

# Leadership at the State Level Mattered

SANDEEP SHASTRI

A post-poll survey of the National Election Study 2009 reveals that no single national leader managed to either catch the imagination of more than 20% of the respondents or drive voting preferences in the Lok Sabha election of 2009. The limited impact of the leadership factor in this election was not only seen in the lower intensity with which party supporters backed their projected leaders, but also in the perception of those who supported the Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party alliances. This points to the states and the leadership therein as crucial factors that determined the poll outcome. Data shows the issues that define and determine voter choice even in a parliamentary election are those relevant and specific to a particular state.

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Sandeep Shastri ([sshastri@eth.net](mailto:sshastri@eth.net)) is with the International Academy for Creative Teaching, Bangalore, Karnataka.

Given the increasing centrality of the role and leadership of the prime minister, parliamentary democracies the world over are often characterised as "prime ministerial" systems (Hennessy 2000, 2007; Kavanagh 1990, 2000; King 1985; Langer 2007; Richards 2009). The conventional "first among equals" status of the prime minister in the council of ministers is rarely the case in practical terms with their ascendancy to the privileged "first" position often eclipsing the "façade of being among equals". India's parliamentary system has frequently encountered this trend with national elections often revolving around the personality of the incumbent or prospective prime minister.<sup>1</sup>

In significant ways, the election campaign for the 2009 Lok Sabha election involved debates linked to leadership. Data from the National Election Study (NES) 2009 shows that only one in six respondents said that leadership determined their voting choice. This article seeks to examine how well political parties tackled the leadership question during the election campaign and to what extent the leadership factor influenced the way in which common citizens voted.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had won the 1999 election using Atal Behari Vajpayee as its election "mascot". An attempt to repeat the same in 2004 helped it to an extent but was unable to help it cross the threshold to be able to return to power. NES 2004 provided evidence that the vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was linked to the leadership the party had. This time around, the NDA and its main constituent, the BJP, hoped that its trump card during the campaign would be projecting and packaging its prime ministerial candidate, Lal Krishna Advani.<sup>2</sup> The BJP also made an attempt to portray the incumbent prime minister as weak and ineffective.<sup>3</sup> In hindsight, there is a consensus

that this strategy boomeranged very badly on the party/alliance. The BJP called for a debate between the prime ministerial candidates of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the NDA – a demand that was summarily rejected by the UPA and its principal constituent, the Congress.<sup>4</sup> In an attempt to prevent the BJP-led NDA from gaining any advantage by projecting a prime ministerial candidate, UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi made a categorical statement while releasing the Congress manifesto that Manmohan Singh was the party's prime ministerial candidate.<sup>5</sup> Thus, during the 2009 election campaign, a focus on the prime ministerial candidate was very much part of the strategy of the two main players, the BJP and the Congress, though with varying degrees of intensity and for quite different regions.

How crucial was the projection of the alliance/party leadership by the principal contestants for power? NES 2009 provides a glimpse of what ordinary citizens felt about who they would like as the prime minister after the election. It is important to record that no single leader caught the imagination of more than 20% of the respondents. The incumbent prime minister received the highest rating but was backed by a little less than one-fifth of the respondents. The UPA chairperson was backed by a little over one-sixth of the respondents. Advani, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, was mentioned by 15% of the respondents. It is interesting that the prime ministerial candidates of the two main alliances that were jockeying for power were together backed by only around one-third of the respondents. Three other leaders who were mentioned were Rahul Gandhi (6%), Mayawati (5%) and former prime minister Vajpayee (3%) (Table 1, p 89). Less than 2% of the respondents mentioned the name of the other prime ministerial candidate that some in the BJP spoke about, Narendra Modi. It becomes amply clear that no single leader appeared to drive voting preference. The Congress troika (Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi) together garnered the support of 40% of the respondents. Even though the Congress is often projected as a party with a "strong" high command, public perception

**Table 1: Prime Ministerial Choice (in %)**

| Prime Ministerial Choice | Overall | Among Party Supporters | Among Allies |
|--------------------------|---------|------------------------|--------------|
| Manmohan Singh           | 18      | 33*                    | 23****       |
| Sonia Gandhi             | 16      | 32*                    | 21****       |
| L K Advani               | 15      | 48**                   | 36*****      |
| Rahul Gandhi             | 6       | 13*                    | 5****        |
| Mayawati                 | 5       | 63***                  | —            |
| A B Vajpayee             | 3       | 9**                    | 6*****       |

\*Congress \*\*BJP \*\*\*BSP \*\*\*\*UPA \*\*\*\*\*NDA

Source: NES 2009, CSDS Data Unit.

seems more inclined to recognise and accept the collective leadership within the party.

