

## **Introduction: What Does Verdict 2019 Tell Us? How Do We Read This Mandate?**

Sanjay Kumar

*Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi*

**D**uring the 2019 Lok Sabha elections held in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) registered a stunning victory, winning 303 of the total 543 Lok Sabha seats. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) ended up winning 353 Lok Sabha seats. It is important to note that during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP managed to increase its vote share to 37.5 percent from its previous best of 31 percent votes in 2014. On the other hand, the Indian National Congress (Congress) managed to win only fifty-two seats and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)<sup>1</sup> tally reached ninety-one Lok Sabha seats. There was hardly any increase in the vote share of Congress compared to the 2014 Lok Sabha<sup>2</sup> elections. Certainly, the gains for the BJP came mainly at the cost of regional parties. The combined tally of seats and vote share of all regional parties put together declined in 2019 compared to their performance in 2014. The losses for regional parties came mainly from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, where the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)<sup>3</sup> and Samajwadi Party (SP)<sup>4</sup> alliance in UP and the RJD-led alliance in Bihar performed miserably. In UP, the SP-BSP alliance managed to win only fifteen seats, of which ten were won by the BSP

and only five were won by the SP. In Bihar, of all the parties that were part of Mahagathbandan, only Congress candidate Dr. Mohammad Jawed managed to win the Kishanganj Lok Sabha seat.

The election of 2019 indicates that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)<sup>5</sup> not only managed to retain its base of support that it built in 2014, but it also expanded it both geographically and socially. It managed to win seats in states where previously it had not performed well. It also managed to get more votes among social communities that had not voted for it in earlier elections. Congress<sup>6</sup> did not improve on its performance in 2014, but it is important to note that neither its votes declined nor its tally of seats went down. The BJP enhanced its performance from 2014 largely at the cost of regional parties. Some regional parties managed to hold onto their base of support, but few others retained the kind of support they held in 2014. In states like Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, regional parties performed badly in spite of many of them having formed an anti-BJP alliance to avoid splitting the anti-BJP votes in their state. The BJP's gain in vote share and seats, largely at the expense of regional parties in many states, begins a new de-

bate as to whether this is the beginning of the end of the dominance of regional parties in the North Indian states<sup>7</sup> or a passing phase in Indian elections. If this decline in the importance of the regional parties is largely related to national elections, could there be a reversal in the trend during state assembly elections?

Various articles in this special issue of the journal attempt to focus on some important questions arising from this verdict. First and foremost, these articles try to explain how and why the BJP managed to register such a resounding victory. Is it because of the work done by the BJP government during last five years, or should this verdict be seen as a vote for Narendra Modi more than anything else? How did the voters of India respond to the aggressive nationalist campaign launched by the ruling BJP? Did the welfare schemes help the BJP in making inroads among the rural poor and female voters? Did the laws against triple talaq help the BJP make inroads among Muslim voters or make it even somewhat more acceptable among Muslim voters? Where did Congress fail? Why was Congress unable to make any impact among its voters? Was that a leadership failure or something else?

The result of the 2019 election signifies that the BJP made further inroads among rural voters, keeping its urban vote bank intact. It also gained in its base in semi-urban constituencies. The vote-share of the BJP increased by 6.8 percent in rural constituencies, by 3.5 percent in semi-urban constituencies, and by 2.2 percent in urban constitu-

encies. Various welfare schemes of the BJP government aimed at the welfare of people living in rural India seemed to have paid dividends to the party. The analysis by Siddharth Swaminathan, “Understanding Voting Patterns by Class in the 2019 Indian Election,” provides a detailed account of how the BJP managed to win the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, including factors that contributed to its victory. While there may be overstatement about how much the welfare scheme helped the BJP make further inroads among poor voters, but evidence from the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey suggests that voters who benefitted from the schemes voted for the BJP in much bigger numbers compared to those who did not benefit. The article “Do Issues Matter in Indian Elections” by Prashant Kumar Choudhary, Reetika Syal, and Tarun Arora provides us with some nuanced analysis on these issues. E Sridharan, in his article “Understanding voting patterns by Class in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections,” takes a deep dive looking at the voting patterns across class. The analysis of National Election Study (NES) 2019 data suggests that the BJP for the first time took the lead over Congress even among the poor and the lower economic classes of voters. The rich and middle classes have voted for the BJP in very large numbers for the last several elections, but during the 2019 Lok Sabah elections, the BJP made massive inroads among voters belonging to the poor economic class, especially the rural poor and the lower economic class.

