



**Gujarat 2017: BJP's Achilles Heel or  
Congress' Catalyst for Redemption? -  
Campaign Strategies**

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## Executive Summary

As the second phase of elections in Gujarat will culminate on December 14, one of the significant factors that are liable to hold sway with voter sentiments are traditional party affiliations among the local populace. In that regard, a look at how the traditional parties of BJP and INC have ingratiated themselves with the Gujarat electorate and if they can be a bellwether in understanding contemporary voter behaviour in the state will be the attempt of the following report. As the preceding report underlined, individual leaders carry the potential to be catalysts in vacillating the results on December 18; however, occupational and caste-based divisions also likely play a significant role in determining affiliations in Indian politics. The following report will be an attempt to understand the nuances of such behaviour and if there is a trend for antagonistic sentiments against the incumbent party, especially after over 20 years of a single-party rule as well as the opposition among the resident population to the perceived complacency of the BJP.

The report will also undertake a brief comparative analysis of the changing approach of the BJP's campaign strategy during erstwhile elections in the state as well as the actual success of the alleged 'Gujarat model' of development. Assessing the Congress' resuscitation in a state that has failed to sway toward the Grand Old Party of India in the past decades also signifies the undercurrents of disenchantment among the public against the BJP and its leadership. In that context, the Gujarat elections particularly underlining the context for the 2019 elections, and reflecting voter sentiment across the country, may set the tone for the electoral politics of the country in the coming months and years.

## Gujarat Elections - How are the Parties approaching the State Elections?

During local body elections that were held in November 2015, the BJP retained six municipal corporation seats, while Congress secured 23 of the 31 district panchayats and 113 of 193 taluka panchayats. In these elections, the Congress party was seen to have made significant inroads into Patidar pockets of Saurashtra, north and south Gujarat, which also included traditional BJP bastions of Morbi, Jamnagar, Amreli and Mehsana. The local body elections were held amid the simmering Patidar agitation that witnessed the Patel community, the traditional vote bank of the BJP, protesting against the incumbent BJP government in the state. Given the aforesaid victory for Congress, particularly across regions that have never been under their belt, the question arises as to if these local body elections were a precursor to greater anti-incumbency that may impact the 2017 elections.

According to data from the 2011 census, urban population in Gujarat stands at approximately 42 percent while the rural population of the state declined to 57 percent from the earlier 62 percent. One of the most important aspects to be noted with regard to identifying patterns of voter behaviour in the state would be to understand the main parties' hold over the rural and urban populaces of the state. With an agrarian economy as well as a dependency on animal husbandry and dairy farming for its revenue, pockets of the population voting for either the BJP or Congress will be dependent on the sops promised by them for the farmers, while also being a reflection on the incumbent government's policies towards these sections of the population.

The urban population in Gujarat comprises a majority of small and medium scale entrepreneurs, who traditionally benefited from the pro-business policies that were adopted when incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the chief minister of the state. However, one of the concerns regarding PM Modi's monetary policies has been their alleged significance only for the large corporations, thus perceivably marginalising the trading community of the state. With that in mind, the question arises as to the

incumbent government's ability to retain the state, despite unfavourable policies as perceived by the traditional support-base of the BJP.

Keeping the aforesaid in mind, it would be relevant to understand the conspicuous departures in the campaign strategy of the BJP as well as that of the Congress from past elections in the state. This would particularly be relevant due to the findings of opinion polls suggesting that the INC will secure vote share of approximately 43 percent, equalling BJP's vote share in the state at this time. The momentum for the Congress has peaked during the most decisive period that would establish the victory for either of the parties' in the state. Gujarat has at least 92 seats out of the total 182 that houses a sizeable rural population. Would this population with its numerical significance make or break the BJP's chances for a victory in a state that holds more psychological rather than numerical relevance for the party's sustained preeminence in the country's politics? An understanding of the party's campaign strategy as the following analysis in the lead-up to the elections will give an overview of what the party perceives to be its key strengths and weaknesses in the state, thus indicating the population's pulse.



