

**Working Paper 402**

**Are Elections to Grama  
Panchayats Party-less?  
The Evidence from Karnataka**

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ISBN 978-81-7791-258-6

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The Institute for Social and Economic Change,  
Bangalore

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Working Paper Series Editor: **Marchang Reimeingam**

# ARE ELECTIONS TO GRAMA PANCHAYATS PARTY-LESS? THE EVIDENCE FROM KARNATAKA

D Rajasekhar, M Devendra Babu and R Manjula<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*That political party systems matter is a well-established theoretical premise; yet, elections to grama panchayats in Karnataka are not held on the basis of political party symbols. With the help of data collected from a large number of contestants to GP elections in Karnataka, this paper shows that most of them are associated with recognised political parties in the state, and that political party affiliation positively influences the electoral outcome. GP elections are to be, therefore, held on the basis of political party symbols as political parties are likely to have a positive influence on economic and social policies, and on improving accountability at the local level.*

## Introduction

Political party systems matter for the simple reason that politicians must form winning coalitions by distributing things of value. Things of value are of two types; first, private goods, which are provided to supporters who are crucial for politicians to retain their position, and second, public goods, which are provided to enhance the welfare of the people as a whole in the jurisdiction. The latter will influence the performance of governments in the delivery of public services (Chibber and Nooruddin 2004). It is also well known that political parties influence the shaping of economic policies. First, those political parties which are in power seek to formulate policies and influence the agenda in favour of social groups that support them in order to win the elections (Chowdhury 1993). Second, political party ideology will contribute to the formulation of policies that are likely to have significant impact on the people. Political parties at the centre of policy making augur well for people's welfare and democratic governance, and this makes out a case for political party based elections.

Election to the local government on the basis of symbols of political parties is however not preferred in some countries for the following reasons. The first reason relates to local governance. The social cleavage theory holds the view that regions divided by politically relevant cleavages are more difficult to govern. The second reason is that political parties adversely affect the social cohesion that is required for development. These considerations have contributed to the policy decision of conducting elections to local government in Indian states such as Karnataka on the basis of non-political party symbols. However, recent literature argues in favour of political party based governance at the local level as this will have a positive impact on accountability (Lederman *et al* 2005) and address the tendencies that contribute to elite capture (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000). The debate calls for an empirical analysis of involvement of political parties in local government elections and whether there is a need to re-examine the policy of non-political party based elections at the local level.

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Such an empirical analysis is carried out in the specific context of Karnataka, which is one of the pioneering states in introducing and implementing decentralisation reforms in India. In 1985, the state passed a new Legislative Act for the establishment of rural local governments (panchayats). This new legislation led to the establishment of a meaningful three-tier panchayat system in the state in 1987-88 – Mandal Panchayat for a cluster of villages, Taluk Panchayat Samithi at the Taluk level and Zilla Parishad at the district level. The Taluk Panchayat Samithi was not an elected body but its members were nominated from across different spectrums. The role of the Taluk Panchayat Samithi, which coordinated the activities of lower and higher tiers of Panchayats, was advisory. The overwhelming success of the five-year panchayat system positively influenced the then Central government to introduce a uniform and constitutionally created third tier government in the entire country. As per the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment, the three-tier<sup>i</sup> panchayats, namely Zilla Panchayat, Taluk Panchayat and Grama Panchayats, were created in Karnataka, although the nomenclature differed from state to state. After the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, Karnataka government incorporated all the important provisions in its new Panchayat Raj Act of 1993. Consequently, elections were conducted to Grama Panchayats in 1994, and Taluk Panchayats and Zilla Panchayats in 1995.

Karnataka had also incorporated the following important provisions of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitution Amendment Act (CAA) in its new Panchayat Raj Act, 1993: (i) Constitution of Grama Sabha; ii) Reservations to Scheduled Castes/Tribes, backward classes and women; iii) Constitution of State Election Commission, and (iv) State Finance Commission. Again, the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA mandates every state to conduct elections to panchayat raj institutions (PRIs) regularly, i.e. once in five years. To avoid interference from state governments in the electoral matters of PRIs, Article 243K of the constitution mandates every state to establish an independent institution, namely State Election Commission (SEC), which is assigned the functions of timely conduct of election to local governments (rural and urban), delimitation of wards/constituencies, preparation of voters' roll, and reservation of seats and positions of authority.

Karnataka has adopted a three-tier panchayat system - grama panchayat (GP) at the village (lowest) level, Taluk Panchayat (TP) at the intermediate/middle level and Zilla Panchayat (ZP) at the district level. Presently, the state has 30 ZPs, 176 TPs and close to 6,000 GPs. Since the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA, five rounds of elections to these bodies have been conducted almost regularly. The most recent ones were in 2015.

Within this three-tier panchayat system, there is a slight variation in the method of elections. The major difference is that, unlike the higher tiers (Taluk and Zilla Panchayats), the elections to grama panchayats (GPs) are being held on the basis of non-political party symbols. In other words, candidates contesting for grama panchayats cannot use the symbols of recognised political (national and local) parties. One of the major reasons for adopting such 'party-less' election is to avoid poll related conflicts both during and after the election. The argument for this is that since villages are societies where every villager knows the other by face and lives in harmony and cooperation, political party based elections to grama panchayats could lead to divisions within the community on party lines, with hatred, criminalisation, and segregation emerging between the castes and classes. These will ultimately hamper local governance and development.

