

The Emergence and Evolution of India's Political Parties – A Study

Dr. K. Chaithanya kumari¹ and Prof. V. Ramchandram²

¹Department of political science, Kakatiya university, Warangal

²Department of political science, Kakatiya university, Warangal

Introduction

Political systems all over the world have been shaped by the ongoing and dynamic process of political party formation. Many political parties have dominated the political scene in the past but have since changed or disappeared. These "historic cemeteries" of political organizations serve as a reminder of the ephemeral nature of political entities, showing how parties arise, change, and occasionally vanish in response to societal needs, political institutions, and electoral rivalry. The development of political parties in their current form has been closely linked to the emergence of representative democracy, even though organized political groups can be traced back to early examples in ancient civilizations, such as city-state politics in Athens or the political conflicts associated with the Gracchi brothers in Rome. Rather than being formal organizations with permanent members, political groups in ancient Athens were frequently unofficial coalitions centered on discussions within assemblies. Similar to this, political groups in Rome came together behind well-known people whose reformist goals opposed the status quo, such as the Gracchi brothers. However, the emergence of broad-based political parties was hampered by these countries' constricted conceptions of citizenship and limited franchise. Political organization could not develop into a long-term institutionalized form without inclusive citizenship and widespread participation.

The formal organization of political interests inside the framework of the state is represented by modern political parties, which are fruits of democratic administration. The emergence of political parties was made possible by the extension of universal suffrage as well as the strengthening of parliamentary institutions and representative assemblies. Informal parliamentary groups and election committees increasingly evolved into formal organizations as the electorate grew, creating long-lasting ties between voters, elected officials, and political platforms. Political parties became vehicles for policy advocacy, mobilization, and political stability in addition to being tools of electoral competitiveness thanks to this institutionalization process, which was crucial in connecting popular engagement with formal institutions of administration.

A democracy with parliamentary and the election system are inextricably tied to the development and establishment of political parties. Political parties carry out this role by combining interests, creating policies, and setting up electoral rivalry. The formation of representative institutions necessitates systems for coordination and collective action among various political players. Renowned political thinker Ernest Barker called the British parliamentary system the "mother of parties," contending that the development of political parties in Britain established a model for parliamentary democracies across the globe. According to Barker, the English Civil War of the seventeenth century, in which two factions—the Parliamentarians or Roundheads (later associated with the Whigs) and the Royalists or Cavaliers (later associated with the Tories)—contested power over the privileges and authority of the King's parliament, is where the modern British party system originated. These groups eventually developed into official political organizations, leading to the founding of the Liberal

Party and the Conservative Party in the 1830s. These two parties served as the model for the current British two-party system, illustrating the shift from unofficial coalitions to formal political organizations that could last for decades and influence governance.

Significant being elected reforms, especially those implemented in 1832, 1867, and 1884, were strongly linked to the consolidation of political parties in Britain. By extending the right to vote, these reforms eventually diminished the power of aristocratic elites in political decision-making and made politics accessible to a wider range of people. These reforms made it easier for citizens to actively engage in electoral politics, which led to the institutionalization of political parties and their emergence as platforms for policy advocacy, mobilization, and representation. The development of political parties in Britain is a prime example of the larger historical tendency that emphasizes public participation in democratic governance by moving political struggle from elite-centered conflicts to mass-based organization.

In order to comprehend political parties' beginnings, purposes, and dynamics, theoretical analysis is just as important as historical exposition. Three different hypotheses about the formation and evolution of party systems were put out by academics Palombara and Weiner. First, the sociological or structural approach highlights how social differences, including class, ethnicity, religion, and geography, influence party formation. This viewpoint holds that political parties serve as platforms for the expression of shared identities and interests, reflecting the fundamental social structure of society. Second, the institutional approach emphasizes how political and constitutional frameworks affect how parties evolve. Political competition, coalition building, and party creation are encouraged by electoral systems, constitutional frameworks, and legislative structures. For instance, first-past-the-post systems frequently promote the rise of two dominant parties, but proportional representation systems typically promote multi-party competition. Third, political actors' agency and their tactics for garnering support, winning elections, and influencing policy are the main topics of the behavioral or mobilization theory. This method emphasizes how crucial political strategy, organization, and leadership are to the formation and growth of parties.

