

2014 Lok Sabha Elections: Explaining the BJP Victory in Karnataka¹

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I : An Overview

Karnataka was a key battle ground state in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections. The Congress was in power in the state for less than a year. The party had fervently hoped that the state would provide a large contingent of members to the lower house. The BJP had always considered Karnataka as its launch-pad in South India. South of the Vindhyas, this was the only state they had been in power. A good performance by the party in the Lok Sabha polls in the state would be a useful bonus in its efforts at reaching the half-way mark. Karnataka politics had an important third force, the Janata Dal (S), which was hoping to retain its presence in the lower house of the Parliament by picking up a few seats in the state.

The election result ran counter to many of the past trends and precedents in the state. After many years, Karnataka went with the national trend³

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³ In 1989, when the Congress was defeated at the national level, it won a majority of seats in Karnataka, in 1999 when the BJP led NDA came to power in Delhi, the state sent a majority Congress contingent to the Lok Sabha. In 2004 and 2009, when UPA was voted to power at the centre, a majority of the Lok Sabha MPs elected belonged to the BJP.

(Shastri 2011). Secondly, for the first time in Karnataka, a ruling party in the state was unable to win a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha elections within less than a year of coming to power.⁴ What accounted for the BJP's creditable performance in the Lok Sabha elections from Karnataka? Why was the ruling party in the state (Congress) not able to retain the momentum within a year of coming to power? This paper would argue that the 2014 Lok Sabha results in Karnataka were a clear impact of the leadership factor and the inability of the Congress party to strengthen its organizational base and build a wider social coalition. While undertaking this analysis the paper draws heavily from the National Election Study 2014, Karnataka Election Study 2013 and series of Tracker Polls conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

The Results

The BJP managed to win 17 of the 28 seats in the state, two less than its tally in 2009. The Congress managed to win 9 seats and increased its tally by three seats as compared to the last election. The JDS won two seats, a fall by one seat as compared to 2009. Though the BJP won close to double the seats secured by the Congress, its vote share was a mere two percentage points higher. Further, in the context of the wider defeat of the Congress party across the nation, its Karnataka contingent was the largest as compared to other states.

In the summer of 2013, the Congress had come to power in the state, defeating the ruling BJP. While explaining the electoral success of the Congress in that election it has been asserted that the popular perception of the poor performance of the BJP government had a major role to play in the Congress victory. In an important sense then, the 2013 election was more the rout of the BJP than a decisive mandate in favour of the Congress (Shastri 2013: 147-9). One could explain the inability of the ruling Congress

⁴ The 1996 Lok Sabha elections were held two years after the Janata Dal had come to power in the state. The ruling Janata Dal won a majority of the Lok Sabha seats in the state in this election. Later in 2009, when the Lok Sabha poll was held a year after the BJP came to power (2008), the ruling party in the state bagged a majority of the seats from the state.

Table 1

Seats Won and Votes Polled in Karnataka in the
2014 Lok Sabha Elections

Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Seat Change from 2009	Vote (%)	Vote Change from 2009
Congress	28	9	3	40.81	3.16
BJP	28	17	-2	43.01	1.38
JD(S)	25	2	-1	10.97	-2.60
AAP	28	0	0	0.82	0.82
BSP	28	0	0	0.85	-0.81
NOTA	28	0	0	0.83	0.83
Other Parties	325	0	0	2.71	-2.78

Source: Analysis of ECI Data by CSDS Data Unit.

to repeat its 2013 performance a year later, as the critical issue in this poll was the disenchantment with ten years of UPA rule and the positive impact of the alternative - especially in terms of leadership presented by the BJP.

