The female voter has shifted the arc of electoral politics

Humain Modi pasand hai. (We prefer Modi). This is what a young woman from the Rawat community, sitting next to her husband in Mohanlalganj, had to say as she began listing the benefits she received (ration, gas and the latest promise of ₹1,000 with her newly made “e-Shram card”). Her husband, on the other hand, was very clear. His vote was going to the Samajwadi Party (SP) due to joblessness and mehengai (inflation). If the exit polls are to be believed, then this difference between husband and wife was no exception.

This distinction between the preferences of female and male household members, the emotive connection with Modi and the expressed trust in the promise of welfare benefits were a repeated theme in conversations we had with Hindu women voters across parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP). This trust has been carefully nurtured over the years.

In 2017, Ujjwala — the scheme providing gas cylinders for free — was the instrument for forging a connection and trust among the female vote base. In 2022, it was the Public Distribution System or free ration. Many female voters told us that they received phone call reminders, often from party workers, to collect rations.

There were other reminders too. Back in Mohanlalganj, a young housewife who would switch from the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) this time, described, Unke photo har jageh dikhit haar (we see his photo everywhere). This process has melded the strength of the BJP’s party cadre with the deification of the Prime Minister (PM) to make welfare delivery, with Narendra Modi as its provider, an effective tool for the political mobilisation of women.

An analysis of how these expressed preferences translated in voting patterns will give us a more definitive understanding of factors that contributed to the BJP victory in UP, but the narrative constructed around the PM and the affinity many female voters expressed point to an important shift in electoral politics that needs reckoning.

The emergence of the female voter as a critical vote bank defies the framework of the identity, caste-based dynamic that has dominated our understanding of politics (particularly in North India). The narratives in eastern UP point to the emergence of a new politics built around the person (Modi) rather than the issue, using the prodigious resources of the party to defy the leader — what political scientist Neelanjani Sircar has called “the politics of vishwas (trust).”

The female voter is emerging as the foundation of vishwas politics, with a clear articulation of the female labharrathi (beneficiary) of schemes directed specifically at her. A large number of female voters with Jan Dhan accounts recalled receiving funds in their accounts during the first Covid-19 lockdown. The Ujjwala scheme, despite the fact that most beneficiaries do not have the means to refill cylinders, is still popular and its link with Modi is alive in female voter narratives. It is this direct attribution that has been the primary strategy to mobilise female voters.

While women often pointed out that ration benefits cannot compensate for joblessness or increased prices, it still provided a reason to vote for the BJP, and fit neatly into a narrative that saw the PM as a protector in times of crisis. Cultivating the woman vote through personalistic politics and welfare delivery is not unique to the BJP.

According to Lokniti, there was a seven percentage point gap between women’s and men’s support for Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress over the BJP in last year’s West Bengal elections. In Bihar, too, a similar strategy has been effective for Nitish Kumar.

These discernible political preferences between women and men, which the BJP has effectively mobilised, is emerging as the new cleavage in our electoral landscape. It is also different from the politics of caste which was embedded in a narrative of dignity and rights.

In the current framing, women are being cast as labharrathi linked to a personalised politics. Its long-term impact on democracy needs greater examination.

Finally, a word on the Congress. The growing importance of female voters is perhaps why the Ladki hoon, ladh sakti hoon (I am a woman, I can fight) campaign was conceived. But the Congress failed to understand and identify the roots of the connect between the female voter and the BJP, in particular the PM. If it wants to take the female voter more seriously, the Congress will need to develop a deeper understanding of the voter and her preferences.

The presence of female voters as a critical vote bank has shifted the arc of electoral politics. The Mandal-Mandir framework which was used to analyse so much of Indian politics has less resonance with the female voter than the emotive appeal of leaders. It is time we take these distinctions seriously.

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The views expressed are personal