

Analysis of India's Assembly Elections 2011

*Assam
Kerala
Puducherry
Tamil Nadu
West Bengal*

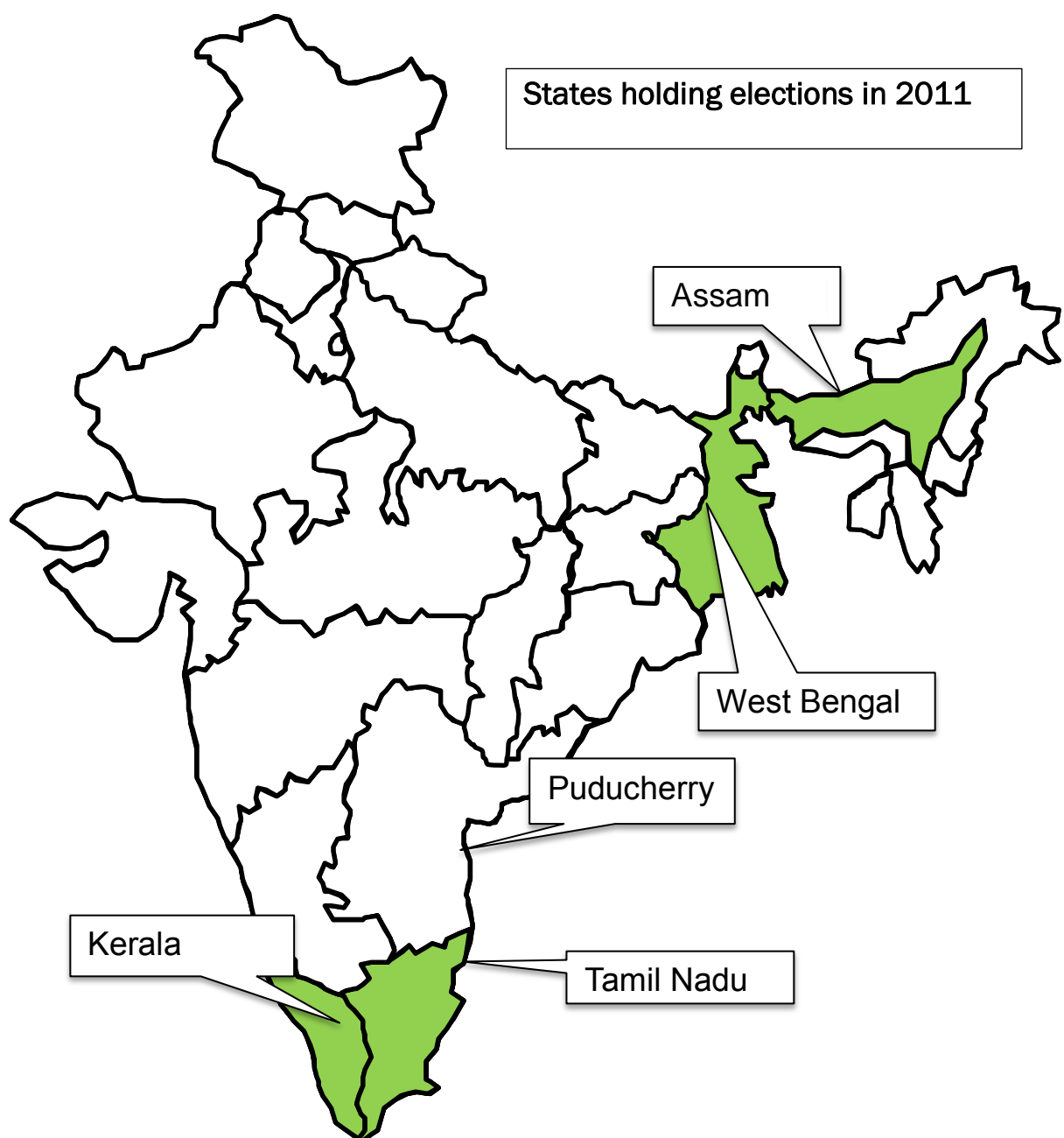
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13 May 2011

THE BATTLEGROUND

The results of the assembly elections in four Indian states (Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) and 1 Union territory (Puducherry) dominated by regional parties were announced on 13 May 2011. Voting took place in several phases during April and May. National attention has focused principally on the results in Tamil Nadu, where the ruling DMK party has been implicated in the 2G spectrum allocation scandal, and in West Bengal, where the Communist Party of India's (Marxist)-led Left Front has been in power for the last 34 years.



