Congress in Free Fall

And SP's loss tells regional parties what doesn’t work against BJP

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The 2022 state elections have thrown superlative results. BJP retains the four states it previously held and makes history in UP, by having its CM re-elected after serving a full term, which had not happened since 1957.

In Punjab, AAP adds 20 points to its 2017 vote share and wins a Delhi-style election, defeating the state’s entire political establishment. Congress reaches a new low by collapsing in Punjab, squandering a winnable election in Uttar Pradesh, and disappearing from UP, despite an energetic campaign led by Priyanka Gandhi.

BJP maintains or increases its vote share across five states, indicating that it succeeded in adding new voters while losing few. A phase-wise analysis of UP shows that BJP scored its best vote share in western UP, indicating that communal polarisation does boost its performance. SP became more competitive as the election moved eastward but not enough to pose a serious threat to BJP.

SP loses the election despite scoring its best ever performance, concentrated however in a string of seats in western UP, Muslim-dominated seats in Rohilkhand, in their traditional Yadav belt strongholds of Mainpuri and Jaswantnagar, and in eastern UP, the only subregion in which it made real inroads. These results show that SP remains in large parts beholden to its traditional support bases, failing to break into the diverse social base of BJP.

BSP scores its lowest vote share since 1993, to the benefit of both SP and BJP.

The other major outcome is Punjab, won by AAP in a decisive manner. Beyond the Congress rout, it is the entire political establishment of Punjab that has been punished by voters. Most leaders of both Congress and SAD have individually lost their seats, indicating that while Congress may have lost the election by itself inflicted wounds, AAP is also riding on a deeper wave of discontent against the traditional political class of Punjab. AAP retains its seats previously held in the Malwa region, and has expanded in every other part of the state. Congress retains a few cluster of seats in the Majha and Doab regions.

How to interpret these results? For one, we do not yet have measures of who voted for whom so this part of the explanation must be reserved for another time.

Second, we should not be surprised that BJP defeated Congress in Manipur, Goa and Uttarakhand, given the flaking of the latter’s organisation across these states. In Goa, one BJP candidate out of four came from Congress. In Manipur, BJP fielded eight Congress turncoats, all professional politicians. Other regional parties across states have also been poaching the local Congress leaders, too happy to leave for greener pastures.

With the loss of Punjab, Congress reaches its lowest point in electoral terms, since Independence. It remains in power in four states, two on its own (Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh) and two as a junior coalition partner (Maharashtra and Jharkhand).

Priyanka Gandhi’s experiment with progressive politics has not prevented her party from almost entirely disappearing from UP. From now on, Congress will probably keep eroding, gnawed seat by seat by BJP and by regional parties, including AAP, which will not limit its expansion ambitions to Punjab.

Third, BJP defeated in UP a regional party that led an effective campaign but could not mobilise enough voters outside its narrow social base. Contrary to parties like TMC or DMK, SP does not incarnate an alternative regional identity, grounded in language and culture, which it can use to mobilise across social cleavages. Parties that have defeated BJP in recent state elections have in common, to mobilise broadly around an alternative collective form of identity.

Finally, the UP victory gives sanction to a model of governance that combines strongman politics, religious, communal and populist appeal, a model that performs despite deep economic woes. Yogi Adityanath’s re-election sends the message that a party led by a strongman can perform politically by substituting welfare to addressing economic issues or the unemployment situation. Other CMs may seek to emulate this model.

What does this mean for 2023? These results necessarily give a shot in the arm of BJP before the next general election. As the PM himself indicated, winning UP was a necessity for BJP. Without any solid challenge in the Hindi belt in sight, the prospects of a unified opposition are dire.

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