However, in practice, the political parties are keen to participate in the GP elections either directly or indirectly. There are incentives for both the contestants and the political parties in revealing their political party affiliation. Political parties see the local bodies as 'power centres' where considerable funds [especially those earmarked for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)] are available at the grama panchayat level (Deccan Herald, May 19, 2015). In fact, the larger quantum of resources available in GP has influenced a sitting Zilla (district) Panchayat (ZP) member to contest for the GP elections!<sup>ii</sup> The political parties were keen to take an active part in the GP elections so that they can consolidate their support base at the local level in the hope that this would be useful for contesting elections to taluk panchayat, zilla panchayat and state legislature. Similarly, the contestants also feel that they stand to gain if they are identified with a political party – be it the party in power at the state or centre. This is because they can invite influential leaders to canvass for them and obtain freebies and funds for election expenditure.

In fact, senior leaders of the political parties provided figures on how many seats that their parties have won in the elections<sup>iii</sup>. At the time of GP elections in 2015, a news reporter observed that *“the Congress and the JD(S) consider themselves as having strong vote base in villages, while the BJP has been claiming that it has spread its roots beyond cities. Senior leaders (of these parties) ... are not directly campaigning at the GP level. But they have fixed the responsibility on party MLAs, taluk and block level leaders. In case of the BJP, it has formed teams of the candidates in villages. Voters can easily identify candidates with their political affiliations.”* (Deccan Herald, May 19, 2015). This suggests that the elections to local bodies are not any more along non-political party basis, and thus, call for an empirical examination of the operation of the rule relating to holding of elections to GPs on the basis of non-political party symbols in the state.

## Objectives

Against this background, this paper addresses the following objectives.

1. To ascertain whether elections to grama panchayats in Karnataka are 'party-less';
2. To examine the linkages between the candidates and political parties and the extent to which these linkages are practised in the field; and,
3. To assess the association between candidates contesting with the support of political parties and their chance of winning in the elections.

## Methodology

The above objectives are analysed with the help of primary data collected from sample GPs in Karnataka selected through multi-stage sampling. In the first stage, five districts in Karnataka, namely Dakshina Kannada, Dharwad, Kalaburagi, Kolar and Mandya, were selected for the study on the basis of development status. The selected districts can be categorised as follows: Dakshina Kannada is a highly developed district with a high human development index, Dharwad district is a developed district, Mandya is an irrigated district, Kolar district is in transition and close to the state capital and Kalaburagi is a backward district.

In the second stage, one medium developed taluk was selected from each district as per the classification of High Power Committee Report (Government of Karnataka 2002). In the third stage, two grama panchayats were randomly selected from each of these taluks. Thus, the study covered 10 grama panchayats representing five districts. In all, there were 135 seats spread across 10 sample grama panchayats. From these seats, 332 candidates contested for the May 2015 elections. Thus, the average number of candidatures per seat works out to 2.5<sup>iv</sup>.

After obtaining the list of candidates contesting in the selected GPs, candidates were contacted for an appointment to conduct interviews. We aimed to cover all the 332 candidates contesting in the 135 seats, but were unable to conduct interviews with 45 candidates due to the following reasons: (i) Candidates were taken out on a trip before the election for president/ vice-president posts; (ii) Candidates were either staying in state or district headquarters; and (iii) Other reasons such as ill-health, sudden death and refusal to provide information.

With the help of a structured questionnaire, interviews were conducted in June-July 2015 at the residence of candidates who contested to elicit information on political experience, reasons for contesting the elections, election expenditure, support received from the political parties and the result of their candidature. In order to assess whether the elections to grama panchayats are really party-less, the information on methods used by the contestants to reveal their political party affiliation to the electorate was collected. The information on informal linkages between the candidates and political parties, and political affiliation was collected from the contestants. To ascertain the accuracy of the information on political affiliation, the information was cross-checked with those contesting against the respondent candidate.

## **Grassroots Democracy**

In India, local governance system (though informal) has existed since ancient times. In those times each village had a self-administered governance system. The village governance was shouldered by the *Panchas* (five wise leaders). The village community used to select the *panchas* unanimously to govern the village affairs. The important criteria followed in the selection of *panchas* were: person's character, truthfulness, benevolence, non-favouritism and capability of delivering justice without prejudice or bias. The main intention of following this method was to have unity and harmony among diverse groups of people in the village, co-operation between the people and to keep away party politics. The philosophy of Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan on local governance is the same as the above. They advocated village self-governance (gram swaraj), where each village is responsible for its own affairs. If elections to GPs are held on party basis, it is feared that these would become subordinate units of state government, result in casteism and political enmity. Ambedkar had similar apprehensions about the panchayat raj system, i.e., elite capture, caste and class division, injustice on marginalised sections, and hence opposed the idea of making panchayat system compulsory in the constitution.

In the post-independent period, these traditions have been followed particularly at the village/ grama panchayat level. The first initiative towards establishment of panchayats in the late 1950s in different states treads the same path of having panchayat institutions on non-party basis at the village panchayat level. In the evolution of panchayat raj system, the practice of electing representatives

without party symbols continued even after the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA. Though the constitution has not made any value judgement on the method to be followed in the establishment of panchayats, many states preferred to have non-party election to the lowest tier of panchayats, i.e. grama/ village panchayat. A large number of states such as Karnataka, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Jammu and Kashmir continued to have election to grama panchayats on a non-political party basis.

