

Karnataka shows no magic needed to defeat BJP in 2024.

Answer is ‘ridiculously simple’

A Congress victory would show the path to a possible defeat for the BJP at the national level. The challenge for the opposition is to understand this path & stick to it.

Yogendra Yadav

Exit polls have confirmed what was fairly obvious in Karnataka: It’s going to be the Congress this time. The numbers leave some scope for doubt since most of the exit polls converge around a bare majority of 110-115 seats for the Congress, which leaves the party vulnerable to another Operation Kamala. I still believe that the party may secure a more comfortable or even a thumping majority. I would go with the India Today-Axis My India projection, which happens to be an outlier this time. They project 122-140 seats for the Congress, 62-80 for the Bharatiya Janata Party, and 20-25 for the Janata Dal (Secular), quite in line with the large pre-poll survey done by eedina.com. I would not rule out the Congress breaching the upper limit of 140 seats in both these projections.

If this broad assessment is not completely off the mark, it invites us to ask a big question: Is there a template in this potential Congress victory that can be carried over to other states and possibly to the 2024 Lok Sabha election? Political marketing requires you to answer three questions: What’s your message? Who is your target audience? How do you reach and convince your target audience? Does Karnataka offer the Congress a template to address these three questions?

This is not the question likely to dominate TV debates on 13 May when results will be declared. You would hear a lot about who should get the credit or the blame. Anchors who would have credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the event of BJP victory, would now rush to protect the PM and blame local party leadership. Conversely, the Congress leaders would credit the national leaders – perhaps party president Mallikarjun Kharge along with Rahul Gandhi – and claim that the party got everything right this time.

Both these responses have an element of truth – local BJP leadership would have to be blamed and the Congress national leadership should get the credit – but they do not tell the whole story. In any case, for someone looking at 2024, this credit-blame debate is pointless.

You may also hear some noise about whether the defeat of the BJP in Karnataka foreshadows its performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Congress enthusiasts may rush to declare the beginning of the end of the BJP. Anchors and BJP spokespersons (it is often hard to tell them from one another) would point out that the logic of state elections does not work for national elections. It is true that the Karnataka outcome may not influence the voters even in the neighbouring Telangana, let alone the rest of India. And there is no guarantee that assembly election trends will carry on till the Lok Sabha election, even in Karnataka.

The real significance of the electoral verdict in Karnataka would be that it keeps the 2024 election open. A re-election of the incumbent BJP would psychologically seal the fate of the opposition and induce a walkover even before the big match begins. A Congress victory would serve as a timely reminder that the BJP is not invincible. It would keep the momentum of the Bharat Jodo Yatra alive. It would also assure the party worker that a direct Modi versus Rahul Gandhi match is not destined to end in the former's victory. No more, no less.

Besides keeping the door open for 2024, a Congress victory in Karnataka may also show a path that leads to this door, an outline of a template that the opposition needs. Here are some key takeaways from the exit polls that help us think in that direction.

Governance matters

First of all, the election demonstrates that governance matters and people are willing to punish misgovernance. Now, it is true that voters in Karnataka are always more ready to punish the incumbent than those in many other states. It might also seem that the Basavaraj Bommai government has been a soft target, easy to demolish. But come to think of it, Modi's actual governance record is no better.

Just think of demonetisation, Covid-19 mismanagement, China border goof-ups, and everyday scandals that keep surfacing. It is Modi and not Bommai who should be held responsible for the price rise, the issue that has hit the BJP most in Karnataka. As for corruption, with the news of the Gautam Adani scandal percolating into everyday conversations, Modi is beginning to lose the halo that he had acquired over the years.

What distinguishes the Modi government at the Centre from the Bommai government in Karnataka is not actual track record but communication. If the opposition can find a way to crack this image, Modi can be defeated.

Communalisation no trump card

Second, the exit poll verdict proves that communal mobilisation does not always trump. The state was a key test of the politics of bigotry, as the BJP had turned this into a laboratory of hate — what with the hijab controversy, azan restrictions, sponsored lynchings, innuendo about love jihad, canard about Tipu Sultan and the communalisation of state textbooks. The PM himself concluded this full-fledged communal assault with the low-grade equation of the Bajrang Dal with Bajrang Bali while addressing Karnataka voters. Thanks to the pliant Election Commission, the BJP left no stone unturned to achieve communal polarisation.

Yet voters did not oblige — there have been no communal overtones to this election as I wrote in these columns. None of the Hindu-Muslim issues figures in the list of top voting considerations in any of the exit polls. If the focus is firmly kept on everyday issues like price rise and unemployment, the Hindu-Muslim divide does not become a decisive electoral factor.

Stick to the bottom

The third lesson is that the Congress must stick to the bottom of the pyramid approach. India Today has shared the data on reported voting by social background of the voters. It shows that the much-hyped switch of the Lingayat voters from the BJP to the Congress did not happen. While the BJP has gained some support among the Vokkaliggas, the latter largely stayed with the JD(S). There is no evidence of the much-anticipated Left-Right divide among the Scheduled Castes (SC) voters. Muslim voters stayed with the Congress despite apprehensions about vote splitters.

The exit poll shows that class and gender mattered more than anything else. The Congress enjoys a 5 percentage point lead over the BJP among men but 11 point lead among women. The BJP is ahead of the Congress among the well-to-do (those who earn more than Rs 20,000 per month, merely 16 per cent of the total voters). The Congress enjoys a decisive lead among the remaining 84 per cent of voters. It confirms the trend noted in the Eedina survey: The poorer the voter, the higher the vote for the Congress.

Clearly, the smartest thing the Congress did was to address this core constituency through its five guarantees. Two of these were addressed to women and the remaining three to different sections of the poor. That is what Congress needs to do if it wishes to take on the Modi government in 2024. In fact, the Karnataka polls suggest that the Congress could have gone further in this direction and done much more to reflect the social profile of its voters in the selection of its candidates.

Keep it real, let BJP do the rest

Finally, the Karnataka election demonstrates that determination and hard work pays off. It was after a long time that the Congress showed collective resolve to take on the BJP. State leaders were not allowed to step outside the boundary line. Disputes over ticket distribution were kept to a minimum. The central leadership decided the overall line of communication. And finally, Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi were out in the field, leading from the front. Rahul built on the Bharat Jodo Yatra that passed through Karnataka and set the tone for the Congress campaign.

Faced with a determined opponent, the BJP started faltering as it always does. Finally, it used up all the weapons in its arsenal. The Modi card was used to the hilt. The party outspent its opponents by several times. Its booth management was smarter than the Congress'. Yet, a determined campaign by the Congress could outweigh all these advantages. This simply reminds us of the lessons learnt in West Bengal and the 2020 farmers' movement: PM Modi cannot withstand a determined opponent.

Karnataka exit polls show that the opposition does not need any magical tricks to defeat Modi in 2024. The template for the opposition is ridiculously simple: Keep the focus on real issues, address the bottom of the pyramid in their language, and work relentlessly, 24×365. The BJP would do the rest.