

Factors behind the Spectacular Success of BJP in UP Assembly Elections

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Abstract

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has created history by winning a consecutive election in Uttar Pradesh at the end of a five-year term. An analysis of the caste-wise voice preference data from the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey points to a story of continuity as far as the BJP's base concerned. The BJP has also achieved some major gains from unexpected quarters. The SP also improved its performance among communities except the upper castes, but this was clearly not enough to defeat the BJP.

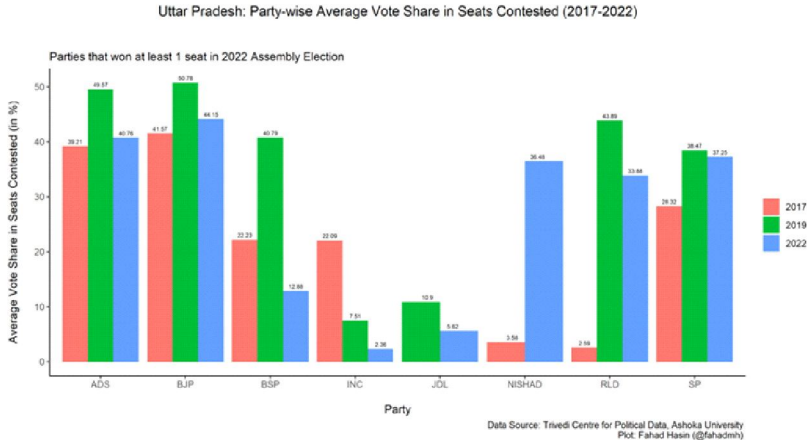
Key Words-*Bharatiya Janata Party, Uttar Pradesh, India*

Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP) has created history by winning a consecutive election in Uttar Pradesh at the end of a five-year term, something that only Sampurnanand, the state's second chief minister of Indian National Congress, succeeded to do in 1957. It has also made Yogi Adityanath the first chief minister in 37 years to win a consecutive majority in the state. The wide social coalition that the BJP crafted and honed in U.P. during national and State election. An analysis of the caste-wise voice preference data from the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey points to a story of continuity as far as the BJP's base concerned. "The BJP has also achieved some major gains from unexpected quarters. The SP also improved its performance among communities except the upper castes, but this was clearly not enough to defeat the BJP".¹

There has been a lot of commentary and analysis on the supposed performance of parties and what they could have done better. This research paper takes a broader view and looks at some plain data-based trends that has emerged from the Assembly election results, and how the parties fare in comparison with previous results.

It is clear from the outcome that there was a bipolar competition between BJP and SP. One can easily get the clear insights from the vote share of the main parties as has been shown in the Figure 1:



The first conclusion emerging from the BJP’s victory itself. The victory becomes more impressive as it also increased its vote share, from 39.7% to 41.3%. The relative decline of seats – 255 against 312 in 2017 – comes from the fact that the Samajwadi Party did well in a bipolar election. There is a slight drop in BJP’s vote share as compared to 2019. It is noteworthy that the vote share of the party has actually gone slightly up from the previous assembly election despite the incumbency. “The BJP managed to not only consolidate its traditionally staunch upper caste base even further, netting over four-fifths support from the Brahmins, Thakurs and Vaishyas, but also held on rather successfully to its relatively recently cultivated support base on non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBC’s). This critical segments that constitutes two-fifths of U.P.’s electorate was widely expected to move away from the BJP in significant measure due to the SP’s alliance with smaller caste-based parties”³

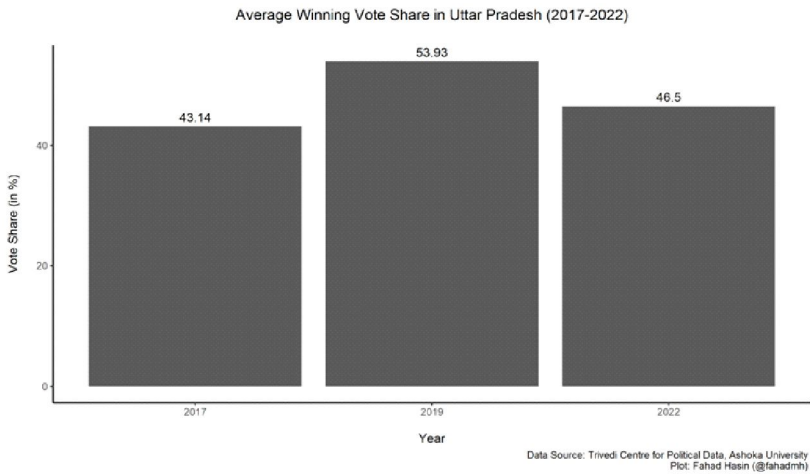
The another major take away from the election results is, the Samajwadi Party (SP) has been able to significantly increase its vote share from the last assembly election. Note that the party fought the 2019 general elections in alliance with Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). This time it fought mostly alone, barring alliances with smaller parties in some seats. Hence, the SP has made significant improvement compared to its performance

