

The Election in Karnataka: Caste, Class, and Regional Complexity

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In the arid, bone-dry Dalit *basti* of a village of central Karnataka's Haveri district, a middle-aged farmer tries to give us a glimpse of the kind of complexity at play in thinking about how to vote in the upcoming Vidhan Sabha elections as he washes his prized buffalo. "The village is extremely caste divided. Other than a small number of people it is very difficult to say who will vote which way. It depends a lot on many local factors, and each group is trying to find out the way their rival group will vote". Dalits, taken as a bloc, make up 17% of the population of the state — thus making them more numerically significant as a group than both the dominant Lingayat and Vokkaliga communities. But will they vote as a bloc?

They are widely regarded as a mixed bag of voters that are likely to split on the basis of numerous parochial, constituency-specific concerns. "The Gowdas here will be split between the two parties [Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)]. The Kurubas will go with Siddaramaiah. We are likely to vote for the BJP this time, because Siddaramaiah has been quite partial to the Kuruba community. In this village, there are a large number of Kurubas and they have become very influential in the last 5 years," he explains. He shows us around the new house he is building, and tells us that his brother works at the Public Works Department in Haveri town.

But even in this village, Dalit identity is not immune to political fissures. The farmer explains, "the Scheduled Castes (SCs) will be divided — we will mostly vote for the BJP, but there is another SC group just across the highway who thinks we have benefited from reservations at their expense. So if they think we will vote BJP, they will definitely vote for the Congress". When asked to hazard a guess as to who would come to power in the state, he quipped, "It is very difficult to say who will be the MLA from here this time, let alone the Chief Minister of the state!"

It against this extraordinarily complicated backdrop that one must draw inferences about Karnataka politics as a whole. The search for macro narratives, "waves" and other sweeping phenomena distracts from the highly localized nature of this election. Karnataka state was formed in 1956 from contiguous regions in Bombay, Madras, Hyderabad, and Mysore states — a regional complexity that is still very relevant for social and political variation in Karnataka politics. Everyone, from voters to pundits (even the exit polls), seems confused as to what will happen.

The challenge is just as daunting for the political parties. Karnataka is a state in which current chief minister Siddaramaiah is the first person to complete a full five-year term since D. Devaraj Urs in 1977 (who also incidentally represented the Congress party and was the last chief minister re-elected in Karnataka). In between, Karnataka has experienced all manner of political coalitions, power-sharing agreements, scandals, and, above all, political instability.

The Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], once a highly powerful regional party, is clinging to its base of voters from the dominant Vokkaliga community in South Karnataka. The other major parties, BJP and Congress, are attempting to glue together a disparate collection of caste and social groups to do what has often proven to be a major challenge: win an outright majority of the 224 seats being contested. In this piece, we investigate how the parties are attempting to construct these broad social coalitions.



Constructing a Coalition of Support

This level of regional complexity admits parties with highly differential social and regional bases of power. The Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], and its founder HD Deve Gowda, has almost cult-like status among the powerful Vokkaliga (Gowda) community in South Karnataka, the areas around Mysore. In a village in Channarayana taluk, we meet a wholly JD(S)-devoted middle-aged man with his wife and children, who states, "Deve Gowda is everything to us." He doesn't seem to have any other discernible political opinions. Not about Prime Minister Modi. Not about demonetization. Just Deve Gowda. His young girls have been enlisted to canvass for the JD(S), but victory in this village seems like a foregone conclusion. The Vokkaliga completely dominate the local power structure. As a Dalit farmer in the same village complains, "It doesn't really matter who wins in Karnataka. Nothing changes around here."



Once one leaves South Karnataka, however, the picture completely changes. Outside of this region, other than a small number of seats where the JD(S) has used local patronage networks or identified locally popular candidates, the main competition is between the BJP and the Congress. Unlike parties imbued with a dominant caste or identity group like JD(S), the “catch-all” parties like BJP and Congress must generate a set of social and political appeals that can cut across disparate, often conflicting, caste and religious groups.

The BJP’s strategy for this catch-all appeal is now quite familiar. It uses a mix of Hindu-Muslim polarization and Prime Minister Modi’s appeal, especially among the poor and backward castes. These are completely separable appeals; the communal appeal only works in pockets in which there is existing tension between Hindus and Muslims. As a young local vendor, and self-professed BJP and Modi fan, on Kapu Beach told us, “We all know that that this Hindutva stuff only picks up around elections. No one here really buys into it. When Siddaramaiah came to power, he put a powerful RSS worker in jail. No one even went to see him.” Nonetheless, this ability to glue together Hindu identity and Prime Minister Modi’s appeal has proven to be formidable across India.

