

# South India: Possible Key to India's Next Government

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## Summary

*India's southern states could hold the fulcrum of power in New Delhi if the current parliamentary polls result in a hung Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Parliament. Unlike in the northern Hindi heartland states, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a major player in only one of five south Indian states, Karnataka. It is, however, hoping to open its account in Kerala after the recent Sabarimala controversy and has entered into a wider alliance in Tamil Nadu with the state's ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam which swept the state in 2014 but now faces a major challenge of anti-incumbency. The BJP's southern power play, combined with Rahul Gandhi's gambit of leading his party's southern charge from the front by contesting from Wayanad in Kerala, indicates how crucial the southern states will be as swing factors in government-formation if no party wins an absolute majority. This paper summarises the political outlook in India's five southern states – Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – examines key factors at play and puts together cumulative data from various state-wise opinion polls to illustrate likely prospects in this crucial region in India's national election.*

## Introduction

How India's southern states vote has often tilted the balance of power in Delhi ever since the era of coalition government started in 1989. The last time the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in power, for example, it lost it in 2004 largely because its then-allies south of the Vindhyas, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, were routed. The 2014 election bucked the historical pattern because of the Narendra Modi wave that catapulted the BJP back into power in the central government, upending the usual framework of Indian politics. Yet, the BJP's landslide 2014 victory masked the fact that it was predicated on electoral advances for the party in just 12 (10 in the Hindi heartland and two in the west) of India's 29 states – which accounted for 85 per cent of all its seats.<sup>1</sup>

With the Modi factor over-riding traditional caste-based political arithmetic in the Hindi heartland and in West India, the BJP's parliamentary majority<sup>2</sup> was largely powered by the sheer scale of dominance in these two regions by maxing out seats there. Though the party

<sup>1</sup> The BJP won 190 of 225 seats in the 10 Hindi heartland states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In west India, it won 51 of 76 seats in Gujarat and Maharashtra. Source: Election Commission of India, [Loki.ai](http://loki.ai)

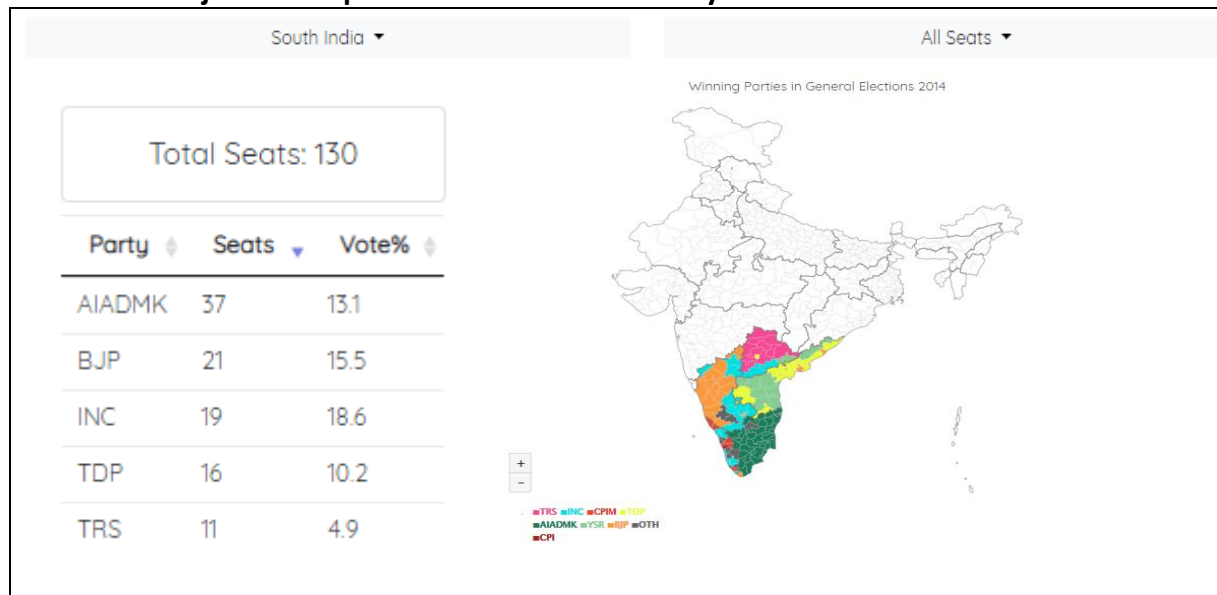
<sup>2</sup> The BJP's tally in Lok Sabha shrunk from 282 in 2014 to 268 in 2019 due to subsequent by-polls held in these seats for various reasons. See latest tally on Lok Sabha official page, <https://loksabha.nic.in/members/PartyWiseStatisticalList.aspx>

did not make major inroads into South India beyond its southern flagship state of Karnataka, the sheer scale of its northern victories in 2014 made the absence of a wider geographic spread for BJP irrelevant in that contest.

