

ISAS Brief

No. 534 – 27 December 2017

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Elections in Gujarat:

A Close Win for the Bharatiya Janata Party

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved a hard fought victory in the Assembly elections in the western Indian State of Gujarat, which is also the home State of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. While the BJP did not achieve its goal of winning 150 seats in the 182-seat Assembly, it won its sixth successive term in the State. The Congress, under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, also received a boost since it gave the BJP a tough fight in the elections. The Gujarat results have important implications for the several State elections in 2018 and the general elections to the Lok Sabha in 2019.

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The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won the crucial Assembly elections in the Indian State of Gujarat, the home State of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, the verdict was much closer than expected. Though the BJP won 99 seats, giving it a clear majority in the 182-seat Assembly, it not only fell far short of its pre-election target of 150 seats, but also won 16 fewer seats than it did in the 2012 elections. The BJP's principal rival, the Congress, on the other hand, performed better than expected, winning 77 seats compared to its tally of 61 in 2012. In terms of the vote share, there was approximately a seven percentage point difference, with the

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BJP winning 49.1 per cent of the votes to the Congress' 42.4 per cent.² In 2012, the BJP won 48 per cent of the votes while the Congress had a vote share of 39 per cent.

The verdict in the State of Himachal Pradesh, where the elections were also held at the same time, expectedly went in favour of the BJP, which won a convincing 44 seats to 21 seats for the incumbent Congress, out of a total of 68 seats.

The BJP's sixth successive win in Gujarat was largely made possible by Modi's intense campaigning, which saw him address over 30 election rallies, and his enduring popularity in the State where he was chief minister from 2001 to 2014. The BJP's victory was also based on its organisational strength and campaign management under BJP president Amit Shah, who is also from Gujarat. The Congress' good showing was based on its strategic alliances with the Patidar, Dalit and Other Backward Classes (OBC) leaders, and, to a lesser extent, on the sustained campaign by its newly-appointed party president Rahul Gandhi.

Analysing the Numbers

The impact of Modi's campaigning on the elections result was critical. According to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies' post-poll survey, during the last two weeks of campaigning, the BJP surged ahead while the Congress lost significant ground. The poll also revealed that over 40 per cent of the voters decided on whom they would vote for in the last two weeks of campaigning, when Modi's campaign was in full swing. More than half of them said they voted for the BJP while only about 38 per cent voted for the Congress.³ It was also during the campaigning for the second phase of the elections on 14 December 2017 that Modi attempted to turn the attention away from core issues, such as the impact of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on traders and agrarian distress, to insults directed at him by the Congress politicians and rhetoric about Pakistan's interference in the Gujarat elections. That he succeeded in this respect was evident from the BJP doing much better in the second phase, compared to the first, in retaining seats that it had won in 2012.

² "General Election To Vidhan Sabha Trends & Result 2017", *Election Commission of India*, 18 December 2017. <http://www.ecireresults.nic.in>. Accessed on 23 December 2017.

³ "How Gujarat was won", Sanjay Kumar and Shreyas Sardesai, *The Hindu*, 19 December 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/how-gujarat-was-won/article21865196.ece>. Accessed on 22 December 2017.

One of the key features of the Gujarat verdict was the urban-rural divide in voting. The BJP won 48 of the urban constituencies in the State, compared to only 10 for the Congress, whereas in the rural constituencies, the Congress won 67 seats to the BJP's 51. The skew becomes apparent when one looks at where the BJP won most of its seats. It won 15 out of 20 seats in Ahmedabad, 9 out of 10 in Vadodara and 15 out of 16 in Surat. Indeed, the BJP's strike rate – proportion of seats won to contested – was 90 per cent in the urban constituencies compared to 44 per cent in the rural constituencies. While discontent over the GST and demonetisation was expected to play a role in Gujarat, Modi's popularity in urban Gujarat and pre-election changes to the GST regime allowed the BJP to retain its support base.

The Congress made the deepest inroads in Saurashtra in the southwestern part of the State, which was one of the centres of the Patidar or Patel agitation spearheaded by Hardik Patel. In 2012, the BJP won 30 of the 48 seats in Saurashtra. However, it only won 19 seats there in 2017. In contrast, the Congress' seat tally nearly doubled from 15 to 28 seats.

While the Congress' two allies, the OBC leader, Alpesh Thakore, and the Dalit activist, Jignesh Mevani, both of whom won from their constituencies, it was Hardik, supporting the Congress from the outside, who made the most impact on the election results. He succeeded in weaning away a large chunk of the Patel vote, especially the younger voters, from the BJP.

One of the striking features of the elections was the marginalisation of the Muslims, who constitute nearly 10 per cent of the population in Gujarat. Muslim candidates won only 1.6 per cent of the total votes, which was the lowest in the State since the elections held in 2002 after the Gujarat riots. While the BJP did not nominate a single Muslim candidate, the Congress nominated six out of whom three won.

Looking Ahead to the Coming Elections

The BJP would be satisfied at holding on to Gujarat despite falling way short of its predictions of crossing the 150-seat mark. The party will also take great strength from the fact that it is now in power in 19 States following the victories in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. It will look to further increasing its footprint in 2018. Four major States – Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya

Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – as well as three smaller northeastern States will go to elections in 2018.

One of the worries for the BJP would be the over reliance on Modi’s charisma to win every election. While Gujarat was particularly receptive to the prime minister, the other States might not be as enamoured of him four years into his tenure. Another concern for the BJP would be the rural discontent with the party, as evidenced in Gujarat.

The Congress can take heart from the stiff fight it gave the BJP in Modi’s home State. Like in Gujarat, the contests in 2018 in the bigger States will largely be a direct fight between the BJP and the Congress. This will be to the benefit of the Congress. Unlike Gujarat, however, the Congress will not have local allies to partner with in these States. It will have to build up an organisation and back local party leaders to counter the BJP’s well-oiled machinery. The Congress will also have to find ways to appeal to the urban voters who, at the moment, seem solidly behind Modi and the BJP. That will be two of the most important challenges before Rahul as he embarks on his term as party president.

The Gujarat results are an indication that the BJP might have to look beyond its traditional strongholds for the 2019 national elections. The BJP is unlikely to repeat its performance in the 2014 national elections in States like Gujarat where it won all 26 seats. That is why it will be looking at States, such as Odisha, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, to bolster its numbers in 2019.

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