

Karnataka

Simultaneous Polls, Different Results

The simultaneous Lok Sabha and assembly elections in Karnataka reveal an interesting duality of trends. While there was a clear vote in favour of the ruling NDA alliance in the centre, the anti-Congress vote in the state was split between the BJP and the Janata Dal (S). With the strong showing of the Janata Dal (S) in the state polls, it is clear that the earlier dominance of the two-party system in the state is moving towards a competitive multipolarity. In turn, this current phase may well form only a transitory phase as the state moves towards a new bipolarity.

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The verdict of the Karnataka voters in the 2004 Elections, unlike in several other states of India, did not come as much of a surprise. The mood across the state was sufficiently clear to those who had their ears to the ground, although there was uncertainty as to the proportion of seats and votes each contender would secure ultimately. Opinion polls/exit polls had more or less predicted that the BJP would do well in the Lok Sabha elections in the state while the race for the Vidhana Soudha in Karnataka would be close. This is the second time the state has witnessed a split verdict following simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the vidhan sabha. However, this verdict marks an important departure from the past and is indicative of a new course that politics in the state is likely to take in the years to come.

The results in the state became crucial for all the major political parties for a wide range of reasons. For the Congress, it was imperative that it retained its status as the ruling party in the state and provided those vital seats in the Lok Sabha for forming government at the centre. For the BJP, Karnataka was verily its launching pad in the south [Shastri 1999]. This was the only state in the south where it not only had a presence but was also the main partner in the alliance. It hoped to increase seats in the NDA kitty by its contribution from Karnataka. Winning power in the state would have come as a welcome added bonus. For the Janata Dal (Secular), this was a do-or-die battle. Its continued relevance depended on its reasonably good performance in these elections, especially at the assembly level.

Mention must be made of the efforts made by other political parties to encash the support they believed they had in the state. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) made a concerted effort to expand its base and increase its vote share, although it remained on the fringe of electoral politics in the state for many years. Liquor baron Vijay Mallya invested a lot of time and money on his Janata Party and fielded candidates in several constituencies. The same was true of the Kannada Nadu Party (floated by the former BJP MP and leading transport magnate Vijay Sankeshwar) and Samyukta Urs Paksha, another formed regional outfits. All of them tested the electoral waters in 2004. Their impact on the nature of the contest was watched with keen interest as the Karnataka voters had rarely ever endorsed the claims of regional political outfits [Shastri 2004].

The verdict of the Karnataka voters draws special attention because of the fact that they have clearly distinguished between the Lok Sabha and the assembly polls. The BJP won 18 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats (60 per cent), the Congress secured eight (30 per cent) and the Janata Dal (S) notched up the remaining

two. The assembly verdict was more divided, with the BJP securing 79 of 224 seats (35 per cent) and its ally the Janata Dal(U) winning five seats; the Congress nominees being elected in 65 seats (30 per cent); and the Janata Dal (S) winning 58 seats (26 per cent). Clearly, what the BJP lost at the assembly level, the Janata Dal (S) gained. There is not much difference in the percentage of seats that the Congress won in the state in the Lok Sabha and assembly elections. The BSP failed to register a significant presence in the state in either of the elections. While the BSP and the Janata Party failed to open their account, the Kannada Nadu Paksha managed to win one seat in the assembly.

As compared to previous Lok Sabha elections, the BJP recorded its best ever performance in the state. In 1998, in alliance with the Lok Shakti it had secured 16 seats. This time around it secured 18 seats on its own, with its ally – JD (U), drawing a blank. It was also the best ever performance of the BJP in the assembly elections. The Congress performance in the Lok Sabha poll from the state was a near rerun of its 1998 performance. In terms of its strength in the assembly, it was a return to its 1985 poll performance. Karnataka had an assembly with no clear winner for the second time. Earlier in 1983, the state had a three-way split in the house with the Janata Party emerging as the single largest party [Cheluvvaraju et al 1983]. After two decades, the elections again threw up a legislature in which no single party enjoyed a clear majority. The only crucial difference being that this time around the BJP emerged as the single largest party.