Among the respondents who voted for Congress candidates, overwhelming support for the leadership troika was clearly evident. More than three-fourths of them backed one of the three Congress leaders. While one-third backed Manmohan Singh, another one-third favoured Sonia Gandhi and a little over 10% hoped Rahul Gandhi would lead the new government. It is interesting to note that the only leader from among the non-Congress component of the UPA who garnered some support from non-Congress supporters of the alliance was Sharad Pawar. Close to 15% of the respondents who voted for Congress allies in the UPA favoured Pawar to lead the government after the poll. It is also relevant to record that Pawar was one of the few non-Congress leaders who remained in the UPA yet made the right "noises" on the leadership question, even saying at one stage that the UPA's prime ministerial candidate would be decided on the basis of who within the alliance gets how many seats.

Notably, as in the case of Congress supporters, Manmohan Singh secured more endorsement than Sonia Gandhi among the allies of the Congress in the UPA. It is evident that the Congress leadership troika was very much accepted by the party's supporters. But the intensity of endorsement it received from those who supported the Congress allies in the UPA was significantly lower. Only close to half of those who voted for Congress allies in the UPA backed the troika for prime ministership.

The pattern of support when it comes to those who voted for the BJP in particular (and the NDA in general) is quite different. The leadership claims of Advani were endorsed by close to half of those who voted

for the BJP. Interestingly, nearly one in every 10 of those who voted for the BJP supported either Manmohan Singh or Sonia Gandhi to be the prime minister. Vajpayee's leadership was preferred by close to one in every 10 BJP voters, and Modi was endorsed by around 7%. This clearly indicated that the transition of leadership, which the party tried to project, was something that its supporters did not fully or overwhelmingly endorse. In the case of the supporters of the BJP's allies in the NDA, Advani was favoured as the prime minister by a little over one-third. Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi were favoured for the position by close to 15% of those who supported the BJP's partners in the NDA. So, within the NDA, Advani's leadership clearly received only lukewarm support.

The limited impact of the leadership factor in this election is not only seen in the lower intensity with which party supporters backed their projected leaders but also in the perception of those who supported Congress and BJP allies. Among those who favoured the allies of the two main parties, close to half endorsed leaders of the allied parties than Congress or BJP leaders. This was much more intense in the NDA than in the UPA. It indicated that within the non-Congress UPA and the non-BJP NDA, support for the leaders of the party leading the alliance was limited.

The only non-Congress, non-BJP leader whose name was mentioned with some frequency for prime ministership was Mayawati. Of the respondents, 5% mentioned her name when it came to their preferred option for prime minister. This aspiration was largely among those who backed the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Nearly two-thirds of those who voted for the BSP mentioned her name when asked who they would prefer as the prime minister after the election.

The six-monthly State of the Nation Survey (SONS) that the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti conducted gives a snapshot of who the respondents preferred, over a period of time, as the prime minister (Table 2).

Support for Sonia Gandhi as prime minister peaked during the 2004 election when nearly one-third of the respondents in NES 2004 mentioned her name. With Manmohan Singh being made the prime minister, support for Sonia Gandhi dropped. Since September 2006, Manmohan Singh's name came to be mentioned more frequently by many respondents, especially those who supported the Congress. He overtook Sonia Gandhi during the 2009 election campaign with the UPA chairperson herself declaring him as the alliance's prime ministerial candidate. The support for Rahul Gandhi saw a sudden rise in the six months that preceded the 2009 Lok Sabha election, and it rose sharply among

**Table 2: Prime Ministerial Choice – Across Surveys (in %)**

|                | NES<br>2004 | SONS<br>Sept 2006 | SONS<br>Jan 2007 | SONS<br>Sept 2007 | SONS<br>Jan 2009 | NES<br>2009 |
|----------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-------------|
| Sonia Gandhi   | 33 (74)     | 29 (52)           | 29 (52)          | 23 (49)           | 19 (46)          | 16 (32)     |
| Manmohan Singh |             | 12 (19)           | 11 (18)          | 12 (22)           | 12 (23)          | 18 (33)     |
| Rahul Gandhi   | 1 (2)       | 2 (3)             | 2 (4)            | 3 (5)             | 6 (13)           | 6 (13)      |
| L K Advani     |             | 2 (6)             | 2 (6)            | 3 (8)             | 10 (31)          | 15 (48)     |
| A B Vajpayee   | 47 (91)     | 19 (59)           | 19 (58)          | 32 (58)           | 10 (27)          | 3 (9)       |

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

Congress supporters at around the time of the poll. Many would have expected him to have had much support among the younger generation of respondents. This however was not true. There is no age variation in terms of those who named Rahul Gandhi as their prime ministerial choice.

