

How Eastern U.P. Voted? A Case of Gorakhpur District in the Assembly Polls of 2022

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Abstract

Uttar Pradesh, being the largest state in the Indian union, has significant electoral ramifications for the rest of the country. Contributing 80 seats to the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament of India), it definitely plays an important role in the electoral calculus for forming the union government. The Vidhan Sabha (state assembly) elections too are in some way an indicator of popular mood, though there has not always been convergence between popular mandate for Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections. The present paper analyses this dichotomy relating to the electoral verdict in the 2022 Assembly elections by taking the case study of Gorakhpur district in eastern U.P. The paper begins by giving a historical/factual account of political/electoral dynamics of the Gorakhpur district thereby looking at voting behavior in the past and 2022 Vidhan Sabha Elections. It then addresses some of the major issues that dominated polls in the 2022 elections, finally trying to trace some general patterns on whether Gorakhpur division was any different from the other major electoral districts and politically whether it could be a trendsetter for U.P./national politics in future.

Keywords: Gorakhpur district, Indian elections, Uttar Pradesh, UP Elections 2022

Introduction

Uttar Pradesh is undoubtedly the most significant state in India from electoral perspective, providing 80 seats to the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament, constituting 16.89 percent of India's total population and 16.57 percent of total electorate.¹ Its combined electoral strength is of a sub-continental size equivalent to that of major west European countries taken together. In many ways therefore electoral politics in U.P. defines the nature and character of elections in the

whole of India, given the diversity of the electorate in terms of gender, caste, religion and demographic profile. Of the total electorate in UP in 2022, men constitute 8.10 crore, women 7.01 crore and third gender 8.8 thousand constituting the total electoral strength of 15.12 crore.²

The state of U.P. has witnessed 18 elections to the state assembly so far, 5 of them after a separate state was carved out of it as Uttarakhand in 2000. In the first four decades of U.P.'s tryst with assembly elections, the electoral trend was by and large in tune with the national trend, with the Congress party and its constituents holding sway over the elections. The change in this trend started in 1990s in the context of post mandal-masjid politics and increasing coalitional party politics, keeping up with the national trend. This era is also regarded as era of unstable coalitions as there was frequent change of governments between 1996-2002. This often was seen as a direct outcome of competitive politics based on ethnic mobilization, pursuit of populist schemes disregarding the fiscal position of the state and one party overdoing the other in a bid to retain power and finally a lack of ideological commitment in practice in contrast to the ideals espoused during electoral politics.³

In the 2000s, there has been a further fragmentation of electorate which broke the symmetry between the caste, candidates and parties as it became incumbent on political parties to give due representation across various caste groups.⁴ Effectively speaking, the domination of the Congress for nearly four decades after independence which thrived on specific upper caste, muslim and dalit votes was broken by the emergence of the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with often a realignment of votes along caste lines, till a more powerful consolidation by BJP along religious identity started taking place post 2014 Parliamentary elections. It has not been very surprising therefore that the 2017 and the 2022 assembly elections have seen a comprehensive consolidation of votes in favour of the 'Hindutva' plank of the BJP across caste lines which saw the total voting percentage of the party go up in the assembly from 15 percent in 2012 to 41.29 percent in 2022 (Table 1). The following table from Assembly elections 2007 to 2022 illustrates the voter shift across three major political players the BSP, the SP and the BJP fairly well.

Table 1: Voter Shift across Political Spectrum in U.P. Assembly elections 2007-22 (403 Assembly segments)

Political Party	BSP	SP	BJP
2007 Assembly Elections Total Seats contested	403	393	350
Total Seats won	206	97	51
Percentage of total votes	30.43	25.43	16.97
2012 Assembly elections Total Seats contested	403	401	398
Total Seats won	80	224	47
Percentage of total votes	25.91	29.13	15
2017 Assembly Elections Total Seats contested	403	311	384
Total Seats won	19	47	312
Percentage of Total votes	22.23	21.82	39.67
2022 Assembly Elections Total Seats contested	401	347	376
Total Seats won	1	111	255
Percentage of Total votes	12.88	32.06	41.29

Figures in bold depict the winning party position

Source: Adapted from Election Commission of India Database for 2007,2012,2017,2022

<https://eci.gov.in/files/file/14185-uttar-pradesh-general-legislative-election-2022/>

The above table shows the trend of electoral shift in U.P. politics during the last two decades very clearly. While in the first decade the electoral calculus focused around the B.S.P and the S.P. with smaller parties playing a negligible role and the B.J.P emerging as the third major electoral competitor, the situation completely transformed from 2017 onwards with a drastic increase not only in the number of seats won by the B.J.P. but also the voting percentage. It is also interesting to note that the B.S.P and the Indian National Congress were completely

decimated in the 2022 elections with each just managing 1 seat in the 403 strong legislative assembly. There is a clear indication therefore that the B.J.P, once considered to be the repository of a few urban, upper caste votes, now holds sway also over significant backward and dalit votes.