In 2004, Karnataka has witnessed a clear ticket splitting, with a significant percentage of voters supporting different parties in the Lok Sabha and assembly polls. The survey data reveals that 84 per cent of those who voted for the Congress candidates in

Table 1: Partywise performance in Lok Sabha and Assembly Elections 1990-2004

Year	Lok Sabha Elections ^a					Assembly Elections ^b				
	Cong	BJP	JD	JD (U)	JD (S)	Cong	BJP	JD	JD (U)	JD (S) Others
2004	8	18			2	65	79		5	58 17
1999	18	7		3		132	44		18	10 20
1998	9	13		3 ^c						
1996 ^d	5	6	16							
1994						36	40	115		33
1991	22	4	2							

Notes: ^a Total seats Lok Sabha: 28; ^b Total assembly seats: 224; ^c The seats were won by the Lok Shakti; ^d One seat in the Lok Sabha poll was won by a regional party.

Source: CSDS Data Unit

the Lok Sabha poll endorsed the candidates of the same party in the assembly polls too. In the case of the BJP, this percentage drops to around 66 per cent (if the votes transferred to the ally the JD(U) is taken into account). This implies that 34 per cent of those who voted for the BJP in the Lok Sabha poll voted for other party candidates in the assembly polls. The shift was more or less in equal proportion to the Congress, Janata Dal (S) and independents. In the case of those who voted for the Janata Dal (S) at the Lok Sabha polls, around 73 per cent continued to vote for the same party candidates in the assembly polls also. The balance shifted in equal measure to the Congress, BJP and other smaller parties. This vote split explains the fact of a legislative assembly in Karnataka with no single party with a clear majority on the one hand and on the other, a Lok Sabha contingent from the state with nearly two-thirds majority for the BJP.

A more detailed analysis of aggregate data with regard to the Lok Sabha and assembly polls reveals the clear difference in the pattern of voting. In Karnataka, every parliamentary constituency has eight assembly segments. In 14 Lok Sabha constituencies (out of the total 28), the party that won the Lok Sabha seat could not secure a majority of the assembly seats that fell within the Lok Sabha constituency. In seven of these 14 seats, the party that emerged victorious managed to secure just one or two of the eight assembly seats, which fell within the constituency.

The Lok Sabha poll in Karnataka witnessed an intense competition as never before. In most of the seats there was a clear three-cornered contest. This is evident in two developments. In the first place, the margin of victories in most constituencies was very slender. In only six of the 28 constituencies, the margin of victory was more than 10 per cent of the valid votes polled. In as many as 13 constituencies the victory margin was less than 5 per cent. Secondly, as many as 23 of the 28 victors secured less than 50 per cent votes. It is important to note that all the Congress winners polled less than 50 per cent of the valid votes. This indicates the relatively high percentage of votes secured by the losing BJP/JD(U) and JD(S) candidates.

We see a similar trend in the assembly polls. In as many as 67 constituencies (30 per cent) the victory margin was less than 5 per cent of the valid votes polled. In the recent past, the state had not witnessed such an intense competition in the assembly elections [Shastri 1994]. In as many as 95 constituencies (42 per cent) the victory margin was in the 5 to 15 per cent range. It is also important to note that the percentage of Congress, BJP and JD(S) candidates who won by margins of less than 5 per cent and more than 15 per cent is more or less the same. The 2004 verdict was thus the by-product of an intense electoral contest among the three major political formations in the state. Between them they polled nearly 84 per cent of the votes.

Electoral Strategies

It is also important to look at the differences in the electoral strategies adopted by the three major political formations in the state. The Congress decided to call a simultaneous poll in the hope that the 'good work' done by the S M Krishna government could help the party win a larger number of seats in the Lok Sabha and vidhan sabha elections. Chief minister Krishna was confident that the party would secure a working majority (*Deccan Herald*, March 5, 2004) in the assembly. The 'Vibrant Karnataka' slogan coined by the party was a reflection of this confidence (*The Times of India*, February 22, 2004). But the Congress Party spent more

time and energy in deciding candidates for the assembly elections than on seizing the initiative in election campaign.

On the other hand, the BJP was more focused on the Lok Sabha poll. It attempted to use Vajpayee's name and the 'Feel Good' factor to ensure the victory of its candidates in the Lok Sabha poll. The state party unit chief, Ananth Kumar, claimed that the party would reap rich dividends from the 'pro-Vajpayee and anti-Krishna wave' in the state (*The Times of India*, February 22, 2004). The party hoped that in the process it would gain in the assembly polls too. The BJP decided to enter into an alliance with the truncated Janata Dal (U) and offered them three Lok Sabha seats and 25 assembly seats.

