

A Political Survey of Madhya Pradesh's Malwa Region

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The Malwa region of western Madhya Pradesh is considered the political nerve-centre of the state. Over the last two decades, electoral majority in Malwa has consistently translated to an electoral majority in the state. The region has exhibited a strict bipolarity in these two decades, as BJP and INC have been the only two parties to win seats from this region. With the assembly elections just a week away, this pre-poll survey seeks to shed light on what issues hold sway among the voters and what are their expectations from the state. The survey results reveal significant anti-incumbency towards the current BJP government in the state. A shift in voter preferences towards the INC is observed that can potentially lead to a decisive mandate in their favour. Additionally, the survey illustrates the limits of populist schemes and the strong demand for affordable and quality social services from the state.

Keywords: Madhya Pradesh; Malwa; electoral politics; populist schemes; election studies; anti-incumbency

1. Introduction

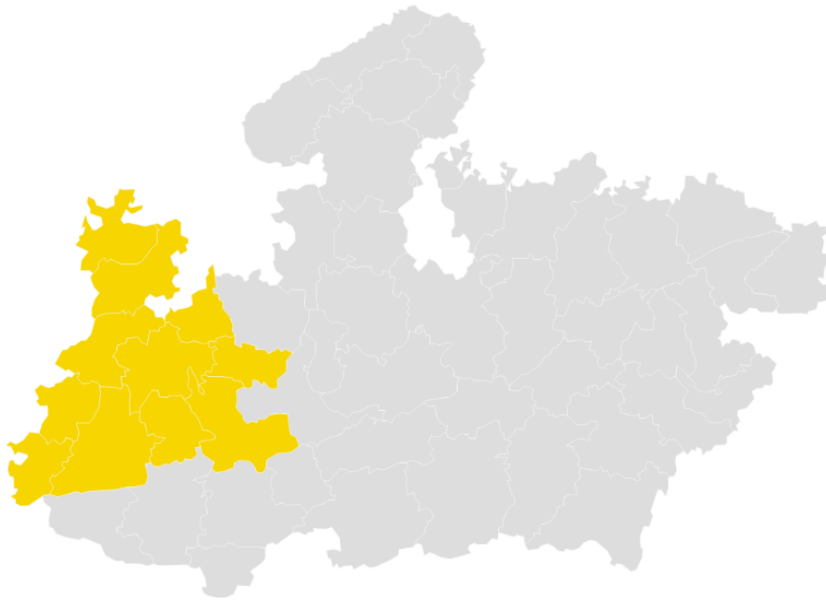
To study the politics of Madhya Pradesh, a geographically large, multi-lingual and culturally diverse state, it is broadly divided into seven regions – Chambal-Gwalior, Madhya Kshetra, Baghelkhand, Bundelkhand, Mahakaushal, Malwa and Nimar.¹ These together comprise of 52 districts, 29 Parliamentary Constituencies (PCs) and 230 Assembly Constituencies (ACs).

The Malwa region comprises of 11 districts² with a population of 1.59 crore,³ which is approximately 22% of the state's population. Located at the Western end of Madhya Pradesh, Malwa is also the commercial nerve-centre of Central India and has a thriving agrarian economy. The region covers 50 ACs, accounting for nearly 22% of the total ACs. Of the total reserved seats in the state assembly, the region has 20% of all SC seats and nearly 25% of all seats reserved for STs. In terms of PCs, the Malwa region covers a total of 6 seats.

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Malwa Region of Madhya Pradesh

