Gujarat 2017: BJP's Achilles Heel or Congress' Catalyst for Redemption? - Key Players

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

One of the states that has had relevance in deciding the country's political future traditionally has been Gujarat, the native state of incumbent chief minister Narendra Modi. Gujarat, especially with its perceived model of economic development, since two decades now has been a bastion for the BJP and the epitome of pride for Narendra Modi. A bastion that was one of the key factors invoking BJP's politics of development and on the basis of which the party campaigned and subsequently won the 2014 general elections. In that regard, the state can be seen as being an unadorned 'first among equals' that has captured the imagination of the electorate as well as the attention of India watchers' abroad. Keeping that in mind, at a time when the BJP seeks to initiate its campaign targeting the 2019 general elections and fighting the anti-incumbency factor, the 2017 Gujarat elections may well be the bellwether that sets the framework for the political future of the country over the next two years.

Given the significance of the elections in Gujarat for the overall political climate of the country in the long-run, the following series of analyses will be an attempt to understand the micro as well as macro factors that are likely to be catalysts in shaping the upcoming elections that are slated to be held on December 9 and 14. For a state whose cardinal reason for supporting the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the past years was development, caste and religion has emerged as an important factor in the 2017 elections. A state whose electoral victory for the BJP was a foregone conclusion over the past two decades is witnessing canvassing by two ideologically opposite leaders who are attempting to appease an electorate that is mostly comprised of traders, businessmen and farmers.

The following report will be an initial analysis of the most significant actors who stand to hold a sway over the result of the elections, encompassing the country's PM, the primary leader of the opposition in the country and the possible wild cards in the fray. Understanding the approach and role of each of these actors singularly prior to comprehending the collective strategy of each of the parties', as well as their psyche will likely also give an insight into the self-perceived power position held by these actors and the populist perception about the same.

Profiling key players in the Gujarat elections

In October 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi during a rally in the capital city of Gandhinagar stated that "*Hoon Vikas Chu, Hoon Gujarat Chu*" loosely translating into "I am Development, I am Gujarat". This statement by the PM asserting his native identity underscores the attempt by the country's leader to invoke his continued sense of belonging to the state before the elections. Keeping in mind the sizeable trading and business community in the state and the possible impact the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) has had along with the Demonetisation program of November 2016, this invoking of the native identity is likely to assuage the concerns of Gujarat's population regarding PM Modi's continued commitment to the state. The following section will analyse how the Indian PM has tried to maintain his position as the citizen of the state while being the country's primary representative.

Narendra Modi : Gujarat's son yet again?

As the campaigning for the first phase of elections wound down on December 7, people across 89 out of a total 182 constituencies, primarily in Saurashtra and South Gujarat, are set to vote on December 9. The districts' going to polls include the diamond hub of Surat that has traditionally been a BJP bastion as well as constituencies from the Saurashtra region, including Rajkot and Junagadh among others. On December 7, during a rally in Surat, PM Narendra Modi, referring to a statement by a senior leader of the opposition party, Indian National Congress calling him "*Neech*" (vile) stated that "People will answer the Congress party through the ballot box". This statement during a campaign referred to as the "*Gujarat Vikas Rally*" underscores the PM's attempt to invoke the sense of identification as the 'son of the soil' and the righteous indignation that the native population should feel on his behalf, consequently denying the opposition victory in the state.

Narendra Modi's 'Gujarat Model of Development' was seen as the reason for the 2014 election victory and the 2017 Gujarat elections appears to be an example that is again running on the Modi platform, rather than the BJP platform. This may particularly be the case due to BJP Party President Amit Shah not being seen as charismatic in relation to Modi or due to the attempt by the BJP to capitalise on the proven record of development under Modi in Gujarat. Furthermore, due to Shah's perceived ineffective leadership during the Patidar agitation of 2015 for reservation by their inclusion in the Other Backward Classes by the Patel community and the consequent disenchantment against Shah among the community that was largely seen as a presumed BJP support group, PM Modi has largely assumed the mantle as the vanguard of the BJP campaign.

