

A shift in political fundamentals

The saturation of caste-based identity politics, the focus on good governance, and the BJP's limitations gave Congress the edge

When votes were being counted on the morning of May 16, there was an unmistakable sense of being witness to a turning point in the nation's political history. The surprise element — the Congress crossing 200 seats and the UPA coming close to the majority mark against the widespread expectation of a badly fractured Parliament — underlined the national character of the outcome. The voters appeared to have delivered a decisive verdict, one that heralded a new era in the country's politics. As India digested its import, the consequences were stark enough for all to see. The verdict provided greater stability to the national government and reduced the bargaining and blackmailing capacity of coalition allies vastly. The verdict eliminated the need for a Congress-Left coalition and was widely seen as paving the way for greater economic liberalisation. The verdict, especially the success of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, catapulted Rahul Gandhi to the centre-stage of national politics. It was tempting to read these consequences back into the minds of the voters and conclude that this was a vote for stability, a man-

date for economic reform and proof that the Rahul magic had worked. A focus on the big regional losers such as Lalu Prasad and Mayawati gave the impression that the days of regional parties and caste-based politics were coming to an end. The new strength of the Congress gave rise to the idea that national parties were back at the centre-stage of national politics.

Political context

Now that the surprise has worn off and now that we have the data from National Election Study 2009, it is time to verify some of these initial impressions. We need to map the political context of this election in different parts of the country, understand the nature of political choices available to the voters and analyse the sociology of voting. We need to keep in mind a fundamental distinction between the consequences of a verdict and its meaning. We need to take our minds away from the absorbing spectacle of the fallout of this election and focus on how India voted. That is what this special supplement is all about.

Take two simple yet basic points. First, for all the excitement following its out-

come, this election was a normal one. It was not woven around an emotive issue, it was not centred on a personality, and it was not a plebiscite on any one issue. Secondly, while there was a nationwide pattern in the outcome for the two big parties, the principal arena of political contestation was very much located at the State level. The political choice available to the voters, the familiar social equation of who prefers who, and the major issues that determine voter choice were all State specific. To be sure, 'national' issues played an important role this time, but these issues and factors manifested in different ways in different States. National politics reaches the people through the prism of the State. The two basic features of this election ensured that the final outcome reflected the balance of political forces in all the States. An interpretation of the mandate, therefore, must be an exercise in understanding how the balance shifted this time.

The widespread impression that the balance shifted in this election in favour of the national parties and against the regional parties is not borne out by evidence.

The combined tally of the Congress and the BJP has no doubt gone up from 283 to 322 seats but their combined vote share has actually come down by 1.3 percentage points. If we add the Left to the definition, the national parties have gained two seats and have lost about two percentage points in vote share.

Remarkable stability

Similarly, the combined vote share of all the regional parties in the country put together shows a remarkable stability: the figures for the last three Lok Sabha elections read 29.3 per cent, 29.3 per cent and 29.2 per cent. The figure for this time reads 29.2 per cent. The obituaries of the regional parties are premature. As long as the States remain the principal arena of politics, State-specific parties will be relevant. Besides, the regional sentiment on which these parties draw is alive and kicking. More than 70 per cent of re-

spondents in our nationwide survey agreed with the statement that we should first be loyal to the region and then to the nation; only 14 per cent disagreed. In fact, this election buttressed the trend of the regionalisation of the national parties, as leaders of national parties with a regional touch such as Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, Tarun Gogoi, B.S. Yeddyurappa and Raman Singh emerged winners.

What really happened is that the internal balance between the two leading national parties has shifted in a fundamental and perhaps enduring manner to the Congress party's advantage. The Congress has gained significantly, if unevenly, in a majority of States, while the BJP has lost across the country. This shift appears to signify more than the usual ups and downs of electoral politics. While the Congress was somewhat lucky to have improved its seat tally in such a

big way, in a way disproportionate to the modest increase in its vote share, the BJP appears to be stuck in a restricted pool of potential voters, a limitation inherent in its exclusionary politics. This shift in balance in favour of the Congress was not a short-term phenomenon. This election was not won or lost during the few weeks of the election campaign or in the few months prior to the polling day. In hindsight, the outcome of this election reflects the political fundamentals.

