

Opinion | Did Delhi's elections mark a turning point in our politics?

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AAP's delivery-based agenda that trounced BJP's identity politics raises the question of whether others can adopt the model

Topics: Aam Aadmi Party

The massive victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Assembly elections is momentous. The Arvind Kejriwal-led party won 62 seats, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managed only eight, and the Congress drew a blank. This is not so because Delhi is the capital of India, or because AAP has been re-elected for a third consecutive term, or because it has defeated the BJP by such a large margin, but because the Delhi elections potentially mark a turning point in Indian politics, with implications well beyond the borders of Delhi. I say "potentially" because it remains to be seen whether India has, in fact, reached that turning point.

For the first time in Indian politics, a party has won such a massive victory with a campaign based entirely on its track record in service delivery set against a campaign based on the divisive politics of identity, in this case Hindutva. This is not the first time that the delivery of a product or service that enhances the well-being of the electorate has been relied upon to win an election. Indira Gandhi won a landmark victory on the slogan of Garibi Hatao, but it was a promise for the future, not an established track record. In fact, the high incidence of poverty remained entrenched in India decades after her victory. There are other instances as well of welfare-enhancing delivery that have helped win elections: Food subsidies, free midday meals in schools, free bicycles for girls, healthcare subsidies, subsidized cooking gas and, most importantly, the employment guarantee scheme. But in all these instances, the schemes—pejoratively described as "populist"—were used not in opposition to the appeal of identity, but as supplementary inducements for voters.

What was different in the Delhi elections is that AAP's actual track record in delivering basic services, such as education, healthcare, water and power, formed the backbone of its election campaign. The BJP did try to feebly question its claims, as did the Congress. But the BJP's main campaign plank was based on Hindutva, equated to nationalism, and the apparent demonization of a religious minority that seemed to be cast as anti-national. The abrogation of Article 370, the Citizenship Amendment Act, the National Register of Citizens, and the ongoing agitations against these at Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere, provided the BJP with a ready-made agenda for its campaign.

Fuelled by hate speeches, the BJP did its best to force AAP to take a position on those issues. But AAP steadfastly refused to be drawn into this terrain and stuck to its own turf, which was its track record of service delivery supplemented by promises on women's security, transportation, pollution, etc. It became a direct confrontation between the politics of service delivery and the politics of identity. In the end, AAP won a stunning victory, marking the triumph of service-delivery-based politics. Home minister Amit Shah later admitted that the BJP's hate speeches may have been a major factor in the party's defeat.

It is important to emphasize that AAP's service delivery-based campaign wasn't a laundry list of promises, but a track record of what the party had already done, which was effectively conveyed through a report card. To illustrate, Delhi's education budget has been quadrupled and now accounts for 26% of the total expenditure, the highest among all states and union territories. This generous allocation has been used to significantly improve infrastructure—such as buildings, classrooms and toilets—as well as teacher training, and introduce learning outcome-linked schemes. As a result, the pass rate in the Class 12 examinations in Delhi government schools has risen to 91%, exceeding the pass rate of 83% in private schools and a national average of 88%.

Similarly, ambitious programmes have been launched for enhanced provision of healthcare, piped water supply, metered power supply, etc. Each month, consumers

get a minimum quantity of water free and 400 units of power for a small flat charge. Despite these, revenues of both departments have risen. Also, while these ambitious development programmes have led to an expenditure growth of almost 10% per year, revenue has been growing at an even faster rate of 13%.

The important question is whether the success of AAP's politics based on service delivery can have a transformative impact in a country so far dominated by the politics of identity. Delhi is a huge, modern, high-income metropolis that has little in common with rural or small town India. What works in Delhi may not work elsewhere. India's political system is a democratic superstructure sitting on what is still a largely feudal political base steeped in identity politics and traditional patron-client relationships. Most political parties in India, and not just the BJP and Congress, depend on identity, be it based on religion, caste or region, for political mobilization. Their resources, influence networks and culture are geared towards this system. Why would they now engage in political competition based on service delivery?

Perhaps the dramatic success of service delivery-based politics in Delhi could lead to its adoption in some of the other metropolises, gradually spreading to smaller cities and then eventually to the rural hinterland. Or perhaps that is just wishful thinking.

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