

Elections in Gujarat: The BJP is a Clear Frontrunner

Ronojoy Sen

Summary

The Bharatiya Janata Party has been in power in Gujarat for the past 27 years and is in a strong position to be re-elected. While the Aam Aadmi Party is a new entrant to the state and has conducted a high-decibel campaign, it is likely to be locked in a fight with the Congress for the second place.

The Gujarat Assembly elections, being held in two phases on 1 and 5 December 2022, will be a test of the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his home turf. Modi, a four-time chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, has largely been instrumental in making the state an unassailable fortress for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

However, in the 2017 Gujarat Assembly election, the BJP did not do as well as expected, winning 99 out of 182 seats and 49 per cent of the vote share, down from 115 seats in 2012. The Congress fared better than anticipated winning 77 seats and 41 per cent of the vote share.

In the current elections, the equations are somewhat different. As in many states, the Congress's fortunes have declined and it looks less likely to compete with the BJP than in 2017. There is also a third contender in the fray in the form of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

[Opinion polls](#) suggest that the BJP is likely to win comfortably. According to the ABP-CVoter survey, the BJP is predicted to win over 130 seats while the Congress is forecast to win less than 40. The AAP is predicted to win between 12 and 17 seats. Another survey by P-MARQ has made fairly similar predictions.

While the opinion polls predict an easy victory for the BJP, the situation on the ground is complicated. According to a [CSDS-Lokniti survey](#), the satisfaction with the state government has increased by 11 percentage points. However, only a third of the respondents believe that development has been for all sections. The impact of the [government's welfare schemes](#) also seems to have been somewhat uneven.

Given a fairly weak opposition, the biggest challenge for the BJP is anti-incumbency. In a bid to beat anti-incumbency, the BJP has denied election tickets to at least 38 sitting members of the legislative assembly (MLAs). The party had, in September 2021, also replaced Chief Minister Vijay Rupani with Bhupendra Patel and made major changes to the state cabinet. This has to do with the fact that none of the [state BJP leaders](#) are particularly popular.

Among the prominent BJP faces that have been denied tickets are Rupani and former Deputy Chief Minister Nitin Patel although the official party line is that they have opted out of the elections. In addition, the BJP has nominated several 'turncoats' or politicians who

have moved to the BJP since 2017. These include Hardik Patel, a former Congress working president in the state and once the face of the agitation demanding reservation for the Patidar community. He joined the BJP in June 2022 and has been nominated to contest from the Viramgam constituency in the ongoing elections.

The replacement of several sitting MLAs and the nomination of turncoats has fuelled some resentment within the BJP. There are over a dozen BJP rebels who are contesting either as independents or on a Congress or AAP ticket, which could potentially hurt the BJP. However, history suggests that turncoats have not done too well in recent elections in Gujarat. An analysis based on data from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University, indicates that the period from 1990-95 was good for turncoats with [over 40 per cent of those who contested getting elected](#). However, since 1998, the numbers have dropped, with 12 per cent of turncoats winning in the 2017 Assembly elections. In contrast, first-time contestants have had a good success rate, with the proportion of first-time winners going above 50 per cent in 2017.

The Congress looks unlikely to repeat its relatively successful performance in 2017. [The CSDS-Lokniti survey](#) indicates that the Congress's vote share has been reduced by half from 2017, and the beneficiary has been the AAP. The Congress did well in 2017, particularly in the Saurashtra and Kutch regions, by focusing on the reservation demand of the Patidars. That issue has been partially defused with the 10 per cent reservation for economically backward classes. Some of the other issues, which the Congress had played up, such as demonetisation and farmers' grievances, are unlikely to have much traction in 2022. Defections have also badly hit the party.

Buoyed by its success in Punjab, the AAP has conducted a high-decibel campaign in Gujarat, spearheaded by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. It has promised free electricity, education, and handouts to women and unemployed youth. The AAP is also hoping to build on its performance in the 2021 local body elections in Gujarat, where it won 42 seats in its first such outing in the state. Though it was a distant third to the BJP and Congress, the AAP put up a strong showing in Surat municipality, where it won 28 per cent of the vote share and 27 seats. The AAP hopes to maintain the momentum in Surat by fielding some of the faces of the Patidar agitation, such as Gopal Italia and Alpesh Kathiriya. While there is a desire for [a third alternative](#), the AAP is likely to be in a fight with Congress for the second spot.

The BJP has pulled out all stops, including several election rallies addressed by Modi and other central ministers, to ensure another victory in Gujarat. The BJP juggernaut looks likely to roll on in the state.

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Dr Ronojoy Sen is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isars@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.