## BJP's Campaign Strategy

According to a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) on the issue of development in the state, which remains the most polarising as well as common political plank for Gujarat, only 26 percent of the people believe that development in the state has been all-inclusive. Thirty-six of the respondents reportedly believed that the BJP's development policies have only been favourable for the country's rich population, while 20 percent believe that there is an absence of significant development in the state. Notably, contrary to the general election campaign strategy adopted by the BJP over the years regarding development, Congress has raised the 'lack of' development as the primary concern during its campaign trail.

One of the most relevant findings during the CSDS survey was regarding Congress leading among the electorate who perceived their regional identity to be of primacy over their national identity while BJP securing support from the electorate who attributed significance to their national identity over being a 'Gujarati'. This assumes particular relevance due to one of BJP's ostensible campaign plank being "*Gujarati Asmita*" (*pride*). In that regard, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi may be projected as the epitome of the state's *asmita* in New Delhi, how much of this sentimental appeal is likely to translate into votes for the party during the elections remains to be seen. One of the foundations for the 2014 election victory for the BJP was attributed to the publicising of the 'Gujarat model of development'.

## The "Gujarat Model" - 'Mere Hype than Reality'?

The characteristic of the BJP's electoral strategy over the years being the 'Gujarat Development Model', it is significant to understand the perceived 'success' of the model and the general perception regarding it. One of the conspicuous criticisms against the so-called Gujarat model has been that of the state performing only satisfactorily rather than exceptionally well on overall growth indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) but falling phenomenally on human development indicators, with widening inequality being a constant cause for concern. While infrastructure development, availability of power per capita and growth rate of income puts Gujarat among the top five states among the 29 states in the country, the state showcases a dismal

performance on indicators such as percentage of people below the poverty line or life expectancy. Gujarat stands at the 10th place among 20 major states in the country with regard to a greater percentage of the state's population being below the poverty line while ranking 11th among the 20 major states in infant mortality rate, with states being ranked on the scale of lowest mortality rate to the highest. With regard to life expectancy, the state ranks 10th while coming in at the 7th place for on the indicator of overall literacy. Notably, the country performs its worst when considering the sex ratio among various states, with Gujarat ranking 24th out of the total 29 states.

While inequality in the distribution of income and subsequently growth has been a challenge for the whole country, as such, inequality in the context of Gujarat assumes more significance. For a state that has prided itself on its growth story, one of the most apparent ancillary has been the inequality among its population. Urbanisation remained a characteristic of the former governance years of Modi as the then chief minister of Gujarat, with a significant section of rural Gujarat undergoing transformation.

Particularly, this development model came into question with the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in July 2017 and the impact that it had on the trading community of the country. The introduction of the GST witnessed a significant decline in support for Prime Minister Modi and the BJP government in the diamond hub of Surat as well as the Saurashtra region, traditionally considered a bastion of the BJP. Traders have raised issue with the demonetisation drive also adversely affecting their livelihood. Given the reliance on monetary transactions between farmers and small traders, the implementation of demonetisation witnessed the inability of many small and medium scale traders to secure produce from the farmers due to the lack of liquid cash. Being a major cotton and groundnut producing area of Gujarat, Saurashtra is home to a significant disaffected population at this moment. In September, the incumbent BJP state government announced the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for 20kgs of groundnut as Rs. 900 in comparison to Rs. 844 last year. The raise in the MSP was likely aimed as a pre-electoral strategy by the BJP government to secure the support of the region's population.

## BJP's approach in 2012 and 2017 - Identifying Conspicuous Departures

On December 13, Union Minister Piyush Goyal released a slew of email communications between former Environment Minister Jayanthi Natarajan and then Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi seeking guidance regarding providing clearance for projects in the state of Gujarat during the UPA administration at the centre, prior to 2014. Goyal went on to allege that the communications were evidence for the INC's attempt to interfere with development in the opposition BJP-ruled state of Gujarat then. Incidentally, the communications were released following a video by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh alleging the BJP of spreading 'falsehoods' about his integrity. The timing of Goyal's press brief assumes particular significance coming on the eve of the second phase of the Gujarat elections, especially as 93 seats across north and central Gujarat were scheduled to vote on December 14.