in the last assembly election, which included the Indian National Congress (INC) in the alliance as well. The Samajwadi Party scored its highest vote share ever (32%) but could not convert the votes into as many seats as it had hoped. The SP failed to break the social coalitions that have enabled the BJP to now win four consecutive elections in Uttar Pradesh. “The post-poll data suggest that the BJP actually ending up gaining more support from these constituencies, except the Rajbhars. Among the Maurya-Khushwaha-Koeri communities for instance, the party increased its vote share from 56% to 64% . Major gains for the BJP also came from Gaderias and Kumhars. The only non-Yadav OBC community where the BJP appears to have lost some support is that to have lost some support is that of the Mallahs. Lokniti’s survey finds that the BJP lost support to the tune of 11 percentage points among the Mallahs. Nonetheless, the BJP was still way ahead of the SP among the non-Yadav OBC’s securing over three-fifths of their votes.”⁴

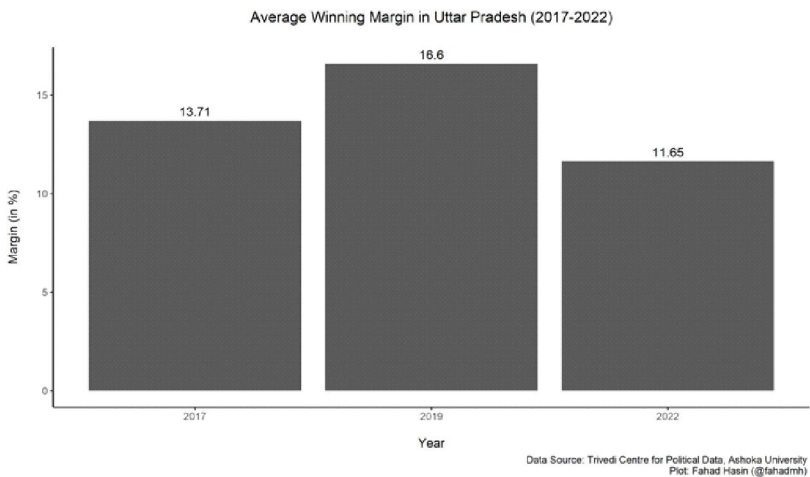
The two losers of this election are the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Congress. The BSP collapsed at 12.9% of total vote share, its worst performance since 1993, when it was still a nascent party. The decline of the BSP in recent elections has been nothing short of spectacular. Its loss of vote share has been gradual since it peaked in 2007 but greatly accelerated this year. The consequences in terms of seats are disastrous. In 2007, the BSP obtained a single majority of seats with 30% of the votes. It is now reduced to a single seat, despite having received 12.9% of the votes. The BJP made some very significant gains among the Dalit: Jatavs non-Jatavs. It won over two-fifths of the support of non-Jatavs Dalits as opposed to one-thirds last time. It made some of its most impressive inroads among Jatav Dalits, the community that has stood by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) through thick and thin in the past, securing 21% or nearly a fifth of their votes, more than double of 2017. The BJP’s vote share among Jatavs came down drastically from 87% to just 65%. Among non-Jatavs, which had already started moving away from the party since the last few elections, the BSP’s vote share reduced considerably too. This indicates that the BSP is facing an existential threat. Interestingly, this time around, it was the SP that gained far more from this BSP decline among non-Jatavs Dalits than the BJP. But it wasn’t sufficient.⁵

The terminal decline of Indian National Congress continued in this election also. Now it is in no position to play any role in Uttar Pradesh in coming general elections, until a miracle takes place. In the 2019 general election, two of the three key players – SP and BSP – had formed an alliance, making it a bipolar contest between the alliance and BJP.