In the 2019 election,<sup>3</sup> though, if the BJP does not repeat the scale of its victories in the Hindi heartland, the big southern states would regain their traditional role as a fulcrum of power in Delhi. Given that the party is facing a strong phalanx of opposition unity in the key Hindi heartland states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, and recently faced reversals in assembly elections in three states (Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh), the party faces an uphill task in its core bastions with a likely erosion of seats here in comparison with 2014.<sup>4</sup> If the BJP is unable to regain a clear majority, the electoral result in the southern states will have a huge bearing on government-formation in Delhi and matter far beyond local interests alone.

This partly explains why the BJP has entered into alliances in two southern states: Tamil Nadu and Kerala where it is hoping to do better than in 2014. Spread across the five states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, and Karnataka, the 130 seats in southern India account for over one-fifth of the 543 seats in India’s Lower House of the Parliament, the Lok Sabha. In 2014, in sharp contrast to its performance in the north, BJP won only 15 per cent of South India’s seats and they accounted for only seven per cent of its total tally (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: South India in 2014: BJP won only 15 per cent of seats in this region and it accounted for just seven per cent of its final seat tally in the Lok Sabha**



Source: Election Commission of India, Lokaai

<sup>3</sup> The election is being held in seven phases: with voting on 11, 18, 23, 29 April and 6, 12, and 13 May 2019. Counting of votes is scheduled for 23 May 2019. Election Commission of India:

<https://eci.gov.in/files/file/9396-announcement-of-schedule-for-general-elections-to-lok-sabha-and-legislative-assemblies-in-andhra-pradesh-arunachal-pradesh-odisha-sikkim-2019/>

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of Hindi heartland, see Nalin Mehta, ‘India’s Hindi Heartland Key to General Elections’, ISAS Insight, No., 560, April 11, 2019. <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ISAS-Insights-No.-560.pdf>

This paper examines the electoral outlook in this region, explains the factors at play in each of the southern states and puts together cumulative data from various state-wise opinion polls to illustrate how the political terrain is shifting.

The southern states are voting in three stages. Andhra Pradesh (25 seats) and Telangana (17 seats) voted in Phase 1 (11 April); Tamil Nadu (39 seats), the union territory of Puducherry (1 seat) and half of Karnataka (14 seats) in Phase 2 (18 April); Kerala (20 seats) and the remaining half of Karnataka (another 14 seats) in Phase 3 (23 April).<sup>5</sup> Technically, this is the first time Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are voting as separate states in a Lok Sabha election since the former was formally inaugurated as a separate state on 2 June 2014, after the general election that year, though the announcement had been made earlier. Let us now examine the state of play in each of these states.

### **Tamil Nadu: A Battle of Known Unknowns after Amma and Kalaignar**

Tamil Nadu's 2019 poll contest is a watershed contest because it is the first election in the state since the demise of long-time party supremos Jayalalithaa (also known by the sobriquet Amma) of AIADMK and M Karunanidhi (Kalaignar) of DMK. In a state where traditional party loyalties have been high and based on personality politics of both of these leaders, the polls will be a litmus test for their successors: AIADMK's state Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami and his deputy O Panneerselvam on the one side and DMK's MK Stalin on the other.

The AIADMK won 37 of Tamil Nadu's 39 seats in 2014. This time it is fighting the polls on only 20 seats and is part of an eight-party alliance comprising the BJP, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), the Puthiya Needhi Katchi (PNK), Vijayakanth's Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK), the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), the Puthiya Tamizhagam (PT) and the All India NR Congress (AINRC). Of these, the AIADMK is contesting 20 seats, the PMK seven, the BJP five and the DMDK (which has aligned with AIADMK after eight years) in four, while the TMC, the PT, and the PNK are contesting one seat each. The PNK is contesting from Puducherry as part of the alliance.<sup>6</sup>

This National Democratic Alliance (NDA) faces the DMK-led Democratic Progressive Alliance (DPA) conglomeration consisting of the DMK – 20 seats, the Congress – 10 (including a seat in Puducherry), the Communist Party of India (CPI) – two, the CPI (M) – two and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in two seats. Vaiko's Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), the Indhiya Jananayaga Katchi (IJK), the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and the Kongunadu Makkal Desiya Katchi (KMDK) are each contesting in one seat.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed and searchable constituency and state-wise breakdown on voting phases, see: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-election-schedule>

