

{ REVIEWING PAST RESULTS }

Decoding narratives that may shape results

Neelanjan Sircar

letters@hindustantimes.com

NEW DELHI: The high-stakes Karnataka elections concluded on Wednesday. As we wait for the results on May 13, a close look at past electoral results can help shed light on the key narratives emerging from this election.

Karnataka has a set of caste equations that do not map cleanly to any other place in India, and the Congress has historically built a broad, stable coalition across these identities. In the last four state elections, the Congress's vote share has stayed between 34% and 38%. In the 2018 elections, the BJP was once again able to consolidate votes from the powerful Lingayat community after welcoming back former chief minister BS Yediyurappa, surging to 104 seats—just nine seats shy of the magic number of 113. Many believed that the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)] would pledge its 37 seats to support BJP in forming the government. But, in a big surprise, the JD(S) joined with the Congress (78 seats) to form the government. HD Kumaraswamy from JD(S) became the state's chief minister.

This time, many observers are suggesting the election may be more of a "bipolar" contest between the BJP and Congress, with a segment of JD(S) voters shifting to one of the two larger parties instead of allowing the party to play kingmaker, splitting votes at the constituency level.

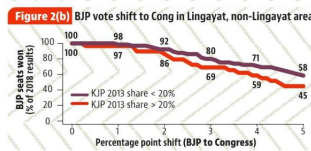
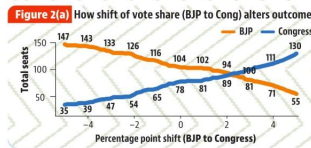
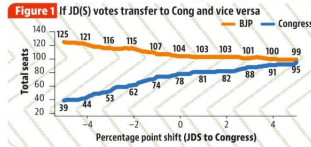
What would be the impact of this consolidation, or what if, contrary to expectations, the JD(S) increases its vote share? To investigate the matter, in figure 1, I simulated seat shares using the 2018 election results at the constituency level and assuming a transfer of votes from JD(S) to Congress and vice versa while holding BJP's votes constant.

Somewhat surprisingly, even with a net transfer of votes from JD(S) to Congress of 5 percentage points, the BJP would barely drop from the 104 seats it won in 2018 to 99 seats. There are two key reasons for this.

First, the BJP, as compared to Congress, disproportionately won seats with a high margin of victory. The BJP won 86 seats (as compared to 46 for Congress) where the margin of victory was greater than 5 percentage points, while it won 19 (as compared to 32 for Congress) where the margin of victory was less than 5 percentage points.

Second, the JD(S) had a concentrated vote share—failing to reach 5% of the vote in 65 (33%) of the 199 constituencies in which it contested—and the BJP did better than the combined vote share of Congress and JD(S) in a majority of the seats (55) it won. This means that JD(S)'s vote has limited capacity to push the Congress past the BJP in most constituencies. On the other hand, given

How vote shifts play out



the lower margins of victory for Congress, figure 1 demonstrates that further fragmentation of the vote in favor of JD(S) would decimate the party compared to its 2018 performance and rapidly boost BJP's seat share. In fact, just a 1.8 percentage point transfer of vote from the Congress to the JD(S) would get BJP to the magic number of 113 (based on 2018 electoral results).

Another key narrative emerging from Karnataka is anti-incumbency due to, among other factors, corruption and fragmentation of the aforementioned Lingayat vote. How might these factors affect electoral outcomes?

In figure 2(a), using 2018 electoral data, we model how a shift of vote share from BJP to Congress (due to anti-incumbency) would impact outcomes. Here the impact to the BJP is far greater. Just a 2.2 percentage point shift in vote share from the BJP to the Congress would see the Congress emerge the single largest party, and a 4.1 percentage point shift would allow Congress to reach the magic number of 113 seats.

The impact of the Lingayat vote is more difficult to discern. One strategy is to use a historical event, when BS Yediyurappa formed his own party, the Karnataka Janata Paksha (KJP), that contested alone in 2013. While it won only 6 seats in 2013, it played a major spoiler for the BJP—winning at least 20% vote share in 48 (24%) of the 204 constituencies it contested. In the 48 seats with at least 20% vote share for KJP in 2013, the BJP won 29 seats (compared to 13 for Congress and 3 for JD(S)) in 2018. In the 154 seats where KJP had less than 20% vote share in 2013, the BJP

won 65 seats (compared to 58 for Congress and 29 for JD(S)) in 2018. This suggests that BJP's 2018 performance was highly dependent on winning back former KJP voters, mostly Lingayats.

Figure 2(b) models the impact of erosion of vote of the BJP to the Congress in Lingayat and non-Lingayat areas by using the KJP vote shares, as a percentage of the seats the BJP would win as compared to a benchmark of its 2018 performance.

The BJP is far more susceptible in Lingayat areas, suggesting that fragmentation of the Lingayat vote (something that has been rumored with disenchantment of certain Lingayat leaders with BJP and the subsequent defection to Congress) would be particularly detrimental to the BJP.

This exercise provides key insights to interpret the upcoming electoral results. The lack of a pre-electoral coalition between the Congress and JD(S) is unlikely to have much of an impact on final results (in fact, it might be beneficial for the opposition if JD(S) can pull away some anti-Congress voters). The BJP's performance is highly sensitive to an erosion in vote share, particularly in Lingayat areas. The final result will hinge on the BJP being able to defend its 2018 vote share, and its Lingayat base.

Neelanjan Sircar is senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research



READ: What do Karnataka's past trends tell us about these polls?