

The BJP Debacle in Uttar Pradesh

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Summary

The 2024 Indian general elections saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Development Alliance's (NDA) seat share plummet in Uttar Pradesh and a resurgence of the Samajwadi Party (SP)-led alliance. The SP alliance, which included the Congress, successfully consolidated support from the Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), including the Yadavs, and the Muslims, while the NDA retained its social base of upper castes and some OBCs. Key issues like inflation, unemployment and dissatisfaction with local members of parliament contributed to the erosion of the BJP's support.

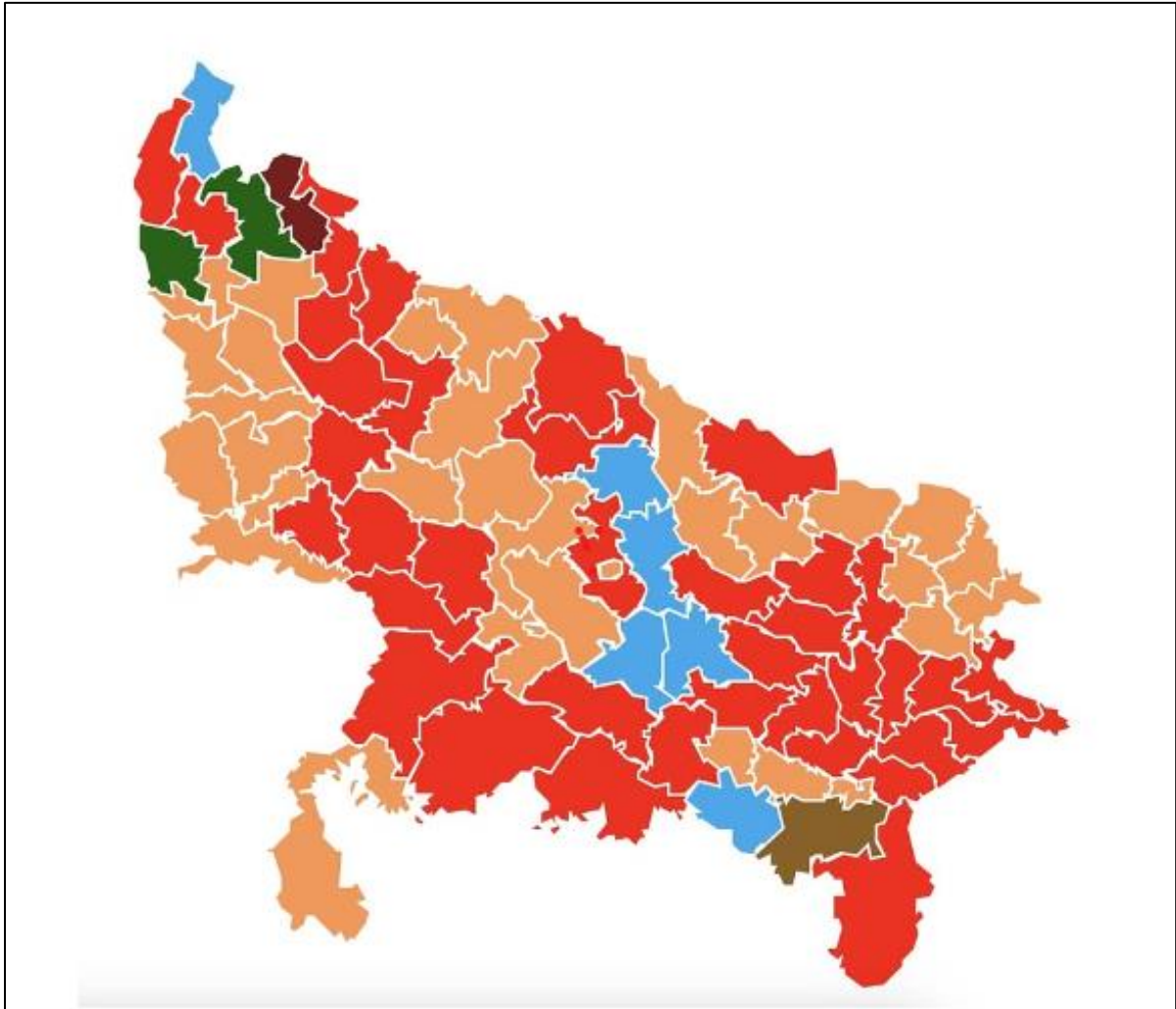
The results of the 2024 general elections in Uttar Pradesh marked a dramatic shift in the political landscape, with the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) seat count plummeting from 62 in 2019 to 33, while its allies Apna Dal (Soneylal) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) won one and two seats respectively. On the other hand, the Indian National Developmental Alliance (INDIA), comprising the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Indian National Congress, won 43 seats with SP bagging 37 seats, up 32 from 2019, and the Congress winning six seats, up by five. The comeback of the opposition is significant considering the results in the past four elections – both assembly and general -- in the state. In the 2014 general elections, the BJP won 71 seats while in 2019, it won 62 seats. In the 2017 Assembly elections, the BJP won 312 seats out of 403 seats in the Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly and 255 seats in the 2022 Assembly elections. These numbers highlight the extent of the BJP's hold in Uttar Pradesh prior to the 2024 general elections. The Uttar Pradesh results were also one of the major reasons for the BJP falling way short of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal of 370 seats for his party and even falling below the majority mark in parliament.

