



Gujarat 2017: BJP's Achilles Heel or Congress' Catalyst for Redemption? – Way Forward

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Executive Summary

On December 18, the Election Commission of India declared the results for State Legislature elections that were held in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing comfortable majorities in both the states to form a government. While the BJP's victory in Himachal Pradesh could be attributed to the alternating incumbency-anti-incumbency factor that has been observed in the state since 1993, the victory in Gujarat was the most-awaited 'litmus test' for the party's performance. This was especially the case, given the conventional perception of the state being a citadel for the BJP, coupled with the need for Prime Minister Modi to ensure a comfortable victory in his native state of Gujarat to emphasise his continued popularity among the Indian populace.

Out of the 182 electoral seats in the state, the BJP managed to win 99 seats, a descent from the 115 that it had secured in the 2012 state assembly elections, while the primary opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC)-led coalition secured 81 seats. Incidentally, the BJP managed to increase its vote share from that of 2012, despite a decrease in the total number of seats, with the party securing 49.1 percent of the total votes compared to its tally of 47.9 percent in 2012. However, the interesting factor with regard to the Gujarat elections remains the sentimental link the BJP shares with the state. Additionally, it also includes the fact that the election results have indicated a below-par performance for the party compared to the elections during the last 22 years, when the party has been able to sustain power in the state.

At a time when BJP Party President Amit Shah had declared a potential victory with over 150-seats, settling for 99 seats indicates a political trend that may be reflective of the prevalent mood in the country regarding the party. In that sense, despite the BJP and its allies securing a power position in 19 out of the country's 29 states, it is significant to understand if the Gujarat elections are a bellwether for the potential trend that India might witness during the state elections in 2018 and the 2019 general elections. Coinciding with this trend is an increasing indication regarding the growing faith on Rahul Gandhi, the INC's Party President, as an able opposition leader. The fact

that the INC managed to make inroads into the BJP bastion at a time when the party has appeared to be at its weakest in terms of the number of seats in itself signals a potential sense of change in the political arena of India. With that in mind, it is significant to understand if the renewed interest in the INC as an able governing alternative is correlational to party President Rahul Gandhi's experimental strategies, as was seen in Gujarat.

All in all, the BJP's diminished victory and the INC's perceived psychological win over the BJP will definitely be reflected on the parties' respective strategies for the general elections. In such a case, both parties are at a juncture to reinvent themselves to stay relevant in national politics at a time when social media as a tool has been seen to be responsible to mould public opinions overnight.



BJP supporters celebrating after party's victory in Assembly elections on December 18

