

YES, NO, IT’S COMPLICATED

# Is the Congress on the comeback trail?

YES



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Chhattisgarh has been the biggest boost to the Congress but U.P. and Bihar are the real tests

The recently concluded Assembly elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are testimony to the fact that Rahul Gandhi has successfully assumed the leadership role of the Congress. Notwithstanding the memes on Twitter and derision as a no-good “Pappu”, Mr. Gandhi addressed more rallies than either Prime Minister Narendra Modi or Bharatiya Janata Party chief Amit Shah did. He also did not shy away from making direct references to Mr. Modi, who continues to enjoy high popularity ratings. Nor was there any pretence that he would shy away from taking power

and exercising it, should it come his way.

**Acting with foresight**  
The biggest boost to Mr. Gandhi’s image was the landslide victory in Chhattisgarh. The modest victories in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan were also important. To be sure, each of these three States had its own script for electioneering. And in hindsight, Mr. Gandhi seems to have acted with some foresight. In Chhattisgarh, many Congress leaders were killed by Maoists in Jiram Ghati in Bastar, just months before the Assembly elections of 2013.

Former Congress Chief Minister Ajit Jogi was a constant spoiler for the party. Yet, the Congress won. Mr. Gandhi took the difficult decision of choosing a Chief Minister and finally picked Bhupesh Baghel, an important Other Backward Classes leader who steered the party after the Maoist attack and picked up important signals of anti-incumbency against Ramman Singh. He also took the calculated risk of not entering into an alliance, which many felt would damage the party’s prospects in the State.

In Rajasthan, Mr. Gandhi placed his bets on a young Sachin Pilot, and sent him to the State as Con-

gress chief two years back. The results of the byelections in Ajmer and Alwar were a bonus. This was a difficult State given the caste politics of the dominant Jats. The Congress’s decision to adopt a pro-Hindu image in order to forestall any critique of it being called a pro-Muslim party paid off. Besides, the Rajasthan Congress does not have any tall Jat or Rajput leader of its own. Ashok Gehlot is the party’s old hand from the socially disadvantaged Mali caste. The factional battles could be seen even in the process of ticket distribution, with Jat leader Rameshwar Dudi opposing Mr. Pilot. Mr. Gandhi played his political innings well, revealing his



caste and gotra. The twitterati failed to get the better of him. People in the State were angry with the then Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje. But the spoils of victory for the party were shared with others, including with Hanuman Beniwal of the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party, who won three seats.

**Toughest of all victories**  
In Madhya Pradesh, the victory was by a narrow margin. This was the toughest of all victories. Shivraj Singh Chouhan was not an unpopular Chief Minister. By providing a slew of pro-poor welfare schemes, he governed for three terms. A tinge of Hindutva was on display when his government came up with a free pilgrimage scheme for senior

citizens. The breaking point for the BJP was farmers’ anger and the Mandsaur firings in 2017. For farmers, there was produce, but they had nowhere to sell the produce. There was no price support, especially for maize and soybean. Mr. Gandhi was present with the Mand-saur farmers, protesting against the firing. There was a tough balancing act to be done in the State, as both backward and forward castes had their own grievances. The Congress could not afford to be seen siding with either. The near-victory was achieved without a chief ministerial face.

The Congress will be tested in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which hold the key for its real comeback, and where regional parties hold sway.

NO



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The Congress has to have an agenda that is different from populism and imitation

If the Congress had received a convincing mandate in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, there would have been some justification for its grandstanding. If we add the NOTA votes to the BJP in Madhya Pradesh, the party would have won the State. The BJP’s vote share in the State was higher than the Congress’s. By scraping through in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, with a good victory in Chhattisgarh, and a humiliating setback in Telangana and Mizoram, the Congress can claim a pyrrhic victory this round, but

there is no indication that it is on the comeback trail. After the 2013 Karnataka Assembly election win, the Congress’s fortunes went downhill. The BJP was on the ascent and it appeared that the very survival of the Congress was in jeopardy. The Congress lost State after State and most of the States went to the BJP.