Vajpayee was clearly the favourite for prime minister in the 2004 poll. With the UPA coming to power, there was a steady decline in support for him. But it needs to be stressed that even after Manmohan Singh became prime minister and Vajpayee's health began to decline, a majority of BJP supporters still saw him as their choice for prime ministership. It is only after the NDA declared Advani as its prime ministerial candidate that support for Vajpayee dipped. Advani, on the other hand, was mentioned by a very small segment of the respondents (including BJP supporters) until he was declared the NDA's candidate for the prime ministership. After he was anointed, those who endorsed him increased but not to the level that Vajpayee was (within both the BJP and the NDA) during the 2004 election campaign.

Thus, across the country, it is evident that in the 2009 poll none of the prominent

leaders of the various political parties had a significant level of support among the voters. Within both the Congress and the BJP, no single leader captured the imagination of their own party supporters. As for the Congress, support was divided among the leadership troika with Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi being mentioned by two-thirds of those who voted for it. In the case of the BJP, its prime ministerial candidate was behind both the Congress leaders among the general pool of voters though he was endorsed by close to half of those who voted for the party.

It is increasingly being argued that the centre of politics is now the states of India (Yadav 2009; Palshikar and Yadav 2009; Shastri 2002). The issues which define and determine voter choice even in a parliamentary election are what are relevant and specific to a particular state. The 2004 and 2009 Lok Sabha polls have provided sufficient proof that each of these elections was not one verdict but 28 authentically

different verdicts. Did state-level leaders of national parties receive higher levels of support from among the respondents? To test this, the data from NES 2009 is analysed. Respondents in each state were asked whom they would like as the chief minister of their state (Table 3).

Though among national-level leaders no one crossed the threshold of 20 percentage points in terms of support, at the state level the picture is quite different. In 10 of the states, the incumbent chief minister was endorsed by more than 40% of the respondents. In six states, more than one-third of the respondents endorsed the leadership of the chief minister. In another six states, the incumbent secured more than 20% support, higher than what any national leader received. Thus, in as many as 22 states, the support for the incumbent chief minister was more than the support any national-level leader received.

In all the states (save Kerala)<sup>6</sup> where the incumbent chief minister secured more than 30% of the support for his or her leadership, the ruling party in the state did well in the 2009 Lok Sabha poll. They include states where the chief minister belongs to a regional party or is from either the Congress or the BJP. Regional parties did well in states such as Orissa and Bihar, riding on the popularity of the chief minister. In some states where the Congress was in power and the party did well in the Lok Sabha poll, the chief minister's rating was reasonably high (Delhi, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Assam, and Mizoram). The same was the case in some of the BJP-ruled states (Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Karnataka). In 15 states, the difference in the popularity levels of the incumbent chief minister and the leading light of the opposition was over 10 percentage points. In all these (save two which have Left Front governments), the ruling party did very well.<sup>7</sup> The good performance of the national parties in the states they were in power could be linked to the positive response to the chief minister of the state. In states where the ruling party/alliance did not do very well in the 2009 poll, the ratings of the chief minister were quite low (Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Goa are cases in point). Maharashtra is

the only outlier in this analysis and this could be because the incumbent chief minister has been in power for only a short time compared to his predecessor who was in power for four years.

If one does a cross tabulation of the prime ministerial and chief ministerial choices of the respondents, an interesting analysis emerges. When someone opted for a leader from the Congress/non-Congress UPA or the BJP/non-BJP NDA as prime minister, how likely was he or she to opt for someone from the same political formulation as chief minister? Four of every 10 who favoured a Congress leader as prime minister also favoured a Congress leader as chief minister of their state. In the case of those who supported a non-Congress UPA leader as prime minister and a chief minister from a similar formulation, the percentage drops to around one-fourth. Around one-third of those who favoured a BJP leader as prime minister also favoured a BJP leader as chief minister. In the case of those who supported a non-BJP leader from the NDA as prime minister, close to half mentioned the name of a non-BJP leader from the NDA as chief minister (Table 4).

