

A New Choice



The results of assembly elections held in the five states of Punjab, Goa, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand took everyone by surprise, including the contestants themselves. Defying expectations of a close three-way fight in the all-important state of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP swept the state with an unprecedented majority. It won 312 seats out of 403 relegating the incumbent Samajwadi Party (SP) to a distant second with only 56 seats and the BSP, with 19, to an irrelevant third. A similarly emphatic victory was achieved in Uttarakhand with the BJP winning 57 out of 70 seats and the Congress being reduced to an obscure second with 11 seats. In Goa, despite a degree of anti-incumbency the BJP achieved a respectable position while in Manipur, it rocketed from zero to 21 seats (out of 60). In both these states, it used deft alliance making skills to steal a march over the Congress in forming government despite having fewer seats. Punjab was the only state to deliver an expected verdict with the Congress achieving a majority and going on to form government.

As analysts dissect the results, it is becoming apparent that one of the factors behind the BJP's victory was its astute micro management of the election. It scrutinised constituency-level voting patterns, negotiated intelligent deals and leveraged the full force of the RSS cadres in reaching out to the public and communicating its message. By contrast, the opposition appeared incoherent, running an unconvincing campaign with tiresome and monotonous messaging. However, this does not explain the sheer margin of the BJP's victory particularly in bastions of voter populations that have historically been considered unfriendly. The explanation that the personal appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi did the trick would seem more plausible but it is worth reflecting about what exactly lent him such appeal. After all, Uttar Pradesh represents the starkest example of India's outmoded politics where elections are won or lost almost exclusively on caste, identity and religious affiliations and the BJP's competitors had supposedly mastered these equations many years ago.

The truth is, UP voters have historically been presented with no options other than those that were socially divisive or exclusivist in nature. What Mr Modi and the BJP have done is to expose the fact that voters have grown tired of identity politics – perhaps they never cared much for them in the first place – and

it is in fact the politicians who have persisted with these notions, even actively stoked them. The BJP's messaging was development-oriented and devoid of identity-based divisions. Yet, a party that fielded no Muslim candidates, unthinkable in a state with an almost-25 per cent Muslim population, swept the polls, winning possibly a small share of the Muslim vote. Further, in a state that has historically aligned behind individual leaders, the winning party was one that had not even projected a Chief Ministerial candidate much less named him. The individual eventually appointed, Yogi Adityanath, was an unusual choice. However, he is renowned for his strong administrative skills, ability to drive change and improve governance. These are traits that UP so desperately needs. He is young and energetic and

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represents a refreshing change from establishment figures that have governed the state for decades.

A second striking aspect of these elections was the conspicuous absence of 'artificial distractions'. In the past, such attempts have often been made to hijack public debate and divert voter attention towards divisive or trivial issues. For once, the 'fight was fairly fought' and voters could make independent, self-informed choices – the results are striking.

Both these inferences lend themselves to application at a nation-wide level and there is no reason they cannot work elsewhere and everywhere. The BJP seems to have gauged this and it is now up to opposition parties to wake up to the same realisation. They need to present convincing messages of upliftment and prosperity to India's young demography rather than paint the world with a religious or casteist hue. If Mr Modi can make them do that he will leave behind a greater legacy than perhaps any leader in India's history. ■

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