

Decline, Resilience and Renewal: The Indian National Congress's Performance in Kerala's Electoral Politics Since 2011

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian National Congress has served the country for over 50 years, paving the way for the country's overall development. Kerala state has a population of 33.4 million, covering 38863 square kilometres, which accounts for 1.18% of the country's total land area. The Political awareness of the people altered the power balance between the two fronts, where the UDF (United Democratic Front), led by the Indian National Congress party, and the LDF (Left Democratic Front), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), have dominated the state since the late 1970s. This alternating pattern of governance between the two fronts indicates that high voter turnout is marked by high literacy, social mobilisation across caste, class, and community lines, and a strong secular ethos among the people (Varkey, 1985). Since 2011, the INC has faced significant electoral fortunes and misfortunes within the system, reflecting its national decline after 2014, which raises critical questions about the party's decline, resilience, and renewal (Thomas, 2016).

This article explores the diverse path of the INC in Kerala's electoral politics from the 2011 Assembly elections through the 2021 Assembly elections and Lok Sabha elections of 2014, 2019, and 2024 for conceptual depth. Despite retaining the position of leader of the UDF, the Congress party is struggling with a decreasing voter share, instability in its leadership and factional issues, exacerbated by the LDF's governance consolidation and the gradual emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the state as a third front that potentially can alter the course of politics in the state. This article mainly focuses on how the INC has experienced a decline, yet demonstrated resilience and pursued renewal in Kerala since 2011.

ORGANISATIONAL DECLINE AND ELECTORAL SETBACKS 2011-2016

The United Democratic Front's (UDF) 2011 assembly election victory by securing 72 seats under Oommen Chandy marked what appeared to be a consolidation of Congress power in the state of Kerala (*Winner's Losses*, 2011). His accessible governance style included his well-known Mass contact programs, and the 24/7 availability created a responsive governance model, contrasted with the previous LDF governments, which many viewed as detached from the public. The traditional UDF social coalition, comprising minority communities (Christians and Muslims) and segments of upper-caste Hindus, appeared stable.

Under this success lies the structural weakness of the Congress party. The victory was based on the strength of the coalition partners, like the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and the Kerala Congress (Mani). Internally, the Congress party was divided between the two groups A and I, led by Oommen Chandy and Ramesh Chennithala, respectively. The division came from the old rivalries (Joseph, n.d.). The Congress party wasted energy in balancing these internal conflicts rather than focusing on governance.

Governance Crisis and the 2014 Setback

The period was not without issues. The Solar Scam in 2013 involved allegations of fraud against people linked to the Chief Minister's office. Although Oommen Chandy, the CM, was not

directly implicated, the scandal damaged the image of his administration's clean governance (*Oommen Chandy: Former Kerala CM Oommen Chandy Indicted in Multi-Crore Solar Panel Scam | Thiruvananthapuram News - Times of India*, n.d.). Combined with rising prices of essential commodities and policy paralysis at the Centre under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) II, headed by the Congress, eroded the UDF's credibility. The 2014 Lok Sabha election dealt a severe blow to the Congress party at the centre, with the party winning only 44 seats. And in Kerala alone, the incumbent government, UDF, won only 7 seats out of the 20 seats. This wasn't merely a national wave that affected Kerala, but it also reflected the growing dissatisfaction of the people towards the state government.

The 2016 Debacle: Consolidation of Decline

In the 2016 Assembly election, the UDF was reduced to 47 seats, with the Congress winning only 22 seats. Multiple factors have led to this, including the strong anti-incumbency sentiment intensified by the corruption allegation, issues in candidate selection, and an effective LDF campaign focusing on development and stability. The BJP's rise as an essential player by winning its first-ever assembly seat from the Nemom constituency and its overall performance further complicated the UDF's prospects ("Kerala Election Results 2016," 2016).

COALITION RESILIENCE AND STRATEGIC ADAPTATION (2016-2021)

The 2016 Assembly electoral defeat of the Congress led them to introspection and enter a phase of recalibration. The elevation of Rameh Chennithala as the Leader of Opposition in 2016 marked an important phase in the Congress's rejuvenation. As the opposition in the assembly, the party reinvented itself as an aggressive watchdog against the ruling government by highlighting LDF's failures in infrastructure projects, financial mismanagement and law and order issues (Balan, 2021).

The 2019 Parliamentary Victory

The 2019 Parliament election notably demonstrated the Congress party's resilience. UDF won 19 out of 20 seats in the state. With Congress alone securing 15 seats of its own. This resurgence from the 2016 assembly defeat resulted from several factors.

- 1. Minority Consolidation:** The BJP's national agenda regarding CAA-NRC created panic among Christians and Muslims of Kerala. The UDF under the Congress positioned itself as the bulwark against the BJP's majoritarian politics, resulting in the consolidation of minority votes to the UDF, and the tremendous victory of the UDF in the parliamentary election (*Upper Castes and Minority Support Spur UDF to Massive Victory - The Hindu*, n.d.).
- 2. Strategic Leadership:** Rahul Gandhi's decision to contest the parliamentary election from Kerala's Wayanad constituency energised the UDF's campaign and sounded the importance of the South Indian electorate in the Congress party's politics.
- 3. Anti-BJP Consolidation:** In the two-front national choice between the UPA and the NDA, the anti-BJP voters strategically supported and voted for the UDF as the stronger national alternative rather than the LDF ("Lok Sabha Election 2019," 2019).