The Campaign

It is also important to record that when asked when they decided whom to vote for, NES 2014 data records that close to one-fourth said that they took this decision close to election day, four of every ten said during the campaign and a little less than one fourth said well before the campaign. It is thus very clear, that close to two thirds in Karnataka state that they took this decision on who to vote for after the campaign commenced. If the campaign strategies of the major parties were to be assessed, it is noticed that all the 28 BJP candidates had a one point campaign agenda - a vote for them was a vote for the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate. One of the senior most BJP contestants in Karnataka, Ananth Kumar⁵, declared that the 'contest in Bangalore South (his constituency) is Modi versus Rahul Gandhi' (Ataulla 2014). On the other hand the Congress in Karnataka tried to deflect attention away from the UPA performance and showcase the achievements of the one year old Congress government in the state. Party General Secretary

⁵ It is relevant to point out that Ananth Kumar was perceived as a pro-Advani leader.

for Karnataka, Digvijay Singh made a statement that he was convinced that under the leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, 'the Congress will get good results in the Lok Sabha elections' (DNA 15 May 2014). During the campaign, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah attacked the previous BJP government in the State for engaging in corruption and attacked the BJP's Prime Ministerial candidate by appealing to the voters that 'the man who could not stop riots in Gujarat was unfit to rule the nation' (The Times of India 15 April 2014). The JD(S) on the other hand was keen to retain its presence in the Lok Sabha and its campaign highlighted the limitations of the two national parties and the need to have a powerful regional party in the Lower House of Parliament. The impact of distinctly different flavour of the campaigns was clearly visible.

Dissecting the Verdict

An in-depth analysis of the election results taken in consonance with the data emerging from NES 2014 provides important explanations of the electoral outcome. The decisiveness of the BJP victory in Karnataka is seen from the fact that in as many as 9 of the 17 seats it won, the margin of victory was more than 10 percent of the valid votes polled. In only one seat, its victory margin was less than 2 percent of the valid votes polled. In the case of the Congress, only 2 of its 9 victories were by impressive margins of more than 10 percent of the valid votes polled. In one-third of the seats that it won, the victory margin was less than 1 percent of the valid votes polled.

If the 2014 Lok Sabha result from Karnataka is analysed in terms of the outcomes in each of the Assembly segments, the commendable performance of the BJP becomes even more visible. Each of the 28 Parliamentary constituencies in Karnataka has 8 assembly segments.⁶ In 4 of the 17 seats that the BJP won, the party led in all the 32 assembly segments. In another 5 Lok Sabha seats, it conceded one assembly segment in each Lok Sabha seat to the Congress. On the other hand the Congress

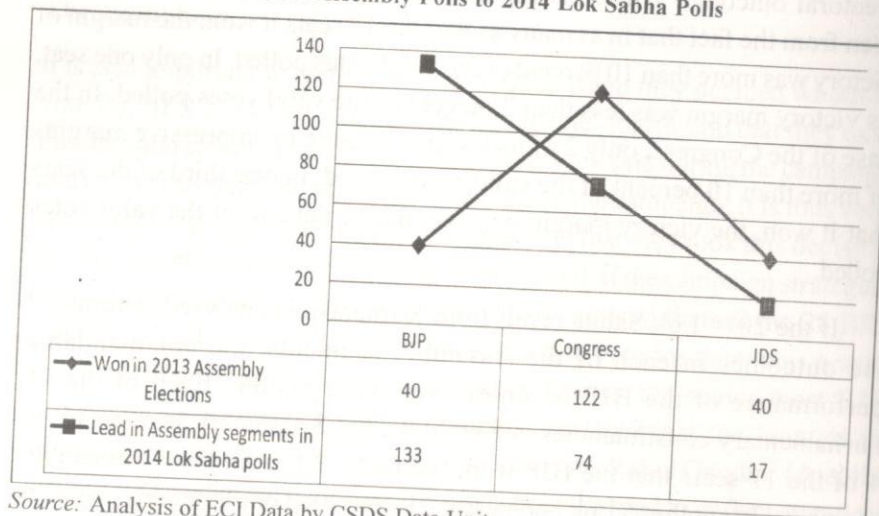
⁶ The 224 seats in the Assembly are distributed among the 28 Lok Sabha seats in such a way that there are 8 assembly segments in each Lok Sabha Seat.

was able to gain a lead in all 8 Assembly segments in only 1 of the 9 seats it won. In two of the seats it conceded the majority in four of the assembly segments to its principal rival and in one Lok Sabha seat it won, it conceded the majority to the opposition BJP and JDS in 6 of the 8 assembly segments. In the case of the JDS too, in one of the two seats it won, it conceded the lead to the opposition Congress in 5 of the 8 assembly segments. This clearly implies that in many of the seats won by the Congress and the JDS, their victory was less impressive as compared to that of the BJP.

