

What Explains the Lok Sabha Verdict in Karnataka?

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The Karnataka voters retained their past trend of ensuring a different verdict in the assembly and Lok Sabha polls. The results in the state left no decisive winner with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led alliance falling way behind its 2019 mark. The Congress on the other hand saw a recovery which was much lower than its expectations. The social coalition that the BJP alliance was able to stitch together seemed more formidable than that of the Congress.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, Karnataka was a key battleground state. The two principal players—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress as well as the distant third competitor, the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S))—had invested a lot of time and effort to swing the state in their favour. Karnataka had been the only state in south India where the BJP managed to come to power on its own¹ (Shastri 2013, 2018, 2024b; Shastri and Devi 2022, 2024; Shastri et al 2023; Shastri and Ramaswamy 2004). To hold on to this gateway in the south, the BJP decided, this time around, to enter an alliance with the JD(S) (Shastri 2023a, 2024c). It hoped to ensure that the anti-Congress vote did not get split. An alliance for mutual survival seemed the only way to challenge the Congress, which had effectively displaced the BJP as the ruling party in the state a year earlier (Shastri et al 2023). For the JD(S), it was a survival battle. Having come to power in the state with a decent majority the year earlier, the Congress needed to put up a good performance in the Lok Sabha polls from the state. This was vital for two reasons—as a morale booster for the state unit and to enhance the electoral footprints of the party and increase its strength in the Lok Sabha.

It is often argued that history repeats itself in veritably and distinctly different ways. The BJP was hoping that the first part of this adage would remain true. Over the years, Karnataka has seen voters making a distinction between Lok Sabha and state assembly elections. In the four Lok Sabha elections held in the first two decades of this century, the BJP had won a majority of the seats. On the other hand, its performance in the state assembly elections was inconsistent. In two of the state assembly elections (2013, 2023), the voters had given a majority to the Congress. The BJP hoped that the Lok Sabha trend in

Karnataka would continue in 2024. The Congress was banking on history repeating itself in a distinctly different way! It saw an opportunity to secure a majority in the Lok Sabha elections from the state after a quarter century (the last was in 1999).

As the results of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls came trickling in, it was clear that the Karnataka voters had ensured there was no categorical winner or devastated loser (Shastri and Devi 2024). Enough political takeaways were reserved for both the BJP-led alliance as well as the Congress (Shastri 2024a). The BJP saw a fall in its seats but remained above the majority mark in the state. The Congress got a little over one-third of the seats, much above its previous performance (one solitary seat) but clearly below its expectations. The JD(S) was left clutching on to two seats (one more than last time). This article attempts to look at the 2024 Lok Sabha from the vantage prism of Karnataka. The analysis in this article is grounded in the Lokniti-csds post-poll survey conducted at the time of the 2024 elections. Further, data from earlier studies is also referred to wherever relevant for a comparative analysis.

The 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in Karnataka

The immediate context of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in the state was the assembly elections held a year earlier. In that election, the BJP which was in power in the state was defeated and the Congress party returned to power with a comfortable majority. The results were seen as setting the stage for the state's Lok Sabha battle, a year later (Shastri et al 2023).

The contest, candidates and campaign:

Many would believe that the campaign for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections began in Karnataka soon after the results of the state assembly elections were declared in 2023 (Manor 2023). The new ruling party in the state faced initial hiccups in deciding on its chief minister. This was soon resolved and the government went ahead and announced the phased implementation of the five guarantees which were a key element of its election manifesto.²

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The party hoped that this move would sway the electorate of the state in their favour (Shastri 2023b). The BJP adopted a threefold strategy to offset the impact of the electoral defeat in the state. First, it decided to enter an alliance with the JD(S) for the Lok Sabha polls. This alliance aimed at both uniting the opposition against the Congress and strengthening the BJP in the Old Mysore region (Shastri 2023a). Second, those directly associated with the earlier BJP government in the state and the state unit of the party were sidelined and a new seat of leaders was given the responsibility. This included giving the state party unit presidentship to the son of veteran leader B S Yediyurappa and appointing a leader and deputy of the opposition in the state assembly who was not directly associated with the leadership of the previous government. Third, the party decided to offset any negative impact of the state government it headed till recently by focusing on the union government and the leadership of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister campaigned quite extensively in Karnataka during the campaign.

