



Last-Year Election Mood Swings: Why Voter Sentiment Changes Before Polling Day

Introduction

Election outcomes can be unpredictable, especially when voter sentiment shifts dramatically in the final year before voters head to the polls. It is not uncommon for opinion surveys conducted months in advance to project a comfortable win for the incumbent government, only for the actual election results to tell a very different story. In many democracies (such as India's five-year electoral cycle), this phenomenon has been observed repeatedly. In fact, analysts note that pre-election forecasts often diverge from final results because many voters only make up their minds in the last phase of the campaign. This "last-year mood swing" can flip an incumbent's fortunes, turning anticipated victory into defeat or vice versa. The case of Andhra Pradesh (AP) in 2024 is one stark example: polls about half a year before the election predicted the ruling party's win, yet by election day a wave of anti-incumbency swept the incumbent out. This white paper explores why public mood tends to change in the final year before an election, examining key factors behind these shifts and illustrating them with real examples. The discussion is kept accessible and humanized – focusing on clear explanations rather than complex theory – to understand how and why voters often change their tune as polling day nears.

Early Years vs. Final Stretch: The Honeymoon and the Hangover

When a new government is elected, it often enjoys a "honeymoon period" – a span of goodwill and high public support. In the first couple of years of a term, voters are generally optimistic and willing to give the ruling party a chance to deliver on its promises. During this time, the incumbent can even gain strength in local or mid-term elections. For example, midway through Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's tenure in Andhra Pradesh, his party enjoyed massive wins in local body polls – sweeping all 11 city corporations and 73 out of 75 municipalities in 2021. Such victories early on reflect how people initially rally behind the ruling party, believing that aligning local power with the state government will bring development benefits (better roads, sanitation, local infrastructure, etc.). There is a pragmatic streak to this: citizens feel the government in power can more readily fund local projects, so it makes sense to cooperate and see if promises translate into action.



However, as the term progresses into the later years, this honeymoon can fade into a hangover. The final year before an election often sees a different public mood emerging. By this time, voters have experienced the government's performance and have had ample time to observe what has (or hasn't) been achieved. The initial patience can give way to impatience or disappointment on unmet expectations. Any lingering problems – whether it's potholes not fixed, jobs not created, or corruption scandals – start to loom large. Essentially, the benefit of the doubt wanes. What was tolerated in year one or two becomes fodder for frustration in year four or five. In many cases, ruling parties face what Indians popularly call the “anti-incumbency” factor – the tendency of voters to swing against the incumbent simply because it is time for a change. By the end of a government's term, fatigue and cynicism about the status quo often set in, creating fertile ground for opposition parties to tap into public discontent.

Rising Stakes as Elections Approach

As the election draws closer, voters become increasingly aware of the high stakes involved in their decision. With just months left in the government's term, people begin to seriously consider that their next vote will shape the next five years of governance. This looming long-term impact tends to concentrate the mind. Choices that seemed acceptable a year or two earlier might be re-evaluated under the pressure of an imminent decision that can't easily be reversed for half a decade. In other words, as polling day nears, citizens often “feel the heat” – realizing that an improper voting decision now could lock in policies (good or bad) for the next five-year stretch. This can spur more cautious, critical thinking about the incumbent's track record and the promises of challengers.

Crucially, many voters do not firmly decide until the campaign's final phase, when they have all the information on hand. Surveys show that a large share of voters only finalize their choice in the weeks or days before voting. In over half of recent state elections studied in India, at least 50% of voters decided on their candidate during the campaign or at the last minute. This tendency has increased over the last decade. What this means is that a significant chunk of the electorate remains open-minded and swayable in the last year and even last weeks. Campaign events, debates, and news developments in the final stretch can therefore have a powerful impact on swinging sentiment. Voters essentially “wake up” closer to elections – weighing the incumbent's actual performance more heavily against the alternatives. Any earlier complacency or loyalty can erode once people start asking themselves, “Do we really want to continue with this government for another five years?”