The Congress did not win because it did something very clever in the last few weeks to sell itself — as always, the party appeared to be working more at cross purposes and seemed lacking in organisational capacity — but because it had a better product to sell than its main rival. It had leaders perceived to be honest and well-meaning, a pro-poor platform, a relatively fair record of governance aided by an economic boom during much of its tenure, and a non-divisive approach to social conflict. The only element of strategy that did work in favour of the Congress was its decision to go it alone in Uttar Pradesh, which paid off in ways unanticipated

by its own leaders.

The Congress was also helped by two fundamental shifts that these elections signalled. First, various kinds of identity politics have now reached a point of saturation and are beginning to be electorally non-rewarding. Voters have rejected the kind of caste politics practised by the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Pattali Makkal Katchi. This politics played an important role in giving their voters a sense of self-worth, but now they want more. In several States, Muslims have refused to remain hostage to the party that captured their vote. They needed these parties to protest against Congress indifference, but they now want to make nuanced choices. This is not to say that we are about to see a demise of caste in politics. Perhaps the way forward is 'identity plus' politics where the basic building blocs of caste or community will be combined with some basic interests.

Good governance

The second fundamental shift is the emergence of quality of governance as an important voting consideration. When elections become 'normal,' routine considera-

tions such as delivery of governance emerge as crucial factors in an election outcome. The days of blind anti-incumbency are over. At the State level, we have reached a fine balance where the incumbent government faces the elections with neither an advantage nor a disadvantage to begin with. This factor worked to the advantage of the Congress, especially among those whose vote was determined by an assessment of the Central government. Voters assessed the UPA government in the last five years positively. It was seen to be better than the previous NDA government and a majority of the people wanted to give it another chance.

The Congress was in a position to benefit from these two shifts. It has a skeleton of a national organisation and its leaders currently enjoy a positive image. The Congress presented itself, without designing — and its critics may say without deserving — as the natural alternative to those voters who wanted to make a shift. While it seems likely that both these factors will shape the future of Indian politics, there is no guarantee that these will work to the advantage of the winner of this election.

The balance between the BJP and Congress has shifted to the advantage of the latter

Portrait of a party in retreat

The BJP needs to reflect not so much on campaign strategy as on its overall political direction

Although the Bharatiya Janata Party did not start this election as the favourite, the scale of its defeat must still come as a shock. It posted its lowest vote share since it first exploded on the national stage in 1989. It won just 116 seats, down from 138 seats it had last time. Its vote share of 18.8 per cent was 3.4 percentage points down on 2004. This is the third successive election that its support base has shrunk since the high watermark of 1998.

While the Congress did not enjoy a positive vote swing all over the country, the BJP suffered a negative swing in nearly every State. Despite picking up the odd seat in Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh thanks to an increased share of the vote, the party saw its support base shrink in

BJP's vote share		
State	Vote share	Swing from 2004
Andhra Pradesh	3.7	-4.7
Assam	16.2	-6.7
Bihar	14	-0.6
Chhattisgarh	45	-2.8
Delhi	35.2	-5.5
Gujarat	46.6	-0.8
Haryana	12.1	-5.1
Himachal Pradesh	49.5	5.3
Jharkhand	27.5	-5.5
Jammu & Kashmir	18.6	-4.4
Karnataka	39.7	4.9
Kerala	6.3	-4.1
Maharashtra	18.2	-4.4
Madhya Pradesh	43.5	-4.6
Orissa	16.9	-2.4
Punjab	10.1	-0.4
Rajasthan	36.6	-12.4
Tamil Nadu	2.3	-2.8
Uttar Pradesh	17.5	-4.7
Uttarakhand	34	-7
West Bengal	6.1	-2

Source: NES 2009. Weighted data, all figures are in per cent, swing in percentage points, rest no opinion

to a point of stagnation, much before the party could cross the threshold of viability. This election marks a point of retreat in this project. The BJP is no longer the small but crucial player that it used to be in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Despite paying a good deal of attention and adopting unorthodox tricks, the BJP is in retreat all over the North-East.

