

### UTTAR PRADESH LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION: WHAT DO THE RESULTS MEAN FOR CASTE POLITICS AND HINDUTVA?

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



On 10 February 2022, residents of Uttar Pradesh started to go to the polls in seven phases, with the results eventually being declared on 10 March 2022. Being India's most populous state, the elections of the legislative assembly are always followed very closely and considered to be a great barometer for analysts who are looking to gauge public sentiments in the lead up to the next national elections. In the Lok Sabha, Uttar Pradesh holds the largest share of seats as the state sends 80 parliamentarians to the assembly. This year's election was deemed to be crucial due to the state and center's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it would also be a referendum for the firebrand Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, who is also the Chief Priest of the Gorakhnath Math. Generally, anti-incumbency sentiments are strong in Uttar Pradesh, and this was another challenge for the ruling BJP.

## The Results

<b>Uttar Pradesh Result Status</b>			
Status Known For 403 out of 403 Constituencies			
<b>Party</b>	<b>Won</b>	<b>Leading</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Apna Dal (Soneylal)</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Bahujan Samaj Party</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Bharatiya Janata Party</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>Indian National Congress</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Jansatta Dal Loktantrik</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Rashtriya Lok Dal</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Samajwadi Party</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>403</b>

**Source:** Election Commission of India, "Uttar Pradesh Result Status", March 2022.

<https://results.eci.gov.in/ResultAcGenMar2022/partywiseresult-S24.htm?st=S24>

In the results that were announced in March, the Bharatiya Janata Party emerged as the largest party by securing 255 seats out of a total of 403 seats.<sup>1</sup> They were followed by the Samajwadi Party (SP) who managed to win 111 seats. Overall, the BJP did far better than what was expected, given the criticism that Yogi Adityanath's government had received regarding unemployment within the state and its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it secured 57 fewer seats than it had in the 2017 polls. SP performed extremely well when compared to its 2017 tally as it picked up 64 more seats than it had in the previous elections.<sup>2</sup> While one may assume that the BJP is losing ground in the state, that is not the case. In fact, the party received a greater share of the popular vote than it had in 2017. SP's remarkable performance can also be measured by the fact that it received a 10.24% swing, taking its vote share to 32.06%, as compared to the BJP's share of 41.29%. While most pre-election polls were fairly accurate when predicting the estimated vote share of parties, the BJP managed to pick up more seats than it had been projected to win. These results are a byproduct of the bipolarity that is emerging in the state, with two parties, one national and one regional, becoming the heavyweights in Uttar Pradesh. Even though SP had contested the previous polls under the umbrella of an alliance with the Bahujan Samaj Party, this time they had relied on

<sup>1</sup> "General Election to Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result March-2022," Election Commission of India, <https://results.eci.gov.in/ResultAcGenMar2022/partywiseresult-S24.htm?st=S24>.

<sup>2</sup> "UP Election 2017 Results: Narendra Modi Leads BJP's Landslide Win after 14 Years - Assembly Elections 2017 News," March 11, 2017, <https://www.indiatoday.in/assembly-elections-2017/story/uttar-pradesh-election-results-narendra-modi-bjp-965221-2017-03-11>.

smaller parties. Furthermore, the BJP's success is down to the fact that they had a high-level of seat retention and its own strategic alliance with local-level political parties.

The results were extremely damning for the Indian National Congress and the BSP, with the former winning a mere two seats and the latter being reduced to a single seat.<sup>3</sup> While Congress' poor performance was expected given the malaise that has impacted the party nationally, BSP's collapse is indicative of the massive shift in Uttar Pradesh's politics. The party had won a majority of seats in 2007, but it seems as if it cannot be resurrected under its current leadership. Given the structural shifts that can be witnessed in Uttar Pradesh's politics this year, it is important to consider some of the factors that have led to these changes.

### Caste Politics

The rise of the BSP and SP in the 1990s and early 2000s can be attributed to the post-Mandal Commission settlement in India, which led to a more prominent status for OBCs (Other Backward Classes).<sup>4</sup> These castes are not considered to be untouchables but have still faced discrimination historically. Given the increase in reservations for OBC candidates in Indian politics, this had changed the state's political landscape dramatically. In the 1990s, these changes had given prominence to castes such as the Yadavs in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. However, OBC solidarity has been declining as many non-Yadav classes have been flocking to the BJP.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the BSP had emerged as a party of Dalits that attributed its success to forging alliances with upper-caste Hindus and the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh. However, over the last few elections, non-dominant Dalit groups have crossed over to the BJP, in a revolt against the dominance of the Jatavs in Dalit politics.<sup>6</sup>

These changes do not mean that caste politics has been eradicated in Uttar Pradesh, as suggested by CM Adityanath in his victory speech.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the BJP has inverted the model used by the SP and BSP. It has increased the overall numbers of upper caste MLAs by forming a wider coalition. In fact, the BJP has the most diverse set of parliamentarians, with the only exception being a lack of representation for religious minorities.

