

# The Changing Paradigm of Caste and Performance: A Longitudinal Study of Uttar Pradesh Politics (2017–2022)

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## **Abstract:**

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the structural shifts in the political landscape of Uttar Pradesh between the 2017 and 2022 Assembly elections. Historically dominated by identity-based mobilization—specifically the "Mandal" politics of Backward Classes and the Dalit-led movement—Uttar Pradesh has transitioned into a new era where performance-based governance and "Labharthi" (beneficiary) politics intersect with traditional caste loyalty. By examining the Bhartiya Janata Party's strategic social engineering, the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the ceiling encountered by the Samajwadi Party, this study demonstrates how the BJP successfully constructed a "rainbow coalition" of upper castes and non-dominant marginalized groups. The article concludes that while caste remains a fundamental social cleavage, its role is increasingly mediated by the delivery of welfare, perceptions of security, and symbolic representation within the power structure.

**Keywords:** Caste Politics, Elections, Regional Parties, Coalition Politics, Welfare Schemes, Vote Bank, Sanskritization, Identity Politics.

Uttar Pradesh is not merely a state; it is a political microcosm of India. With 403 Assembly seats and 80 Lok Sabha seats, it dictates the national narrative. For nearly three decades following the decline of the Congress party in the late 1980s, UP was the primary battlefield for identity politics, where the SP and BSP alternated power by consolidating specific "vote banks" based on caste and religion. The state has produced several Prime Ministers, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Narendra Modi (elected from Varanasi). Therefore, the voting behavior in UP not only impacts state-level governance but also influences national politics.

Uttar Pradesh presents a complex mosaic of caste configurations. Broadly, the population is divided among upper castes (such as Brahmins, Thakurs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs like Yadavs and Kurmis), Scheduled Castes (mainly Dalits), and a significant Muslim minority. The caste system's deep entrenchment in society makes it a reliable predictor of political allegiance. Historical developments, such as the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in the early 1990s and the rise of identity-based parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), further cemented the link between caste and voting.

Uttar Pradesh has played a critical role in shaping the central government's composition. The state has produced several Prime Ministers, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Narendra Modi (elected from Varanasi). Therefore, the voting behavior in UP not only impacts state-level governance but also influences national politics.

The foundational work of Rajni Kothari (1970) emphasized that caste and democracy in India are not contradictory but complementary to each other. According to Kothari, caste has been "politicized" and politics "caste-ized" meaning that caste has adapted to democratic competition and become a key instrument of political participation. Today caste is no more a social phenomenon rather it is a political phenomenon. M.N. Srinivas (1966), with his concept of Sanskritization, highlighted how social mobility and caste reordering has influenced Indian politics.

Over the past two decades, UP has witnessed dramatic shifts in electoral politics, with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) managing to break traditional caste alliances and carve out a new social coalition. The Assembly elections of 2017 and 2022 have shown how caste mobilization has evolved wherein not only traditional loyalties matter but also issues such as development, nationalism, and leadership image intersect with caste identity. In 2017, The BJP's return to power with 325 seats (including allies) was not a mere victory but a total reimagining of how a party could win in a caste-sensitive environment. By 2022, the political discourse had evolved further. Despite the economic disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread Farmers' Protest in Western UP, the incumbent government led by Yogi Adityanath secured a second term—a historic feat in the state's recent history. This article explores the mechanisms behind this shift, arguing that the BJP's success lies in its ability to transcend narrow identity silos through a combination of sub-altern Hindutva and robust welfare delivery.

Paul Brass argued that Indian politics is structured by durable social divisions. In UP, these divisions are primarily caste-based. The BJP's strategy was to create a new cleavage—not just Hindu vs. Muslim, but "the marginalized many" vs. "the dominant few". By portraying the SP as a "Yadav-only" party and the BSP as a "Jatav-only" party, the BJP invited all other castes into its fold.