The developments within the state Janata Dal (U) need to be also mentioned in this context in order to explain the verdict. In the 1999 polls, the party had a shaky electoral alliance with the BJP and was in a position to win as many as 18 seats in the assembly and three Lok Sabha seats in the state. In the last five years, the fortunes of the party have witnessed a dramatic decline. All its legislators, except one, had deserted the party. They had either joined the Janata Dal (S) or the Congress. The three sitting MPs too had left the party. In view of its truncated strength and influence, the state unit of the BJP was against any alliance with the JD (U). Finally, the alliance was grudgingly accepted by the state BJP, due to the overarching electoral considerations at the national level, especially the alliance politics in Bihar.

The Janata Dal (S), on the other hand, appeared to be in a much stronger position. It focused exclusively on the assembly polls. Its only star candidate for the Lok Sabha poll was party chief and former prime minister Deve Gowda, who stood from two constituencies. The Janata Dal (S) attempted to regain the support that the former unified Janata Dal had enjoyed and in most constituencies it put up candidates who had earlier emerged successful in the 1994 polls when the Janata Dal (under Deve Gowda's leadership) had emerged victorious.

The survey data clearly reveals the mind of the Karnataka voter and explains the nature of the verdict in the two polls. When asked to assess the performance of the NDA government in the last five years, nearly half the respondents (46 per cent) said that they were somewhat satisfied with its performance. Another 20 per cent said that they were fully satisfied with its performance. Less than 20 per cent of the respondents were fully dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with its performance. The victory of 18 BJP candidates is significant in this context. When asked to assess the performance of their state government, nearly 56 per cent of the respondents said that they were somewhat dissatisfied with the performance. An additional 11 per cent opined that they were highly dissatisfied with the government's performance. Only one-fourth of the respondents (25 per cent) were fully satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the state government.

On a few major issues the voters were categorical in their criticism of the state government. Nearly 51 per cent felt that corruption in the administration had increased, 45 per cent felt that the drinking water problem had worsened and nearly 41 per cent were upset with the erratic power supply (Table 2). Nearly 57 per cent of the respondents felt that the state government had given more importance to urban areas and had neglected the problems of rural areas (Table 3). When asked whether the state leaders had protected the interests of the state, 60 per cent of those who took a stand on the subject felt that the state leaders had failed in this regard. The contrast in their evaluation of the two governments was evident.

The dissatisfaction with the Congress state government resulted in what is often called an 'anti-incumbency' vote. However, this rejection vote was not channelised in the direction of any single party but was divided between the BJP and the Janata Dal(S). In the past 20 years, Karnataka has been witness to the rejection of a ruling party in the assembly poll. However, in the past, the voters expressed their preference for a clear alternative – either the Janata Party/Dal or the Congress. It was only in 1983 that the verdict led to an assembly with no clear winner (like this time). 1983 marked the end of one party domination in the state when the voters neither fully rejected the Congress nor fully endorsed the claims of the Janata Party.

This time around too, neither the BJP nor the Janata Dal(S) has been able to present itself as a viable alternative to the Congress across the state. The result is a verdict in favour of no one party in particular. For several years, the state has been witness to a clear bipolar competition [Shastri 1994, 1999, 2004; Shastri and Vinod 1991]. Elections 2004 has reversed this trend and Karnataka has once again entered a phase of multi-cornered contests.

The defeat of the Congress can be attributed to several factors. The first was the choice of candidates. Thirteen of the 17 sitting MPs were renominated, and eight of them were defeated. In the assembly polls, it renominated 106 sitting MLAs. More importantly, 25 of them (24 per cent) were those who had been elected to the previous assembly on the ticket of some other party and had now chosen to join the Congress. Of the 108 sitting MLAs given the party ticket, as many as 74 were defeated (70 per cent). These 74 included 17 'defectors'. Secondly, the choice of new candidates, especially for the assembly polls, was done without consulting either grass roots level workers or local party leaders. Dissidence was a natural corollary. Many prominent Congress leaders were not seen actively in the campaign, because of their unhappiness with the choice of candidates and their virtual non-involvement in formulating the campaign strategy.

Secondly, the poor assessment of the state government (as revealed in the survey and outlined earlier) also contributed to the decline in its fortunes. It is also important to record that the party did exceptionally badly in northern Karnataka. In this region, the survey data reveals that more than 65 per cent of the respondents felt that successive governments had ignored northern Karnataka. Former chief minister S M Krishna too conceded the fact that the party strategy to go in for simultaneous polls may have backfired and the government may not have given sufficient importance to the rural sector and its problems (*Deccan Herald*, May 24, 2004).