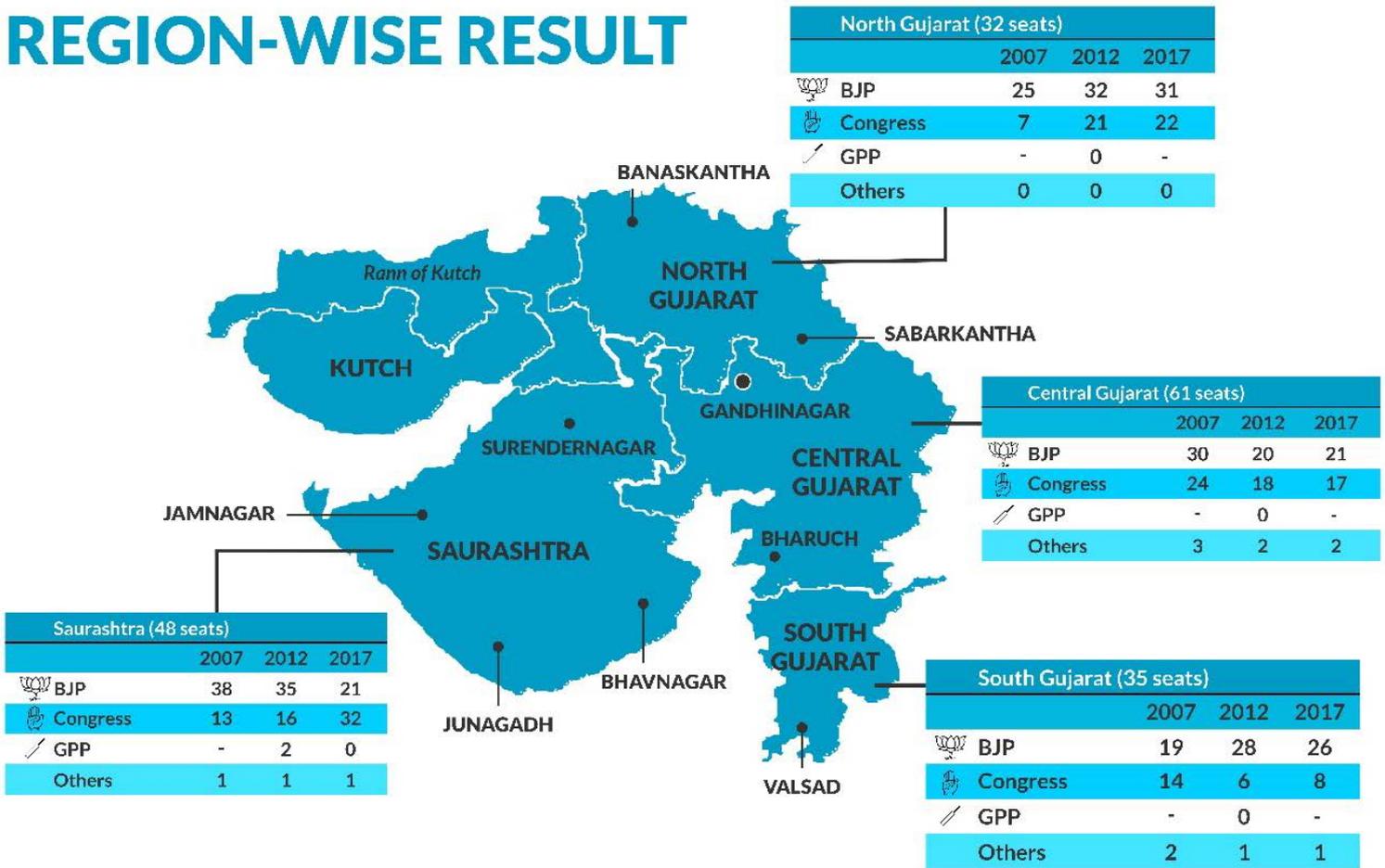
BJP's Win: A Psychological Defeat?

Securing less than ten seats more than the majority mark of 92, while the BJP ensured its sixth consecutive victory in the state of Gujarat, one of the primary underlying arguments regarding the elections has been about the victory actually being a 'psychological defeat' for the party. This has especially been the case due to the sustained pride in Gujarat being the BJP's bastion and the state being the 'model' for development as was pioneered by former Chief Minister and incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The party's campaign included Shah's shadow micro-management and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's blitzkrieg roadshow campaign across the state raking his Gujarati identity and *asmita* (pride) in a bid to ensure the local electorate's support at a time of ostensible disenchantment with the ruling party. Shah's strategic calculus for campaign management included measures that were aimed to secure the support of the numerically strong OBC community in the state, especially because of the Patel community's disenchantment with the government as was seen during the Patidar agitation. The aim to split the 27 seats concentrated with Scheduled Tribes and make the party a favoured one among a community that has traditionally voted for the Congress also worked for the BJP. Lastly, by supporting independent candidates in regions that may have vacillated, Shah envisioned a strategy that would primarily deny victory to the INC. Put together, these measures point to the BJP's attempt to facilitate victory by strategically manipulating electoral voting.

The loss of incumbent cabinet ministers to newcomers representing the Congress party most importantly underlines the 'psychological defeat' for the BJP. Additionally, the party's poor showing among the state's rural masses, with only 55 of the total 127 odd rural and semi-urban seats compared to that of Congress' 68 is indicative of the waning popularity of the party among distressed farmers as they perceive the Prime Minister's economic policies to be favouring the entrepreneurs and rich class more than the farmers.

REGION-WISE RESULT



Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Indian National Congress (Congress)

Gujarat Parivartan Party (GPP)

Source: CSDS-Firstpost

Defeat in Unjha - The Beginning of the End for the Modi Era?