The BJP’s expanded base of support is also credited to the inroads it

managed to make among the numerically large Other Backward Classes (OBC) of voters, especially in the Hindi heartland states. There was a time when nearly 50 percent of OBC votes were divided between Congress and the BJP and the other 50 percent of OBC votes were cornered by various regional parties dominant in different states. Things began to change during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when the BJP managed to make some inroads among the OBC, but the 2019 elections witnessed massive inroads of the BJP among OBC voters, especially the lower OBC. This did not happen all of a sudden, but was very strategically worked toward by the BJP by isolating the dominant OBC caste who voted for one of the other regional parties within a state and focusing on mobilizing the non-dominant OBC caste (also referred as lower OBC) mainly in the states of UP and Bihar, but also in some other states. How the OBC voted in different states is analyzed by Sanjeer Alam in his article “The Backwards Turn Right in the Hindi Belt: Trajectories and Implications” using the Lokniti-CSDS NES 2019 data. Not only did the OBC, Dalits, and Adivasis vote for the BJP in a big way, young voters (ages eighteen to twenty-five) also voted for the BJP in large numbers. The age as a political category was hardly evident in Indian elections before the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Age has become significant as a political category only since 2014 Lok Sabha elections, when young voters started voting in very large numbers; their turnout was higher compared to the average turnout and they voted in favor of the BJP in much

bigger numbers compared to voters of other age groups. This was largely due to their attraction to and faith in Narendra Modi. This trend, which begun in 2014, more or less continued during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections and Vibha Attri and Jyoti Mishra provide a detail account of how young voters voted in 2019 in their article “The Young Vote in Lok Sabha Elections 2019.”

The Mahagathbandan failed to perform well in UP, contrary to popular belief that the SP-BSP alliance would put the BJP in a difficult situation. The BJP received more than 50 percent of the votes in forty-one Lok Sabha constituencies in UP, neutralizing the effect of the numerical dominance of the SP-BSP alliance. Similarly, the NDA alliance polled 50+ percent of the votes in thirty-one of the forty Lok Sabha seats in Bihar. The BJP’s increased vote share in UP compared to 2014 Lok Sabha election caused many to believe that Muslims may have also voted for the BJP in large numbers. The evidence from the NES 2019 suggests that there was hardly any increase in Muslim support for the BJP either in UP or in other parts of India. Evidence suggests that only 8 percent of Muslims voted for the BJP nationally and the figures remained the same for UP. A detailed account of how Muslims voted in different states is presented by Hilal Ahmed in his article “Does Muslim Vote Matter? Presence, Representation, Participation.”

The story of 2019 cannot be completed without investigating why Congress failed so miserably. One could understand the party’s defeat in

2014 as it was up against the very strong anti-incumbency mood of the voters, especially in the North of India, but many failed to understand why Congress failed to even move an inch ahead of its previous performance. Voters had already punished Congress for its misdeeds while it was in power between 2004 and 2014, but it was unthinkable for many to expect that voters would punish Congress twice more when people voted for the party in the assembly elections in the states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan barely six months before they cast their vote for the national government. The performance of Congress surprised many because there were visible signs of anxiety among the voters on issues related to economic growth, joblessness, and other livelihood issues. Evidence from the NES 2019 clearly indicates voters having these anxieties. Why did Congress fail to capitalize on this anxiety among the voters? Was there an issue of leadership whereby people compared Congress to the BJP?

The failure of the Congress Party could be analyzed by the fact that whatever discontent toward the BJP government was, although not very much, the party failed to even capitalize on that. The defeat of Congress in 2014 was expected, and it did not come to many Congress leaders as a surprise. But the defeat in 2019 shattered the confidence of many Congress leaders and many privately accept that the party needs a change of leadership. Voters not having trust or faith in the leadership of Congress should be a matter of concern for the party, but far more worrying for the

party should be the loss of trust of its own leaders and workers for national leadership. The party that managed to snatch power from the BJP in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh only few months before the 2019 Lok Sabha performed badly in these states during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Voters made a clear choice between the state election and national elections. The success of Congress in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, or earlier in Punjab indicates that strong state-level leadership of Congress could still pose a challenge for the BJP, but the relatively weak national leadership of Congress was hardly any match against the very strong leadership in the name of Narendra Modi. What Congress needs is not to think is about its national leadership, but at the same time it also needs to encourage state-level and local leadership. Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, and Sonia Gandhi do not seem to be an answer to Narendra Modi.