AHINDA

Unlike many other parts of India, where the Congress has been caught flat-footed by BJP’s newest avatar, the Congress here (led by JD(S) defector Siddaramaiah) is taking a page from Karnataka’s political history in trying to resurrect the AHINDA (A Kannada acronym for minorities, backward classes and Dalits) coalition.

In 1972, D. Devaraj Urs was elected to power with a full majority and became the first Chief Minister to have a full 5 year term in the state. The political coalition he stitched together, AHINDA proved to be a caste combination that could effectively demolish the traditional hold that the Lingayat and Vokkaliga leaders had on the state’s politics. While the logic of such a coalition is indisputable, its origins were likely necessitated by the situation of Karnataka’s politics at the time. Given that the major dominant caste leaders of the state, such as Veerendra Patil, S Nijalingappa and HD Deve Gowda had all broken away from Indira Gandhi’s Congress, it seemed unlikely that Urs (a member of the aristocratic Arasu community) would be able to draw from their dominant caste base. Yet, crucially, Urs was able bind these disparate social groups together through support for a series of popular and sweeping land reforms (among other things). This effectively generated a type of “class politics” to bridge caste and religious divides in the AHINDA coalition.

But this is not a politics that is free of caste; in fact, it very much makes use of local caste/religious leaders to mobilize voters. But it mobilizes these voters around a set of issues that are palatable to the economically disadvantaged in society. Siddaramaiah has replicated this strategy through a series of popular welfare schemes, chief among them *anna bhagya* — which offers rice for Rs. 1 per kilogram. So popular is this program that even the Dalit farmer in Haveri who is considering voting for BJP, told us, “I remember having to walk 7 miles to get rice, and often having to beg for it from a feudal lord. Siddaramaiah changed that. But even if he loses power, no party would think of revoking it for the negative impact that would be generated.”

Nonetheless, there is reason enough to believe that Siddaramaiah’s AHINDA consolidation will be qualitatively different from that of Urs. To begin with, the successes of Urs must also be thought of in context of the fact that Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, was an immensely popular figure in the state. Her political programs, particularly the abolishing of bonded labor, had already had a massive impact on consolidating landless groups of backward classes and Dalits. Urs did conduct many programs that benefited these communities, but he was totally routed politically after leaving the Congress, and even today many of these same communities remain staunch Congress supporters with fond memories of Indira Gandhi. By contrast, Siddaramaiah is acutely and personally invested in AHINDA as a political strategy.