<sup>6</sup> T Ramakrishnan, '2019 Lok Sabah elections: AIADMK alliance release list of constituencies', 17 March 2019, The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/aiadmk-to-contest-in-20-seats-bjp-in-five/article26559256.ece> Also see TNM Staff, 'Full list of candidates for AIADMK-BJP alliance from Tamil Nadu for LS polls', 25 March 2019, The News Minute, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/full-list-candidates-aiadmk-bjp-alliance-tamil-nadu-ls-polls-98943>

<sup>7</sup> TNM Staff, 'Lok Sabha 2019: Full list of DMK-led candidates in TN and Puducherry', 2 April 2019, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/lok-sabha-2019-full-list-dmk-led-alliance-candidates-tn-puducherry-99346>

First, in a state where power normally alternates between the two Dravidian parties, the AIADMK is facing a double anti-incumbency factor this time having retained power in 2016 in the state assembly election under Jayalalithaa and now having entered into an alliance with Delhi's ruling BJP. Its political imagery has suffered in the post-Jayalalithaa era as various leaders jostled for power.<sup>8</sup> In a state where the Dravidian self-pride has always been central to identity, the DMK has built its campaign on a narrative that charges the AIADMK with having turned into a puppet of Delhi.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the AIADMK faces the challenge of a split in its traditional vote by TTV Dhinakaran's breakaway party the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK). The former AIADMK treasurer has put up rebel candidates against the AIADMK – such as in Theni, an AIADMK bastion, where O P Paneerselvam's son is facing former Congress state president EVKS Elangovan. The vote here is likely to be split by a former AIADMK MLA Thanga Tamilselvan, now standing from AMMK.

Third, the Lok Sabha election in Tamil Nadu is directly linked to the future of its state government as well. Up to 22 vacant state assembly seats in the 234-member state assembly are also going to the polls. The AIADMK has a wafer-thin majority in the assembly. If the AIADMK does not win at least eight of these assembly seats, it will lose its majority in the state assembly.<sup>10</sup> As such, Dhinakaran's primary political target aligns with that of DMK's: both aiming for an AIADMK defeat in the parliamentary poll, which in turn could possibly trigger a collapse of its state government.

Third, the NDA alliance will be banking on its caste arithmetic working, particularly in northern Tamil Nadu where the PMK, in alliance with the AIADMK after a gap of eight years, has a strong Vanniyar vote – in seats like Dharmapuri, Villuparam, Vellore, Cuddalore and Tiruvannamali – and in the south where the BJP is contesting five seats. The BJP's focus seats are: Kanyakumari, which it won in 2014, Tuticorin where its state president Tamilisai Soundararajan is taking on the DMK's Kanimozhi, Sivaganga where its national secretary H Raja is facing Congress' Karti Chidambaram, Coimbatore, and Ramanathapuram where the former AIADMK legislator Nainar Nagendran is contesting on a BJP ticket.

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<sup>8</sup> TM Veeraraghav, 'A weak BJP in the South may get less than half its 2014 seats', 22 March 2019, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/south-india-lok-sabha-polls-bjp-prospects-challenges>

<sup>9</sup> G Babu Jayakumar, 'The AIADMK-BJP alliance in Tamil Nadu has a lot going against it', 20 March 2019, <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/india/opinion-the-aiadmk-bjp-alliance-in-tamil-nadu-has-a-lot-going-against-it-3673141.html>.

<sup>10</sup> In the 234-member assembly AIADMK needs 118 MLAs but had 110 MLAs before the by-election while DMK had support of 98. M Manikandan, 'EC's poll announcement a mini-assembly poll in Tamil Nadu', 9 April 2019, The Hindustan Times, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-ec-s-bypoll-announcement-a-mini-assembly-election-in-tamil-nadu/story-CVQMKaBSyLGoFTofDSiaJJ.html>

**Figure 2: Poll of polls in Tamil Nadu: 39 Lok Sabha constituencies<sup>11</sup>**

Date Published	Agency	UPA	NDA	Others
Apr 2019	PuthiyaThalaimurai TV	32	7	0
Apr 2019	IndiaTV-CNX	21	13	0
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	33	6	0
Apr 2019	India TV-CNX	21	13	5
Apr 2019	Cultural and Communication Centre (CCC)	30	4	5
Mar 2019	News Nation	24	15	0
Mar 2019	Times Now-VMR	18	15	6
Mar 2019	India TV-CNX	21	15	3
<b>Average</b>		<b>25</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms

An average of polls conducted in Tamil Nadu (Figure 2), whose results have been published since January 2019, currently gives the edge to the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with 25 seats as opposed to 11 for the NDA alliance. If this trend holds, then the BJP would be a net-net gainer from the lone seat it held in 2014 in Kanyakumari.