It is also interesting to juxtapose this figure alongwith the Lok Sabha polls held during 2004-2019

Table 2: Voter Shift across Political Spectrum in U.P. Lok Sabha elections 2009-2019 (80 Lok Sabha seats)

Political Party	BSP	SP	BJP	
Political Parties	BSP	SP	BJP	Congress
Total Seats won 2009	20	23	10	21
Percentage of Votes 2009	27.42	23.26	17.5	18.25
Total Seats won 2014	0	5	71	2
Percentage of Votes 2014	19.77	22.35	42.66	7.53
Total Seats won 2019	10	5	62	1
Percentage of Votes 2019	19.43	18.11	49.98	6.36

Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India data base by the author

While during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, there was a relatively equitable spread of seats won between the BSP, SP and the Congress, with BJP in the fourth place and having the least voting share, the 2014 and 2019 elections put the latter in the top gear with 71 and 62 seats respectively and the voting percentage rising from 42.66 percent to a staggering 49.98 percent. Thus the shift towards the BJP in both the assembly as well as Lok Sabha elections has been pretty decisive in U.P.

Gorakhpur District: A Brief Profile

Gorakhpur district, located in the eastern part of U.P., often known as Poorvanchal is part of the larger agrarian belt of the Indo Gangetic plain. Over the years, with a lack of industrial development and employment generation coupled with diminishing returns in the agricultural sector, the high population district has also seen a lot of out migration to cities like Delhi, Mumbai and the rest of the states.

Though the poorvanchal by and large constitutes the backward districts of the state, Gorakhpur, by virtue of it being the leading town and associated industrial, infrastructural and cultural/religious facilities fares better than the other adjoining districts of the region such as Ballia, Jaunpur, Ghazipur to name a few. Gorakhpur happens to be the headquarters of the North Eastern Railway, which makes it a hub of passenger and freight train connectivity in the region. It also has from the perspective of spiritual/cultural/religious point of view the seat of Sant Goraknath located at Gorakhnath Temple, which attracts millions of pilgrims every year. Besides, it also has the historic 'Gita Press' which is credited with popularizing the Hindu spiritual and religious texts for the masses, about to complete hundred years of its formation in 2023.⁵

A close look at the socio-economic data of the district too confirms its position as a 'upper-middle-level' district with its human development indicators giving it an above middle rank among the 70 districts of the state with an HDI rank of 28 in 2005 and 25 in 2011. However, in terms of human development index (HDI) for the year 2011, it has been classified as low ranked with 0.529. Further, while the district fares well in education (25th rank) and health (25th rank), the standard of living index is low (48th rank).⁶ It is also significant to note that the district has overall literacy rate of 70.83 percent.⁷ This background is important for us to understand the general profile of the constituency and then to relate to the electoral landscape as it evolved during the last couple of decades, leading finally to the elections of 2022 in the final segment of the paper.

Electoral politics and political dynamics in Gorakhpur

Gorakhpur district has two Parliamentary Constituencies: Gorakhpur and Bansgaon and nine Assembly constituencies consisting of Campierganj, Pipraich, Gorakhpur Urban, Gorakhpur Rural, Sahjanwa, Khajni, Chauri Chaura, Bansgaon and Chillupur. Political dynamics in Gorakhpur and electoral politics in general in the post independence period has by and large fitted within the larger narrative of politics in the politics of the Hindi heartland, with slight variations. The broader framework of politics in the district/region has been summarized in the following four broad (often overlapping and intersecting) phases:⁸

- a) The phase of Congress domination in the post Independence period: This was the phase when the Congress ruled the Centre and the state for nearly four decades after independence and all the permutations and combinations across the region were

decided by decisions percolating down from a hierarchical party structure from top. At the local level, consolidation of votes took place on the basis of trusted upper caste, muslim and dalit vote. The only exception in this regard was the Gorakhpur parliamentary seat for which more will be elaborated later.

