Assessing Party Performance and Alliance Dynamics in the 2015 Bihar Election

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Introduction

The 2015 Bihar election represented a stunning reversal of fortune for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the 2014 national election, the NDA won 172 out of 243 assembly constituency (AC) segments. But in the 2015 Bihar election, just 18 months later, the NDA won only 58 ACs. In this piece, we investigate electoral data from the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide a nuanced picture of the shift in Bihar. We argue that poor party coordination within the NDA, in addition to campaign dynamics, account for the magnitude of the NDA's defeat.

Prior to 2014, the JD(U) and the BJP were in alliance together under the NDA banner, but the JD(U) left the coalition over the choice of Narendra Modi as prime ministerial candidate and decided to contest the 2014 election alone. In 2014, without the JD(U), the NDA won 31 out of 40 parliamentary constituencies, with the JD(U) winning just two seats. In the 18 months between the 2014 and 2015 election, once bitter foes, Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, and their respective parties, Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), joined forces along with the Congress to form the *mahagathbandhan* or Grand Alliance to defeat the NDA. The NDA, comprised of the BJP, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) and the Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (RLSP) in 2014, stayed intact and added a new party, the Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM), to its ranks.

In the election post-mortem, many have offered explanations for the NDA's reversal of fortune. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley has argued that the NDA's poor performance was due to the "social arithmetic" of caste and less about the its message or campaign strategy (1). Observers of the Grand Alliance have pointed to campaign manager Prashant Kishor's effective campaign strategy and coordination across all parties in ticket distribution and voter mobilization (2). Our data analysis suggests that the outcome of these elections was less about caste arithmetic and more about the poor coalition strategy of the BJP. In particular, the ways in which the BJP treated its allies contributed to the magnitude of the NDA's defeat. At the same time, we find that although the parties in the Grand Alliance coordinated their efforts better than the NDA, they did not attract more voters than in 2014.

Overall Party Performance

Looking comparatively at a party's seat share or vote share performance in these elections is misleading, since parties contested in different numbers of seats and within different alliances. For instance, the BJP has a higher vote share than any other party but contested more seats, 157 against 101 for JD(U) and RJD, and 41 for Congress. Seat sharing agreements also imply that vote transfers from one party's supporters towards another party's candidates may take place, blurring single party performance analysis. In this article, we examine the results in three different ways: 1) an overall analysis of vote shares and strike rates by coalition; 2) an analysis of intra-alliance dynamics; and 3) a phase-wise break up of the strike rates to assess parties' performances throughout the campaign.

In the seats it contested, the JD(U) received an average of 40.5% of the votes, the RJD bagged an average of 44.2% vote share in the seats it contested, and the Congress received 39.4% vote share. These percentages do not reflect the stand-alone strength of the parties, since they all benefited from transfers from their allies' supporters. In all, nearly 16 million people voted for the Grand Alliance, against nearly 13 million for the NDA (9.3 million for the BJP alone). In terms of percentages, the Grand Alliance received an average 41.9% vote share against 34.1% for the NDA (Fig.1). The Grand Alliance's vote share performance beats the historic high of the 2010 BJP–JD(U) combine. Its 41.9% average vote share converted into 73.2% of the seats, less than the winning coalition of 2010, which won 84.8% of the seats on 39.1% average vote share (fig.2).
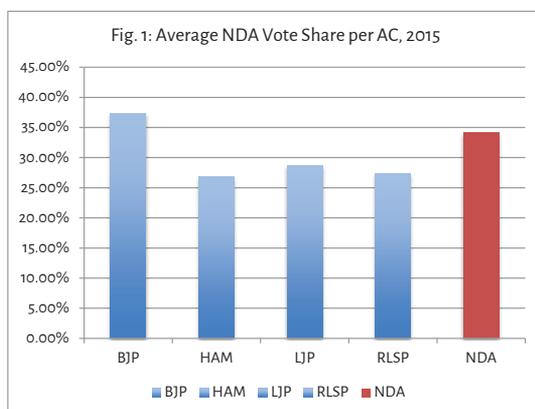
Fig. 1: Average NDA Vote Share per AC, 2015

