

ANALYSIS

How the BJP Won Again in Uttar Pradesh

With a rare reelection in India's most populous state, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party may have found its winning formula.

By **Sumit Ganguly**, a columnist at *Foreign Policy* and a professor of political science at Indiana University, Bloomington, and **Himanshu Jha**, a lecturer and research fellow in the political science department at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute.

MARCH 16, 2022, 2:04 PM

Beginning last month, five Indian states held legislative elections, and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won four of them. The jewel in its crown was Uttar Pradesh, which has the largest number of seats of any state legislature in India. The BJP achieved a clear-cut majority—255 of 403 seats—and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath won reelection. The monk-turned-politician will now see his profile rise, with media now perceiving him as a presumptive future national leader. Most notably, after more than three decades, an incumbent party will hold onto power in Uttar Pradesh.

There is an adage in Indian politics: To form a national government, a party must win Uttar Pradesh. And the state has long posed a significant challenge for politicians. It is not only the most populous state in India, but it is also quite socially diverse, which requires cobbling together disparate constituencies into a single bloc. Given the state's sheer size and the logistics involved, voting this year took place over seven phases between Feb. 10 and March 7. The results were announced on March 10.

The BJP's win in Uttar Pradesh presents a puzzle because a few factors should have worked against the incumbent government. First, the ruling party was reelected despite the state's mishandling of the pandemic last year, when acute shortages across the state led to unnecessary deaths. Second, unemployment in Uttar Pradesh increased dramatically in the last five years, with the full employment rate dipping from 38 percent in 2016 to 32.7 percent in 2021. Finally, Uttar Pradesh was the epicenter of

yearlong protests against national farm laws introduced in 2020. (The central government eventually repealed the laws.) But the BJP won handily, even in the western part of the state known for its high concentration of farmers.

So how did the BJP pull off this victory? Many observers might say the Hindu nationalist BJP benefited from blatant and bigoted religious appeals. The party relied liberally on Hindu symbols during its Uttar Pradesh campaign. Its slogan, “*Jo Ram ko laye haye, hum unko layenge*” (“Whoever brings Ram, we will bring them to power”), alludes to the controversial issue of building a temple dedicated to the Hindu god Ram in Ayodhya, located in the state. Divisions along religious lines were evident: In Uttar Pradesh, 83 percent of Muslims voted for the opposition Samajwadi Party (SP), which came in a distant second.

But sectarian appeals alone cannot explain the BJP's win. The party also highlighted various welfare programs while campaigning, including free rations, cooking gas for the poor, and direct cash transfer schemes. Some of these programs came during the pandemic, and exit polls suggest they shaped voting preferences. Campaigning for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also highlighted welfare programs—quoting an elderly woman captured in a viral video saying, “I ate Modi's salt. ... I will vote for him.”

Highlighting law and order also proved consequential for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. Robbery cases declined from 4,089 incidents in 2017 to 1,633 incidents in 2020, according to the *Times of India*. Women's safety was also on the ballot: More women than men voted in the Uttar Pradesh election, and some female voters said Adityanath's government had done a better job than its predecessor despite a recent surge in crimes against women. Furthermore, Adityanath has aggressively pursued land barons involved in the illegal seizure of private and government property, demolishing their infrastructure. The bulldozer served as a BJP campaign symbol in the state.

Finally, the BJP also benefitted from a weak and fragmented opposition. The SP, in an alliance with another regional party, entered the fray too close to the election and fielded

flawed candidates. The party's ties to disreputable land barons and its leader's bizarre calls to boycott the COVID-19 vaccine did little to burnish its image. The Indian National Congress party also ran a lackluster campaign, parachuting one of the Gandhi family scions, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, into the state in the hope of winning the women's vote. Despite this last-minute barnstorming, the party lost in its pocket boroughs—reliable constituencies controlled by a single family or person.

It is important to point out that the BJP victory in Uttar Pradesh in part can be attributed to India's first-past-the-post electoral system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins, even with less than 50 percent. If there had been unified opposition, the electoral outcomes could have been vastly different. Exit polls suggest the BJP has successfully expanded its base in Uttar Pradesh across all social groups. In this election, the BJP garnered 41.3 percent of the total votes, a slight improvement from 39.4 percent in 2017—and the first time since 1977 that a party has secured more than 40 percent of the vote share in Uttar Pradesh's state assembly elections.

Unsurprisingly, Modi is already trumpeting a likely victory for the BJP in the 2024 national election. The party may have found the winning formula: mixing its appeals to Hindu nationalism with a dose of welfarism and promises of law and order. It may apply this strategy as the 2024 campaign looms, but whether it will work nationwide remains an open question. The Indian National Congress, the principal opposition party, may yet find ways to rejuvenate itself; alliances with regional parties to contest the elections may be the most viable course of action. Alternatively, regional parties may forge their own coalitions to form a third front.

Meanwhile, if Uttar Pradesh's bellwether election leads the BJP to double down on its embrace of Hindu nationalism, it will have serious consequences for the future of India's fraying liberal democracy. The next few months will no doubt reveal if Modi's party chooses to follow that path.

Sumit Ganguly is a columnist at *Foreign Policy* as well as a distinguished professor of political science and the Rabindranath Tagore chair in Indian cultures and civilizations at Indiana University, Bloomington.

Himanshu Jha is a lecturer and research fellow in the political science department at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute. Twitter: [@himmijha](https://twitter.com/himmijha)

TAGS: ELECTIONS, INDIA