THE PLAYERS

Assam

All-India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) – regionalist

Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) – regionalist, anti-Congress

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – centre-right, Hindu nationalist

Congress – centre-left, dynastic

Kerala

Left Democratic Front (LDF) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] – communist

United Democratic Front (UDF) – Congress/allies

Puducherry

All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – Dravidian populist

Congress – centre-left, dynastic

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) – Dravidian populist, dynastic

Tamil Nadu

All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) – Dravidian populist

Congress – centre-left, dynastic

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) – Dravidian populist, dynastic

West Bengal

Congress – centre-left, dynastic

Left Democratic Front (LDF) [Communist Party of India (Marxist)] – communist

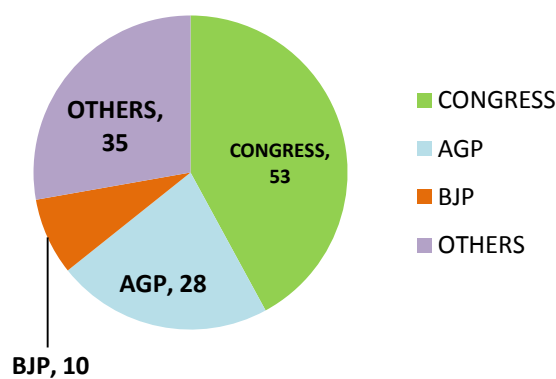
Trinamool Congress – centre-left

THE VERDICTS

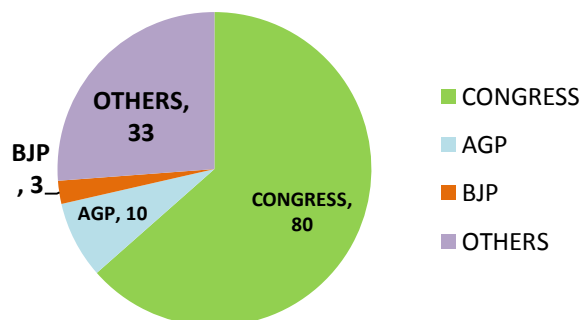
ASSAM – capital: Dispur; population: 31m; languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo

ASSAM

2006



2011

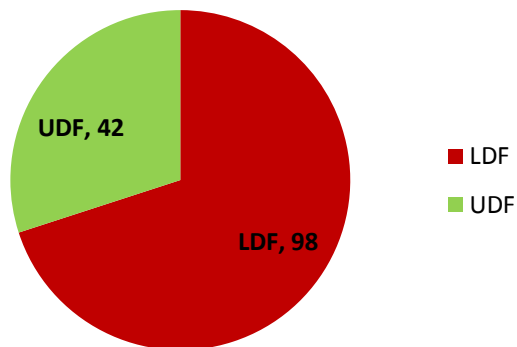


The third-time-running win by the Congress and its Bodoland People's Front allies is an endorsement both of outgoing chief minister, Tarun Gogoi, and the Union government's attempts at conciliation with the various Assamese separatist groups. The AGP and BJP's attempts to whip up feeling against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants failed.

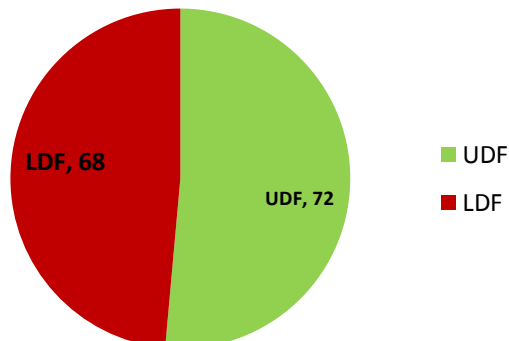
KERALA – capital: Thiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum); population: 33m; languages: Malayalam

KERALA

2006



2011

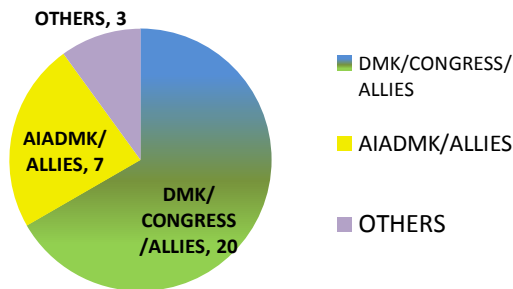


The communist-led LDF and the Congress-led UDF have tended to alternate in power in India's most literate state, and that pattern has been repeated in 2011, although the Congress might have expected a more decisive victory over 88-year-old outgoing chief minister V.S. Achuthanandan, whose political career is now at an end. The Communist Party locally is likely to go through a period of turmoil: Achuthanandan was imposed on the local party by the national politburo.

