

Decoding Gujarat Election Results: The Voting Behaviour of OBCs

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Abstract: The recent election in Gujarat is considered as one of the semi-finals of the General Elections in 2019. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has once again proved their strength in Gujarat with the support of urban, middle class, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) vote bank along with their Hindutva ideology. Amit Shah's micro poll management strategy (Panna Pramukh) also worked out for the party at the grassroots levels. On the other hand, The Indian National Congress (INC) tried to gain the anti-incumbency vote bank through the support of young leaders like Hardik Patel, Alpesh Thakor, and Jignesh Mevani. The leadership of Rahul Gandhi also tested in the recent elections. The Patel Reservations, Good and Sales Tax (GST), Demonetisation, Dalit issues, OBCs concerns and the pride of Gujarati were the issues widely debated in the poll campaigning of both parties. The other important factor of this election is the rise of the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) that is having significant vote bank in tribal areas. This paper will concentrate on the above-mentioned issues and examines the voting behavior of OBCs.

Keywords: Caste and Politics, Electoral Behaviour, Strategies, Other Backward Classes (OBC), Party System, Election Survey.

INTRODUCTION

Caste is considered as one of the factors that impact the voting behaviour in the country and serves as a vote bank for certain political parties.

Since independence, many researchers have worked on the caste and politics. Kothari [1], Jha [2], Palmer [3], Jaffrelot [4-6], Jaffrelot & Verniers [7], Yadav [8], Verma [9], and Despande & Mehta [10] Despite various progressive steps like political reservation, reservations in employment and education, and anti-caste policies, caste continues to be a major determinant of political behavior. Politicization of caste is a reality of the Indian political system. This paper concentrates on the impact of caste on the voting choices of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Gujarat Elections and politics that impacted their voting behavior.

Gujarat Elections: A Historical Background

In post-independent India, the state of Gujarat played a crucial role in shaping the national politics. In the 1950s, while Indian National Congress asserted itself at the center, Hindu traditionalist Congressmen played a significant role at the state level. As personalities like K.M. Munshi, one of the popular leaders from the state, joined the Swatantra party as he had criticized the Nehru's idea of cooperative farming, several other leaders like Dahyabhai (son of eminent Congress leader Sardar Patel) also followed him. Gujarat became one of its strongholds, for this reason, and also because of the support of the Patel-dominated Krishikar LokPaksh. In 1962, the Swatantraparty got 24 percent of the valid votes in the state. The co-founder of the Swatantra party, M.R. Masani, was elected as MP for Rajkot in 1967 general elections. Based on the

cultural, political, social heterogeneity, the state of Gujarat is being divided into four regions. The four major regions include Gujarat, the region of Saurashtra, Kutch (also spelled as Kachchh) and Eastern Gujarat, which consists of the Adivasi belt¹. During the 1960's and 1970's, as Congress party continued to witness decline by losing its significant organizational strength and elections in primary states of India, leaders like Moraji Desai played a prominent role. Moraji Desai instrumentally played a crucial role in as he continued to maintain a close affinity between traditional Congressmen and Sangh Parivar. The differences between Moraji Desai and Indira Gandhi emerged as a significant political battle in the state of Gujarat.

In run up to 1972 assembly elections in Gujarat, the two major outfits Congress (O) and Congress (R) witnessed an intense political rivalry. Out of 168 seats in the Gujarat assembly, the Congress (R) secured 139 and mere 16 seats won by Congress (O). Tannen Neil Lincoln, in an article titled 'The Political Historiography of Modern Gujarat' emphasize that 1972 assembly elections were considered as a major milestone in Gujarat due to certain factors. 'Firstly, the older support or social base of the Congress that was predominantly upper caste in nature lost its power quotient in the newly established powerful Congress (R). Second, the numerically dominant caste and other

¹ The Bharatiya Tribal Party played crucial role in the tribal region in 2017 Assembly Elections.

groups in Gujarat began to play a more significant role in forming the party's new social base' [11]. The Gujarat witnessed the KHAM (Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis, and Muslims) coalition in the electoral politics. The KHAM theory was proposed by Madhav Singh Solanki who was the Chief Minister of Gujarat in the late 1970s and till 1980s. 40 percent of Kshatriyas, 7 percent of Harijans, 14 percent of Adivasis and 8.3 percent of Muslims that constituted 69.3% of the state's population are included in KHAM coalition. This electoral formula also included the backward communities that were included in the Bakshi Commission of Gujarat (1976) and were later recognized as OBCs [11]. The election strategy was also a shift in the political strategy for the Congress party's election strategy. This significant shift enabled the Congress party to attract the oppressed sections of the society and tried to keep an end to the Congress party as landlord community dominated and upper caste party. However this strategy by Congress had helped the BJP to attract the upper caste and dominated communities in their fold. Since 1995, the BJP raised to capture the power in the state and the party has become the biggest party in terms of vote share and also winning majority assembly seat. Initially, the party captured the urban bodies like Rajkot and Ahmedabad municipal corporations and extended its influence in the urban areas in the state of Gujarat. The party continued to hold the urban areas even today.

