

## Congress suffers in Punjab, Uttarakhand

The Congress party Tuesday faced prospects of being voted out in Punjab and Uttarakhand as millions of votes cast in three assembly elections this month began to be counted.

The only consolation for the Congress came from Manipur where it had a slight lead despite a strong challenge from the Manipur People's Party (MPP) in the insurgency-hit state.

The Akali Dal-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combine was celebrating in Punjab as counting of votes from the Feb 13 electoral battle put it well ahead in nearly 70 of the total 117 seats.

Although most Congress leaders, including Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, were poised to win from their respective constituencies, the party was in a bad shape, taking the lead in just 34 seats.

A beaming Akali Dal leader Sukhbir Singh Badal predicted a victory for his party and said his father and veteran politician Parkash Singh Badal would be the new chief minister of the state.

'The (new) chief minister will be my father,' Badal junior said in Chandigarh, as the electronic voting machines began to be decoded from 8 a.m.

Cricketer-turned politician Navjot Singh Sidhu of BJP also took a comfortable lead over his rival and Punjab Finance Minister Surinder Singla of the Congress from the Amritsar Lok Sabha seat, which too saw a by-election.

Although keeping in tune with most predictions, the Congress was seriously disappointed in Uttarakhand where early voting trends showed it could manage to hang on to power before the BJP started to reverse the trend.

By 10 a.m., BJP candidates were on the winning track in 30 of the total 70 seats leaving the Congress behind in 13 seats. Smaller parties made gains in 10 seats.

But if there is a hung assembly in Uttarakhand, smaller parties could end up playing a crucial role.

In Manipur, the Congress was ahead of everyone else but election officials predicted the politically instable state would see another hung legislature that could lead to a coalition government.

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