

India State Elections 2022: The Dalit Vote and Political Dynamics in Punjab

Iqbal Singh Sevea

Summary

The Congress party's attempts to consolidate the Dalit vote could have a long-term impact on the political dynamics of Punjab.

The Indian state of Punjab goes to the polls on 20 February 2022. The significance of these state elections has been accentuated by the fact that they are taking place in the wake of a 16-month long [mass protest by farmers against a series of farm laws](#) passed by the central government. Punjabi farmers played a key role in this protest, which forced Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to make a rare policy retreat. Within this charged political climate, the Congress party is not only fighting to be re-elected to power in Punjab but also to revive its political fortunes at an all-India level.

The controversy over the farm laws has galvanised substantial segments of the Jat population against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Jats are a landowning agrarian caste group that has dominated the political and socio-economic landscape of Punjab. Prior to 2021, all but one of Punjab's chief ministers have been Jats. Despite the strong anti-BJP sentiment amongst the Jats, there is no single political party around which they have coalesced. Traditionally, the Jat vote has been split between the Congress and the Shrimoni Akali Dal. In 2017, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) contested in Punjab for the first time and ate into the Jat base. The equation is further complicated this time round as a section of the protesting farmers has launched a political party, the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM). While the SSM is unlikely to emerge as a major player, it may appeal to segments that are not wedded to the two established parties and had voted for the AAP in 2017.

Sensing this, the Congress is making a big pitch to broaden its voter base. It is hoping that its support of the protesting farmers will help it to retain its Jat vote share. Moreover, in the months preceding the elections, the Congress state government announced loan [waivers to farmers](#) owing up to ₹200,000 (S\$3,600). While similar variations of pro-farmers schemes have been offered by almost every party, the Congress is trying to build a rural vote bank extending beyond the Jats. Marginalised lower castes, rural workers and tenant farmers have long been neglected by the major political parties. Indeed, various political players in Punjab who supported the farmers' protest approached it as an issue that solely impacted the Jats. There was scant discussion on the plight of landless agricultural workers, many of whom are Dalits.

The Dalit is a broad category that refers to groups formerly described as "untouchables". Attention was also not paid to the power of the Jat farmers who have collectively imposed [social boycotts upon Dalit labourers](#) calling for higher wages. It is, thus, telling that weeks before the elections, the Congress announced that it would grant loan waivers not just to

landed farmers but also to [landless labourers and Dalits](#) who had taken government loans to establish self-employment ventures.

The Congress also took the symbolically important step of appointing Charanjit Singh Channi, a Sikh Dalit politician, as the chief minister of Punjab four months before the elections. Furthermore, on [6 February 2022](#), it announced that he will remain the chief minister if the party wins. In doing so, the Congress has broken from its practice of not announcing its chief ministerial candidates and assumed the risk of alienating its Jat leaders and voters.

Despite constituting approximately 32 per cent of Punjab's population, the Dalits have remained politically and economically marginalised. For the purposes of comparison, the Jats constitute slightly over 20 per cent of the population. Unlike Uttar Pradesh, the numerical strength of the Dalits in Punjab has not translated into political influence. A major reason for this is that the Dalits are not a homogeneous community that votes in unison. 'Dalit' is a term that applies to individuals from different caste groups who are dispersed across the state. The political choices of a number of Dalits are also influenced by the religious *deras* (religious abodes or sects) that they ascribe to. An examination of the [vote share from the state elections of 2012 and 2017](#) reveals that the percentage of Hindu Dalits voting for the Congress increased from 37 to 43 per cent. On the other hand, the percentage of Sikh Dalits voting for the Congress decreased by 10 per cent. This is likely to have been transferred to the AAP. In naming Channi as the chief ministerial candidate, the Congress is focusing on regaining and building upon the Sikh Dalit vote.

Further, the Congress is hoping that Channi will draw Dalit voters from the Doaba and Malwa regions. The Doaba region is home to the highest percentage of Dalits in Punjab. It is significant that Channi belongs to the Ramdasia caste, which is the dominant Dalit group in Doaba. As the most populous region of Punjab, Malwa is politically crucial. This is also the region where Channi has built his political base. Apart from his bastion of Chamkaur Sahib, he is slated to contest in the reserved seat of Bhadaur. Both of these seats are part of Channi's "[Mission Malwa](#)" – an effort to solidify the Dalit vote in Malwa and retain the Jat vote share. With a view towards appealing to the Dalits in urban centres like Ludhiana, Channi recently announced that his government will regularise the appointments of thousands of Dalits who have been employed by municipal bodies. This has been a long-standing demand of the community.

Overall, the Congress is hoping that the Dalit vote will see it re-elected in Punjab and have an impact on the national elections of 2024. It remains to be seen if the Dalits will vote in unison and if the Congress' initiatives will alienate sections of its Jat voters. It is, however, clear that a consolidation of the Dalit vote – if it happens – will have a long-term impact on the political dynamics in Punjab.

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Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea is Director at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasiss@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.