



India Votes 2019

General Elections Analysis

Volume II, May 2019

This is the second volume in the General Elections 2019 analysis series from Chase India.

With elections in 426 of the 543 parliamentary constituencies now complete, some indicative trends are beginning to emerge which point to a scenario where the National Democratic Alliance may need few more partners to form the government at centre. There is little doubt that the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) is set to emerge as the single largest party but is could fall short of the half-way mark. In 2014, riding on the Narendra Modi wave, BJP secured 282 seats on its own.

It's important to note that Prime Minister Modi's popularity has not ebbed, which is the principal reason why the BJP will still perform well in the on-going elections. However, consolidation of the anti-Modi vote in Uttar Pradesh where bitter rivals Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, have formed an alliance to defeat the BJP, the going is proving to be tough.

The Uttar Pradesh Challenge

The BJP had won 71/80 seats in UP in 2014 with approximately 43% vote share while SP and BSP got roughly 22% and 19% vote share respectively. A mere adding up of their vote share would, according to pollsters, have got BJP down to 35 seats. The assessment after four phases of polling in the state is that the alliance is making an impact on the government. There is aggressive voting by minority communities and dominant OBC groups against the BJP.

At the same time, the BJP has over the past five years consolidated its disparate vote mix which largely comprised upper castes and smaller backward caste groups. The latter essentially moved away from the BSP owing to their poor economic status and unsatisfactory patronage. There were many unpatronised smaller caste groups with similar economic profile which voted for BJP as an alternative to BSP and the strong arm tactics of the SP.

BJP's Muslim appeasement line in 2014 also helped combine the pro-Hindu plank with Modi's Gujarat model 'vikas' pitch. In 2019, Modi is back with a similar pitch. But this time the BJP is showcasing some of the Centre's social sector schemes, particularly Ujjwala, Saubhagya, PM Awas Yojna and Ayushman Bharat. All these interventions directly target the poor caste groups, which has morphed into a single poor class vote group for the BJP. This transformation was tested successful in the 2017 UP state elections. Further, 10% reservation for economically backward classes was essentially aimed at consolidating the poor among the upper caste groups, who have government employment concerns.

So, the consolidation of votes in both camps has made UP a close fight. The BJP, however, is counting on Modi's cult-like popularity among the first time voters, who could tilt the balance in many constituencies. The voting percentages in the first five phases in UP have remained similar to 2014, which means that in absolute terms the number of people who cast their vote this time has proportionately increased. The BJP is inferring this as clear indication of first-time voters coming out and voting for Modi.

The extent of loss that the BJP may face from its handsome number of 71 seats in UP due to the SP-BSP alliance holds the key to determining how far below the party may be from the 272 mark.

The Expansion in Bengal

The BJP did factor this in its strategy and focused on increasing its tally in the 120 seats it contested but did not win in 2014. Nearly half of these seats are in West Bengal and Odisha. The BJP has positioned itself as the natural challenger to Mamata Banerjee and Naveen Patanaik in both these States. In other words, building a campaign around Modi, the BJP has edged out the Left in West Bengal and the Congress in Odisha. In fact, it has openly enrolled the services of many local leaders who left both these parties.

BJP president Amit Shah is clear that he has nothing against politicians changing parties in election time but is opposed to those who do so after winning a contest. This principle was applied first in 2014 in Assam, where present day BJP strategist Himanta Biswa Sarma quit the Congress to join the Saffron Party. He brought considerable talent from the Congress with him. Sarma also proved useful with his network among other regional parties in the different parts of the North-East. The BJP also defeated the Left in Tripura, giving itself a chance of winning the two Lok Sabha seats in the State.



A similar approach is visible in West Bengal, where former Trinamul leader Mukul Roy has joined the BJP as is now the key strategist against Mamata. The BJP has thereafter successfully taken many TMC rebels within its fold at every level. This helped the BJP perform well in the Panchayat elections, which in turn provided the platform for the BJP to challenge Mamata Banerjee.

For the first time, elections in West Bengal are happening across all seven phases of the general election. It started with North Bengal, where the BJP was considered the strongest. Each phase has been marked with increased security. By now, there are 600-plus companies of para military forces in West Bengal. This deployment is the second largest after Jammu & Kashmir. The reason for this is the spate of complaints on incidents of political violence, largely against the TMC.

As a result, the EC has posted a Special Police Observer for the first time in the state. He has effected many transfers with the view to disrupt any collusion between local police and politicians. The voter turnout has been in the vicinity of 75-80% which is same as 2014.

Unlike in UP, the BJP has seemed like gaining in every phase in West Bengal. There are assessments that suggest a surge for Modi of the kind one saw in Western UP in 2014. The splintering of the Muslim vote between TMC, Left and the Congress has further improved BJP's chances as a polarized environment also lends itself to a consolidation of the Hindu vote coupled with the aspirational vote that Modi seems to be inspiring in the State. The gain in West Bengal will be critical to BJP's plan to compensate for potential losses elsewhere.