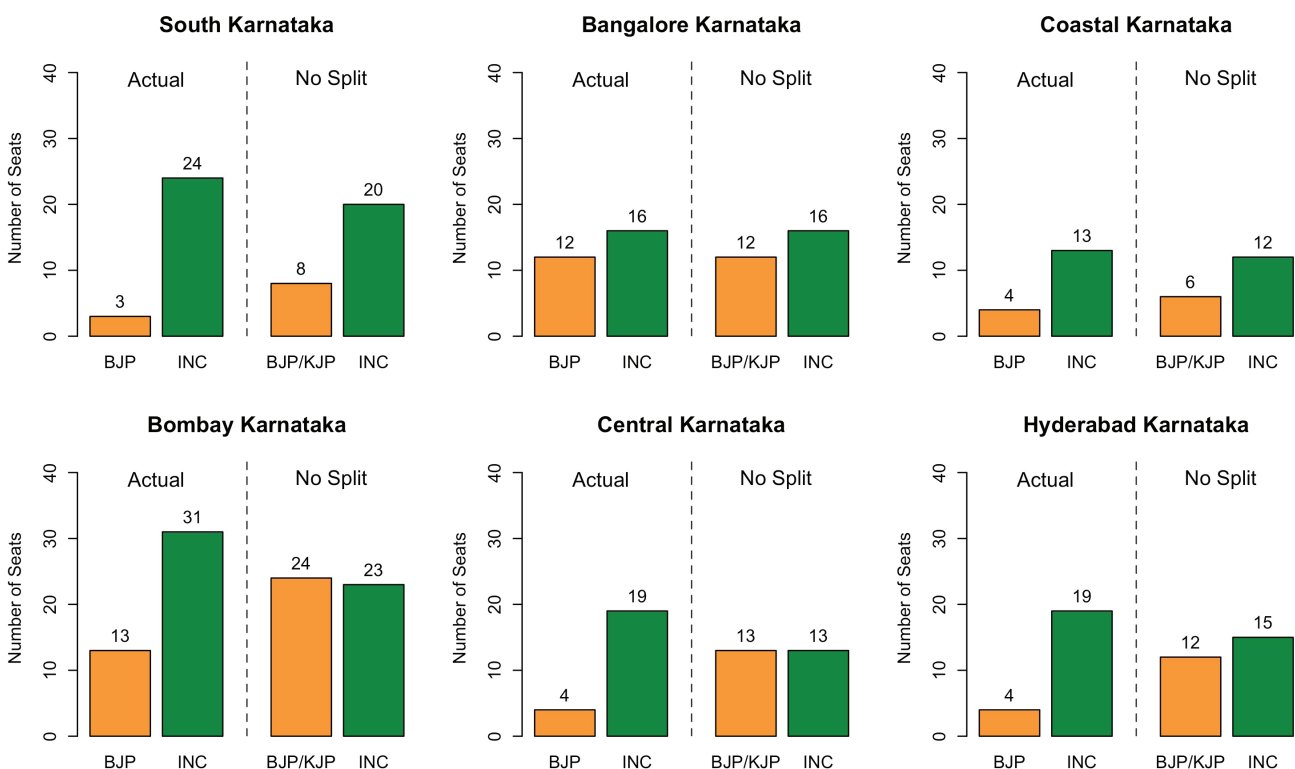
As a Kuruba leader and the first backward class chief minister the state has had in nearly two decades, his claim to be an anti-caste leader of the masses does not come across as political expediency. His experience of being an adept leader unable to progress in a Vokkaliga party, the JD(S), resonates deeply with people who wish to unseat locally powerful leaders. Moreover, the popular perception of the Congress high command is far different from that Mrs. Indira Gandhi's time. If a large part of Urs' electoral success can be credited to Indira Gandhi, the converse is true of Siddaramaiah's 2018 campaign. Should the Congress win a majority or come close, there can be little doubt that it would be largely due to the leadership and political insight of Siddaramaiah and the relative non-interference of the Congress high command.

Yeddyurappa and the Lingayats

"I've made the BJP realize what it is without me," roared former Karnataka chief minister BS Yeddyurappa after the 2013 election. In 2012, Yeddyurappa, the most prominent leader from Karnataka's powerful Lingayat community, formed the Karnataka Janata Paksha (KJP) — a not so subtle attempt to destroy the electoral fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) by stealing away its core base of Lingayat voters. Reeling under accusations of corruption and illegal land deals, the central leadership all but forced Yeddyurappa to resign his chief ministership, leading to his vengeful defection. It worked. The BJP dropped to just 40 seats in the 2013 state election, down from 110 in the previous state election.

This time, the KJP is gone and Yeddyurappa is back in the fold for the BJP as its chief ministerial candidate, and the working assumption was that the Lingayat community had returned to the BJP. That was until current Congress chief minister Siddaramaiah took advantage of a schism in the Lingayat community by distinguishing higher status Veerashaivas from other Lingayats, whom he has granted "minority status." (Over this period, the BJP has also picked up scheduled tribe leader B Sriramulu and much of his Badava Shramika Raitha Congress or BSR Congress Party.) While a detailed discussion of the Lingayat community is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that a "minority status" demand is nothing new within the community. The Lingayat community sees itself as a religious movement that traces its roots to the 12th century, and is far from a highly consolidated single community.

To bring some data to the issue, we start by considering what would happen if Yeddyurappa brought every vote back with him to the BJP. The figure below compares the actual election results (in number of seats) by region with a model in which the vote shares of BJP and KJP are merged into a single party. Predictably, a combined BJP/KJP performs much better in Bombay, Central, and Hyderabad Karnataka where the Lingayat community is large in number — in these 3 regions, the BJP/KJP combine picks up 28 more seats compared to when the BJP and KJP contest separately. All told, in the hypothetical scenario of perfect transfer of KJP



votes to BJP, the Congress still wins 99 seats (instead of 122), while the combined KJP/BJP wins 75 seats (up from 46 when they are split), and the JD(S) holds steady at 35 seats (instead of 40). These numbers point to the differing geographic bases of the JD(S) and the BJP/KJP, while demonstrating the centrality of these 3 regions in determining the ultimate outcome in this election.