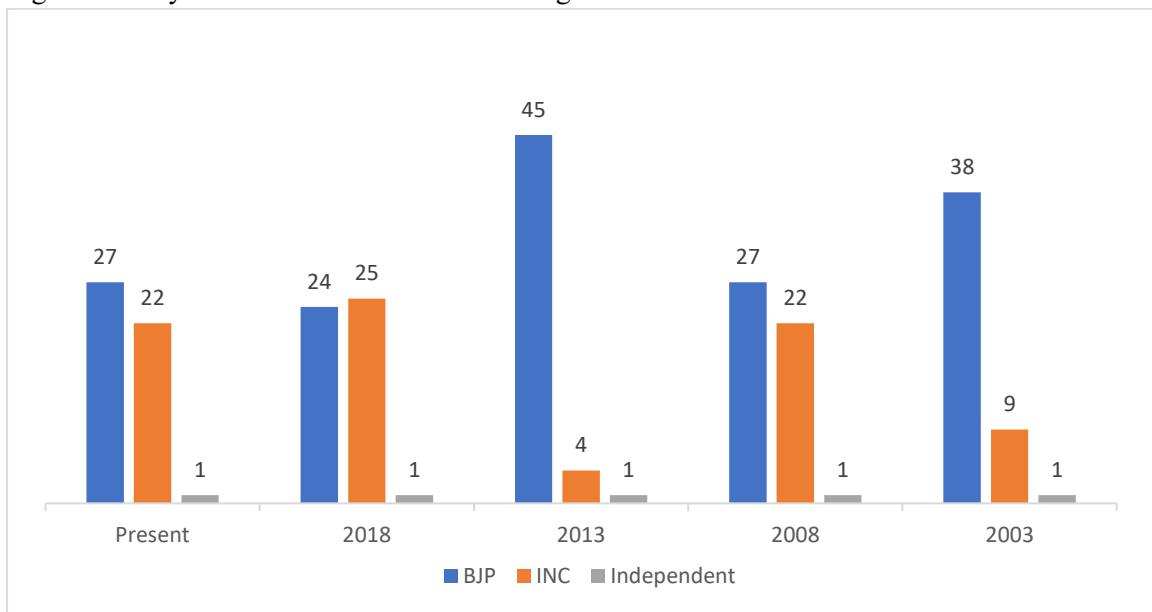
Malwa



Map data: © OSM · Created with Datawrapper

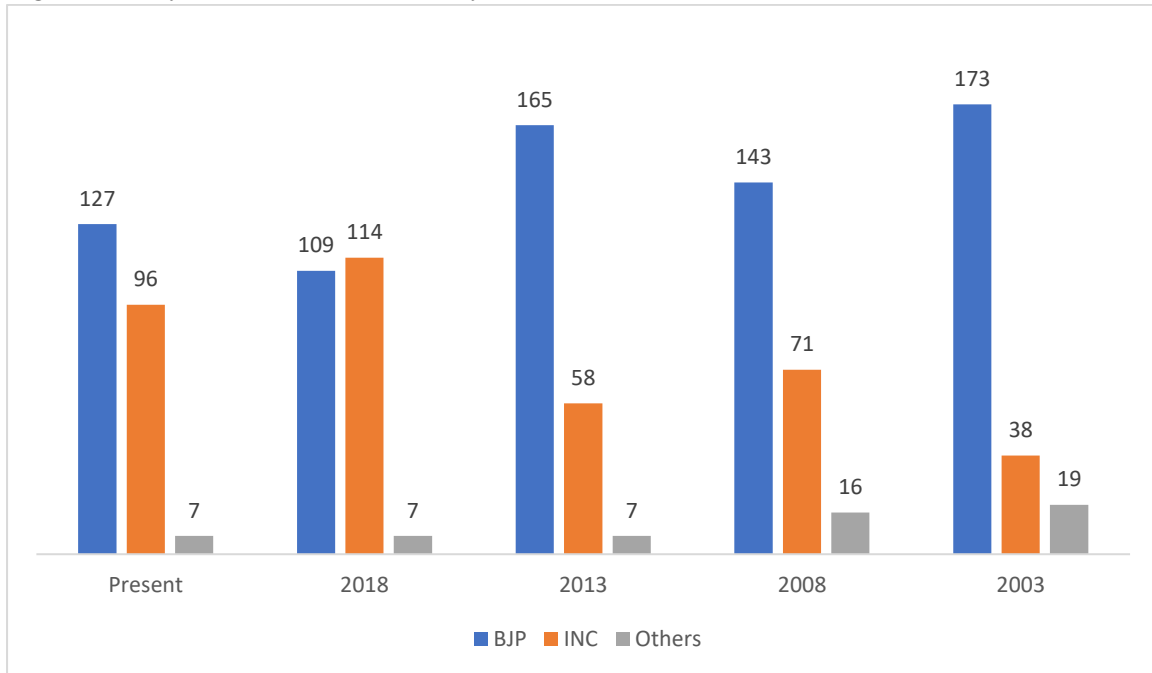
Political observers often say that the party which wins a majority of seats in the Malwa region also wins the state elections. An analysis of the results of the last 20 years reveals that this trend has held sway⁴, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Even the current composition of the assembly, which changed after the fall of the Kamal Nath government,⁵ re-affirms this trend. Results also reveal the firm bipolarity of the region, as no other party except Indian National Congress (INC) and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has had a winner from any of the Malwa assembly seats in the last 3 decades.

