

India State Elections 2022: All Eyes on Uttar Pradesh

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Summary

Of the five Indian states currently witnessing elections, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is decidedly the most significant. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had swept the 2017 Assembly election and the 2019 national election in UP. This election is likely to be a bipolar contest between the BJP and the Samajwadi Party, with the BJP holding the edge.

Beginning on 10 February 2022, five Indian states – Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh (UP) – are involved in elections. Much of the attention is focused on UP which is India's largest and most populous state. With around 240 million people, it would be the fifth-largest nation if it were a country; it sends 80 members to India's Lower House of Parliament. The seven-phase elections in UP assume importance as they could provide crucial pointers to the popularity of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi at around the halfway mark of his second term.

There is talk of this set of elections being the 'semi-final' before the general election in 2024. These sentiments might be misplaced. There is enough evidence to suggest that the Assembly elections are decided on issues quite different from the general election. Besides, there are over two years to go before the general election, with several other states going to polls before that. However, the BJP's performance in UP, given the centrality of the state in Indian politics and to the party's fortunes, will, to a great extent, determine its strategy in the lead-up to and during the general election.

The BJP, which alone won 312 out of 403 seats in UP in 2017, is the frontrunner in the current election. Most opinion polls have forecast a victory for the BJP. Although polls can go wrong, the fact that all of them are pointing in the same direction augurs well for the BJP. There is also a consensus among the surveys that the BJP's tally is expected to fall. The [ABP News-CVoter survey](#), for instance, has forecast that the BJP will get 41 per cent of the vote share and between 225 and 237 seats. A survey by [Zee News](#) has come up with similar findings.

Opinion polls have also forecast a bipolar contest between the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) alliance, with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Congress being relegated to a distant third and fourth. According to ABP News-CVoter, the SP-RLD alliance is likely to win 35 per cent of the vote share and between 139 and 151 seats, which is roughly on par with Zee's findings.

Although one might have expected the state government's mishandling of the COVID-19 second wave and the state's poor economic performance, particularly its tardy record in job creation, to have hurt the BJP, this does not seem to be the case. The BJP has played up

Chief Minister Adityanath's record on law and order and the benefits of "[double-engine sarkar \(government\)](#)" – where the BJP is in power at both the Centre and in the state – for UP's economic development. The government has implemented several welfare schemes, including centrally sponsored ones, which involve direct cash transfers to voters. Indeed, Modi has even singled out Adityanath's exemplary handling of the pandemic.

This has been accompanied by astute social engineering and religious polarisation. In parts of the state like western UP, in 2017, the BJP was able to consolidate the Hindu vote in the aftermath of communal riots. Adityanath, who is seen by some as a successor to Modi, has not hesitated to add a [communal colour](#) to the current campaign.

Since 2014, the BJP has also been successful in creating a caste coalition comprising its traditional support base of high castes, along with a high share of the non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBC) and the non-Jatav Scheduled Caste (SC) or Dalit vote. The Yadavs are the traditional support base of the SP and the Jatavs of the BSP.

The *India Today* [post-poll survey in 2017](#) showed that while the BJP retained 62 per cent of the upper caste vote, it was also able to get a substantial portion of the votes of OBC groups like Lodh, Kushwaha, Kurmi and Koeri. The party also won significant support from the non-Jatav Dalit communities such as Pasi, Valmiki and Khatik. The BJP has an alliance with two smaller parties – the Apna Dal (S) and Nishad Party – to specifically target some of these OBC and SC communities.

The SP, which had won only 47 seats in 2017 and five seats in the state in 2019, is hoping to make a strong comeback under former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav. Its tie-up with the RLD, led by former Prime Minister Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhuri, is expected to pay dividends in western UP. There are 70 seats up for grabs in western UP, of which the BJP had won 51 in 2017. This time things might be different since the RLD has traditionally been popular with the Jats who wield considerable influence in this region. Western UP was also one of the sites of farmer protests over the controversial central farm laws, something which might dent the BJP's vote. The run-up to the polls has also seen some high-profile defections, such as former minister and OBC leader Swami Prasad Maurya, from the BJP to the SP. However, as [an analyst has pointed out](#), to defeat the BJP, the SP has to not only consolidate the opposition vote but also wean voters away from the BJP.

As UP heads for its third phase of voting on 20 February 2020, the BJP continues to [exude confidence](#) of a resounding victory. While that might be for public consumption, in reality, the contest could be closer.

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