

BJP Banking on Fortress Gujarat but Faces Challenge in Maharashtra

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Executive Summary

The two western Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra together account for 74 out of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament).

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept all 26 Gujarat Lok Sabha seats in 2014. In 2019, Gujarat, the home ground of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP President, Amit Shah, remains a major prestige battle. The Congress is counting on making inroads into the state after doing well in the assembly elections in December 2017 but the BJP seems to have recovered some ground here since then.

Maharashtra, with 48 Lok Sabha seats, sends the second-highest contingent of members of parliament to the Lok Sabha after Uttar Pradesh (UP). Like in UP, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance is facing a tough battle in Maharashtra with a renewed Nationalist Congress Party leading the United Progressive Alliance's charge. It has emerged as a major battleground in 2019 whose result could be decisive for government formation in Delhi.

This paper summarises the political outlook in both these western Indian states and examines the key factors at play.

Introduction

Gujarati-ness is inseparable, as a marker of identity, from the political persona of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Gujarat's symbolism as the original political base of the Prime Minister, therefore, adds a special edge in the political sweepstakes for the 26 parliamentarians the state sends to the 543-member Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament). If Gujarat is the original laboratory of Hindutva, then its neighbouring western Indian state of Maharashtra, with 48 Lok Sabha seats – the second-highest after Uttar Pradesh (UP) – has also been a saffron bastion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its regional ally, the Shiv Sena, since the early 1990s. Both western Indian states are, therefore, indispensable building blocks in the ruling National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) political matrix as it bids to return to power.

Though both Gujarat and Maharashtra have had a strong and consistent right-wing vote-base since the early 1990s, the underlying dynamics that drive politics and the levers of mobilisation in both states vary significantly. This paper examines the electoral outlook in these two western Indian states, explains the factors at play in each of them and puts together cumulative data from various state-wise opinion polls to illustrate shifts in the political terrain.

Gujarat: BJP looking ascendant despite setbacks in the 2017 assembly election

The BJP swept all 26 Gujarat Lok Sabha seats in 2014. Any significant losses here in 2019 would be seen as a personal setback to the Prime Minister and his party president Amit Shah, who is making his debut as a Lok Sabha candidate from party patriarch L K Advani's erstwhile constituency of Gandhinagar. This is why Shah, speaking just after filing his debut nomination from Gandhinagar told voters, "[Narendra] Modi is set to become PM again, but make him PM in style. Give all 26 seats to BJP." Similarly, Modi told supporters in Sabarkantha, "Giving us 26 seats is not enough; ensure maximum opposition candidates lose deposits."¹

It is important to provide context to this maximal vote push in Gujarat by Modi and Shah. The BJP's complete sweep in 2014 was unusual even by Gujarat's standards (Figure 1). The BJP's 2014 Gujarat victory haul was the biggest by any party in three decades since the Congress won 25 seats in 1980.

Figure 1: BJP has consistently won Gujarat since 1991 but 2014 scale of victory was unusual

Lok Sabha Elections	BJP Seats	BJP Vote (per cent)	Congress Seats	Congress Vote (per cent)
1991	20	49.3	5	28.4
1996	16	47.4	10	37.8
1998	19	46.1	7	37.8
1999	20	51.5	6	44.6
2004	14	47.4	12	43.9
2009	15	46.5	11	43.4
2014	26	59.1	0	32.9

Source: Election Commission of India, *Loki.ai*.