Figure 1: Party-wise ACs won in the Malwa region since 2003



Source: Election Commission of India

Figure 2: Party-wise ACs won in Madhya Pradesh since 2003



Source: Election Commission of India

Malwa has also been in the news in recent years for inter-faith communal incidents (Kakvi 2021). According to the 2011 census data, the region, when compared to the rest of the state, has a slightly higher proportion of minorities. Hindus in Madhya Pradesh form 90.89% of the population while Muslims are 6.57%. In the Malwa region, Hindus are 88.43% while Muslims are 9.38%. The region's Jain population is also higher, at 1.26%, compared to 0.78% for the entire state, which is reflected in the Jain community's proportionately greater political influence in the region.

Given this background, a political survey was undertaken in the months of September and October across 7 randomly selected ACs of the Malwa region. The survey was aimed at not only gauging the electoral mood of the region, but also to understand the political perceptiveness of the voter and their expectations from the state.

2. Methodology

Using multistage cluster sampling, 7 ACs were randomly selected from the Malwa region, and 2 random polling stations were selected from each of these ACs. 20 respondents were selected from each of these polling stations for interview. Out of the 140 randomly selected voters, 104 were successfully interviewed, while 36 were unable to participate in the survey, mostly due to their unavailability at the address specified in the electoral roll. The demographic profile of the sample is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic distribution of the interviewees

Gender	Male	53%
	Female	47%
Age Group	35 years and below	31%

	Above 35 years	69%
Geographic Area	Rural	64%
	Urban	36%
Religion	Hindu	85%
	Muslim	15%
Caste Category	General	38%
	OBC	20%
	SC	42%

The survey questionnaire was structured with both open-ended as well as closed-ended questions. All interviews were conducted face-to-face by the author in the months of September and October. Additional observations made during the interview have also been mentioned in the paper since these bring more nuance to the interviewees' answers.

3. Observations from the Survey

3.1. Flagship Programmes

The current Chief Minister (CM) of Madhya Pradesh, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, has become famous for his women-centric populist schemes, the most popularly advertised among them being the Mukhyamantri Ladli Behna Yojana (MLBY).

However, the opinion on MLBY illustrates the limits of such populist schemes. Only 1% of the total respondents thought that the scheme was very beneficial, while 36% opined it was somewhat beneficial and as many as 62% said that the scheme was not beneficial at all.⁶ Here there is a significant divergence between male and female respondents, with as many as 78% of the men saying the scheme was not beneficial, compared to 43% women (Table 2). Interestingly, as many as 98% of the respondents were aware of the scheme and its benefits, clearly showing the extent to which it has been advertised and popularised by the state and media.

Table 2: Opinion of all respondents on MLBY

Opinion	Men	Women	All Respondents
Very Beneficial	0%	2%	1%
Somewhat Beneficial	20%	53%	36%
Not Beneficial At All	78%	43%	62%
Don't Know	2%	2%	2%

Only 1 in 3 beneficiaries⁷ found the scheme somewhat beneficial, while 2 out of every 3 beneficiaries said the scheme was not beneficial at all. None of the respondents receiving benefits of MLBY opined that the scheme was very beneficial. The primary reason for this disappointment cited by the interviewees was that the amount under the scheme was not sufficient to offset the high prices of most basic commodities in the market. Some respondents also mentioned the long-term fiscal burdens imposed by such programmes on an already debt-ridden state government (Sirothia, 2023).

The survey also asked respondents about how beneficial has the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) been. This is a flagship scheme of the Modi government, celebrated as an instrument of women empowerment and government’s pro-poor policy. The survey found that among those availing the benefits, only 8% opined it was very beneficial while 92% of beneficiaries said the scheme was not beneficial at all. The most common complaint among the beneficiaries was the high cost of LPG cylinder, which lasts only around 20-25 days in the absence of any other heating provisions in the household. Some others in the rural areas complained about delayed delivery of refill cylinders, since their registered LPG agency is in another village.

