

Uttar Pradesh Elections 2017

Failure of Pre-electoral Coalition

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This article examines the electoral alliance between the Samajwadi Party and the Congress in the recently held Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in the context of India's complex polity at the national and state levels.

What can we expect about electoral coalitions in India, particularly state-level electoral coalitions, from theory and comparative experience?¹ India does not neatly fit into theories of coalition politics developed on the basis of the European experience of parliamentary democracy in mostly unitary states with less ethnic heterogeneity than India, and using proportional representation or mixed-member electoral systems.

First, India's polity at the national or state level is not characterised principally by a single left–right ideological axis but multiple cross-cutting axes, including the left–right axis—for example, secular versus Hindutva, and a variety of caste and community bloc-based axes, varying statewise.

Second, party identification in India is relatively weak both among politicians and voters, and parties tend to be clientelistic, lacking well-defined social bases compared to most Western democracies. Defections and splits that are common in Indian parties would be unusual in most European parties because of well-defined party ideologies, policy orientations and relatively stable social constituencies. There is a large floating vote that is up for

grabs and major swings are possible, for example, the 12% nationwide swing in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014 or nearly 25% swing for the party in the assembly elections held in March.

Third, generally speaking, parties have a strong incentive to aggregate votes through formation of alliances based on sharing out the total number of contested seats so as not to split but to pool votes. This is because in a plurality-rule system a small addition of votes has the potential to hugely increase or alternatively decimate a party or coalition in terms of seats. Since electoral coalitions, unlike post-election coalitions, are formed under conditions of uncertainty about which party will get how many votes and win how many seats, there are even greater incentives to add on partners to increase chances of victory, and not take any chance of losing, without being too particular about ideological and programmatic compatibility, except in conditions of extreme incompatibility. Thus the first-past-the-post system would tend to give incentives to politicians to form ideologically indiscriminate pre-election coalitions, or even “seat adjustments” for pooling of votes or avoiding splitting of votes, which are only partial, not true, coalitions (Laver and Schofield 1998: 25–26, 204–06; Sridharan 2002: 280–81).

Even if a single party majority results from a pre-election coalition in a first-past-the-post system, the seat majority of the dominant partner in a surplus majority coalition depends on the vote

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transfer of the supporters of the minor partners to the major partner in seat-sharing, that is, vote-pooling arrangements, though their seats may not be critical in the legislature elected, for example, the Communist Party of India-Marxist in West Bengal in all governments between 1977 and 2011, and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2014. This gives an incentive for the dominant party to accommodate its smaller allies.

Fourth, available evidence indicates that stable and effective coalitions at the state level in India are based on roughly proportionate sharing of seats in pre-electoral coalitions based on a quota whereby partner parties are allocated seats which they either hold or were runner-ups, and also when coalition governments share portfolios in a roughly proportionate manner (Sridharan 2014). However, the logic of pivotality, or perceived “bridging” vote share can violate such quota-based pre-electoral coalitions where the smaller party that is perceived to hold a “bridging” vote share (that can make a difference between victory and defeat) is able to leverage that to extract a higher number of seats to contest in a pre-electoral coalition. We argue in the present case of Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2017, that the Congress managed to contest a number of seats that amounted to 93% more than its quota. While this might have damaged the alliance’s prospects, it is quite likely that the alliance might have been doomed anyway given that the BJP had around 40% vote share in a three-cornered contest. It is unlikely to face a serious challenge except from a Bihar 2015-style grand alliance of the opposition in the 2019 parliamentary elections in the state. It is against this background that we explore coalition formation in UP between the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) (henceforth Congress) and seek out reasons for the failure of the alliance in the recently held assembly elections in the state.

Political System in Uttar Pradesh

The political history of UP since independence closely resembles the politics of India. We can broadly classify it into

four phases: 1950–67, 1967–90, 1990–2007, and 2007 to the present. While the first phase was characterised by the dominance of the Congress, the second phase heralded the advent of significant opposition to the party in the state, associated with the rise of a wide array of parties claiming to represent agrarian interests, and comprising primarily of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The third phase, beginning in 1990, witnessed the ascendance of Hindu nationalism, represented in the rise, consolidation and concomitant decline of the BJP in the state, and the emergence and consolidation of backward caste and lower caste parties—the SP and the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP) (Jeffrey 2014: 2–5).

The fourth phase began with the consolidation of the core social base of the two principal contenders—the BSP and the SP. What followed was a carefully crafted attempt at social engineering, achieved through consolidation of their core support base amongst Dalits, mainly Jatavs, and OBCs, principally Yadavs, shoring up vote plurality at the constituency level with the additional support of Brahmins, Thakurs, non-Yadav OBCs and Muslims. This resulted in single party majority (SPM) governments in the state by both BSP and SP in 2007 and 2012 respectively. This was the apogee of caste-based political mobilisation in the state, where the multiparty system had come to be associated with the BSP and the SP. The two national parties, the BJP and Congress, were relegated to the sidelines.

