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Implications of the Karnataka Assembly Election Results



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The Karnataka Assembly Elections of May 2023 attracted nation-wide attention. This was for multiple reasons. It was an election where the BJP and the Congress were in a direct fight. The BJP was also defending its governance record in the only state south of the Vindhya's, where it was in power. Given the distinctly different trends emerging in national and state level elections, one would need to be cautious in extrapolating the Karnataka trends to national politics. The Congress victory is a morale booster for the party not just at the state level but to reinvigorate it nationally. For the BJP, the Karnataka defeat is a political setback in its efforts to expand its political footprints in the southern part of India. For the third player in Karnataka – the JD(S), the results have pushed the party to a distant third position in the electoral contest.

What are the major implications of the Karnataka verdict? It reinforces a four-decade old trend in the state, of a ruling party not securing a clear majority in the next elections. One could assess the verdict from four different perspectives. Firstly, the election saw two competing narratives seeking public endorsement. One was the narrative of the BJP that focused on national issues and depended on the charisma and perceived popularity of its national leadership. Though in power in Karnataka, the BJP preferred not to highlight, its state governments record. It did not declare a Chief Minister candidate in spite of having an incumbent Chief Minister. The Congress party on the other hand

focused on a strategy that was exclusively entrenched in the local. The entire campaign of the party revolved around issues relevant to the state with a special focus on attacking the performance record of the state government. Its national leaders too, focused their campaign speeches on local issues and desisted any temptation of bringing national level issues to the forefront. Being a state assembly poll, the voter in the state appeared to endorse the strategy adopted by the Congress. This has important lessons for state elections across the country.

Secondly, the battle in Karnataka was essentially in its distinct regions. It may be important to note that the BJP saw a sharp fall in its seat share though its vote share remained more or less intact. The true story emerges if you delve into the vote share of the BJP (and the Congress) in the regions of the state. The Kittur Karnataka and Central Karnataka region saw a sharp fall both the vote and seat share of the BJP. The beneficiary was the Congress party. In Kalyan Karnataka region too, there was a fall in the BJP vote share and the Congress gained both in terms of votes and seats. Though the BJP, retained most of the seats it won in the Udipi and Dakshina Kannada regions of Coastal Karnataka its votes share saw a decline. On the other hand, the BJP improved its vote share in Bengaluru and the Old Mysore region. Yet this increase, had different consequences in the two regions. In Bengaluru, it led to a larger number of seats it won while in Old Mysore in spite of an increase in vote share, it won a reduced number of seats compared to last time. What explains the trend in the Old Mysore region? While the BJP vote share increased, its vote across constituencies did not cross the threshold that was required to beat the Congress in a straight contest. What increasingly happened in Old Mysore was the retreat of the JD(S). This led to several direct fights between the Congress and the BJP. In the process, even though the BJP vote share increased, the Congress share of votes remained higher. The weaker performance of the BJP across regions (save Bengaluru and Coastal Karnataka) and the improved performance of the Congress (in all regions save Bengaluru and Coastal Karnataka) explain the final results. An important implication for both the national polls and state level elections, is the need for a more granular analysis of the performance across regions.

Thirdly, both BJP and the Congress attempted to build a rainbow social coalition. The BJP hoped to retain its Lingayat vote, add to its Vokkaliga vote, secure a fair share of the OBC, Dalit and Tribal vote. Lokniti-CSDS survey data indicates that there was a dip in its Lingayat vote, no significant increase in its Vokkaliga vote, a decline in its support among Dalits and Tribals and its inability to perform better among the OBCs. On the other hand, the Congress increased its share of votes among both the Lingayats and Vokkaligas, greatly consolidated its support among the OBCs, Dalits, Tribals and Muslims. Thus, it was clear that the Congress was more successful in creating a rainbow social coalition as compared to the BJP.

Finally, the Karnataka poll is witness to a clear class divide. While the BJP did secure a fair share of the Upper- and Middle-class vote, it secured limited support among the poor. The gap in support between the Congress and the BJP among the poor was much wider than the overall gap in the

vote share of the two parties. This could well have a lot to do with the five major promises made by the Congress parties if voted to power. These included free electricity supply (200 units), unemployment allowance to graduate and diploma holders, financial support to women who are heading a household and subsidized rice to each BPL family. This explains the urgency demonstrated by the new government, in formally announcing the implementation of these promises.

If one were to use a cricketing analogy, no semi final is a predictor of the way the finals would go. Even if the Karnataka polls were to be seen as a semi-final (with the state assembly elections at the end of the year being the second semi-finals) before the 2024 Lok Sabha finale, the factors that impact the semi-finals and final could well be very different. Karnataka has led the trend of making a distinction between the state and national elections. In the 2013 assembly polls, the BJP was routed and the Congress was voted to power. The very next year - in 2014, the BJP got a majority of the seats from the state, in the Lok Sabha poll the BJP won a majority of the seats. In 2018, the BJP was unable to secure a clear majority in the state assembly polls. In the very next year – in 2019, the won 25 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in Karnataka, the implication is clear - a victory in the state assembly elections is no guarantee for success in the Lok Sabha polls. This is what puts greater pressure on the Congress leadership in Karnataka to perform well in the Lok Sabha polls from the state. Much would depend on the performance of the state government and of course developments in national politics in the run up to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.