Kanchan Chandra's theory posits that voters in patronage-based systems perform a "headcount" of their group members in a party's leadership to estimate their access to state resources. The BJP applied this by giving assembly tickets to hundreds of candidates from small, non-dominant sub-castes and appointing leaders like Keshav Prasad Maurya (an OBC) as State President and later Deputy CM. This signaled to these groups that the BJP was their "ethnic home".

Hanna Pitkin's, Study of Dimensions of Representation provides a framework to distinguish between *descriptive representation* (looking like the voter) and *substantive representation* (acting for the voter). The BJP's "Double Engine" government claimed to provide both. It gave the smaller castes a "face" in the cabinet while ensuring that welfare benefits reached their doorsteps regardless of their local political affiliation.

To understand the current shift, one must revisit the "Mandal" era of the 1990s. This period saw the rise of the Samajwadi Party (representing the Yadavs and Muslims) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (representing the Dalits, particularly the Jatavs). These parties successfully challenged the "upper-caste" hegemony of the Congress and the BJP at the time.

By the early 2010s, however, a sense of fatigue had set in. The non-Yadav OBCs (such as Kurmis, Mauryas, and Rajbhars) and non-Jatav Dalits (such as Pasis and Khatiks) felt that the gains of Mandal politics were being cornered by a few dominant sub-castes. The BJP, under the leadership of Amit Shah and Narendra Modi, identified this "internal cleavage" and began a systematic outreach to these marginalized groups, promising them both descriptive representation and a share in development. Although it is not a set pattern yet on a broader perspective in Uttar Pradesh the party politics and the voters on the caste line can be summarised as follows:

Yadav's	SP
Jatav's	BSP
Non – Yadav OBC's	BJP (e.g.- Kurmi, Lodh, Maurya)
Upper Caste	BJP
Muslims	SP, Congress
Non-Jatav Dalits	BJP/BSP

Prior to 2017 elections, Uttar Pradesh had been governed by the Samajwadi Party(SP) led by Shri Akhilesh Yadav. The SP drew its support primarily from the Yadav Community and Muslims, forming a social Coalition that had traditionally helped it to gain political power. However, internal conflict within the Yadav family and a perceived deterioration in law and order created an atmosphere of uncertainty. The 2017 election was won at the booth level by the BJP. The RSS and the BJP worked in tandem to reach the "last mile" of UP's social hierarchy .

**Election Results (2017):**

- Total Seats - 403 seats
- BJP-Led NDA - 325 seats (BJP alone 312)
- SP- Congress Alliance- 54 seats
- BSP - 19 seats

The BJP/RSS 's Grassroot Mobilization focused on rural hamlets and "bastis" where the state's presence had historically been weak . They mobilized communities through cultural symbols and localized outreach, building a narrative of Hindu unity that included the most marginalized Dalits. The BJP formed strategic alliances with smaller caste-based parties, such as the Apna Dal (targeting Kurmis) and the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (targeting Rajbhars). These alliances were not just for seat-sharing but served as a psychological bridge to these communities. Hence, the 2017 election outcome was a sweep.

The BJP won 312 seats on its own, with its allies taking the total to 325 . The SP was reduced to 47 seats, and the BSP to a mere 19 .

By 2022, the BJP had shifted from a party of "identity mobilization" to a party of "delivery." The creation of the Labharthi Class was the most significant political development of the decade .The government utilized Direct Benefit Transfer to ensure that the "leakage" typical of previous regimes was minimized. Key schemes mentioned in the paper include:

- PM Awas Yojana: The construction of millions of pucca houses provided a sense of permanent security and dignity to the rural poor .
- Ujjwala Yojana: The delivery of free LPG cylinders targeted women specifically, easing their daily labor and creating a loyal female vote bank .
- Free Ration Scheme: Launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, the provision of free grains, oil, and salt was a critical lifeline for millions. For many voters, "salt loyalty" became a powerful rhetorical tool in the 2022 campaign .
- PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi: Direct cash transfers of ₹6,000 per year to farmers provided a safety net that helped the BJP retain support even in the face of the Farmers' Protest.