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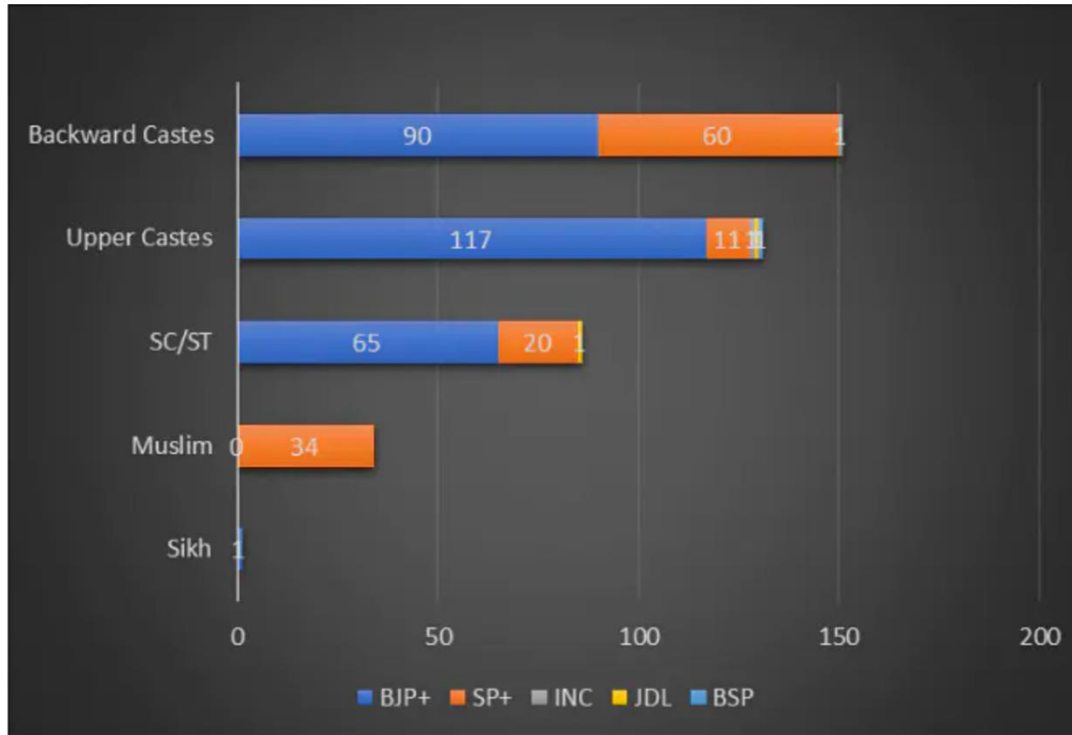
<sup>3</sup> "General Election to Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result March-2022."

<sup>4</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India*, Comparative Politics and International Studies Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), xvi

<sup>5</sup> Gilles Verniers and Christophe Jaffrelot, "Mandal vs Kamandal Redux? Caste Is Back as a Major Variable in UP Elections," *The Wire*, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://thewire.in/politics/uttar-pradesh-elections-caste-bjp>.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Verniers, "How the Collapse of the BSP Marks the End of an Old Model of Politics in Uttar Pradesh," *Text, Scroll.in* (<https://scroll.in>, May 16, 2022), <https://scroll.in/article/1023637/how-the-collapse-of-the-bsp-marks-the-end-of-an-old-model-of-politics-in-uttar-pradesh>.

<sup>7</sup> "People Buried Politics of Caste, Religion: Yogi Adityanath on BJP's UP Victory," *The Tribune India*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/people-buried-politics-of-caste-religion-yogi-adityanath-on-bjps-up-victory-376725>.



