



A Litmus Test For Narendra Modi

The Gujarat poll arithmetic will be crucial to removing hurdles in the way of Modi's leadership in 2014

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For all its efforts to downplay the importance of the Gujarat assembly elections beginning this Thursday, the Congress knows that a two-thirds sweep of the state will catapult Narendra Modi on to the national stage. In an election as defining as this, numbers matter. Modi won 114 and 117 seats respectively in 2002 and 2007. A crushing victory - over 125 seats in Gujarat's 182-seat assembly - will smoothen the craters that dot his path to Delhi.

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections will be a watershed in several ways. No party or coalition has won three consecutive Lok Sabha polls since Jawaharlal Nehru's hat trick in 1952, 1957 and 1962. Indira Gandhi won in 1967 and 1971 but was defeated in the post-Emergency election of 1977. Indira and son Rajiv won in 1980 and 1984 respectively but Rajiv was routed in 1989. The Vajpayee-led NDA won in 1998 and 1999 but lost decisively in 2004.

The second reason why the 2014 Lok Sabha elections will be a landmark is that young people born after July 1991 will, for the first time, be eligible to vote. In the May 2009 general elections, they were still not 18 years of age. Why is July 1991 so important? It marks Manmohan Singh's first interim budget, delivered on July 24 shortly after he was appointed finance minister in the Narasimha Rao

government. That budget, followed by the February 1992 budget, laid the foundation for India's economic liberalisation.

Those born in or after July 1991 - the post-liberalisation generation - were still below 18 during the May 2009 Lok Sabha elections. They will vote for the first time in 2014. Those born between 1991 and 1996 represent an estimated 110 million new voters of the nearly 800 million voters who will be eligible to vote in 2014.

Why is this demographic slice so vital for the UPA, NDA and regional parties preparing their strategies for 2014? These 110 million new voters have grown up in post-liberalisation

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India with little emotional baggage of the past. They want jobs, development and good governance. They despise corruption - both the petty sort they encounter in their daily lives and the mega scams they read about on the internet and watch unfolding on television.

For them the Gujarat riots of 2002, the Babri demolition of 1992 and the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 are important historical events that need resolution and closure.



Has Modi caught the mood of the young electorate?

But they do not want them to fester like open wounds. They believe India should move on and join the global mainstream in terms of technology, governance and development. They abhor dynastic politics as much as they deplore ultra-nationalism. Overall they are tolerant but impatient with the misgovernance, corruption and inflation that have blighted their families' lives during the past decade.

They seek change. But when they look around they see national opposition parties like the BJP and large regional parties like the SP, BSP, NCP and DMK practising the same brand of discredited politics as the Congress: nepotistic, corrupt, opportunistic. Modi was quick to catch the mood of this young demographic slice. Hence his ceaseless use of the internet and social media to build a brand not

unlike what American presidential candidates routinely do.

Blindsided by the Congress's rediscovery of economic reforms and hobbled by its own strategic errors, the BJP's central leadership has little option now but to fall in line behind Modi. Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley and others have decided that Modi could be the party's best electoral bet to confront the quartet of Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and P Chidambaram who will lead the Congress's 2014 Lok Sabha election campaign.

But can Modi's appeal among younger voters spread to the rest of the electoral demographic? The BJP needs around 25% national vote share to win 185 Lok Sabha seats. It won 182 seats with 25.59% vote share in 1998 and again the same number, 182 seats, with just 23.75% in 1999

due to a greater number of coalition allies. It won 138 seats with 22.16% vote share in 2004 and 116 seats with 18.80% vote share in 2009. It thus needs a swing of around 6% from its 2009 vote share to climb back to 185 seats. At that numerical level, it will attract allies like the AIADMK, BJD and others apart from old faithfuls such as the Shiv Sena and Shiromani Akali Dal.

Three further imponderables are likely to impact the next general elections. One, the floating Muslim vote might coalesce this time around regional parties like the SP, AIMIM, NCP and others, cutting into the Congress's hitherto safe vote bank. Two, Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party could cannibalise vote shares from both the Congress and the BJP though, as the incumbent, the Congress is likely to be hurt more. Three, Rahul's debut as the Congress's prime ministerial candidate too could backfire.

In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, following the Mumbai 26/11 terror attack and the Indo-US nuclear deal, the electorate voted for Manmohan Singh's probity and competence. While the prime minister's reputation has since been diminished by serial scams, Rahul has acquired little political equity of his own and might not relish a direct prime ministerial contest with Modi. Another, younger CEO-PM could thus be forced upon the beleaguered Congress with Rahul taking over Sonia's role as party leader in a continuing diarchy.

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