Thus, as the campaign proceeded, for the BJP it prioritised national issues and the leadership of the Prime Minister, while the Congress made the campaign essentially local. The JD(S) clearly changed its pitch (as compared to the state assembly elections) and now increasingly spoke the language of the BJP. Its state unit president H D Kumaraswamy in response to a question on the Muslim vote shifting away from the JD(S) said, “what have Muslims done for us?” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2egg6q2dYBg>, viewed on 4 October 2023).

When it came to the distribution of tickets, both the BJP–JD(S) alliance as well as the Congress had their fair share of distinctly different challenges. The BJP had won 25 seats the last time around and additionally backed an independent winner. This time around, it finally decided to contest only 25 seats, conceding two seats to its alliance partner, the JD(S). Of its 25 sitting member of Parliament (MP), it renominated only 10 of them, putting up new candidates in 15 seats. This was done to offset any impact of anti-incumbency as many of the MPs

have completed more than two terms. In the three seats assigned to the JD(S), the party nominated the members of the Deve Gowda family in two seats. The Congress faced a different set of challenges. Being in power in the state, its ministers were not keen to contest the Lok Sabha polls. Many of them used the occasion to launch the political career of a relative. The party fielded 25 new candidates and only retained three. Over four of every 10 candidates (12 of 28) were relatives of senior politicians in the party.

As the campaign began, it was clear that there were two different templates which the BJP-led alliance and the Congress were using. All the BJP alliance candidates sought votes in the name of the Prime Minister and made him the focus of their campaign (Shastri 2024b). The Congress, on the other hand, focused on local issues and the five guarantees promised by the state government (Shastri 2023c, 2024c). Clearly, the election campaign seems to have made a difference. The Lokniti-csds post-poll survey indicates that one-third of the respondents stated that they decided on whom to vote for on the day of the poll or a few days earlier. Merely one-fourth of the respondents decided on whom to vote for before the declaration of candidates.

Explaining the verdict: It is interesting that the seat share of the three major players in 2024 returned exactly to what it was in 2014 (Shastri 2024a). Then too, the BJP had won 17 seats. The Congress securing nine and the JD(S) holding on to two. The BJP saw a fall in its seats but remained above the majority mark in the state. The Congress got a little over one-third of the seats, much above its previous performance (one solitary seat) but clearly below its expectations (Table 1).

Table 1: Seats and Vote Share of Parties in Karnataka Lok Sabha Elections 2014–24

Party	Seat/Vote Share	2024	2019	2014
BJP	Seats	17	25	17
	Vote share (%)	46	51	43
Congress	Seats	9	1	9
	Vote share (%)	45	32	41
JD(S)	Seats	2	1	2
	Vote share (%)	6	10	11
Others	Seats	0	1	0
	Vote share (%)	3	7	5

Source: Election Commission of India.

Except for the 2019 verdict, BJP victories over the last two decades have been in the 17 to 19 range. Similarly, save in 2019, the Congress victories have been in six to nine seats. The JD(S) had won seats in the range of two to three seats, as it has done this time too. The BJP victory has been in the lower end of the range and the Congress in the higher end.

In 11 of the 17 victories of the BJP, the party had changed its candidates. All the nine new Congress MPs and one of the new JD(S) MP are entering the Lok Sabha for the first time. Thus, three-fourths (21 of 28) of the Karnataka Lok Sabha MPs are elected to the house from the constituencies that they won from for the first time. They include three former chief ministers, three former union ministers and a former speaker of the state assembly.

The vote share trend indicates that for the BJP, compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, it fell by 6 percentage points. Compared to the 2013 assembly polls, it rose by 10 percentage points. The Congress saw a 13 percentage point improvement in its vote share from the 2019 Lok Sabha polls to 2024. In terms of the difference between the Congress vote share in the 2023 assembly polls and the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, it rose by a little over 3 percentage points but its seat share fell sharply. The JD(S) which has traditionally had a poor vote share in Lok Sabha polls (save 1996) saw a 4 percentage point dip between 2019 and 2024. In 2024, the vote share difference between the BJP and Congress was just one and a half percentage points, though the BJP got nearly double the seats won by the Congress (Table 1).

Close to two-thirds (62%) of the respondents were satisfied with the performance of the union government. Among them, one-third (32%) were quite satisfied with the union government and another one-third were dissatisfied with its performance. The endorsement of the union government was not overwhelming but just above average. These numbers are in consonance with the support for the BJP-led alliance and the Congress. While more than three-fourths of the BJP voters in Karnataka (78%) endorsed another term for the BJP government, close to

two-thirds of the Congress voters (65%) were against it. Interestingly, around 92% of the JD(S) voters said yes for another term (Table 2).³ In yet another question, respondents were asked whether the work done by the union government or state government mattered more when deciding whom to vote for, the response was clearly on party lines. Among the BJP voters, more than half (52%) opined that the union government mattered more and a little over one-third (35%) stated that both governments mattered. On the other hand, among Congress voters, a majority (55%) said both mattered while a little over one-fourth (27%) saying that the state government mattered more (Table 3). The implication clearly is that the party you support decides the stand you take. Thus, the perception battle becomes critical.

