

## Loss and Gain for Both Parties

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Politics in India has been driving the economy wheels, but post liberalisation, economic issues have started influencing the outcome of electoral competitions in the country. The results of the Gujarat assembly elections also seem to have a heartening message for both, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress.

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The polls in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh were held simultaneously and had similarities as far as competitive politics and contrasting dimensions of governance and media coverage are concerned. The electoral similarity in both the states that went to polls after the implementation of the goods and services tax (GST) was the bipolar nature of the electoral contest between the two largest national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress with the former in power in Gujarat and the latter in Himachal Pradesh, fighting anti-incumbency sentiments. The absence of a political alternative in both the states made it a direct battle with Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi leading their respective contingents from the front. Both the parties lacked state leadership with credible mass appeal, as a result of which the burden and responsibility of canvassing and mobilising fell on Modi and Gandhi.

However, there was a notable difference in the governance record in the two

states. The Vijay Rupani government in Gujarat was forced to face the quota stir by the Patel community and incidents of atrocities against Dalits by saffron fringe groups. The governance report card of the Virbhadra Singh government in Himachal Pradesh was stained by a plethora of corruption cases. Also, the election in Gujarat received massive coverage both in the print and electronic media, while Himachal Pradesh received little coverage and rarely grabbed the headlines.

The reason for the Gujarat election hogging more limelight and information dissemination than Himachal Pradesh electoral contest was on two accounts. First, it was the home state of the Prime Minister with a reputation for the fastest development record in the post-liberalisation era. Modi was the protagonist of the Gujarat model of development, which he promised to replicate all over India. Second, the Gujarat electoral contest received a lot of media attention due to the election schedule there not being announced along with the one in Himachal Pradesh. It was deferred by the Election Commission of India (ECI) on the pretext that the flood relief operations in the state needed to be completed.

The date of aggregating the electronic voting machine (EVM) votes in Gujarat preceded the declaration of the dates for voting, and the long pause by the EC led to public furore with question marks being raised on the ingenuity of the decision and credibility of a free and fair poll in Gujarat.

### Decoding the Verdict

The BJP and the Congress contested the two-phase Gujarat election with multiple public rallies and high voltage rhetorical exchanges between Modi and Gandhi. The demagogical warfare transcended electoral issues and resulted in acerbic personalised attacks on each other. The pre-poll election surveys and exit polls predicted that the BJP would electorally overcome the Congress easily. The saffron party did win with a simple majority. The results also showed that the BJP had faced a political quandary which required an escalated dose of “Modi magic” and Amit Shah’s election micro-management to fend off one of the strongest challenges mounted by the resurgent Congress on the saffron party in Gujarat. The BJP crossed the majority mark with a surplus of seven seats (total 99 seats), which was a loss of 16 seats as compared to the 2012 elections. A comparison with the 2014 Lok Sabha elections makes the scene even grimmer, as the party faced a staggering loss of 66 assembly seats. This means that since its ascendancy in Gujarat, the BJP tally of seats has for the first time dipped below the three-digit figure, 51 short of its ambitious target of winning 150 assembly seats.

The 49% vote share of the BJP marked an increase of one percentage point, as compared with 48% in 2012, but it still lost 16 seats in the elections. The reason for this was that while it won seats with an average margin of around 30,000 votes, the Congress won its assembly seats with an average margin of around 13,000 seats. Thus, Congress votes were uniformly spread across the state leading to a better vote-seat conversion, while the BJP had a lesser rate of conversion of votes into winning seats and more wasted votes. However, the BJP scored a distinction by procuring more

votes than the Congress cutting across all segments: rural-urban, regions, and Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) candidates. A vote-share comparison with the 2014 elections reveals a major let-down for the BJP, as it lost 10 percentage points in vote share. It won 46 out of the 56 seats located in urban areas with a vote share of 58%, reaffirming its dominance in the urban landscape of the state.

**Table 1: Assembly Seats in Gujarat**

Parties	Seats Won 2017	Change since 2012	Change since 2014
BJP	99	- 16	- 66
Congress plus	80	+ 19	+ 64
Others	3	- 3	+ 3

Total assembly seats: 182.