The 2024 election results reflect a significant shift in voter support, with the BJP-led NDA alliance suffering losses in both seat and vote share compared to 2019. In 2019, out of the 64 seats won by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) alliance, the margin of victory in 43 seats (of which the BJP won 42) was over 100,000 votes. In 2024, of these 43 seats, the NDA lost 11 seats to the SP and the Congress. This time, the NDA won only 13 seats with a margin of more than 100,000 and had a victory margin of less than 50,000 votes in 20 seats. On the other hand, the INDIA bloc won 15 seats with a margin of more than 100,000 votes and 10 seats with a margin of less than 50,000 votes. In terms of overall vote share, the BJP's share went down from 50 per cent to 41 per cent, while that of the SP significantly improved, going from 18 per cent in 2019 to 34 per cent in 2024. In terms of the regions within Uttar Pradesh, the BJP performed poorly in Eastern Uttar Pradesh (Purvanchal) and Awadh (Figure 1)¹. In Purvanchal, the BJP won 10 of the 26 seats, down 8

¹ "Crucial Losses In Awadh And Purvanchal: BJP's Seat Count Halves In Uttar Pradesh", NDTV, 5 June 2024, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lok-sabha-election-2024-results-crucial-losses-in-awadh-and-purvanchal-bjps-seat-count-halves-in-uttar-pradesh-5823824>.

from 2019². Even Modi's victory margin in Varanasi, which is in the Purvanchal region, declined from 4,79,505 to 1,52,513 votes and saw a drop of 9.4 per cent in vote share. In Awadh, which consists of 20 seats, the BJP managed to win nine seats. Importantly, the BJP lost the constituency of Faizabad, where Ayodhya and the recently consecrated Ram temple are located, to the SP's Awadesh Prasad. Contrary to expectations, the Ram temple issue failed to gain traction among Uttar Pradesh voters. Additionally, the BJP also lost ground in the Rohilkhand region, where it won four of the 11 seats, and in Bundelkhand, where it won one of the five seats.

Figure 1: Map of Uttar Pradesh



Source: *The Print*, 5 June 2024, <https://theprint.in/opinion/2024-election-mandate-in-up-is-more-against-yogi-than-modi/2118370/>.

One of the key reasons for the SP's resurgence was the consolidation of the Scheduled Castes, the Yadavs and the Muslims behind the INDIA alliance. According to the CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey,³ the NDA was preferred by the upper caste Brahmin, Rajput and Vaishya voters, with 79 per cent of them voting for the NDA, while only 16 per cent voted for the

² Ibid.

³ Mirza Asmer Beg, Shashikant Pandey, Akhilesh Pal, "CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey: Why the BJP underperformed in U.P.", *The Hindu*, 8 June 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/cds-lok-niti-post-poll-survey-why-the-bjp-underperformed-in-up/article68264434.ece>.

INDIA bloc (Figure 2). It also had an edge over the INDIA bloc among the non-Yadav Other Backward Castes (OBCs), with 59 per cent voting for the BJP compared to 34 per cent for INDIA. On the other hand, 82 per cent of the Yadavs, 25 per cent of the Jatav Dalits, 56 per cent of the non-Jatav Dalits and 92 per cent of the Muslims voted for the INDIA bloc. According to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) also resulted in a boost for the INDIA bloc as many traditional voters of the BSP switched to the INDIA bloc. This raises a crucial question: how was the INDIA bloc able to consolidate this social coalition and dent the BJP's hope of winning a successive landslide victory in the state?