Another indicator of the impact of party preference determining the recognition of the level of government for implementing welfare schemes was noticed in the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll. Among those who benefited from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the support for the BJP was 16 percentage points higher than that for the Congress. Among non-beneficiaries, the support was uniform between the two parties. Further, when it came to schemes like the employment guarantee scheme, housing scheme, public distribution system and the health scheme, most of the Congress supporters would attribute the scheme implementation to the state government (in most cases over 70%) and most of the BJP supporters would attribute the success of the scheme to the union government (over 70%).

Table 2: Should the BJP-led NDA Government Get Another Chance—Response by Party (%)

	Yes	No	Don't Know/Can't Say
Congress voters	22	65	14
BJP voters	78	6	16
JD(S) voters	92	2	6

Source: Lokniti-CSDS data unit No 913.

Table 3: What Mattered to You When Deciding Whom to Vote for—Response by Party (%)

	Union	State	Both	Neither/ Don't Know
Congress voters	13	27	55	5
BJP voters	52	7	35	6

Source: Lokniti-CSDS data unit No 836.

The Modi factor seems to have been critical to the BJP's success in the state. In the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll, more than one-third of the BJP voters (36%) said that if Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP they would have changed the way they voted. Over one-fourth (26%) of JD(S) voters made a similar point.

The BJP continued to do well among the rich with a 24 percentage point lead over the Congress. The Congress had greater support among the lower middle class (a 15 percentage point lead over the BJP) and the votes of the poor were equally divided between the two. In comparison to the state assembly elections, the BJP has gained increased support among the poor.

The Congress secured more than half the votes of women. There was a 10 percentage point lead over the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) among women voters. The impact of the guarantees is evident as is the Prajwal Revanna controversy,⁴ especially in phase two of the voting. Though the JD(S) had no candidate in this phase, the impact of the controversy seems evident. Among men, the alliance had a 10 percentage lead over the Congress. If one were to assess the female vote in Karnataka's Lok Sabha and assembly elections since 2013, the Congress has always been ahead of the BJP, except in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

The BJP did better among the younger voters (5 percentage points higher among the first-time voters) while the Congress did better among the older voters (6 percentage points ahead among those above 56). The BJP was also ahead of the Congress among middle-aged voters (ranging from 7 percentage points among those in the 46–55 age to 5 percentage points among the 26–45 age group).

The BJP had a wide lead over the Congress when it came to the votes of those with a college degree (it led by 17 percentage points). On the other hand, among those who had only completed different levels of school education, the Congress had a lead over the BJP (ranging from 17 percentage points among those who had completed primary education to 8 percentage points among those who had completed school education).

The impact of the social coalitions that the NDA and Congress stitched together are seen in the election results. The BJP helped the NDA to hold on to the upper-caste vote. The BJP has always been doing well among the influential Lingayats—a dominant caste in Karnataka. The alliance secured three-fourths of the vote from the Lingayats. The Vokkaliga—other dominant caste—vote was split between the NDA and the Congress. This goes against the trend reported in the media that the JD(S) helped the alliance secure the Vokkaliga vote. The Lokniti-CSDS data indicates that the Congress did well among the Vokkaliga voters. Why this was unable to convert itself into seats was due to the Congress's performance among the non-dominant Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (Table 4). Here, the NDA benefited by securing over two-thirds of the non-dominant OBC vote. This was a pattern seen in the assembly elections as well. Except for the Kuruba (Shepherd) community, a significant chunk of the rest of the non-dominant OBC vote swung towards the BJP.

Table 4: Vote by Caste/Community (%)

	Congress	BJP	JD(S)	Others
Upper castes	22	6	5	7
Lingayats	20	76	0	4
Vokkaligas	56	35	9	0
Non-dominant OBCs	31	59	7	3
Dalits	66	31	2	1
Tribals	44	44	12	0
Muslims	92	8	0	0
Other minorities	41	39	16	4

Source: Lokniti-CSDS data unit No 915.