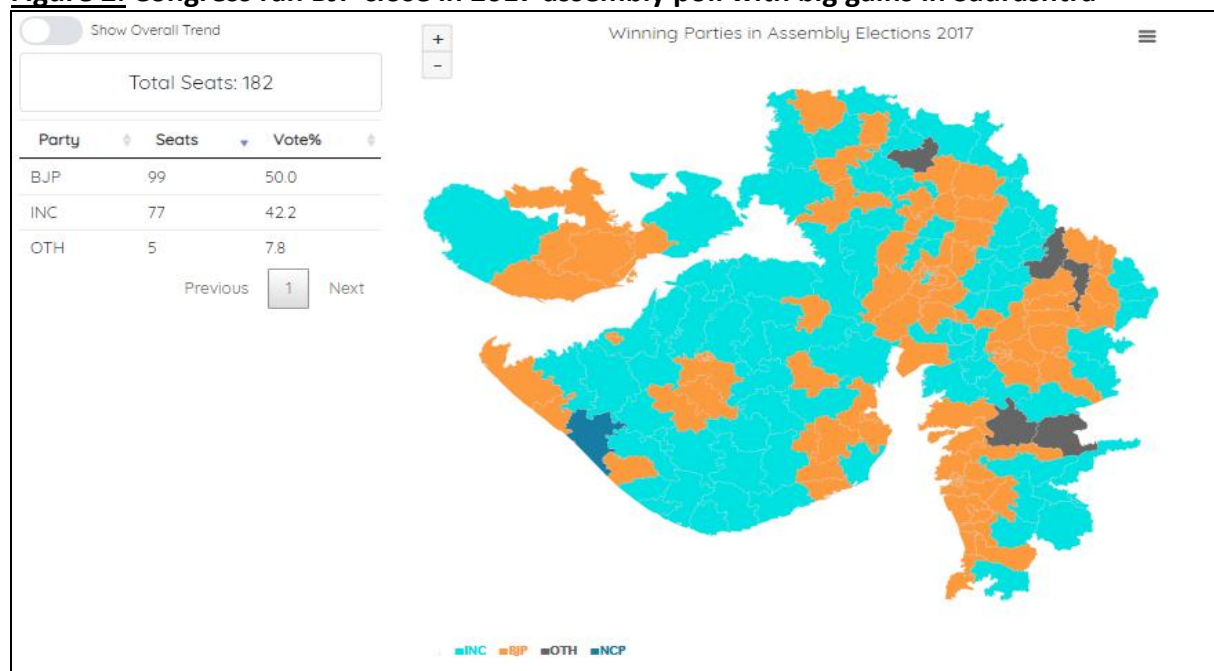
Since then, though the Congress pulled back significant lost ground in the December 2017 assembly election where it won 77 of the 182 state assembly seats and ran the BJP close (Figure 2). This was the Congress's second highest tally in Gujarat since 1985 when it won 149 out of 182 seats.

It was the Congress revival in that electoral contest, the first after Rahul Gandhi took over as Congress party president which gave it momentum ahead of subsequent assembly poll victories in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh in December 2018.

Extrapolating the 2017 assembly poll onto parliamentary seats would have given the Congress eight Lok Sabha seats. This is why it began the Lok Sabha poll campaign with buoyed hopes for Gujarat, banking especially on the state's western region of Saurashtra, where it made significant gains in 2017 (Figure 2).

¹ TNN, 'Gujarat elections: Modi, Shah eye clean sweep again, but assembly show buoys Congress', The Times of India, 23 April 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/gujarat/news/modi-shah-eye-clean-sweep-again-but-assembly-show-buoys-cong/articleshow/68999124.cms>

Figure 2: Congress ran BJP close in 2017 assembly poll with big gains in Saurashtra



Source: Election Commission of India, Loki.ai.

In the months following the assembly election, however, the political game in the state seems to have shifted again. An average of various opinion polls (Figure 3) before polling in the state showed a consistent pattern where the BJP seems to have recovered some of the lost ground where Congress had gained in 2017.

Figure 3: Poll of polls average in Gujarat before voting

Gujarat		Lok Sabha constituencies 26	
Date published	Polling agency	NDA	UPA
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	22	4
Apr 2019	India TV-CNX	24	2
Apr 2019	News Nation	21	5
Mar 2019	Spick Media	13	13
Mar 2019	News Nation	21	5
Jan 2019	Republic Tv - Cvoter	24	2
Average	Poll of polls	21	5

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms.

So, what has changed and will this pattern hold? First, many of the 2017 Congress gains reaped the benefit of mobilisation by three young leaders from different castes who aligned with the party: Hardik Patel who led the Patidar agitation, Other Backwards Classes (OBC) leader Alpesh Thakor who was elected as a Congress Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Radhanpur and Dalit leader Jignesh Mevani who was elected as an independent MLA from Vadnagar. In 2019, though, only Patel out of this trio is actively galvanising voters for the Congress in Gujarat. Much of the momentum they generated in 2017 has been lost.