Some states have adopted innovative methods to encourage party-less and unanimous elections at the village panchayat level. In Himachal Pradesh, the non-party based election is adopted not only at the GP level but also at Panchayat Samithi (Block) level. In Andhra Pradesh, before the 73<sup>rd</sup> CAA, elections to all the three-tier panchayats were held on non-party basis. However, now it has applied this method only at the GP level. Again, in Gujarat non-party based election to GPs has a unique scheme, namely 'Binharif', introduced in 1992. This is nothing but an uncontested election (unanimous) enjoying the privilege of an award of money to the GP from the state government. The nomenclature of the scheme was changed to 'Samras' in the year 2001, the aim of the scheme being the encouragement of unanimous selection of members to GPs. To motivate the villagers to go for *Samras*, incentives in the form of grants to GPs has been introduced. Presently, the grant given to each GP coming under 'Samra' varies between Rs.2.0 lakh and Rs.5.0 lakh (Bhat 2013). This is a sizable amount for a GP considering the total available resources.

However, the situation seems to be changing now at the local governance level. Though the states have legally adopted non-party based election at the grama/village panchayat level, various methods have been used by both the individuals and political parties to have their members in these bodies. It is often pointed out that the political parties are involved through their proxy candidates in panchayat elections. The candidates are winning by using money and muscle power in the panchayat level elections (The Pioneer 2016). In Himachal Pradesh, as pointed out above, elections to GP and PS levels are on non-party basis, but in reality the two major political parties (Congress and BJP) in the state took an active interest in them during the 1991 elections. Further, it was claimed that in the next 1995 elections Congress-supported candidates were elected in a majority of the areas (Sanan 2013). In the state of Punjab, it was reported that the political parties campaigned informally for their candidates in the GP elections (Khanna 2013). In Goa state, a discussion with the elected representatives of some village panchayats revealed that the political parties openly campaign for the candidates affiliated to them (Babu 2016). These developments at the ground level indicate that there is no sanctity for the legal rule of party-less elections, especially at GP level.

## **Influence of State Politics on Local Elections**

### **Profile**

Before we examine the question of whether state politics influenced the local elections in Karnataka, let us provide the profile of the candidates who contested the 2015 grama panchayat elections.

The gender composition of the contestants indicates the participation of women in the elections. Historically, the participation of women in panchayats was less because of the prevailing social structure. In order to improve their representation and participation in the local self-government,

seats and executive positions are reserved for women. Policies of providing reservations to disadvantaged groups can help them to have a voice in the local bodies (Crook and Manor 1998). Because of these, the local elected government is expected to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public officials (Blair 2000; Crook and Sverrisson 2001; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999).

**Table 1: Profile of the Sample Candidates (%)**

<b>Particulars</b>	<b>Highly developed [N=51]</b>	<b>Developed [N=72]</b>	<b>Irrigated [N=52]</b>	<b>Transition [N=56]</b>	<b>Backward [N=56]</b>	<b>Total No. of candidates [N=287]</b>
<b><i>Gender</i></b>						
Male	54.9	61.1	44.2	48.2	48.2	<b>51.9</b>
Female	45.1	38.9	55.8	51.8	51.8	<b>48.1</b>
<b><i>Age</i></b>						
<=25 years	5.9	4.2	9.6	5.4	10.7	<b>7.0</b>
26-35 years	25.5	34.7	34.6	37.5	33.9	<b>33.4</b>
36-45 years	29.4	34.7	32.7	25.0	32.1	<b>31.0</b>
46-55 years	29.4	20.8	17.3	21.4	17.9	<b>21.3</b>
>=56 years	9.8	5.6	5.8	10.7	5.4	<b>7.3</b>
<b><i>Education</i></b>						
Illiterate	2.0	11.1	7.7	23.2	33.9	<b>15.7</b>
Primary (1-5)	23.5	43.1	11.5	10.7	8.9	<b>20.9</b>
Upper Primary (6-7)	11.8	12.5	13.5	12.5	17.9	<b>13.6</b>
High School (8-10)	37.3	15.3	46.2	19.6	12.5	<b>25.1</b>
Pre-University/ Technical Education	11.8	13.9	9.6	19.6	12.5	<b>13.6</b>
Degree	13.7	1.4	7.7	14.3	10.7	<b>9.1</b>
Post Graduation	0.0	2.8	3.8	0.0	3.6	<b>2.1</b>
<b><i>Occupation</i></b>						
Wage labourer	11.8	26.4	25.0	14.3	14.3	<b>18.8</b>
Self-employed	62.7	52.8	44.2	50.0	48.2	<b>51.6</b>
Salaried private employee	3.9	4.2	5.8	1.8	5.4	<b>4.2</b>
Household work (such as domestic chores)	17.6	16.7	23.1	32.1	28.6	<b>23.3</b>
Others	4.0	0.0	1.9	1.8	3.6	<b>2.0</b>
<b><i>Caste</i></b>						
SC	9.8	16.7	28.8	42.9	37.5	<b>26.8</b>
ST	11.8	2.8	0.0	12.5	7.1	<b>6.6</b>
Minorities	15.7	8.3	3.8	1.8	10.7	<b>8.0</b>
Other Backward Castes	27.5	23.6	19.2	7.1	32.1	<b>22.0</b>
Dominant Backward Castes (Vokkaliga, Lingayath & Reddy)	29.4	47.2	48.1	33.9	12.5	<b>34.8</b>
Forward Castes	5.9	1.4	0.0	1.8	0.0	<b>1.7</b>

**Note:** The source for this and the following tables is the primary data.

Nearly half of the 287 candidates interviewed were women in the age group of 26 to 45 years (Table 1). Women's participation was more than 50 per cent in irrigated, transition and backward districts<sup>v</sup>, while it was the least in the developed district. This is not because of low representation of women in GP elections; it is mostly due to the fact that the study team could not interview some women candidates from the developed district as they were on an enforced tour fearing kidnap before the elections to the posts of presidents or vice-presidents.

