

Trends in the Party System: From the Congress System to Multi Party Coalitions

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Abstract

Indian democracy has been operating for over seven decades which has shaped the party system. This paper analyses the different trends in the Indian party system. The focus is on the current phase which shows a tilt towards a stable equilibrium.

Keywords: *Party, Democracy, Party system, Elections Nation building, Opposition party*

Political party is a link between the people and the state. In fact, democracy cannot be imagined without them. In essence, a political party calls for citizen's participation in the political process – open expression of opinion on public matters, creating requirements without fear of repression, by the process of voting etc. Political party is a necessary part of modern politics. The institutions and organizations are required to represent the interests of the citizens.

In a pluralistic political order, various organized groups work in the political process. The groups articulate their interests and parties aggregate them. This interaction works in the form of political parties. It mobilises and competes for popular support based on the programme of policies and action which requires a democratic climate and an electoral process.

The quality of democracy in any country depends on the character and conduct of political parties. The role of political parties in a pluralistic society like India, becomes important where it is not only strengthening political democracy but also promoting participatory democratic political culture.

In A. Kohli's words; India's democracy has been strengthened by a political process that has facilitated a modest degree of redistribution of power and of other valued resources such as status and dignity, even if not of wealth (Kohli, 2001, p.2)

All political parties have a definite ideological orientation which shapes their goals and programmes. In western societies, political parties act as a representative instrument and a means of insuring peaceful and regular alternation of government. Whereas in developing countries the parties work for the invention of new ideas to link the public and leadership.

The origin of the party system in Indian politics is largely a result of historical development with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Here, a well- organized national movement was allowed for independence. It had a mass base also. After independence, single member constituency or first past the post system was adopted (Sridharan, 2005, pp.344-369). India has evolved a unique party system which combines the functions of providing a stable framework of authority with a wide range framework for disputes and resolution of conflicts at various levels of society. It is a competitive party system in which the competitive parts play rather dissimilar roles. It consists of party of consensus and parties of pressure.(Kothari, 2012, p.40) The parties of pressure function on the margin. Inside the margin are various factions within the party of consensus and outside the margin are several opposition group and parties. They constantly pressurize and influence the ruling party. The working of representative government in India has maintained a parliamentary system based on competitive and free elections. The role of party system has played a crucial role for the survival of this system. Various factors have affected the character of the party system in India such as diversity of the cultures, character of the state, demand for economic development etc. M. Duverger in his 'Political Parties' aptly says that; “the party system and the electoral system are two realities that are indissolubly linked” (Duverger, 1959, p.205). There is high competition in elections through which a political party gains power in the Indian party system. To win elections, issues related to caste, class, religion etc. are used by them to mobilise people and at times a compromise is done to capture power. There is a noticeable change within the party system over a period of time.

The responsibility of the Election Commission is to conduct free and fair elections. Consistent steps are taken by the Commission during elections to reduce violence, misuse of money, booth capturing etc. although more serious efforts are required to make the process fair. However, there has been a noticeable change now as the marginalized sections also participate and elect their representatives.

The last three decades in India, i.e. after 1990, have been dynamic with regard to the evolution of party system. The Indian party system is facing transition from one party dominance to a multi-party system and a sort of coalition government. This is due to the rise of regional centres of power. However, the role of regional political parties is very crucial within national politics.

The role of the Congress party has been very crucial in shaping the party system and at the same time responsible also for its downfall. In 1967 elections, Congress lost its position as a majority party in many states due to which its dominance was strikingly reduced. Many parties emerged simultaneously and it created conflict and competition among them. As a result, these parties formed coalition governments in various states. In 1969, the Congress split to give way to the formation of Congress O which changed the shape of the party. Indira Gandhi tried to establish her supremacy by consolidation of power and use of slogans like “Garibi Hatao”.

With the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and victory of Congress I with Rajiv Gandhi as the Prime Minister, opposition unity became more difficult. In comparison to other parties, support for Congress I was still widespread, however, it was also declining region and community wise. It began to lose base not only in the Hindi belt which is about 42 percent of parliamentary seats but in Muslim dominated constituencies too. This indicated the weakening of Congress in the minority and regional bases. Post 1984 elections, a new political situation had emerged. The Congress was the dominant party only at the centre but in the states, it was a different scene.