In the 2013 Assembly elections in the state, the Congress has won 122⁷ seats, the BJP and the JDS, 40 each. Where the parties able to retain the lead in the assembly segments they had won (in 2013) in the Lok Sabha polls. The Congress was able to retain the lead in only one third (44 out of 133) of the seats. It conceded the lead to the BJP in as many as 75 of these seats and to the JDS in 3. The BJP on the other hand held on to close to 90

Figure 1

From 2013 Assembly Polls to 2014 Lok Sabha Polls



Source: Analysis of ECI Data by CSDS Data Unit

⁷ When the 2013 Assembly elections were held only 223 seats saw polling as the election was countermanded in one seat (Periyapatna). The Congress won 121 seats. Later the Periyapatna seat too was won by the Congress when the elections were conducted there.

percent of the seats that it had won in 2013 (35 of 40), conceding the rest (5) to the Congress. The JDS was able to maintain the lead in only one third of the seat it had won in 2013 (13 of 40). In the 2014 polls, the BJP had a lead in 133 of the 224 Assembly segments, the Congress in 74 and the JDS in 17 (Table 1). This is yet another indicator of the decisiveness of the BJP victory in the state.

The BJP victory was clearly visible in some of the regions of the state. It swept Coastal Karnataka by winning all three seats in the region; it won all but one of the seats in Mumbai Karnataka, Central Karnataka and Bangalore regions. The seats in the Hyderabad - Karnataka region were share evenly between the BJP and the Congress. In the Southern Karnataka region, the BJP fared poorly winning only one of the 7 seats. Close to half the Congress victories were in Southern Karnataka and the JDS picked up both its seats in this region. When the BJP rose to prominence in the 1990s and early 2000s, its main strengths were in the regions where it re-asserted its presence in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. Doing well in the Southern Karnataka belt has always been a challenge for the BJP (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2004; Shastri and Padmavathi 2009; Manor 2008).

Prior to the start of the election campaign, Lokniti-CSDS had done a pre poll survey in which respondents were asked to evaluate the UPA government at the centre. Over three of every ten respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of the Central government. A little over half the respondents were lukewarm in their response and said that they were somewhat satisfied with the government. Past experience in Karnataka surveys has shown that the level of tolerance among the voters towards their government is reasonably high. If close to one third were to express their unhappiness with the government, it indicates a comparatively high level of dissent. An added factor which has been discussed earlier is the fact that close to two-thirds of the voters said that they decided about whom to vote for after the campaign began. When asked in NES 2014, about their assessment of candidate choice in the elections, the BJP appears to have found favour. Close to nine of every ten of those who voted for the BJP in Karnataka stated that the party made a better choice of candidates

as compared to the Congress and the JDS. Interestingly, over four of every ten who voted for Congress and JDS candidates stated that the BJP made a better choice of candidates as compared to their parties.

