National, state elections: Do voters differentiate?

The verdict in assembly polls may not indicate the possible results of the Lok Sabha polls or the vice-versa, but the state results can reveal both the scope and limits of the BJP’s dominance as well as Indian democracy.

Among the seven states that will vote in 2022 to elect their assemblies, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is an incumbent in all but one. And the party will be contesting these elections under the weight of an emerging electoral trend that is not favourable to it.

Despite the BJP’s victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the 2022 results remained elusive for the party. The BJP is having a tough time retaining (or winning) states where it is the incumbent. The party lost in 2019, but it has failed to come back to power in Maharashtra and Haryana under a coalition arrangement. The BJP emerged as the single-largest party in the 2020 Bihar polls, but only managed to retain power with allies, and with a narrow margin. Perhaps Assam is the only state in the recent past where the BJP held on to its past performance.

Furthermore, recent state elections have shown a significant drop in the party’s vote share in comparison to national elections. While the extent of difference in vote share may vary, the pattern was consistent where national and state elections were held concurrently (Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, BJP’s only victory before Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, after shortly (Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Delhi).

It is no surprise then that many observers find the inability of the BJP to replicate its LS performance in state elections puzzling. After all, the party enjoys similar organisational and resource advantages over its competitors in both kinds of elections. The difference, then, for such observers between two sets of elections, is leadership. And the analytical weight to explain this pattern gets limited to the centralising tendencies of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi — the sheer centralisation of the party’s activities, its saffronisation, and the advertising built around it.

While there is some truth to the claim that the BJP’s over-reliance on Modi has created a significant cost for the party at the state level, the underlying reason for the divergence of results as a divergence of a puzzle to the BJP underplays the role of several other explanations that are doing the heavy lifting. This is not against the fact that the final vote share differs for the BJP, but to put the emerging trend in a historical context and set the scope of this analytical question right.

First, the divergence in the performance of a party in national and state elections is neither a new phenomenon in Indian politics, nor are there enough data points to claim that a large portion of voters is engaging in split-ticket voting, i.e., choosing different parties in national and state elections. Perhaps barring the first decade after Independence, there has always been a distinction between Indian voters in state and national elections.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Congress’s dominance at the national level was met with significant opposition at the state level. Similarly, the fragmented party system and severe instability in ruling coalitions — both at the Centre and in the states since 1989 — created a conducive atmosphere that encouraged swing voters to place a premium on different parties in different elections. The proportion of such voters (who split their tickets or frequently change parties) have rarely crossed the segment that displays moderate to strong party attachment.

Second, since Modi’s anointment as the chief campaigner of the BJP in 2013, the party has witnessed its social and geographical expansion, especially in the states where it was either a marginal force or in opposition. By the end of 2017, the party, along with allies was ruling in 21 states, roughly 70% of the population. The electoral victories then underlie how the party is positioning itself as an incumbent party in most states. In these elections, voters are evaluating and scrutinising the BJP state government’s performance, and it is only then that the hypes that the BJP creates of its expected performance that in many states its final tally looks dismal, but in reality, the party’s performance was disappointment rather than an achievement.

Third, it is only when measured against the hypes that the BJP creates of its expected performance that in many states its final tally looks dismal, but in reality, the party’s performance was underwhelming rather than the achievement. In Haryana, despite a 20 percentage point drop in its assembly elections vote share, the party is in power for a second consecutive time in a state wherein pre-2014 its vote share was in single digits.

Or take the case of Bengal. Though it lost badly, the BJP has emerged as the principal opposition, decimating both the Congress and the Left in the state. And notwithstanding these electoral reversals, the BJP’s ideological project remains at its peak, and even the opposition to its politics mirrors the party’s ideals and tactics (for example, the recent debate on Hindu Vs Hindutva).

Fourth, the arrival of Modi on India’s political centre-stage marked a shift in the voting patterns. The outcome of the national elections was no longer a sum total of state-level verdicts. Modi’s campaign style brought a palpable character to the LS elections in which the party’s ideological platforms, designed with a hyper-nationalistic pitch and a strong focus on welfare delivery, was national mood during the LS elections that dissolves state specificities. This condition for assembly elections becomes a site of deeper contestation and bringing state specificities back with greater vigour. Political parties are learning entities and many of them have adapted to the new realities of emerging politics. They seem to have developed a template to challenge the BJP juggernaut in their respective strongholds which involves three things: Highlight local issues and if needed play on sub-regionalist sentiments as far as possible, stay clear of direct attacks on Modi and challenge the National Democratic Alliance’s state-level leadership and its dominant caste groups. There is a limit to this strategy as a large section among the dominant castes feel excluded from the ruling coalition and asserted themselves in state elections. These antagonised voters may still vote for the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections, but not in the same numbers in state elections.

After all, the dominance of these groups is built on controlling various levers of State power. Given these realities of India’s federal polity, the Opposition may appear electorally decimated at the national level, but it will make its presence felt in assemblies. What should we expect from the upcoming assembly elections in 2022 to inform us about national politics? It is also no-brainer that among the seven, retaining Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat are crucial for the BJP in the run-up to 2024. Not merely because of the number of MPs they send to the Lok Sabha. The two states are important because they form the core of BJP’s narrative — the BJP flattered the Gujarat model in its campaigns and the party won all 26 LS seats in the last two elections. Modi remains BJP’s UP in the LS, and the size of the BJP contingent in the House has been heavily dependent on its performance in the state.

Rahul Verma is with the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi. The views expressed are personal.