The Momentum of Anti-Incumbency

One of the strongest forces driving mood change pre-election is anti-incumbency sentiment. This refers to the growing desire among the public to “throw the bums out” – effectively, to punish or replace the current rulers. In many democracies, and notably in India's states, anti-incumbency builds up over time as inevitable grievances accumulate. Every government



makes some unpopular decisions or fails to satisfy all sections of society; over years, these disillusionments stack up. By the final year, minor gripes can snowball into a general narrative that “it’s time for change.”

Multiple factors feed this anti-incumbent momentum:

- **Unkept Promises and Performance Gaps:** Voters recall the big promises made during the last election. If tangible progress is lacking – say infrastructure is still poor, or job growth is disappointing – people feel let down.
- **Scandals and Governance Fatigue:** Any corruption scandals, heavy-handed governance, or simply the arrogance of long-term power can alienate the public.
- **Economic or Daily-Life Issues:** High inflation, unemployment, or poor public services wear down goodwill. Even if a government launched popular welfare schemes, neglect of basics like infrastructure or jobs can overshadow those benefits.

By election year, these sentiments often reach a tipping point. When such undercurrents become widespread, they create a momentum that campaign freebies or last-minute promises by the ruling party struggle to counter. In essence, the longer a party stays in power, the more it risks accumulating enemies or dissatisfied voters, and this backlash tends to manifest strongly as the mandate’s renewal comes up for judgment.

When Pro-Incumbency Prevails

While anti-incumbency is common, there are notable cases where a pro-incumbency mood takes hold instead – meaning the public mood swings in favor of giving the ruling party another term. This usually happens under special circumstances, often related to the state of the opposition or exceptional performance by the incumbent:

- **Weak or Divided Opposition:** If opposition parties are in disarray – say, leadership crises, lack of unity, or a poor track record from when they were last in power – voters may stick with the incumbent for lack of a better alternative.
- **Incumbent’s Continued Popularity:** Some leaders manage to retain personal popularity through effective governance or charisma, neutralizing anti-incumbency. For example, Odisha’s Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has defied the usual anti-incumbency trend for over two decades.
- **Opposition’s Past Failures:** When the opposition party was in power previously and had a poor performance, voters remember that as well. In such cases, any nostalgia for the old regime is dampened.

In summary, pro-incumbency sentiments arise when voters perceive stability and continuity as safer than change. This is especially true if the incumbent has provided a basic level of governance and the opposition hasn’t convinced people it would do better.



Case Study: Andhra Pradesh 2024 – A Dramatic Mood Reversal

In 2024, Andhra Pradesh state elections showed how public mood can swing sharply in the final year. About six months before the vote, opinion surveys predicted Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and his YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) were poised to win re-election comfortably. For instance, an October 2023 Times Now-ETG national survey forecast a near-sweep for YSRCP. Another December 2023 ELECSense survey projected Jagan's party would win around 122 of the 175 seats.

However, as election day neared in May 2024, anti-incumbency surged. Despite large-scale welfare schemes, voters cited lack of job creation, poor infrastructure, and rising costs as major issues. There was frustration over high liquor prices, the slow pace of flagship projects like Polavaram, and the three-capitals proposal that diluted Amaravati's status. Sympathy for opposition leader Chandrababu Naidu, after his arrest, and dissatisfaction among government employees also played a role.

By the end, the opposition alliance of TDP, Jana Sena, and BJP gained momentum. They tapped into grassroots discontent and turned the polls into a referendum on Jagan's governance. The result was dramatic: the alliance won 164 out of 175 seats, while YSRCP managed only 11. The ruling party's vote share fell sharply, highlighting how pre-election surveys failed to predict the electorate's late shift.

This case shows that despite early advantages and strong welfare delivery, a ruling party can be upended by changing public sentiment, especially if the opposition mobilizes effectively and people feel their core concerns have been ignored.

About Author

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