A guide to decode the UP election

Like all elections, this one too will be based on issues. But their salience in a voter’s decision matrix will change as the campaign progresses.

Speaking to party workers and prospective voters over the past week across three rivers in Uttar Pradesh (UP) — Ganga (Kanpur), Gomti (Lucknow), and Ghaghara or Saryu (Ambedkarnagar) — I realised that the water bodies serve as informal boundaries, separating political cultures and idioms.

While the issues of price rise, unemployment, communal tensions, law and order, welfare benefits, national security, corruption, and stray cattle remained largely the same, the idioms used to express the sentiments around them varied greatly. Which among these will shape the campaign narrative, the verdict, and finally, the broader implications?

With over four months to go for the polls, voters in UP, like anywhere else in India, are reluctant to declare their political leanings and suggest they are in “wait-and-watch” mode till candidates are officially declared. But prod them a little, and one realises that a large majority of voters have developed strong sympathies for one political party or the other. And, in the process, they rationalise these pre-existing political sympathies using localised idioms.

So, for supporters of the current regime, the increase in petrol and diesel prices is a result of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government trying to raise money for free vaccinations or free rations. For the supporters of the Samajwadi Party (SP), the alleged deterioration in law and order, under the previous state government, is false propaganda spread by the media (and the BJP) to suppress the assertiveness of backward castes against the dominance of upper castes in every field, including the media.

In this climate, how must one interpret voices on the ground? First, in the run-up to most elections, issues are largely going to be common across political geographies in a state, with some variations based on local factors. Two, criticism of the incumbent is a given. Even sympathisers of any regime are never fully satisfied with the incumbent on all matters. Three, voters are more often than not likely to bring up the issue that is being discussed in the public sphere at that moment — be it in the community, political meetings, social media, or news. Four, one must be careful in interpreting colourful idioms used by some voters to drive their point home and extrapolating it to a large section of the voting population. Some voters are simply more expressive than others. And finally, reference to an issue does not mean that the voter’s political choice is going to be based solely on that issue in the polling booth.

The emerging discourse across these districts suggests that, unlike in the past, when the state witnessed a multipolar contest with four players — the BJP, SP, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress — the 2022 assembly elections will be bipolar. The main competition in the majority of 403 seats will be between the BJP-led and the SP-led coalitions. In less than one-fourth of the seats, around 100, either the BSP or the Congress may emerge as a viable third alternative. The fact that many important politicians from these two parties have joined either the BJP or the SP in recent months substantiates this. Similarly, most smaller parties in the state are too busy negotiating a favourable deal from either of the two coalitions. And thus, the chances of a third party winning a substantial number of seats are slim, thereby creating a possibility in which a large portion of the BSP’s base is up for grabs in this election.

As polls approach, voters get swayed in one direction or the other by the emerging structure of political competition. This shapes the menu of choices that voters can finally choose from. They make some strategic calculations given their own preference matrix — in which caste- or religious-based identity is one of the most important. For these social identities are primary lens shaping ideological leanings and policy preferences among voters across the globe. And, the position of issues in the voter’s decision matrix changes as the campaign progresses.

And that is why campaigns matter as they make certain issues more salient than others, certain leaders more appealing than others, and certain parties more electorally more viable than others. It solidifies the choice of strong sympathisers to not only vote for their preferred party, but also mobilise fence-sitters in its favour. This is not to claim that voters are purely rational actors driven by some sophisticated cost-benefit analysis. It is to suggest that the decision of whom to vote for is based on the competitive credibility of viable alternatives in their constituency, filtered by the consideration of who is more likely to govern at the top.

What will the national implications of the UP assembly results be? Given the political weight of the state in the Lok Sabha and the timing of the assembly elections being midway from the 2024 elections, the UP verdict is likely to shape the tone and tenor of political discourse for the next two years.

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