It is against this backdrop that the 2014 parliamentary election results in the state, which witnessed the BJP-led NDA registering an electoral landslide, were a departure from the previous assembly and parliamentary elections, as the party had been in a state of gradual decline since the 1999 parliamentary elections and 2002 state assembly elections.

Table 1: Seats and Vote Share in 2014 Parliamentary Elections and 2017 Assembly Elections for BJP, SP, BSP and Congress

Party	Parliamentary Elections 2014							Assembly Elections 2017						
	SC	SW	VS (SC) (%)	VS (%)	PV	PS	Strike Rate (%)	SC	SW	VS (SC) (%)	VS (%)	PV	PS	Strike Rate (%)
BJP	78	71	43.7	42.6	1	1	91	384	312	41.55	39.65	1	1	81
SP	78	5	22.8	22.3	2	2	6	311	47	28.32	21.83	2	2	15
BSP	80	0	19.8	19.8	3	5	0	403	19	22.23	22.23	3	3	5
INC	67	2	9	7.5	4	3	3	114	7	22.13	6.25	4	4	6

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2017 and the Parliamentary Elections 2014.

The NDA won 73 seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections, with the BJP alone winning 71 seats with an impressive vote share of 42.6%. Its previous best in the parliamentary elections from the state was in 1998, when the party had won 57 seats with a vote share of 36.5%. The SP, BSP, and Congress were relegated to second, third, and fourth positions by vote share. The SP and Congress won five and two seats respectively, while the BSP failed to win even a single seat (Table 1). The BJP vote share was nearly double the 22.2% that of the SP and translated into a massive mandate—73 out of the 80 seats—for the BJP-led alliance (Verma 2014: 90).

In a four-cornered fight, the BJP ran a superior campaign with Prime Minister Narendra Modi leading from the front. This, along with the moving away of substantial numbers of non-Jatav Dalits, non-Yadav OBCs from the BSP and SP respectively, consolidation of the BJP’s traditional support base amongst the upper castes, and an alliance with the Apna Dal, helped the BJP register a formidable victory and decimate the opposition (Verma 2014: 92).

Most importantly, the BJP was the leading party in 328 of the 403 assembly segments. The tally for the SP, BSP and Congress was 42, 15, and nine respectively (Table 2). In a state with a four-cornered electoral contest, under a simple plurality system, the contests in the past have been fairly close. To put this in perspective, the BSP in 2007 and the SP in 2012 won an absolute majority on

Table 2: Party Position by Assembly Segments in 2014 Lok Sabha Elections for BJP, SP, BSP and Congress

Party	Lead	Runner-up
BJP	328	62
SP	42	141
BSP	9	155
INC	15	30

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Report on General Elections 2014.

their own with a vote share of 30% and 29% respectively. The BSP and SP had won their electoral majorities by a narrow average margin of 6% and 7% in 86% and 80% of the total seats won by them in 2007 and 2012 assembly elections (Table 3).

Table 3: Assembly Constituencies Won by the BSP and SP in 2007 and 2012 Assembly Elections

Year	Party	Seats Won	Seats with a Victory Margin Less than the Third Position Candidate	Percentage of Seats with a Victory Margin Less than the Third Position Candidate	Average Margin (%)
2007	BSP	206	178	86	6
2012	SP	224	180	80	7

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2007 and 2012.

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the BJP had won a whopping 43.7% of the vote share in the 78 seats contested by the party and had won 52 seats with greater than 40% vote share. In 17 seats, the BJP had a vote share of more than 50%. The BJP's performance in 328 assembly segments where the party had the lead was equally formidable. In 253 of these 328 assembly segments, BJP had over 40% vote share with an absolute majority in 94 assembly segments (Chakravarty 2017).

Against this backdrop, both the SP and BSP were incapable to take on the resurgent BJP on their own. Therefore, the only viable option for both the SP and BSP would have been to forge a Bihar-like grand alliance, along with the Congress in order to be in a credible position to take on the BJP-led NDA in the 2017 assembly elections. This would have made electoral sense too as the

Table 4: Parliamentary Constituencies in 2014 Won by the BJP Having a Victory Margin Less than the Third Position Candidate

Party	Seats Won by BJP with a Victory Margin Less than the Third Position Candidate	Percentage of Seats Won by the BJP with a Victory Margin Less than the Third Position Candidate	Average Margin (%)	Runner-up	Second Runner-up
BJP	38	54	11		
SP				18	16
BSP				18	18
INC				2	2
QED					2

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Report on General Elections 2014.

combined vote share of the SP, BSP and Congress even in the 2014 parliamentary elections was 49.6%. In the 2014 elections, both the SP and BSP had lost 18 seats each and the Congress lost two seats by an average margin of 11% to the BJP. The victory margin for the BJP in these 38 seats was less than that of the vote share of the third position candidate. The BSP, SP, and the Congress were in the third position in 18, 16, and two of the seats respectively and so was the Quami Ekta Dal (QED) in two seats (Table 4).