Evolution and Growth of the Party System in India

The National Commission investigated how Indian politics accommodates many points of view. Two important trends influenced political mobilization throughout the independence movement. The first was horizontal, resulting in a widespread national awakening as significant numbers of people from all around the nation joined the cause. In areas like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Hindi-speaking Rajasthan, Madras, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh (Telugu-speaking regions), the second was vertical and reflected the integration of certain regions under the influence of developing linguistic middle classes. The depiction of many communities was made possible by these regional identities, which also helped to foster a sense of national cohesion.

An important turning point in the development of political parties in India was the creation of the Indian National Congress by Allan Octavian Hume during the final week of December 1885. The Congress operated as a composite party, uniting disparate perspectives, philosophies, and tactics under one organizational roof. It promoted the development of a cohesive national political discourse by offering a forum for the accommodation of various regional, social, and political viewpoints. This inclusivity established a precedent for integrating regional and ideological differences inside a common political framework and created the groundwork for India's party system.

The establishment of the Swaraj Party by Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru in 1922 was another significant event. This party's founding demonstrated a changing political approach that prioritized active involvement in legislative councils in order to attain self-rule. The Swaraj Party had a major impact on the organizational dynamics of Indian political parties and legislative procedures, which in turn affected the party system's overall course.

Political parties started getting ready for the first general elections after the Indian Constitution was enacted on January 26, 1950. A formal legal and institutional framework for representative democracy, electoral competitiveness, and party activity was established by the Constitution. Indian political parties transformed from nationalist movements into organized, constitutionally recognized organizations that could operate within the democratic framework of an independent India throughout the election preparation phase.

Despite significant structural changes in the political system that resulted in the shift from the dominant party system to the competitive political system, the 1967 elections marked a turning point in Indian politics. On the one hand, the Congress has lost a majority in eight state assembly across sixteen states, including Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras/Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh. On the other hand, the party's overwhelming influence in the center has diminished. The nationwide share of congressional votes decreased from 44.7% to 40.8%. The election severely damaged Congress's hegemony. A party led by a woman (Indira Gandhi) that was fragmented, divided, and formless, still in shock over Nehru's passing and the complexity of two states. She was badly torn to bits at the polls because many party officials found this intolerable.

Polarization of Regional Political Parties (1967-77)

Notwithstanding significant structural changes in the political system that resulted in a transition from a dominant party system to a competitive polity, the 1967 elections marked a turning point in Indian politics. In eight state assemblies—Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madras/Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, Kerala, and Uttar Pradesh—out of sixteen states, the Congress's overwhelming power at the federal level was undermined. The national percentage of votes cast in Congress decreased from 44.7 percent to 40.8 percent. Congress's hegemony was severely damaged by the elections. Under the leadership of a woman (Indira Gandhi), the party was shattered, divided, and unformed, still stunned by Nehru's passing and the complexities of two successions. Many party officials found her unacceptable, and relatively irate voters severely attacked her at the polls. There was division within the party. Indira Gandhi lacked the strength to take over the organization and the government. However, the less faction-ridden opposition groups were only somewhat better equipped to capitalize on the public's disenchantment. In 1969, "small elections" for four state assemblies marked a new test of strength. In West Bengal and Punjab, the earlier type of unified regional or alliance proved to be a strong alternative to the Congress Party, but in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the latter type was unable to accomplish so. The United Front staged the most dramatic return in West Bengal, while the Akali Dal dominated Punjab. This party system saw growing polarization between the INC and a coalition of regional parties following years of unrelenting turmoil. However, there were several significant upheavals in Bengal, Assam, and Maharashtra in 1969 and 1970. Indira Gandhi stressed the need for a strong and stable government by stating that any other option would be an invitation to chaos. Indira Gandhi took a more combative stance toward non-Congress governments in several states as well as opposition parties at the federal level. In both the party and the administration, she established a "pyramidal style of decision-making

