

## AGGREGATE DATA OVERVIEW

Alistair Mcmillan

The Congress' euphoric reaction to the election results, and the claim that a decisive mandate has been awarded the party, are somewhat hard to reconcile with a closer examination of the share of the votes and seats won by the party. Anyone who looks only at the vote shares can be forgiven for thinking that the Congress may have actually lost the elections. The party's share of the votes through the country is 26.7 per cent, followed by the BJP at 22.2 per cent. In a strange coincidence, both the parties have lost exactly 1.6 percentage points each compared to their performance in the 1999 elections. Yet, their tally of seats presents a very different picture. The BJP's tally has dropped to 138, down from the 182 seats that it commanded in the previous house. The Congress, on the other hand, has increased its tally from 114 to 145. This takes the Congress to its highest tally since the 1991 elections, while the BJP is down to its worst since 1991.

What accounts for this paradoxical result? A good deal of the answer lies in the logic of alliances. The Congress contested only 417 seats this time, leaving 36 additional seats for its allies than it did last time. While the formal figures show a drop in the vote share for the Congress, in reality the Congress marginally increased its vote share per constituency that it contested. The opposite was the case with the BJP. The decline in its vote share was actually higher than what the figures show, for it contested 361 seats this time, 22 more than what it did last time.

The real question thus is that of the vote shares of the two major alliances. Last time the BJP did very well despite trailing the Congress in vote share because its alliance did very well. The share of the then NDA stood at 40.8 per cent of the national vote that enabled the NDA to win 300

seats in the Lok Sabha. Thus the allies contributed 118 seats and 17 per cent votes to the NDA kitty in 1999. The Congress had very few allies then. They brought just 20 additional seats and 5.5 per cent of the national votes. The Congress alliance trailed the NDA by 7 percentage points and lost the elections. This time the picture has changed. The Congress led alliance has bridged the gap and both the alliances stand neck to neck around 36 per cent. The BJP's allies contribute 51 seats this time and bring 13.8 per cent votes. The Congress' first attempt at building alliances brought it rich dividends: the allies contributed 74 seats and 9.1 per cent votes to the combined tally. The figure is actually a little higher, for in many states, the Congress contested in alliance with the Left whose figures are not taken into account here. In other words, the NDA lost about 5 per cent of the national vote share as compared to the last elections, while the Congress led alliance gained two per cent of the national vote share.

In relative terms, the BJP's allies fared worse than the BJP. While the BJP lost about a quarter of its seats, the allies lost more than half of what they won last time. In terms of votes too, the allies lost one-fifth of their vote share, while the BJP lost only one out of 16 votes that it had last time. It is a moot question if the BJP can entirely escape the responsibility of the heavy reverses suffered by its allies in states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Bihar, especially in Tamil Nadu where the BJP switched the allies around. The net result is that the BJP now dominates the NDA more than before, as its share of seats in the alliance has gone up from 60 to 73 per cent seats.

As parties get used to alliance arithmetic, the country's electorate is also beginning to accept coalitions as a normal part of political reality. The CSDS has tracked ordinary peoples responses to coalition governments in its National Election Studies since 1996. When first asked about the prospects of a coalition government on the eve of the first experiment in 1996, one-third of the electorate strongly rejected the idea. This opposition has gradually come down with each election and is only 17 per cent this time. On the other hand, the proportion of those who see no harm in a coalition government has steadily gone up from 16 per cent to 30 this time. In all a majority of the respondents interviewed this time were prepared to accept coalitions with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The picture of votes and seats has not undergone any dramatic change for other parties. The Samajwadi Party had put up 234 candidates all over the country in the hope of emerging as a national party. But all it succeeded in gaining outside UP was one seat in Uttaranchal and an

additional half a percentage point of the national vote share. The BSP has had greater success in expanding outside UP as its national vote share has jumped up by one point to record a little over 5 per cent. This election represented a high point for the Left, as it beat its own previous record of 56 seats in 1991. This time the Left bloc will have 61 MPs in the parliament (including the one Left supported independent). But that has not lifted the vote share of the Left Front very much. The overall vote share for the Left is 8.3 per cent this time, compared to 8.0 per cent last time. This is partly because the Left parties, specially the CPI, fielded much fewer candidates this time. Besides, the big gains for the Left in Kerala are based on very small swing in votes.