Fig.2 : Average Grand Alliance Vote Share per AC, 2015

Source: Jensenius, F., Verniers, G. Indian State Assembly Election and Candidates Data (1962-Present)
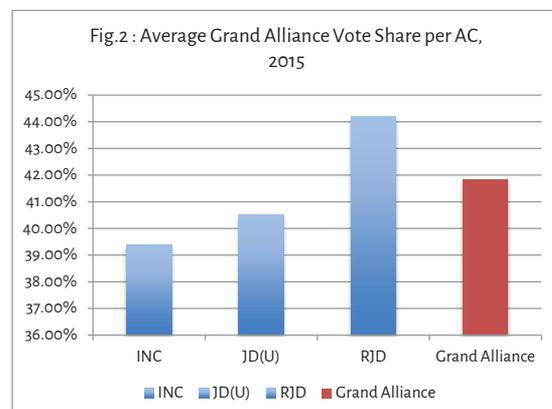
Source: Jensenius, F., Verniers, G. Indian State Assembly Election and Candidates Data (1962-Present)

Analysis of Aggregate Vote and Share Swings From 2014

The 2015 election took place 18 months after the NDA swept the state in the 2014 national election. Comparing parties' results between these two elections gives us a better sense of the swings that have taken place. The BJP on its own lost 3% vote share in seats in which it contested. Its partners lost 9% of vote share in seats in which they contested. Altogether, this means that the NDA – which was comprised of the same parties minus HAM in 2014 – lost 5% of vote share between the two elections.

Given the disproportionality effect of the first past the post electoral system, small swings of vote share can have large consequences in terms of seats. To understand the difference between the two elections in terms of seats, we have divided the 2014 parliamentary constituencies into their respective assembly constituency segments using Form 20 polling-booth level data. From this method, we ascertain that the NDA effectively lost in 120 AC segments out of the 172 it won in 2014 and succeeded to win only six segments it did not win in 2014.

This is a loss of a magnitude far more substantial than a mere 5% vote share drop suggests. One way to represent this swing is to look at strike rates, that is the ratio of seats won to those contested. A comparison between the 2014 and 2015 elections shows a complete trend reversal. In 2015, the NDA's strike rate fell to less than half of what it was in 2014, dropping from 70.8% to 23.9%.

The 5% slide in vote share for the NDA provides a counterpoint to BJP's claims that this election was lost due to "social arithmetic". We can reasonably assume that part of the 5% vote share lost by the NDA went to the Grand Alliance's candidates (given that the combined average vote share for the top two coalitions per constituency was 75.8%). Had the NDA held its 2014 vote share of 39.4%, it would likely have won the election (the JD(U)-BJP coalition swept the 2010 Bihar election, winning 206 of 243 seats, with a combined vote share of 39.1 per cent). Given the first past the post electoral system, a 5% loss in vote share led to a collapse in seat share for the NDA.

Coordination within alliances and strike rates

There was a lot of variation in intra-alliance party performance in each of the two main alliances. Of the 58 seats the NDA won, 53 were won by the BJP, and only 5 seats were won by the other three coalition partners combined. This generated a huge difference in strike rates. The BJP had a strike rate of 33.8%, while the other three partners combined had only a 5.8% strike rate (fig.3). In the seats contested by the BJP, the NDA received an average vote share of 37.2%, whereas the other NDA coalition partners received an average vote share of 28%. This suggests that in many places BJP supporters did not vote for other coalition partners.

This difference in strike rates, however, is not just due to poor cooperation among voters within the NDA. The data show that the BJP's coalitions partners contested in seats that were harder to win. We use here the combined vote share for the Congress and RJD, who were in coalition under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and the JD(U), who contested alone, to measure Grand Alliance vote share in 2014. In the 157 seats contested by the BJP in the 2015 Bihar election, the average 2014 NDA vote share was 40.6% against an average 2014 Grand Alliance vote share of 44.9%, a gap of 4.3%. In the 86 seats contested by all other partners in the 2015 Bihar election, the average 2014 NDA vote share