For a slightly deeper understanding, it may be useful to pick up the other key states – minus UP, West Bengal, the North-East and Odisha that have already been discussed -- in bunches

BUNCH #1 (Delhi, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Chandigarh)

The BJP appears strong in this entire zone, except Punjab where Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has managed to hold sway.

So, while the Congress is in pole position set to bag 80% of the seats in Punjab, the story in Haryana is just the opposite. The non-Jat vote appears firmly with the BJP and there's possible three-way split in the Jat vote which former Congress CM Bhupinder Singh Hooda is hoping to consolidate. Ground reports suggest that this is not how it has played on the ground.

The inability of the Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress to stitch an alliance in Delhi has come as a blessing in disguise for the BJP as the opposition vote is now like to split both ways. The situation in the hill states of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh remains positive for the BJP. Overall, the BJP will do well in this bunch.

BUNCH #2 (Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh)

This clutch broadly covers 139 seats, of which BJP (including its ally Shiv Sena had won 130. However, in December, the BJP lost assembly elections in Rajasthan, MP and Chhattisgarh. While reports indicate that Modi will make a significant impact in these states for the Lok Sabha polls, the broader assessment is that even then BJP may shed some seats. What's clear is it's unlikely to be a sudden slide against Modi, except for Chhattisgarh where the Congress swept the State elections and continues to look good.

BUNCH#3 (Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala)

Barring Karnataka, bulk of these are non-BJP states. In fact, at one level, there's a clear North-South Divide in these elections. Modi's speeches which are central to his politics and public persona are not a factor in most of these state, which may vote on local concerns, largely inclined to regional parties.

In Karnataka, however, the BJP is up against the Congress-JD (S) alliance. This may again be effective but not as potent as the one in UP. The state has in recent history become a three-cornered struggle. The fact is that former PM H D Deve Gowda's JD (S) has its base in the Mysore-Mandya region, where its traditional rivals are the Congress, not the BJP. So, while a clean sweep may not be in the cards, the fact is the BJP may end up with some bonus numbers due to the fast growing resentment within and against the State government.



It's important to note that in case the BJP is short of few seats to form the government in the Centre, it can potentially engineer a split in the Cong-JD (S) alliance by agreeing to let Gowda's son H D Kumaraswamy remain the CM.

The 42 seats of the erstwhile united Andhra Pradesh are likely to be captured by two regional parties -- TRS and YSR Congress. So, their respective heads K Chandrashekhara Rao and Nara Chandrababu Naidu are likely to emerge as potential kingmakers in Delhi.

Looking Ahead

The remaining two phases in the general election are, however, absolutely crucial for the BJP. It needs to bag 80-90% of the seats on offer to narrow its distance from the half-way mark. And conversely, if it suffers a major loss, it could find itself in a rather difficult situation to run a coalition with Modi as the PM. Even if such an arrangement is reached, the nature of that government would be qualitatively different to 2014. The curious part would be how PM Modi, who has never in his career run a coalition government, approach such a reality.

But even more important to this will be the question of who will be the Number 2 in such an outcome. With reports indicating that BJP president Amit Shah is looking to enter the cabinet, a fierce competition may emerge on who should occupy this coveted spot as coalition management will prize skill to showcase.

Also, among allies, Bihar CM Nitish Kumar may fancy his role as a NDA coordinator like his mentor George Fernandes was to former PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

But for any of these scenarios to play out, the BJP will have to lose big in UP and gain less in West Bengal. If it loses big in UP but gains big in West Bengal, then too a coalition possibility may emerge but one that Modi may find easier to manage. Either ways, the extent of the slide in UP holds the key and going by feedback until now, Modi will have to pull out the stops in the next two phases to create a wave in the Varanasi-Gorakhpur political catchment. That may just make the difference between winning and leading for the BJP.



About Chase India

Chase India is India's leading public policy research and advisory firm with growing practices in healthcare, food & beverage, technology, sustainable environment and climate change. The firm provides advisory services to organisations for mitigating business risk through insight based policy advocacy campaigns.

Çhase Dialogue is the flagship policy discussion platform that brings together experts from the field of technology, health, sustainability, environment and climate change to discuss issues of pressing concern. The team at Chase India comprises of experts with extensive experience spanning across regulatory and industry bodies, government organisations, academia and media, in roles engaged at various levels of public policy. Chase India is a WE Communications Group company.



Manash K Neog
Executive Vice President & Co-founder

D: + 91 11 4662 5516

M: + 91 9811307549

E: manash@chase-india.com

Disclaimer

Chase Avian Communications Private Limited nor (referred to as "Chase India"), any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, nor any of their contractors, subcontractors or their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or any third party's use or the results of such use of any information, apparatus, product, or process disclosed, or represents that its use would not infringe privately owned rights. Reference herein to any specific organization, commercial product, process, or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise, does not necessarily constitute or imply its endorsement, recommendation, or favoring by the Organizer or any agency thereof or its contractors or subcontractors. The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Chase India or any agency thereof.

chase|india