If the same issue were to be looked from another perspective, the analysis

**Table 3: Chief Minister Choice (in %)**

|                   | Support for Incumbent Chief Minister | Support for a Prominent Leader from the Opposition | Difference between the Incumbent Chief Minister and the Leading Figure from the Opposition |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Orissa            | 63                                   | 8                                                  | 55                                                                                         |
| Bihar             | 61                                   | 16                                                 | 45                                                                                         |
| Madhya Pradesh    | 50                                   | 11                                                 | 39                                                                                         |
| Tripura           | 50                                   | 11                                                 | 39                                                                                         |
| Delhi             | 49                                   | 2                                                  | 47                                                                                         |
| Mizoram           | 47                                   | 16                                                 | 31                                                                                         |
| Gujarat           | 45                                   | 7                                                  | 38                                                                                         |
| Sikkim            | 42                                   | 16                                                 | 26                                                                                         |
| Chhattisgarh      | 40                                   | 21                                                 | 19                                                                                         |
| Rajasthan         | 40                                   | 35                                                 | 5                                                                                          |
| Himachal Pradesh  | 39                                   | 36                                                 | 3                                                                                          |
| Tamil Nadu        | 38                                   | 31                                                 | 7                                                                                          |
| Andhra Pradesh    | 37                                   | 35                                                 | 2                                                                                          |
| Assam             | 35                                   | 9                                                  | 26                                                                                         |
| Kerala            | 34                                   | 19                                                 | 15                                                                                         |
| Karnataka         | 33                                   | 19                                                 | 14                                                                                         |
| Haryana           | 32                                   | 13                                                 | 19                                                                                         |
| Uttarakhand       | 30                                   | 14                                                 | 16                                                                                         |
| West Bengal       | 30                                   | 19                                                 | 11                                                                                         |
| Uttar Pradesh     | 27                                   | 27                                                 | 0                                                                                          |
| Punjab            | 27                                   | 33                                                 | -6                                                                                         |
| Goa               | 23                                   | 31                                                 | -8                                                                                         |
| Jammu and Kashmir | 18                                   | 21                                                 | -3                                                                                         |
| Meghalaya         | 16                                   | 16                                                 | 0                                                                                          |
| Manipur           | 15                                   | 13                                                 | 2                                                                                          |
| Maharashtra       | 7                                    | 8                                                  | -1                                                                                         |

Jharkhand is not included as it was under president's rule and Arunachal Pradesh is not included as the chief minister did not find significant mention.  
Source: NES 2009.

**Table 4: Prime Minister vs Chief Minister Choice (in %)**

|                                                   |    |
|---------------------------------------------------|----|
| PM from Congress/CM from Congress                 | 39 |
| PM from non-Congress UPA/CM from non-Congress UPA | 26 |
| PM from BJP/CM from BJP                           | 34 |
| PM from non-BJP NDA/CM from non-BJP NDA           | 48 |

n = 20154

Source: NES 2009.

varies significantly. If one were to take respondents' chief minister choice as the base and then link it to their prime minister choice, the relationship becomes even more robust. Among those who chose a Congress leader as their choice for chief minister, how many opted for a Congress leader as prime minister? The figure now jumps to more than 80%. Close to two-thirds of those who opted for a chief minister from the non-Congress UPA opted for a prime minister from the Congress. The percentages fall a bit when we come to the BJP/NDA. A little less than six of every 10 who opted for a BJP chief minister opted for a BJP leader as prime minister. In the case of respondents who opted

for a non-BJP NDA leader as chief minister, less than half opted for a BJP leader as prime minister. It is also important to record that more than one-third of those who opted for a BJP chief minister or a non-BJP NDA leader as chief minister opted for a Congress leader as prime minister (Table 5).