Secondly, the BJP expanded its bandwidth on the political spectrum by acquiring new allies. The NDA of 1999-2004 represented the pinnacle of the BJP's political expansion. Since then it has been downhill for the party. From the peak of 41.1 per cent share of the national vote, the NDA slipped to 35.9 per cent in 2004 and has fallen to just 24.1 per cent this time. Big allies such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazha-

The BJP suffered a negative swing in nearly every State

gam, the Telugu Desam Party, the Trinamool Congress have dumped the BJP, because they found the cost of losing minority votes higher than the gains the alliance brought. This time the BJP did win back some old allies like the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam and the Indian National Lok Dal in Haryana, but it is possible that they may reach similar conclusions. The manner in which the Biju Janata Dal dumped the BJP and got away with it could give ideas to the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar. As the BJP's own strength declines, and its capacity to accommodate diverse interests decreases, it becomes less attractive to existing and potential alliance partners.

Thirdly, the BJP attracted new social groups during its phase of expansion. It expanded from urban to the rural areas. From being an upper caste party, it cultivated a major base among the lower OBCs. It took major strides towards capturing the adivasi vote in middle India and started securing some votes among non-Hindus. By 1999, the BJP was in a position to claim power by adding these newly acquired votes to its core bloc of the socially privileged.

This election represents a stagnation or reversal in all these respects. Except Karnataka, the BJP does not appear to be cultivating a new social base anywhere. In this election, the BJP's hitherto upward trend among adivasis and Muslim voters has been reversed and its expansion among the lower OBCs halted. The BJP faces a threat in its core constituency too. Though it continues to be the first preference of upper caste Indians, the only social group where the BJP is ahead of the Congress, the party has faced a sharper than average erosion in this group. The BJP trailed the Congress among 'middle class' urban voters. All this confirms the picture of a party in retreat.

These three reversals underline the basic limitations of the political strategy the BJP has been employing. It is a party with a smaller catchment area, a declining capacity to reach out to newer groups, and a lower 'coalitionability.' It takes an exceptional situation such as Kargil, an extraordinarily accommodative leadership as that of A.B. Vajpayee, and an extra large coalition such as the NDA of 1999 to carve out a victory from this base. Otherwise, it faces a permanent disadvantage. Perhaps it is time for the party to ask the big question: aren't these limitations related to the narrow and divisive approach the party has espoused? The BJP is still the largest opposition party, runs many State governments (and reasonably well by the prevailing standards), and contains a second rung leadership. It is in a position to ask the big question that it needs to.

A revival for the Congress?

The truth is that the party increased its vote share only marginally, but earned a disproportionate reward in terms of seats

This election handed over an unambiguously positive verdict for the Congress at a time when the party least expected it. The Congress went into this election with three handicaps: it was an incumbent government nervous about what it had to show by way of achievement, its allies were fewer and weaker than in 2004, and it was perceived as being on the backfoot on the question of its prime ministerial candidate. Eventually, the Congress won 206 seats, crossing the 200-seat threshold for the first time since 1991. It performed well in States that it was expected to dominate, and also did better than expected in many others.

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where it was considered too weak to make a recovery. Though there was nothing like a national wave, strong or mild, there appeared to be a nationwide trend working to the Congress' advantage.

