

Original Article

Delhi Assembly Election 2025: BJP's Ideological Triumph over AAP's Populism

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Abstract

The 2025 Delhi Assembly election symbolized a dramatic political shift, with the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party ending the decade-long government of the Aam Aadmi Party. While scholars have examined the electoral factors that led to the AAP's defeat and the BJP's victory, less emphasis has been placed on analyzing this shift through the lens of party ideology and its role in shaping political outcomes. Although the AAP emerged from anti-corruption campaigns and massive mobilizations in 2011–12, driven by widespread public dissatisfaction with endemic corruption, the party has found it difficult to articulate a clear and consistent ideological position. Unlike the BJP, which has maintained a relatively constant ideological foundation and organizational structure since its inception, the AAP's ideological identity has remained vague. There has been considerable debate over whether the party aligns with the left or the right, raising concerns about its long-term ideological coherence and political positioning.

This paper examines the Aam Aadmi Party's foundations in the anti-corruption movement, its influence on contemporary political discourse, and how its ideological limitations may have contributed to its recent electoral decline. It further analyzes the party's impact on electoral discourse within Delhi's party system and argues that such influence was limited in duration. On the other hand, the paper explores how the Bharatiya Janata Party's nationalist orientation and sustained organizational consolidation illustrate how a strong ideological foundation can contribute to long-term electoral success. A strong ideological base is essential for any political party seeking long-term success, as it builds trust, shapes a consistent vision, and strengthens the relationship between the party and the electorate beyond short-term populist appeals. For example, the BJP projects its ideological and developmental vision through the slogan "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas," thereby combining inclusivity with governance and long-term national commitment. As a result, the BJP is gaining trust and power in various states as well as at the central government level.

The central argument of this paper is that ideological clarity and institutional continuity remain crucial determinants of political durability in democratic electoral politics. A clearly articulated ideology provides a party with a coherent vision, guiding principles, and a stable policy direction that resonate with citizens beyond immediate electoral cycles. It enables voters to identify the party's long-term commitments and fosters deeper trust and loyalty. At the same time, institutional continuity—expressed through strong organizational structures, leadership consistency, cadre development, and sustained grassroots engagement—ensures that ideological commitments are effectively translated into governance and political practice. Together, ideological coherence and institutional stability create the foundation for enduring public support and long-term success in competitive democratic systems.

Keywords: Ideological Ambiguity; Electoral Behavior; Party Competition; Political Realignment; Contemporary Indian Politics.

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Introduction:

Political parties have been widely recognized to be naturally ideological; while short-term success or failure may differ, long-term political sustainability is dependent on ideological consistency and coherence. According to Andrew Haywood, modern 'de-ideologized' party politics in the contemporary era has seen both parties from the left and the right becoming detached from their ideological roots since they often lose their sense of purpose and direction, as politicians become increasingly desperate to engage with the visions that were foundational. (Heywood, 2017).

This study investigates the implications and ramifications of the anti-corruption movement's dilemma—whether to remain within the sphere of civil society action or to enter political politics, which eventually was chosen by some disenchanted supporters, leading to the founding of the AAP. The study investigates the AAP's political appeal and governing model in Delhi since 2013, examining the origins and progress of both the movement and the party. The party's early success raises an interesting research question: despite its rapid ascent and strong popularity among varied constituencies—including the urban middle class and the urban poor—the AAP has had difficulty with ideological clarity and stability. Its multifaceted tendencies and multi-class urban appeal, combined with the lack of a strong ideological base, call into question the long-term stability of its political position of power. On the other hand, the BJP's political dominance and success are due to its clear ideological base, robust organizational structure, and consistent long-term goal. Unlike parties with uncertain ideological orientations, the BJP has maintained electoral growth by ensuring that its ideological convictions and political approach are consistent, thereby strengthening its voter base and institutional stability (Bhattacharjee, 2013 & Roy 2014).

Background:

The anti-corruption mobilizations of 2011-12 were a watershed event in India's political history, stemming from widespread popular dissatisfaction with systematic corruption and governance failings during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. A series of highly publicized financial scandals heightened scrutiny of political institutions and strengthened the notion that corruption had become ingrained in the governmental apparatus. The widespread media coverage of these incidents exacerbated public dissatisfaction, weakened trust in the ruling

establishment, and triggered a larger crisis of governmental legitimacy. As a result, calls for openness, accountability, and clean government grew into a national movement that opposed the legitimacy of the current political order (Roy 2014).