As a result, the average vote share required to win was very high in this election. This time, despite the SP, BSP and INC fighting separately, the average winning vote share is higher from the last assembly election. Figure 2 illustrates it clearly:



At the same time, the average winning margin is much lower as compared to earlier elections. Taken together, all of this indicates the bipolarity of the contest in 2022 election, with SP and BJP emerging as the only meaningful players. Figure 3:



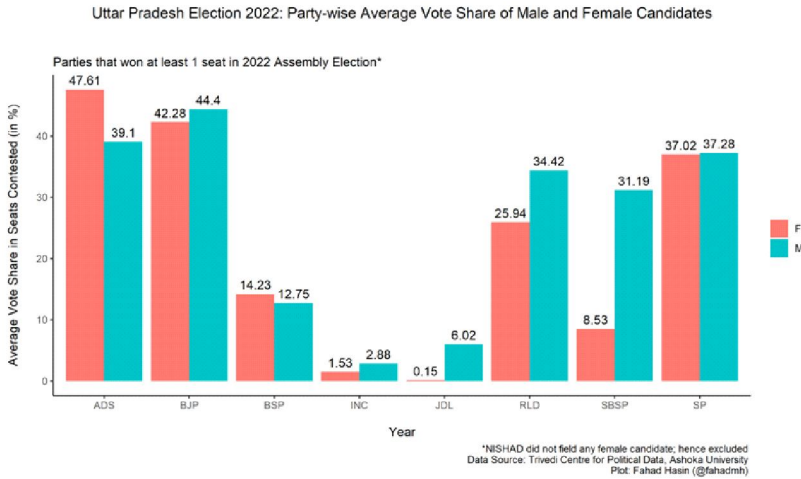
On average, the BJP's candidates won with the highest margins, almost double that of its primary opponent SP. Even for the two and one seat(s) that INC and BSP won respectively, they did it with very low margins. This shows the clear and decisive advantage that the BJP holds over others in the state.

Performance of female candidates

As with most recent elections, there has been a lot of discussion over the role of female voters but little about the female candidates. The representation of women in law-making at both the Union and states is abysmally low. The key reason for it is that parties usually refuse to give tickets to women candidates, citing issues of 'winnability'. A party-wise breakdown for this election shows that the performance of male and female candidates is very similar for two main players, SP and BJP. The gaps are higher for RLD, JDL and SBSP, likely because of idiosyncratic factors in the small number of seats they contested. Female candidates within AD(S) and BSP performed better than their male counterparts. Overall, only Women representation, finally, went up modestly, from 42 to 47 MLAs. The Congress party's 'Ladki Hoon, Lad Sakti Hoon' campaign failed to produce any significant impact on electoral outcome. The campaign also couldn't inspire other parties who did not by and large make more space for women contestants. As a result, while the overall number of women candidates progresses, under the effect of the Congress decision to field 155 women, the overall number of women in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly does not increase by much. In the name of 'winnability', political parties continue to deny the women their due in the Indian politics.

The BJP did not offer more tickets to women than in 2017, while both SP and BSP did increase their number of women contestants marginally. The failure of the Congress campaign of inclusion should not, however, be derided as a farce. Bringing so many women to contest was a meaningful project that we can only hope to see other parties imitating. Many of the women who contested on a Congress ticket had prior political experience, in local elected bodies or party organisations. The experience of running for office will certainly help some of these candidates to pursue some form of involvement in public life, which is needed. 285 out of 1,620 candidates (18%) from main parties were female.

Figure 4:



“Going by the performance of female candidates in some recent elections in the state, concerns about the so-called ‘lower winnability’ of female candidates seem mostly unfounded. Female candidates from main parties performed almost the same as their male counterparts in 2017 and 2019. The drastic decrease in the vote share of female candidates in this election is primarily because most of them (54%) belonged to INC, which performed poorly overall. If INC is excluded from the analysis, the average vote shares for male and female candidates from main parties are 30.65% and 31.83% respectively for this election. As parties set a high bar for giving tickets to women, there could be some selection bias here. It is, however, also counterbalanced by the phenomenon wherein parties field women candidates as a token gesture in constituencies they are anyway weak (and likely to lose). Hence, our analysis of the 2022 poll data should make parties more confident in giving a much higher share of tickets to women candidates going ahead in the state. The trajectories of parties’ vote share since 1993 indicate the magnitude of transformation of the state’s politics. The BJP has crossed the 40% bar in a state election for the first time of its history. It is hard to remember that before 2017, the BJP was, in fact, on the decline. Few parties have succeeded to gain as many votes in such a short period of time as the BJP has done.¹⁰

The Samajwadi Party too made its best performance, at 32%. Ten years ago, it would have obtained a comfortable majority in the assembly with such a vote share. But the days of low vote share single majorities are for the time being over, with the BJP having raised the winning

threshold in Uttar Pradesh drastically. By virtue of alliances, the BJP and the SP did not contest every seat – the BJP contested 376 out of 403 and SP contested 347. Vote share in seats contested is a better measure of a party's performance, even though one must assume that their partners did contribute in some way to boost their performance. BJP vote share thus increases to 44.2%, against 37.3% for SP. The first-past-the-post system continues, as always, to produce a disproportionate allocation of seats. The BJP seat share went from 77.4% to 63.3%, while SP's seat share increased from 11.7% to 27.5% in 2022. Both the BSP and the Congress have been completely laminated, reduced to one and two seats, respectively.