The BJP successfully linked these benefits to the personalities of Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath. The "trust factor" was so high that even voters who faced local grievances often chose the BJP because they "trusted the top" .

The Regional Dynamics of Uttar Pradesh is a collection of diverse regions, each with its own political logic which can be categorised as under:

Region	Key Characteristics	2022 Dynamics
Western UP	Prosperous agrarian belt; Jats and Muslims dominant.	Dominated by the Farmers' Protest. While the SP-RLD alliance made gains, the BJP held onto its urban seats and non-Jat Hindu votes .
Awadh	The central heartland including Lucknow.	A BJP stronghold where welfare schemes and "Double Engine" messaging resonated strongly with the rural poor .
Purvanchal	Densely populated, caste-fragmented eastern region.	A fierce battleground. Despite some OBC leaders (like Swami Prasad Maurya) defecting to the SP, the BJP's organizational depth kept its base intact .
Bundelkhand	Arid, poverty-stricken region.	The BJP swept all 19 seats. Voters cited improved water connectivity and consistent ration delivery as primary reasons .

**Election Results 2022:**

- Total Seats - 403 seats
- BJP- Led NDA - 273 seats (BJP alone 255)
- SP- Led Alliance - 125 seats
- Congress - 2 seats
- BSP - 1 Seat

The 2022 assembly elections was power regaining for BJP once again, although SP was able to gain the seats but not enough to form the government. Both Congress and BSP failed to mark their presence in the elections. The BSP’s performance was historic for its decline. From a majority in 2007 to just one seat in 2022, the party has lost its status as a viable alternative .

- The Silent Dalit Shift: While Jatavs remained largely with Mayawati, the "Other" Dalits migrated to the BJP . They felt that the BSP had become too insular and that the BJP’s welfare schemes offered more substantive benefits than identity pride alone .
- Absence of Mobilization: The paper notes that the BSP leadership was largely absent from the ground between 2017 and 2022, failing to protest or engage with voters on daily issues .

Akhilesh Yadav attempted to broaden his party's appeal by forming alliances with smaller OBC parties (like the RLD and SBSP) . While the SP’s vote share increased significantly and it won 111 seats, it could not overcome the "Yadav-Muslim" perception. The "Yogi model" of governance, emphasizing a "tough on crime" stance (the "Bulldozer" image), was a direct contrast to the perceived lawlessness of the previous SP regime . This perception prevented the SP from winning over upper-caste and non-Yadav OBC voters .

One of the most profound shifts noted during this phase was the emergence of women as an independent voting bloc. Historically, women in rural UP followed the head of the household’s choice but in 2022, the "silent women voters" played a decisive role. Women voters consistently cited improved safety and the ability to move freely after dark as a reason for supporting the incumbent. Although the Congress won only two seats, its "Ladki Hoon, Lad Sakti Hoon" campaign was a cultural milestone . It empowered women to see themselves as political actors, though ironically, many of these empowered women chose the BJP for its perceived stability and welfare.

The study of the 2017–2022 cycle in Uttar Pradesh reveals a "new normal" in Indian politics. The BJP has successfully institutionalized a model that synthesizes identity and performance . By providing descriptive representation to a vast array of sub-castes and delivering substantive benefits through a massive welfare state, the party has made traditional "vote bank arithmetic" obsolete .

For the opposition, the path forward is complex. Relying on identity alone is no longer enough to challenge a hegemon that has co-opted both religion and development. As the 2022 results show, the UP voter is increasingly sophisticated, weighing the benefits of caste representation against the tangible outcomes of governance. The era of "pure" identity politics has evolved into an era of "identity + delivery," and for now, the BJP remains the primary architect of this new landscape.

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