Thakor left the Congress in April 2019, Mevani has been trying to build a national profile by focusing attention on campaigns outside of Gujarat and Patel was barred from contesting in the Lok Sabha poll due to a conviction in a riots case.²

Second, the Congress in 2017 polled more votes in eight Lok Sabha seats in the Saurashtra and north Gujarat regions: Banaskantha, Patan, Mehsana, Sabarkantha, Surendranagar, Junagadh, Amreli and Anand. Some common factors in most of these seats were lack of irrigation waters from the Narmada, water shortages, non-payment of compensation from the 2017 floods in some seats, agrarian issues and the lack of jobs. Since then, as a recent Times of India analysis showed, the BJP has responded with two broad local responses: fixing some of the water woes and by poaching many key local Congress leaders in areas where the BJP is weak. These poached leaders include senior Congress leader and OBC strongman Kunvarji Bavaliya who was made a cabinet minister within hours of defecting to the BJP, senior Congress MLA Jawahar Chavda from the Ahir community who has influence in four Lok Sabha seats and several others.³

Third, to get over anti-incumbency, the BJP dropped as many as 38 per cent (10 of 26) of its sitting members of parliament (MPs). Fresh candidates, including Shah himself, are fighting from these seats: Banaskantha, Ahmedabad East, Gandhinagar, Surendranagar, Mehsana, Anand, Chota Udaipur, Patan, Panchmahal and Porbandar. Half of these seats are ones where the Congress gained in 2017.

Fourth, the BJP made unprecedented gains in 2014 because of the Modi factor and the idea that Gujaratis were voting for one of their own as Prime Minister. The BJP is banking on the same sentiment being repeated in the national election this time around as well. Even in the assembly poll, while local issues drove much of the campaign narrative, in the end, the Modi personae and personal appeals by the Prime Minister allowed the BJP to pip the Congress. The BJP's bet is that voters in a national poll in Gujarat will only vote on the question of whether they are with or against Modi, hoping that the sentiment of regional pride and Gujarati *asmita* (pride) will cut through local discontent.

Fifth, Congress was in a serious fight in at least a dozen seats in the state. Post-polling, its party leaders privately remain confident on several of them: Amreli, contested by its leader of opposition in the state assembly Paresh Dhanani; Anand, which is being contested by former state party president Bharatsinh Solanki and where the BJP's victory margin was a low 6.5 per cent in 2014; Porbandar; and the tribal seats of Dahod, Godhra and Sabarkantha.

Sixth, the big challenge for the Congress is that though it made huge gains in Saurashtra in the assembly contest of 2017 (Figure 2), an overwhelming number of these seats in the 2014 poll were won by BJP by huge margins of 20 to 32 per cent. This means that Congress needs a huge swing in these seats to turn the tables. In addition, there are several firewall seats in

² Ashish Chauhan, 'Hardik Patel, Jignesh Mevani and Alpesh Thakor: Congress young Turks fall silent this time', The Times of India, 12 April 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/gujarat/news/congs-young-guns-fall-silent-this-time/articleshow/68842182.cms>.

³ Kapil Dave and Himanshu Kaushik, 'Will BJP repeat 2014 feat and sweep 26 seats in Gujarat?' The Times of India, 26 March 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/will-bjp-repeat-2014-feat-and-sweep-26-seats/articleshow/68570262.cms>.

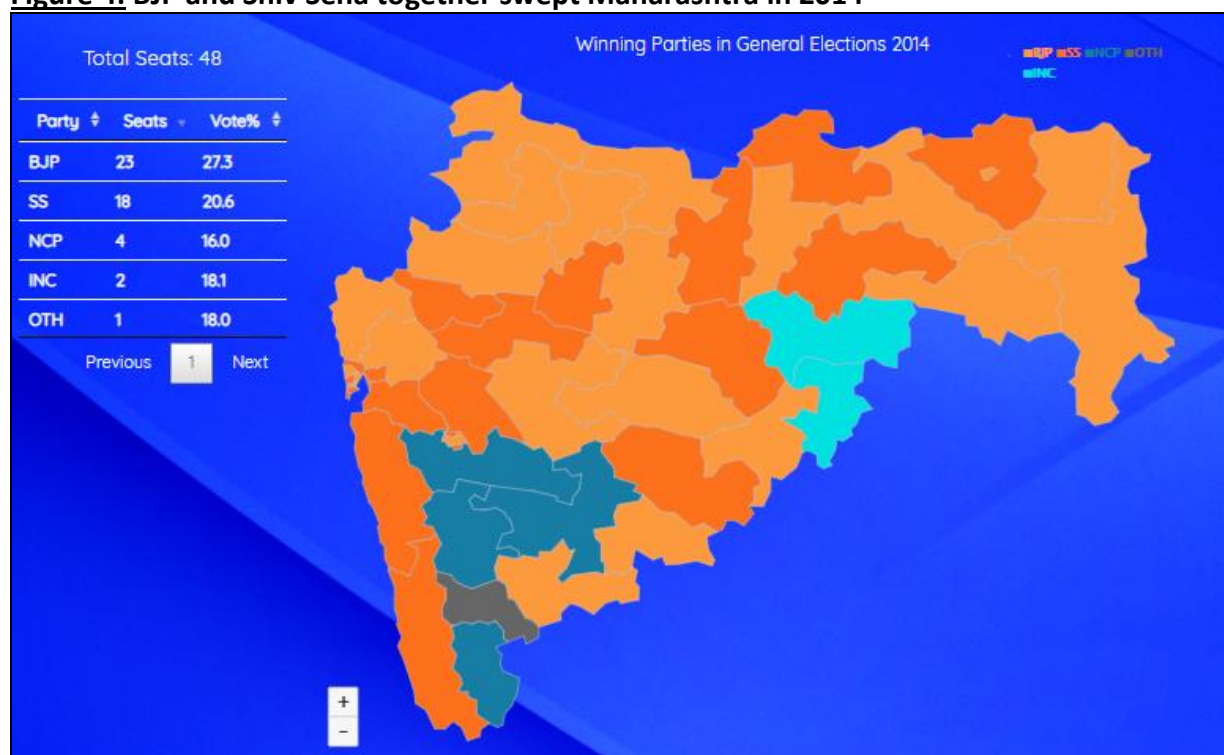
Gujarat which the BJP has not lost since 1989: two seats in Ahmedabad, Gandhinagar, Vadodara, Surat and Bhavnagar.