- b) The rise of caste based politics: Caste has always been an important factor in India's politics.⁹ People have always shown a greater inclination to vote for a candidate of their caste, who in turn is nominated by the party keeping in mind the broader caste calculus in the constituency. Gorakhpur has been no exception to this, more visibly in the post Mandal period since the 1990s when SP and BSP became major contenders for power in U.P. It is interesting to note here that the ticket allocation many a times cuts across the caste permutations, often seeing the winnability of the candidate.
- c) Phase of Politics-Gangster nexus: Crime and politics is another recurrent theme in Indian politics, where mafia dons with money and muscle-power have often dominated the political landscape.¹⁰ There is a two way-mutually sustaining relationship between the two. Politicians need the mafia to bolster their financial and muscular base and the mafia needs the political class for extending state patronage and protection. Gorakhpur became known for such a nexus pretty early on account of mafia politics that emerged from the sixties, due to lucrative railway contracts, extortions, bribery over government jobs etc. The infamous gangster rivalry between Harishankar Tewari¹¹ and Virendra Shahi¹² was also termed as caste rivalry between Brahmins and Thakurs in the region implying that caste and criminality in politics intersected in Gorakhpur in a significant way.
- d) The rise of Hindu Right or Hindutva politics: The emergence of hindutva politics (the politics that is shaped by assertion of the hindu faith) which is the dominant political narrative in India today, is very much in tune with the politics that was played out by the Gorakhnath Math and its presiding mahants who steered the hindutva agenda at different points of time, both shaped and got shaped by the national hindutva discourse and many a times caused a flutter with state level right wing party politics. From Mahant Digvijaynath, who is seen as the prime mover of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement since the 1940s and his perceived association with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, to his successor Mahant Avaidyanath, often known as the moderate

face of the movement who ironically saw the turning point of the dispute with demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and finally with Yogi Adityanath, founder of the Hindu Yuva Vahini in 2002, who is known for his most vitriolic and firebrand politics of hindutva taking over as Chief Minister in 2017, the centrality of Gorakhpur in U.P.s politics has come a full circle.¹³Yogi Adityanath's re-election in 2022 however has put electoral politics in Gorakhpur in fresh limelight. The historic mandate that he got by being the first chief minister in U.P. to get re-elected and whether it has the potential to shape not just U.P.'s but also India's politics in future have become interesting areas of exploration for political analysts. We discuss the 2022 elections in the following segment.

Gorakhpur Assembly Elections 2022: The verdict, the message and future

The U.P. assembly elections 2022 were contested by ruling B.J.P. against the heavy odds of a Chief Minister never being able to retain his seat, giving the impression that anti incumbency had always been the norm rather than exception in the state. India's largest state therefore would always keep the ruling party and the sitting chief minister on tenterhooks as they would try to come up with new slogans and explanations of the work they did. This time however, the narrative of the ruling BJP at a manifest level focused around the Chief Minister and the work that he did on bringing in honest governance, containing lawlessness in one of India's most crime prone state, containing the spillover of communal tension during Anti CAA protests, managing the Covid infrastructure and logistics within the huge state and promoting infrastructural and investment opportunities in the state.¹⁴ With visible evidence of an improved law and order in the state and significant thrust on industrial and infrastructural push, coupled with the consolidation of the hindu vote being a major factor as admitted by the C.M himself in an interview to a T.V channel ¹⁵, the BJP won a majority in the 2022 assembly elections with 255 seats, 57 less than the 2017 figure of 312, but increased its vote share to 41.69 percent from 32.67 percent.

Table 3 helps us in analyzing these trends in a greater detail comparing the 2022 results across party lines in terms of party which won and the victory margin as percentage of total votes polled. An increase in victory margin indicates the expansion of the vote base of the party. The following inferences can be clearly drawn looking at these figures:

**Table 3: Performance of winning Party in Gorakhpur Division
Assembly Segments 2007-20022**

Year	2007		2012		2017		2022	
	Winning Party	Victory Margin as percentage of total votes	Winning Party	Victory Margin as percentage of total votes	Winning Party	Victory Margin as percentage of total votes	Winning Party	Victory Margin as percentage of total votes
Campierganj			NCP	4.56	BJP	15.16	BJP	19.09
Pipraich	BSP	6.91	SP	17.82	BJP	5.21	BJP	25.39
Gorakhpur Urban*	BJP	24.66	BJP	28.76	BJP	27.75	BJP	41.41
Gorakhpur Rural*	BJP	24.66	BJP	9.04	BJP	1.87	BJP	9.47
Sahjanwa	IND	2.26	BSP	7.05	BJP	7.34	BJP	19.47
Khajni +	N.A.	N.A.	BJP	5.72	BJP	10.69	BJP	18.79
Chauri Chaura +	N.A.	N.A.	BSP	12.14	BJP	23.57	BJP	20.08
Bansgaon	BSP	1.90	BSP	5.54	BJP	12.79	BJP	17.25
Chillupur	BSP	5.50	BSP	5.57	BSP	1.52	BJP	9.58

*Gorakhpur used to be a single assembly segment till 2007

+Khajani and Chauri Chaura were not carved out as separate assembly segments in 2007

Sources: Compiled by author from Election Commission of Data Database <https://eci.gov.in/files/category/92-uttar-pradesh/>