However, this was easier said than done not only due to the incompatible social support base of the two principal non-BJP parties, but also the history of acrimonious personal relationship between the BSP leader Mayawati and the SP's Mulayam Singh Yadav. It dates back to the 1995 attack on Mayawati by workers of the SP after the BSP decided to break its 1993 alliance with the former (Jha 2015). This acrimony was the main reason behind the party's refusal to consider the SP's offer of an alliance in January 2015. The ruling SP government not only had to face anti-incumbency but also had to deal with the family feud within the ruling party. Mulayam Singh Yadav remained adamant in his refusal to ally with the Congress. His son and then UP chief minister Akhilesh Yadav responded positively to the Congress's overtures primarily to shore up his party's chances in the assembly elections and consolidate his position within the party in case of internal sabotage of its electoral prospects by disgruntled sections within the extended Yadav family. The attempt by the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) to be part of an alliance between the SP and the Congress was scuttled primarily because of the former's refusal to concede more seats than the generous 105 to the Congress. The Congress too refused to share seats with the RLD from its kitty of seats, though the two parties had contested the 2012 assembly elections in alliance. The alliance with SP, which was a lifeline for the Congress, was relegated to the margins of UP politics. However, the fact that the Congress and the SP decided to join hands was indicative that both of them were not comfortable going it alone.

Pattern of Seat Sharing

The SP and the Congress reached a seat-sharing arrangement where the two parties decided to contest 298 and 105 seats respectively, although in reality, both contested on 311 and 114 seats as they were engaged in a face-to-face contest in 25 assembly seats.

If we assume that the seat sharing was based on a quota defined as the claim for the winner and runner-up seats, then going by their performance in 2012 assembly elections the SP and the Congress should have contested 301 seats and 59 seats respectively. Therefore, the two parties exceeded their quota by 10 and 55 seats each (Table 5). The SP staked its claim and fought in 260 seats out of the 301 seats where the party was either a winner or a runner-up in 2012. The remaining 51 seats contested by the party comprised of constituencies where the party was uncompetitive, that is, not in the top two positions in the 2012 elections.

Table 5: Pattern of Seat Sharing between SP and Congress in 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections Based on Their Performance in 2012 Assembly Elections

Alliance in 2017	Assembly Elections 2017 Seats Contested	Performance in 2012 Assembly Elections		
		W	R	Seats Managed beyond Quota
SP	311	224	77	+10(3%)
INC	114	28	31	+55(93%)

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2012 and 2017.

The Congress, on the other hand, contested only 32 of the 59 seats where it was either a winner or a runner-up. It staked its claim and fought in as many as 82 constituencies where it was not competitive (as explained above). These included 13 seats which it had not contested in the 2012 assembly elections. Its then ally the RLD had contested seven of the 13 seats. The Congress did seem to have an upper hand given its performance in the 2012 assembly elections. It managed to secure 10 seats which the SP had won in the previous election and 19 seats where the SP was a runner-up. The SP on the other hand staked its claim and fought in 16 constituencies contested by the RLD in the previous assembly election and not contested by the RLD ally Congress.

The number of seats contested by the SP where the Congress was a winner or a

runner-up were three and two, respectively. In the 25 seats where the two allies fought against each other, the SP had won 13 seats and was a runner-up in four others in the previous assembly election, while the Congress had won only two of these seats in the previous assembly election in 2012; it was runner-up in five seats and had not contested two seats. Therefore, if we go by the logic of seat-sharing quota, then the SP should have contested 17 seats, and the Congress seven seats. The SP was a runner-up in one constituency, of the two not contested by the Congress in 2012. In three seats the alliance decided to back independents, and two of them managed to win.

Electoral Performance

The electoral results were largely a repeat of the 2014 parliamentary election. The BJP-led alliance registered a spectacular victory by winning 325 of the total 403 seats contested. The BJP alone won 312 seats of the 384 seats contested with a vote share of 39.65%. While it was able to hold on and consolidate its position in the state, the opposition on the other hand was completely decimated. The BJP with its allies managed to win 80% of the total seats in the assembly (Table 6).

Table 6: Seats and Vote Share in 2014 Parliamentary Elections and 2017 Assembly Elections for BJP, SP, BSP and Congress

Party	Parliamentary Elections 2014							Assembly Elections 2017						
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Congress	67	2	9	7.5	4	4	3	114	7	22.13	6.25	4	4	6

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2017, and General Elections 2014.