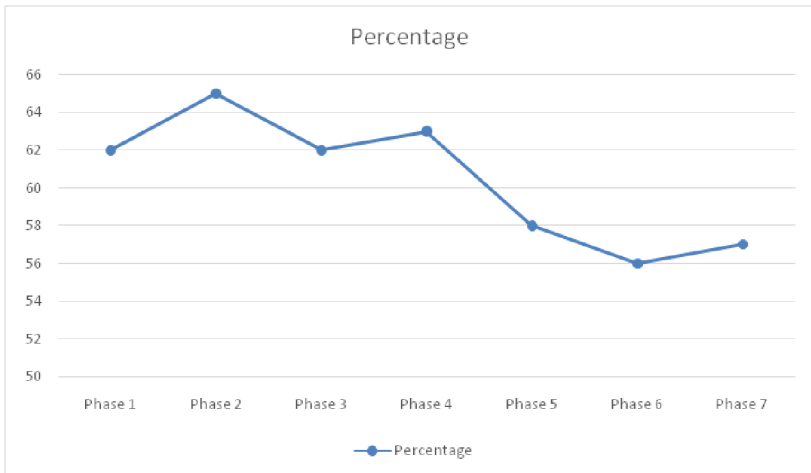
Region wise Analysis

The region-wise analysis of the results speaks volume. Going from west to east, we can identify clusters that give us clues about parties' performance. In western Uttar Pradesh, there is an RLD cluster in and around Muzaffarnagar. The constituencies of Shamli, Thana Bhawan, Budhana, Siwalkhas and Chaprauli are all seats containing a sizeable Jat population, directly involved in the farmers' movement. These areas have also been most affected by communal violence since the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013. The SP won the seats of Kairana, Sardhana and Charthawal and Saharanpur, the former stronghold of Rasheed Masood, who passed away in 2020. This shows that the SP-RLD alliance worked and that the farmers' movement did prepare the ground for change. But as expected, it remained a local phenomenon. The RLD remains a local party that did not have much to offer to the SP in the rest of the state.

The second SP cluster is located in Rohilkhand, in and around the Rampur area, stronghold of Azam Khan, who won a 10th term in the Vidhan Sabha (while contesting from jail). Seats like Noorpur, Kanth, Suar Tanda have some of the highest proportion of Muslim voters in Uttar Pradesh. The Muslims make 31% of the population of that entire sub-region. The consolidation of Muslims' votes behind the SP helped the alliance to get a 44% strike rate in that region, its second highest after eastern Uttar Pradesh.¹¹

The third cluster is located in lower Doab, around the traditional Yadav belt SP strongholds of Jaswant Nagar, Karhal, Bidhuna, where members of the Yadav family usually contest. The BJP's Jayveer Singh, however, won the seat of Mainpuri, another Yadav stronghold, which the SP had won in 2012 and 2017.

We finally move eastward towards the regions where the SP made its greatest inroads in this election. The SP has bagged 26 of the 61 seats of eastern Uttar Pradesh and 22 of the 52 seats of the North East. Its seats are clusters around Azamgarh, while BJP seats are clusters around Gorakhpur. This is also the area where SP's partner, the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, has won its six seats. To understand how the SP made inroads in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the 2019 election, assembly segments, give us a clue. Most of the seats the SP swept in that region correspond to assembly segments in which the BSP led 2019. One can, therefore, assume that many BSP voters shifted their vote towards SP, at any rate in greater proportion than that for the BJP. In 2019, the BSP also did well in the North-western tip of the state, in the Saharanpur and Bijnor area. The BSP votes is likely to have split more evenly between SP-RLD and BJP candidates, compared to the East. In 2017, the SP seats were completely scattered around the map. Clusters were formed in 2019, even though the BJP still swept that election. These clusters grew further in 2022, to the benefit of the Samajwadi Party. This means that while the BJP's appeal tends to be transversal to the state's geography, the SP appeal remained more localised. The SP will have for the future to think more about specific sub-regional strategies to hope to break the BJP's dominance in central Uttar Pradesh, lower Doab and Bundelkhand.