For the first time in the last 22 years of BJP rule, anti-incumbency appears to be a factor that may just vacillate the election away from the party. While seeking to understand the campaign strategy of the PM in Gujarat, the most conspicuous factor has been the emotional connect that he has attempted to kindle with the audience. The strategic difference in the PM's campaign in the 2017 elections has been the PM's reliance on not

just development as the plank that would appeal to the voters in Gujarat. The campaign has included direct jibes on opposition leaders such as Rahul Gandhi, invoking the caste factor when necessary and integrating his role as the PM and the consequent position of leverage for the state due to his larger role while also representing the state.

Overall, these assessments lead us to the question of a possibly ebbing charisma of the PM among the electorate of his state and its likely translation into the BJP's diminished chances in winning the 2017 elections. While the assessment would be complete regarding the PM's continued clout in his home state only after December 18 when the results to the elections are slated to be declared, it is also important to understand the BJP's strategy as a party, especially when it has been helmed by President Amit Shah.

Amit Shah: Party President or Shadow Synergist?

Party President Amit Shah during a "*Yuva Townhall*" called upon the Gujarat electorate to "not fall prey to Anti-BJP propaganda on social media", a likely indication of the ability of the other opposition leaders' attempt and potential successful use of social media to promote anti-BJP sentiment. For a party that capitalised on online traffic to secure its electoral victory during the 2014 general elections as well as other state elections since, BJP is witnessing significant resistance as other young leaders have also started using the medium to ensure their ideological reach among the local electorate.

Shah, who was largely credited with the majority victory for the BJP during the Uttar Pradesh elections in March 2017, has ostensibly assumed a behind-the-scenes role in the Gujarat 2017 elections. One of the primary reasons for Shah's strategic victory in UP was attributed to his role in ensuring the efficacy of booths and cadres at the grassroot level. In that context, the Gujarat elections, while may be a litmus test for the PM due to his roots and years of laying the foundation for a development agenda, it remains a contest between the two Party Presidents (Rahul Gandhi likely becoming the INC President over the coming days) at this time, especially with their ability to galvanise opinion and trust in question.

BJP has long been a cadre-based party, wherein the power is not solely concentrated with the political elite of the party, but is seen to be managed by cadre leaders, who at the local level engage with the resident population and communicate with the party elite regarding the grievances for effective implementation of policies. In that context, Shah is known to be running a tight ship for the Gujarat campaign, with micromanagement being the keyword attributed to his strategy.

At the base of the campaign pyramid are the '*page pramukhs*', who follow-up with a list of voters on a page regarding being enrolled in the voters' list, while also publicising the party's work in the state. At the next level, encompassing 3-4 polling booths are the '*Shakti Kendras*', who assess the party's strengths and weaknesses in a region based on the local grievances and accordingly work to alter the party strategy. Shah has been known to have attended numerous Shakti Kendras' meet over the past months of the ongoing campaign. Approximately 47,000-50,000 *Shakti Kendras* of the BJP are reported to have been established in Gujarat alone. At the next level is the role of a "*Vistarak*" who assess the party's position and directly engage with the local population

while also detailing their visits and providing feedback to the Party headquarters regarding "definite" BJP supporters as per categorisation established. The Shakti Kendras and Vistaraks have also been seen to be managing the party's door-to-door campaigning to facilitate a personalised approach in the course of the election campaign.

The aforestated delegation of administrative work and an attempt to appease the grassroots of the Gujarat society while being helmed by Shah coincides with the emergence of Rahul Gandhi as the successor to the Congress Presidency. With a more tactful and systematic campaigning, the Congress leader is increasingly perceived to have provided a likely strong opposition platform. Given that the Congress' performance will be perceived as the initial test regarding the acceptance of Gandhi as an able leader who could dent the official BJP bastion, the Congress leader's campaign during the impending Gujarat elections have been particularly revealing as detailed below.

Rahul Gandhi - The Congress Revivalist?