As far as the educational status of candidates is concerned, there is a general perception that literates are preferred over illiterates. This is because voters are of the opinion that literacy plays an important role in the effective administration or functioning of the grama panchayat. Literate elected representatives will be in a better position to oversee the functionaries of grama panchayats. The preferences among the voters for educated leaders may influence the composition of the contestants to the local body election. Barring 16 per cent of the illiterate candidates who were in the fray, the rest had some level of educational attainment. In fact, more than one-tenth of the candidates were either graduates or post-graduates<sup>vi</sup>. However, when one looks across the districts, the proportion of illiterates contesting GP elections was substantially higher in the backward district (33.9%) as compared to the highly developed district (2%).

Of late, the GP elections have become expensive as the prospective candidates tend to spend a considerable amount to woo the voters. It is, therefore, expected that contestants are usually from the better-off households. When we look at the occupational status of the candidates, more than half of them were self-employed and this proportion was comparatively high in the highly developed district. This lends credence to the observation that elections have become expensive and that cultivators and business class (usually the better-off segments in rural areas) are contesting the elections.

Women attending to domestic chores and not involved in any economic activity comprised about 23 per cent of the candidates. This proportion was lowest in the developed district and highest in the transition district. This can be interpreted to mean that the reservation for women are positively motivating housewives to take part in the GP elections. Alternatively, this can also mean that reservation of seats to women is contributing to the trend of women from the politically powerful rural households contesting in the elections. Less than one-fifth of the candidates were working as wage labourers. The proportion of wage labourers contesting the GP elections was relatively high in the developed and irrigated districts.

About 33 per cent of the contesting candidates belonged to SC/ST castes. This proportion was comparatively high in the transition (55.4%) and backward (44.6%) districts. This implies that the number of persons contesting the grama panchayat elections is more than the reserved number of seats in the case of depressed caste groups. This also implies that some candidates belonging to these castes contested from the general category seats.

### **Political party affiliation**

The grama panchayats elections are expected to be on the basis of non-political party symbols. In other words, candidates cannot use any of the recognized political parties' names or symbols. Each candidate will be given a separate election symbol for contesting the GP elections. Nevertheless, it was common

knowledge in the sample GPs that the candidates are affiliated to one political party or the other. In fact, voters were found to be very much aware of the political leaning of the contesting candidates.

We therefore asked all the candidates who contested about their party affiliation and their responses are presented in Table 2. The important political parties in Karnataka are BJP, Congress and Janata Dal (S). The proportion of candidates affiliated to these political parties is as follows: Congress (43.9%), BJP (20.9%) and JD(S) (17.1%). About 15 per cent of them claimed to be independent and not affiliated to any political party.

**Table 2: Distribution of Candidates Who Contested (%) by their Party Affiliation in the Selected Districts**

Political Parties	Highly developed	Developed	Irrigated	Transition	Backward	Total
BJP	35.3	26.4	9.6	0.0	32.1	<b>20.9</b>
Congress (I)	37.3	27.8	44.2	50.0	64.3	<b>43.9</b>
Janata Dal (S)	0.0	1.4	44.2	44.6	0.0	<b>17.1</b>
Independent	9.8	44.4	1.9	5.4	3.6	<b>15.0</b>
Others	17.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	<b>3.1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>72</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>52</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>56</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>56</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>287</b> <b>(100.0)</b>

Table 2 shows the variation in the political party affiliation across the study districts. The proportion of BJP candidates is high in highly developed, developed and backward districts as this party has a sizeable presence in coastal Karnataka and Bombay-Hyderabad Karnataka regions. The proportion of BJP candidates is less in irrigated and transition districts because the JD(S) is the main opposition party in these districts. Candidates associated with Congress party existed in all the sample districts, although their proportion was relatively less in the developed district, where the proportion of independents is high. The presence of JD(S) was mostly confined to two districts – irrigated and transition. Other parties, notably the Communist Party of India (Marxists), are confined only to the highly developed district as this party is historically dominant in south coastal Karnataka.

How many contesting candidates won the election? What is the political party affiliation of those winning the grama panchayat elections? These two questions can be addressed with the help of data presented in Table 3. Of the 287 candidates in the fray, only 39 per cent had won the elections. In three grama panchayats, the candidates were selected unanimously. Typically, a unanimous election took place when one of the candidates had offered the highest amount towards temple construction/development. This phenomenon was also observed in other places. The print media termed it as 'GP seats auctioned' (Prajavani, May 14, 2015). Basically, the candidates confirm their seats by paying money for temple construction/development (Prajavani May 14-16, 18, 21, 25 2015). The election commission had requested the Deputy Commissioners of the concerned districts to conduct a probe into this aspect. However, as none came forward to give a written complaint, the matter was considered as 'elected unopposed' (The Hindu, May 27, 2015b).

The proportion of winning candidates was the least in the developed district whereas it was the highest in the transition district. A majority of those candidates (76.7%) who were not affiliated to any

political party lost the elections. This is a significant finding and confirms the widely held theoretical view that political parties do matter in the elections although the policy makers would like these elections to be 'party-less'.