**Source:** Arvind Kumar, “BJP has the most diversified representation”, ThePrint.in. March 13, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/bjp-has-the-most-diversified-representation-see-caste-composition-of-new-up-assembly/870693/>

### The Politics of Hindutva

Given the substandard performance of the Yogi Adityanath government in matters related to the economy, it chose to prioritize issues of a communal nature. The BJP attacked the SP for being a party that appeases Muslims and uses the religion card. Given the level of religious polarization in the state, this line of attack has been effective in curtailing the SP from attracting upper-caste voters. Yogi Adityanath’s pre-election rhetoric of the polls being a contest between the “80 and 20 percent” highlights how anti-Muslim sentiments were used to energize the core base of the BJP.<sup>8</sup> Measures such as the adoption of a controversial “anti-conversion” bill and cow “protection” measures have increased the profile of Yogi Adityanath in the eyes of hardcore Hindutva fanatics.<sup>9</sup> However, the emphasis on Hindutva has also helped the BJP to advance its strategy regarding caste-alliances. By showcasing how Muslims now occupy the lowest rung in society, it has an easier job in attracting Dalit voters towards its agenda.

<sup>8</sup> Manish Chandra Pandey, “UP Polls: Yogi Repeats 80 per Cent vs 20 per Cent Remark Ahead of Final Phase Voting - Hindustan Times,” Hindustan Times, March 5, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-election/up-polls-yogi-repeats-80-per-cent-vs-20-per-cent-remark-ahead-of-final-phase-voting-101646491951932.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Rhea Mogul et al., “An Election in India’s Most Populous State Pits Covid-19 Anger against Hindu Nationalism,” CNN, March 9, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/09/india/uttar-pradesh-election-india-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>.

## BJP and its Populism

The Bharatiya Janata Party's victory cannot be only attributed to the politics of Hindutva and strategic caste-based alliances. In order to counter anti-incumbency, the state government relied on welfare schemes to ensure that it remains popular with the voters. Endeavors such as the distribution of LNG cylinders, minimum income support to farmers and COVID relief cash grants have allowed the state to tactically engage with voters.<sup>10</sup> This allows the BJP to supplement its nationalist ideology with notions of developmentalism. These welfare schemes have been successful in attracting voters for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a sense of synchronicity between the central and state government as far as the execution of these plans is concerned. The center can divert key funding to the state for programs such as the PM Housing Scheme. Secondly, the Uttar Pradesh government has managed to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles as far as access to welfare schemes is concerned, especially with the aid of information technology.<sup>11</sup> The digitization of welfare payments helps reduce the need to go through institutional intermediaries.

The Samajwadi Party campaigned on a platform of job creation and upliftment of the state's farmers.<sup>12</sup> Akhilesh Yadav, The President of the party, promised to introduce minimum support prices for farmers and to introduce a 33% reservation for women in government jobs.<sup>13</sup> While SP made gains in this election, they could not challenge the BJP due to a weak communications strategy and by initiating their campaign at a very late stage.<sup>14</sup> In particular, SP's manifesto did little to address law and order, an issue that they had been weak on while in government.

## Conclusion

The BJP's success in Uttar Pradesh can be attributed to a three-pronged approach that merges welfarism with nationalist and caste-based politics. Not only has the BJP tactically formed prudent alliances with other groups, but it has also successfully adopted the model of a "tactically-extended

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<sup>10</sup> Hilal Ahmed, "BJP's Electoral Victories Are a Result of a New Kind of Welfarism," *The Indian Express*, March 14, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bjps-electoral-victories-are-a-result-of-a-new-kind-of-welfarism-uttar-pradesh-7818327/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ambar Kumar Ghosh and Niranjana Sahoo, "Uttar Pradesh Elections: Will Welfarism Triumph over the Identity Politics?," Observer Research Foundation, March 7, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/uttar-pradesh-elections/>.

<sup>12</sup> "UP Polls: Samajwadi Party Promises 33% Reservation to Women in Govt Jobs, Sops for Farmers," *India Today*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-2022/story/up-polls-samajwadi-party-promises-33-reservation-to-women-in-govt-jobs-sops-for-farmers-1910506-2022-02-08>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Arvind Kumar, "Why Akhilesh Yadav Could Not Defeat Yogi despite Signs of Anti-Incumbency," *ThePrint* (blog), March 11, 2022, <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-akhilesh-yadav-could-not-defeat-yogi-despite-signs-of-anti-incumbency/868644/>.

state". The party has been able to utilize populist programs in a tactical manner by addressing the concerns of specific social groups, rather than relying on holistic approaches to development.<sup>15</sup> Not only has the state used its welfare mechanisms and alliances to attract Dalit and OBC voters, but by denigrating the Muslim vote bank, it has managed to cement a social order. In this new hierarchy, Muslims are seen as the weakest section of society and are blamed for holding back collective development of society.

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<sup>15</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *I Am the People: Reflections on Popular Sovereignty Today*, Ruth Benedict Book Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 73-80.