The NAYA Scheme<sup>8</sup> promised by Congress failed to attract voters as it came into being too late. Evidence from the NES 2019 suggests that half of the voting population had not even heard about it until election day. Most of those who would have been beneficiaries and might have thought of voting for Congress in anticipation of getting this benefit had very little information about this scheme. Where did the Congress strategy fail? This has been meticulously analyzed by James Manor in his article “The Prospect of a Congress Party Revival.”

There are reasons for the BJP to celebrate its 2019 victory. At the moment, the party enjoys enormous popular support, but the BJP would be making a mistake if it failed to recognize that some proportion of the votes it received is critical, which could swing away from the party if the government fails to address the economic issues of regular people. The BJP benefitted from the anti-incumbency mood of the voters against Congress, which was the ruling party in many states between

2014 and 2019. That five-year cycle is over now and in many states, the BJP is the ruling party and there is no anti-incumbency against Congress in these states. The BJP's performance in various state assembly elections held after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections (Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Delhi) is a testimony to the BJP's vulnerability if it fails to perform on the economic front or when it up against a strong regional party or against a formidable state-level leader.

## **Notes**

- 1 UPA is an alliance of eleven political parties for the 2019 Lok Sabha election. Led by Congress, its members were Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Nationalist Congress Party, Janata Dal (Secular), the Rashtriya Lok Samta Party, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Hindustani Awam Morcha, the Vikassheel Insaan Party, the Communist Party of India, Indian Union Muslim League, the Jan Adhikar Party, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (Prajaantantrik), Swabhimani Paksha, Bahujan Vikas Aaghadi, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, Kerala Congress (M), the Revolutionary Socialist Party, Kongunadu Makkal Desia Katchi, Indhiya Jananayaga Katchi, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, Navaneet Kaur (independent candidate supported by Congress in Amravati, Maharashtra), Lalnghinglova Hmar (independent candidate supported by Congress in Mizoram), and Surendra Kumar Gupta (independent candidate supported by Congress in Pilibhit, UP).
- 2 Lok Sabha is composed of the representatives of people elected through direct election on the basis of adult suffrage. It is the Lower House of the Parliament and is made of Ministers of Parliament (MPs). It has 345 seats, and MPs for each seat are elected for a term of five years. The winning party appoints the leader of the Lok Sabha, who is the Prime Minister.
- 3 BSP was formed in 1984 by the Kanshi Ram. The main objective of the party was to advocate for Dalits and backward classes and work for the betterment of downtrodden and marginalized communities. The BSP had made ground in UP by creating a support base among Dalits, Muslims, and those from most backward classes. The party ran for the first time in the state assembly election in UP in 1989 and won thirteen seats out of 425. In the 2007 state assembly election, the party won 206 seats, with 30.43 percent of the votes, and formed the government. The party is influential in UP, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.
- 4 SP is a social base party, representing backward castes and Muslims in UP. The party was founded by the Mulayam Singh Yadav in 1992 with the support of backward and Muslim leaders. The party ran in the 1993 state assembly election, winning 109 seats with 17.9 percent of the votes. In the 2012 state assembly election, the party gained an absolute majority in the election.

- 5 The BJP is a right-wing political party, established in 1984 as the political wing of a pro-Hindu group. The party enjoyed social support among the higher castes in northern states of India. Later, the BJP attempted to attract a lower caste and inducted several Dalits and backward caste leaders in the party and appointed them to prominent positions. The party ran in the 1984 Lok Sabha election and won only two seats with 7.74 percent of the votes. Afterward, in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP gained huge support from all castes and communities and won 282 seats with 31.34 percent of the votes.
- 6 Congress was formed in 1885 during the freedom movement. The party is truly secular and generally considered to left-liberal in Indian politics. After independence, the Congress Party sustained one-party dominance in India until the 1967 election to the state assemblies. Afterward, the party declined in several states and was defeated by huge margins in several places, including the northern states of India. In the most recent Lok Sabha election, the Congress Party won only fifty-two seats with 19.49 percent of the votes.
- 7 There are six north Indian states, namely UP, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, and Delhi.
- 8 The Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY Scheme) is a Congress scheme described in its 2019 election manifesto to guarantee a minimum income to five crore of the poorest families.