### **Karnataka: The BJP's Southern Bastion**

This is the BJP's only flagpole state in South India where it has consistently won a majority of parliamentary seats in the last three elections. Of the 28 Lok Sabha seats in the state, the BJP won 18 in 2004, 19 in 2009 and 17 in 2014.

The BJP also emerged as the single-largest party in the state assembly election in 2018, winning 104 of the 224 assembly seats<sup>12</sup> though it is now in opposition after failing to cobble together a majority vis-à-vis the Janata Dal-Secular (JDS)-Congress post-poll alliance currently in power. Mapping the 2018 assembly results onto parliamentary segments, though, showed a relative drop to 13 Lok Sabha seats for the BJP.

With the state in political flux ever since, what has been the fallout? An average of polls conducted in Karnataka, whose results have been published since January 2019, currently gives the edge to the NDA alliance with 15 seats, as opposed to 13 for the JDS-Congress combine that makes up the UPA in the state.

<sup>11</sup> Average numbers have been rounded off.

<sup>12</sup> The Karnataka assembly has 224 elected seats with one additional nominated member. See for instance, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/karnataka-election-2018-karnataka-voting-dates-karnataka-election-results-karnataka-polling-schedule/articleshow/63922007.cms>

**Figure 3: Poll of polls in Karnataka<sup>13</sup>**

<b>Karnataka</b>	<b>Lok Sabha constituencies 28</b>	<b>NDA</b>		<b>UPA</b>	
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	16	12		
April 06, 2019	India TV - CNX	16	12		
Apr 2019	Republic TV - Jan ki Baat	18	10		
Mar 2019	Times Now-VMR	15	13		
Feb 2019	Spick Media	13	15		
Jan 2019	Republic TV - CVoter	14	14		
<b>Average</b>		<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>		

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms

There are three clear trends. First, as political analyst T M Veeraraghav has pointed out,<sup>14</sup> the BJP support remains high in the state’s north-western Mumbai-Karnataka region where it has consistently won a majority of its seats since 2004. The BJP’s core base in over 10 seats where it won by large margins in areas stretching from Belgaum and Uttar Kannada to Shimoga remains strong.

Second, the combined Congress-JDS vote-shares in the state’s north-eastern Hyderabad Karnataka region are higher than the BJP’s in some seats it won in 2014. This means that in traditional JDS bastions in the state’s Mysore-Karnataka region, where the Congress lost by low margins in 2014, the UPA alliance has a mathematical edge on combined vote-shares. It translates into closely fought contests in six of the 17 seats the BJP won in 2014: Ballari, Koppal, Davangare, Mysore, Bidar and Haveri.<sup>15</sup>

### **Andhra Pradesh and Telangana: The Third Factor**

Although Telangana was formally bifurcated from Andhra Pradesh in June 2014, the general election that year was held in the erstwhile combined state, with BJP in alliance with the TDP. The last two Congress regimes in Delhi, in 2004 and 2009, were both enabled by strong performances by the party in this region. In 2019, though, the absence of both the Congress and the BJP as strong players in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh is striking.

While the TDP’s Chandrababu Naidu broke away from the BJP earlier on the issue of special status for the state, his prime challenger is Jagan Reddy’s YSR-Congress Party. In Telangana, where the Telangana Rashtriya Samiti (TRS) recently swept the 2018 assembly polls, the

<sup>13</sup> Average numbers have been rounded off.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with the author.

<sup>15</sup> Based on ground intelligence and analysis by TM Veeraraghav.

party has publicly kept equidistance from both national parties, arguing instead for another non-BJP, non-Congress regional front of leaders.

In 2014, BJP won two seats in Andhra Pradesh (Visakhapatnam and Narsapuram) and one in Telangana (Secunderabad) but it was then in alliance with the TDP. Its challenge in 2019 is that it has never fought won a seat in these regions when fighting alone.

If the Lok Sabha ends up as a hung house, both Jagan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh and K Chandrashekhara Rao in Telangana are betting on holding a crucial role with their regional numbers.

A poll of polls conducted in both states since January 2019 (Figure 4) shows the TRS in the pole position in Telangana with 13 seats, with its ally, Asaduddin Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM).

**Figure 4: Poll of polls in Telangana: 17 Lok Sabha seats<sup>16</sup>**

Date published	Polling agency	TRS	UPA	BJP	AIMIM
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	14	2	0	1
Apr 2019	IndiaTV	12	4	0	1
Mar 2019	Times Now-VMR	12	1	2	1
Jan 2019	Republic Tv - Cvoter	16	0	0	1
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>13</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platform.