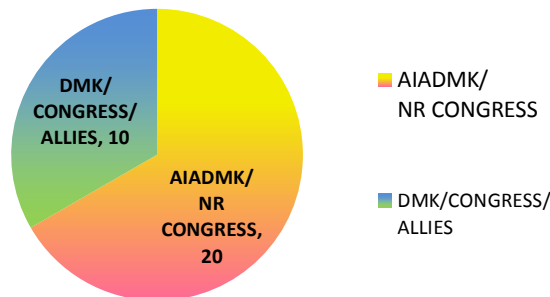
PUDUCHERRY – capital: Pondicherry; population: 1m; languages: Tamil, French, Telugu, Malayalam

PUDUCHERRY

2006



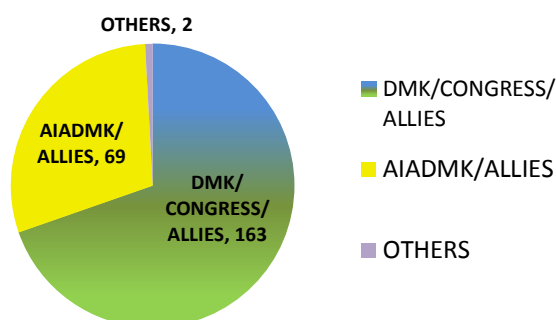
2011



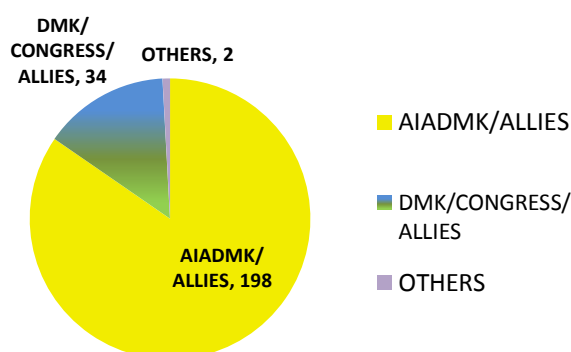
The Congress and its DMK allies have suffered a severe defeat at the hands of Congress splinter group, the NR Congress – led by former chief minister N. Rangasamy – and its allies, the AIADMK, broadly following the pattern in Tamil Nadu which surrounds most of the tiny state, a French colony until 1954.

TAMIL NADU – capital: Chennai (Madras); population: 72m; languages: Tamil

2006



2011

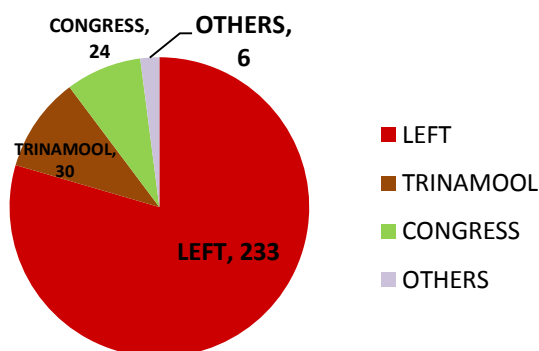


The pollsters will be licking their wounds: they all predicted a tight race. As it turned out, former chief J. Jayalalithaa – popularly known in the state as Amma (‘mother’) - has scored a massive win over the DMK from which her party broke away in the 1970s. The parties tend to alternate in power, but the serious defeat for the DMK will be regarded as punishment for its involvement in the 2G spectrum allocation scandal – the largest in modern Indian history – which is currently being investigated. Former DMK telecoms minister A. Raja is currently in jail awaiting trial. Kanimozhi, a national MP and the daughter of the 86-year-old outgoing chief minister and DMK leader, M. Karunanidhi, is currently seeking bail, having been implicated herself. The Congress will rue its decision to stick with the DMK, having been offered an alliance by Jayalalithaa several months ago. Whether the DMK will now quit the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance coalition at the national level, to be replaced by the AIADMK, remains to be seen.

