

The Fight for Uttar Pradesh West

By Anupama Ghosh

For any Lok Sabha elections, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is a crucial state, comprising the largest number of seats and one of the largest electorates. The western part of the state, popularly known as UP West or Paschim Pradesh, is markedly different from the other divisions of the state. The region comprises vast swathes of agricultural lands, growing sugarcane and potato, which co-exist with parts which have witnessed exponential economic growth because of the region's proximity to Delhi and the National Capital Region. Similar to the past elections, it seems that UP will be a prized catch and will make an interesting contest.

What Makes UP West Crucial?

The electorate of UP is an amalgamation of communities, castes and sub-castes. The state has one of the largest proportions of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Muslims in the country.

The castes and communities like the Jats, Yadavs, Dalits, Jatavs, Thakurs, Rajputs, Gujjars, Brahmins and Muslims call this region of UP West, home. It is the interplay within these castes and communities which makes it an election to watch out for.

The last Lok Sabha election is mostly considered to be a wave-election, which was swept by the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) with Narendra Modi at its helm. It may also go down in the electoral history of India as the one election in which the boundaries of the numerous castes and communities were transcended effectively.

The BJP Strongholds in 2009 and 2014 Elections

In a total of 29 seats in UP West, the BJP swept through 26 of them in the 2014 election. However, a look at the data of the results of the elections of 2009 and 2014 shows that there are only four seats, which the party had won in 2014 as well as in 2009. They are Agra, Aonla, Ghaziabad and Pilibhit. The demographic composition of these four seats is somewhat similar with a preponderance of groups like the Brahmins, Thakurs, Kashyaps, Kurmis, Jatavs and Lodh Rajputs. The data points out the fact that the BJP not only retained these seats, but except for Aonla, managed to win the seats with a greater margin of victory.

Table 1: BJP strongholds in UP West

Constituency	Margin of victory for BJP-2009	Margin of victory for BJP-2014	Runner-up party 2009	Runner-up party 2014	Demographics
Agra	192,982	300,263	BSP	BSP	Brahmins, Thakurs, Jatavs, Muslims, Yadavs
Aonla	208,822	138,429	SP	SP	Thakurs, Brahmins, Kurmis, Kashyaps, Muslims, Dalits
Ghaziabad	268,956	567,260	INC	INC	Rajputs, Vaishyas, Brahmins, Thakurs, Muslims, Dalits
Pilibhit	138,038	370,052	INC	SP	Kurmis, Lodh Rajputs, Muslims, Dalits

Source: Election Commission Data

The BJP Sweep in 2014 Election

In a total of 26 seats which were won by the BJP in 2014, there was one seat (Bulandshahr) where the party won by more than a margin of four lakh votes. While in other seats like Etah and Shahjahanpur, it won with over two lakh vote margin and in Fatehpur Sikri the party won with over one lakh vote margin. A closer look at the data suggests that a major chunk of the electorate in these seats were the Lodhs and the Rajputs, who emerged as the communities which overwhelmingly supported the BJP in the 2014 election.

Table 2: Lodhs and the Rajput votes for the BJP in 2014

Constituency	Winner in 2009	Winner in 2014	Victory margin 2014	Demographics
Bulandshahr	SP	BJP	421,973	Rajput-Lodhs, Jats, Muslims, Dalits
Etah	JKP	BJP	201,001	Rajput-Lodhs, Yadavs
Fatehpur Sikri	BSP	BJP	173,106	Rajputs, Kushwahas, Dalits, Muslims
Shahjahanpur	SP	BJP	235,529	Lodh, Shakya, Maurya, Kushwaha, Sainis

Source: Election Commission of India

Other communities which switched their preference towards BJP in 2014 were the dominant agricultural communities of western Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana – the Jats and Gujjars. These communities had been with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) of Ajit Singh, and the party was able to win all the five Jat and Gujjar seats in the region. But in 2014, the RLD lost all these seats, including its strongholds of Amroha, Baghpat and Bijnor to the BJP.

Table 3: Move from RLD to BJP in 2014

Constituency	Winning party 2009	Winning party 2014	Victory margin 2014	Demography
Amroha	RLD	BJP	1,58,214	Jats, Muslims
Baghpat	RLD	BJP	2,09,866	Jats, Muslims, Jatavs
Bijnor	RLD	BJP	2,05,744	Jats, Jatavs, Prajapati, kashyap

Source: Election Commission of India

The Strength of the Alliance

In order to challenge the BJP in the state, the two prominent state parties, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have decided to come together. The strength of these parties has been their hold over specific demographic groups. While the BSP counts the Dalits and Jatavs as segments which consistently vote for it, the SP enjoys unstinting

support of the Yadavs. In the past two decades, both the parties have emerged as a favourable choice of the Muslim community in the state.

In 2014, only three seats were able to withstand the Modi wave in this region. They were the SP strongholds with Yadav dominance – Badaun, Firozabad and Mainpuri.