The movement bought national attention when senior social activist Anna Hazare, a Gandhian from Maharashtra, organized a fast-unto-death in April 2011 in Jantar Mantar and then at Ramlila Maidan, demanding immediate passage of a strong Jan Lokpal Bill. This demonstration became the focal point of the larger India Against Corruption (IAC) movement, which brought together huge segments of civil society across the country. The Aam Aadmi Party grew out of this movement. Arvind Kejriwal, a prominent member of "Team Anna," was instrumental in directing the movement's momentum and popular support toward a political platform. Finally, the Aam Aadmi Party was legally established in November 2012, signalling the shift from anti-corruption agitation to legitimate political politics (Sharma, L. K., & Sharma 2019).

When the Aam Aadmi Party joined the election fray in 2013, it represented an unusual undertaking inside Indian democracy—a drive arising directly from citizen demonstrations instead of typical party structures. Unlike established political groups heavily linked to historical belief systems, AAP presented itself as a sensible choice meant for reforming the bond linking the people and the governing body. Its appeal derived not from lengthy philosophical narratives, but rather from its promise to deal with immediate and tangible city problems. The communication from the party concentrated on improving the standard of shared utilities, particularly in sectors such as schooling, medical care, power supply, water distribution, and waste removal. Through emphasizing these routine matters, AAP became known as a results-oriented and public centered force in Delhi's political sphere. Furthermore, it emphasized transparent rule by encouraging local participation and supporting straightforward dialogue among area officials and residents (Roy 2014, Diwakar 2016). This governmental method sought to combine grassroots action with administration, offering a picture of straightforward management, responsibility, and transparency in its functions. The initial successes of the party suggested that a distinct method of urban political interaction—grounded in citizen matters instead of standard belief structures—possessed the capability to temporarily shift the voting landscape (Sohail & Raazia 2015).

This political moment has largely been analysed in a limited manner—either as a mass mobilization against the Congress-led regime or as

the origin of the Aam Aadmi Party as an alternative political formation. While these interpretations are valid to some extent, they overlook another significant development unfolding during the same period: the steady political consolidation of the BJP. The party's long-term ideological groundwork, which had begun with movements such as the Ram Mandir campaign, continued to reshape the broader political landscape. In the aftermath of the Anna Hazare movement, while AAP emerged as a regional alternative in Delhi, the BJP expanded its appeal at the national level by positioning itself as the principal proponent of a nationalist ideology. Thus, the anti-corruption movement did not merely give birth to a new party; it also coincided with, and arguably facilitated, a broader realignment in Indian politics in which the BJP strengthened its claim as the primary national alternative (Gopal Jayal, 2016).

From Movement to Ruling Party: A Comparative Performance Analysis of AAP

As previously stated, the India Against Corruption movement inspired the formation of the Aam Aadmi Party. As a result, the objective of this study is to examine the transition from a social movement to a ruling government in Delhi, the national capital. It investigates the factors and strategies that lead to its early political success, despite the lack of a well-established ideological underpinning.

The AAP's debut into electoral politics in 2013 marked a historical episode for contemporary Indian politics, with a movement-based formation directly confronting traditional party institutions. After the anti-corruption mobilizations, the party quickly moved from street protests to the ballot box, contesting the Delhi Legislative Assembly elections within a year of its formation. Contrary to forecasts, the AAP won 28 of 70 seats and almost 30% of the vote, emerging as the second-largest party in a hung legislature. Despite the BJP emerged as the single largest party and was widely regarded as voters' first electoral option, it failed to gain the necessary numbers to establish the government (Roy 2014, Diwakar 2016). In this setting, AAP, which is frequently lauded as a transformational alternative in mainstream academic discourse despite having a weak ideological basis, grasped the opportunity to gain power. Accepting external support from the Congress Party against which it launched its movement, the AAP prioritized governmental acceptance over ideological stability. This move exposed a fundamental disconnect between its anti-establishment moral stance and political practicality. Kejriwal's appointment as Chief

Minister marked the movement's entry into state power, but the government's collapse within 49 days revealed the structural fragility of a party lacking strong ideological and institutional cohesion (Mohan & Saqib, 2025).