As we decode the Statistical Report on General Elections, 1995 to the Legislative Assembly of Gujarat by Election Commission of India (ECI), out of the 182 seats the BJP party contested, it won 121 seats with 42.51% of the total votes in the state and Congress won 45 seats with 32.86 percent of vote share. The BJP party secured 53.2 % votes in the urban areas, followed by 45.9% in the semi-urban areas, and 41.4% and 39.1% votes in the rural and tribal areas respectively. It secured 38% of the vote share among the OBCs. However, the highest vote share for BJP regarding percentage was among the upper castes (67%) and Jains (50%) [11]. The rise of Modi in Gujarat's politics is a crucial development in the rise of BJP in the state of Gujarat. Modi was the first OBC Chief Minister in the

state and the initial days of Modi rule had witnessed the communal violence in the state. Though he faced the criticism within the party and outside the party but his charisma was not affected. The assembly elections of 2002 and 2007 strengthened the BJP party in the rural and urban areas. The 'Sadbhavana Mission' of Modi to reconcile the Muslim community in the state had not impacted much to attract the Muslims voters to the fold of BJP. But the policies and politics of Modi had attracted the Patels, Thakurs, and other dominated communities by shifting their loyalties towards BJP from the Congress. The major chunk of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) also attracted towards the BJP in the state and constituted major vote bank for the party. As Christophe Jaffrelot mentions that BJP under Narendra Modi has managed to 'plebeianize' itself to a considerable extent as his policies arguably promoted the interests of the urban, upper-caste middle class [4]. In 2012 election BJP secured 63.19 percent of the vote share and won 115 seats whereas Congress won 61 seats with 33.52 percent of the vote share. Though BJP lost 1.26 per cent of the vote share it continued to rule the state [12].

Gujarat State Assembly Election 2017: OBC's Voting Behaviour

Few days before the Gujarat legislative assembly elections, Congress made an 'undisclosed' deal with Hardik Patel regarding the reservations to Patidars and stated that it would not impact the reservations of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the state. This decision turned out to be disastrous for Congress even though it tried hard to translate the high anti-incumbency to vote bank. According to the Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker surveys, the majority of Kolis and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) who constitute around 41 percent of voters supported the BJP. If we analyze the figures given in the below table, Patels, who are traditional vote bank of BJP shifted towards the Congress after the Congress's assurance to Pateldars, whereas Kolis and OBCs though initially considered Congress as an alternative, however, continued their support to BJP after the Congress's deal with PAAS.

Table-1: Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker

| Caste/communities | Leading party in terms of votes and margin leading by over nearest rival in early August | Leading party in terms of votes and margin leading by over nearest rival in October-end | Leading party in terms of votes and margin leading by over nearest rival in November-end |
|-------------------|--|---|--|
| Upper castes | BJP +59 | BJP +32 | BJP +26 |
| Patels | BJP +58 | BJP +20 | Cong +2 |
| Kshatriyas | BJP +25 | Cong +4 | Cong +1 |
| Kolis | BJP +42 | Cong +10 | BJP +26 |
| Other OBCs | BJP +47 | BJP +22 | BJP +16 |
| Dalits | Cong +14 | Cong +8 | Cong +18 |
| Adivasis | BJP +21 | BJP +18 | Cong +18 |
| Muslims | Cong +22 | Cong +68 | Cong +53 |

Source:-Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News Gujarat Pre-Election Tracker, Round 3 survey
<http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Gujarat-Tracker-3-Report.pdf>

Despite negative effects of GST and Demonetisation, the performance of BJP in South Gujarat (Surat area) is intact due to the high presence of Koli (fishing) community. The Kolis and OBCs are an undercurrent in this Gujarat election, and they saliently rejected the Pateldars reservations as it is considered as the encroachment of OBC's limited opportunities in the state.

The BJP has tactically brought the OBC issues and emphasized on the granting of Constitutional Status to National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) and OBC Sub-categorisation. The decision to the appointment of Justice Rohini commission to look into the various aspects of subcategorized OBCs attracted Most Backward Castes (MBCs) like Dafer, Meta, Mena, Madari, Vadi, Nat, etc. in the state. Though they are numerically not strong, their numbers are significant when many seats are lost in 200-2000 votes.

It was Vijay Rupani, the first Chief Minister in the country who commented on the need for the Constitutional status to NCBC when the bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, even though he belongs to Jain Buniya community. There is no counter campaign to the BJP's strategies to attract OBCs in the state by Congress and highly dependent on Alpesh Thakor on attracting OBC status. However, the fact is a Kheshtriyathakor cannot attract the OBCs and most backward castes to a more significant extent. The booth level poll management strategy by Amit Shah to attract OBC castes is crucial to saving BJP from a high level of anti-incumbency in Gujarat, and the same is missing in Congress.

This is the time for OBCs to consider some of the questions seriously - are OBCs considered only as a vote bank by BJP? What if OBCs shift towards other parties or form a party like in the case of Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP)? OBCs along with Dalits and Tribals are considered least benefited with the kind of economic development that is happening in the state. They are highly depended on the government jobs and educational opportunities. Though the Congress tried to catch this dissent on the BJP Government in the form of Hardik, Alpesh, and Jignesh, they failed to convert OBC's dissent into votes.

CONCLUSION

OBCs initially shifted towards INC but later shifted towards BJP after the announcement of Pateldars reservations by the Congress. This reflects the political consciousness of OBCs in the state of Gujarat and also their active participation in the politics. OBCs in the state should now try to negotiate with the

Government for more substantial opportunities beyond the reservations like distribution of land, encouraging OBCs to start a new business and extending financial help from state government, reservations in private sector are some to mention. Entrepreneurial development and new skills development in OBCs are crucial to empowering them. These steps will also help to reduce the discontent among the youth. The economic development must trickle down to the empowerment of masses. OBCs must consolidate and push for their demands. The Vijay Rupani's Government that is formed in the state should concentrate on OBC issues otherwise they will face the heat in next general elections.

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