

# The aam aadmi enters politics: Analysing the outcome of Delhi's State Assembly elections

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*Siddharth Bannerjee examines the strategies that helped the Aam Aadmi Party make historic gains in last week's State Assembly elections in Delhi.*

Recently concluded State Assembly elections in Delhi witnessed the [historic success of an upstart](#) political entity, the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP, Common Man's Party). Although less than a year old, the party won an impressive 28 (out of 70) seats in the State Assembly by nominating a slate of '[giant killing](#)' novices, as a [record two in three citizens \(including many first-time voters\)](#) turned out for the polls. The de facto head of the party, Arvind Kejriwal, an ex-revenue services officer turned anti-corruption crusader, beat out the [15-year, three-term incumbent Chief Minister Sheila Dixit](#) by a healthy margin, signaling the end of an era for the Congress party that she represented, which won only eight seats.



[National](#) (and [international](#)) attention has focused on this election because the emergence of the AAP represents a unique, issue-focused (rather than regionally driven or identity-based) strain of politics in India. The AAP rode a [strong anti-incumbent wave](#) and campaigned on an anti-corruption platform that emphasised transparency, accountability and local-level representation, reflecting their antecedents in India's recent anti-corruption social movement led by the Gandhian, Anna Hazare. Beyond this [successful transition from protest and legal policy advocacy to formal political participation](#), the AAP case is also interesting as an exemplar of the coming of age of India's urban middle-class, one that has globally informed social aspirations, is professionally grounded, media savvy, and increasingly willing to explore its moral convictions.

The genesis of the recent anti-corruption movement, and its focus on passing a law, [the Lokpal bill](#), that would create an independent ombudsman to prosecute major corruptions cases, was a reaction to the rise of "grand" or "big-ticket" fraud in post-liberalisation India. The convergence of state and private interests in the development and management of mega ventures (such as natural resource extraction, information technology service provision, and public works construction projects) across India enabled unethical bureaucrats, politicians and businesspersons to engage in large-scale corruption.

Unmindful of the urgency among [young, ambitious and dynamic Indians](#) and complacent in the belief that a decade and a half of 5-10 per cent GDP growth would protect them from public scrutiny, most veteran politicians continued with a self-enriching 'business as usual' approach to public service commitments. Hence no one in the Indian political establishment or within the media was quite prepared for the intensity of public outrage caused by recent corruption scandals—a sentiment [Hazare continues to leverage](#) by holding mass protests and hunger strikes to support his version of the *Lokpal* bill.

High-profile scandals corruption scandals – such as the [2G telecom spectrum](#) sale, 'coal-gate', and [2010 Commonwealth Games](#) construction contracts – served as a tipping point to mobilise [the urban, middle-class Indians](#) who comprise the anti-corruption movement. Dubbing it 'a new independence struggle', the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement appropriated Gandhian repertoires of activism like *satyagraha* and *swaraj* (self-rule) to highlight the ineptitude and venality of ruling political parties.

But, as is often the case with contested processes, intra-movement disputes emerged: [differences arose](#) between Hazare's populist yet 'apolitical' or 'antipolitical' movement, and Kejriwal's vision of mootng a radical democratic and direct participation-based political entity, the AAP. Kejriwal, a key architect and choreographer of Hazare's movement, along with supporters such as academic and [psephologist Professor Yogendra Yadav](#), Indian Supreme Court lawyer Prashanth Bhushan, journalist Manish Sisodia, and poet Kumar Vishwas, had become frustrated with the delay in passing the *Jan Lokpal* bill. They also became increasingly critical of the non-inclusive and hierarchical nature of Hazare's IAC movement. After a number of public spats, 'Team Kejriwal' splintered off to found a political party that called for [decentralised, direct accountability mechanisms](#) and local decision-making powers (such as *muholla* or neighbourhood committees) .

Though new to the political fray on launching in November 2012, the AAP was quick to [adapt and adopt innovative repertoires of contention](#) in several aspects of their campaign. The AAP has distinguished its campaign from the business of 'politics as usual' and instead invested in 'clean politics'—a buzzword for transparency and accountability. The AAP has also used a crowdsourced and crowdfunded strategy implemented by an [army of volunteers](#) for public engagement as well as to determine candidate- and issue-selection criteria.

Contending with a paucity of financial resources and harbouring deep distrust of mainstream and corporate Indian media networks, the AAP also engaged in various forms of self-mediation to get its message out, especially on [interactive social media platforms](#), including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google Hangouts. For example, on their Facebook page and other social media platforms, as well as in public appearances, the AAP asks for [small, publicly acknowledged donations from supporters](#) (similar to US President Barack Obama's grassroots fundraising strategy) and selects candidates based on a nomination process in contravention of the established practise of a party leader handing out election tickets to favoured or high-paying cadres.

The success of the AAP necessitates a more nuanced mode of analysis of Indian politics and civil society, one that goes beyond the traditional structural tropes of caste, class, and religion. For one, there seems to be a [newfound idealism](#) in the way politics and politicians are perceived, signalling a shift in the tone and level of discourse. Rising above the prevalent cynicism, the AAP has successfully engineered a throwback to the golden era of India's anti-colonial struggle by symbolically and methodologically evoking Gandhi and his indigenously framed, morally superior solutions for good governance—ones that bridge class, caste and religious divides.

In their selection of a [polling manifesto](#), the AAP has played a masterstroke by tapping into the most immediate issues affecting urban Delhiites such as sanitation and waste management infrastructure improvement, subsidised education for the urban poor, better standards of safety for women in the wake of last year's [brutal gang rape](#), reduced electricity and water bills, improved health facilities and, of course, the party's central demand: the passage of a Delhi-centric *Jan Lokpal* bill.

At this stage, the AAP is perfectly poised to be the main opposition party in Delhi ( [pending a call for re-election to avoid a hung Assembly](#)), a position it can use to shore up its governance credentials while operating as a thorn in

the side of any perceived maleficence. With [federal elections less than four months away](#), it remains to be seen whether the AAP will be able to replicate their successful [initial experiments](#) on the national stage—an uncommonly difficult task in a [regionally fragmented country](#) like India.

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