In post 1989 period, remarkable change was observed with the coming up of an opposite trend towards regionalization of Indian politics. This had helped in bringing the marginalised section into the central level of Indian politics. In fact, this period showed a hegemonic dominance of the Congress party, on one hand, and support for the regional parties, on the other. However, barring

few states many state governments were replaced by national parties like the one in Bihar and Orissa.

In India, party system has travelled a long way from one party dominance to coalition system. Coalition governments are generally associated with instability. However, the concern is to save it from misuse for selfish purposes. The party system in India is exclusive in nature. It has been characterised by one party dominant system with Congress occupying the central position. It became competitive both at the centre and in the states after 1967 general elections.

Emerging Trends

It is essential to understand the nature of the party system in democracy which has deepened more in the last seventy years in India. Participation of weaker section has increased and thereby strengthening the democratic process. The pattern of representation to Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha mainly reflects that each segment of the population is getting represented.

After independence, only educated rich class got the chance to be elected as people's representative. But in recent years, a new trend has come up where S.C., S.T. farmers and women too, are getting a chance to participate in elections. Their participation has increased considerably. The 2004 elections aimed to end one party dominance. The growth of regional parties has resulted in power sharing with the central government. The system has reflected tolerance for difference. One important feature of the Indian process of democratization has been the radical shift in the social basis and is one of the important factors behind the growth of regional parties.

The quality of democracy in any country depends on the character and conduct of the political parties. For a successful and stable democracy there should be two major political parties contending for power – one in the government and the other in opposition, for an alternative.

In a healthy democratic setup, elections are contested on local issues and problems affecting common people. However, in Indian democracy, it seems to be a far off aim. Indian democracy is changing very fast: many issues have been already addressed, some new issues have emerged and a few old issues remain to be resolved. The need of the hour is that divisive tendencies should be closely

taken up and evaluated timely.

The dynamics of the 2014 general election raised some important questions about contemporary Indian electoral politics. It was experiencing a paradigm shift marked by less fragmentation, more popular participation and weaker electoral competition. There was an increase in the number of political parties and candidates during those elections. A. Ziegfeld writes; “from the perspective of the vote shares won by the country's main political parties, not as much has changed as the news headlines might suggest.” (2014, para7). An assessment by R. Diwakar, concluded that “although the Congress decline has continued, and therefore the BJP has won many recent state assembly elections, it is premature to conclude that the Indian party system has shifted to a BJP-dominated one”. (2017, p.327)

India is moving towards a different, dominant-party system away from fragmentation and coalitions. Political scientists have their own views regarding this. Some have pointed out that India was witnessing the birth of a new party system. In the *Journal of Democracy*, E. Sridharan writes: “The results were dramatic, possibly even epochal. The electoral patterns of the last quarter-century have undergone a sea change and the world's largest democracy now has what appears to be a new party system headed by a newly dominant party.” (2014, p.20) Similarly, P. Chhibber and R.Verma noted that with its historic victory, “the BJP has clearly replaced the Congress as the system-defining party” and would likely become the “focal point of electoral alignment and re-alignment” in India (2018, p.221).

M. Vaishnav and D. Smogard (2014) concluded their assessment of the 2014 results by noting that if the trends persist, “India may well have closed the book on twenty-five years of electoral politics and moved into a new era”(10th June2014, para.2). On the same lines, L. Tillin remarked that the extant evidence is “somewhat equivocal as to whether the 2014 elections mark a departure in longer term electoral patterns or the consolidation of a new social bloc behind the BJP” (2015, p.117). The bulk of the increase has come from unrecognised parties or smaller parties that have not met predetermined thresholds outlined by the Election Commission to qualify for official recognition as either national or state party.

The reason behind BJP's success in 2014 is due to its regional stronghold.

Actually, 75 percent of the BJP's parliamentary tally in 2014 came from just eight states in the north, west, and central regions of the country (Vaishnav, 2018, para.10). The big pro-BJP move was the result of party's effectiveness in mobilising its traditional urban middle class and upper caste Other Backward Castes (OBC) Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Before the 2014 general elections, the BJP ruled just five (of twenty-nine) states –less than even its previous high of seven states (Vaishnav, Ravi and Hinston, 2018, para.12)

There is empirical support for more unequivocal judgments of 2019 elections results which led to serious political changes. Indeed, the available evidence points in one direction: 2014 was not an aberration; it was instead a harbinger of a new era (Vaishnav, 2019, para.4). India appears to have ushered in a new, fourth party system— on a different set of political principles, quite different from the earlier one. During the 2019 elections, the BJP gained majority in the Lok Sabha for the consecutive second time; a feat that was last accomplished by the Congress Party in 1980 and 1984. After this, the competition in the system in recent decades held that in India's first past the post electoral system, a small share of candidates are winning elections with the support of a majority of voters in their constituencies. Since then it has become routine for members of parliament to win only with minority support.