The chances of the BJP in the assembly elections were marred by a combination of factors. Its reasonably good performance in the Lok Sabha poll can be attributed to the faith in the leadership of the NDA and the stability that it provided. It is interesting to note that the survey reveals that nearly half (46 per cent) the respondents see no problem with a coalition government. Another 8 per cent endorse it in inevitable circumstances. The 'Vajpayee factor' was crucial in Karnataka. The survey data reveals that 28 per cent of those who had heard of Vajpayee claimed that their voting decision would have been different if he were not leading the NDA. A significant percentage among them said that they would not have voted for the BJP if Vajpayee were not heading the alliance. The BJP, however, did not give adequate attention to the state assembly polls, since its focus was on retaining the government in Delhi. Thus, much care was not taken in the choice of candidates. It renominated as many as 37 of the sitting MLAs. Of them, as many as 18 had to taste defeat.

The BJP's alliance with the JD(U) did not bring it any major benefit. The JD(U) was not able to win even one of the three Lok Sabha seats allotted to it. It managed to emerge victorious only in five of the 25 assembly seats it contested. The logic of alliances that each alliance partner contributes to the collective success of the alliance did not work.

The Janata Dal(S) focused on the constituencies that the undivided Janata Dal had won in 1994. Its campaign was largely in the Old Mysore region and pockets in the Hyderabad Karnataka region. It is here that the party achieved most of its successes. Its winning candidates were mostly those who had won earlier in 1994.

The capacity of all parties to retain seats that they won in the previous poll clearly witnessed a decline in the 2004 poll. This was more evident in the assembly polls as compared to the Lok Sabha election. In the Lok Sabha polls, the BJP was in a position to retain its seven seats and wrest an additional 11. The Congress was in a position to retain seven of its seats while it lost as many as 11 and wrested one from the Janata Dal(U). Among the seats it lost were: one seat it had never lost (Bellary) and two seats that had been its traditional strongholds (Bangalore North and Dharwad South). While the Janata Dal(U) lost all the three seats it held, the Janata Dal(S) wrested two seats.

Seat swapping also is more apparent in the assembly polls. Of the 132 seats which the Congress had won in the previous elections, it was in a position to retain only 42. It wrested an additional 23 seats from other parties. The BJP was in a position to retain less than half the seats it won in 1999 (21 of the 44 seats). It wrested an additional 58 seats from other parties. The Janata Dal(S) too, lost four of the 10 seats it had won in 1999 but wrested 52 seats from other parties. Political parties are no longer able to claim that they have 'safe seats' in the state.

Karnataka has been traditionally divided into four regions, for the purpose of political analysis. The Old Mysore region consists of those parts of Karnataka which were earlier part of the princely state of Mysore. It accounts for 14 of the 28 Lok Sabha seats and 113 of 224 assembly seats. The Hyderabad-Karnatak region includes most of those areas that were earlier part of Hyderabad state. It accounts for five Lok Sabha constituencies and 39 assembly seats. The Mumbai-Karnatak region includes areas which were part of the Bombay presidency. This region accounts for six Lok Sabha seats and 51 assembly constituencies. The coastal Karnataka region is the coastal belt and accounts for three Lok Sabha constituencies and 21 assembly seats. If the performance

Table 2: Rating of the State Government on Different Parameters

	Deteriorated	Same as before	Improved	No Opinion	N
Corruption in administration	51	25	10	14	1514
Drinking water	45	26	24	5	1514
Uninterrupted power supply	41	26	27	6	1514

Note: All figures are in percentage points.

Source: National Election Study – 2004, weighted data set.

Table 3: Rating of the State Government

	Yes	N
Town and cities have been given more importance	57	863
Cities and villages have been given equal importance	23	343

Note: All figures are in Percentage Points (No Opinion not included).

Source: National Election Study – 2004, weighted data set.

of the various parties in these four regions is undertaken we notice that the Congress vote and seat share has declined in all the regions. However, the space vacated by the Congress was not occupied by any one party but shared by both the BJP and the Janata Dal(S).

In the Old Mysore region, the Janata Dal(S) did very well. The rise of the BJP was checked not merely by the Congress but also by the Janata Dal(S). The BJP success was essentially in coastal Karnataka and the Mumbai-Karnataka regions where it won all the Lok Sabha seats and a significant number of assembly seats. It needs to be stressed that the Mumbai-Karnataka region was an area where Ramakrishna Hegde had a significant following. This election was also the first after his passing away. The BJP seems to have successfully established its base here. The social dynamics of this process is discussed below. The Janata Dal(S) gave a tough fight to the Congress in the Hyderabad-Karnataka region. The triangular contest in most constituencies is evident from the fact that in only 50 of the 224 constituencies (22 per cent) did the winning candidate get more than 50 per cent of the votes. All other candidates won by splitting the votes of their opponents.