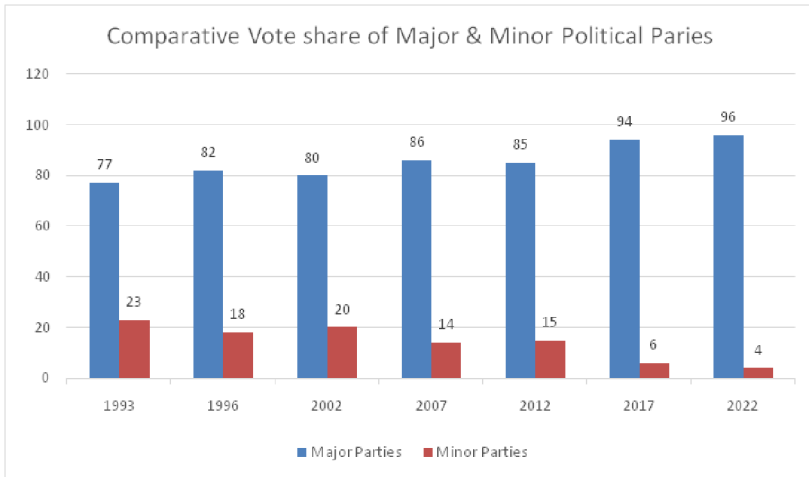


The Voter participation phase-wise-figure:5

A strong measure of BJP's performance is the number of seats they have retained. Traditionally, half of Uttar Pradesh's sitting MLAs lose their seat, leading to a great transfer of seats between parties. This

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year, 274 seats did not change hands, 232 alone held by BJP. This is a high rate of seat retention that supports the idea that the BJP did consolidate its previous gains, rather than win and lose many seats.

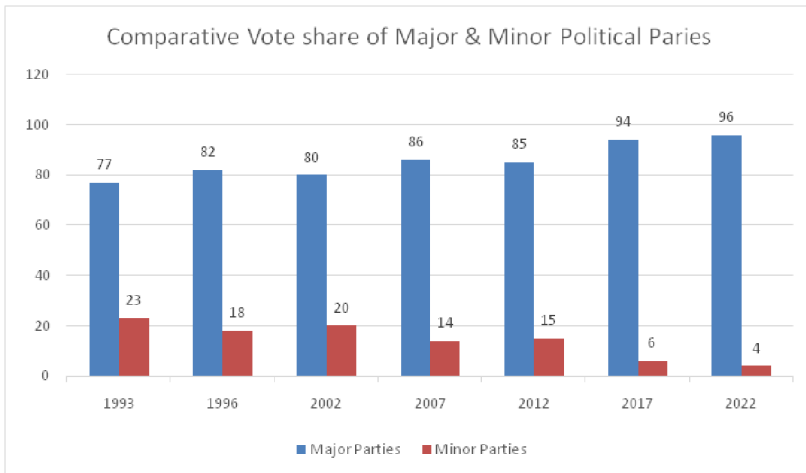


The voter participation remained essentially the same in 2022, from 60% five years ago to 60.7% this year. A phase-wise breakdown of seat-level participation data shows that participation went down as the election moved eastward. In the first phase the voting percentage was more than the average that is 62%, in Second phase it was highest 65%, in third phase it was 62%, in the fourth it marginally increased to 63%, in the fifth the voter turnout was lowered to 58%, while in the sixth phase it was lowest 56%, and in the last seventh phase it could only rise up to 57%. This is not a new phenomenon. Past elections have shown that voter turnout is generally lower in eastern Uttar Pradesh. There are several possible explanations for it. Western Uttar Pradesh and Rohilkhand are intensely competitive sub-regions, producing much political churning. General political trends tend to be somewhat more stable in the East, where we find a greater resilience of old patterns of social and political dominance from traditional elites. Greater competition can induce more participation.