Source: Election Commission of India.

### Summary of the Verdict

The Congress failed for the sixth time to form the government in Gujarat, but it made an impressive electoral comeback by winning 77 seats, 16 seats more than 2012 elections. It had 44 members of legislative assembly (MLAs) in its fold; considering defections and horse-trading it gained 31 more seats in this election. It improved its vote share from 39% in the 2012 elections to 41%, but it did not fare

well in the urban areas of the state, barely winning 10 out of the 56 assembly seats. However, it continued its dominance in the rural terrain of Gujarat by winning 67 out of the 120 seats, 14 seats more than the BJP. The disaggregation of the results on a regional basis reveals that the BJP lost one seat each in North, South and Kutch and two seats in Central Gujarat and 11 seats in its traditional stronghold, Saurashtra. The Congress did very well in Saurashtra by winning 13 seats more as compared with 2012 elections. It won 23 seats out of 52 seats with Patidar voters in excess of 20%, a gain of nine seats since the last assembly elections. It also was the first party of choice for the tribal communities, as it won 17 out of the 27 seats reserved for them. The 8% gap in the vote share of the two parties shows that the BJP still remains the favourite party of the Gujarati electorate.

### Contemporary vs Historical Issues

The political situation in Gujarat was fragile since the provincial BJP leadership failed to contain the violent agitation led by the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti

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(PAAS) demanding reservations for Patels in government jobs and institutes of higher learning. Hardik Patel was the face of the unabated protest, which led to clashes between the police and protestors, leaving 13 people dead and many injured in 2015. The estrangement of the Patels was a setback for the saffron camp, as they formed the core support base of the BJP in the state. The situation further worsened with a spate of atrocities against members of the Dalit communities by cow vigilante groups.

The political tensions and widespread anger against the BJP found an outlet in social media, as PAAS popularised the video titled *Vikas Gando Thayo Che* (Development has Gone Crazy) to make a dent in the BJP vote bank. The state BJP announced largesse that included a waiver of GST for farmers using micro-farm equipment, increasing the allowances and maternity leave for contractual

employees and enhanced monetary benefits to accredited social health activists. It also announced the second phase of the Ahmedabad Metro rail project and allocated grants to the Patel community.

Gandhi, for his part, questioned the failure of the BJP government in providing 50 lakh new houses and the bad debt situation in Gujarat due to the financial mismanagement and publicity expenses. The Gandhi scion harped on the high cost of education in the state, spiralling unemployment among the youth and women's safety concerns. He accused the BJP of forcibly acquiring the lands of the tribal community for big business houses, condemned its failure to address atrocities against the Dalits and criticised demonetisation and GST for affecting the traders in Surat, Rajkot, Alang and Anjar. The agrarian crisis and farmers' distress due to the stagnant minimum

support price, steep increase in the prices of equipment, seeds and fertilisers, crop failure of cotton and peanuts and the increase in farmer suicides were also raised during the election campaign.

### Defining Reasons

The reasons for a fractured verdict in Gujarat with the BJP getting a slender lead of 22 seats over its main adversary are manifold, but a reductionist interpretation would assign it to the unwavering "Modi" wave. It was Modi's charisma and emotional appeals for votes, which generated a strong sympathy wave, resulting in a podium finish for the deeply entrenched saffron establishment. The defining variables, other than Modi magic, which explains the BJP trumping the Congress to post include:

(i) **Campaign strategy:** Modi overpowered Gandhi's campaign strategy by

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switching from Hindi to Gujarati in public rallies and road shows, which led to a better political connect with the electorate. Modi changed the election debate midway from development versus corrupt dynastic politics to emotive and identity-based issues. He maximised the “son of the soil” and Gujarati Asmita (Pride) card to leverage his image. He highlighted the Nehru–Gandhi family’s historical exploitation and injustice to Gujarat, portraying Gandhi as a carry forward agent of this legacy.