Opinion on Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) was comparatively better with 17% of total beneficiaries saying the scheme was very beneficial, 55% finding it somewhat beneficial and only 28% saying it was not beneficial at all.

The interviews revealed that there was greater appreciation for schemes with more substantive and longer term effects, such as Mukhyamantri Ladli Laxmi Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana, Mukhyamantri Kanya Vivaah Yojana and PMFBY.

3.2. Inflation

Among various issues ailing the country and the state, there was near unanimity among the respondents over inflation having increased significantly in the last 5 years. 92% of the respondents said that inflation has increased a lot in the last 5 years, while the remaining 8% said it has increased a little. Clearly, inflation will be a major issue in not only this assembly election but also in the Lok Sabha election due next year.

3.3. Unemployment

Regarding the level of unemployment in the last 5 years, 47% of the respondents said that it has increased a lot, and another 21% of the respondents said that it has increased a little (Table 3). Interestingly, only 4% of the respondents said that unemployment has decreased a little, and each of these respondents, the survey data reveals, voted for BJP in the 2018 assembly elections and in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

Table 3: Opinion on unemployment in the last 5 years

Opinion	Respondents
Increased a lot	47%
Increased a little	21%
Remains the same	20%
Decreased a little	4%
Decreased a lot	0%
Don't Know	8%

3.4. Communalism

On the issue of communalism, there was a difference in the responses of Hindu and Muslim interviewees (Table 4). As many as 94% of Muslims said that communalism has increased to

some degree in the last 5 years, while only 41% of Hindus said the same. In fact, no respondent from the Muslim community said that communalism is the same as it was 5 years ago nor did anyone from the community say that it has decreased. However, 18% of the Hindu respondents said that communalism was the same as it was 5 years ago, while another 18% of Hindus said that it has decreased a little in this period.

Table 4: Opinion on communalism in the last 5 years

Opinion	Hindu Respondents	Muslim Respondents	All Respondents
Increased a lot	23%	81%	32%
Increased a little	18%	13%	17%
Remains the same	18%	0%	15%
Decreased a little	18%	0%	15%
Decreased a lot	0%	0%	0%
Don't Know	23%	6%	20%

3.5. Crimes Against Women

On the issue of crimes against women, 46% of respondents said that it has increased a lot in the last 5 years (Table 5). Perhaps expectedly, there was a difference of opinion between men and women on this issue. 31% percent of the male respondents said that crimes against women have decreased to some degree in the last 5 years, while none of the female respondents said there has been a decrease in such crimes. In fact, 55% of the female respondents said that crimes against women had increased a lot in the last five years, while only 38% of male respondents felt the same.

Table 5: Opinion on crimes against women in the last 5 years

Opinion	Female Respondents	Male Respondents	All Respondents
Increased a lot	55%	38%	46%
Increased a little	2%	2%	2%
Remains the same	27%	25%	26%
Decreased a little	0%	16%	9%
Decreased a lot	0%	15%	8%
Don't Know	16%	4%	10%

While these opinions on critical issues of public interest reflect the perceptions of the electorate, the impact this will have on electoral outcomes will depend on the degree to which these issues can become a part of public reasoning and political discourse.

3.6. Anti-incumbency

The vote percentage of BJP in the 2018 assembly elections was 41.02%, with INC close behind at 40.89%. These numbers are somewhat also reflected in the survey numbers, where 42.26% of the respondents eligible to vote in 2018⁸ said they voted for BJP in 2018, while 38.14% said they voted for INC. Nearly 20% of those who voted did not want to disclose who they voted for in 2018, which can perhaps explain the small variation between survey numbers and the actual voting percentage.

To understand the extent of anti-incumbency, all respondents were asked who they intend to vote for in the upcoming assembly elections. Among the respondents who voted for the BJP in 2018, 49% said they will definitely vote for BJP again, while 32% of BJP voters said that they will vote for INC this time. This shift in voter preference was not observed among those who voted for INC in 2018, as 97% of them said they will vote for INC again in the upcoming elections.

However, these numbers are likely to change further, since 15% of the respondents said that they remain undecided and another 9% refused to reveal their preference. This percentage of vote share may also vary since most of the interviews were conducted early in the election cycle, when the candidate list for the two parties had not been fully released. Some voter preferences are known to change closer to the day of polling. The vote share is also likely to be impacted by dissidents from either party standing as independents or on the ticket of AAP or BSP.

