Praise for the Book

'Axis My India has predicted the results of most elections accurately. This shows their ability to understand the mind and the expectations of the common man of this country.

Pradeep Gupta is one of the most well-known psephologists of India and he has studied the social, economic and political realities of the country very thoroughly. Through his in-depth surveys and studies, he has developed a great insight into the voter's psychology and election results.

I am very confident that this book will prove to be helpful for both voters and election analysts in developing the right understanding of how people use their right to vote and how election results should be analysed.'
Amit Shah, Union Minister of Home Affairs

'Pradeep Gupta and Axis My India are pioneers in conducting election surveys and gauging the public mood. He is well known for conducting data-based scientific surveys all over the country. I believe his success comes from his deep understanding of the voter's psychology which goes beyond market research and statistics.

In *How India Votes*, Pradeep Gupta delves deep into the psyche of the Indian voter and takes readers on an insightful journey through how Indians choose their leaders.'
Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh

'Pradeep Gupta of Axis My India has been doing election-related surveys all over India for almost a decade. He has turned this huge experience into the book *How India Votes*. I hope this book proves to be very useful to election experts in understanding the people and voting culture of the world's largest democracy.'
Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh

'Why do people vote the way they do? Pradeep Gupta uses data obtained from Axis My India's rigorous surveys of Indian voters to explain what motivates – and what does not appear to matter to – Indian voters. He draws significantly on data gathered during Axis My India's survey of Indian voters. Axis My India's processes are documented in a Harvard Business School case on the company. This book is vital for anyone interested in how Indian democracy works and has important lessons for those interested in how democracy works in other parts of the world.'
Ananth Raman, UPS Foundation Professor of Business Logistics, Harvard Business School

'Pradeep Gupta is the gold standard of polling in India. His pioneering technique of conducting a post-poll study in every seat allows for a granular understanding of election results. Axis My India's enviable track record has transformed how opinion polling is perceived in the country. I have had the

privilege of working closely with Pradeep and have seen the dedication he has to his craft and the emphasis he lays on teamwork, which is what helps him deliver results that other pollsters can only dream of. This work ethic is also what gives me the confidence of running his exit poll results on the India Today Group even if they so against the grain of perceived wisdom about which way the "hawa" is blowing.'
Kalli Purie, Vice Chairperson, India Today Group

'An Indian election verdict is often a puzzle wrapped in a mystery. But how do you make sense of the numbers? No pollster does that better than Pradeep Gupta, the man who gets it right more often than anyone else. *How India Votes* tries to decode the science behind the maths of exit polling. Valuable reading for anyone who wants to understand an Indian election and exit polling.'
Rajdeep Sardesai

How India Votes

How India Votes

And What It Means

Pradeep Gupta

❀ juggernaut

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Contents

Foreword

A lot has changed since the first edition of this book came out.

In May, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) won a hard-fought victory in the West Bengal polls by defeating an aggressive Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) campaign to wrest the state away. The result has set the cat among the pigeons in the Opposition camp, leading to some churning.

The year-long protests by farmers against the three central agricultural laws are also finally over, with the Modi government withdrawing the controversial laws in a rare retreat. Since first edition's release, the chief ministers of four states – Gujarat, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Karnataka – have been shunted.

Amidst all this, poll season is upon us again with Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa, Manipur, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh set to elect new governments in 2022. While Gujarat and Himachal

Pradesh will go to polls later this year, the other five will likely see elections in February and March.

Six of these seven states currently have a BJP government, with the Congress as its principal challenger. In many of these states, like Goa, Punjab and Uttarakhand, other parties are emerging as alternatives to both the principal parties. 2022, then, represents Congress' best chance to gain a foothold, re-establish its dominance and fend off other Opposition parties baying for a larger role.

The outcomes of each of these polls will be crucial in their own contexts, but the one that is surely going to indelibly alter the country's landscape, irrespective of the result, is the outcome of the Uttar Pradesh polls.

Unarguably, Uttar Pradesh is the most important state in the country for any political party's fortunes since it sends a total of eighty Lok Sabha and thirty-one Rajya Sabha MPs. But for pollsters like me, Uttar Pradesh, apart from being critical, is also a challenging state to crack.

First, the size.

Uttar Pradesh has the most number of legislative assembly constituencies at 403; for context, the state with the second-largest number of seats is West

Bengal with 294 seats. To get this state right, we employ nearly ten times as many personnel on the ground to conduct interviews. Even the time taken to conduct our surveys is a lot more than it is in other major states.

So vast is the state that the six different regions within it have varied, often contrasting, problems the populace keeps in mind while voting.