**Table 3: Political Party-wise Distribution of Candidates (%) by their Election Status**

Election result	BJP	Congress (I)	Janata Dal (S)	Independent	Others	Total (Nos.)
Won	35.0	38.1	61.2	23.3	33.3	39.0 (112)
Lost	65.0	61.9	38.8	76.7	66.7	61.0 (175)
<b>Total (Nos.)</b>	<b>100.0 (60)</b>	<b>100.0 (126)</b>	<b>100.0 (49)</b>	<b>100.0 (43)</b>	<b>100.0 (9)</b>	<b>100.0 (287)</b>

In the sample GPs, candidates affiliated to Janata Dal (S) were most successful in winning the elections followed by Congress (I) and BJP. But the success of candidates affiliated to JD(S) was mostly confined to the transition and irrigated districts in that order (Table 4). This is not surprising given the relatively high concentration of Vokkaliga community (which forms the backbone of JD(S) in the state) in these two districts, and people from this community are known to be sympathisers of JD(S). In addition, money spent by each winning candidate from this party was the highest. BJP had more success in the highly developed district as this political party is generally strong in this district. The Congress (I) was more successful in backward and irrigated districts.

**Table 4: District-wise Distribution of Winning Candidates (%) by their Political Party Affiliation**

Political parties	Proportion of winning candidates					
	Highly Developed	Developed	Irrigated	Transition	Backward	Total
BJP	44.4	31.3	0.0	0.0	33.3	18.8
Congress (I)	38.9	12.5	50.0	40.0	62.5	42.9
Janata Dal (S)	0.0	6.3	45.8	60.0	0.0	26.8
Independent	0.0	50.0	4.2	0.0	4.2	8.9
Others	16.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7
<b>Total winning candidates (Nos.)</b>	<b>100.0 (18)</b>	<b>100.0 (16)</b>	<b>100.0 (24)</b>	<b>100.0 (30)</b>	<b>100.0 (24)</b>	<b>100.0 (112)</b>

### Election expenditure

How much expenditure was incurred by the candidates on the elections? We asked the candidates about the details of the expenditure and how they mobilised that money. The average amount spent by the 287 candidates was Rs. 64,284. The purpose for which the amount was spent differed depending on the age and gender of voters. Newspapers at the time of elections reported that the expenditure was typically incurred on the following, which were different in nature for men and women voters (Prajavani May 29-30, 2015a): i) For men - arranging parties with non-vegetarian food and alcohol; if some persons are reluctant to join the parties, then food and alcohol were sent to their houses; ii) Women

were given sarees/ blouse pieces/ towels and silver items containing *kumkuma and arishina* (vermillion and turmeric) powder signifying '*muthaidhe*<sup>vii</sup>'. In some cases, loans were given to the women having membership in self-help groups; iii) In order to facilitate the voting of migrant workers at some places, vehicles were arranged for pick-up and drop to the place of migration, and food was provided to them; and iv) Voters were also paid when the candidate visited their houses for canvassing or on the day of voting.

The above details were also noticed in our study GPs. Of the total expenditure incurred by the candidates, 43 per cent was spent towards distributing money to the voters, 25 per cent on food and cool drinks, and about 17 per cent on alcohol distribution. The remaining amount was spent on hiring of canvassers and supporters (6.5%), printing of materials like pamphlets, brochures (3.2%) and hiring of vehicles (2.5%).

The average amount spent by the successful candidates (Rs.67,693) was marginally higher than the unsuccessful candidates (Rs.62,102). However, there were variations across political parties. In general, candidates having affiliation to JD(S) party (especially the successful candidates) had spent more money. Interestingly, the average amount spent by candidates who lost the elections was comparatively high among candidates having affiliation to BJP and Congress, and among independent candidates.

The election expenditure incurred by the candidates in the transition district was substantially higher (Rs.112,806) as compared to the other category districts (Table 5). The second highest amount of expenditure was incurred by candidates from the backward district. The average expenditure of the candidates was comparatively low in the highly developed district (Rs.7,317) followed by the developed district (Rs.47,355).

**Table 5: Average Election Expenditure by Political Party Affiliation and Districts**

Political parties	No. of candidates	Average expenditure (in Rs.)			Districts	Average expenditure (in Rs.)
		Both	Won	Lost		
BJP	60	45,042	37,246	49,240	Highly Developed	7,317
Congress (I)	126	73,288	68,581	76,185	Developed	47,355
Janata Dal (S)	49	99,304	104,220	91,542	Irrigated	71,518
Independent	43	37,475	35,667	38,024	Transition	112,806
Others	9	3,911	8,100	1,817	Backward	82,690
<b>Total</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>64,284</b>	<b>67,693</b>	<b>62,102</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>64,284</b>

The total expenditure incurred on elections by the 287 candidates was Rs.1.84 crore. Candidates have largely used their own money (57.6% of the expenditure) to finance the election expenditure (Table 6). There were also cases wherein the candidates had pledged or sold off their assets such as agricultural land, house, jewellery, etc., to meet the election expenditure. There is a general perception that the candidates winning the election can make money or recover all the election expenditure.