Figure 2: Voter Percentage by Caste in 2024 General Elections in Uttar Pradesh

Groups	India	NDA	BSP	Others
Upper Caste	16	79	1	4
Yadav	82	15	2	2
Kurmi-Koeri	34	61	2	3
Other OBCs	34	59	3	4
Jatav	25	24	44	7
Non-Jatav	56	29	15	1
Muslims	92	2	5	1

Note: The ones highlighted in red show a percentage drop of more than 10 per cent from 2019

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post Poll Survey, *The Hindu*, 8 June 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/cds-lokniti-post-poll-survey-why-the-bjp-underperformed-in-up/article68264434.ece>

Figure 3: Voter Percentage by Caste in 2019 General Elections in Uttar Pradesh

Groups	Congress	BJP+	MGB ⁴	Others
Upper Caste (Brahmin, Jats, Rajputs, Vaishyas, and others)	6	83	7	4
Yadav	5	23	60	12
Kurmi-Koeri	5	80	14	1
Other OBCs	5	72	18	5
Jatav	1	17	75	7
Non-Jatav (Other SC)	7	48	42	3
Muslims	14	8	73	5

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post Poll Survey, *The Hindu*, 26 May 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/post-poll-survey-why-uttar-pradeshs-mahagathbandhan-failed/article27249310.ece>

The answer lies in the caste dynamics in Uttar Pradesh. The electoral success of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh since 2014 can be largely attributed to the broadening of its social coalition. Earlier, the BJP used to be seen as a primarily upper-caste Hindu party. However, it worked on social engineering and expanded its base by “inducting people from different parties, different social groups, promoting and elevating them”.⁵ Prashant Jha notes that the party

⁴ MGB-Mahagathbandhan mega-coalition was an alliance of the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party.

⁵ Shyamlal Yadav, Bhupendra Patel, “Disconnect on ground, ticket distribution, caste, jobs: How BJP lost the plot in UP”, *The Indian Express*, 5 June 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-politics/local-disconnect-agniveer-ticket-choice-caste-equations-how-bjp-lost-the-up-plot-uttar-pradesh-9372166/>.

increased its vote share amongst all groups, especially among the OBCs and the Dalits. The OBCs and the Dalits had around 10 per cent representation in the BJP in 2014 and by 2016, it had nearly tripled to around 30 per cent.⁶ Jha argues that in the process of doing so, the BJP moved from being a “relatively exclusivist Hindu party to becoming an inclusive Hindu party”.⁷ Jha also notes that this was being done against the backdrop of the SP ruling Uttar Pradesh from 2012 to 2017. The SP was perceived to be a party for the Yadavs due to the Yadav “domination of local bureaucracy, police and social structure”⁸ and the Muslims due to the SP’s outreach to the minority community as well as the BJP emphasising this.⁹ The BJP’s strategy focused on constructing political alliances by mobilising non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalit groups that were socially dominant but politically marginalised.¹⁰ Sudha Pai and Avinash Kumar note that in order to win over the non-Jatav Dalit vote, constituting nine per cent of the population of Uttar Pradesh, the BJP “decided to appropriate the legacies of B R Ambedkar”¹¹ and promised to give the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award in India, to Kanshi Ram, the founder of the BSP.¹²

However, in 2024, the SP’s supremo Akhilesh Yadav came up with the Pichde-Dalit-Alpsankhyak or Backward-Dalit-Minority alliance. The SP’s tactical ticket distribution backed its commitment to this social engineering. It gave tickets to 32 the OBCs, of whom only five were Yadavs, 16 Dalits, 10 upper-caste candidates and four Muslims.¹³ It also appointed Shyamlal Pal, an OBC, as state party president during the polls.¹⁴ Why then did the non-Jatav Dalit votes shift from the BSP to the INDIA bloc instead of gravitating towards the BJP?

