

# A fundamental shift in electoral behaviour

Role of the intermediary in Indian politics stands fundamentally decimated with welfare delivery — and political attribution and power — centralised in party leaders. This was most pronounced in UP

**T**he Samajwadi Party (SP) did everything it promised it would do in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) election. Its alliance touched a vote share of almost 35%, it achieved caste consolidation among the groups it said it would, but this still wasn't nearly enough.

With a crumbling Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) shedding votes, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) improved on its 41% vote share from 2017 — breaking the trend of party alternation that has characterised UP's politics over the past few decades.

In Punjab, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) seemed like a spent force after its state unit seemingly imploded after the 2017 election. Yet, five years later, without much of a state unit, Bhagwant Mann as a recently named chief ministerial (CM) candidate, and a thin party machinery, it trounced the competition by winning more than 75% of the 117 seats in Punjab.

The traditional regional party powers could not compete in Punjab or UP. In many ways, these elections herald the core changes taking place in Indian

electoral behaviour today. Traditionally, whether farmer leader, party organiser, caste leader or village *sarpanch*, an Indian citizen's access to State benefits was thought to be negotiated through a "middleman" or "intermediary." They were the facilitators and gatekeepers of public goods. A ration card, a visit to the police station, renewing licences or "transfer" of kin, the intermediary was the entry to the Indian State.

But, through two cycles of elections that this team has observed, the role of the intermediary in Indian politics stands fundamentally decimated with welfare delivery — and political attribution and power — centralised in party leaders.

The AAP's core challenge in Punjab was the ubiquitous boots on the ground problem. In Gidderbaha, we met an AAP supporter who could not even recall the name of the party's candidate (though he knew the others). In a long interview with an AAP booth worker, we saw little semblance of party structure or coordination. This was in sharp contrast to its competitors, the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), who had well developed networks of polling booth workers, and local financial power. Yet, despite all this, time and again we heard voters pining for Arvind Kejriwal's governance and the "Delhi Model".

In UP, too, there was talk of the frus-

trations of local caste leaders and candidates who had a base in the constituency, leading to "local anti-incumbency." But when we spoke to voters, it was clear that local legislators were no

longer the guarantors of welfare benefits that they once were. As a young man outside Lucknow told us, "We are three brothers, and each one of us gets ₹6,000 a year, plus some of us even got an extra ₹1,000 under e-shram. Our ration has also doubled since last December." They had been BSP supporters in 2017, but now, he added, they would switch to the BJP. Naturally, they were supportive of both CM Yogi Adityanath and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as they were the new guarantors of welfare benefits.

What explains this shift of loyalties away from local intermediaries? Fundamentally, this is attributed to the nature of change in the Indian State. As it moved to a direct cash transfer model, a State limited in its ambition and hampered by its reach has stopped investing in difficult to provide infrastructure such as health, housing or education. For it, a direct cash transfer to young people, to women, to farmers is what can be provided efficiently, and, as a bonus, it is compatible with political centralisation.

A standard framing to understand Indian politics was the need for



Bhanu Joshi



Ashish Ranjan



Neelanjana Sircar



What explains this shift of loyalties away from local intermediaries? Fundamentally, this is attributed to the nature of change in the Indian State, and its increasing focus on direct cash transfers to citizens

RAJ K RAJ/HT PHOTO

"descriptive representation," the principle that voters are best represented by leaders and legislators that look like them — in caste or religion. This was a core principle in the rise of social movements and parties that animated caste assertions in the 1990s. But many voters expressed that they felt trapped by such characterisations. A man from the Thakur/Chauhan community explained that he could never vote for any party other than the BJP because in any other party, *hamari ginti nahin hogii* (we are not counted.)

Whether duplicitous or not, the parties — the BJP in UP and the AAP in Punjab — promise a politics that is not predicated on "counting." In the run-up to the election, many felt that

the BJP would suffer heavy losses because notable non-Yadav other backward class (non-Yadav OBC) leaders had defected from the BJP to the SP. Among the most notable defections was that of Swami Prasad Maurya.

Yet a quick visit to areas with the Maurya community found them still largely supportive of the BJP. The new articulation of centralised beneficiary politics means that someone from the Maurya community is perfectly comfortable voting for Narendra Modi rather than a leader from her own caste community.

In Punjab, too, the Congress pinned its hopes on wooing the scheduled caste community (which makes up about one-third of the state's popula-

tion, according to the Indian Census) by naming Punjab's first-ever scheduled caste CM, Charanjit S Channi. But, much like the SP in UP, the Congress went up against a party (in the AAP) that had no discernible identity-based connect or appeal, choosing rather to sell its "Delhi Model" to bolster health and education in the state.

The elections in UP and Punjab are, thus, more than ordinary electoral defeats. They portend an emerging new politics in India.

Bhanu Joshi is a PhD candidate at Brown University. Ashish Ranjan is an independent election researcher. Neelanjana Sircar is senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research. The views expressed are personal.