There is also a slight shift in voting patterns when viewed through the categories of region, religion, age and caste.

Among the rural respondents, 43% of the eligible voters voted for the BJP in 2018 and 39% voted for INC. In contrast, only 18% of rural respondents said they will vote BJP in the upcoming elections, while 58% of them said they will vote for INC. Among the urban respondents that voted in 2018, 40% said they voted BJP. For the upcoming elections, including the respondents who will vote for the first time, 32% said they intend to vote for BJP. For the INC, 37% of urban voters said they voted for the party in 2018, and 41% (including first time voters) said that they will vote INC in the upcoming elections.

When viewed religion-wise, a significant shift is seen within the Hindu voters. 48% of Hindu respondents eligible to vote in 2018 said they voted for BJP and 33% of the eligible voters voted for INC. In the upcoming elections, 27% Hindus said they will vote BJP, while 50% said they'll vote INC. Among the Muslim respondents, only 8% of the registered voters said they voted for BJP in 2018, while none of the respondents from the community said they will vote for the BJP in the upcoming assembly elections. It is worth mentioning here that 25% of Muslim respondents remain undecided regarding who they will vote for this month. The anti-CAA protests, selective application of “bulldozer justice” (Ribeiro 2023) and routine targeting during Hindu processions and festivals (Outlook Web Desk 2023) are some of the primary reasons for Muslim community’s alienation from the BJP. Some of them also added that up until 2013-14 the incumbent CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan did not resort to religious polarisation. However, this changed in recent years (Editorial 2021) and that has contributed towards anti-incumbency within the Muslim community.

The shift in BJP vote base is also seen to be greater among the older respondents. 46% of voters above the age of 35 years voted for the BJP in 2018, while only 28% of the voters in this age group said they will vote for the BJP in the coming assembly elections. Also, the undecided voters are higher among the younger respondents (those 35 years old or below) at 34%,

illustrating the demography of the swing voters. The survey reveals a consistently stronger INC base among the younger generation, as 48% of eligible voters aged 35 years or below voted for INC, and 50% of this age group expressed their intention to vote for INC in the upcoming elections.

Among the General category respondents (excluding the first time voters), 38% voted BJP and 28% voted INC in 2018. As many as 34% were hesitant to reveal the choice they made in 2018. For the upcoming polls, 41% of the General category respondents (including the first time voters) said they will vote BJP while 26% said they will vote INC. Unlike the General category, anti-incumbency is far more evident for OBC and SC respondents. While 81% of the OBC respondents eligible to vote in 2018 favoured BJP, for the upcoming elections 57% (including first time voters) said they are considering voting for INC, while 24% remain undecided. Among the SCs, 55% of those eligible to vote in 2018 said they voted INC. For the upcoming elections, 73% of the SC respondents expressed their intent to vote for INC. Clearly, INC’s focus on caste census to attract the OBC vote has the potential to yield positive electoral outcomes for the party.

Since voter preferences change as elections approach, a better way to gauge anti-incumbency is by assessing the performance of incumbent MLAs from both the parties. Each respondent was asked to rate the performance of their incumbent MLA on a scale of excellent, good, satisfactory, poor and very disappointing (Table 6). 25% of respondents from ACs with a BJP MLA said that the performance of their representative was very disappointing, and another 32% said it was poor, while only 7% opined that it was good. None of the respondents rated a BJP MLAs performance as excellent. For INC MLAs, only 17% respondents said that they were very disappointed, while 19% gave an excellent rating and 9% said the performance was good.

Table 6: Ratings of incumbent MLAs

Rating	Party of incumbent MLA		Overall
	BJP	INC	
Excellent	0%	19%	9%
Good	7%	9%	8%
Satisfactory	16%	47%	30%
Poor	32%	0%	17%
Very Disappointing	25%	17%	21%
Don't Know	21%	9%	15%

A recurring factor that influenced this rating of MLAs was the extent of assistance these representatives provided during the pandemic. Some interviewees noted that they were impressed by their INC MLA’s assistance, even though his party was not in power. In a similar vein, some interviewees were disappointed at the BJP MLA’s failure to assist even though his party was in power at the state and national level. This illustrates how the ‘double-engine’ catchphrase, coined by the BJP leadership, can also have adverse consequences.