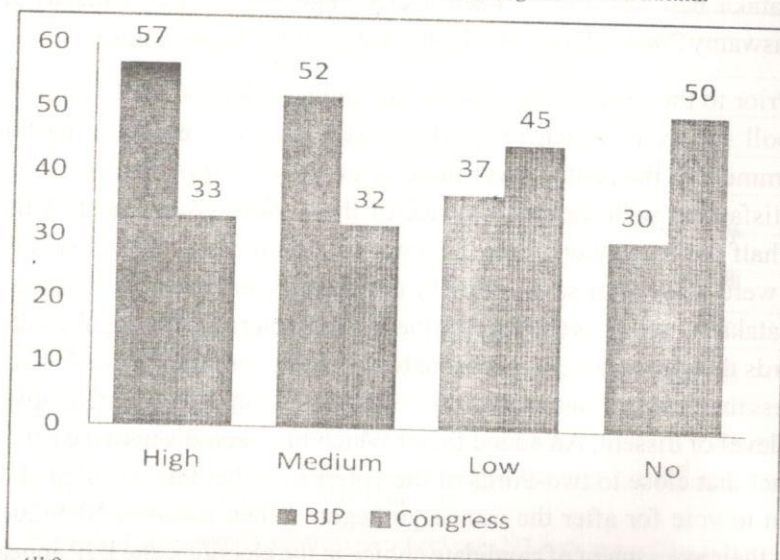
Critical Demographic Differences

Much of the election campaign this time around was run through the media. Based on NES data, respondents in Karnataka were categorised into High Media Exposure, Moderate Media Exposure, Low Media Exposure and No Media Exposure. The support for BJP is 20 percentage points higher than for the Congress among those who had High and Moderate Media Exposure. On the other hand, the Congress scores over the BJP (with a lesser degree of intensity) when it comes to those with Low or No Media exposure.

A linked factor is that support for BJP tended to rise with greater access to education and the reverse was true in the case of the Congress. Close to six of every ten of those who had a college degree stated that they voted for

Figure 2

Media Exposure and Support for BJP/Congress in Karnataka



Note: All figures are in percent

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll Survey conducted by CSDS; Sample Size - 1073

the BJP. This percentage declines when one assesses the response of those whose education level was below primary among whom only one third claimed that they voted for the BJP. The same is true in the case of those who do not know how to read and write. Close to half of those who could not read and write stated that they voted for the Congress and just one third of those with a college degree reported voting for the party. Further, the largest percentage gap among those who voted for the BJP and the Congress is found among the first time voters and the middle aged voters. There is a 7 percentage point gap between the two parties (with BJP being ahead) among first time voters. This difference rises to 16 percentage points when those in the 36 to 45 age group are taken into account (again in favour of the BJP). In the older generation (56+) the Congress takes a 20 percentage point lead over the BJP.

While aggregate data provides evidence of the scale of the BJP victory, survey data points out some factors that could have contributed to the success of the BJP and lead to the dismal performance of the Congress. Given the fact that most respondents stated that they made their decision about whom to vote for after the start of the campaign, the choice of candidates, nature of the campaign and media exposure seems to have had an impact. The BJP was not just able to sway the first time voter and the middle aged voter, those with access to education too appeared to have move towards the BJP.

Did Leadership Matter?

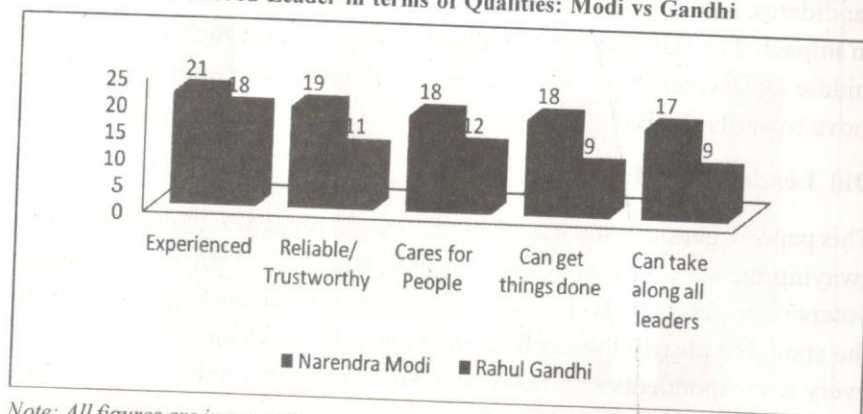
This paper argues that the leadership factor too played an important role in swaying the state verdict in favour of the BJP. NES 2014 shows that the voters were generally well disposed towards the Congress government in the state, but clearly focussed on the choice for the Centre. Over nine of every ten respondents said that Chief Minister Siddaramiah was the right choice for Chief Ministership. When asked to rank the present Congress government in the state with the previous BJP government, six of every ten respondents said that the present Congress government was far better. If one were to disaggregate those who voted for the Congress and the BJP,

nine of every ten Congress voters favoured the current Congress government while six of every ten BJP voters supported the previous BJP government. It is useful to record that over one fourth of those who voted for the BJP said that the Congress state government was better. This explains why, unlike the rest of the country, the route faced by the Congress party was less intense in Karnataka as compared to some other states where it was in power or had a presence.