The answer lies partly in the BJP’s own campaign strategy. The slogan of *Ab ki baar, 400 paar* (This time 400 seats and beyond) turned out to be counter-productive for the BJP. In February 2024, Modi announced on the floor of the parliament that his party was aiming to win 370 seats on its own and 400 with its allies.¹⁵ Subsequently, a few BJP leaders made statements that these numbers are needed to change the constitution. For instance, in March 2024, the BJP’s member of parliament from Karnataka, Anantkumar Hegde, said that the BJP needs a two-thirds majority to amend the constitution “and set right distortions and unnecessary additions made to it by the Congress”.¹⁶ Again, in April 2024, the BJP’s election

⁶ Prashant Jha, *How the BJP Wins: Inside India’s Greatest Election Machine* (Juggernaut Books, 2017), p. 107.

⁷ Ibid, p. 96.

⁸ Ibid, p. 113.

⁹ Ibid, Chapter 6.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 99.

¹¹ Sudha Pai, Avinash Kumar, “Understanding the BJP’s victory in Uttar Pradesh”, *Rise of Saffron Power* (Routledge India, 2018), pp. 111-129.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sanya Dhingra, “‘Threat’ to Constitution, Dalit-Muslim-OBC alliance — how SP won over Dalits in Uttar Pradesh & challenges ahead”, *The Print*, 9 June 2024, <https://theprint.in/politics/threat-to-constitution-dalit-muslim-obc-alliance-how-sp-won-over-dalits-in-up-challenges-ahead/2122837/>.

¹⁴ Shyamlal Yadav, Bhupendra Patel, “Disconnect on ground, ticket distribution, caste, jobs: How BJP lost the plot in Uttar Pradesh”, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ “370 seats for BJP, NDA to go 400 paar in Lok Sabha polls: PM Modi’s top quotes”, *The Times of India*, 5 February 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-replies-to-presidents-address-in-lok-sabha-key-quotes/articleshow/107430192.cms>.

¹⁶ “Anantkumar Hegde stirs another controversy by seeking two-third majority for BJP to amend Constitution”, *The Hindu*, 11 March 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/hegde-stirs-another-controversy-by-seeking-two-third-majority-for-bjp-to-amend-constitution/article67936332.ece>.

candidate from Rajasthan, Jyoti Mirdha, claimed that tough decisions need to be taken in the national interest “and for that we have to make constitutional amendments”.¹⁷

The Congress and the opposition were quick to catch on to this. The official Twitter handle of the Congress called out the BJP and said that the “BJP and PM Modi hate the constitution and democracy. By abolishing the constitution given by Babasaheb, [the] BJP wants to snatch away the rights of the people.”¹⁸ Consequently, the constitution became a key part of the election campaign, and opposition leaders made it a point to emphasise the need to save the constitution. The Congress’ leader, Rahul Gandhi, was seen at a number of election rallies holding a copy of the constitution.

In an earlier election for the Bihar Assembly in 2015, the constitution had also played a key part. In the run-up to the 2015 Bihar elections, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat had critiqued the politicisation of reservations and pitched for a committee to review it.¹⁹ Lalu Prasad Yadav, former chief minister of Bihar, was quick to respond and declared that if the BJP was to come back to power “it would end reservations”.²⁰ As a result, the election became an upper caste versus OBC election.²¹ The BJP was on the defensive. Modi himself reiterated the commitment to reservations but it did not work, and the BJP-led NDA was defeated in the elections.

Things in 2024 were similar. Though the BJP tried to distance itself from the allegations by the opposition, its counter-campaign²² and even the prime minister’s repeated mention of preserving²³ the constitution and trying to communalise,²⁴ the issue did not get enough traction. Yamini Iyer and Neelanjan Sircar argue that reservations, enshrined in the constitution as compensatory measures to address historical injustices, serve as a primary mobilisation tool for the lower caste groups to assert their representational claims.²⁵ Hence, the opposition’s campaign struck a chord with the electorate in 2024 as it did in Bihar in 2015. For instance, a Yadav farmer from Uttar Pradesh made it clear in an interview with Sircar and Iyer that “the constitution matters because it protects us...it gave us reservations. *Humein samvidhaan bachana hai* (the constitution must be protected).”²⁶ Therefore, we can

¹⁷ Hamza Khan, “Another BJP candidate’s remarks on ‘amending Constitution’ give ammo to Congress”, *The Indian Express*, 4 April 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bjp-candidates-remarks-on-amending-constitution-give-ammo-to-congress-9247529/>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Prashant Jha, *How the BJP Wins: Inside India’s Greatest Election Machine*, op. cit., p. 100.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² “BJP govt will never change Preamble of Constitution, reservation will remain: Rajnath Singh”, *The Hindu*, 5 May 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/bjp-govt-will-never-change-preamble-of-constitution-reservation-will-remain-rajnath-singh/article68142718.ece>.