organization." Politicians, including the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam, and Madhya Pradesh, were purged by Indira Gandhi. Previously, the Congress High Command handled all party problems, but she began settling all disputes within the party. "Indira is India and India is Indira" is how Jayaprakash Narayan represented it. India was therefore on the verge of transitioning from a "one party dominant system to one party authoritative rule." Following 1967, there was a significant delinking of state assembly and parliamentary elections starting in 1971, as well as a suspension of Congress Party organizational elections from 1972 to 1992.

Evolution of Bi- Party Situation: Mergers and Splits (1977-79)

Thirty years of Congress Party control, eleven years of Indira Gandhi's administration, and twenty-one months of emergency that had pushed the country into authoritarianism came to an end with the general elections in March 1977. Indira Gandhi's highly centralized government undoubtedly played a role in the emergence of opposition groups and movements like the Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti in Bihar and the Nava Nirman Yuvak Samiti in Gujarat, as well as student organizations that swiftly expanded to other states and further established the framework for future political Public strikes increased throughout that period, particularly in the railroad and industrial sectors. When there was a police mutiny in Gujarat and Bihar, the situation grew severe. On the one hand, the opposition parties incited public discontent and called for the resignation of the state government. Food shortages, unemployment, industrial slowdown, high inflation, and declining economic development all appeared to be too much for the political system to handle.

On its electoral setback in 1978, the Congress Party was once again divided into two factions: the Indira Gandhi-led Indira Congress, or Congress (I), and the Swaran Singh-led Dev Raj Urs group, or Congress (S). At the same time, the Janata party's diverse membership and the ambitious goals of its three main leaders—Morarji Desai, Jagjivan Ram, and Charan Singh—reflected the government's lack of cohesiveness. In the end, the Janata Party government fell apart in the middle of 1979, and many of its members fell. Free rivalry between political parties and increased party system volatility were hallmarks of this era. The ongoing decline is a result of the frequent switching of ruling parties at the state and federal levels. There is a lot of flexibility in the factional and rump party structure as a result of party fragmentation brought on by a propensity for personalized party control or outbursts of divergent interests.

The "regionalization of politics" is the cause of the Congress Party's primary problems. expansion of regional parties and national parties' regionalization. Numerous regional parties were established at the state level, including the Janata Dal in Karnataka in 1983, the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir, the CPI(M) in West Bengal and Tripura, and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. The assassination of Indira Gandhi cast a shadow over the 1984 national elections and sparked a wave of support for the Congress Party. Rajiv Gandhi was named by the Congress Party as his mother's natural heir throughout the election campaign, and the party itself was positioned as a defense against the forces of secession. With the motto "desh akhand" (undivided country), the campaign's central goal was to "rescue India" from both internal and external threats. Paul Brass refers to them as "snap elections" where citizens cast ballots for local congressional candidates regardless of their qualifications and moral character. Consequently, the Indian National Congress (INC) secured 404 Lok Sabha seats with 49.10% of the vote, outperforming all elections conducted under Indira Gandhi and matching the level attained under Nehru in 1957.

However, the eleven state assembly' election results in March 1985 cast major doubt on how the electoral judgment should be interpreted in terms of "waves". Congress (I) lost three state legislatures by large percentages, gained a minor majority in four states, and secured an absolute majority in just four. The party increased the number of assembly divisions but lost 26.79% of seats. In the September 1985 elections for the Punjab Vidhan Sabha and the December 1985 elections for the Assam State Assembly, the INC suffered another defeat as the regional parties, Shiromani Akali Dal (L) and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), respectively, secured absolute majorities. Subject to the regionalization of state politics, this represented a persistent trend.