Thus, in both the alliances (much more in the case of the UPA), the chief minister

**Table 5: Chief Minister vs Prime Minister Choice (in %)**

|                                           |           |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------|
| CM from Congress/PM from Congress         | 80 (13*)  |
| CM from non-Congress UPA/PM from Congress | 62 (15*)  |
| CM from BJP/PM from BJP                   | 58 (35**) |
| CM from non-BJP NDA/PM from BJP           | 49 (35**) |

\*Supported BJP PM \*\*Supported Congress PM

n = 20154

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

choice was the driver of whom most people voted for. When one does a logistic regression analysis of voting for the UPA and the NDA, controlling for media exposure, caste, political participation, class, age, gender and place of residence (rural/urban), and the prime minister and chief minister choice, one finds that those who supported a UPA candidate for prime minister and chief minister voted for the UPA and the same is true of NDA supporters. What is interesting is that in the case of the NDA (more specifically, the BJP) there is very little variation in those who opted for an NDA chief minister or NDA prime minister in determining who they voted for (the probabilities are almost identical, a little over .5 in both instances). In the case of Congress supporters, there is a difference. Those who chose a Congress leader as their chief ministerial choice were more likely to vote for the Congress (with a probability of almost two-thirds, 0.64) than those who chose a Congress leader as their prime ministerial choice (the probability was just over a half, .54) (Table 6).

It is increasingly clear that in the 2009 poll, the campaign saw the presence of

state-level leaders much more than national leaders even in the case of national parties. In states where parties did well, state-level leaders/chief ministers ran successful campaigns (even in the case of national parties) and added a local flavour in their appeal to voters. Much more than the presence and persons of national "icons", it was state-level leaders who played a big role in highlighting the little influence that the leadership had on the election results.

#### NOTES

- 1 When the Congress contested general elections under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and later Indira Gandhi, the leadership factor was central to the election campaigns. The campaigns often revolved around the personality of the leader. The landslide victory for the Congress in the 1984 Lok Sabha election is often attributed to the "sympathy wave" in favour of Rajiv Gandhi.
- 2 The election manifesto of the BJP opened with the slogan "Determined Leader, Decisive Government." The manifesto went on to eulogise the leadership it had to offer. "India today faces a severe crisis of leadership. The nation needs a determined and decisive leader who has the capacity, commitment and conviction to take command of the situation and lead from the front. The country needs a leader who can restore the government's credibility and the people's confidence in themselves. The polity needs a leader who values consensus over conflict, consultation over confrontation. Then alone can good governance replace the all-round failure of the Congress. That leader is Shri L.K. Advani." [www.bjp.org](http://www.bjp.org)
- 3 The election campaign of the NDA's prime ministerial candidate, Advani, had frequent references to the leadership of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. All the attacks ran on similar lines. In a campaign speech at Mathura he stated, "From Jawaharlal Nehru till now, I have seen all prime ministers very closely. But I have not seen a weak prime minister like Manmohan Singh. I call him a weak PM because in a democracy, the most important address is of the prime minister, which is 7 Race Course Road, but for the first time, from 2004, it is not the most important address. Now the most important address is 10 Janpath, the residence of Sonia Gandhi." ANI press release, *Deccan Herald*, 26 March 2009.
- 4 Inviting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for a live television debate, Advani said in an election rally in Arunachal Pradesh, "Let the prime minister come for a live TV debate for which I am ready", IANS, *Deccan Herald*, 27 March 2009.

- 5 At the release of the Congress manifesto in New Delhi on 25 March 2009, Congress president Sonia Gandhi picked up the party's election manifesto and placing a hand over her own picture on the cover she drew attention to Manmohan Singh's smiling face and asked, "Can you see this? Tell me, can you see this?" and went on to add, "There are many people who want to become prime minister. But no one can match Dr Manmohan Singh". For the first time in the history of the Congress, a non-Nehru-Gandhi surname was projected as its prime minister candidate before the election. Sonia Gandhi's statement is quoted from *Deccan Herald*, 26 March 2009.
- 6 In Kerala, NES 2009 finds that the chief minister continues to be popular and the reason why the ruling UDF did not do well had more to do with the infighting in the Communist Party of India (Marxist).
- 7 Kerala has been discussed in the previous note. The poor performance of the Left Front in West Bengal in spite of the reasonably high popularity of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya would have to be seen in the light of the fact that compared to earlier opinion polls, support for him has dipped considerably. It could also imply that his personal image and popularity may be high but does not get translated into votes for the Left Front.

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**Table 6: Predicted Probability of Voting for Congress/BJP If Prime Minister/Chief Minister Choice was from the Same Party**

| Party                                                  | Mean Scores |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Prime ministerial choice and voting for party Congress | .54         |
| BJP                                                    | .55         |
| Chief ministerial choice and voting for party Congress | .64         |
| BJP                                                    | .51         |

n = 20154

Source: CSDS Data Unit.