The social base of different political parties needs to be taken into account. The survey data clearly reveals that the BJP continues to have significant support among the upper castes (Table 4). The majority of the dalits appear to back the Congress. There seems to be a three way split of the backward caste vote, among the Congress (37 per cent), BJP/JD(U) (34 per cent) and the JD(S) (26 per cent). It is also important to emphasise that in Karnataka the role of the two dominant castes – the vokkaligas and lingayats – is crucial. Both are peasant castes with the vokkaligas dominating the Old Mysore region and the Lingayats having a significant presence in northern region: Mumbai-Karnataka and Hyderabad-Karnataka. The survey reveals that 38 per cent of the vokkaliga vote went to the Congress Party (S M Krishna is a prominent vokkaliga leader). The BJP/JD (U) alliance got only 18 per cent of the vokkaliga vote. Deve Gowda, a prominent vokkaliga leader, got the biggest share of his community's vote (43 per cent) for the JD(S). The lingayat vote has largely gone to the BJP/JD(U) alliance – 60 per cent. For a long time, the lingayats perceived Ramakrishna Hegde as representing and protecting their interests (though he was a brahmin). With his death, the BJP seems to have made deep inroads into the lingayat vote and their success in northern Karnataka is linked to this development. The survey reveals that the Congress was able to secure 31 per cent of the lingayat vote (Table 4).

Among the non-dominant OBCs, two communities are prominent – kurubas (shepherds) and idigas (toddy tappers). The then JD(S) state president and current deputy chief minister, Siddaramaiah, hails from the kuruba community and Bangarappa belongs to the idiga caste. There was a three way split of the kuruba vote between the major parties and a significant chunk

of the idiga vote went to the Congress. This could imply that the Bangarappa factor did not play as big a role as expected in assisting the BJP's march to power.

Karnataka politics today appears to be at the crossroads. The state has sent a sizeable chunk of MPs for the BJP but they have to sit in opposition. In the case of the assembly, with no clear majority party, a phase of coalition/minority governments is a natural corollary. The formation of the Congress-JD(S) coalition government under the leadership of Dharam Singh is essentially an arrangement forced by mutual necessity in order to come to power and keep the BJP out of office. Coalition/minority governments are not new to Karnataka. Hegde's first government (1983-85) was a minority government with outside support. It is interesting to note that in the survey, nearly 47 per cent of the respondents in Karnataka saw nothing wrong in the coalition government. The government and its leaders are in the process of settling down to the realities and the need to adhere to 'coalition dharma'. Even after a few months of the formation of the coalition government, the chief minister was unable to expand the ministry largely because of pressures from within his own party. It is important that the Congress party gets its act together in order to retrieve its support and strength among various social groups.

State politics in Karnataka seem to be in transition once again. The Congress wishes to revive its fortunes. The need to run the government with an aggressive coalition partner does not make its job easy. In the long run, the party needs to ensure that the strains of coalition do not adversely affect its electoral support base in the state. The BJP is waiting in the wings and wishes to augment its electoral strength in the coming years. Its challenge would lie in its being able to overcome the 'inertia' of being out of power both at the centre and state. The Janata Dal(S) is seeking to carve out a space for itself as a legitimate third force. This explains its politics of attacking the Congress even while being its partner in the coalition.

Elections 2004, as pointed out by Yogendra Yadav (2004), can be understood only when the centrality of the role of the states in the emerging national trends is taken into account. The election results in Karnataka appear to be a vindication of such a postulate. With the 2004 elections, the state has moved from an earlier bipolarity towards a competitive multipolarity, which may as well turn out to be a transitory phase to a new bipolarity. **EPW**

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Table 4: Support for Parties among Different Caste Groups

	Congress	BJP/JD(U)	JD(S)	N
Backward castes	37	34	26	766
Scheduled castes	46	30	7	251
Scheduled tribes	32	32	33	138
Others	30	56	8	242
Vokkaligas	38	18	43	230
Lingayats	31	60	5	236

Note: All figures are in Percentage Points.

Source: National Election Study – 2004, weighted data set.