Despite Prime Minister Modi's emphatic speeches underlining Gujarati *Asmita*, one of the pronounced losses that contributes to the idea of the party's psychological defeat in the elections is the party's loss in the state's Unjha. Unjha is a constituency in the Mehsana district and houses Vadnagar, the Prime Minister's native town. Congress candidate Asha Patel won the constituency with a comfortable margin of 19,000 votes against incumbent Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Narayan Patel in a change of trends from the results in 2012. Mehsana was at the heart of the Patidar agitation in 2015 against the government and the defeat may be perceived as a reflection of the antagonistic sentiments among the resident Patel community against the government. This further assumes significance due to the ineffectiveness of Prime Minister Modi's native identity to be able to sway the perceivably negative opinion.

The BJP's discernibly diminished victory during the Gujarat elections can be attributed to a number of factors apart from the seeming disenchantment with the incumbent party's policies. One of the most significant factors that may have catalysed a change in the political trends have been the seeming popularity rise of independent candidates such as Hardik Patel, Jignesh Mevani and Alpesh Thakore, who did not just win their respective seats but have seemingly been able to drive public opinion among their native influential communities in the state. The ability of the Congress to exploit the rural distress enough to facilitate an edge, translating it into significant victories also forms part of the various factors that appears to have conspicuously undermined the party's position and clout in the state, thus affecting the results. While these are significant factors that may continue to influence voter behaviour, given Gujarat's identification with the Prime Minister, addressal of the many grievances that the voters have voiced against the government may just enable a shift back of the voters' loyalties to the BJP. In that sense, it is significant to understand that, as such, the election results may not be a glimpse into the political trends that may be part of the larger political thought ahead of the 2019 general elections.

In that context, it would be presumptuous to say that the Prime Minister’s popularity or the BJP’s clout has been completely undercut by the opposition due to the marginal victory. The results are likely to have been a momentary disenchantment with the BJP’s policies and just reflective of the same in a bid to drive the party to adopt more favourable policies. Despite these factors and the BJP’s ‘diminished’ victory, one of the most significant trends that emerged during the Gujarat elections were the Congress’ ability to make inroads and secure victories in regions that were traditionally not their bastions. Also, one of the significant trends that were observed were the party’s extremely marginal losses, an indication of the party’s ability to have emerged as the majority party in the absence of BJP strategies to ensure that. Comprehending the Congress’ strategy and their ability to be an able opposition to a stronger BJP over the coming months and years remains relevant.

REGION-WISE VOTING IN GUJARAT

REGIONS	2017	2012	GAIN/LOSS
RURAL	98	98	
 BJP	38	47	-9
 INC	55	46	9
 NCP	1	2	-1
 BTP	2	0	2
IND	2	1	1
 GPP	0	1	-1
 JD (U)	0	1	-1
SEMI-URBAN	31	31	
 BJP	17	20	-3
 INC	14	10	4
 GPP	0	1	-1
URBAN	53	53	
 BJP	44	48	-4
 INC	9	5	4

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

Indian National Congress (Congress)

Gujarat Parivartan Party (GPP)

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)

Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP)

Janata Dal United (JD (U))

Independent (IND)

Source: Firstpost

Congress 'Defeat' - Rahul Gandhi - A Force to Reckon with?

One of the most significant differences with the political parties' campaigns in the state were the BJP's emphasis on evoking sentiments and identity politics while the Congress' sustained emphasis on distancing itself from its traditional pro-Muslim identity in a largely Hindu state. The Congress' attempt to adopt policies that were perceived as largely characteristic of cadre-based parties such as the BJP became testament to the party's attempt to reach out to the grassroots masses. These attempts are seen to have translated into votes for the party with the emphatic victories in rural regions of the Saurashtra as well as north Gujarat belt. The Gujarat elections came amid a period when Rahul Gandhi was expected to take over as the President of the INC. In that sense, a victory or even ensuring a marginal upward trend in its performance in BJP's traditional bastion was assumed to be able to give Gandhi's leadership an impetus that the party needs ahead of the 2019 general elections.