When it came to the Lok Sabha polls, there were clearly some other factors working on the mind of the voters. In Karnataka, the BJP had strategically converted the 2014 elections campaign, as a choice between their Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. This proved decisive As Modi was ahead of Rahul Gandhi as the most preferred Prime Ministerial name by a mere 2 percentage points⁸. However, when asked to comment on who was best suited on leadership qualities, Narendra Modi was ahead of Rahul Gandhi by a wide margin on all indicators. The difference varied from three to nine percentage points.

Figure 3

Preferred Leader in terms of Qualities: Modi vs Gandhi



Note: All figures are in percent

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll Survey conducted by CSDS; Sample Size - 1073

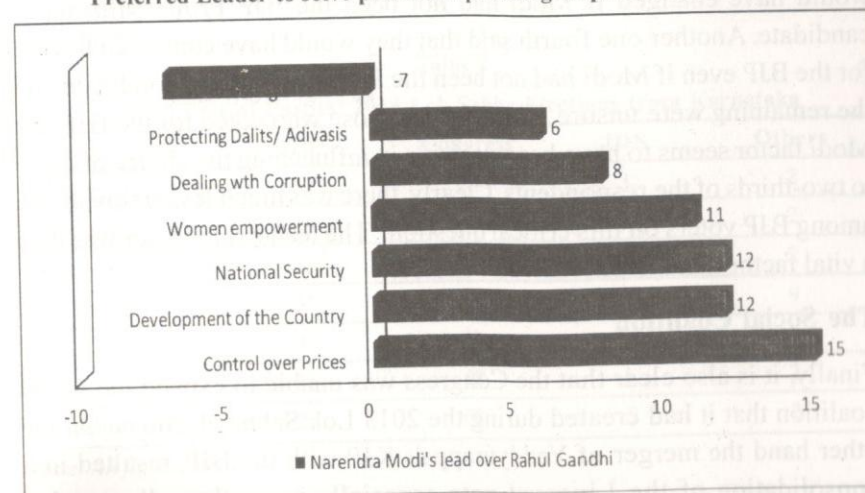
⁸ While 33% stated that they would like to see Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister another 31% mentioned the name of Rahul Gandhi.

When asked about the choices of leaders at the national level who could resolve important issues or protect social groups, Narendra Modi was ahead of Rahul Gandhi by a relatively significant margin, save on the question of protecting the interests of the Muslims.

A clear indicator of the role of leadership was seen in the response to a question in NES 2014 on whether one would have changed the voting preference if Modi was not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP. The response in Karnataka, gives a clear indication to what could have crucially impacted on the vote. Across the state, four of every ten respondents stated that if Modi were not the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate their choice of the party they would have voted for would have changed. Another one fourth said it would have made no difference and the remaining were unsure. Thus across the state, the Modi factor influenced the voting preference of four of every ten voters. If one were to look at those who voted for the BJP the picture alters in a significant way. Now, six of every ten of those who voted for the BJP stated that their voting preference

