

## Congress Wins Clear Mandate in Karnataka

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### Summary

*The Congress won a comfortable majority in the recent Karnataka Assembly elections, wresting the state from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – the only state in south India where it was in power. The verdict will boost the Congress' confidence ahead of important Assembly polls and the 2024 general elections, and could force the BJP to rethink its campaign strategy in state elections.*

The Congress won a convincing victory in the Karnataka Assembly elections this month, securing 135 of the 224 seats on offer. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was a distant second with 66 seats and the regional outfit, Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], did poorly with 19 seats. While it was expected that the Congress, riding on anti-incumbency, would win the maximum number of seats, the party's strong performance came as a surprise to some. The Congress not only won a comfortable majority but also increased its vote share by five percentage points from 38 per cent in 2018 to 43 per cent, which is the highest by any party in the state since 1989.

### Analysis of the Result

Besides anti-incumbency and the electoral record of Karnataka, where the incumbent is voted out every five years, there were several reasons for the Congress' victory.

First, the Congress, which has a credible organisation in Karnataka, ran a strong campaign which focused on corruption charges against the incumbent. According to the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey, over 50 per cent of the respondents said [corruption had increased](#) and 57 per cent believed that the BJP was the more corrupt party. The survey also found that unemployment and poverty were key issues with the voters. The Congress, by appealing to this segment through a slew of welfare programmes, [performed far better in rural constituencies](#) and among the poor, compared to the BJP.

Second, the Congress stitched together a broad support base, comprising the Vokkaligas, Dalits, Muslims and other smaller communities like the Kurubas, to which Congress leader Siddaramaiah belongs, to trump the BJP, which primarily drew upper caste and Lingayat voters. According to the [Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey](#), 70 per cent of Muslims, 63 per cent of Dalits and nearly 50 per cent of Vokkaligas voted for the Congress. This saw the Congress make significant gains in all parts of the state with the highest increase in Central and Kittur Karnataka. The shift in the Vokkaliga vote and the consolidation of the Muslim vote behind the Congress also hit the JD(S) particularly hard.

Third, in contrast to the BJP, the Congress presented a united front during the election campaign. The differences between their two most prominent leaders, state party president

D K Shivakumar and former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, were kept aside during campaigning.

The BJP's vote share decreased marginally from 2018 but its seat share fell by nearly half. The loss becomes even more stark if one calculates it from 2019 when there were defections from the Congress and JD(S) to the BJP and the subsequent by-elections. Part of the reason for the dramatic fall was due to the BJP losing an average of five percentage points in seats where it won in 2018 and gaining them in seats where it was in no position to win. It also arguably suffered due to the sidelining of the party's tallest leader, B S Yediyurappa, who was replaced as chief minister by Basavaraj Bommai in 2021. This was part of the BJP's national strategy of not allowing regional leaders to rise beyond a certain stature.

The BJP's politics of religious polarisation also possibly reached a saturation point in the state and was not able to override issues such as unemployment, corruption and poverty. This was evident from the losses that the BJP suffered in almost [all regions of the state](#), including in Coastal Karnataka, which is the party's stronghold and where communal politics have been most strident.

## Implications

The Karnataka verdict's biggest impact is likely to be on the Congress. The party is in power in only a handful of states and the victory in Karnataka, one of the richest states in India, will boost the Congress' confidence and its access to resources ahead of important state polls and the 2024 general elections. The Congress also has a template with which to counter the BJP in states such as Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which go to polls later in 2023 and where the contest is primarily between the Congress and the BJP. The Congress would hope to replicate its campaign where it banked on local leadership, focused on governance issues, promised welfare measures and used effective communication strategies. Finally, the party's central leaders, who are either absent or do not contribute meaningfully, might also have done their bit. Rahul Gandhi's 'Bharat Jodo Yatra', which travelled 511 kilometres in Karnataka through 21 constituencies in 2022 possibly had an impact, with the Congress [winning 16 of these 21 seats](#), compared to five in 2018. While this does not necessarily establish a correlation, the march seems to have energised party workers.

The loss of the only state in southern India where it held power will hurt the BJP. The Karnataka result is a reminder that centrally-driven election campaigns, without any local narrative or strong regional leaders, are unlikely to work in all states. The heavy reliance on Prime Minister Narendra Modi also harms the party in Assembly elections, especially outside the Hindi heartland. While Modi's election blitz possibly helped the BJP in the Bengaluru region, where the party marginally increased its tally, it did not seem to have had much of an impact in the rest of the state.

Looking ahead, the recent verdict might not say much about the 2024 general elections since the outcomes in Assembly and general elections have been very different in Karnataka

in the recent past. This is true for other states as well. However, the verdict will make the Congress a central player in opposition politics in 2024.

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