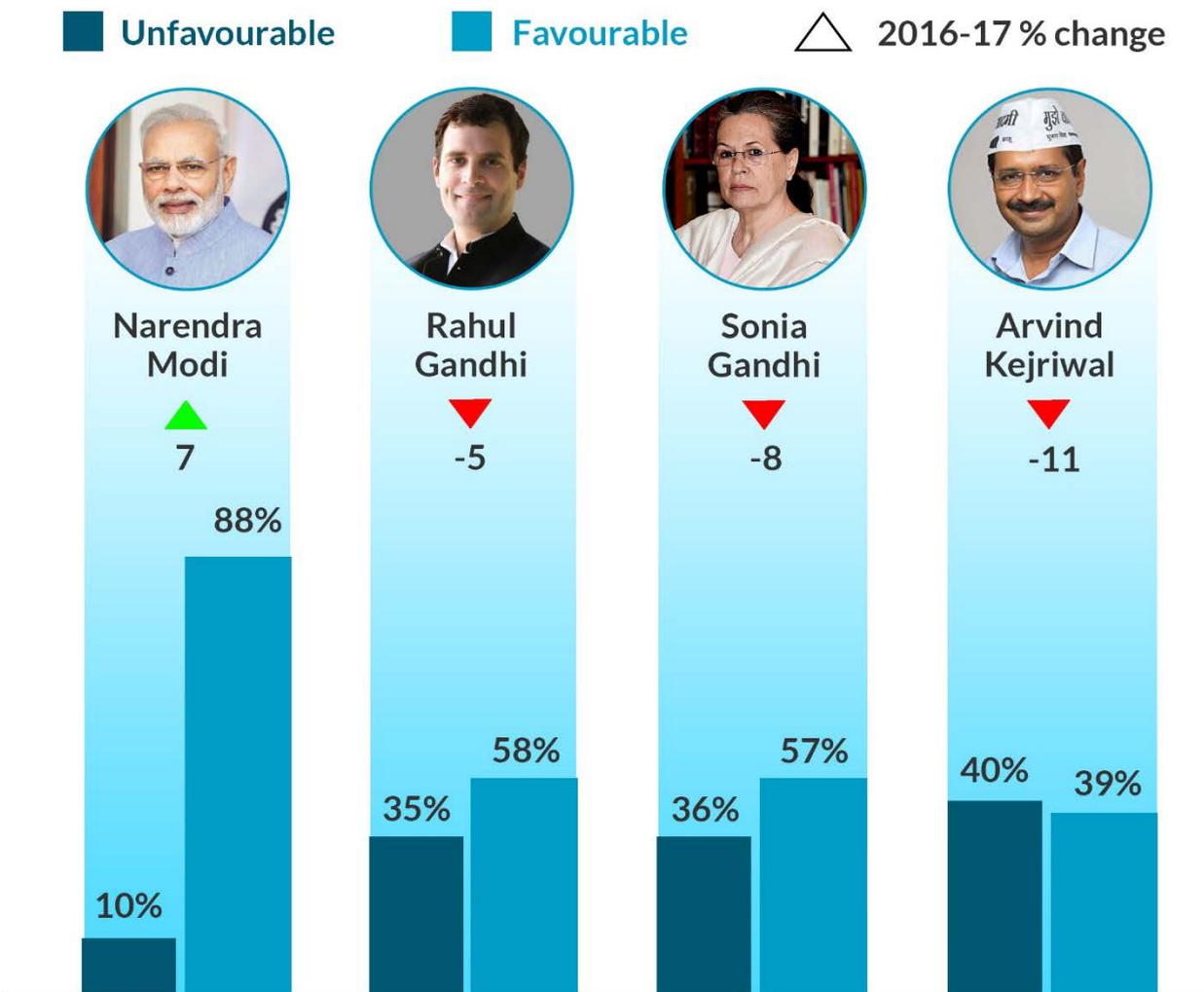
At a time when the incumbent BJP had pretty much written off Rahul Gandhi as an able opposition leader while deriding his personality and personal choices, the Gujarat elections witnessed him assuming a political persona by reaching out to distressed masses in the state and strategically managing the elections. The ability of the young leader to be able to consolidate an anti-BJP coalition by bringing together Hardik Patel, leader of the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), and Alpesh Thakore, an OBC leader, has been widely lauded. This is especially the case as the Patidar-led PAAS demands' to be inducted into the OBC list for reservations is incongruent with the OBC community, with the community opposing any such move due to the Patels' likelihood to undercut the reservation that is already guaranteed to them. In that regard, facilitating a working coalition against the BJP was a strategic move that does seem to have paid off for the Congress party during the elections.

