[A Psephological Nightmare](#)

Election Prediction in Uttar Pradesh

Electoral outcomes in Uttar Pradesh are difficult to predict, and it has been called "Ulta Pradesh" for this reason. Looking at past predictions of election outcomes in UP, a brief analysis of this election and electoral possibilities are presented.

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A stroll down memory lane of elections held in Uttar Pradesh (UP) would reveal that the electoral politics in the state has been so topsy-turvy that the state has rightly earned the nickname, "Ulta Pradesh."

The reason for this nomenclature arises due to two reasons. One, UP has the distinction of going against the national trend by not voting in favour of the political party which came to power after winning the Lok Sabha elections on several occasions. Two, the "psephological surprise" of electoral outcomes in UP in the last decade was neither anticipated by the political parties in the fray, nor by the political analysts and pollsters during the hustings.

It becomes important in this context to revisit opinion poll-based election forecasting in the state, the limitation in achieving high levels of accuracy in seat predictions, and election prophecies for the assembly elections which are underway in the state.

Past Opinion Polls

The review of election predictions in the last decade reveals that the state elections in 2007 was predicted to be a split verdict (hung assembly), but the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) proved the pollsters wrong by winning a clear majority on its own.

In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the poll predictions for Congress in the state were in single digits, but the election forecasters were in for a surprise as it proved them wrong by winning 21 out the 81 parliamentary seats in the state.

The pollsters once again predicted in the 2012 assembly elections that the mandate would be fractured with the Samajwadi Party (SP) most likely to emerge as the largest party. The predictions were again off the mark, as SP not only won a majority but also recorded its biggest victory in UP since its inception in post-Mandal era.

The next challenge for the polling industry was General Elections 2014, which were held in the backdrop of the Muzaffarnagar riots in UP and visible communalisation of the electorate in the state.

Most polls predicted that there is a "Modi wave" which combined with polarisation of the Hindu votes in the state would help the BJP in winning 40–50 Lok Sabha seats. The result surprised everyone as the saffron party made a near clean sweep by winning 73 out of the 81 seats.

UP has become an Achilles heel for the opinion polling industry as the elections are prone to throwing up not only unanticipated election outcomes, but also vindicate the nickname given to it time and again.

Limitations of Polls and Predictions

The limitations of election surveys in capturing a clear snapshot of the mood of the electorate in UP are manifold, but it can be primarily attributed to the heterogeneous profile of the electorate, which is diverse in sociopolitical, cultural, and demographic terms. These differences not only have a direct bearing in the voting choices of the people in the state, but also in forming an opinion on political issues that concern them. The overlapping of the multiple identities of voters based on region, caste, language, and religion make it difficult to ascertain the patterns and continuity of their political affiliation and electoral choices.

The presence of four major political parties makes voting behaviour of the electorate in UP highly volatile, and it shifts like sand dunes between two elections. The presence of a significant number of floating voters makes it more problematic for the pollsters to determine the exact vote share of political parties and the right seat predictions before the elections process is set into motion.

The multipolar nature of the contest in UP makes it quite daunting to ascertain the vote shares of the major parties precisely and a slight error in approximation completely upsets the seat predictions. Similarly, the formation of new political alliances before elections further dilutes the accuracy levels of seat predictions, as survey cannot factor in the working of the alliance at ground levels and compute the transfer of votes between alliance partners.

The uneven concentrations of votes for some parties in some regions and pockets of the states also make it difficult to make the right election forecast even if the vote estimates of the main political dispensations are correct. The limitations of opinion polls in capturing the mergers and splits of parties, the change of party affiliation by political heavyweights, the factionalism in parties, the impact of rebel candidates, and the localised dynamics of elections at ground zero are major structural roadblocks in achieving accurate election forecasts in UP.

Poll Prophesy of 2017 Election

The forthcoming assembly election in UP is expected to be a direct face-off between identity politics of regional parties based on caste mobilisation and development politics of the national parties. The pan-India surge of the saffron party makes it a front runner in the election, but it expects a

formidable opposition from the SP, the BSP and the Congress. The three non-BJP parties are looking for an electoral rebound to overcome the severe beating they received in the hands of the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014.

The state election is not only vital for the political establishments in the electoral contest, but also for the opinion polling industry, as it needs to reverse the trajectory of erroneous election forecasting during the previous elections.

The opinion polls conducted to gauge the mood of the voters in UP have once again predicted a hung assembly in the state except for one prepoll survey which gives a majority to the BJP. Two opinion polls indicate that the BJP is most likely to emerge as the largest party after the election, while one poll puts the SP–Congress to be in the driver's seat.

The poll predictions make it a direct fight between the BJP and the SP–Congress relegating the BSP to the bottom of the table in tally of assembly seats likely to be won. The election predictions needs to be seen in tandem with the election held in five phases in UP, the electioneering strategies adopted by the political parties, and the efficacy of the issues presented to the electorate translating into actual votes. This will not provide a snapshot of the electoral scenario before the final phases of voting is held in the state but also an analytical assessment of the performance of major political dispensations in the fray and what lies in store for them.

Table 1: Prepoll Forecasts for Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections.