The SP managed to retain its vote share from the 2014 parliamentary election while the Congress's vote share registered a further decline, though the alliance seemed to have benefited it more than the SP if one looks at the vote share of the two parties in the seats contested. When compared to the 2014 election, the SP vote share in the seats contested by the party increased by 6 percentage points, from 22.8% to 28.32%. The Congress, on the other hand, registered an increase in its vote share in the seats contested by 13%, from 9% to 22.13%. In the absence of an alliance, probably the

Congress would have failed to even open its account. In fact, the overall vote share of the party declined marginally by 1%.

The SP secured 11.7% seats, that is, 47 seats with a vote share of 21.8%. The Congress managed a miniscule 1.7% of the seat share, that is, seven seats, and a vote share of 6.25%.

In the 25 seats where the alliance partners contested against each other, the BJP ended up winning 21 seats, and its ally the Apna Dal(s) won one seat. The SP was able to register a win in two seats while the Congress could only secure one. The BJP won by a convincing share of more than 40% in as many as 12 of these 25 seats, while the SP and Congress's combined vote share was more than the BJP's in only five.

What Went Wrong?

The scale of the BJP's electoral dominance in the recently held assembly elections could be gauged from the fact that "effective number of parties" (ENP) both by seat and vote share (ENPV) was the lowest in the last 40 years. While the ENP was 1.49 the ENPV was 3.42. The low value of the two indicators reflects how uneven the electoral contest was both in terms of seats and vote share and how absolute was the BJP-led alliance's

dominance (Goyal and Kaushik 2017a). The BJP's average margin in the seats won by the party was 15.04% (Goyal and Kaushik 2017b). The fact that the BJP's vote share in 74% of the seats (232 seats) won by the party was over 40% corroborates this and underscores the depth of its victory.

The SP and the Congress overestimated their strength during the seat distribution. This is corroborated if one looks at the performance of the two parties in the assembly segments in the 2014 parliamentary elections. If the benchmark for seat distribution would have been the

competitiveness of the two parties in the assembly segments in 2014, that is, winner or runner-up, then the SP exceeded its quota by 128 seats and the Congress by 69 seats. Therefore, in a whopping 197 constituencies, the two parties were already in a vulnerable position (Table 7). Even if one were to go by their respective positions in the 2012 assembly elections, the SP and the Congress contested in 51 and 72 seats in which they were uncompetitive. The allies SP and Congress managed to win only in three and five seats respectively.

Table 7: Pattern of Seat Sharing between SP and Congress in 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections

Alliance in 2017	Assembly Elections 2017 Seats Contested	Performance in 2012 Assembly Elections		
		W	R	Seats Managed beyond Quota
SP	311	42	141	128(70%)
Congress	114	15	30	69(153%)

Source: Election Commission of India: Statistical Reports on General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh 2017, and General Elections 2014.

The alliance formation between the SP and the Congress lacked coherence and an eye for detail where the two unequal parties were unable to reach an amicable seat-sharing arrangement. This was the result of both the internal feud within the SP and a game of one-upmanship between the proposed alliance partners as well as warring factions within the SP. The internal feud was responsible for the release of two separate lists by the two factions within the SP. On the other hand, the declaration of a list of contestants by the SP, even as an alliance was being negotiated with the Congress was an attempt to pressurise the party and present it with a fait accompli. This resulted in a situation where the two parties were left contesting against each other in 25 seats. The Congress managed to wrest as many as 29 seats from the SP where the party was a winner and a runner-up in 10 and 19 seats respectively.

The BJP won 27 of these seats and one seat was won by its ally, the Apna Dal(s). The SP contested in only four such seats where the Congress was either a winner or a runner-up and lost three of these seats to the BJP while managing to secure one. The SP refused to ally with the RLD and contested in 16 seats where the RLD had contested in 2012 assembly

elections. The BJP won in 14 of these seats. Even in the 25 constituencies where the two parties contested against each other the joint vote share of the SP and the Congress exceeded that of the BJP-led alliance only in five seats. The combined vote share of 29.8% of both the SP and Congress in the 2014 parliamentary election was woefully short of the BJP's vote share of 42.6%. In the 2017 assembly election, the combined vote share of the SP-led alliance and BSP was more than the BJP and its allies in 201 seats. The SP, BSP and Congress were in the second position in 111, 58, and 33 seats respectively. Therefore to take on the BJP electorally and have a fighting chance, a simple coalition between the

SP and the Congress in the absence of the BSP was severely inadequate.

NOTE

- 1 For an account of the evolution of coalition politics in India, and expectations derived for state-level coalition politics from the logic of the SMSP system in a federal polity, see Sridharan (2002).

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