



DK SINGH

Poll results show it's about the economy

CONGRESSMEN WHO HAD gone to Himachal Pradesh as campaigners or observers were unanimous in their feedback to the high command: that, but for the Centre's cap on subsidised LPG cylinders, the party could have romped home comfortably. The high turnout on polling day was also construed as a manifestation of the anger of housewives in the hill state.

No wonder, risking the wrath of the Election Commission, Petroleum Minister M Veerappa Moily sought to salvage the situation in Gujarat, which voted later, declaring that the cap would be raised from six to nine cylinders per household per annum. When the EC frowned, he "retracted", though the party hoped the message had gone across.

Sunday's results showed the narrative may have been different. While the cap on subsidised cylinders was never expected to be a popular decision, when Himachal voters were voting, they obviously had bigger concerns on their minds.

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Bold economic reforms entailing unpopular decisions may not be a vote-fetching plank, but anti-reforms stance does not pay electoral dividends either.

The BJP had teamed up with the Left and other opposition parties to paralyse the functioning of Parliament for days together over FDI in multi-brand retail, but it certainly did not have any impact in Himachal. Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi had opposed FDI in

retail but he never made it a poll plank. Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand, battled for FDI in retail in their election rallies in Himachal.

As the Gujarat results showed, while the Congress retains its hold in rural areas, the party is fast losing its appeal in urban and semi-urban constituencies, which were swept by Modi.

It is quite a fall for the Congress and its allies, which had swept most of the cities in the country in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections.

There is no denying the appeal of Modi's model of development among the urban middle class even outside Gujarat. The only way the grand old party can hope to wean the middle class away is to show them a better and secure future with the economy back on a high growth trajectory. The UPA may need to take some tough, unpopular decisions but as these Assembly elections have proved, they can be made palatable as long as people are convinced of the larger narrative being scripted.

Deepak is a senior assistant editor based in Delhi

dk.singh@expressindia.com