**The BJP is still strong**  
Now, the Congress is making tall claims that it will win the 2019 election. It is doing this to hoodwink allies and attract funds for the big bat-

tle for the Lok Sabha. The UPA was in power in two-thirds of the States in 2014 and it failed to win even 60 seats. Now it is in power in five major States. In all of them, the BJP is still very strong. So where are the Congress numbers coming from?

With its new-found glory the Congress will try to stitch together a grand alliance but no party, be it the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Telugu Desam Party, the Trinamool Congress or the Rashtriya Janata Dal, is going to concede seats to the Congress. In a grand alliance, the leader of the

pack will not have 200 seats to contest. This situation is different from 2004 and 2014, when the Congress led the pack.



**Staying the course**  
This gives a big advantage to Narendra Modi. Had the Congress been able to retain Mizoram, improve its performance in Telangana, and win big in the other two States, one could have given the party credit for revival. In defeat too, the BJP looks robust. There is no sign that Mr. Modi’s charisma has ebbed. Rather, the BJP decided to stay the course and not compete with the Congress on populism.

IT’S COMPLICATED



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Rather than setting the terms of the game, the party is following the terms dictated by others

Obituaries of the Congress proffered since 2014 have been premature; claims of its return to glory and power are courageous. The party’s three-State win has ensured a somewhat respectable assessment of its future. Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were no ordinary States. They have bipolar contests without the advantages of a multi-party competition. In erstwhile Madhya Pradesh, the BJP had strong roots dating back to the late 1960s. More recently, it had been in power for three consecutive terms in these States. The State govern-

ments were not exactly unpopular. Yet, the Congress won these States along with Rajasthan, factionalism notwithstanding. This is no mean achievement. But can this be seen as the ‘comeback’ of the party?

**What does comeback mean?**  
If comeback refers to being a major contestant, then, at least in States where the competition is between the Congress and the BJP, the Congress has surely retained the position of a key challenger. So, let us ask a question: what would involve the Congress’s comeback? It would

involve challenging the BJP in States where it is locked in a bipolar competition; emerging as the majority party in States where it was traditionally a major player; challenging the BJP nationally by playing a critical role in shaping a non-BJP political grouping; bringing sharpness to its social profile; and becoming the main architect in the discursive space of politics.

How does the Congress fare on these five criteria? It has indeed wrested Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh from the BJP. But in terms of vote share and seats won, the party has barely

passed the test. It forced a tough competition for the BJP in Gujarat, but failed to retain its own strength in Karnataka. In Telangana, the strength that it enjoyed in 2004-2014 has greatly diminished. Against such a backdrop of a truncated geographic presence, the Congress finds itself severely constrained in leading an anti-BJP coalition. The party has been making some smart and desperate moves in this direction, but in a majority of States where its coalition partners matter, it has such a pathetic presence that it is unlikely to be accepted as the anchor of a non-BJP political configuration.



More importantly, the Congress seems unable to either forge a new social coalition or ensure a more evenly distributed electoral acceptance across different social sections. It is still not getting adequate support from SCs, STs, and economically deprived sections, so it cannot call itself the party of the marginalised. Neither is it able to win the confidence of the OBCs. It is also unable to retain its base among peasant proprietary castes. This means that it is miles away from enjoying robust social support. Above all, its comeback is halted by the fact that it has very little to replace the BJP with in terms of ideas. It is confused on the question of religion and the politics of religion, it

does not have anything much to say by way of a policy discourse, and it has limited skills to capture the public imagination.

**A very narrow chance**  
In the absence of a capacity to construct a social coalition and without a defined ideology, the Congress’s chance to make a comeback remains very narrow. Parties can be said to be making a comeback when they return to old glory or have the courage and skill to redefine themselves. For now, the Congress is far away from both these possibilities. Rather than setting the terms of the political game, the party is simply following the terms dictated by others.

