

## BJP Victory In Perspective

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There can be little doubt that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has achieved an electoral breakthrough and that its win in the recent elections in Karnataka marks a watershed for the politics of the State and country. After all, its victory is the fulfilment of the party's long-cherished goal of forming a government on its own strength in a southern State.

The jubilant saffron party now regards itself as a frontrunner in the Lok Sabha contest that is not far away. However, a closer reading of the results would indicate that the party's euphoria is misplaced. In terms of the seats won, the BJP is the clear winner bagging 110 out of the 224 Assembly seats, an increase of 21 from its 2004 tally. The Congress has won 80 seats, 15 more than last time. Significantly, the Janata Dal (Secular) is the only party to lose ground in terms of seats in what was basically a triangular contest. Its tally in 2008 was lower by 30 seats when compared to 2004.

The BJP's improved performance, it would appear, is largely due to the manner in which vote shares of the three political parties have stacked up in a closely-fought three-way contest in particular, vote shares across the four broad regional divides show that while the BJP may have won, it is by no means the end of the road for the Congress as well as the JD(S). The analysis has important political implications for each of the three main parties.

Despite its loss, the Congress remains the single biggest political force in the State, while maintaining, a marginal lead over the BJP in terms of vote shares across the State. It won 34.60 percent of the popular vote in Karnataka, a lead of a little less than one percentage point over the BJP. In fact, the Congress' share of the popular vote has fallen only marginally in 2008 from its level of 35.3 percent in 2004. In terms of overall vote shares, the BJP has registered significant gains. Its share has increased from 28.3 per cent in 2004 to 33.9 per cent in 2008.

The JD(S) too has not totally lost its popular base. Its share of votes polled has fallen only marginally—from 20.8 to 19.1 percent. So, where have the BJP's gains come from? The votes polled by independents and smaller parties have fallen sharply—from 15.64 in 2004 to 12.44 percent in 2008. In fact, 60 percent of the gains registered by the BJP in these elections have come at the expense of the smaller parties and independents, while 28 percent has been wrested from the JD(S). The Congress has polled more than one-third of the popular vote in each of the four regions in the 2008 elections. In contrast, the BJP's popular support base suffers from a geographical bias. In particular, its poor performance in the southern districts, barring Bangalore urban agglomeration, highlights this weakness. As for the JD(S), its support base is concentrated in the southern districts, precisely in the area where the BJP has a relatively weak support base. Its vote share in this region is almost 10 percentage points below not only the Congress but the JD(S) too. In fact, its overall lead in terms of seats won has largely been due to the over 5 percentage point lead over the Congress in Bangalore Urban and in the coastal districts. In

the northern districts, the balance is almost even between the Congress and the BJP.

What are the implications of the election figures for the politics of the region? The figures highlight a quirk of the first-past-the-post Indian electoral system. In a closely-fought triangular contest, a small shift in vote-share can often result in a significant change in seats won by parties. This is what has happened in Karnataka, and the BJP reaped the gains.

Secondly, the arithmetic of electoral politics poses the obvious question of an alliance between the two avowedly secular parties, the Congress and the JD(S). Such a coalition in the next Lok Sabha elections would result in the BJP being a distant second rather than the frontrunner that it imagines itself to be. It is important that the Congress not take the JD(S) for granted in such an arrangement because the JD(S), despite being the weakest of the three main parties, retains almost one-fifth of the popular vote. This may not fetch it many seats if it is on its own. But a coalition with the Congress could dramatically change the political landscape in Karnataka. □□□