

CELEBRATING DEMOCRACY

INDIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS



RESULTS | INDIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi led Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) has swept the Lok Sabha (lower House of Parliament) elections of 2019, registering an impressive victory by winning 303 out of the 542 seats in an intense and decisive electoral battle. The principal opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC) trailed much behind managing to win only 52 seats.

This victory is historic for many reasons, but primarily for the manner in which the Bharatiya Janta Party and its allies stormed into the bastions of powerful regional State parties such as the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, the Biju Janta Dal (BJD) in Odisha, the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Tripura, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) in Telangana. These were some of the states where the BJP was expected to underperform, but the final results have proved contrary to expectations.

It was also projected that the BJP would fail to re-create its stellar performance of 2014 and lose ground in the 'Hindi heartland', home to a third of India's population comprising of the key states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Madhya Pradesh (MP), Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar who together send more than 150 lawmakers to the lower House. However, this prediction proved wrong as the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (BJP and its allies) retained their stronghold over these states also. Despite the formidable opposition faced by the NDA from caste based alliances such as BSP-SP-RLD in UP, the saffron party performed exceedingly well, winning 62 (out of a total of 80) seats in the state alone, and in fact increasing its vote share from 42.6% in 2014 to 49.5% percent in 2019. The arithmetic of these once strong regional players seems to have fallen flat in these general elections, and their performance has forced their leadership to call for a complete overhaul of the party structure and a review of their politics, policies and communication strategies.

The primacy of the Bharatiya Janta Party and the margin with which they have captured the ballot in these general elections has made the regional parties practically irrelevant in the larger political discourse of the country. Even for the parties forming the National Democratic Alliance (Janta Dal United in Bihar, Mizo National Front in Mizoram, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra among a handful of others), the next five years will be challenging as they will have to strive harder than before to get their voices heard and demands accepted. For many this steep rise of a single party is also a matter of concern, as they fear it might lead to a change in the Center-State equilibrium and pose a challenge to the increasing federal character of India's political set-up.

NEW VOTERS

The 2019 Lok Sabha elections recorded the highest ever voter turnout of 67.47%, a figure which also encapsulates the participation of nearly 15 million new voters according to a recently released report by the Election Commission of India. The country is in the midst of a major demographic shift, where the voices of Generation Z are getting louder. Cognizant of this change and mindful of the repercussions that it might have on the ballot, this election season candidates across parties and regions kept the demands and aspirations of the youth central to their election campaigns.

Young voters in India expect their government to not only increase employment opportunities, but also provide them with world-class educational institutions, clamp down on corruption and ensure women's safety. The BJP managed to touch all these cords and more. In their road-shows, rallies and interviews to the media, the BJP-NDA leaders reiterated the alliance's aspirational agenda for India; the vow to eliminate corruption, construct institutions of eminence and consolidate work under the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme [Pradhan Mantri Rojgar Protsahan Yojana (PMRPY)] and the Skill India initiative, the two main flagship programs of the NDA launched in 2015. However, in extension to all this the millennials also saw in PM Modi a decisive leader - the son of a tea seller who rose from within the ranks of the party, worked relentlessly for 18-20 hours a day, is free from family attachments and the only leader capable of giving a befitting reply to Pakistan in the wake of the Uri and Pulwama attacks. Young India saw in Modi a chief who took bold and audacious decisions such as demonetization (to track down black money), GST implementation and sanction surgical strikes to take down terrorists. Most importantly, they saw in him a leader who could accelerate the growth story of India and make it into a formidable global power.

Along with these factors, it is also important to take into account the impact of BJP's well-oiled digital media machinery and the absence of a credible opposition candidate to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to fully understand the reasons behind this landslide victory. Though the opposition tried to stitch various voices into a Coalition, they were not seen as a credible counter to Modi.

MODI 2.0 – THE ROAD AHEAD

With a historic mandate behind him, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has now set the tone for his second innings; Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (development for all) and now Sabka Vishwas (trust of everyone). Talking to his party workers at the BJP headquarters just hours after the significant win, Modi recognized the substantial work done by his government in the first term, but also highlighted the need to win the confidence of India's minorities and work towards their upliftment. He urged his party Parliamentarians to understand India's complex social fabric and look beyond the issues of caste and religion.

All geared up for the second term, the government will undertake a review of proposals in the next 100 days to refine policy changes and launch big ticket economic, trade and agricultural reforms to effectively attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and bring India's consumption economy back on track. However, on some policies a continuity will be maintained, especially those concerning national security, such as "zero tolerance on terrorism", defence reforms and the economic strategies with US and China.

To boost manufacturing and job creation, the Finance Ministry will soon announce measures simplifying the GST process and might also do away with the top two tax slabs that of 18% and 28% respectively. According to tax and trade pundits these steps will ensure a lower tax burden and reduce time spent on tax compliance to 1 hour a month.

The government in all likelihood is also going to focus its resources on the 'Make in India' initiative to re-ignite job creation and self-employment. BJP's failure to effectively tackle the looming job crisis has been one of its main critiques by the opposition parties, and a matter that needs urgent attention by both central and state governments. The other policies and legislations likely to be introduced are the National E-Commerce Policy and the Personal Data Protection Bill. Flagged as protectionist by MNC's, trade chambers and foreign governments the drafts of these policies were introduced just months before the elections to appease the BJP's primary voter base i.e. the domestic traders and exporters. While the policy drafts may undergo some iteration, the overall tone will remain protectionist and foreign companies will need to comply with most of the new norms.

In its second term the government will have to maintain a balance of safeguarding the businesses of domestic manufacturers but also create the right regulatory environment to boost FDI inflows. The decisive result is a stunning vote of confidence for Modi, who will now have to hit the ground running on all aspects of the economy to truly deliver on his promise of a 'Shining India'.