²³ Amit Bhelari, Modi takes on the Opposition in Gaya, says even BR Ambedkar cannot change the Indian Constitution, *The Hindu*, 16 April 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/this-election-is-to-punish-those-who-are-against-constitution-pm-modi-at-gaya-rally/article68070968.ece>.

²⁴ “At Uttar Pradesh Rally, PM Modi Says Opposition Alliance Will Change Constitution, Give Reservation to Muslims”, *News 18*, 26 May 2024, <https://www.news18.com/elections/at-up-rally-pm-modi-says-opposition-alliance-will-change-constitution-give-reservation-to-muslims-8904580.html>

²⁵ Yamini Aiyer, Neelanjan Sircar, “The Constitution, a surprise entrant in poll battlefield”, *The Hindu*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-constitution-a-surprise-entrant-in-poll-battlefield/article68225687.ece>.

²⁶ Ibid.

reasonably conclude that the campaign of winning more than 400 seats was detrimental to the BJP as it allowed the INDIA to reach out to the backward communities and re-iterate its support to reservations while portraying the BJP as a change in the status quo.

Inflation, Unemployment and Anger on the Ground

There was anxiety about inflation and unemployment and there was anger on the ground. The CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey²⁷ is a testament to the fact that unemployment and price rise were major concerns of the voters. While 62 per cent of the respondents believed that it has become harder to find a job in the last five years, only 12 per cent said that it has become easier. Interestingly, 21 per cent of the respondents believed that the central government was at fault for this, 17 per cent believed that it was the state government's fault and 57 per cent believed that both governments were at fault. On the other hand, 71 per cent of the respondents believed that prices have increased in the past five years. On being asked, who was at fault, the responses were very similar to the ones on unemployment. One can argue that unemployment and inflation are issues in every election and that people criticising the government for it is not uncommon. However, things were different in the 2024 general elections. This was due to the prime minister and his party's denial of the issues.

Additionally, younger voters seemed to be disillusioned about the government's intention to resolve issues such as unemployment. For instance, a significant chunk of job seekers in India are government job aspirants. For such government jobs, there have been frequent leaks of examination papers.²⁸ Due to the leaks, there have been delays and cancellations of recruitment exams, which have frustrated job seekers and their families, and have further eroded public trust.²⁹ The vacuum left by the incumbent party's denial of these issues was capitalised on by opposition leaders Akhilesh and Rahul,³⁰ who repeatedly spoke about inflation and unemployment in their election rallies and also made these two issues a central narrative alongside the protection of the constitution. Furthermore, there was palpable discontent with the local members of parliament in Uttar Pradesh. Indeed, the BJP fielded 49 incumbent members of parliament in 2024 and only 22 managed to win. The BJP thought that Modi's face value alongside Yogi Adityanath's (Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister) would trump over the local factors, but this was not the case. On the contrary, out of the 21 new candidates, 10 ended up winning and showed a better performance than their incumbent counterparts.

²⁷ "Lokniti-CSDS 2024 pre-poll survey | Jobs, inflation key issues in 2024 Lok Sabha elections", *The Hindu*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/lokniti-csds-2024-pre-poll-survey-jobs-inflation-key-issues-in-2024-lok-sabha-elections/article68051581.ece>.

²⁸ Arvind Kumar, "2024 election mandate in Uttar Pradesh is more against Yogi than Modi", *The Print*, 5 June 2024, <https://theprint.in/opinion/2024-election-mandate-in-up-is-more-against-yogi-than-modi/2118370/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Rahul raises unemployment, paper leak issues", 21 February 2024, *Hindustan Times*, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/rahul-raises-unemployment-paper-leak-issues-101708457746196.html>.

Conclusion

The 2024 general elections in Uttar Pradesh signalled a resurgence of the opposition and a setback for the BJP in the state. Despite a strong hold over state politics over the last 10 years, the BJP failed to hold its ground. Its '*400 paar*' campaign evidently backfired, allowing the opposition to mobilise support around concerns about constitutional changes and social justice. Additionally, issues of inflation, unemployment and local dissatisfaction with the members of parliament further eroded the BJP's electoral prospects. The results also reflect the voter's concerns about constitutional integrity and social equity.

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