



An overview of Maharashtra assembly elections: Through the years

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Abstract

Maharashtra politics in the last three decades invariably revolved around Sharad Pawar and late Bal Thackeray-indisputably the two tallest leaders of Maharashtra politics in recent times. Some other prominent leaders of the era such as the Bharatiya Janata Party's late Pramod Mahajan and Gopinath Munde were more active as a conduit between the BJP and Thackeray while Sushil Kumar Shinde, late Vilasrao Deshmukh and late Sudhakar Naik (all former chief ministers of the state) were largely seen as quintessential Pawar baiters in the Congress. Pawar was once even considered a strong contender for the prime minister's post in the early '90s while Thackeray remained the uncrowned king of Bombay (now Mumbai). Yet unlike Pawar, the latter personally remained away from electoral politics despite floating his right-wing political outfit, the Shiv Sena in the 1960s.

Keywords: Maharashtra politics, prime minister, Thackeray, Pawar

Introduction

Maharashtra politics in the last three decades invariably revolved around Sharad Pawar and late Bal Thackeray-indisputably the two tallest leaders of Maharashtra politics in recent times. Some other prominent leaders of the era such as the Bharatiya Janata Party's late Pramod Mahajan and Gopinath Munde were more active as a conduit between the BJP and Thackeray while Sushil Kumar Shinde, late Vilasrao Deshmukh and late Sudhakar Naik (all former chief ministers of the state) were largely seen as quintessential Pawar baiters in the Congress.

Sharad pawar and Bal Thackeray: Two Pillars of Maharashtra Politics

Pawar was once even considered a strong contender for the prime minister's post in the early '90s while Thackeray remained the uncrowned king of Bombay (now Mumbai). Yet unlike Pawar, the latter personally remained away from electoral politics despite floating his right-wing political outfit, the Shiv Sena in the 1960s.

There had been many similarities between Pawar and Thackeray and both shared a good personal equation as well despite being political rivals. Both catered to the Maratha pride; floated their political outfits and remained a force to reckon with in national politics. Both patronised family politics and promoted their respective daughter (Supriya Sule) and son (Uddhav Thackeray) and nephews as well (Ajit Pawar and Raj Thackeray) in politics!

It won't be an exaggeration though to term Pawar more ambitious than Thackeray whose politics remained Maharashtra-centric.

Pawar: Rebellious and Ambitious

Pawar remains a rebel Congressman at heart. At 38, he became the youngest CM of Maharashtra after breaking away from the Congress to form a coalition with the Janata Party in

1978. Yet his Progressive Democratic Front government was dismissed in February 1980, when the Congress (Indira) returned to power under Indira Gandhi at the Centre.

Pawar became the President of the Congress (Socialist) in 1981 and led his party to wins in 54 of the 288 assembly seats in the 1985 state elections to himself assume the role of the leader of the Opposition in the state Assembly. He rejoined the Congress (I) in 1987 as he saw "the need to save the Congress Culture in Maharashtra", in the wake of a rising Shiv Sena! He soon reassumed the CM's position after the induction of the then CM, Shankarrao Chavan, in the Union Cabinet by the then PM Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. Pawar had the task cut out for him to check the rise of Thackeray in state politics and in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, he did ensure Congress's victory in 28 of the 48 seats in the state. Yet he could manage a Congress victory by a whisker in the 1990 assembly elections where the Congress could win just 141 of the 288 seats and just fell short of absolute majority in the face of stiff challenge from the SS-BJP combine. Pawar managed to muster up the support of 12 independent MLAs to become the CM for the third time on 4 March 1990.

Maharashtra Politics: Contest between Rightists and Centrists
Following the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in course of the 1991 general elections, Pawar emerged as a leading contender for the PM's post but finally lost the race to another Congress leader PV Narasimha Rao. Ever since, his focus shifted to New Delhi though in between, he did return to state politics as CM from 1993 to 1995 when eventually the Congress lost the state assembly elections to the SS-BJP combine.

Ever since, Maharashtra elections have largely remained a keen contest between the Rightists and the Centrists with little space for the Left parties. Pawar has remained the driving force of the Centrist politics in Maharashtra. His discomfiture with the Gandhis resulted in his breaking away from the Congress once again and this time he set up the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 1999.

In the 1999 state assembly elections though the Congress and NCP fought separately and got 75 and 58 seats respectively, they were compelled to go for a post poll alliance to prevent formation of a National Democratic Alliance government. The NDA comprising the SS and the BJP had then bagged 125 seats (Shiv Sena 69 and BJP 56). But with the help of Independents, the Congress-NCP alliance formed their first government in state – an alliance that was to return to power in the successive state elections in 2004 and 2009.