The BJP's approach to the elections in 2017 have ostensibly witnessed a departure, with the primary focus of the campaign strategy not being on development but being an attack on the Congress leadership. This is a marked departure in the party's approach due to the state's voting pattern conventionally being reliant on the economic development platform. Given the significance of even a reduced margin of victory in Gujarat, especially since the state has been the BJP's citadel, these shift in approaches towards a more sentimental appeal to the local populace based on Gujarati *asmita* points to the shift in the BJP's rationale in appealing to the local populace of Gujarat in the absence of possibly discernible development.

Not just a shift in the BJP's approach, the distinct significance for the Congress also can be underscored on the basis of a shift in their approach toward the election. Additionally, the torchbearer of the fresh approach has been Congress President Rahul Gandhi. Gandhi's growing appeal among the Gujarat populace due to his speeches targeting Prime Minister Modi's development promises, coupled with the party's ability to consolidate the anti-BJP groups to form a coalition under his leadership carries the



potential to translate into votes that might just reduce the margin of victory for the BJP, if not outright hand over a victory for the Congress in the 2017 elections.

## Congress' Gujarat Campaign - Nothing to Lose Strategy?

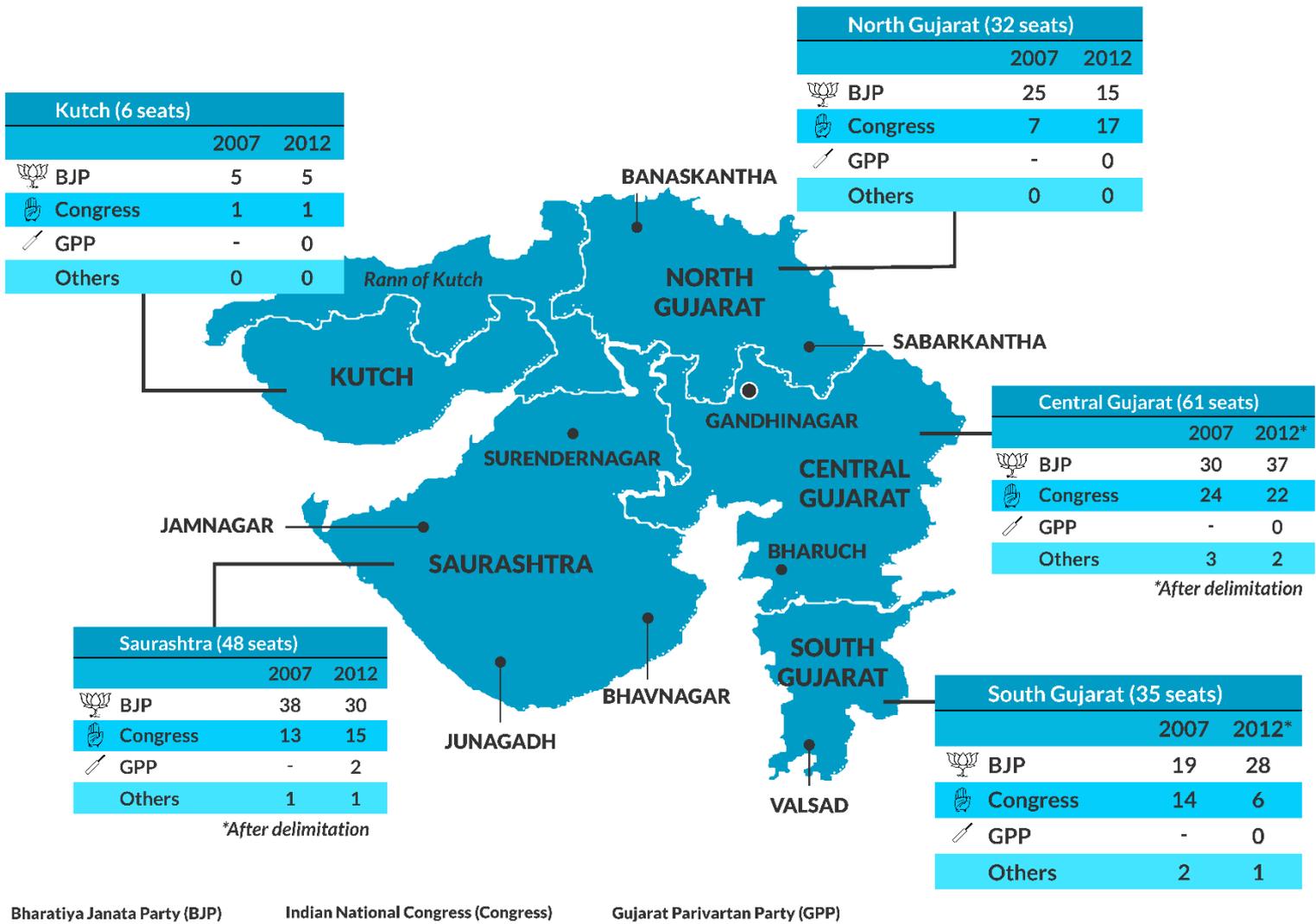
With over 22 years of being under BJP rule, the state election verdict could have easily been a foregone conclusion. However, a number of factors has led to the emergence of the INC as a contender and an 'able' one at that with regard to the state elections. Some of the factors can be attributed to leadership roles such as that of Rahul Gandhi. However, factors such as working on erasing the party's general perception of being 'anti-Hindu' for a state that prides itself on its Hindu religious identity, as well as trying to exploit the general discontent among the local population with regard to the government's economic policies can also be perceived to be significant. Furthermore, ensuring some support from the numerically significant Patidar community, who constitute between 12-14 percent of the state's population, while also consolidating support from the OBC community, comprising 40 percent of the total population, while