A close look at the vote shares and vote changes suggests that initial reactions may have overestimated the Congress gains. Despite boosting its tally by an impressive 61 seats, the Congress did this by increasing its vote share by a mere two percentage points from 2004. Overall, it won 28.6 per cent of the vote, almost identical to its vote share in 1999, when the National Democratic Alliance triumphed. In the last three elections, the seat/vote 'multiplier' (proportion of seats won divided by proportion of votes) for the Congress has gone up from 0.74 in 1999 to 1.01 in 2004 and to 1.34 in 2009. To put it differently, every one per cent of the vote gave the Congress four seats in 1999, 5.5 seats in 2004 and 7.2 seats in this election.

Now, a higher multiplier is not just plain luck. Clearly, the Congress succeeded in focusing its energies in key battlegrounds such as Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala and Rajasthan and obtained disproportionate rewards for its votes. At the same time, a higher multiplier should not be confused with an electoral wave representing a broad change in the public mood, or a national swing.

An analysis of the State-wise picture bears this out. The swing in favour of the Congress was far from uniform. Among the major States, it varied from a loss of 7.6 percentage points in vote share in Orissa to a gain

No national wave		
State	Vote share	Swing from 2004
All India	28.6	2.1
Andhra Pradesh	39.0	-2.6
Assam	34.9	-0.2
Bihar	10.3	5.8
Chhattisgarh	37.3	-2.9
Delhi	57.1	2.3
Gujarat	43.5	-0.4
Haryana	41.8	-0.3
Himachal Pradesh	45.6	-6.3
Jharkhand	15.0	-2.9
Jammu & Kashmir	24.7	-0.4
Karnataka	36.8	0.0
Kerala	40.1	8.0
Maharashtra	19.6	-4.2
Madhya Pradesh	40.1	6.0
Orissa	32.8	-7.6
Punjab	45.2	11.0
Rajasthan	47.2	5.8
Tamil Nadu	15.0	0.6
Uttar Pradesh	18.2	6.2
Uttarakhand	43.3	5

Source: NES 2009. Weighted data, all figures are in per cent, swing in percentage points, rest no opinion

of 11 percentage points in Punjab. But such was the Congress' fortune this time, that even losses translated into victories. Thanks to the break-up of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Biju Janata Dal alliance in Orissa, the Congress was able to pick up four extra seats. In Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, the loss in the Congress' vote was more than offset by the entry of crucial players such as the Praja Rajyam Party and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena; these parties allowed the Congress to add to its tally of seats. On the other hand, in States

The Congress has not yet peaked; it still has a lot of room to grow

such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, a moderate positive swing brought handsome gains for the party in terms of seats. Parties should not expect such a boon every time.

The Congress' vote share in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar ought to please the party most. In Uttar Pradesh, the votes it received were concentrated in some pockets, thus giving it disproportionate rewards. But even so, a vote share of 18 per cent provides it with a launching pad for reviving the party in the State. The journey of revival in Bihar is bound to be tougher than in Uttar Pradesh, but Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalu Prasad may have done the Congress a favour in Bihar by forcing them to make an attempt. In Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, the Congress proved a useful secondary partner for its bigger allies, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Trinamool Congress.

A revival in the electoral fortunes of the party has also been accompanied by a subtle shift in the social profile of its voters. By the late 1990s, the Congress had become a party whose support base was a mirror image of its opponent in different parts of the country. The party did not have a vote of its own and was excessively dependent upon the residual support it got from the marginal sections of society. In the last election, the Congress regained something of its famous 'rainbow coalition.' This election takes this trend a step further. The stigma attached to voting for the Congress among a section of Muslims and Sikhs is definitely over. The Congress has improved its standing among the urban middle classes and educated voters. It has done so while largely retaining the 'bottom of the pyramid' that constitutes its core voting bloc.

This recovery is still very partial, especially in States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where the Congress has been unable to access the bottom of the social pyramid. Also, there are many States where the Congress is in no position to take on the BJP. The Congress cannot outgrow its allies in other parts of the country, at least not yet. But to say this is to imply that the party has not yet peaked. The Congress still has a lot of room to grow.

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