The 2004 state election was a triumph of Pawar as his NCP emerged from the shadow of the Congress and bagged 71 seats as against 69 that were won by its alliance partner, the Congress. Yet, the NCP – a key component of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance at the Centre, let go the CM's post to the Congress in bargain of some key portfolios for its members in the state. Together the alliance had bagged 141 seats in the 288 member House and yet again it needed the support of Independents to form the government. The performance of the NDA had further slumped as it could win just 117 seats (SS – 62, BJP – 54 and the Swatantra Bharat Paksh – 1). Yet the worst was yet to come for the SS-BJP alliance and in the 2009 assembly elections where together they could get just 89 seats. Incidentally this was the first time that the BJP with 46 seats had done better than the Sena (45). Perhaps the writing was on the wall now and in 2014 both the parties finally parted ways ahead of the assembly elections. As for the Congress-NCP alliance, it did hit the halfway mark of 145 with the Congress scoring 83 and the NCP, 62. This was the election when many smaller parties too opened their accounts—prominently among them the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) of Thackeray's nephew Raj that got 12 seats. Even the Samajwadi Party and the Peasants and Workers Party could get four seats each then. Yet a large chunk was grabbed by Independents who not just got 15 percent of the total vote share but also bagged 24 seats.

It is interesting that despite all the clout that Thackeray wielded in Maharashtra politics, he always required the support of the BJP to remain a formidable force in the state as well as national politics. The only time that the Sena could to form its government in the state was in alliance with the BJP in 1995. Its best ever tally in the state elections has been 73 that it secured in 1995. The party still struggles to make a strong rural presence in the state. The BJP, on the other hand, always piggybacked on Sena and even its best showing at the state assembly elections in Maharashtra was of 65 seats that it could win in 1995.

The BJP, which won 122 seats in 2014, when the saffron parties contested separately, aspires to reach the majority mark of 145 on its own or get as close to it as possible, reducing dependence on the Shiv Sena, its 'frenemy' of five years. The Shiv Sena, on the other hand, would want to win over 100 seats to at least achieve parity in the tie-up, where the Modi-led BJP has since 2014 taken over the role of senior partner.

The NCP, too, would like to change its status in the secular front, with its chief Sharad Pawar having become the face of the opposition campaign and the Congress, devoid of a prominent face, taking a backseat. The Shiv Sena's stormy petrel, Saamna executive editor Sanjay Raut, began the game of one-upmanship the day before the declaration of results, telling TV channels on Wednesday that the BJP would need

the Sena to run the state government. On the other side, Pawar had, during the poll campaign, replied to Congressman Sushil Kumar Shinde's suggestion that the Congress and NCP should merge by saying he was "neither old nor tired".

Maharashtra: President's Rule changes terms of power play as BJP makes a comeback in November 2019

The power struggle in Maharashtra took everyone by surprise when 30-year-old allies BJP and Shiv Sena refused to see eye-to-eye and sort out differences and stake a claim to power between October 24, when the result was declared and November 9, when the term of the previous assembly ended. Shiv Sena claimed that the BJP had cheated it out of the promised 50-50 power share formula, the BJP said no such promise was ever made. Both stuck to their guns and time ran out. Eventually, on November 10, the governor asked the single-largest party BJP to show intent to form the government within 24 hours. When the BJP declined, on November 11, the governor invited Shiv Sena, the second-largest party, to form the government. The next day, Shiv Sena expressed its interest in forming the government with the help of Congress and NCP but asked for an additional three days to produce letters of support. But the governor denied their request and moved on to invite the NCP.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 1960, and also of predecessor states such as Bombay, the politics of Maharashtra has been dominated by the Indian National Congress party ^[13]. Maharashtra became a bastion of Congress party stalwarts such as Yashwantrao Chavan, Vasantdada Patil, Vasantrao Naik, and Shankarrao Chavan. Sharad Pawar has been a significant personality in state and national politics for nearly forty years. During his career, he has split Congress twice, with significant consequences for state politics. After his second parting from the Congress party in 1999, Sharad Pawar formed the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) but joined a Congress-led coalition to form the state government after the 1999 Assembly elections. The Congress party enjoyed a nearly unchallenged dominance of the state political landscape, until 1995 when the coalition of Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured an overwhelming majority in the state, beginning a period of coalition governments. Shiv Sena was the larger party in the coalition. From 1999 until 2014, the NCP and INC formed one coalition while Shiv Sena and the BJP formed another for three successive elections, which the INC-NCP alliance won. Prithviraj Chavan of the Congress party was the last Chief Minister of Maharashtra under the Congress-NCP alliance that ruled until 2014.

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