The 2015 Delhi Assembly election highlighted AAP's spectacular political resurgence. Following the collapse of its 49-day government, the party revised its strategy to reestablish public trust. The campaign focused on the theme "Paanch Saal Kejriwal" (Five Years of Kejriwal), which was a direct plea for stability and continuity. By publicly apologizing for retiring prematurely in 2014, Arvind Kejriwal turned a perceived failure into a story of humility and accountability, reconnecting with disillusioned voters. This well-crafted political discourse, along with a focus on governance and service delivery, connected effectively with voters. The outcome was unprecedented: the AAP won 67 out of 70 seats, delivering one of the most decisive mandates in Delhi's electoral history. The magnitude of this triumph demonstrated the party's capacity to reestablish trust and rally support across class and community divides (The Hindu, 2025).

In her paper titled 'Being the Change', Srirupa Roy has thrown light on the entire process of party-building in which AAP offered so many enthusiastic individuals with spaces and opportunities to partake in this moment of political hope and stake a claim to have been part of something historic. (Roy, 2014) This moment offered a new lease of life to many who were disillusioned with established political parties and the government of the day. The AAP offered them an opportunity to start anew, akin to starting from a clean slate; a state of 'tabula rasa'. The anti-establishment character and claims of being an 'outsider' were a huge draw and attracted people across classes. After the remarkable performance of the party in the 2015 Assembly Elections in Delhi in which the party won 67 seats, Ravi Kumar attributed the 'lack of history' as one of the reasons for their victory. (Kumar, 2015).

Within this growing trajectory and developing political discourse, the AAP gradually expanded its participation beyond the bounds of Delhi, attempting to establish itself in the larger national electoral arena. The party's greatest crucial achievement took place in 2022, when it won 92 of 117 Legislative Assembly seats in Punjab, establishing its first full-fledged government outside of the National Capital Territory. In the same election cycle, AAP had a small but symbolic presence in other states, obtaining five seats in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly and two in the Goa Legislative Assembly. These accumulated successes not only solidified the party's organizational

expansion, but also resulted in its official recognition as a “national party” (The Hindu, 2025).

However, while electorally dominant, this era raised the core question of this study: whether the AAP's massive victory was the result of long-term ideological consolidation or primarily driven by strategic, issue-based mobilization. Furthermore, the party's reliance on individual populism, particularly Arvind Kejriwal's personal appeal and public persona, was essential in molding voter impressions and consolidating its election successes. Manash Bhattacharjee compares Kejriwal's political approach to Rousseau's social contract theory and to his idea of popular sovereignty, which asserts the sovereignty of the people above parliament. He continues on to discuss the similarities between the two movements. According to him, Jayaprakash Narayan's 1970s movement was the most well-known example of popular sovereignty. He portrays the situation as similar: unrestricted corruption in Congress, rising inflation, and sharp price increases in basic items. JP succeeded in bringing the populist mood to the streets. Despite crackdowns and arrests during Indira Gandhi's frantic declaration of Emergency, the JP movement-turned-party won the 1977 general election. (Bhattacharjee, 2013, Heywood, 2017).

The advent of the AAP dramatically changed the political landscape of Indian democracy, providing as a shining example of alternative, anti-establishment politics. However, the party's recent result in the 2025 Delhi Assembly election poses a significant question: why did AAP stumble despite its long-standing political agenda and previous electoral dominance? The answer lies in the importance of ideology in maintaining long-term political stability. Unlike the AAP, which has frequently relied on populist techniques and issue-based mobilization, the BJP, despite not always being in power in Delhi, has maintained a constant ideological framework that has resonated with the people. Over time, this ideological consistency helped to solidify the party's support base, giving it long-term political power and endurance.

BJP's Ideological Base versus AAP's Populist Appeal: Lessons from the 2025 Delhi Assembly Election

The 2025 Delhi Assembly Election highlighted that Indian politics has evolved beyond regional rivalry, to become a contest of ideologies in which governance record, public perception, and strategic alliances play critical roles. Opposition parties that refuse to recognize this fact are unlikely to recover their election losses. Traditionally, both the AAP and Congress have depended on welfare

programs and subsidy-based policies to gain voter support. In contrast, the BJP has proved that combining a strong ideological base with targeted social programs and a development-oriented governance approach resonates more well with voters (Verma 2015 & The Hindu, 2025).