The INC reportedly lost at least eight seats in the Gujarat elections due to numerous independent or other party candidates who were natives and split the votes that could have enabled a victory for the Congress party. In that context, while this is an indication

of the strategy adopted by the BJP leadership, it also underlines the Congress party's likelihood of securing a majority, especially as the margin of victories for one in three seats have been identified to have been 5 percent or lower.

It remains to be seen if Rahul Gandhi can use the momentum that the Congress, in general, and him, in particular, have achieved following the Gujarat elections to translate into popularity and subsequently votes during the Legislative Assembly elections in the state of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka in 2018. However, one of the most important strategies adopted by the Congress to field independent candidates in a bid to ensure its relevance in the state may just turn the tables again for the party during the upcoming elections.

Popularity Ratings of Leaders among Indians



Source: PEW Survey

Political Stage for 2018-19 - BJP's likely Need to Reinvent itself amid Anti-BJP Coalition

While the BJP leadership as well as national media has been emphasizing on the party's expansion of its reign over 19 out of the country's 29 states with the victory in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, the hard-fought campaign in Gujarat was indicative of the settling-in of an anti-incumbency sentiment among the electorate. The party leadership's need to have supported Independent candidates in order to have secured marginal victories in many constituencies are indicative of the need for strategy even in a state that has been a bastion of the BJP for over two decades now.

The BJP is facing a period when local as well as national opposition parties are attempting to come together, despite their ideological differences, on the basis of an anti-BJP platform. In such a scenario, if the Congress party, just as it did during the Gujarat elections, is able to strategise effectively while playing their cards right with strong regional parties in various states may be able to project themselves as an able alternative amid anti-incumbent sentiments among the country's population, especially rural. Apart from the BJP's recent win in Uttar Pradesh, the party failed to secure a victory over the Congress during the Punjab Assembly elections in February 2017, thus indicating a likely rural-urban distinction in the perception of BJP's performance. With a large section of the country's population being in the rural pockets of the country, the Congress' ability to strategise in a manner of exploiting rural distress may work in favour of the anti-BJP consolidation envisioned ahead of the 2019 elections.

According to a Pew Research that was conducted in February-March 2017 and the results of which were declared in November, nine out of ten Indians reportedly held a favourable opinion of Prime Minister Modi and two-thirds of those surveyed believed that he was taking the country into the right direction. But the credibility of the survey comes into question due to the lack of clarity regarding the background of the survey participants. One of the most significant arguments has been that although demonetisation and the implementation of the contentious Goods and Services Tax has invoked a sense of displeasure among the country's urban and semi-urban sections,

these sections still believe in the international economic indicators that promise a growth story.

Given the distress among the numerically significant rural population, which may consequently affect the broad electoral results across the country, the BJP needs a strategy that reinvents itself as a party for all and not just the urban elite. This is especially relevant as out of the four states that is up for elections in 2018, three states have incumbent BJP governments with anti-incumbency and rural distress likely playing major spoilers in deciding the victor. With Rajasthan facing the incumbency-anti-incumbency trends and Karnataka banking on incumbent Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's popularity to enable positive trends for the Congress, the BJP cannot assume these state elections to be a foregone conclusion, especially following the nature of the win in Gujarat.

Winning over the rural electorate, thinking ahead to stem the significance of local independent candidates and being able to undermine the traditional support base of the Congress, which may believe in the new and young Congress leadership are likely to be significant characteristics for the BJP to reinvent itself ahead of the upcoming elections. Furthermore, the tendency of the Indian electorate to also lean toward untried ideas and candidates may just work in favour of the INC amid a promising alternative in Rahul Gandhi.

All in all, the Gujarat elections reflect a healthy trend for the Indian democracy with the likely resurgence of a capable INC under Gandhi, thus undermining a one-dimensional polity that seemed to be emerging under incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the last three years since the BJP came to power in 2014.

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