Seat Forecast	BJP	SP–Congress	BSP	Others
India Today-Axis	180–191	168–178	39–43	1–4
Times Now-VMR	202	147	47	7
The Week-Hansa	192–196	178–182	20–24	5–9
ABP News-CSDS	118–128	187–197	76–86	5–9

Note: The seat predictions were made based on opinion polls after the SP–Congress alliance in January 2017.

Party Identities at Stake

The incumbent SP government has been on the receiving end of the political spectrum due to its poor record of governance and failure in maintaining rule of law in UP. The armed battle between police and a religious sect in Mathura is a flashpoint that indicates that there is a complete breakdown of law and order in the state. The negative socio-economic indicators and the high statistics on crime virtually speak volumes about the SP misrule in the state.

The only silver lining for the party has been its Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, whose clean image and development initiatives seem to have neutralised the strong anti-incumbency against the SP. Yadav

not only triumphed in the family feud and took complete control of the party, but also reinforced his electoral prospects by immediately striking an electoral alliance with the Congress.

The formation of a new political combination altered the nature of electoral competition from a four-cornered to a three-cornered contest resulting in the consolidation of non-BJP votes either for the SP–Congress or the BSP making it tough for the BJP to march ahead of others before the elections. The SP plunged into the election with a strong showcasing of its development work and announced poll sops with a special focus on youth, who form a formidable section of the state electorate. The SP is banking on the transfer of alliance votes, youth support, and minimising the sabotage attempts by dissenters in the party to score a back-to-back victory in the election.

The development agenda of the BJP which created a "Modi wave" and brought rich dividends for the party in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections is yielding diminishing electoral returns, and the defeat in the Bihar assembly elections raised a red flag for the party. To bolster its electoral prospects, the party adopted a twin strategy. One, it took recourse to soft Hindutava by announcing a Ramayana museum near the disputed site in Ayodhya, with the aim of mobilising Hindu votes in central and eastern UP, while the continuing communal tensions in western UP seem to be polarising voters on religious lines in its favour. Two, the ongoing debate on the regressive practice of triple talaq among the Muslim community and the BJP leaders call for ending it is a clever ploy to split the Muslim votes, as progressive Muslims and women who have been victims of it may vote for the saffron party.

The BJP seems to have a taken a pole position in the election, but the lack of a suitable candidate for the post of chief minister and relying on the declining "Modi wave" seemed to have run into major roadblocks. The demonetisation drive by the BJP, hailed as a political "masterstroke" in bringing back black money and reviving the ailing Indian economy not only increased its popularity ratings, but was also expected to pay rich electoral dividends to the party in the state elections. The intention of the policy was welcomed, but the poor implementation of the currency exchange seems to have caused hardships and distress among the Indian citizenry, and the state elections will be a referendum for the BJP. The party subverted the Supreme Court judgment banning the use of religion and caste during the elections by raising communal bogeys, but the polarisation of votes on religious lines seems difficult at this time.

The stock of the BSP plunged to a new low after the disaster in the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 as it failed to win even a single seat. It was further besieged by defections of prominent leaders and cadres from the party in recent years. The party changed its earlier strategy of creating a "grand social coalition" of various castes, and is now more focused in mobilising the votes of Dalits and religious minorities.

The polarisation of Muslim votes in favour of a single party has always been a problem in UP as it is split three way between the SP, BSP and the Congress. Thus Dalit votes will not be enough for Mayawati to win the elections, but if there is a political backlash of the currency exchange on the BJP, the BSP could be a beneficiary and may cross the finishing line first.

Mayawati continues to be a dark horse and has the potential to spring an electoral surprise as she did during the 2007 elections. The Congress was the first to raise the battle cry in UP with a *padyatra* by Rahul Gandhi across the state to connect with the farmers and the common people. The response was far from satisfactory and the party struck an alliance with the SP to retain the number of seats it won in the last elections or to increase its tally. The decision of the party to call upon Priyanka Gandhi for party campaigning sparingly was a wise political decision, as she is the only trump card left with the Congress, and should only be expected to do more after Rahul Gandhi completely fails

to revive the party.

Conclusions

A review of the electoral landscape after five phases of elections indicates that the BJP which had an edge over its rivals lost the plot and seems to be searching for issues to solicit votes in the last stages of the election to stay in race. This could be mainly due to the failure of its members of Parliament to maintain a connect with the electorate in UP, and fulfil the promise of ushering in "achhe din" after the 2014 general elections.

The saffron party faltered in its electoral narrative and changed it midway from development to communal paradigm which combined with demonetisation woes is leading to a perceptible political backlash against it. The SP which appeared to be the main challenger to the saffron brigade emerged stronger from the trial by fire and seems to be dodging the anti-incumbency to emerge as the front runner in the elections. The new political realignment in the state provided the impetus to the BSP, which was languishing and it seems to have recovered its lost electoral ground, and remained a strong contender for the throne of Lucknow. The polling industry besieged with its poor record of seat predictions in UP is getting psephological nightmares in estimating the right vote share and number of seats and forecasting the hustings correctly. The history of electoral politics has been so ambiguous and unpredictable that even Nostradamus, if reborn in India, would have refrained from predicting the election outcome in UP.