3.7. Opinion on Turncoats

Turncoats remain a common phenomenon in Indian politics and Madhya Pradesh is no stranger to this. The memory of Kamal Nath's elected government falling in 2020, as a result of turncoats led by Jyotiraditya Scindia, is fresh in the electorate's memory. The survey sought to understand how the voters perceive such acts of changing allegiance, especially when it leads to a reversal of people's mandate. 63% of the respondents opined that this was unethical, while only 4% said it was ethical. 13% said that it was 'neither ethical nor unethical' while 19% of the respondents did not have an opinion on this issue. This is in contradiction to the often presumed notion that turncoats in Indian politics continue to win elections successfully since voters do not care much about switching of political allegiance.

3.8. Expectations from the state

Madhya Pradesh significantly lags behind in education and health sectors (ASER 2023). There has been mushrooming of private schools and hospitals throughout the state, while government facilities suffer from neglect and poor service provisioning (De Costa and Diwan 2007). As a result, the citizens incur high out-of-pocket expenditure for accessing the most basic services.

In this context, respondents were asked several questions pertaining to their expectations from the state (Table 7). When asked if the government should be responsible for providing education and affordable healthcare to its citizens, every respondent answered in the affirmative. This includes respondents from economically wealthy backgrounds, most of whom confessed they rarely avail any government facilities for their health and education needs. While asking these questions, the respondents were explicitly given the context of increased privatisation in these sectors.

Similarly, in spite of the BJP government's push for 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' and state incentives for private firms to generate employment, every respondent said that the government should take responsibility for generating employment opportunities for the youth of the country. Unemployment in the state has been high, while government recruitments have been embroiled in cases of corruption (Kumar 2015) and inordinate delays (Anand 2023). Furthermore, the expectation from the state to provide employment opportunities seems incongruent in the age of neoliberalism and a shrinking state.

A vast majority also agreed that the government should be responsible for providing affordable housing for its citizens and subsidy on essential items such as LPG cylinders, fertilizers, electricity and so on. A small minority opined that these can be managed by the citizens, so far as the government provides affordable healthcare and education.

Table 7: Expectations from the government

Category	Yes	No	Maybe	Don't Know
Government providing for education	100%	0%	0%	0%
Government providing for affordable healthcare	100%	0%	0%	0%
Government providing for employment opportunities	100%	0%	0%	0%
Government providing for affordable homes	95%	4%	1%	0%

Government subsidising essential items	96%	4%	0%	0%
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These numbers point towards a dissonance between the political class and the citizens, as the former continues to push for greater privatisation, contractualization and cash transfer programmes, instead of increasing budgetary allocation towards education and healthcare. One of the major reasons for this is the lack of adequate discussions and public engagement on the critical issues of quality health, education and other basic needs (Drèze and Sen 2013).

3.9. Medium of news and sources of verification

The medium of getting news and information has also significantly changed with the proliferation of social media and online platforms. When respondents were asked which medium they use to access news, 63% of them said they use social media (such as WhatsApp), YouTube channels and other online sources, 61% said Television news channels, and only 24% said they use newspapers.⁹ This explains the increase in political messaging on online platforms, with politicians promoting their own YouTube and WhatsApp channels, and opposition voicing concerns over social media corporations' alleged suppression of their online accounts.

While there was an awareness among the respondents about the high prevalence of fake news, none of the respondents said they use fact-checking websites to verify the authenticity of what they read or hear. When asked how do they verify the authenticity of news they receive through unverified sources, some respondents said they ask a friend or their spouse, some others said they 'Google' and check the authenticity, and the rest said they intuitively figure this out themselves. The poor penetration of fact-checking websites does not bode well for India's democracy, given the proliferation of online platforms and their lethal potential for disinformation campaigns.

3.10. Opposition's political messaging

In spite of opposition's allegations that they do not get their fair share of coverage in the media, INC has managed to successfully reach the voters with their promises for the state. 74% of the respondents were aware of at least 2 promises that the INC has said it will implement if it comes to power in Madhya Pradesh. Popular among these is ₹500 for LPG cylinder, 100 units of electricity free, farm loan waiver and ₹1500 per month for women.

Another important indicator of successful political messaging by the opposition is the opinion of the electorate on their Bharat Jodo Yatra, which traversed through the Malwa region. 80% of the respondents had heard about the yatra led by Rahul Gandhi, and 71% among these had a positive opinion of such a mode of outreach to connect with the citizens, even if they didn't align with the politics of INC or Rahul Gandhi.

