

For 2024, parties must focus on young voters

With campaigning for the Karnataka elections in full swing and at least five more assembly polls scheduled this year, the road to the 2024 Lok Sabha (LS) elections is finally in sight. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Opposition are test-driving narratives, as was evident in the flurry of manifestos in Karnataka this week. For the BJP, it appears to be welfare delivery, nationalism and aspiration, along with faith-based appeals and the popularity of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. For the Opposition, the emphasis is on localising the elections, the non-performance of BJP governments, collusion with big business, corruption, and caste-based distribution of resources.

But both formations will have to tailor their messaging to the most crucial demographic in the 2024 elections — voters between 18 and 25 years, who will make up a 175-million strong population. This diverse group will form a vast untapped class of voters, many of whom would have spent most of their adolescent years under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime. In 2019, 45 million people became eligible to vote. This, some estimates showed, expanded the voters' list by 5% compared to 2014. A larger increase is expected in 2024.

During the party's national executive meeting in January, PM Modi asked BJP workers to focus on the 18-25 segment, saying that they gained adulthood during or after 2014 and thus did not witness the "corruption" of previous governments. Therefore, the BJP, he added, must make this segment aware of the difference between the BJP's rule and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance's reign.

What compelled PM Modi to look at younger voters?

This group has been one of the most loyal support bases of the BJP in the last two elections. Not only was the turnout among younger voters (18-25) higher than the overall turnout, but this segment also overwhelmingly voted for the BJP, according to the National Election Studies surveys conducted by Lokniti-CSDS.

In 2019, PM Modi urged first-time voters to dedicate their vote to honour the armed forces. Data indicates that participation in election-related activities (rallies, canvassing and poll donations) was four percentage points higher among young voters than in other segments. And such respondents were more likely to act as vote mobilisers for the BJP. Additionally, the young (18-25 years) voted decisively for the BJP in 2019. The party's vote share among young voters (41%) was four percentage points higher than its overall vote share. In 2014, the BJP's support among young voters was 37%, compared to the party's total vote share of 31%. Approximately, 51% of voters in the 18-25 years category preferred Modi as PM; this number was 48% among the 26-35 category, and 45% among voters above 36 years.

But there is a catch. While the BJP remains the most preferred party among young voters, there is a change in their voting patterns since 2019. Now, young voters, in comparison to the elderly, are somewhat less enthusiastic about voting for it. This slight shift may open a narrow window, or so the Opposition

hopes. This trend was visible even in states where the BJP won convincingly, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Gujarat. For example, the Axis-My India exit poll during the 2022 UP elections suggests that there was only one percentage point gap between the BJP and Samajwadi Party in the 18-25 category (41% for the BJP against 40% for the SP); the gap was far wider among other age segments. In the 36-50 category, the BJP polled 48%, and the SP polled 35%; in voters above 61, the BJP polled 54%, and the SP polled 30%. Similarly, in Gujarat, exit polls indicate that the BJP polled 45% of young voters and 49% among those above 50 years.

To be sure, this is not conclusive evidence of voting trends for the 2024 LS polls, but possible sign of a potential shift. Why is this happening? Economic concerns — primarily unemployment and price rise — may be contributing factors, say surveys.

The Mood of the Nation Survey released in January by India Today and CVoter, while underlining high approval ratings for the PM, also found many respondents saying that the job situation in India is dire; the proportion of those calling attention to this problem was the highest among the 18-34 group.

PM Modi's emphasis on making the younger voters aware of the governance record of previous regimes has two aims: It is targeted at mobilising its loyal support base and converting a large segment of this demographic into the mainstay for the BJP's future. The party believes this will counteract Opposition efforts to build a coalition based on economic anxieties.

The challenge is steeper for the Opposition. The past few months have seen meetings between a raft of Opposition parties, but many of them, including the Congress, did not garner the support of young voters in the last two general elections. For example, Lokniti-CSDS data indicates that the Congress and its allies received 24% of the youth vote in 2019, three percentage points lower than their total vote share.

Many of these parties are trying to win young people over. But this will be difficult given that issues such as unemployment will contribute to the anti-incumbency of regional parties that run governments. Second, their social media infrastructure is no match for the BJP's.

Finally, in many cases, the young faces are relatives of the patriarchs and matriarchs of these formations who not only carry the burden of dynasties but also, in some cases, lack the charisma and ground connect of previous generations. Given the PM's relentless attacks on dynastic politics and corruption, these parties must carefully curate their campaign to target young voters.

Elections are about the competitive credibility of rival parties on various parameters. Political parties try to build campaigns to shore up their support base and discredit opponents. In the next 10 months, we will witness how both sides spend their energy wooing younger voters. More than the outcome in Karnataka, parties and analysts should focus on how different demographic segments vote, and the new social fault lines that could emerge defining the 2024 campaign.



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The views expressed are personal