**(ii) Organisational base:** The BJP had a better organisational structure and grass-roots support base, which enhanced its election micro management, and ensured voter constituencies. It was buttressed by right-wing affiliates and more importantly, the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has been mobilising votes for the BJP on the basis of social work done since Gujarat earthquake in the 1980s. On the other hand, the Congress had been in opposition for more than two decades, with dwindling party offices and members on party roll, financial crunch, demoralised foot soldiers due to a series of state electoral defeats and weak organisational strength to take its policies and programmes to the people in the state.

**(iii) Caste–community arithmetic:** The caste–community alliance stitched by the Congress with Alpesh Thakore, the leader of the Thakore caste group, which formed 20% of the population and Jignesh Mewani, who represented the 7% Dalit community, was far from perfect and did not benefit the Congress, as the transfer of votes did not reach a critical mass required for winning seats. The alliance with these two groups resembled “crowd outsourcing” without any ideological underpinnings, resulting in splitting of votes. The alliance with Hardik Patel (12% of the population pie) up in arms against the BJP, had a better swing ratio of community votes, which in combination with farmers in agrarian distress led to the Congress winning seven more seats in Saurashtra region since the last elections. However, he could not mobilise the Patel community entirely,

as the BJP won 28 out of the 52 seats dominated by the Patidars with a 20% plus population.

**(iv) Gandhi’s soft Hindutva card:** Gandhi played the soft Hindutva card by visiting Hindu temples and refrained from meeting Muslim clerics and groups for vote mobilisation, to avoid communal polarisation and division of votes on Hindu–Muslim lines in the state. This worked well for the Congress in the first phase of the elections, as the Congress won 18 seats in constituencies where he visited the temple. Modi realised the ploy and foiled it by dragging in Gandhi’s Christian origins and the Congress–Pakistan conspiracy. There was a polarisation of votes on religious lines, as the BJP received higher votes in the second phase of the elections as compared to the first.

**(v) Self-goals by Congress:** The Congress party has developed a penchant for scoring self-goals in state electoral contests and surrendering its early advantage to the opposition party. First, Kapil Sibal asked the Supreme Court to adjourn the judgment in the Babri Masjid case till the next general elections were over as it would create Hindu–Muslim divide and communalise the contest. The BJP picked up his comment and presented it as a Congress stand, opposing the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and Modi used it to his advantage. The second was scored by Mani Shankar Aiyar, who made a remark about Modi which the latter again used to his advantage. The propaganda team of the BJP quickly interpreted it as an assault on the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) identity of Modi, which swayed OBC votes towards the BJP.

**(vi) GST issue a non-starter:** The GST demonetisation did have a negative impact on the traders, business persons and shopkeepers in the industrial cities of Surat, Ahmedabad, Rajkot and Vadodara, strongholds of the saffron party. However, the disapproval of the economic policies did not have an electoral fallout, as the BJP won 28 out of the 32 assembly seats in these cities and maintained its political dominance.

## Conclusions

Politics in India has been driving the economy wheels, but post liberalisation, economic issues have started influencing the outcome of electoral competitions in the country. The political message of the Gujarat mandate for the BJP is heartening and will provide it a winning momentum in the next cycle of elections in five states. The impressive comeback by the Congress signals a political resurgence, and the party seems to have embarked upon a journey of self-revival, which could roadblock the electoral expansion of the saffron establishment. Gandhi displayed immense potential during the elections and could emerge as a leader, and challenge Modi’s supremacy. The twin election triumphs for the BJP is a short-term affirmation of the initiation of GST and currency exchange programme, though its long-term impact would be assessed by the electorate in the next general elections. The handful of seats lost by the saffron party in rural Gujarat reveals the voter disenchantment due to the agrarian distress, which could spiral into a major political issue and determine the electoral mandates.

The use of EVMs in elections courted a lot of controversy in recent times with parties opposed to the BJP levelling allegations of tampering and questioning the election results. The Gujarat result, which was a mirror reflection of the ground situation, should end the various conspiracy theories on the misuse of EVMs and restore the credibility of the ECI. The poll rhetoric on issues was interspersed with personalised attacks, which severely lowered the standard of electoral demagoguery, and set a dangerous precedent for political parties to follow in winning elections.

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