The INC in its first five decades of operation has always had the backdrop of being the party that could invoke its role in the independence struggle during election campaigns to appeal to the sentiments of the Indian populace. However, with a population demographic for whom the independence struggle has merely been illustrations in history textbooks, the Congress has felt the need to reinvent itself as a mass-party that can also directly engage the country's grassroot population. Since the emergence of PM Modi as a populist leader who engaged the country's population on the development platform, the INC has been staggering with the lack of effective central leadership and perceivably inadequate ability to mobilise party support. The incumbent Congress VP Rahul Gandhi has regularly been portrayed as inept and lacking touch with the country's reality and people's needs in the past, especially by the opposition parties, particularly the BJP.

In contrast, the campaigning for Gujarat elections witnessed Gandhi's attempt to capitalise on the ascending anti-BJP wave, especially among the rural population of the state, as well as small and medium-level businessmen and traders. A revived Congress strategy based on questioning PM Modi's commitment regarding development in the state instead of the traditional plank of caste and communal politics has been perceived to have been appealing for the resident population, with the leader's rallies witnessing mass participation in the INC's campaigns over the preceding days.

Gandhi's attempt to pose a question a day to PM Modi in the course of the campaign has encompassed issues from tribal welfare, women empowerment to unemployment in the state. The questions, backed with data, have been promoted on social media by the party, thus inciting questions regarding the actual success of the Gujarat Development Model. Although numerous opinion polls have predicted a BJP victory, albeit with a small margin, one of the most significant aspect to be taken into account has been of a recent poll indicating the INC increasing its predicted vote share in the election to 43 percent, at par with that of the BJP.

These developments are also aided by the Congress' attempts to ensure grassroot level support among the Gujarat populace. The initiative to establish a Chief Election Coordination Centre (CECC) under a retired IPS officer, Kuldip Sharma, wherein party workers would attempt door-to-door campaigning, was likely to counter the BJP's strength as the cadre-based party in the state. Sharma is aided by an analytics professional, who identifies and dedicates work to booth-level workers across 25,000 booths in approximately 114 constituencies of the state, according to a report. Party workers on the ground are reportedly provided with the caste profiles, electoral history and shifting demographics of the said constituency based on which they carry out their door-to-door campaigning. The constituencies were also chosen after discarding 23 seats wherein the Congress was sure to face defeat, thus ensuring effort only where the electorate could be swayed.

One of the most important factors driving the election at least partially in Congress' favour has been Gandhi's ability to create an anti-BJP platform and bring together three completely different youth leaders. It remains to be seen how significant has been this consolidation for the Congress to have split the votes for the BJP numerically, translating into a positive outlook for the Congress.

Congress VP Rahul Gandhi while campaigning in Gujarat

Gujarat Legislative Assembly Elections 2017: Key Actors

Narendra Modi

Role: Incumbent PM, Leader of BJP

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **37.6 million**

Facebook:- **42.6 million**

Strength: Charismatic leadership, Development platform

Weakness: Anti-incumbency, discontent among traders with Modi following GST implementation, demonetisation

Amit Shah

Role: President of BJP

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **8.43 million**

Facebook:- **10.76 million**

Strength: Knowledge of grassroot politics, Experienced in management of cadres

Weakness: alleged corruption scandal surrounding Son

Rahul Gandhi

Role: Vice-President of Indian National Congress

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **4.78 million**

Facebook:- **14,72,291**

Strength: appeal as an able alternative on the backdrop of anti-incumbency, consolidating opposing castes on an anti-BJP platform

Weakness: Inexperienced, past gaffes

Patel, Thakore and Mevani - Wild Cards in the Fray?

