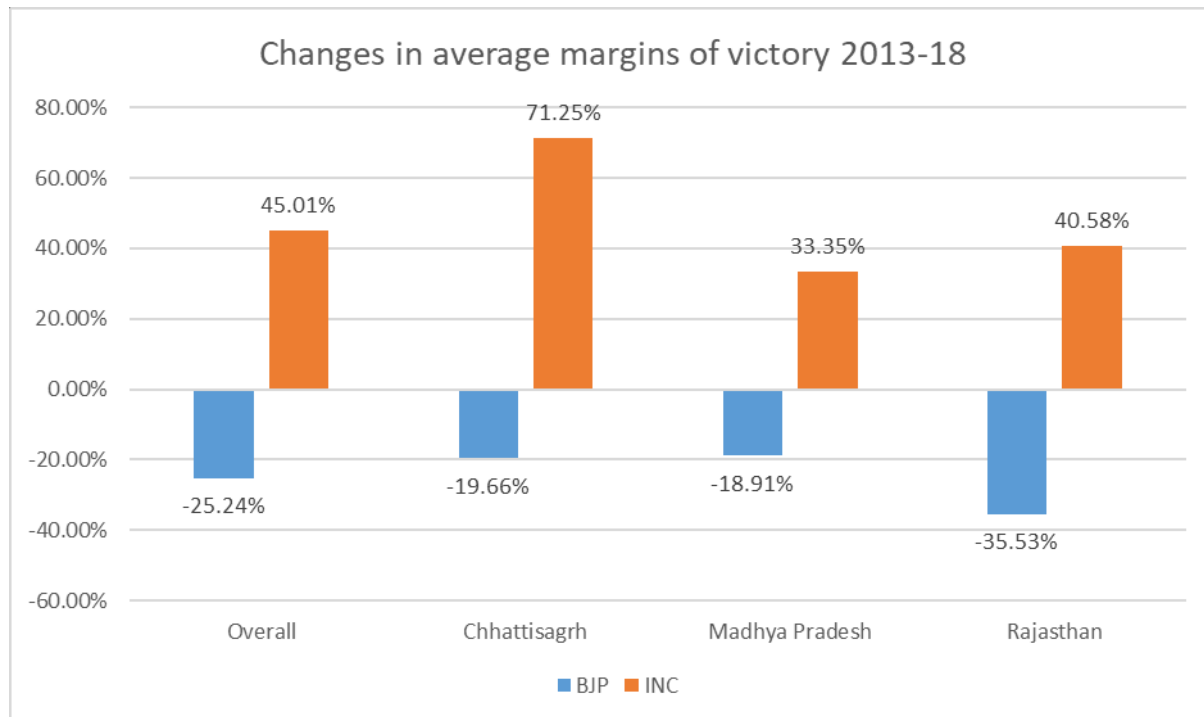
Figure 3 – Average margins of victory 2013-18



Source: Author calculations based on Election commission of India data.

Figure 4 shows the changes in average margins of victory between the two rounds of state elections. The Congress has managed to win a high number of seats with high margins, while the BJP saw the proportion of its 'safe' seats to drop quite dramatically. This means that the Congress, in these three states, should be in a relatively comfortable position at the 2019 national elections.

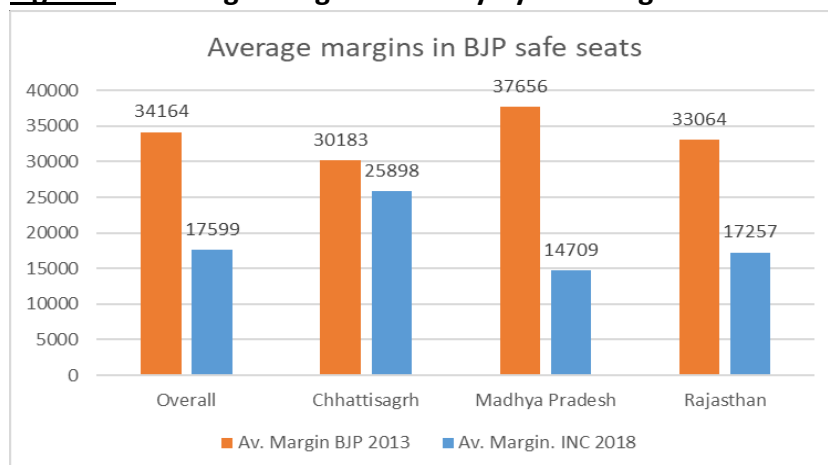
Figure 4 – Changes in average margins of victory by state



Source: Author calculations based on Election commission of India data.

The diverging trends in vote share means that even relatively safe seats might not be very safe after all. In fact, the average margin of victory of the Congress in BJP (supposedly) safe seats are rather high, as figure 5 shows.

Figure 5 – Average margin of victory by the Congress of BJP's safe seats



Source: Author calculations based on Election commission of India data.

Across the three states, the BJP lost 37 seats that it had won in 2013 with very high margins (34,164 votes on average) to the Congress, which won these seats with an average of more than 17,599 seats over the BJP. This is a rather large swing of votes, which should be read as good news by the Congress party. In Chhattisgarh the margins are even higher. Furthermore, even in the safe seats that the BJP managed to retain, the average margin of victory declined by 19 per cent (although most of these seats remain safe).

Of course, discontent against the BJP in these three states does not necessarily mean that similar levels of resentment among voters will manifest in the other Hindi belt states. But, as Nilanjan Sircar noted,¹ the BJP's performance was particularly disappointing in areas with large presence of farmers. This – coupled with the very disappointing performance in Gujarat's rural areas in 2017 – could mean that farmers distress that has brought hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in recent months might be a nation-wide (or at least a north-India-wide) narrative that could seriously undermine the BJP's ability to retain power at the national level.

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¹ 1 Neelanja Sircar, 'BJP Strike Rate Drops in both Rural and Urban Areas', Hindustan Times, 12 December 2018