Fig. 3: Main Parties Strike Rate in 2015 Bihar Vidhan Sabha Elections

Source: Jensenius, F., Verniers, G. Indian State Assembly Election and Candidates Data (1962-Present)

was 37.3% against an average Grand Alliance vote share of 47.9%, a gap of 10.6%. In short, the BJP's coalition partners were placed in seats they were more likely to lose. Of the 86 seats where non-BJP NDA parties contested, only 5 had an incumbent NDA MLA.
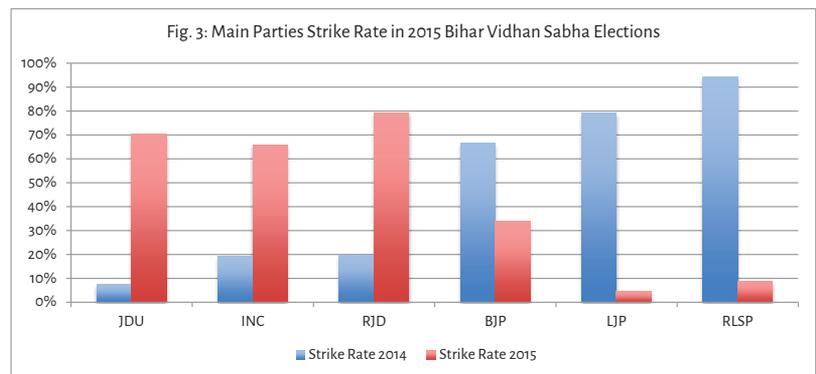
While there were performance variations between the parties in the Grand Alliance, they were far less pronounced than within the NDA. In the 2015 Bihar election, the strike rate for the Congress was 65.9% and the strike rate for the JD(U) was 70.3%, while

the RJD performed better with a strike rate of 79.2% (fig.3). These differences also show up in the vote share in the seats each party contested. In the seats contested by RJD, it received an average vote share of 44.2%, while JD(U) and Congress received average vote shares of 40.5% and 39.4%, respectively.

We may again observe the disproportionality between vote share and strike rates. The JD(U) multiplied its strike rate tenfold in 2015, the RJD fourfold, and the Congress by nearly the same amount, as compared to 2014. These are massive swings and a clear sign of a sweep far more significant than suggested by the alliances' and parties' respective vote shares.

Congress' performance needs to be placed in context. Twenty-seven seats is the Congress' best performance since 1995, but these numbers are inflated due to the transfer of pro-Nitish and pro-Lalu votes and from the fact that a quarter of its candidates were "imported" from both the JD(U)'s and the RJD's ranks. Besides, the Congress contested many seats in the Muslim belts of Seemanchal, Tirhut and Saran, where NDA candidates faired worse this time.

Finally, a look at head-to-head competition between parties reveals some interesting results. The JD(U) contested 101 seats, 55 against the BJP and 46 against other NDA parties (that is 45.5% of the time). The JD(U)-BJP contests were competitive, with the JD(U) obtaining a strike rate of 52.7% in constituencies in which they went head-to-head, whereas it had a strike rate of 91.3% against other NDA parties. The Congress and RJD were more effective against the BJP, jointly garnering a 71.6% strike rate in constituencies in which they went head-to-head against the BJP and a strike rate of 85.0% against the other NDA parties. At the same time, the Congress and RJD only contested against one of the other NDA parties 28.2% of the time.

All in all, this suggests that the JD(U) was quite a bit less effective against the BJP, but that its overall strike rate was bolstered by an unusually high number of constituencies in which it competed against one of the other NDA parties. The data show that the RJD was the most effective party in the Grand Alliance. One section of analysts has argued that the JD(U) could have won without joining forces with the RJD. Our data suggests that it would have been difficult for the JD(U) to win without allying with the RJD.

Phase-wise Analysis

The elections took place over four weeks and what happens between the first and last day of polling matter enormously. One way to account for this is to divide party strike rates per phase (fig.4), to see how parties performed throughout polling.

The RJD started strong, sweeping nearly all the seats it contested in phases 1 and 2. Then it gradually weakened, relatively speaking, towards a 60% strike rate and got a last phase bump in seats mostly dominated by Muslim voters.

The JD(U) also started strong but experienced a comparatively sharper decline, which they compensated for in the last phase (in which they nearly doubled their strike rate as compared to phase four). The BJP had a disastrous beginning. It won only 12 seats out of 43 in the first two phases. It then stagnated over the next two phases and collapsed in phase 5.

