



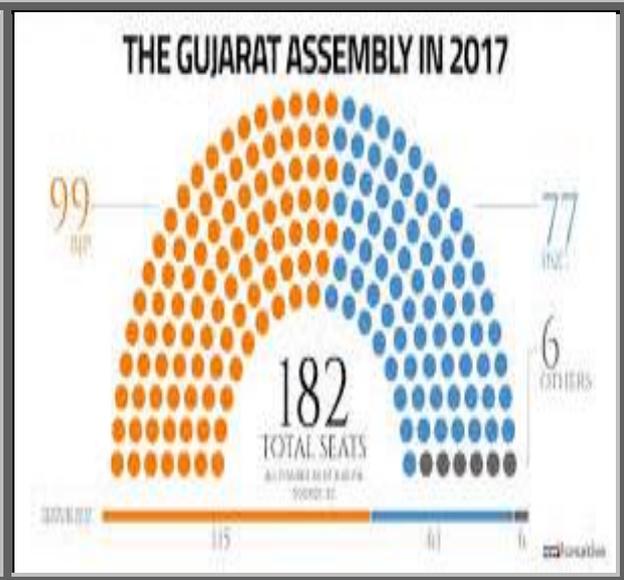
GUJARAT STATE ELECTIONS DECEMBER 2017: BJP DOMINANCE DIMINISHED

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The BJP continued its political dominance in Gujarat in the recently concluded state assembly elections, winning 99 out of the 182 seats. The much awaited and aggressively campaigned-for elections held in two phases on December 9 and 12, 2017 showcased the BJP-Congress rivalry for several weeks, and were seen as providing indicators for how upcoming state and national elections would unfold in India over the coming months and years.

These were after all in a state that has for over two decades been a BJP stronghold, and where Prime Minister Modi had spent several years as Chief Minister, in what has become a memorable time, both for the apparent and assumed economic development under him – popularly coined as ‘Modinomics’ – and for allegations of state-led pogroms against Muslims. Any major dent in BJP dominance would then have meant that Congress had made significant inroads, and point to the negative electoral effects of the (mostly economic) policies of the current BJP government. The result of the elections eventually showed both a continued BJP dominance as Gujarat remains a BJP state, but also a revival of the Congress that may be indicative of the backlash the BJP government is likely to face over the coming months.

The elections saw an average of 68.41 percent polling in the two-phase process. And after winning 99 of the 182 seats, the BJP is expected to form a government in Gujarat, though with a much reduced majority from the previous elections as the Congress also managed to win 77 seats, in what

is its best result for several years.¹ With the importance of Gujarat, and the focus of the election campaigns in the state, BJP's victory in the parallel elections in Himachal Pradesh has been somewhat sidelined. This is despite the drastic reduction in Congress seats in the state, where the "Hindutva card" of BJP has apparently not had the ramifications that it did in Gujarat.²

While the election victory margin in Gujarat has been thinner than the BJP hoped – and indeed expected – some also see it as being a morale booster to the party in other regions during a time that has seen infighting and divisions as a result of the GST and monetization policies of the government that have had adverse effects on public opinion. Gujarat shows that these negative effects can and have been overcome in elections – albeit with some trepidation – and for states with similar reasons of potential voter unrest, Gujarat offers good signs for the party and indicates how elections can be won in troubling times by offering unified party front to the people.³

For its part, the Congress too has claimed moral victory and sought to find positives in the way the voting occurred in Gujarat, where for many party insiders results have been better than expected. They have expressed confidence and derisively undermined the BJP victory, with one Congress party leader in Gujarat calling it a "temporary and face-saving win...[that is] a moral defeat for BJP."⁴ Indeed, the Congress rhetoric after elections has been to highlight the negative attitude and campaigning of the BJP in the prior weeks, and to laud the Congress for its response. In a Twitter message, for instance, newly elected President of the party, Rahul Gandhi wrote: "My Congress brothers and sisters, you have made me very proud. You are different than those you fought because you fought anger with dignity. You have demonstrated to everyone that the Congress's great strength is its decency and courage."⁵

Congress rhetoric and public expressions of satisfaction are not without reason. This was the best result in Gujarat for the party for over two decades, and thus it is not surprising that party leaders

¹ "Gujarat Assembly election results: Counting ends as BJP closes out Gujarat with 99 seats; Congress claims 77," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/live-updates-2017-gujarat-legislative-assembly-election-results/article21830220.ece?homepage=true>

² Harish K. Thakur, "Analysis: how BJP got back Himachal Pradesh," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/himachal-pradesh-2017/analysis-bjp-reinstated-in-himachal-pradesh/article21832055.ece?homepage=true>