**Table 6: Proportion of Election Expenditure Mobilised through Various Sources**

Party sponsored	Proportion of money mobilized through						Total
	Own source/savings	Borrowed from relatives & friends	Borrowed from moneylenders for interest	Sale of assets	Party sponsored	Others	
<b>BJP</b>	50.0	18.5	22.8	4.4	1.6	2.7	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Congress (I)</b>	52.9	20.3	20.6	3.7	1.5	1.0	<b>100.0</b>
<b>JD(S)</b>	66.7	22.2	5.7	0.1	1.4	3.9	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Independent</b>	69.9	8.7	18.0	0.0	0.0	3.5	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Others</b>	93.8	6.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>57.6</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>16.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>

About one-fifth of the expenditure was mobilized through borrowings from relatives and friends, while about 17 per cent was borrowed from moneylenders on interest. Only 1.4 per cent of the expenditure was sponsored by the concerned political party. This shows that only a small proportion of the expenditure was sponsored by the political parties to which the candidates had affiliation. However, it may be noted that political parties do not directly fund the elections. They indirectly sponsor them through the local MLA/ party workers. The same was observed in the field as well.

### **Campaign by Political Party Leaders**

Table 7 provides the data on whether any local taluk or district level leaders from the political parties canvassed for the candidates. About 55 per cent of the candidates affiliated to BJP stated that local and taluk level leaders had canvassed for them. The corresponding proportion for candidates having Congress and JD(S) affiliation was 38.9 per cent and 40.8 per cent, respectively. Interestingly, 16.3 per cent of the candidates who contested as independents stated that local and taluk level leaders canvassed for them suggesting some understanding with political parties.

**Table 7: Distribution of Candidates (%) by their Responses on Who Canvassed for Them**

Political Party	Local leaders	Taluk leaders	None	Total (Nos.)
BJP	51.7	3.3	45.0	<b>60</b>
Congress (I)	38.9	0.0	61.1	<b>126</b>
Janata Dal (S)	34.7	6.1	59.2	<b>49</b>
Independent	14.0	2.3	83.7	<b>43</b>
Others	77.8	0.0	22.2	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>38.3</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>59.6</b>	<b>287</b>

A majority of the candidates (87.8%) irrespective of their political party affiliation stated that they did not receive any monetary or non-monetary support (Table 8). However, candidates having affiliation to BJP, Congress and JD(S) had received either money or materials or both. This proportion ranged from 12.2 per cent among JD(S) candidates to 15.1 and 16.7 per cent among Congress (I) and BJP candidates respectively. During the 2015 GP election, Congress party leaders complained to the Deputy Commissioner of Dakshina Kannada district about violations of election code of conduct such as

the distribution of pamphlets on the achievements of the one-year period of Narendra Modi government at the Centre (Daijiworld Media Network 2015). The newspaper also reported that the practice of using the names and photos of prominent leaders from a political party was commonly used on pamphlets/ leaflets. In addition, the leaflets would also highlight the programmes that were initiated or the achievements made by these political leaders. The candidates had distributed such pamphlets during election campaigns. Apparently, the opponent candidates also complained to the Election Officer calling for immediate action against those candidates who had violated the Model Code of Conduct (Prajavani May 28, 2015).

**Table 8: Distribution of Candidates (%) by their Responses on Whether a Political Party Provided Monetary and Non-monetary Support**

Political Party	Has the party provided money or materials?				Total (Nos.)
	Yes, money	Yes, materials	Yes, both	Nothing	
BJP	6.7	8.3	1.7	83.3	<b>60</b>
Congress (I)	13.5	0.0	1.6	84.9	<b>126</b>
Janata Dal (S)	12.2	0.0	0.0	87.8	<b>49</b>
Independent	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	<b>43</b>
Others	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	<b>9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.0</b>	<b>87.8</b>	<b>287</b>

### Rivalry and violence during the GP elections

When the candidates spend considerable amount on elections, they will naturally be interested in winning the elections. Elections fought on the basis of healthy political debates are always good for democracy. However, if elections result in intense rivalry among the candidates and lead to violence, they are not good for the social fabric in the village. Because of this reason, elections to GPs are held on non-political party symbols in the hope that such a policy will not result in poll-related violence. Let us now look at the evidence.

Poll-related violence took place during elections to the lowest tier of local bodies. At some places, the intensity of violence was low. However, at other places intense rivalry could be seen, which resulted in the kidnapping or murder of candidates or their immediate kith and kin.

In our sample, about 7 per cent of the candidates reported having experienced major violence during GP elections which occurred before, during and after the elections. However, many candidates reported having experienced minor friction/ arguments/ fights. For instance, in the highly developed district, a candidate affiliated to BJP started doing negative campaign about his opponent affiliated to another political party through whatsapp messages on mobile, which led to an argument between those two candidates. In the developed district, a candidate had alleged that his opponent had tried to tie a bag containing black magic materials to an electric poll in front of his house to damage his chance of success in the elections. This resulted in a fight between the two groups.

Similar incidents were also reported in other districts (other than the selected districts) such as Chikkaballapura, Tumakuru, Kodagu and Mandya. Newspapers reported that candidates were doing black magic (such as offering/ killing chicken, placing earthen pots, breaking eggs, using nailed lemons,

breaking coconuts, applying vermilion and turmeric, etc) for supposed invocation of evil spirits on his/her opponent candidates. Such practices were done in front of the houses of opponent candidates (Prajavani May 29-30, 2015b). Similarly, on the day of vote counting, some of the candidates got incantations done at a temple or by an astrologer. Such candidates carried spell-cast lemon, flower vermilion, doll, etc., to the counting stations (Prajavani June 6, 2015).