Fig. 4: Phase-wise Strike Rate of Major Parties in 2015

Source: Jensenius, F., Verniers, G. Indian State Assembly Election and Candidates Data (1962-Present)

So the BJP was actually doing better and better in these elections, and the Grand Alliance started well but declined until the last phase of the elections. These two trends were reversed in phase 5, where the BJP collapsed and the JD(U) consolidated its victory.

One possible explanation is that the areas covered by different phases correspond to various parties' strongholds. Phase 4 took place in the Saran and Tirhut sub-regions, where the BJP traditionally performs well. Phase 5 took place in the Seemanchal and Mithalanchal sub-regions, where the Muslim population is large, and the BJP has traditionally performed poorly, even in 2014.
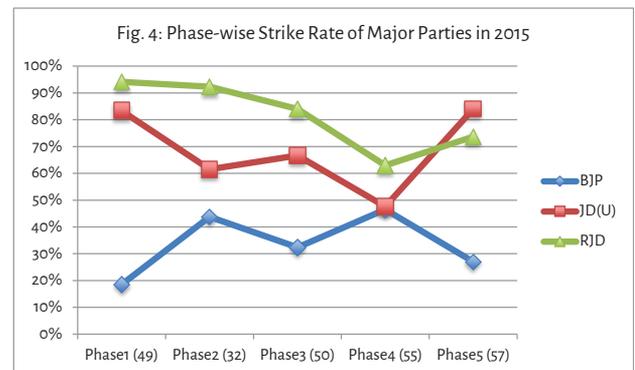
Another possible explanation is that the BJP suffered a backlash the moment it started communalizing the campaign. Amit Shah's Pakistan remark, the cow advertisements, and the Prime Minister's declaration on the reservations that Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav would "steal away" in favor of minorities intervened in the last two phases of the election. In phase 5, the Grand Alliance bagged 44 seats against 11 for the NDA.

The fact is that, before phase 5, the BJP was actually improving. But if we again compare with 2014, the numbers tell a different story. Comparative strike rates in figure 5 show that the BJP actually suffered its greatest losses in phase 4, set in BJP strongholds near the Uttar Pradesh border. In 2014, the BJP swept 95% of the seats in that area. In 2015, it won only 46.5% of these seats.

Thus, we see that these different ways to display the election results demonstrate that the BJP / NDA's defeat is more serious than it seems, and not simply caused by the presence of a mathematically stronger Grand Alliance. The BJP failed to mobilise support the way it did in 2014, even in its strongholds.
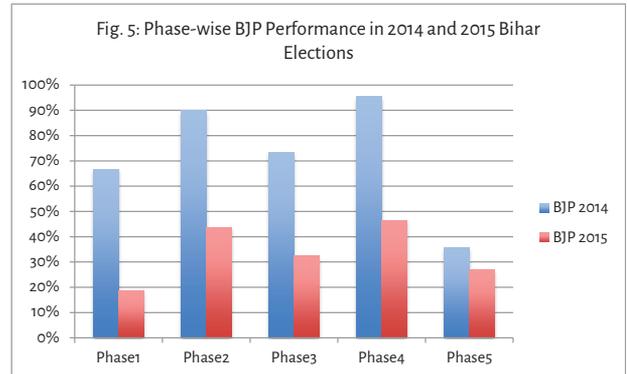
Fig. 5: Phase-wise BJP Performance in 2014 and 2015 Bihar Elections

Source: Jensenius, F., Verniers, G. Indian State Assembly Election and Candidates Data (1962-Present)

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from this clear victory is in fact a nuanced one. The 5% slide in vote share for the NDA hides a far more serious collapse for the alliance. "Social arithmetic" alone did not determine the outcome; the BJP also lost considerable traction in its own strongholds. Much of this is due to BJP's poor cooperation with parties in the NDA and an ineffective campaign. On the other hand, there is no evidence of a particular popular upsurge in favor of the Grand Alliance, as the alliance did not bring in a significantly larger share of voters. The Grand Alliance coordinated across its parties much better, however, and the JD(U) seems to have benefited a lot from the coalition, given close contests with the BJP. There are obviously many factors that account for losing an election, but the magnitude of BJP's defeat could have been mitigated had it been a fairer coalition partner.

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