**Figure 5: Poll of polls in Andhra Pradesh: 25 Lok Sabha seats<sup>17</sup>**

Date published	Polling agency	YSRCP	TDP	UPA	NDA
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	20	5	0	0
Apr 2019	IndiaTV-CNX	18	7	0	0
Jan 2019	Spick Media	22	3	0	0
Jan 2019	Republic Tv - Cvoter	19	6	0	0
Mar 2019	Times Now-VMR	22	3	0	0
Mar 2019	Republic Tv - Cvoter	11	14	0	0
<b>AVERAGE</b>		<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms.

Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, the poll of polls shows Jagan Reddy's YSRCP with a strong lead of 19 seats with the TDP projected as winning six. Actor Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party is expected to cut votes of established players but if this trend holds then both Reddy and Chandrashekhara Rao can be expected to have a strong play in the post-poll game of thrones in Delhi.

<sup>16</sup> Average numbers have been rounded off.

<sup>17</sup> Average numbers have been rounded off.



## Kerala: Rahul Gandhi's Southern Push

Congress President Rahul Gandhi's candidature from Wayanad, which the Congress won by just a 2.3 per cent margin in 2014, is reflective of his party's bet that it is looking for a southern revival through Kerala. While Kerala has usually followed a pattern of alternating power between the Left Front and the Congress-led United Democratic Front, Rahul's direct entry into the poll this time and the wider resonance of the Sabarimala debate about allowing the entry of women into the temple shrine after a Supreme Court verdict has injected a new dynamic in the campaign.

Kerala, more than any other state, illustrates the challenges of opposition unity to take on the BJP. The Congress, for example, is going head-to-head with the CPI-M here in as many as 12 of 20 Lok Sabha seats: Kannur, Vada-kara, Kozhikode, Thrissur, Thiruvananthapuram and Pathanamthitta

The BJP, which has never won a seat before, is eyeing at least three seats. In the south: Pathanamthitta, the home of the Sabarimala shrine, and Thiruvananthapuram where it won 32 per cent of the vote in 2014 to finish behind Congress' Shashi Tharoor and Chalakudy in central Kerala where it won over 10 per cent of the votes in 2014.

**Figure 6: Poll of polls in Kerala: 20 Lok Sabha seats<sup>18</sup>**

Kerala		Lok Sabha constituencies 20		
		UDF	LDF	NDA
Apr 2019	Asianet News-AZ	15	4	1
Apr 2019	Times Now-VMR	17	2	1
April 2019	India TV - CNX	14	5	1
March 2019	News Nation	15	4	1
March 2019	Times Now-VMR	16	3	1
Jan 2019	Spick Media	13	5	2
Jan 2019	Republic TV - Cvoter	16	4	0
Oct 2018	ABP News- CSDS	12	6	2
Sep 2018	Spick Media	12	8	0
<b>Average</b>		<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>

Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms

A poll of polls conducted in the state since January 2019 (Figure 6) shows the Congress-led UDF in the poll position with 14 seats, the LDF with five and the BJP opening its account with one.

<sup>18</sup> Average numbers have been rounded off.



## Poll of Polls: Conclusion

To sum up, in south India, the UPA is clearly in the lead position with 54 seats overall in the cumulative poll of polls in southern states so far. The NDA is a distant third with 28 in this reckoning while other parties come a close second with a total of 47 seats between them.

**Figure 7: Poll of polls in south India**

STATE	NDA	UPA	OTHERS	TRS	LDF	TDP	YSRCP
Tamil Nadu	11	25	3	-	-	-	-
Karnataka	15	13	0	-	-	-	-
Telangana	1	2	1	13	-	-	-
Kerala	1	14	0	-	5	-	-
Andhra Pradesh	0	0	0	-	-	6	19
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>19</b>

*Source: Opinion poll data compiled by author from various TV broadcasts and media platforms*

The BJP had 21 seats in South India in 2014. If this trend holds in the results, then it indicates three things. First, it would be making marginal gains in the south through its alliances, which would only partly compensate for its relative losses in the Hindi heartland. Second, unlike in the north, the UPA would be leading here, but without a clear dominance after losing ground in its old bastions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Third, the poll of polls number seen without context may be misleading because while the BJP may have slightly reduced numbers in Karnataka, it may also gain potential allies from the TRS and the YSRCP in a post-poll scenario. In the case of a hung house, expect regional parties from the south to exert an influence in government formation in Delhi and return to their traditional national role as power-players in coalition governments.

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