But predicting the direction of the Lingayat vote is anything but easy and the complete transfer of votes from KJP to BJP is anything but guaranteed. We hear in *Bunder*, the port area of Mangalore, that there is dissension in the BJP ranks as Yeddyurappa has brought his own workers back into the organization. The politics of AHINDA may also win over non-Lingayats who had voted for BJP but are wary of a dominant Lingayat community.

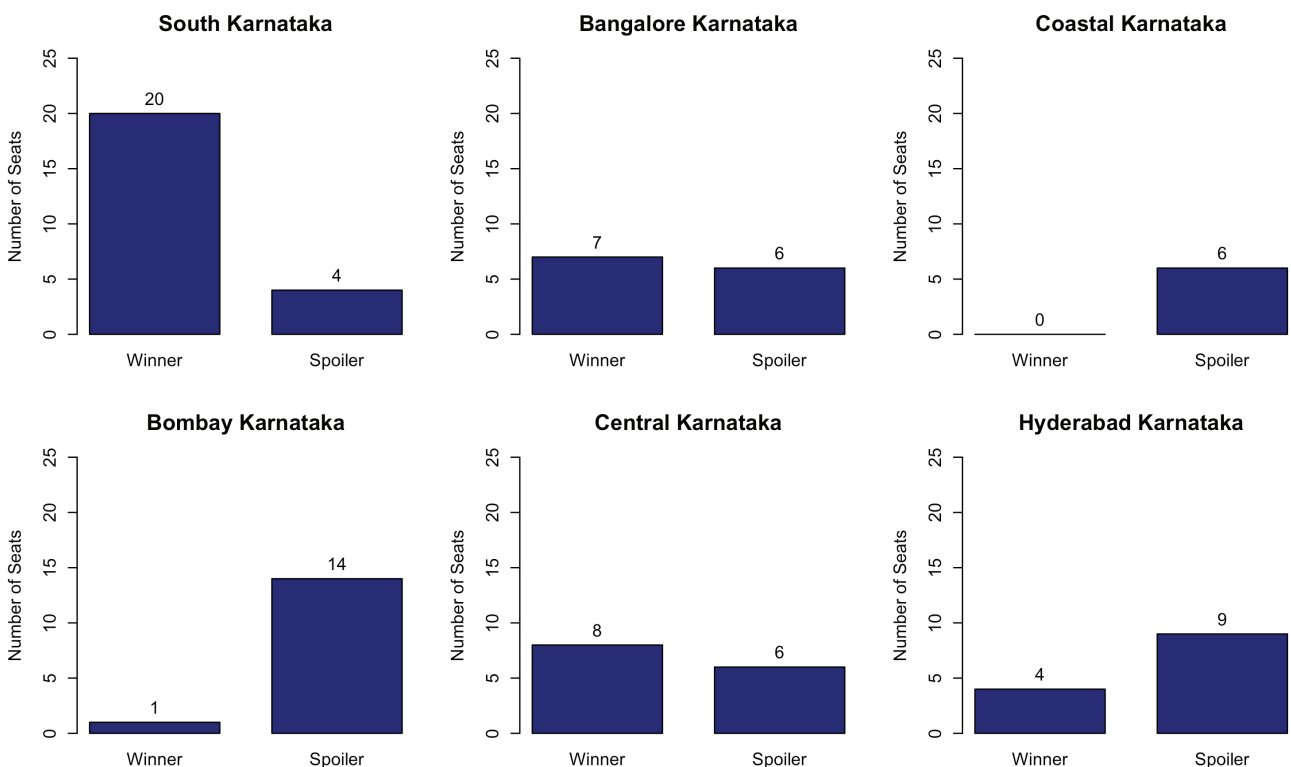
In the lush paddy fields outside Hirekerur town in Haveri district, a young Lingayat farmer told us that the implications of the minority status decision for Lingayats were unclear. “The impact of the decision would be more on the powerful Lingayat *mutts* that can gain state benefits and expand their reach than on ordinary people. You cannot assume that Lingayats as a whole will vote either way because of a decision like this.” In turn, he conceded, these *mutts* could “potentially influence the choices of Lingayat voters.”

The young man tells us that Siddaramaiah's move, while not directly appealing to voters, is a higher level game: “Certain Lingayat *mutts* share close relations with Yeddyurappa and the BJP. Siddaramaiah's move gives options to those *mutts* aggrieved with the BJP patronage of specific *mutts*.”