A local newspaper in Koppal district reported that a candidate, who had filed his nomination for the GP election, went missing on the last day of withdrawal of nomination and police registered a complaint and urged the citizens to provide information on his whereabouts (Koppal Varthe May 29, 2015).

Poll-related violent incidents, as reported in newspapers, were also noticed in non-study districts. For instance, it was reported in Prajavani (May 26, 2015) that in Chamarajanagar district, a candidate affiliated to Congress was pressured by his powerful opponent to either withdraw his nomination or act as a dummy candidate by giving just a token fight. However, this candidate did not yield to the pressure. Just a few days before the GP election, he died in a suspicious manner and police were investigating this unnatural death.

In the same district, there was another violent incident, which was reported in a newspaper (The Hindu, June 1, 2015): *"A group of BJP workers allegedly assaulted Congress supporters with weapons...there had been heated arguments between BJP and Congress supporters in the village"*. This election-related dispute led to the death of two persons, who included the husband of the Congress-backed candidate in the grama panchayat election, and resulted in serious injuries to four others.

In Kolar district, Mr. Subramani, who had earlier served as vice-president of the Balla Grama Panchayat, had again contested for the GP elections in 2015. He was stabbed to death just five days before polling day (The Hindu, May 29, 2015). On the day of election, his wife and father became emotional witnessing the number of people casting their votes in the polling station (The Hindu, June 2, 2015).

In Gangavati taluk of Koppal district, a candidate received death threat over phone from the brother of a former Zilla Panchayat member, pressuring him to withdraw his candidature from the race. However, this candidate filed a complaint against them with Superintendent of Police, Koppal district (Prajavani May 23, 2015).

The above reports show that Grama Panchayat elections, though held on non-political party symbols, are marked by poll related skirmishes/ violence. The argument that non-political party based elections will not lead to violence and break the social fabric in the villages is therefore not tenable.

## **Determinants of Election Outcomes**

What factors determine the success in local elections? This question is sought to be answered in this section with the help of a probit model wherein the dependent variable is '1' if a candidate wins the GP election, '0' otherwise. The results are presented in Table 9. The independent variables are age, gender, caste, education, land holding and political party affiliation of the candidates and the election expenditure incurred by them. A positive sign is expected for the variables such as **age** and **education**. This is because more experienced and educated persons are preferred over inexperienced and illiterate

persons. Similarly, a positive sign is expected for the **land holding** variable because land is taken as a proxy for the economic status of the candidates, and land owning households will be in a better position to spend considerable amount during elections. A positive sign is expected for **election expenditure** as it is anticipated that the election expenditure incurred to woo voters will have a significant bearing on the results. As far as **gender** and **caste** variables are concerned, the expected sign is positive because we expect a positive relationship due to the reservation policy.

**Table 9: Determinants of Election Outcomes**

Variables	Whether candidate won				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Candidate age	0.076 (0.061)	0.076 (0.058)	0.082 (0.066)	0.076 (0.059)	0.076 (0.061)
Candidate age square	-0.00085 (0.00067)	-0.00085 (0.00064)	-0.00096 (0.00072)	-0.00085 (0.00064)	-0.00085 (0.00067)
Candidate is female	0.38*** (0.087)	0.38*** (0.083)	0.37*** (0.082)	0.39*** (0.086)	0.38*** (0.087)
Candidate is SC/ST	0.14 (0.14)	0.15 (0.16)	0.10 (0.12)	0.14 (0.16)	0.14 (0.14)
Candidate is illiterate	-0.45* (0.27)	-0.42* (0.25)	-0.39 (0.26)	-0.44* (0.27)	-0.45* (0.27)
Total land	0.013 (0.014)	0.014 (0.014)	0.017 (0.014)	0.015 (0.015)	0.013 (0.014)
Total election expenditure	0.00000023 (0.00000059)	0.00000049 (0.00000068)	-0.00000022 (0.00000080)	0.00000037 (0.00000068)	0.00000023 (0.00000059)
Candidate affiliated to any political party	0.52*** (0.19)				
Candidate having affiliation to Congress		-0.020 (0.16)			
Candidate having affiliation to JD(S)			0.72*** (0.24)		
Candidate having affiliation to BJP				-0.17 (0.18)	
Candidate not having any affiliation (independent)					-0.52*** (0.19)
Constant	-2.55** (1.29)	-2.14* (1.19)	-2.30 (1.40)	-2.09 (1.28)	-2.03 (1.28)
Observations	287	287	287	287	287

**Note:** Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the GP level. \* p<0.10, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

The key result that emerges from this model is that 'party matters'. In other words, the candidate is likely to win the grama panchayat election when he/ she has affiliations or leanings for a political party and is not contesting as an independent. This is consistent with the results shown in column 5 wherein there is a negative association between candidates contesting as independents and

winning the elections. However, it appears that this is largely a relationship that emerges from the political affiliation of candidates to JD(S). In other words, results provided in columns 2 to 4 show that of the candidates having affiliation to one of the three main political parties, those affiliated to the JD(S) have a high possibility of winning the election.

The gender and education of the candidates seem to have an effect on election result. If a candidate is female, then she is more likely to win the elections. On the other hand, illiterate candidates are less likely to win. This indicates that the policy of reservation has benefited female candidates. The results also confirm that the electors prefer educated candidates.

Other variables such as age, caste, landholding and election expenditure do not have any significant effect on the outcomes of the election.