³ Satish Kumar, "In troubled times, Gujarat victory is a morale booster for BJP's Karnataka unit," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/in-troubled-times-gujarat-victory-is-a-morale-booster-for-bjp-state-unit/article21871335.ece>

⁴ Sobhana K Nair, "Opposition spots chinks in BJP armour," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/myth-of-bjps-invincibility-stands-busted/article21855631.ece?homepage=true>

⁵ Sandeep Phukan, "Rahul Gandhi thanks workers who 'fought anger with dignity'," *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/congress-accepts-peoples-verdict-fought-anger-with-dignity-says-rahul/article21832758.ece?homepage=true>

are keen on portraying it as a moral victory for themselves. As P. Chidambaram noted categorically: “There is an electoral victory and there is a political victory. Need I say who is the political victor in Gujarat? Congress has returned a morale-boosting performance in Gujarat....”⁶

Indeed, independent analysts have also urged BJP to be more cautious and warned that the party will face tougher tests in the near future since a diminished majority in a decades-old BJP bastion demonstrates that all is not well. For instance, Samarth Bansal and Roshan Kishore have assessed that the elections in Gujarat were a more closely contested election than the numbers show. This is since the category of “None of the above (NOTA) has polled more votes than the victory margin in 30 assembly constituencies” and this option was only introduced in 2013, and has been in BJP’s favor in 2017. Moreover, almost half of the seats have been decided with a margin of under 10% votes, which shows significant support to the Congress even where it “lost” the election. For the future of the state (and the country), this is important also since this is a much greater proportion of seats won with such a narrow margin compared to past election cycles. However, they also note that it is rural areas where this competition has been much hotly contested since urban areas have largely been loyal to the BJP.⁷

Thus, post-election analyses, while highlighting the Congress revival of sorts in Gujarat, are also quick to note that there are still attributes that the BJP retains that have ensured its success despite overwhelming opposition from multiple stakeholders for its economic policies over the past eighteen months. The question then asked is why Gujarat voted the way it did, bringing the BJP to power once again, albeit with a diminished majority. One argument for this is the “Modi factor” as the Prime Minister’s “blistering campaign” in every district in his home state and the heated rhetoric that it accompanied, played a crucial role in firmly establishing the BJP as the party to beat in these elections as well, in spite of its economic policies and in the face of vigorous Congress rallying.⁸ Moreover, even though the Congress gained significant support of the Patidars, the BJP had the favor of urban areas, and its retention of Gujarat was also the result of the party’s organizational structure during its campaign.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Samarth Bansal and Roshan Kishore, “Gujarat election results: Make no mistake, the contest in Modi’s home state was really close,” *Hindustan Times*, December 19, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/gujarat-election-results-make-no-mistake-the-assembly-polls-were-really-close/story-VPSM0BYXNzmTWMktIKsP5K.html>

⁸ Nistula Hebbar, “Analysis: why Gujarat voted the way it did,” *The Hindu*, December 18, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/analysis-gujarat-assembly-election-results-why-gujarat-voted-the-way-it-did/article21831625.ece?homepage=true>

⁹ Ibid.

Indeed, even before the elections, the organizational model of the BJP had already been highly praised for its visibility, technology, outreach and message. As one analyst had noted, this was a “highly centralized military-corporate machine [with]... space for only one message — Prime Minister Narendra Modi.”¹⁰ Clearly, this was a model that resonated with people, especially since the Prime Minister has become a larger than life figure in his own state, if not in other parts of the country. Getting together sleek media teams, grassroots activists and blustering corporate-like entities that ran the BJP campaign was compared to the Congress which was said to be “tied to its past organizational traditions, even as it has added a smart phone and a laptop to its overall capacity.”¹¹ This is, of course, not to say that there was no criticism or disadvantage to the expensive, channeled and narrow discourse of the BJP campaign – but as the results of the elections show, overall this was money well spent. It remains to be seen if it is more ominous a victory than BJP celebrations currently seem to show. There are both warning signs and lessons to be learnt from Gujarat in 2017 for Lok Sabha elections in 2019 for the BJP. A history of dominance and the aura of Modi in his home state have led to a sort of victory that has caused significant encouragement to political opponents, and these factors are unlikely to be translated in other parts of the country. On the other hand, adverse effects of BJP’s economic policies, party infighting, and Congress success in reaching out to groups such as the Patidars who have been disillusioned by the BJP, all of which have been evidenced in Gujarat in recent months, will be highlighted throughout the coming year as both parties gear themselves for campaigning for the 2019 general elections.

¹⁰ Rajesh Mahapatra, “Gujarat elections 2017: A tale of two organisational models in Indian politics,” *Hindustan Times*, December 15, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/gujarat-elections-2017-a-tale-of-two-organisational-models-in-indian-politics/story-4EdN1sn7dgWFBorTBI5q4N.html>

¹¹ Ibid.