1952 to 1967: One Party Dominance

The period between 1952 and 1967 in India's party system is characterised by the dominance of the Congress and the existence of smaller opposition parties for both at the centre and the states. The social background of the Congress leadership and its important role in winning the country's independence played a key role in placing it in a dominant position. Most account of the Congress party emphasize the role of Nehru in the construction of a high modernist India where the state will be in charge of Nation-Building and economic development. The appeal was to adhere on the ideas of Socialism, Secularism, Democracy and Federalism. The Indian National Congress (INC) was ruling without coercion. Dominance by a single party coexisted with inter party competition. Opposition parties had little hope of obtaining sizeable majority at the legislatures in spite of the very fact that Congress didn't gain a majority of the votes. Its votes varied from 49 to 40 percent. Within the

Congress various groups with opposition parties assumed the role of opposition, reflecting the ideologies and interests of other parties. Therefore, the conflicts were within the party.

The opposition party had little hope of preventing the Congress from sizeable majority in the legislature despite the ruling party's failure. This could be due to the inadequacies of the opposite players on the political scene. Due to the fragmentation of opposition parties which seriously contested elections, limited their ability to unseat the Congress. Instead, at times the foremost political competition occurred between factions within the Congress Party representing different ideological viewpoints (Chhibber and Verma, 2018, p.221). Thus within the Congress and not between the Congress and the opposition parties that the major conflicts within Indian politics occurred. According to R. Kothari, this phase consisted of a party of consensus and parties of pressure, where the latter functioned on the margin (Kothari, 1964, p.1162).

1967 to 1977: Period of Dominant Party and Opposition at the State Level

The year 1967 had created a situation that the dominance of the Congress party was strikingly reduced. The fifth Lok Sabha elections marked the start of another phase of Indian party system and continued till 1975. Despite the strong opposition the Congress won the general elections of 1971. Although, in the same year parliamentary and state assembly elections were delinked. In this phase, the Congress party retained their central position but anti-Congress alliances also started emerging simultaneously. These alliances represented a consolidation of the non-Congress space at the state level. There was a clear rise in political competition and political cleavages resulting from social change. New groups and classes were incorporated into the political system. The dominant party model had shown the way to differentiated structure of party competition. Then parties started making alliances to make coalition governments.

The imposition of Emergency in 1975 eroded the popular support for Congress party. The party system weakened due to the suspension of freedom of press. The press only represented the government. No one could criticise the government. This led to the concentration of extra-constitutional powers with

the centre. Thus, this period marked the decline of the party system, making them rely on make-shift electoral arrangements for generating support.

1977 to 1989: Conflict between the Congress and Regional Parties

The Congress faced a defeat in 1977 elections while its rule was restored in 1980. This period showed the possibility of emergence of a two-party system. But this too failed due to the disintegration of the Janata Party and dramatic re-gaining of power by the Congress. The return to power for the Congress was a different affair this time. The earlier phases saw a bestowing of respect for the opposition but this phase reflected an intolerance with exclusivist leaders and no sharing of power. There was distrust towards opposition. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, an emotional support was extended to Rajiv Gandhi and the Congress. Various electoral majorities in a fragmented party system emerged and national parties did not command widespread support across all regions of the country. The new political situation after 1984 elections showed the dominance of Congress at the centre but not in majority of the states.

1989 to 2004: Multi-Party System and Beginning of Coalition Politics

The 1989 elections showed the end of single party rule in India. Hence onwards, the party system had acquired a true multi-party character. It established a coalition government at the centre formally. A new party configuration of polarised multi-party system had emerged with more fragmentation, unstable coalition governments and weak administration. The National Front coalition of 1989-90 had a different outcome. The spatially compatible loose alliance put together by the National Front-BJP-Left, however, was based on ideological incompatibility. This reiterated the unsustainability of a broad anti-Congress coalition, which had not yet set aside the ideological extremes.