## **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The literature on democratic politics argues that political parties matter for governance and development. Nevertheless, elections to grama panchayats in Karnataka are held on the basis of non-political party symbols. With the help of primary data collected from a large number of contestants to grama panchayats spread over five representative districts in Karnataka, this paper demonstrated that the elections to grama panchayats in Karnataka are not party-less although it is made to believe that the opposite is true.

The key finding is that a majority of the contesting candidates had identified themselves with one or the other political party. Both the contestants and the political parties have incentives in revealing their political party affiliation to the voters. The contesting candidates managed to enlist the support of political leaders for not only canvassing but also obtaining monetary and non-monetary support.

The key result that emerges from the paper is that the 'party matters'. The candidate is likely to win the grama panchayat election when he/ she is affiliated to a political party rather than contesting as an independent candidate. This indicates that the party-less election at the local level is only on paper and in practice, everyone follows party politics since this is likely to result in benefits to both political parties and candidates. There has been intense competition among the candidates having different political leanings. In fact, prominent leaders from different parties celebrate the success or lead of their candidates in the GP elections, and had similar hopes for the other local elections such as Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike and Zilla/ Taluk panchayat, and for elections to the state assembly.

Did the elections to local government on non-political party symbols lead to peace and tranquillity in the villages? An answer to this question needs to be provided because political party-less elections to the local government are propagated on the grounds that this will not result in fights and conflicts among various communities in rural India. However, the qualitative evidence suggests that there was poll-related and political violence leading to ugly incidents such as kidnapping and murder of candidates. The State Election Commission said that "the elections are bitterly fought in villages as political awareness is high among rural people. Maintaining law and order is a challenge for the police." (Deccan Herald, May 19, 2015). This suggests that the main purpose of having political party-less

elections is not achieved. If that is the case, then the question arises why the elections should be held on non-political party symbols.

From the voters' point of view, when the elections are conducted on the basis of political parties it becomes easy to fix responsibility on the respective political parties for the actions of their candidates at the local level. In addition, the literature also shows that the political party system matters because the distribution of private and public goods becomes more valuable and this results in effective delivery of public services. In view of this, there is a need to change the current policy of the grama panchayat elections where elections are conducted on the basis of non-political party symbols.

The change in policy is all the more necessary given that there is no uniformity in political party participation in the three tiers of rural local government. In Karnataka, Zilla and Taluk Panchayats are allowed to have political party participation. This raises the following questions: Why is that only grama panchayats are denied this facility? If the cleavage theory is applicable to grama panchayats, why is it that this does not apply to Taluk and Zilla Panchayats, which are also close to the people? There does not seem to be any logic in segregating the local governments in so far as the involvement of political parties in the electoral process is concerned.

## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> In smaller states there are only two tiers.
- <sup>ii</sup> A sitting ZP woman member belonging to ST community representing Bharatiya Janata Party had contested the GP election in Vijayapura district as she was left with just a one-year term as ZP member. She hoped for an easy win in the GP election, which would fetch her the GP President position for five years (The Hindu, May 27, 2015a). Many of her relatives having affiliations to Congress and JD(S) were also in the fray (Prajavani, May 27, 2015b).
- <sup>iii</sup> Commenting on the results of 2015 Grama Panchayat elections, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, Mr. Siddaramaiah, stated that BJP got the lead in five districts, JD(S) in three districts and his own party (Congress) succeeded in taking the lead in 22 districts and that around 40,000 candidates supporting Congress have won the elections (The Hindu, June 8, 2015). The Chief Minister also forecast that a similar result will be repeated in BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike), Zilla Panchayats, Taluk Panchayats and assembly elections (Deccan Chronicle June 7, 2015).
- <sup>iv</sup> According to Karnataka State Election Commission, the total number of seats in 5,837 GPs was 94,344 in Karnataka. Of them, no elections were held for 879 seats because, as per the newspaper reports, elections were either boycotted owing to lack of basic amenities or held up because of the demand for an upgradation of the GP to town panchayat (The Hindu, May 27, 2015b). Thus, elections were held in 93,465 seats; in these, candidates were elected unopposed in 8,675 seats. The total number of candidates in the fray was 233,493 (The Hindu, May 27, 2015b). The average number of candidates per seat works out to be at 2.8.
- <sup>v</sup> The larger participation of women in the backward district was also reported in the newspapers. The total number of candidates contesting from 243 GPs in Kalaburagi district was 4214 and of them, 51.5 per cent (or 2169) were female. Thus, as compared to males, females contested in 126 more GP seats (Prajavani, May 19, 2015). Similarly, in Mandya district the women representation has gone up by 14 per cent in the last term of GP elections. Of the 3,889 posts from 234 GPs, 57.31 per cent has been reserved for women candidates in 2015 as compared to 43 per cent during the 2010 elections (Deccan Herald, April 29, 2015). The figures of State Election Commission also show that the proportion of seats reserved for women was about 52 per cent in Karnataka as a whole.
- <sup>vi</sup> At the time of elections to GPs, the newspapers highlighted that highly educated persons have contested the GP elections. For instance, the contesting candidates included one Ph.D. holder in Sindagi taluk in Vijayapura district and one M.Tech graduate from Kadur taluk in Chikmagalur district (Prajavani May 27, 2015a).
- <sup>vii</sup> *Kumkuma and Arishina* packets are given to women and considered as auspicious especially for a married woman wishing for long life to her husband. *Muthaidhe* refers to a married woman with a living husband.

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