

LEADERSHIP AND PERFORMANCE

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In calling for early elections, the BJP strategists had banked heavily on the popularity of Vajpayee. The reasoning was simple and persuasive. One, the PM's popularity rating was way above that of the Congress leader and it was unlikely that Sonia Gandhi would be able to close the gap during the campaign. Two, the Central government was not very unpopular and the people were likely to wish to give it another chance, specially if Vajpayee's name was attached to it. And, three, the BJP could turn this election into a presidential race, a 'Vajpayee vs. a Question Mark' election. The findings of the NES 2004 suggest that while the BJP was quite right in the first two assumptions, the third assumption was deeply flawed. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was and indeed remained popular through the campaign. But his popularity and a desire to give him another chance did not translated as easily into votes for the NDA as the BJP strategists may have assumed.

The campaign by the BJP and the projection of these two leaders by the media, turned the election at least partially, into a battle between the two. Ironically, the candidate who had a greater acceptability as the next prime minister has lost the so-called battle between the two! This election saw the exit of Vajpayee who was preferred by almost forty per cent people in an unprompted choice. Interestingly, the people were not so much interested in the party, which Vajpayee was leading. No other leader of his party was accepted by even one per cent people as the next prime minister. The '*Lauh-Purush*' (iron man) of BJP, the architect of the Hindutva face of BJP, has only less than half per cent takers as prime minister. Mayawati, Mulayam, Sharad Pawar and Laloo Prasad are ahead of Advani in popular preference for the nation's top post In fact, for any casual observer of the politics in the country, it was evident since 1999 that Sonia's credentials to become prime minister was a non-issue for the majority. Even after a long drawn campaign against her, the BJP could not gain from this issue. But in focusing on the issue of Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin, the BJP and the media

might have actually helped Sonia Gandhi acquire an image. Over 5 per cent of our respondents said they may not have voted for the NDA if Vajpayee was not leading it. Similarly, a little over two per cent voters said they may have considered voting for Congress if only Sonia was not the leader. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the BJP lost in spite of Vajpayee and the Congress gained power in spite of Sonia Gandhi.

Surprising though it may appear, almost half the population was willing to give the NDA another chance. Those who were satisfied with the government easily outnumbered those who were dissatisfied (27 per cent). People had a generally favourable assessment of the BJP in terms of its ability to solve the problems before the country. The NDA was not defeated because people felt that it was doing too badly. But perhaps, shrill claims about 'feel good' did not go down well with the electorate. Although a robust proportion of the electorate agreed that the image of India had improved, safety and security of the country had improved, and development of the country also improved, the anxieties about real life and day-today economic issues mattered the most. People did not perhaps assess the economy in terms of forex and sensex, but in terms of survival and existence. Only a small minority (17 per cent) thought that employment situation had improved. For most, it either remained the same or deteriorated. For a party campaigning on the logic of feel good, this must be seen as a severe indictment.

Another issue that was probably central to the people's choices, was the performance of the state governments. To the question, 'In making your voting choice, what mattered most, central government or state government?' twenty two per cent answered that the state government mattered most and another twenty three per cent said that both governments mattered. Thus, for almost half the people, the state government was the main consideration in making their voting choice. If we take into account the fact that majority of the states were governed either by the BJP or by the other partners of the NDA, we might understand the apparent paradox that the people seem to have voted out the government that they thought was doing a reasonable job. And even in the states where the NDA was not in power, the election result has been against the party in power at the state level (Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu). This point is reflected in the responses to the question on performance of state government. In most case, the people are dissatisfied with the performance of their state government. The combination of disapproval of the state governments and protest against the economic conditions may have worked against the NDA. Perhaps, a closer look at the people's response to the questions related to economy can tell us more about these elections.