- a) The very fact that the BJP made a clean sweep in all the nine assembly segments in two consecutive assembly elections in 2017 and 2022 in Gorakhpur District shows that the party has certainly made deep inroads and is well on its way for further consolidation and deepening of its vote base. This will have clear and predictable implications for the 2024 Parliamentary elections in the constituency.
- b) Both Gorakhpur Urban and Gorakhpur Rural assembly segments continue to remain BJP bastions since the 2007 assembly elections, with the former having a significant victory margin over its nearest rival which has increased from 24.66 percent in 2007 to 41.41 in 2022. This certainly owes itself largely to Yogi Adityanath himself being the candidate from the constituency.
- c) Besides Gorakhpur, the expansion and deepening of BJP voter base has taken place to the adjoining rural constituencies of Pipraich, Sahjanwa and Campierganj, with the candidates in these segments also registering significant victory margins in their

name. This might be an indication of the fact that a more consistent penetration of the BJP in the BSP and SP vote base of Dalits and OBCs might have already taken place and while this may not necessarily validate the 80:20 hypothesis of the C.M., but it may bring BJP comfortably closer to the victory margin again in 2024.

- d) This consolidation has come alongside a certain watering down of the hardline hindutva narrative coming from the Chief Minister and his close associates at least at the manifest level. One of the first things that was done after his coming to power was to tone down the rhetoric of the Hindu Yuva Vahini and mould it more towards social activities. After the elections of the 2017, the HYV units of Gorakhpur district were disbanded at the request of BJP leadership and those leaders who rebelled against the decision were expelled from the organization. This also might have been prompted by the provocative activities of similar named groups that had emerged in several parts of India, thereby lending a negative perception about the CM who was trying to script a new language of politics in U.P. Finally after the elections of 2022, the HYV has been dissolved, with the ostensible objective of working to assist the BJP for the 2024 elections and expanding its social footprint to western U.P.¹⁶

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to provide a historical/political mapping of Gorakhpur division from the perspective of 2022 electoral verdict. It is quite clear that the segment has given a decisive mandate in favour of the BJP, driven largely by the mercurial leadership of the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath himself. While the hindutva plank has always been at the base of electoral politics in the region, in 2022 elections issues of governance, administration and infrastructure did dominate the discourse rather than the religious plank alone. A persistence of a more positive agenda in the coming times will certainly help the BJP to consolidate its gains in the future, unless a failure on these fronts propels it to go back to a polarizing agenda which may in turn drift the newly attracted voters away from it and enable the rivals to gain lost ground.

References:

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- [4] Giles Verniers <https://scroll.in/article/661905/up-politics-101-understanding-the-most-important-state-this-election>
- [5] See <https://www.gitapress.org/aboutus>
- [6] Nagendra Kumar Maurya, Sapana Singh, Shagun Khare Human Development in Uttar Pradesh: A District Level Analysis, Social Science Spectrum, Vol.1 No.4 pp 262-278, <http://www.socialspectrum.in/index.php/sp/article/view/36/31>
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- [9] For perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of the issue see Rajni Kothari, Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Blackswann, 1995
- [10] Milan Vaishnav, A Look at why Crime Pays in Indian Politics, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/11/look-at-why-crime-pays-in-indian-politics-pub-67983>
- [11] Harishankar Tewari (85) holds the dubious distinction of being the first Indian politician to have won an election from prison, that too as an independent in 1985, when there was an all India wave in favour of Congress. He was later given a ticket by the Congress and won assembly elections five times in a row and managed to be part of the government during BSP, SP and BJP regimes at different points of time.
- [12] Virendra Pratap Shahi was seen as the rival to Harishankar Tewari, also as an independent M.L.A. in 1980s with distinct political patronage of his own, provided by the Math, according to some . He was killed in 1997.
- [13] It is also significant to note that the Gorakhpur Parliamentary constituency from late 1960s has propelled the Mahants of the Math backed by the 'hindu right' to victory thrice with Hindu Mahasabha in 1967, 1970 and 1989 and five times with B.J.P. in 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014.
- [14] Shantanu Gupta, The Monk who transformed Uttar Pradesh, Garuda Publications ,2022.
- [15] U.P Assembly Elections: It is 80% versus 20% in I.P. Assembly election says Yogi Adityanath <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/up-assembly-elections-its-80-vs-20-in-up-assembly-election-says-yogi-adityanath/article38214446.ece>. Yogi was quick to clarify that by 80% he meant those who stood for nationalism and good governance in response to a query as to why the Brahmins should vote for BJP when they were being wooed by BSP and SP.
- [16] <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/yogi-dissolves-up-unit-of-hindu-yuva-vahini-101659551472073.html>