

Political Parties and Reforms: Convergence and Differences

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1. Introduction

Political parties are indispensable to the functioning of representative democracy. They provide structure to political competition, enable citizen participation, and ensure the continuity of governance. In India, political parties have historically played a decisive role in the freedom movement, constitutional development, and social transformation. However, in recent decades, the functioning of political parties has been increasingly scrutinized due to declining public trust and perceived democratic deficits. The political parties in India are facing various organizational challenges. Since Independence, political parties have failed to observe the basic norms of inner party democracy. The authority in organizational matters has been founded in hierarchical manner through successive layers of party structures. The leadership in most political parties in India may be democratic in appearance but highly oligarchic in reality. Frequent rifts between the national and state party organizations in almost all national parties led to the realization that a national party is over-centralized. Issues such as criminalization of politics, unaccounted political finance, centralized leadership, dynastic succession, and ideological dilution have raised serious concerns about the health of democracy. These challenges have intensified demands for political party reforms, both from within the political system and from civil society, judiciary, and academia. While there is consensus on the need for reform, the debate becomes complex when addressing the scope, nature, and mechanisms of reform.

2. The origin of political parties in India

It can be traced to the freedom struggle, which emerged as a mass anti-colonial movement involving people from all sections of society. This movement gradually led to the development of an organized party system, influenced by socio-religious reform movements and political opposition to British rule. India's cultural diversity, caste and community structure, religious pluralism, regional aspirations, and ideological differences played an important role in shaping political parties. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, was the first organized political party and became the main platform of the national movement. Earlier groups existed, but they were not well-organized political parties.

After Independence, India initially followed a one-party dominant system, but gradually it developed into a multi-party system. This period saw the rise of regional parties, fragmentation, and coalition governments. Political parties are not clearly mentioned in the Constitution of India, except through the Tenth Schedule added in 1985, which deals with defection and disqualification of legislators. In the absence of detailed constitutional rules, the Election Commission of India plays a key role in registering and recognizing political parties. Overall, the growth of political parties in India reflects the country's democratic and social diversity

2.1. Participation of Political Parties in General Elections (2004-2024)

Election Year	Type of Parties	Registered Political Parties	Parties that Participated in Elections
2004	National, State & Registered	Around 150+	About 50-60 parties

	(Unrecognised) Parties		contested
2009	National, State & Registered (Unrecognised) Parties	Around 160+	About 60-65 parties contested
2014	National, State & Registered (Unrecognised) Parties	Around 1,600+	About 460-470 parties contested
2019	National, State & Registered (Unrecognised) Parties	Around 2,300+	About 610+ parties contested

Source: Election Commission of India

3. Political Parties and Democratic Governance

Political parties serve as intermediaries between the state and society. Their democratic role includes:

- Representing social interests and identities
- Mobilizing voters and political participation
- Recruiting political leadership
- Formulating public policies
- Ensuring accountability through opposition

In a plural society like India, the multi-party system reflects social diversity but also reproduces social inequalities. The internal organization and democratic functioning of parties significantly shape governance outcomes and democratic legitimacy.

4. Weaknesses of the Party System in India

- Proliferation of political parties based on caste, community, region, or personal ambitions rather than ideology.
- Frequent splits in existing parties, especially in State legislatures, often engineered by ambitious leaders seeking ministerial positions.
- Lack of clear political ideology in many parties, weakening principled politics and policy-based competition.
- Erosion of parliamentary democracy, as party splits and defections undermine voters' electoral choices.
- Confusion among voters due to the large number of parties contesting elections.
- Political instability, with frequent changes in governments and fragile coalitions.
- Coalition compulsions giving disproportionate influence to small parties.
- Encouragement to factionalism, as individuals split parties to gain bargaining power in coalition governments.
- Decline of national parties, resulting in fragmentation of the political system.
- Overall weakening of the party system, affecting governance, accountability, and democratic stability.

4.1. Rationale for Political Party Reforms

The demand for reforms stems from persistent structural and ethical challenges: Criminalization of Politics:

The increasing presence of candidates with criminal backgrounds undermines constitutional morality and the rule of law.