For the first time in 1991 elections, no party secured a majority in the Lok Sabha nor could they form a coalition government. Moreover, people were more aware of their caste and class positions. Therefore, allegiance to parties representing their interests rather stability was a priority for the voters. Vote share of the Congress reduced during this election. Furthermore, marginalised social groups had started entering the political sphere and utilised the democratic

space provided by electoral politics. This might be looked as a 'second democratic upsurge from below' (Yadav, 2004, p.1) which was more coherently represented by the United Front, the BSP, SP and RJD. In 1996 elections, there was a significant number of regional parties within the central politics which in turn signified politicization of individuals living in remote areas. Caste had also played a crucial role at this point. Success of BSP among Dalits, consolidation of OBCs in Bihar and UP, in the post-Mandalisation phase, led to rise in reservation politics based on caste. It also led to the growth of various sorts of caste associations mostly in north India which showed a positive co-relation with election outcome. In this election, BJP emerged as the single largest party with 162 seats and took the lead in government formation. The 1998 elections witnessed three coalitions. There have been three contenders rather than two for power in 1991, 1996 and 1998 elections. Before 1991 the opposition parties come together to challenge the Congress party but after 1991 Congress was opposed single-handedly even by the BJP. This situation continued till the 1999 elections.

The formation of alliances and coalition governments at the National and State levels has introduced a new phase in party competition and cooperation. The role of regional political parties in coalition politics is dictated by two contradictory parameters. One is accommodation and adjustment between coalition partners on ideological political and electoral questions. The other is 'realpolitik' characterised by the efforts of the partners to enhance their individual space within coalition. (Raghuraman, 2004, para.12)

2004: Revival of Congress and Coalition Government

Congress Party had fulfilled the message of a single party dominance/coalition between 1952 and 1989. End of single party rule was the message of 2004 elections. The result of 2004 elections gave an opportunity to all non-NDA political parties to evolve an alternative political coalition led by Congress in the name of UPA (United Progressive Alliance). The regional parties also had played a significant role. It appeared that any party wishing to win a national mandate has to weave its way through the different states and secure a verdict in each of these. (Yadav, 2004, p.1)

End of single party or coalition rule was the result of 2004 elections. The results of this election revealed that in states like Kerala, Tripura, West Bengal and UP

the electorate had many choices between the NDA, the Congress Alliance and others. In each case the 'others' had a great share of votes. It projected the likelihood of two alternative coalitions – the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA. Thus, disapproving 'bi-polar hypothesis'(Raghuraman, 2004, para.16). This change in the party system; along with a decline of the strong base, increased the representation of regional parties, regionalisation of all parties, continuous increase in competition; explain the changed system of government formation.

2014: Towards Stable Equilibrium

In 2014, India again had a single party majority after 1984. BJP took the position that belonged to the Indian National Congress, eight elections ago. Although BJP had majority on its own but headed for coalition with its pre-election allies. The Congress was defeated and reduced to its lowest ever vote share. The big pro-BJP swing was the result of party's effectiveness in mobilising its traditional urban middle class and upper caste base and forging a deep connection with other backward castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. BJPs objective was to expand its base from the present as its majority of 52% of Lok Sabha seats is very disproportionately based.

Despite the fragmentation and the creation of new regional political outfits, states have witnessed a growing convergence around two parties or alliances. These alliances are often fluid but their anchors remain fairly constant. So, after a period of considerable turmoil, Indian politics is reverting to a more stable equilibrium.

These trends reflect low levels of trust in opportunistic political cultures that have reduced the time horizons of coalition partners engaged in multi-level political combats. In such a context, parties that understand and seize the chances offered by coalition building have some advantage. Those who make the system work are rewarded while those who are unable to reconfigure it to their advantage are gradually marginalised (Yadav, 2004, p.4).

While the struggle for power between castes and classes dominates political life in the primary arena of state and panchayat politics in India, regional aspirations are significant factors in the political calculations. However, the last decade has recorded unending multiplication within the

number of political parties and fictionalization of the political space, an increase of regional/caste based political parties that threaten to unleash fissiparous tendencies, an end of ideology based politics, a decline in political morality, political corruption, and criminalisation of politics. While urban middle class were busy bashing politics and politicians, the democratic space provided by electoral politics was being used more deftly by marginalised social groups who voted not as individuals but as groups and more often used their rights to reject very frequently (Yadav, 1999, p. 2393).

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