Lastly, Gujarat's voter turnout of 64.1 per cent this time is the highest since 1967, which indicates that the verdict is likely to be decisive in the state. Interestingly, tribal seats recorded the highest turnout of over 70 per cent and seats in the Saurashtra region, where Congress is hoping for gains, the lowest, around the 55 per cent mark.⁴

Maharashtra: The NCP leading the opposition fightback and the BJP banking on the Modi factor

Maharashtra sends 48 MPs to Parliament. In 2014, the BJP and its ally, the Shiv Sena, won 41 of these 48 seats with a combined vote-share of 47.9 per cent (Figure 4).

Figure 4: BJP and Shiv Sena together swept Maharashtra in 2014



Source: Election Commission of India, Loka. ai.

While the BJP and the Shiv Sena have been allies since the mid-1990s, the alliance dynamic has shifted since 2014 when BJP won more Lok Sabha seats than the Shiv Sena for the first time in the national as well as the state assembly elections, where it won 122 seats with 27.8

⁴ TNN, 'Gujarat turnout best since 1967, set for a 'decisive mandate'' The Times of India, 26 April 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/gujarat/news/highest-turnout-in-gujtribal-belt-rural-beats-urban/articleshow/69017310.cms> and <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/gujarat/news/gujarat-turnout-best-since-1967-set-for-a-decisive-mandate/articleshow/69034350.cms>.

per cent votes compared to Shiv Sena's 63 seats with 19.3 per cent votes.⁵ With the BJP determined to expand in Maharashtra and the Shiv Sena sensing a threat to its state-level dominance, the alliance narrative between 2014 and 2018 was largely marked by regular public outbursts of disaffection by the Shiv Sena. It essentially behaved like an opposition party in this period despite being part of the NDA alliance. However, both sides put their differences aside in February 2019 to announce a renewed alliance, with the BJP contesting 23 seats and Sena 23 seats respectively.⁶

While the BJP has often been accused of taking on a big brother attitude with its allies, the renewal of this alliance on virtually equal terms in a state, where it had a far higher vote share than the Shiv Sena, was the first public marker of the BJP willing to cede ground and make tactical adjustments in crucial states. This was in sharp contrast to the Congress which has chosen to go alone in crucial battleground states like UP.

However, in Maharashtra, the saffron alliance is facing a challenge from the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) combine, which claims to have stitched together a conglomeration of 56 parties and groups.⁷ While the Congress is contesting 24 seats and the NCP 20, the Bahujan Samaj Party has been given one seat, with one for an independent. The alliance includes the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS), led by farmer leader and MP Raju Shetti who was with the NDA in 2014 but left two years ago, protesting against the lack of action on agrarian issues. The SSS has been allocated two seats: Shetti is contesting from the Hathkanangle while Vishal Patil, grandson of former state chief minister Vasantdada Patil, is fighting from Sangli.

A poll of polls taken before voting indicates a tough fight in Maharashtra with the NDA being projected an average of 31 seats and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) an average of 16 seats (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Poll of polls in Maharashtra indicates NDA lead but a tough contest

Maharashtra: Lok Sabha constituencies 48		NDA	UPA	Oth
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	38	10	0
Apr 2019	India TV - CNX	34	13	1
Apr 2019	Republic TV - Jan ki Baat	36	12	0
Mar 2019	Spick Media	23	25	0
Jan 2019	ABP News - Cvoter	20	28	0
Jan 2019	VDP Associates	25	20	3
Jan 2019	India TV - CNX	30	18	0
Nov 2018	ABP News- C Voter	28	20	6
Oct 2018	ABP News- CSDS	36	12	0
Sep 2018	Spick Media	36	10	2
Average	Poll of Polls	31	16	1

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms.