For instance, the infrastructural development in western Uttar Pradesh is on par with the infrastructure in some of the most progressive regions in other states, whereas eastern Uttar Pradesh, also known as Purvanchal, is one of the most under-developed territories in the country.

I remember asking residents in western Uttar Pradesh – most of whom are engaged in cultivating sugar cane – what their problems were, listing out basic amenities I thought they would choose from, like water supply, power and roads. They chose none of these and instead conveyed that the only issue they faced was the long pendency of their dues from the sugar cane crushing factories in the area. In stark contrast, locals in Purvanchal told us they were struggling for bare necessities like clean drinking water and quality healthcare services. Sugar cane

played no role in people's voting choices there. In these parts, there are no jobs, whereas western Uttar Pradesh boasts of some of the biggest manufacturing units of global companies.

As a result, the needs of both these regions are often diametrically opposite.

Similarly, the proportion of its major castes also varies across different regions, making it difficult to predict their voting patterns. In the western part of the state, Muslims and Jats are dominant. In contrast, the Yadav community is dominant in central Uttar Pradesh. In the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh, upper-caste groups and Dalit communities are dominant, while the proportion of Muslims, Jats and Yadavs is too little to matter, with the exception of Azamgarh.

Another unique aspect is the abundance of smaller, regional and caste-specific parties in the state. From the Rashtriya Lok Dal to the Apna Dal, from the Nishad Party to the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, smaller parties are integral to Uttar Pradesh's electoral politics. While these parties might not win many seats on their strength, they can end up cutting into the votes of other parties. That is why, come election season, each major political player in Uttar Pradesh tries to lure some of these parties their way.

With such a vast and diverse electorate, it isn't entirely surprising that holding the reins of the state is also a tricky affair for its politicians.

Uttar Pradesh is one of the only states currently that has a four-corner contest in which all the four players – the BJP, the Congress, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) – have come to power with a majority at least once in the last four decades and have formed alliance governments at least twice.

But what, in my view, truly shows why Uttar Pradesh can be tricky to predict is a fact that is often overlooked in popular discourse around this state's polity. It is that no ruling government in the last four decades has been able to get re-elected there despite getting handsome majorities in their first tenures. The last three governments formed in the state – in 2007, 2012 and 2017 – were all formed with full majorities, only for the incumbent to be booted out the next time. The electorate there is alert and watchful and doesn't mind relegating the most powerful of its chief ministers to political oblivion.

One often associates this nearly compulsive anti-incumbency with states like Punjab, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, but the Uttar Pradesh electorate can

be as fickle, and trends could change at any time, making it an unpredictable election till the last vote is cast.

All this only makes our jobs as pollsters tougher.

Since our methodology at Axis My India involves surveying each seat, the Uttar Pradesh elections are a labourious effort, especially since the vast and diverse demography means that one cannot extrapolate any assumptions gathered in specific areas and regions. In other states, one gets a general voting pattern in the months leading up to the election, but in Uttar Pradesh, these trends change within a matter of weeks.

In most other states, apart from surveying each seat, we study the inclinations of five major caste groups towards the big political players to gather an accurate understanding of the voting trends. In Uttar Pradesh, we need to study at least fifteen castes and sub-castes to be able to develop a similar understanding.

The results of these polls are bound to have implications on the careers of some of the leading players.

For Yogi Adityanath, an outright victory would mean he would become the first chief minister in

decades to be re-elected for a second term. Needless to say, such a victory would also cement his place in the pantheon of prominent Uttar Pradesh leaders.

For his main contender, Akhilesh Yadav, the poll is a test of his popularity and, to some measure, even his legacy. The results will tell us whether the electorate thinks of Yadav as a mass leader, like his father Mulayam Singh Yadav, and whether he can expand beyond his urban-centric image. For Mayawati, this election might be a win-or-bust poll, since she has already been out of power for ten years now. Her party is floundering, her resources seem depleted and her leaders are deserting her. Our experience on the ground tells us that her vote bank is committed to her, but that alone is unlikely to make a significant difference to her fortunes.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra is leading the charge for the Congress, and the party's faring will be seen as a judgement on her. For years now, there has been some clamour around her entry into politics, with breathless followers even comparing her to grandmother Indira Gandhi. Her focus on female voters is novel, and the outcome will tell us whether this approach proved to be wise or not. This is the first full-fledged poll campaign she is in charge of;

it will be her first big test, and if she loses, her last because the failure might be difficult for her to shrug off.

Lastly, the polls will also be seen as a referendum on Modi's popularity. A loss will galvanize the Opposition and inflict a deep blow on the prime minister's repute as a leader, especially after the loss in Bengal; a win will only further cement his appeal.