To appreciate the significance of an ideological foundation in achieving political success, we must first explore the BJP's origins. The party's ideology is profoundly grounded in cultural nationalism, and its idea of *Rashtra* (nation) is central to its political objectives. Unlike organizations that develop quickly from a single movement, such as the AAP, the BJP has grown its organizational power over decades by drawing on long-term nationalist initiatives, such as the Ram Mandir mobilization. Its vision goes beyond short-term political benefits, incorporating a consistent right-wing, nationalist framework that informs both its programs and political approach. This long-standing intellectual and organizational foundation has allowed the BJP to consolidate its support over numerous political cycles and social sectors (Shani 2021).

The period of 2013–14 was largely dominated by the Anna Hazare movement and the romanticization of AAP's politics, often overlooking a broader shift in Indian politics: the growing mass support for the BJP and its ideological vision. This support went beyond mere electoral preference, reflecting both ideological alignment and an emotional connection with the party's nationalist agenda. During this time, the BJP not only consolidated its presence at the central level but also began translating its ideological appeal into widespread support across state elections.

The 2025 Delhi Assembly election is a stark example of the issues created by populist, movement-based parties such as the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and it presents critical questions for political analysts. While the AAP remained in power for a long time, its electoral performance has forced historians to examine the limits of romanticized populism: such parties may achieve short-term success, but long-term political domination necessitates a strong intellectual underpinning. Some commentators suggest that the AAP's approach is similar to left-wing economic populism, since it combines generous budgetary allocations with a significant emphasis on education, health, water, electricity, and other municipal amenities in Delhi's predominantly urban and multicultural environment. Others attempt to situate the party along the traditional left-right ideological spectrum (Biju 2015).

A recent article in *The Hindu* described the AAP's electoral strategy as “a hybrid of left-leaning

economic measures and right-leaning cultural signalling.” The party’s lack of persistent ideological coherence, as well as its ability to shift positions depending on the political context, have made it difficult for scholars to classify it within the classic left-right divide. In a 2020 interview with The Wire’s senior editor, AAP’s social media strategist stated unequivocally that the party does not want to be limited by a single philosophy, and that its solutions to public issues might come from anywhere on the political spectrum. This strategic ideological flexibility demonstrates the party’s dedication to pragmatic government, but it also raises concerns about the viability of a political model based on populism rather than a strong ideological framework (Menon and Nigam 2011, Wire 2020 & The Hindu, 2025).

Niraja Gopal Jayal has termed this assessment as mistaken and contended that nothing is completely innocent of ideology and nobody without a political program can be taken seriously as a serious contender for running the government. (Gopal Jayal, 2016) The AAP’s lack of clear ideology and criticism of the both the Congress as well as BJP depending on their own political and electoral considerations has led to them being a political force restricted to Delhi. But this paper highlights due to unclear ideology AAP have also failed in Delhi. But on the other hand, from its origin ideological foundation BJP won this election due to anti-incumbency and corruption allegations against AAP leadership and most importantly unclear ideological stand.

In a significant political shift, the BJP returned to power in Delhi after more than 26 years, securing 48 out of 70 seats in the Assembly elections held on February 8, 2025. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) managed to retain only 22 seats, reflecting a substantial decline in its electoral support, while the Congress failed to win any seat for the third consecutive term. This outcome underscores a realignment in Delhi’s political landscape, highlighting the BJP’s consolidation of voter support, arguably rooted in its ideological appeal, and signalling the limits of AAP’s populist strategy in sustaining long-term dominance (Hindu 2025).

Conclusion:

An important lesson on the function of ideology, populism, and electoral strategy in Indian politics can be learned from the 2025 Delhi Assembly election. The Aam Aadmi Party’s absence of a cohesive ideological framework hindered its long-term political viability, even as its populist appeal and issue-based mobilization brought about short-term success. The BJP’s resounding win, on the other hand, is indicative of the benefits of

sustained ideological unity, organizational strength, and unified cultural-nationalist rhetoric. The election shows that although populist tactics might yield short-term victories, a consistent ideological framework that establishes legitimacy, encourages voter loyalty, and supports long-term governance is necessary for India to maintain political dominance. Thus, Delhi 2025 emphasizes the importance of ideology in maintaining political power.

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