Two-thirds of the Dalit vote (65%) remained with the Congress. The Muslim vote too was strongly aligned with the Congress (92%). Thus, the social coalitions that both the BJP-led alliance and the Congress created, are explained in the nature of the electoral verdict.

Key indicators: What were the factors that helped the BJP to claim a majority of the seats, even though it saw a loss of one-third of its seats? Three factors appeared to work in its favour. First, the fact that over the last three elections, the voters in the state have distinguished between assembly polls and Lok Sabha elections and in the span of a year, voted for one party in the assembly polls and

another party for the Lok Sabha is clear. Second, the Modi factor appears to have played a critical role in securing the BJP's victory. All the NDA candidates sought votes in the Prime Minister's name and saw themselves as proxies for one more term for Modi as Prime Minister. Third, the social coalitions that the NDA alliance was able to stitch together worked to their advantage. This also explains the wider victory margins of the NDA candidates.

Three different sets of factors helped the Congress recover from its 2019 performance. First, the guarantees that the state government implemented found some traction with the voters. Second, the Congress also benefited from the lack of unity in the state unit of the BJP which was visible. This was especially evident in the second round of polling, where in the BJP strongholds, the Congress forced an equal division of the seats. A supplementary factor in the second phase was the embarrassment that the BJP candidates faced due to the Prajwal Revanna controversy. A deeper study of the Lokniti-CSDS data indicates the way in which women's vote swung in Karnataka. Finally, the Congress entered this election with greater unity and a strong sense of desperation. A wipe-out would have led to very difficult times for the state government. The nine seats were veritably a face-saver.

Karnataka gave a verdict which had takeaways for both the BJP-led NDA as well as the Congress. Both had something to cheer about and the indicators of alarm for both were patently evident.

In Conclusion

What are the long-term implications of the Karnataka verdict? The voter in Karnataka has left all political players with a sense of unease. Soon after the results, the Congress leadership at the state level had a lot of explanation to do. It had promised the central leadership that they would do well in Karnataka and did not achieve the anticipated outcome. Immediate dissensions within the party became apparent and the blame game was out in the open. The corruption allegations against the chief minister in particular and the government in

general, have once again united the party behind the chief minister. However, the emerging controversies have prevented the government from focusing on governance. The inability of the Congress to stitch together a winning social coalition (especially bringing in the non-dominant OBC vote) is its major challenge.

The BJP still faces factionalism and with the party having to run a coalition government at the union, there would be less focus on the state units. The state leadership of the party has been attempting to be proactive in its role as an opposition. The way they have attacked the chief minister and the government on the corruption allegations is a case in point. Yet the internal dissensions within the state unit of the party are clear. The party managed to create a winning social coalition in the Lok Sabha polls by regaining a significant portion of the Lingayat votes and retaining the non-dominant OBC votes.

The JD(S) has become part of the union government with its leader becoming an important minister in the cabinet. The party cadres have been energised by this. Yet with its key leader now in Delhi as a union minister, there is a feeling that the state unit of the party could well get ignored. In the Lok Sabha polls, the JD(S) did not succeed in bringing the coalition a majority of the Vokkaliga vote. From the position of a distant third, the party could well see further marginalisation, especially in the Old Mysore region, with the BJP and Congress being the key beneficiaries.

The political battle lines in the state are clearly drawn and political players have used every opportunity after the 2024 Lok Sabha results, to carry forward the confrontation. The fireworks are set to begin soon and the state-level politics in the state is clearly marked by a high level of political polarisation and tensions.

NOTES

- 1 It never secured a majority in an election but formed the government with the support of independents and/or legislators from other parties who resigned and moved to the BJP.
- 2 The five schemes were (i) Gruha Jyoti—free electricity for every household up to 200 units

per month; (ii) Anna Bhagya—10 kg foodgrains to eligible families through direct benefit transfer; (iii) Shakti—free bus travel in government buses for women; (iv) Gruha Lakshmi—₹2,000 for every woman head of every eligible family; and (v) Yuva Nidhi—monthly allowance of ₹3,000 to unemployed graduates and ₹1,500 to unemployed diploma holders.

- 3 One uses the term interestingly as just a year ago, during the 2023 assembly elections, in the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey, three of every four JD(S) voters said no to a second term to the BJP government in the state.
- 4 Prajwal Revanna, the grandson of JD(S) leader H D Deve Gowda and the MP from Hassan (2019–24) and a candidate from the same seat in 2024, has been embroiled in a scandal involving the alleged sexual abuse of several women over the years. This scandal came out in the public domain after the first phase of voting in Karnataka. Prajwal lost the elections and is now under arrest.

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