BJP entered the 2017 campaign fray against the backdrop of a perceivably ill-managed reservation agitation initiated by the Patidar community in Gujarat. Patidars, accounting for approximately one-eighth of Gujarat's 6 crore-odd population, demanded reservation for them with regard to educational opportunities and government employment through their inclusion in the Other Backward Class (OBC). The demonstrations were led by then 22-year old Hardik Patel in 2015 and subsequently cracked down upon by the incumbent BJP government. The crackdown largely witnessed the Patel community being antagonised by the BJP, a development that is at least likely to impact the outcome of the elections to some extent. This may especially be the case as the Patels, with their 12-14 percent of the population, concentrated in strategic Saurashtra, seek to vote against the BJP. The Patidars have been a community that came together with the BJP on the foundation of the party's Hindutva agenda. As per reports citing leaders of the Patidar community, at least 106 of the 182 seats remain influenced by Patel votes. Rather than being divided on the basis of sub-caste divisions of Leuva and Kadva, the latter of which Hardik Patel belongs to, the Patidar community's vote-split has been perceived to have been more area-specific.

One of the most important characteristics regarding the Congress consolidation of an anti-BJP platform has been Rahul Gandhi's ability to bring together Patel, OBC leader Alpesh Thakore and Dalit leader Jignesh Mevani, despite their differences. Thakore and Patel are seen as arch-nemesis', especially given that the state's OBC community believes their share in reservation to be potentially dented with the inclusion of the upper-caste Patels in the OBC category. The OBCs comprise 40 percent of the state's population, thus making Thakore's role in the anti-BJP equation significant.

The Dalit population of the state, approximately encompassing 7 percent of the total population, could also act as a spoiler for BJP's sustained political aspirations. Mevani, who is not perceived as a well-known leader even among his own community of Dalits, got the Congress to not field a candidate against him in Vadgam while contesting as an independent candidate. The Congress strategy to extend this support to Mevani, despite the likelihood for losing seats because of Mevani's limited support, only reiterates the Congress' larger idea to come across as a party that supports the Dalit agenda. This also falls in line with the party's larger strategy to distance itself from its erstwhile traditional perception of being secular and merely a pro-Muslim party.

Bringing together Thakore, Patel and Mevani underscores the opposition's strategy to also appeal to the younger demographic that is afflicted by a growing sense of disenchantment with the government due to rising unemployment and lack of considerable opportunities. Another reason for the opposition to consolidate a youth platform that capitalises on social media was likely in a bid to counter the PM's standing popularity on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, thus promising interactive governance.

Gujarat Legislative Assembly Elections 2017 – Key Actors

Hardik Patel

Role: Founder of Patel Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), leader of Patidar agitation

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **201 K**

Facebook:- **8,72,399**

Strength: Support from majority of the "patel" youth following patidar agitation

Weakness: CD Scandal and a diminishing popularity

Jignesh Mevani

Role: Dalit leader and leader of Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **28.4 K**

Facebook:- **1,01,001**

Strength: Congress support despite limited voter-base

Weakness: limited appeal among state's Dalit population

Alpesh Thakore

Role: OBC leader, leader of OBC Ekta Manch, founder of Gujarat Kshatriya Thakore Sena

Social Media Following:

Twitter:- **6,060 (unverified)**

Facebook:- **2,89,333**

Strength: support from OBCs mainly from Thakores in key districts

Weakness: young OBC leader not being able to consolidate absolute Thakore support

Is it just about the people catalysing the change or is it the need for change itself?

Put together, looking at the actors on ground with respect to the Gujarat elections, the question remains as to how much each of them would be able to capitalise on their respective charisma and popular support while translating them into electoral votes.

The Gujarat elections, while maybe able to reflect the political mood of the country, also remains significant as a matter of pride for both the Congress and the BJP. While this report analysed the role and functions of the most significant actors who may catalyse the change during the Gujarat elections, it is important to understand the respective party strategies and factors that may favour them or aspects that may curtail their support base. In that regard, the second part of the series will be an attempt to delve into strategic maneuvers of the BJP and Congress, and how they have been collectively able to influence public opinion.

GRID91

Your Derisking Partners

C 1003, ONE BKC, G BLOCK

BANDRA-KURLA COMPLEX

BANDRA (EAST)

MUMBAI-400051

INDIA

T: +912262364401

E: connectingminds@grid91.com

W: www.grid91.com