To add another dimension of complexity, this young farmer viewed his first identity as that of a farmer. The young man remained unconvinced of Congress, but he would likely vote for JD(S) this time. While Siddaramaiah's move on the Lingayat community may not yield votes for the Congress, it may have the side effect of making Lingayat voters select parties based on identities other than that of being a Lingayat. On the other hand, there are reports that a section of Lingayat leaders are so angry at Siddaramaiah's politics that they have aggressively pursued greater Lingayat consolidation under the BJP.

JD(S) — A Spoiler?

It would be wrong to say that JD(S) only does well in South Karnataka (where the Vokkaliga are numerous). Of the 40 seats JD(S) won in 2013, 20 were from outside South Karnataka — where the JD(S) has been effective in leveraging local patronage networks to win non-Vokkaliga votes. Congress chief minister Siddaramaiah is well aware that if he is to return to power, he will have to significantly eat into the non-Vokkaliga votes of JD(S).



To understand the impact JD(S) has on the electoral system, we characterize the number of seats won by JD(S) and the number of seats in which JD(S) plays “spoiler” by region. We define JD(S) as a spoiler when it finishes third or lower, as compared to Congress and the combined vote share of BJP and KJP (since B S Yeddyurappa has returned to the party), but has greater voteshare than the margin between Congress and a combined BJP/KJP. In effect, these are seats in which JD(S) has no chance of winning but has enough votes to push the second place party over the top. While in the South, JD(S) wins many seats and is spoiler in very few, the situation is reversed outside the South — where JD(S) won 20 seats but played spoiler in 41. This implies that there are a large reservoir of votes that the AHINDA strategy can plausibly bring into the Congress fold from JD(S) to stave off a stronger BJP than 2013.

Indeed, we’ve found evidence that it is working. If one of the three components of Siddaramaiah’s AHINDA strategy is likely to band together unanimously, it is certainly the Muslim vote. “We used to consider voting for the JD(S), especially if the candidate was known to us and had done good work. But this time Siddaramaiah has not only done good work in the state, but has also kept communalism under control. More than any other policy, the peace of the area is important,” explained a young Muslim vegetable vendor in Puttur town in the communally sensitive Dakshina Kannada region. The idea that a vote for the JDS is a vote for the BJP this time around is acutely understood by the Muslim population across regions. Campaigning by the likes of UP CM Yogi Adityanath has helped consolidate the Muslim vote along larger lines. “We must ensure at all costs that our Karnataka does not become like UP - where such communalism is common,” added a Muslim rice trader in Honnali town of Davangere district.

But, as we discussed above, the picture for the Dalit community is more complicated. In Tumakuru’s N.R. Colony, Dalit voters face a conundrum between voting for the incumbent Congress MLA who they say has worked well, and voting for the JDS candidate who they say has been instrumental in his earlier role as a social activist in ensuring they have no major water problems. “The JD(S) candidate is a great person, but the objective has to be to defeat the BJP and ensure Siddaramaiah becomes the CM. If some of us vote Congress and others vote JD(S), the BJP will gain. We have to ensure that there is unity.” A young activist from the colony says that the colony is split roughly two to one for the Congress and the JD(S) respectively, and that this could potentially help the BJP in the constituency overall.

Shivamogga district provides us with a solid counterpoint to the complexity seen in other places. Both young and middle-aged Dalit voters in Bhadravati said they would be firmly behind the Congress. “The JD(S) is a party of Gowdas, and Siddaramaiah is not a casteist leader. Under him, Muslims, Dalits and few of the backward class communities have had peace and good relations”. When asked if the JD(S) allying with Mayawati’s Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) would have any impact, they replied in the negative: “The Congress is the party that we have voted for since the time of Indira Gandhi and they have looked after our needs. Siddaramaiah should be the CM, and we would like to see Rahul Gandhi become the PM in 2019 as well.”

In this election, Congress needs to win over non-Vokkaliga voters from the JD(S) to score a big victory. An effective AHINDA consolidation is exactly what will guarantee such an outcome.

Final Thoughts

The sheer regional complexity in social and political identity, combined with a three-cornered fight between BJP, Congress, and JD(S) in many seats, makes this an extraordinarily difficult election to predict. However, there is undeniably great social churn on the ground. Siddaramaiah’s politics, and the AHINDA strategy, may not be enough to get enough Congress over the top again. But even if it fails to do so, it has fundamentally shifted the social and political cleavages in Karnataka.