## SINGLE FILE

### Whims of a digital boss

The rise of app-based aggregators has been a boon for consumers but not necessarily for the workers

AKRITI BHATIA



Recently, a video of a Zomato delivery agent caught eating the food he was supposed to deliver went viral. This led to criticism, especially from middle- and upper-class consumers who questioned the accountability and monitoring mechanisms of food delivery apps and websites, which are important features of the platform or the gig economy. However, the working conditions of app-based employees are hardly discussed. In this case, given the pressure to fulfil never-ending targets to avail of certain incentives, the worker might not have found time to rest between deliveries or to have his own meal.

The rise of app-based aggregators has been a boon for consumers to access at their doorstep and with the touch of a phone a range of services including cabs, food, and retail. It also purportedly creates decently paid employment opportunities for millions of literate people. But what is the nature of employment arrangements, contracts, quality of work, security, grievance redress mechanisms and accountability in such cases?

The first “person” that app-based workers – whom the companies ironically label “partners” – must report to is the app itself, which is effectively their digital boss. This “boss” gives instructions, sets targets and provides incentives such as boosts, bonuses, star ratings and badges for the workers. It also provides disincentives in the form of fines and penalties. This “gamification” system, seen in apps such as Uber, puts insurmountable pressure on the app-driven worker, who tends to overwork even at lower pay to earn higher scores. And even if the driver or delivery “partner” aspires to be a self-employed mini-entrepreneur, it is the app companies that decide what commission rates to deduct from their earnings and what monetary incentives to give. Even the fares, prices and surges, including the locations and frequency of duty requests, are not determined by these workers. Thus, we may meaningfully ask whether this is a model of self-employment or self-exploitation.

Further, cases of technical glitches in the app, or incorrect payment or deductions from their earnings are no less than a crisis for these workers, since getting justice from these apps or from tedious helplines and zonal offices that get hundreds of complaints each day is often not feasible. Most importantly, we must ask why, in cases of accidents, to which these delivery persons and drivers are highly prone given the rush they are in, shouldn’t there be accountability and compensation, as well as job security, provided by these companies. Finally, why shouldn’t these workers be allowed to organise and unionise to exercise their right to collective bargaining? It appears that app-based companies have realised that there is a simple strategy to avoid these outcomes – keep workers busy with their next duty and block their app IDs in case of any aberration.

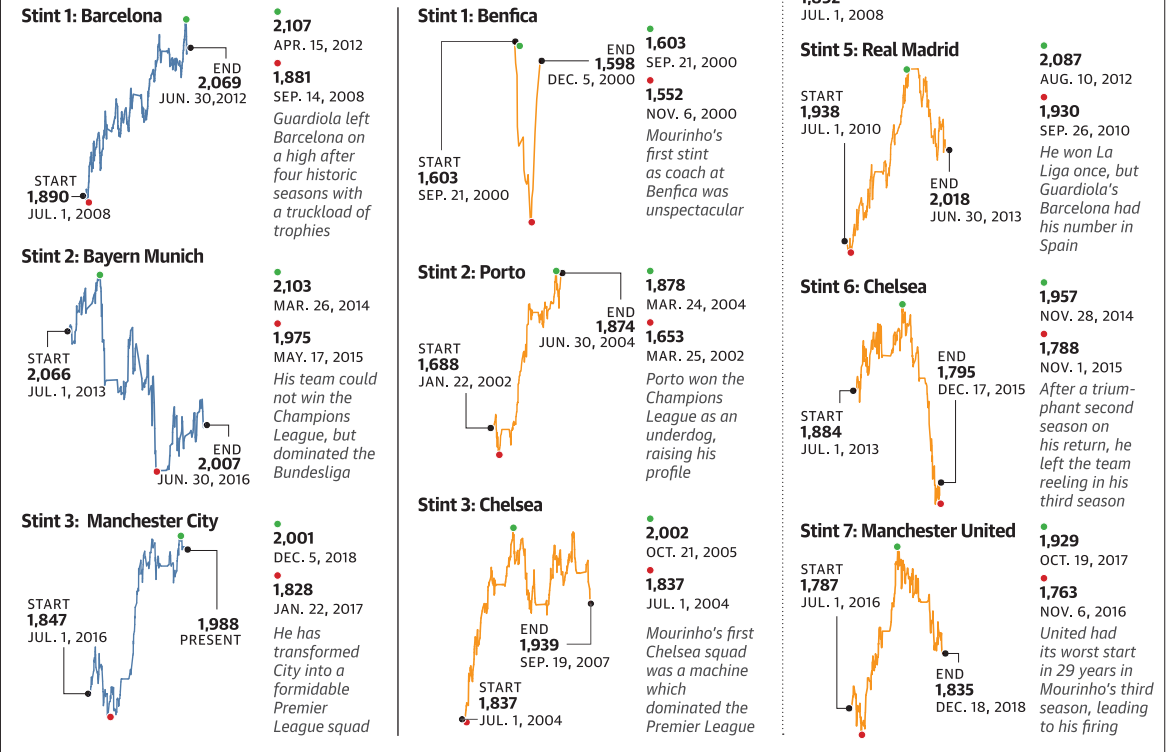
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## DATA POINT