The interviews also revealed an inter-state contagion in terms of political messaging and policy implementation. The Malwa region not only shares geographical proximity with Rajasthan, but also has close cultural, historical and commercial ties with the state. Out of 10 districts of M.P. that share a border with Rajasthan, 5 belong to the Malwa region (Mandsaur, Agar-Malwa,

Neemuch, Jhabua and Ratlam). Interviewees who travel frequently to Rajasthan or have familial ties there were aware of the welfare schemes of the Gehlot-led Rajasthan government, such as cheaper LPG cylinders and Mehangai Rahat Camps. This had a positive impact on their opinion of INC as a party that delivers on its promises, motivating them to vote for the party in their own state. Such contagion effects have not been studied in Indian politics, and can be an area worth exploring for future researchers.

3.11. Lok Sabha elections

The Modi wave of 2014 and 2019 prevailed over the Malwa region completely, with BJP winning all 6 Parliamentary seats in both elections. Even now, despite the anti-incumbency at the state-level, PM Modi's popularity remains largely intact. When respondents were asked about his single greatest achievement since 2014, 31% said construction of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. For his regime's biggest failure, 21% respondents said high inflation.

For the UPA I and II governments, a majority of the respondents said economic stability or deft management of the economy was their biggest achievement. When asked about their greatest failures, the answers largely hovered around inability to take decisions and failure to talk to citizens. For many respondents, it was difficult to remember much about the UPA-era (2004-2014), since nine years is akin to an era in Indian politics. This perhaps presents an opportunity for the INC to shed some of their past baggage.

4. Conclusion

While the small number of interviewees may not be sufficient to make a precise seat-by-seat numerical prediction, the demographic diversity covered helps provide important insights into the political mood of the region's electorate.

INC will likely get a decisive mandate, provided it manages factionalism within the party successfully and is able to persuade its dissidents to stand down as independent candidates. In the 2018 elections, INC lost out on a few coveted seats in this region because of splitting of votes between the INC candidate and his rival within the party who stood as an independent.¹⁰

BJP's strategy of putting out high profile candidates may grab headlines, but it cannot conceal the widespread anti-incumbency against the party. The sidelining of the incumbent CM by the central leadership is all too obvious to the voter, with many of the BJP supporters having accepted that the next CM from their party will likely be somebody else. What may work in favour of the BJP is their massive cadre base in the Malwa region, which includes the RSS and its affiliate organizations. INC cannot match the resources the BJP has at its disposal, giving the latter a clear edge in electoral campaigning.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the politics of mandir has also gained traction in the Malwa region. Just as the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya is an emotive issue for mobilising Hindu voters, the newly developed Mahakal Lok in Ujjain has become an emotive issue in the Malwa region around which the BJP hopes to mobilise the Hindu voter.

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Notes

¹ While Malwa and Nimar are often clubbed together, they both form distinct geographical, historical and political units, and therefore can be treated separately.

² These 11 districts are Agar-Malwa, Alirajpur, Dewas, Dhar, Indore, Jhabua, Mandasaur, Neemuch, Ratlam, Shajapur and Ujjain.

³ All population figures are from Census 2011, available at <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/>

⁴ Elections before 2003 are not taken into account since the number of ACs and the overall area of the state was different prior to the creation of Chhattisgarh in 2000.

⁵ There has been a change in the seats held by BJP and INC since by-polls in several ACs were held after 2020.

⁶ These numbers represent the opinion of all respondents, including those who have no member of their family enrolled in the scheme. This was done to understand the general perceptions of citizens on a scheme that has been widely advertised and also has a significant effect on the state's exchequer.

⁷ Here beneficiaries include women directly receiving benefits as well as men whose immediate member of family is receiving benefits under the scheme.

⁸ The survey also includes respondents who will be voting in their first assembly elections this year, since they were not registered to vote in 2018.

⁹ There are overlaps in these numbers since most of those who follow news do so through more than one medium.

¹⁰ One example of this is the Ujjain Dakshin seat, where the winning candidate from the BJP, Dr. Mohan Yadav, garnered lesser votes (78,178) than the combined total of the INC candidate Rajendra Vashishtha (59,218) and the INC rebel Jay Singh Darbar (19,560) who stood as an Independent candidate.