⁵ Election Commission of India data. Data analytics by <https://pollniti.com/live.html#/>

⁶ The NewsRoom Post, 'BJP-Shiv Sena announce tie-up for 2019 polls, to contest 25 and 23 seats respectively' 18 February 2019, <https://newsroompost.com/elections/bjp-shiv-sena-announce-tie-up-for-2019-polls-to-contest-25-and-23-seats-respectively-in-maharashtra/433617.html>

⁷ Alok Deshpande, 'In Maharashtra, the 'might of 56' takes on BJP-Sena combine', The Hindu, 28 March 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/in-maharashtra-the-might-of-56-takes-on-bjp-sena-combine/article26666722.ece>

A few key factors stand out. First, Sharad Pawar's NCP, which got decimated in its bastions in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra, is looking for a revival. Unlike Vidarbha and Marathwada, this region is more prosperous, better irrigated and has been crucial as a power centre in Maharashtra politics. In 2014, the NDA's alliance with the SSS allowed it to make inroads into this belt. This time, the SSS has switched sides to the UPA. Simultaneously, a number of leaders from the UPA have also switched sides to the BJP.

Second, a major feature of the campaign has been the huge public response for Raj Thackeray of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) who is not contesting any seats but campaigning on behalf of the UPA. His unique style of using video clips to attack Prime Minister Modi has added energy to the opposition alliance. This was best illustrated by a recent shift in the Congress positioning on Thackeray. From opposing any tie-up earlier, the Congress state-in-charge and leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, recently said that it welcomed "all like-minded parties" against Modi and would leave the decision on an alliance with MNS for the upcoming state assembly polls to the state unit.⁸

Third, there is a third front in Maharashtra which will have an impact. Prakash Ambedkar, the grandson of B R Ambedkar, joined hands with the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen to form the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA), which is contesting all 48 seats.⁹ Ground reports do not indicate significant traction for the VBA except in some pockets like Solapur where the Congress' former union minister Sushil Kumar Shinde is contesting from.

Fourth, local reports indicate that the BJP is leading the charge for the NDA, with Shiv Sena candidates looking relatively weaker in their respective seats. For the UPA, the torch-bearer has been the NCP in the absence of a major Congress figure fronting the campaign. The BJP is banking on retaining its support in the urban areas of Maharashtra like Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur and Aurangabad. The NCP is focusing on recovering lost ground in western Maharashtra in its traditional strongholds like Baramati, Satara, Kolhapur, and Raigarh. The UPA is also targeting some gains in Vidarbha, Konkan and northern Maharashtra.

Fifth, Maharashtra is crucial to the NDA's ambitions of returning to power but there has been a big difference in the way the BJP and the Congress have approached the campaign. Fully cognisant of the vital importance of Maharashtra, Modi has campaigned nine times in the state – from Wardha on 1 April 2019 to Mumbai on 26 April 2019. In contrast, the Congress campaign has been lacklustre. Rahul campaigned only four times, starting with Pune on 5 April 2019 and ending in Ahmednagar on 26 April 2019. He chose not to campaign in Mumbai.¹⁰

Election campaigns are about momentum and galvanising voters as much as they are about issues. In Maharashtra, while Modi has led the NDA charge from the front, for the UPA, the narrative has been defined more by Pawar. Along with UP, Maharashtra is the second major

⁸ Praful Marpakwar, 'We welcome Raj Thackeray... to align for Maharashtra polls is up to local Congress', 27 April 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019/maharashtra/news/we-welcome-raj-thackeray-to-align-for-maharashtra-polls-is-up-to-local-congress/articleshow/69067629.cms>.

⁹ Alok Deshpande, 'In Maharashtra, the 'might of 56' takes on BJP-Sena combine', The Hindu, 28 March 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/in-maharashtra-the-might-of-56-takes-on-bjp-sena-combine/article26666722.ece>.

¹⁰ Details from TOI's Campaign Tracker: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/campaigntracker>.

state where the NDA is facing a tough opposition challenge. How the state votes will be central to government formation in Delhi and may also impact the fortunes of the incumbent state chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, who has been fronting the BJP's local campaign.

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