### Coaching contrasts

Recently sacked Manchester United manager **Jose Mourinho** and incumbent Manchester City manager **Pep Guardiola** coached winning teams across three major European leagues. While Guardiola has consistently improved or helped his teams play at high levels (expressed in ELO\* ratings), Mourinho was much better in his earlier stints than his later sojourn in England. (\*) denotes peak ELO achieved (•) denotes worst. **Vignesh Radhakrishnan** analyses the numbers



With inputs from Srinivasan Ramani. Graphic by Kartthick S.T. \*ELO ratings rank football teams based on relative performance. Source: <http://clubelo.com/System>

## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 21, 1968

### Legislation against subversive activities

The Home Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan, to-day [December 20, New Delhi] said in the Lok Sabha that subversive activities in some parts of the country had been causing concern to the Government, and that he was seriously considering the question of evolving some legislation to stop this “increasing trend.” Mr. Chavan, who was replying to the demand by all sections of the House, barring the Communists, for firm action against the “Naxalite elements”, said he was anxious to have a discussion with the leaders of various political parties before taking any legislative action. He favoured a cautious approach in the matter, and said he did not want to face Parliament with a Bill which might be opposed. Members belonging to the Congress, Jan Sangh, Swatantra and P.S.P. expressed concern over the widespread appearance of Mao’s posters and portraits depicting his thoughts in several cities, and urged that this should be dealt with promptly and effectively.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 21, 1918.

### Mr. Patel’s Bill.

A meeting convened by over 40 prominent citizens of Poona belonging to all castes was held this afternoon [in Poona on December 20] in Kirlskar Theatre to accord support to the principle in Mr. Patel’s Hindu’s Inter-castes Marriage Bill. It was... confined to those who were in favour of the Bill. However it became apparent long before the time of the meeting that the oppositionists had rushed in and occupied nearly the whole theatre. Two days before handbills were circulated... by the oppositionists caricaturing the effect of inter-caste marriages and appealing to Mr. Tilak’s authority in opposition to the Bill. The arrival of conveners of the meeting like the Hon’ble Mr. Paranjpye and Mr. N.C. Kelkar was greeted with continued hisses and it became impossible even to begin the proceedings. Thereupon the meeting was declared dissolved.

## CONCEPTUAL

### Relative deprivation

#### SOCIOLOGY

This refers to a theory of social change that attributes drastic events like social and political revolutions to the desire among a group of people within society to acquire the privileges that are enjoyed by other privileged groups. In other words, social change is seen as the result of the feeling of deprivation or other forms of serious discontent experienced by a group of people. Relative deprivation could be caused by economic or other social inequalities among various social groups. It is believed that group members who were earlier dispersed may find common ground in a cause that leads them to ignore their individual interests and unite under a single cause.

## MORE ON THE WEB



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