Table 4: Yadavs and the SP

Constituency	Winner 2014	Margin of victory	Winner 2009	Margin of victory	Demography
Badaun	SP	1,66,347	SP	2,01,202	Muslims, Yadavs
Firozabad	SP	1,14,059	SP	2,19,710	Yadavs, Muslims
Mainpuri	SP	3,64,666	SP	2,19,239	Yadavs, Muslims, Shakyas

Source: Election Commission of India

The Emerging Arithmetic

Even though it would be naïve to consider that the coming together of parties ensures a confluence of entire castes and communities, given some issues and arithmetic, certain assumptions can be made.

The coming together of SP and BSP may mean, at least on paper, the coming together of the Yadavs, Dalits and Jatavs. The RLD has also joined the alliance of SP and BSP. Taking into account the vote share of these parties in 2014 election, the BJP may run into trouble in western Uttar Pradesh.

Table 5: BSP, SP and RLD arithmetic

Party coming second	Number of seats	Margin of victory		
		Less than 1 lakh	1 lakh to 3 lakh	More than 3 lakh
BSP	8	-	4	4
SP	13	4	9	-
RLD	1	-	-	1

Source: Election Commission of India

In the 2014 election, except SP none of the parties managed to win any seats. Again, it was only SP which managed to give a fight to the BJP in some of the constituencies like Rampur and Sambhal, where the margin of victory was 23,435 and 5,174, respectively.

With the polarisation that the state saw in the 2014 and the 2017 elections and certain incidents under the Yogi Adityanath government, the alliance may successfully consolidate the sizable minority votes in the state.

One may add the agrarian distress to it. The western part of UP is known for the cultivation of sugarcane and potatoes. The farmers, many of whom are Jats and Gujjars, had voted for the BJP in 2014 and even in 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections held months after the demonetisation. But now as the farmers of UP are reeling under debts, with no solution in sight other than the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana guaranteeing Rs 2000 every four months, they are expected to return to their original party of choice -- the RLD.

The Question of the Minority Votes

Of the total population in western UP, 72.29 per cent are Hindus and 26.21 per cent are Muslims. Although the Hindus are a majority, the proportion of Muslims in western UP is higher than that in the entire state. Muzaffarnagar, situated in western UP, was the location of the communal riots between the Muslims and the Hindu Jats.

In the 2014 election, BJP's Sanjiv Baliyan won the seat with a large margin of over four lakh votes. In the 2019 election, the BJP is once again being represented by Sanjiv Baliyan. RLD's Ajit Singh is representing the SP-BSP and RLD combine.

Muzaffarnagar constitutes an estimated 16.5 lakh voters, out of which Muslim voters constitute about 5 lakh voters, while the Jatavs and Jats make another 2.5 and 1.5 lakh voters, respectively. The rest of the 7 lakh voters comprise different Hindu castes including OBC and non-Jatav Scheduled Castes groups. The alliance is hoping that it will be able to gather the votes of the Jatavs, Jats and the Muslims and will have an edge over the BJP in the 2019 election.

But given the acrimonious past due to the riots of 2013, it would be interesting to see if there would be a complete shift of the Muslim vote to the alliance, as it is being expected. Also, regardless of the equations in Muzaffarnagar, there exists a pertinent question. With the parties having their own set of followers or voters, who may be antagonistic to each other, does an alliance between parties mean a transfer of votes to the candidates in the alliance?

Where Does the Congress Stand?

The victories in the Kairana, Gorakhpur and Phulpur by-polls had shown the strength of the alliance in UP. In Kairana, the RLD candidate supported by the Congress, SP and BSP defeated the BJP candidate. While in Gorakhpur and Phulpur, the victorious SP candidate was supported by the BSP.

In the 2009 election, the Congress had managed to win three seats in this region, while in the 2014 election it did not win any seats.

Given the Congress party's lack of organisational structure in the state, there arise a few relevant questions. Will the party be able to wrest any influence on the elections? Or will it be rendered inconsequential? Will its presence only lead to a fracture of votes, helping the BJP in the end?

Such questions are being raised by the selection of candidates in western UP, some parts of which are going to the polls in the first two phases. Congress has fielded candidates in 15 of 17 such seats. The party is fielding strong Muslim candidates in the Saharanpur, Bijnor and Moradabad seats. At Saharanpur is Congress's Imran Masood, who may spoil the party for BSP, which has also fielded a Muslim candidate. In Bijnor is the former BSP leader Naseemuddin Siddiqui, a former key aide of Mayawati, and in Moradabad, the Congress candidacy of Imran Pratapgarhi seems to divide the minority votes.

An Exciting Finish

In the electoral circles, UP is considered a state where the equations of caste and communities determine the outcome of the election results in a major way. The BJP had transcended it in the last election. The question that arises now is will the party be able to do it again in 2019? Does the Modi wave retain its steam or will it falter in the face of agrarian crisis, polarisation and the not-so-positive feedback for the Yogi Adityanath government in the state?

Will the coming together of SP, BSP and RLD successfully alter the situation in UP west, which so far has favoured the BJP? And what about the Congress? Will the party's plunge to contest most seats pay-off? All of these aspects will make the battle for UP west an exciting one.