bringing leaders of the two communities' together on an anti-BJP platform makes the Congress' strategy significant.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi, who assumed the helm of the Congress officially on December 12, was seen campaigning for the state's elections since mid-2017, with numerous visits to the state and characteristic election rallies. The rallies were reportedly also supported by Gandhi's attempts to establish further grassroots links in the state in comparison to the BJP's traditional cadre-based strategies. Identifying regions of the state that can oscillate toward the INC after the BJP's perceived 'mishandling' of the Patidar agitation, getting hold of the OBC electorate have formed a part of the party's targeted campaign strategies. Furthermore, the party has sought to maintain their support base among the state's tribal population by aligning themselves with Chottu Vasava's Bharatiya Tribal Party by giving them five seats, reserved under the Scheduled Tribes category.

One of the aims for INC during the Gujarat elections has been to split the votes of the Patel community that was always a definite electorate base for the BJP in erstwhile elections. Additionally, even making significant inroads into south Gujarat and Saurashtra regions apart from maintaining the traditional bastions in north Gujarat may translate into a strong performance by the party on December 18. However, given the BJP's already established grassroots links in the state as well as the local population's identification with both Party President Shah and BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi still makes the state difficult to conquer for the Congress at this point

## REGION WISE RESULTS OF 2012 LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS



Source: CSDS

## BJP vs. Congress approach to 2017 as a lead-up to 2019 General Elections

Economic reforms as well as growth and development have been the agenda of the BJP in maintaining their departure from the Congress' performance in the past. Given that replicating the Gujarat Development Model was what was pledged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the people of India before securing the 2014 election victory, success in the Gujarat elections will be largely perceived as the general mood of the country's population with the incumbent central government of the BJP. An INC victory on December 18 will also be significant for the party in general due to the party's potential winning strategy being based on Gandhi's leadership alone, despite lack of a regional face as the party's representative. Furthermore, the Gujarat elections would also set the tone for campaigning ahead of the Legislative Assembly elections in 2018 across various states in India. The backdrop of a victory in Gujarat or making a dent into the BJP's fortress of Gujarat will aid the INC to maintain a stronghold in the already Congress-ruled state of Karnataka and making inroads into the states of Madhya Pradesh as well as staying in contention with regard to Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan.

