

Trends and lessons from India's latest shock elections

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*Dramatic results in the Lok Sabha and Delhi Assembly elections point to a change in broader trends in Indian electoral politics, writes **Abhirup Bhunia**.*



The February 2015 Delhi Assembly Elections which the young Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) swept and the erstwhile invincible-looking BJP took a massive drubbing in has been analysed from every angle possible. The BJP, it must be noted, achieved a similar landslide itself in last year's Lok Sabha elections, shattering all previous records. Without trying to analyse the specific causes for these victories, I will point out a few broader trends in Indian electoral politics that these results suggest.

1. Strong mandates/waves:

The second term of the Congress-led UPA (2009-14) was a difficult coalition government led by the Congress. But since the beginning of this year we have seen many governments with simple or absolute majority – Centre, Haryana, Jharkhand, Delhi. It may seem that the UPA made so much out of the “compulsions of coalition politics” to justify policy paralysis during that time that people went back to giving super-strong mandates to a party (or a pre-poll alliance). However, there is also a very strong possibility that the Indian electorate is actually [influenced by the constantly booming electronic media](#) to the point of behaving like a homogenous herd. Call it the workings of a “magic bullet” or an engulfing “spiral of silence”, swimming-with-the-tide seems to have become the new norm as far as the Indian electorate is concerned. At the urban middle-class level, this might have something to do with the social media boom as well. Could this be the beginning of the end of coalition politics in India?

2. Muslim vote consolidation:

Indians, it seems, have started to vote above their castes. While this may not be a trend set in stone, [figures show](#) that voting on religious lines very much exists. 77 percent of all Muslims voted for the AAP in Delhi. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, only 8% Muslims voted for the BJP. Voting en-bloc by a religious community is not a good sign for democracy, since it diverts from genuine public policy issues and encourages politicians to communalise electoral agendas. One of the keystones of democracy remain the Church-state separation. But the past few months of BJP-led polity in India have brought with it a growing tendency for majoritarian politics. From brazen communalisation by the RSS, an Indian cultural right wing organisation, to [regressive comments](#) by even elected representatives like Sakshi Maharaj, the cultural right-wing reared its ugly head rather bald-facedly, much to the uneasiness of the minority community. The Muslim community in Delhi used to flock to the Congress which seemed to them the only – albeit bad – alternative to the perceived *Hindutva* bunch. As soon as an electoral alternative presented itself, the community threw its weight behind the AAP. Here again, one notices herd mentality.

3. Impatient voters:

It can turn out to be a good thing for Indian democracy that the electorate is teaching political parties a very useful lesson: perform or perish. Parties in India have for long taken the electorate for granted and been complacent until the election looms. However, there is a flip side to this trend too. If taken to an extreme, voters might suffer from an illusion that silver bullets indeed exist. As far as issues of economic growth and jobs go, time is necessary before the results show. For example, Modi's promise of providing jobs to the youth will only show fruits 'on the ground' when files move, investments are cleared and actual capital formation happens. Employment, for all its importance, cannot be created out of thin air. However, in India there are many issues (e.g. corruption, mal-governance, etc.) which can actually be tackled in a very short span. Some people say petty corruption [vanished during AAP's previous 49-day rule in Delhi](#). It is also said that rent-seeking has been curbed in the last eight months of Modi government. While, it's a great thing that the Indian voter is denying cakewalks to political parties by refusing blind

permanent loyalties, it is important to remember good policies will generally take some time to bear fruits.

4. Populism, not reformism, works locally:

The promise of reforms might work as a grand narrative in national elections once every five years, but in Indian regional elections, economic populism still works better than most other things. It is no secret that Arvind Kejriwal banks on [populist promises](#). As a result the Delhi subaltern consisting of traders in the unorganised sector, the unemployed, homeless, drivers, maids and the like threw their full weight behind the incorruptible Kejriwal. A day ahead of the elections my maid told me that she would vote for Kejriwal because he would make things cheaper and that's all she could care about. She obviously referred to water, electricity and other utilities. Some urban poor pointed out to me that the Centre's policy of making LPG (cooking gas) subsidy a direct benefit transfer system (PAHAL) by transferring the difference between the market price and the subsidised amount to Aadhaar-linked Jan Dhan Yojana bank accounts has not gone down well with many. They would much rather buy cheap. Also, Modi utterly failed to win over Delhi voters by trumpeting Central/all-India schemes like the Jan Dhan Yojana, smart cities, and the much-talked-about 'Make in India'. These, and his successful foreign policy moves, as it turns out, are only likely to work as election planks nationally, not regionally/locally.

India remains a complex democracy where politics entails navigating a wide range of socio-political and economic challenges. With greater awareness in recent times, the character of the electorate has undergone a paradigm shift, and some new trends have emerged, as highlighted above. It remains to be seen whether these trends assume a longer term hue. But one thing is for sure: the nature of Indian politics is constantly evolving even as old designs are being taken down.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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