As with these principal players, even the principal parties have a lot riding on these polls.

A crushing defeat for the Congress in these polls will cast a shadow on Gandhi Vadra's future as a leader and only increase the din among the Opposition parties for a stronger anchor to lead the alternative charge against the BJP. For the BJP, a win will reassure them of the party's re-election prospects come 2024. It could considerably deflate the Opposition's belief and morale – that the 2024 results will be different from the one of 2019.

All in all, the outcome of the Uttar Pradesh polls is likely to set the tone for the country's politics over the next two years.

Not too far away from Uttar Pradesh, the politicking in Punjab might also have a ripple effect on the country's politics. The state is seeing a churn

in its political alignments. The decades-old BJP-Shiromani Akali Dal alliance has broken up, and ex-Congressman Captain Amarinder Singh's new party, the Punjab Lok Congress, has now entered into a tie-up with the BJP and Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa's Shiromani Akali Dal (Sanyukt). What used to, mostly, be a bipolar contest has now turned into a multi-corner fight, with the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerging as a strong contender and an alternative for many. Arvind Kejriwal is holding up the Delhi model of governance, while trying to capitalize on the anti-incumbency against state government as well as the Centre.

But the event that promises to shape political trends nationally is the appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi as the state's new chief minister.

Punjab has the highest proportion of Dalits across all states in India, with nearly 32 per cent of the population belonging to Scheduled Castes. Punjab was the birthplace of Dalit leader and BSP founder Kanshi Ram. Despite this, the state has predominantly had Jat Sikhs as chief minister, till Channi became the first Dalit Sikh to ascend to the post. His appointment has even pushed the Shiromani Akali Dal and the BSP to enter into an alliance in

order to lure the Dalit voter. If the Congress snatches a victory here, much of the credit would have to go to Channi and his appointment. The Congress' experiment, if successful, might also help it draw more Dalit voters towards itself nationally. Nowhere else would this be more relevant for the Grand Old Party than in Uttar Pradesh, where Mayawati's flailing campaign could see Dalits exploring other options to back. Is this 'Dalit + female voters' the secret formula that the Congress is targeting in Uttar Pradesh? Time will tell.

Uttarakhand is one state where the BJP finds itself on the defensive, after having to change three chief ministers in five years, ostensibly due to reasons of factionalism and non-performance. The AAP is trying hard to build a base there, and it remains to be seen whether the AAP can puncture the state's predominantly bipolar politics between the BJP and the Congress.

Similar is the case with Goa, where new players AAP and the TMC are looking to queer the pitch for the Congress and BJP, the predominant political powers in the state. Both parties are going all out and see the small, sunny state as an easy hunting ground to expand themselves in, with just 40 assembly seats

to fight over. Despite its size, Goa has traditionally thrown up hung assemblies, and it will be interesting to see whether any of these parties agree to work with each other. That collaboration could just set a national template.

In Manipur, a resurgent BJP is likely to launch an assertive campaign to retain the state. The state was a Congress stronghold, and the party will be desperate to snatch it back from the BJP.

All these polls, from the mammoth Uttar Pradesh to the tiny Goa, have repercussions on the country's politics as it inches closer towards the 2024 polls.

Regional parties are growing increasingly assertive and are demanding a chance at leading the Opposition charge against the BJP. In many of these states, emergence of parties like the AAP and the TMC could end up dividing the anti-BJP vote and result in the BJP's victory.

That is why the results will matter a lot – a win for the Congress in at least two states will give it the confidence to assert itself and insist that it is the natural leader of any collective effort against the BJP. But if it doesn't and the BJP manages to defeat it comprehensively in all the five states, the Congress will have a lot more to ponder over. Wins for the

BJP will mean the party will walk into 2024, high on confidence.

Many of the factors that the book discusses will be at play here. For instance, the increasing voting share of female voters is a theme to watch out for, especially in Uttar Pradesh, where Gandhi Vadra is aggressively wooing this crucial demographic. The final outcome notwithstanding, this is the first time we are seeing female voters being targeted as a separate constituency by any party in Uttar Pradesh.

Similarly, Uttar Pradesh also promises to be a communally charged election. As I explain later, indulging in communalism seldom helps a party wins more votes, something that has been proven time and again by the Indian electorate.

Our team is already on the ground and is raring to go. So far, we have been on the mark in predicting forty-eight of the fifty-two elections, with an accuracy rate of 93 per cent.

I hope these five elections help it take a few percentage points higher.

Pradeep Gupta
January, 2022