Figure 4

Preferred Leader to solve problems/ protect groups: Modi vs Gandhi

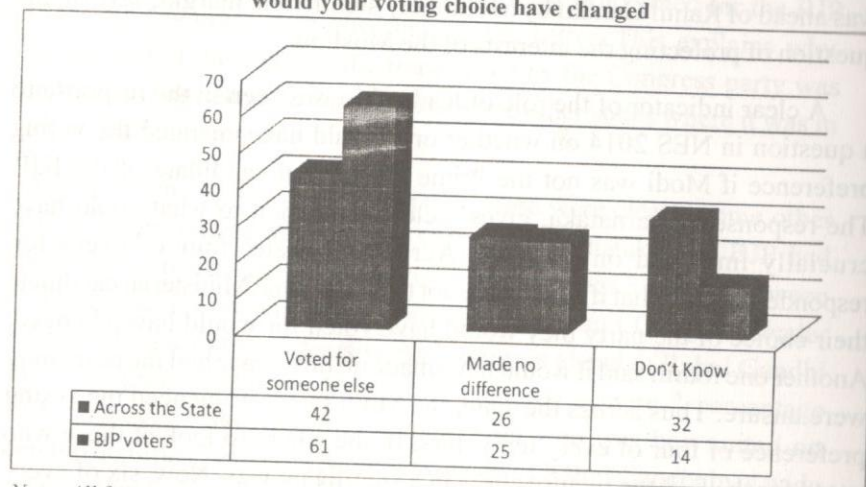


Note: All figures are in percent

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll Survey conducted by CSDS; Sample Size - 1073

Figure 5

If Modi had not been the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP
would your voting choice have changed



Note: All figures are in percent

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll Survey conducted by CSDS; Sample Size - 1073

would have changed if Modi had not been the BJP Prime Ministerial candidate. Another one fourth said that they would have continued to vote for the BJP even if Modi had not been the Prime Ministerial candidate and the remaining were unsure. Thus, among those who voted for the BJP, the Modi factor seems to have been decisive in influencing the choice of close to two-thirds of the respondents. Clearly, there was much less ambivalence among BJP voters on this critical question. The leadership factor was thus a vital factor that influenced voter choice.

The Social Coalition

Finally, it is also clear that the Congress was unable to expand the social coalition that it had created during the 2013 Lok Sabha elections. On the other hand the merger of Yeddyurappa's KJP with the BJP, resulted in a consolidation of the Lingayat vote especially in northern Karnataka. Karnataka Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah has consciously developed a non-dominant backward caste, Dalit and minority coalition (popularly called as

AHINDA in the local language). By bringing together the non-dominant backward castes, the strategy was to pose a counter weight to backward caste domination in politics⁹ (Shastri 2008). Evidence from NES 2014 indicates that the non-dominant backward caste and Muslim vote was firmly with the Congress. It is important to record that the data shows that one fourth of the Muslim vote went to the BJP and the JDS secured a much smaller share of the minority vote. By not making it a more inclusive coalition, the Congress faced a serious backlash. The Lingayat vote once again strongly consolidated with the BJP. The BJP had emerged as a powerful force in Karnataka with the support of this dominant caste (Shastri and Ramaswamy 2004; Shastri and Padmayathi 2009). The unhappiness of the Vokkaliga community on not being accommodated in the Congress social alliance did lead to a three way split in the Vokkaliga vote, with the BJP gaining significantly, especially in Bangalore city. The Upper Caste vote which has traditionally been with the BJP, remained with them this time also. Thus, the inability of the Congress to broaden its social coalition on the one hand and the consolidation of the votes of one dominant caste (Lingayats) in favour of the BJP and three way split in the vote of the other dominant caste (Vokkaligas), paved the way for the BJP to move ahead of its opponents.

Table 2

Social Base of Parties: 2014 Lok Sabha Elections from Karnataka

Caste	BJP	Congress	JDS	Others
Upper Castes	62	33	3	2
Vokkaliga	38	29	31	2
Lingayat	63	23	10	2
Other OBC	37	44	10	9
SC	35	43	13	9
ST	35	58	5	2
Muslim	25	68	5	2

Note: All figures are in percent

Source: NES 2014 Post Poll Survey conducted by CSDS; Sample Size - 1073

⁹ This approach was experimented earlier by Devraj Urs in the 1970s.

VIII: Summing Up

The Lok Sabha verdict from Karnataka was a vote for the BJP's leadership. It was also an expression of unhappiness with the UPA government. The inability of the Congress to stitch a wider social coalition also contributed to their winning a limited number of seats. If the Congress did not perform as badly as it did in some other states, it was on account of the relatively clean image of its one year old state government, which still enjoyed tremendous goodwill among the people. Karnataka was a state that proved that leadership clearly matters. The BJP was able to strike a chord with the voters by projecting a leadership while its principal opposition faced the elections fighting anti-incumbency and a leadership that failed to inspire confidence among the voters.

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