Restoration of Congress Party's Dominance (1980-89)

It was a period marked by Congress (I)'s resounding victories in 1980 and 1984, as well as later state assemblies led by Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv, which reinforced charismatic leadership qualities. The failure of non-Congress or anti-Congress parties at the national level, on the one hand, and the party's complete reliance on the leader as hegemon, on the other. Indira Gandhi's perspective on Indian politics was hence patrimonial. She believed that her boys should inherit her father Nehru's estate (the Indian political system). Because of this, she was hesitant to let leaders of Congress emerge in the states or at the federal level with independent public support.⁹⁰ The Congress Party's organizational weakness stemmed from the progressive deterioration of inner-party democracy brought about by the suspension of party elections, strict control over ticket distribution, financing party machinery, and the selection of Chief Ministers, among other things, all of which came under the supervision of the Center. Rajiv Gandhi was unable to stop these trends and bring the party institutions back to life.

Emergence of Multi-Party System at National Level and End of Congress Dominance (1989-96)

The 1989 parliamentary elections marked a turning point in Indian politics overall and in the formal transition of the party system from a one-party dominant system to a multi-party system. The multi-party system was reflected in three consecutive minority governments: the National Front, led by Premier V.P. Singh, the Samajwadi Janata Dal, led by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, and the Congress Party, led by P.V. Narasimha Rao. The pattern of party dominance in the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and Vidhan Sabhas was more varied and distinct, which tended to result in a more federalized structure of power—that is, a substantial change in the top power structure. Neither any party even approached the 263 seats needed for a majority in the Lower House in the 1989 parliamentary elections. The "hung Parliament" was consequently overthrown. Despite losing its majority, the Congress Party gained 197 seats and 39.5 percent of the vote, making it the largest party in the House of People. With just 17.8% of the vote, Sudha Pai, who first used the term "federation of parties" (NF), won 143 seats. The NF's allies fell short of expectations; the TDP won two seats, the Congress (S) won one, the DMK won none, and the BJP increased its number of Lok Sabha seats from two to eighty-eight, placing third behind the Congress and Janata Dal. P.V. Narasimha Rao started a policy of economic reforms known as liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG), which included devaluing the rupee, cutting public spending, privatizing public sectors, and lowering subsidies. Conflicts arose both within and between parties as a result of the new fiscal policy. Another issue faced by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao was the involvement of his ministers Buta Singh, Balram Jakhar, Madhava Rao Scindia, Arjun Singh, K. Natwar Singh, N.D. Tiwari, and others in the Hawala scam and JMM bribery case. The electorate's perception of the Congress Party was damaged by these cases. The party became even more divided as a result of Narasimha Rao. G.K. Moopanar created the Tamil Manila Chanakya Method Congress as a result; N.D. Tiwari and Arjun Singh broke away from the party to form Congress Tiwari. Furthermore, the INC was weaker both organizationally and electorally following Rajiv Gandhi's passing than it had been since 1977. In the two biggest states, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, the party's strength fell to third place.

Conclusion

The Indian national party system started to show signs of a loose coalition framework instead of a single-party dominance after the general elections of 1989 and 1991. The emergence of a multi-coalition system, usually consisting of three to four major groupings, was reflected in the distribution of seats and the patterns of alliances among political parties. In order to increase their parliamentary presence and coordinate policies and legislative actions, national parties in this system frequently formed alliances or fronts with regional and smaller parties. During this time, regional and ideological diversity was accommodated while parties were able to consolidate their power through these coalitions, which became a defining characteristic of Indian politics.

The Congress Party became the dominant force in the biggest coalition following the November 1991 by-elections. Through strategic partnerships with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and four other minor parties, the party's direct representation in the Lok Sabha was increased from 227 seats to 251. Despite lacking an absolute majority, this alliance allowed the Congress to continue to hold a dominant position in parliamentary proceedings.

At the same time, the Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) united to form an alliance that now holds 123 seats in the House of People. The BJP's influence in regional and national politics was strengthened by this group, which constituted a sizable opposition force. With a combined strength of 140 seats, the Janata Dal led another important coalition under the National Front. This coalition, which included a number of smaller and regional parties, demonstrated the growing importance of coalition politics in counterbalancing the power of the major national parties.

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