Caste and religion still form the bedrock of people's political understanding in Uttar Pradesh

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From this author

As for the Muslims, they seemed so resolutely anti-BJP that their turnout should be larger than in 2014. (Express photo by Vishal Srivastav)

It is widely believed that Uttar Pradesh will determine who wins power on May 23. In 2014, if the BJP, instead of 71 seats, had won only 10 seats, as it did both in 2004 and 2009, it would still have formed the government, but in a substantially constraining alliance. Instead, a wave thrust Narendra Modi

into power, and the alliance partners were reduced to political insignificance.

During my recent field visit to East UP, I did not detect a Modi wave. Instead, one can speak of two sub-waves, one among the upper castes, and another sweeping through the Dalit-Muslim-Yadav communities. The BJP is the primary beneficiary of the former, and the SP-BSP-RLD Mahagathbandhan of the latter.

To derive the larger meaning of these two sub-waves, one will have to rely on observations emerging from elsewhere in the state, as well as refer to UP's underlying caste and religious arithmetic. Any claim that economic development can generate a decisively large multi-caste, multi-religious coalition and deliver election victories runs up against the basic political realities of UP.

It is not that nobody discussed the government's toilet construction or its provision of gas connections during my field trip, but most conversations, within minutes, turned to caste — and religion-based political leanings. Moreover, the discussion never veered towards class as a variable. Caste and religion formed the bedrock of people's political understanding. And it has been so for a long time.

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Let us begin with the first cut into UP's political arithmetic. Basically, it is a 20-20-20-40 state: 20 per cent upper caste, 20 per cent Dalit, 20 per cent Muslim and 40 per cent OBC. Some communities are a bit smaller (Muslims, for example, are 19.2 per cent of the state), others slightly larger (Dalits are roughly 21 per cent), and the upper caste and OBC figures are sample-based estimates. But, overall, the 20-20-20-40 division is a good starting point for political analysis.

Further subdivisions mark each of these larger aggregations. Some of the subcategories have become politically significant and are noteworthy. The largest upper castes — Brahmins (9-10 per cent of the state's population) and Thakurs (7-8 per cent) — do not always agree. Shia Muslims, a small community, have had historical differences with the much larger Sunnis, and often voted for the BJP. Dalits are divided among the Jatavs (10-12 per cent) and non-Jatavs (8-10 per cent). The latter category has further subdivisions, though no other Dalit caste constitutes more than 4 per cent of the state's population. Finally, the Yadav (9-10 per cent) and non-Yadav (30-31 per cent) distinction among the OBCs has been extensively noted. The non-Yadav category is basically a congeries of many small castes, none touching the 4 per cent mark.

One can now put together the basic arithmetic of the two sub-waves. The Mahagathbandhan is heavily centred around the Jatavs, Yadavs, Jats and Muslims, adding up to roughly 40-42 per cent of the population. The BJP's vote is concentrated among the upper castes, some non-Yadav OBCs (for example, Mauryas, Lodhs and Kurmis, each about 2 per cent of the state's population), and select non-Jatav Dalits. Had all non-Yadav OBCs and all non-Jatav Dalits been part of the BJP's base, the party's catchment area would have been a whopping 58-60 per cent, but that is not the case. For example, the Pasis, the second largest Dalit caste, constituting roughly 3 per cent of the state population, are split between the Mahagathbandhan and the BJP. The best inference is that the BJP's base roughly matches the Mahagathbandhan's. It is around 40-42 per cent of the state's population.

The notion of "party base" does not imply that the entire caste would vote for a single party. That does not normally happen. All that it means is that a vast majority of the caste — roughly 70 per cent and above — would vote for a given party or alliance. Since 2004, the BJP has been consistently getting at least 70 per cent of upper caste vote, SP at least 70 per cent of Yadav

vote, and BSP at least 70 per cent of Dalit vote.

What, then, would determine the results this time around?

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First and foremost, unlike 2014, the non-BJP vote is not entirely split. Three regional parties — BSP, SP and RLD — have joined in an alliance. If the SP and BSP had come together in 2014, their combined vote share, and the BJP's, would have been identical (42 per cent), assuming votes of each alliance partner were transferred to the other. In the 2017 state assembly elections, the combined vote share of SP and BSP (44 per cent) was greater than that of the BJP (40 per cent). Even if some slippage takes place this time in the SP-BSP vote and the BJP holds on to its 40-42 per cent share, at the aggregate level the two sides are, at the very least, equally matched.

Second, the aggregate matching has to be locally disaggregated. The base of each party is not evenly distributed. For example, although Yadavs are only 9-10 per cent of the state's population, they are 15 per cent of many constituencies in East UP. Similarly, many seats are over 30 per cent Muslim. The Jats are mostly in West UP. If a party's base is not evenly spread, its results can be better.

Third, wherever the Congress party has put up upper caste candidates, especially Brahmins, they will cut into the BJP's Brahmin vote, especially if the candidates have substantial local following. This point was well understood when the Mahagathbandhan excluded the Congress. In my conversations in East UP, the BJP's local leaders readily admitted that this was happening. Of course, it was also initially believed that if the Congress

took large chunks of the Muslim vote, it would hurt the Mahagathbandhan. My East UP impression is that Muslims were determined to defeat the BJP and were voting strategically. They would not vote in large numbers for Congress candidates, if they were definitely losing.

Fourth, turnout rates of the major communities are critical. It is generally believed that low aggregate turnouts would help the Mahagathbandhan. Since the upper castes vote less than the lower castes, low average turnouts at the constituency level tend to advantage those parties that have a base among the lower castes. As for the Muslims, they seemed so resolutely anti-BJP that their turnout should be larger than in 2014.

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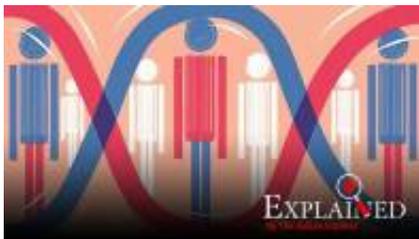
How all of this would end up will be known only on May 23. Political analysis can't predict the number of seats. It can only lay out the factors that would determine the outcome.

This article first appeared in the print edition on May 16, 2019 under the title 'What goes UP'. The writer is director, Center for Contemporary South Asia, Brown University.