

2017 Legislative Assembly election results: Experts react

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Yesterday the results were announced for five legislative elections held in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa. **Mukulika Banerjee**, **Surajit Bhalla**, **Meghnad Desai** and **Maitreesh Ghatak**, who were at LSE for the fourth [LSE SU India Forum](#), gathered to discuss key trends and features emerging from the results.

Mukulika Banerjee: We're at LSE as the results are coming in. In Punjab it's very clear the Congress has won, while in UP there's been a huge wave in favour of BJP and they've won more than 300 out of 403 seats. They've also won convincingly in Uttarakhand. In Manipur and Goa the results are more divided. Congress has got more seats in both, but not a majority. So that's the context, what are your first thoughts on these results?

Meghnad Desai: By winning Punjab Congress has registered that it has a possibility of reforming itself if it allows individual states the autonomy to fight elections. It shouldn't be centralised. The victory is a real saviour for Congress in Punjab, whereas in UP the result confirms what the last election showed, namely that Congress has very little support on the ground in UP and the state is now lost to them.

The other thing I find interesting is that BJP has now adopted the Congress tactic of having the leader campaign everywhere. Congress did this with Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the BJP are now using PM Modi. There are very few local leaders in BJP who can win elections – which is why they have not won in Goa. Manohar Parrikar was not good enough.

What these results do mean is that 2019 is now secure, there is no doubt that it will be difficult for any anti-BJP coalition to form. This is especially the case because AAP did so badly: they didn't get many seats in Punjab, and they didn't get any in Goa.

Surajit Bhalla: Indian politics is going the way of politics everywhere. It is becoming much more presidential and about individual leaders, rather than about Chief Ministerial candidates and so on. That's one distinct shift in the Indian polity which has risen with Modi, although if Modi hadn't been there we would have had to invent an alternative because it's the direction politics has been moving in.

I travelled quite a bit in UP and have met the leaders. Congress has many problems but one of the major issues is that Rahul Gandhi is not interested in politics. It is like a mother wanting her son to be a dentist, when all he wants to do is be a rockstar, or a physicist. All of us around this table live and breathe politics, he doesn't.

This is the existential dilemma the Congress has to face up to. If you had a dynastic Congress leader who was really interested in politics it would be a different story. But Rahul Gandhi just doesn't feel it, and India's moved on from dynastic politics. It's 2017! To think that one family should have shaped the Congress party from when it was founded in 1885, and still be in contention today.

The economist Irving Fisher once said "from shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations". The Congress Party has had its three generations, it's now time for somebody else. Modi is a brilliant politician and he's showing leadership. We had some of that leadership with Narasimha Rao, and with Vajpayee, but they were hampered by coalition politics. Modi is even better, he is a genuine article. He provides a vision that has been completely lacking.

Maitreesh Ghatak: Modi's performance has been quite impressive given what the early predictions about UP. I think what is unique and brilliant about him is that he has grabbed a certain narrative and carved a certain role for himself, albeit one which is almost orthogonal to the objective realities about the economic conditions or institutions.

Let me be clear about what I mean. The only analogy I would draw between Trump and Modi – and I draw it with

some caution – is Donald Trump assumed a narrative and persona that some unjust things are happening, Americans are not being treated well in their own country and he's the one to fix it. Modi has essentially, through his oratory and command over certain symbols, managed an odd combination of a Hindu resentment nationalist narrative (which was always there), alongside pro-capitalism and some of the leftist rhetoric that the ordinary Indians have to be uplifted.

He also reflects the new aspirational India. There was a time where we were good guys, educated and polite guys, always a bit deferential. Now there is huge aspiration which you can see from the buzz of the Indian students here at LSE and many other universities. You might trace it back to the moment when cricket player Sourav Ganguly took off his shirt and swung it around his head in celebration of a victory at Lords in 2002. One of the reasons the move was so popular all across India was that was the moment that said 'no more Mr Nice Guy'. Different people have different visions for what this might amount to substantively. The fact that India has now 'arrived' and it's impatient, we want to really go up a gear, where we can dictate terms on the world stage.

Modi has somehow combined all those elements. Coming back to UP, based on all the predictions I knew that he was going to win comfortably, as in 2014. I often disagree with Surajit, but I always said he was right about the size of the 2014 margins, they seemed so high but he was closer than many of the other forecasts. It is in some ways a classic case: the Indian voters are in the middle of a movie starring an Amitabh Bachchan-like figure, and therefore in UP all he needed to do was show up and say, "I'm Amitabh Bachchan, the movie has only just started, you need to give me more time to finish it". Indians don't like short films! That's the reality, you try to make a half hour film, it will flop. We like 3-hour blockbusters and Modi has projected himself to that lead character.

That said, at some point substance and outcome has to catch up. In 2019 certain concrete things have to be there, whether that is digital infrastructure, growth, jobs and so on. Otherwise, in a democracy these characters will not have a shelf life of more than 10 years. On the flipside, a decade in itself is impressive. Starting where we did in 2013, many of us did not see this coming.

Mukulika Banerjee: We've talked about leadership, we've talked about big trends. I just want to talk about voters. For me this particular election, especially the contrast between the different states, shows how the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah combination is absolutely key to understanding the success in UP.

This is an aspirational India and Modi has tapped into that. But at the same time, the booth management that has been achieved in the Uttar Pradesh elections is extraordinary. Today Sambit Patra was on television saying very clearly, "the secret was when people come to Amit Shah and say 'I want to work for the BJP', his first question will be 'which booth can you help with?'"

This is the level of micromanagement in our elections today. It is not master strategists from universities abroad, it is about micromanagement of every booth, drawing on booth-level data that is freely available through the Election Commission of India, so parties can monitor how people are voting. This worries me as an Indian citizen because the secrecy of the ballot is seriously compromised as a result. It is not surprising that the BJP – and two or three other smaller parties – have resisted the introduction of the [Totaliser](#). You can see the benefits of not having mixing of ballots any more because you can monitor booth by booth who's voting.

So you have the big messaging on top and then you have the micromanagement of voters on the ground. Today I want to know what voters in UP felt like when they thought were exercising their vote. How free are Indian voters today in really making up their minds?

Meghnad Desai: The only practical thing I know is how to fight elections, I've fought them in the UK context in my local Labour Party constituency in Islington South where I was chairman for six years. Election fighting is not about the leader. It is the question of ground troops who will do the hard work, they'll go and knock on doors street by street, household by household. BJP has them, partly because it is much more a cadre based party, and partly because of RSS – it's what RSS people do. Congress used to have those troops, the Left used to be cadre-based,

they no longer are. Ultimately individual political workers have to go and get the vote out.

Maitreesh Ghatak: As economists when we talk about a firm's performance we talk about how you need a brand, labour, capital, and infrastructure. I would therefore not talk about the leadership and the booth management as mutually exclusive. The narrative and brand is essential, but you also need the organisational capital and the strategic acumen, and a certain ruthless winning mindset. In UP, the BJP were able to bring that all together.

One last comment, it is always tempting to say "this is the new thing, this hasn't happened before" but there are fluctuations and cycles. Anti-incumbency is a factor, and one which we have seen before. It might offer a simpler hypothesis for the results in Punjab, UP, and Goa too. It could be a case of the more things change, the more they remain the same: anti-incumbency is an important factor, and one that we've seen before.

Cover image: Voters queuing at a polling booth in Uttar Pradesh in the 2009 Lok Sabha election. Credit: Public.Resource.Org CC BY 2.0

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