Candidates and parties contesting

For the first time since 1985, the total number of parties contesting the Uttar Pradesh election is not higher than in the previous election: 289 parties contested in 2022. The number of parties represented in the assembly – nine – is also the lowest since 1985, again. What explains that chasm is the fact that voters in Uttar Pradesh are not willing to

waste their votes on candidates or parties that stand no chance of winning. In 2017, a stunning 94% of all votes went to one of the four major parties contesting, and their allies. Five years later, that number increases to 95%. As elections in Uttar Pradesh become more bipolar, there is also lesser space for small parties to enter politics effectively. This phenomenon accounts why a party like the All India *Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen*, or AIMIM, could assemble vast crowds in its rallies, but could not convert that audience into supporters at the polling booth. The cumulative vote share of political parties in UP show the growing preference for large parties, which are National or State level. From 1993 onwards this trend is quite obvious. In 1993 77% voters preferred large political parties, in 1996 this percentage grew to 82%, in 2002 it was around 80%, in 2007 it grew to 86%, in 2012 it remained almost same that is 85%, in the year 2017 it jumped to 94% and in 2022 it kept its upward trend by climbing to 96%. Figure:6



The number of first-time MLAs in the Uttar Pradesh assembly (211) is the lowest it has been since 1977. That is still a short majority of all legislators. This is again induced by the fact that the BJP won a consecutive election and retain much of its seats won in 2017. In the year 1977 a total of 318 first time MLAs were elected out of 425 seats which is 75% of the total, this number came down to just 52% in the year 2022 that is 211 out of 403 Assembly constituencies.

Another positive outcome of the UP elections is the rejection of turncoats by voters. Turncoats are another popular fixture of Uttar Pradesh elections. In 2022, 206 candidates ran on a different party affiliations. For all the talk about the role of defectors in this election, the number

of turncoats in 2022 was the lowest it has been in Uttar Pradesh since 1977. Their performance has also been one of the poorest, as barely one of five defectors managed to win. The Samajwadi Party fielded the largest number of turncoats (59). Only 19 of them won. All BSP turncoats lost, by virtue of all BSP candidates having lost (except one first-time candidate). Sixteen of the 28 turncoats fielded by the BJP won, which is not a high proportion, given the overall BJP strike rate in this election.

The Minority Representation Grows

Thirty-four Muslims have been elected to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly, 10 more than five years ago. When we look at major parties, we find that SP, BSP and Congress together did increase the number of tickets given to Muslims candidates over the past two elections. “In 2022, the BSP gave 16% of its tickets to Muslim candidates, against 13% for the SP and 10% for the Congress. All 34 Muslims MLAs have been elected on tickets given by the Samajwadi Party or one of its ally. Like in 2017, the BJP did not give a single ticket to a Muslim. The representation of Muslims within the Samajwadi Party increased, but it should be reminded that Muslims get higher representation when there are at least two major parties providing them some space. The collapse of the BSP did not simply lead to a transfer of Muslim representation to the SP. More Muslims would have been elected had the BSP remained in the race”.¹²

Conclusion

This dive into the details of this elections’ results lead us to make three observations. First, these results are indicative not only of the bipolarisation of the party system, but of the deep polarisation that divides Uttar Pradesh society. The Samajwadi Party performed best in areas that contain the largest share of its core support base – the Yadavas in Lower Doab, Muslims in Rohilkhand. Eastern Uttar Pradesh offers a more complex setting which requires more investigation. But the outcome in Western Uttar Pradesh was also geographically specific, and marked by caste-based and communal polarisation. The consolidation of the Muslim vote behind the SP is an indicator of deepening polarisation too. Second, the features of BJP’s performance indicate a consolidation of its previous victories. It is a major feat for any party to not lose ground, particularly in a state particularly affected by mass poverty, economic distress, unemployment and a general lack of future prospects for its enormous youth population. Of course, there

have been plenty of factors that have worked in favour of the BJP. Publicity around its welfare schemes like 'Direct Benefit Transfer Scheme, Ujjwala yojana, PM Awas yojana, Kisan Samman Nidhi and of course the centrality of Ayodhya Temple Construction, competitive communal politics and a mix of resources, decisive leadership of PM Narendra Modi and CM Yogi. The strong and omnipresent organisation of BJP have all contributed to this re-election. The simple caste arithmetic of 1990s is no longer working in 21st century UP politics. Writing my research paper based on the analysis general election 2019 results, especially in Uttar Pradesh, my paper highlighted the outcome as "A beginning of the end of Casteism", the electoral success of BJP again in 2022 Assembly elections with a thumping majority, proves the point. 13.

And finally, the Samajwadi Party can find some comfort in defeat by having scored its best performance. It also has a lot going on for them: leadership, a strong core social base, organisational capacity and a focus on issues rather than constant denigration of its adversary. The cycle party has less than a year to think about how build its appeal beyond its core support base. That is the key for turning the 2024 Uttar Pradesh election into a real challenge.

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