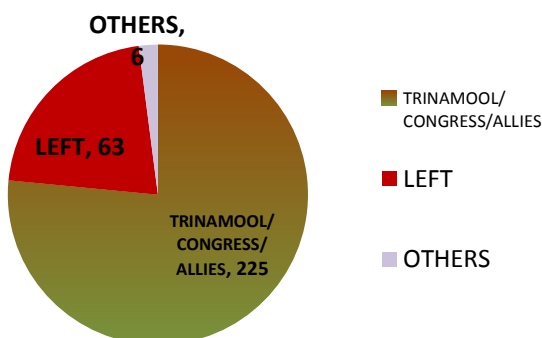
WEST BENGAL – capital: Kolkata (Calcutta), population: 91m, languages: Bengali, English

WEST BENGAL

2006



2011



Union railway minister and Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee's victory over the communists has long been expected after the Trinamool's wins in municipal polls last year, but it was still emphatic and it appears she did not need the help of her Congress allies. Her support now extends far beyond Kolkata, India's intellectual capital. Outgoing chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was among many leading Left figures to lose his seat as the communists were routed after 34 years in charge. The challenges the Trinamool faces in terms of repairing the state's reputation given the violence that afflicts rural districts, the desperate position of the state finances and the challenge from Naxalite (Maoist) terrorists, are formidable, however. But, today, Mamata can savour an historic win on the simplest platform of all: get the Left out.

THE NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Sonia Gandhi, leader of the Congress and chair of the United Progressive Alliance, will have much food for thought this weekend. The UPA had hoped for a 5-0 win in this year's state elections. It was not to be.

The Assam win was as overwhelming as it was predictable, but the Congress spectacularly misread the mood in Tamil Nadu, where their DMK allies were crushed. It was the same in tiny adjacent Puducherry. The Congress had been offered a national and state-level alliance by the victorious AIADMK but turned it down. The DMK have now become not just an embarrassment, but an electoral liability to the Congress as well. On the flip side, the DMK's leverage over the UPA is now minimal, while Trinamool's hand has been strengthened, a potential problem down the line for Congress given Mamata's spirit of independence. The DMK will still hope for Congress's help dealing with the investigations into 2G, but Congress is under no compunction to oblige. Should the DMK leave the national government, Congress can rely on other parties such as the AIADMK and the Samajwadi Party (SP) to sustain the UPA.

It is not as though the opposition has received any kind of mandate to challenge the UPA on the basis of these results. The main national opposition party, the BJP, had nursed some hopes of re-establishing themselves in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam, but these were dashed. It was largely irrelevant today, but it remains a force to be reckoned with in northern, central and western India.

The other opposition force, the Left, was the big loser: it has suffered its worst defeat ever. Its rule in West Bengal – the jewel in the crown of what remains of communism in the democratic world – is finally over. Coupled with the much less traumatic loss of Kerala, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)'s claim to be a national force is questionable. General Secretary Prakash Karat's continued leadership must be in doubt as the party's rule at the state level now extends no further than little Tripura with a population of just 2 million.

Nevertheless, the results in Tamil Nadu would suggest that the Indian people are developing a healthy distaste for corruption. Unless it can overcome the perception that it is drifting from one scandal to the next, the UPA government might find itself under pressure at the next national polls in 2014. As the adage goes, oppositions don't win elections – governments lose them.

WHAT THE RESULTS MIGHT MEAN FOR BUSINESS

Few would question the view that decades of communist party rule in West Bengal have ravaged the state economically. Still, a switch to Trinamool does not necessarily mean much improvement from the point of view of business. Mamata Banerjee's championing of local interests in Singur against those of Tata (which wanted to build a Nano car plant there) still colour many industrialists' view of the Trinamool Congress. It would appear that Mamata Banerjee is aware of the problem and the likely appointment of Amit Mitra, former secretary general of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), to a senior post in the new state government will be intended as a signal from Trinamool that it desires a fresh start to its relationship with business. It will be interesting to see whether a headline mega-project soon follows.

Tamil Nadu is, in some ways, the mirror image of West Bengal. For all the poison at a political level, both main parties are seen as firm friends of industry. Indeed, the state could be seen to have turned the corner in terms of its development during Jayalalithaa's last term as chief minister. She is the beneficiary of disgust at the DMK's antics during the first UPA government but whether her election will cure all the transparency issues at a state level is another matter. Politics in Tamil Nadu is a very expensive business.

As for Kerala and Puducherry with their tourism-dependent economies, changes of government are unlikely to have much effect on economic policy although the Left's defeat in Kerala might reduce the potency of some of the agitation against new industrial developments. Whether some of Kerala's many migrant workers in the Middle East might be tempted to return home is an open question.

Likewise, in Assam, the return of another Congress government means few policy changes are to be expected, but with violence diminishing in the north-east and the restrictions on travel by foreigners being progressively lifted across the north-east, Assam is well-positioned to play a leadership role in India's least-developed region.

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