Money Power in Elections:

Escalating election costs promote dependence on illicit funding, weakening equality in political competition.

Absence of Inner-Party Democracy:

Leadership selection and decision-making in most parties remain centralized and opaque.

Dynastic Politics and Weak Accountability:

Familial control over political parties restricts merit-based leadership and political mobility. Lack of transparency in decision-making and finance erodes public confidence in political institutions.

4.2. Convergence in Political Party Reforms

Despite sharp ideological differences and electoral competition, political parties in India show a growing convergence on certain key reform areas that are essential for strengthening democracy. These areas reflect a shared understanding that systemic reforms are necessary to restore public trust, ensure fairness in elections, and improve the quality of governance.

Transparency in Political Finance

One major area of convergence among political parties is the demand for greater transparency in political finance. There is broad agreement on the need to disclose sources of party funding, maintain properly audited accounts, and regulate election expenditure. Political stakeholders increasingly recognize that unchecked and anonymous funding undermines democratic accountability and encourages corruption. As a result, reforms emphasizing limits on anonymous donations, mandatory financial disclosures, and stronger oversight mechanisms are widely supported. Such measures are seen as essential for ensuring a level playing field among parties and enhancing public confidence in the political system.

Electoral Integrity

Another significant area of consensus relates to electoral integrity. Political parties, civil society, and democratic institutions broadly support the conduct of free and fair elections as the foundation of representative democracy. There is strong agreement on the strict enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct to prevent misuse of money, power, and media during elections. Additionally, the independent functioning of constitutional bodies such as the Election Commission of India is widely acknowledged as crucial for maintaining electoral credibility. Strengthening election management, ensuring impartial supervision, and protecting the autonomy of electoral institutions are therefore viewed as common reform goals across the political spectrum. Overall, these converging reform priorities indicate that, despite political rivalry, there is shared recognition of the need to improve transparency, accountability, and fairness within India's democratic framework.

5. Differences in Political Party Reform Approaches

Despite agreement on objectives, significant differences exist regarding implementation.

Regulation versus Autonomy: Reform advocates argue that political parties perform public functions and should be legally regulated. Political parties emphasize freedom of association and resist excessive state interference.

Compulsory Inner-Party Democracy: Scholars support legally mandated internal elections. Parties argue that internal structures vary and cannot be uniformly regulated.

Public Funding of Elections: Proponents view public funding as a solution to money power. Opponents highlight fiscal constraints and administrative feasibility.

Anti-Defection Laws: Supporters stress political stability. Critics argue these laws weaken legislative independence and debate. These differences reflect competing democratic interpretations and political interests.

6. Role of Judiciary and Institutions

Judicial interventions have significantly influenced political party reforms. The Supreme Court of India has mandated transparency through candidate disclosures and electoral monitoring. Similarly, electoral institutions have introduced reforms such as expenditure tracking, voter education, and technological innovations. However, judicial and institutional measures alone cannot substitute for political commitment and democratic culture within parties.

7. Comparative Perspectives

International experiences demonstrate varied reform models:

- Strong party regulation in European democracies
- Public funding with strict accountability mechanisms
- Independent ethics and oversight bodies

Comparative analysis reveals that reforms must be context-specific and culturally grounded.

8. Challenges in Implementing Reforms

Key challenges include:

- Political resistance to self-regulation
- Weak enforcement mechanisms
- Legal limitations
- Low levels of citizen participation

Without sustained civic engagement, reforms risk remaining procedural rather than transformative.

Conclusion

Political party reforms are vital for democratic consolidation. While there is convergence on reform goals such as transparency, accountability, and ethical politics, differences persist regarding regulation, enforcement, and institutional design. A balanced approach that combines legal safeguards, institutional oversight, party autonomy, and active citizen participation is essential. Ultimately, democratic reform must begin within political parties themselves. Strengthening internal democracy and ethical leadership is fundamental to revitalizing democratic governance.

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