One of the most significant factors with regard to the 2017 elections remains the general trend of anti-incumbency, a pattern of political thinking among the electorates that makes them apathetic or disenchanted with the ruling government. In that regard, given that Gujarat has defied the anti-incumbency factor for decades now, it remains to be seen how a BJP loss or even a marginal victory may impel the party to adopt strategies that makes it work against a spreading sense of anti-incumbency among the Indian populace ahead of the 2019 general elections.

## Identifying the Grey Areas - The CEC Being a Front for the BJP?

The Election Commission of India (ECI) is an independent body that is tasked with the scheduling of Elections as well as conducting them. One of the criticisms against the party made by Congress was that the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) while announcing the schedule for the Himachal Pradesh elections failed to do that for Gujarat on October 12. The reason cited by Congress was that the ECI headed by CEC Achal Kumar Jyoti had deliberately not announced the dates so that a scheduled rally by PM Modi on October 16 could go ahead. Given that the rally witnessed the announcement of a number of additional sops for the state ahead of the elections, the ECI's decision was perceived as deliberate and intended to help Prime Minister Modi. On December 13, a notice was also sent by the ECI to Congress President Rahul Gandhi for an interview being aired by local news channels in Gujarat after campaigning culminated in the state before the second and last phase of elections on December 14. However, the Congress denounced the notice as well as the ECI's actions stating that the prime minister had also used the platform of speaking at the Federation of Indian Chambers for Commerce and Industry (FICCI) to point out the BJP's development agenda and to attack Congress on the eve of the election.

Secondly, some of the most common criticisms used against the BJP are regarding tampering of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) during the first phase of the Gujarat assembly elections on December 9. Approximately 40 machines were reported to have had technical glitches during the first phase while the opposition also alleged the machines being connected to mobile bluetooth devices. Additionally, 33 EVM devices in Rajkot district reportedly had glitches during the voting process. While the ECI reported replacing malfunctioning EVMs, they denied the allegations of tampering of the devices to suit the ruling party's political ends. While these claims definitely need independent verification, the conspicuous moves by the ECI likely to toe the line of the political executive makes the question of the independence of the ECI much more relevant.

## December 18 - A Bellwether for India's Political Future?

Despite the perceived resurgence of the Congress and the expected inroads the party is likely to make during the Gujarat elections, one of the most important factors to consider with regard to the political trends of India is the perception regarding BJP being synonymous with development in the country. This factor most exemplified at the micro level can be the BJP's attempt to win over the tribal population of Gujarat. In 2012, Congress secured 16 seats out of the total 27 seats that comprise the tribal belt of the state. The tribal belt of the state is concentrated in the eastern side of the state in Dahod, Chhota Udaipur and Panchmahal districts. Since the elections in 2012, one of the most discernible initiatives has been that of establishment of Ekal Vidyalayas, primarily run by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) for tribal children. Furthermore, VHP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Pracharaks are allocated blocks and talukas, wherein they organise religious gatherings and distribute Hindu idols. Added to these initiatives are Shah-helmed outreach by vistaaraks in the interior regions of the state that make the BJP's clout still significant in the state.

The BJP's flood-relief programme in August 2017 as well as support from the state's cooperative bodies that control sectors such as milk and livestock, farming, fisheries, consumer, irrigation, cooperatives banks makes the BJP's support base appear stronger and more extensive. Gujarat is home to approximately 76,000 cooperative societies, with around one-third of the state's population reportedly being linked directly or indirectly with them. With the support of the cooperatives, BJP seeks to secure support in the Anand and Kheda districts, especially due to the sops supporting the dairy farmers.

Keeping in mind the psychological significance of a victory for the BJP with regard to Gujarat, coupled with the state's influence in setting the political mood for the country in the near-term, the nature of victory for the BJP, even a diminished one at that, will be instrumental in concretising people's perceptions regarding respective party leaderships in the Indian political arena.

C 1003, ONE BKC, G BLOCK  
BANDRA-KURLA COMPLEX  
BANDRA (EAST)  
MUMBAI-400051  
INDIA

T: +912262364401

E: [connectingminds@grid91.com](mailto:connectingminds@grid91.com)

W: [www.grid91.com](http://www.grid91.com)

