

Big Drama, Small Stage

Karnataka's assembly polls are always localised contests and results don't carry much weight nationally or in the South. They also combine stable caste representation with high seat-level volatility

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Even as the Karnataka campaign is underway, speculation is already abounding over the significance of its results for the next general election. Will this election put the Congress on track for 2024? Would a BJP victory ease its inroads in the South?

As voters are still making their mind up about whom to choose, it is useful to look at historical patterns in Karnataka state elections, and remember that the meaning of state elections is first and foremost regional.

It's all local

Karnataka has been voting differently in state and national elections for a long time. Since 2004, Congress and Janata Dal (Secular) have won three state elections out of four; the fact that BJP managed to bring down two majorities and form a government without being elected for it is a separate matter. In the general elections that followed, BJP won with increasing vote-share every time.

Before 2004, voters favoured Janata in state elections and Congress in general elections. The only exception was 1989, when both elections happened during the same year. Generally speaking, voters favour the dominant national parties in national elections, whereas they consider their regional options as well in state elections.

This does not prevent parties from spinning their performance in whatever terms suit them. In case of victory, the BJP would obviously interpret its state election performance as a sign of momentum for 2024. Just as it would argue to the contrary if it lost the election.

And likewise for Congress. Party leaders will take credit in case of victory, and lay the blame at the door of their regional party units in case of defeat. Be that as it may, evidence points to the fact



that voters see these two kinds of elections as distinct and make up their minds accordingly.

Outcome really doesn't ripple out

Similarly, what happens in Karnataka elections has little bearing on what happens around it. Southern states have distinct politics not only compared to the North but also among themselves. A victory in Karnataka does nothing to ease the entry of the BJP in other southern states. In fact, there are longstanding political tussles between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, such as the Kaveri water dispute. Being in power in Bengaluru does not provide a competitive advantage per se in neighbouring states.

This does not mean that these elections are without implications for 2024. Some of them are practical. Karnataka is a rich state. A Congress victory would provide it access to resources it desperately needs to run its national campaign. Politically the stakes are high for Congress. It needs to show that it

can perform in a state where it still has a presence and organisational strength. It must also demonstrate that it is not toxic to its alliance partners, a crucial factor for the building of an opposition front for 2024.

Karnataka elections are also characterised by intense seat-level volatility. From one election to another, most seats keep changing hands.

- In 2018, parties retained only 93 seats out of 224.

- Seat gains were distributed between parties (71 seats gained by BJP against 30 seats gained by JDS and Congress).

- This number was 98 in 2013, and 53 in 2004.

The only region where parties maintain some strongholds are in the South. BJP consistently wins in Bengaluru's periphery, while Congress and JDS maintain a few strongholds in the surrounding Vokkaliga-dominated rural districts.

Caste-wise representation remains stable

Stability of caste-based representation is a third defining feature of Karnataka politics. Since 1952, the combined representation of Lingayats

and Vokkaligas has always oscillated between 45% and 50% of the seats. There has not been an assembly in which members of these two caste groups did not occupy a majority of the seats. Regardless of which party wins, these two communities never lose.

The geographical distribution of their representation is also remarkably stable, since these groups are concentrated in distinct parts of the state. Lingayats dominate in the north, while Vokkaligas dominate in the south. Lingayats and Vokkaligas are not competing for power against each other but among themselves, barring a few exceptions.

A third group that has significant political presence in the assembly are the Kurubas, who are mostly prominent in coastal Karnataka. As a result, there is little sociological differentiation between Congress and BJP, as they tend to select their candidates according to similar local calculations. A cursory look at major parties' candidate lists this year indicates that this election is not likely to be any different.

Missing women

A final unchanging aspect of Karnataka elections is the extreme marginalisation of women candidates and elected representatives. Only six women were elected in 2018, a dismal situation that is unlikely to change significantly this year, as women barely make 6% of all major parties' candidates.

State elections are fought primarily on regional matters, which include issues of caste, religion, policy preferences and governance, local grievances and aspirations. To reduce state elections to a national match between two parties and a handful of their national political figures would reflect both ignorance about state politics and disdain for voters' sophistication.

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