The 2021 Assembly Election and Aftermath

The 2021 Assembly election is Historic in terms of electoral verdict in Kerala, for the first time, an incumbent government returned to power for the record second time in Kerala, deviating from the alternate government formation that was happening from 1980 till 2016. The LDF won 99 seats and secured 45% of the votes compared to the UDF's 41 seats and 39% of the votes. Pinarayi Vijayan became the first Chief Minister to be re-elected after completing a full term in office (Jacob, 2021). It should be noted that the LDF was routed to defeat in the 2019 Lok Sabha

Poll by winning only one seat from the state, and the UDF swept the Lok Sabha election by winning the remaining 19 seats. This election tested whether the Parliamentary momentum could translate into state power. Despite expectations, LDF came back to power with 99 seats out of the total 140 seats in the 2021 state assembly election. This reveals resilience limits in the Congress party.

1. **Alternate Voting:** Kerala's electorate practices alternate voting, supporting the Congress-led UDF alliance in the national election as anti-BJP votes, but preferring an alternate form of government in the state between the LDF and the UDF, which, for the first time, breached this pattern in the 2021 assembly election.
2. **LDF's Welfare Advantage:** The LDF, under the leadership of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, has successfully positioned itself as a welfare-oriented and development-focused alliance. Over the last nine years, Kerala has been steadily inching towards Navakeralam. This envisions a society where social equality and economic growth go hand in hand. Major welfare initiatives, such as the LIFE Mission, and an effective COVID-19 response at the local level, strengthened the LDF's appeal across different social groups, including youths, the urban middle class, and the poor. This, in turn, enhanced the perception that the LDF can deliver a stable and result-oriented government. This has posed a serious challenge to the UDF, which has struggled to counter the LDF's popularity with an equally compelling policy agenda or political narrative (*Kerala: Four Years of LDF 2.0 | Peoples Democracy*, n.d.).
3. **Congress State-Level Vacuum:** The Congress party failed to project a compelling state-level vision or charismatic leader compared to Pinarayi Vijayan. Although the Congress party leads the UDF coalition, it has witnessed a steady erosion in its mass base, particularly since 2000, and this can be attributed to the structural weaknesses and leadership failures in the evolving political landscape. The absence of a mass-based leader after Oommen Chandy still haunts the party (Soman, 2025).
4. **BJP's Spoiler Role:** The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not made significant electoral gains in Kerala's political landscape. But its increasing visibility has begun to reshape the state's political dynamics. The BJP maintains an average of 10-12 % vote share; it splits the anti-Communist votes in several constituencies without winning substantially, so this anti-LDF vote comes from the vote bank of the Congress-led UDF, which, in a way, destabilises the UDF and shakes its probability of winning the election.

The 2021 election result established that parliamentary resilience doesn't guarantee state success. Congress needs more than anti-BJP positioning to regain power.

THE 2024 LOK SABHA SUCCESS

The Congress-led UDF's performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha election served as a powerful reaffirmation of its importance in Kerala's electoral environment. Repeating its 2019 electoral success, the UDF won 18 of the state's 20 parliamentary seats, with the Congress itself winning 13 seats. This decisive victory positioned itself as the major alternative for anti-BJP consolidation in Kerala. Rahul Gandhi contesting from Wayanad energised the coalition and the Congress party. Importantly, the election witnessed the consolidation of Minority votes with Christians and Muslims rallying behind the UDF headed by the Congress in response to the majoritarian politics of the BJP. However, this victory, much like in 2019, was more a verdict on national politics than an endorsement of the state Congress unit's organisational strength. The BJP has opened its Lok Sabha account in Kerala with Suresh Gopi's win in Thrissur, which saw an

unprecedented advancement of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (Bureau, 2024).

THE 2025 LOCAL BODY ELECTIONS: A TENTATIVE SIGNAL OF RENEWAL

The UDF showed a mixed sign of hope in the 2025 local body elections in Kerala. This performance hints at possible organisational renewal and grassroots recovery. The Congress-led UDF won decisively in the 2025 local body election. Meanwhile, the LDF faced a setback, and the BJP-led NDA achieved a historic win in the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, where it secured its first win. Breaking the LDF's dominance in the local bodies, the UDF, which dominated the battles across panchayats, municipalities, and Corporations, won 8,021 grama panchayat wards, 1,241 block panchayat wards, 196 district panchayat wards, 1,458 municipal wards, and 187 Corporation wards. The LDF, which lost significant ground this time, won 6,584 grama panchayat wards, 928 block panchayat wards, 148 district panchayat wards, 1,103 municipality wards, and 126 Corporation wards. The NDA claimed 1,448 gram panchayat wards, 54 block panchayat wards, 1 district panchayat ward, 324 municipality wards, and 93 Corporation wards (Abbas, 2025). This victory was particularly important because the local body elections are traditionally fought on local issues of development, service delivery, and strength of party machinery, rather than the national narratives that benefited the UDF in the parliamentary elections. This victory indicates a partial rebuilding of the party's grassroots network and a more coherent opposition strategy that resonated at the village and municipal levels. Furthermore, the BJP's continued presence, though electorally marginal in seat count, siphoned off a critical share of anti-LDF votes in several close contests, reminding the Congress that its path to reclaiming state power in 2026 remains fraught with the challenge of consolidating a fragmented opposition vote.

CONCLUSION: THE PATH TO 2026 THE LOCALISED RENEWAL

The Indian National Congress's journey in Kerala since 2011 reveals a party operating within the bipolar politics of the state, while struggling with internal issues. The 2024 Lok Sabha victory of the Congress party reaffirmed the established model of coalition resilience, a survival strategy built on managing the minority vote bank in national elections against the BJP's majority consolidation. However, the parliamentary election victory of 2019 underscored a constant weakness: the Congress's success remained confined to national politics and did not translate into assembly election results, as in the case of the 2021 Kerala assembly electoral defeat.

The local body election results of Kerala in 2025 mark a crucial turning point, as the Congress party's grassroots organisational renewal was evident in the election. The decline of the UDF was reversed in the local election by securing half of the district panchayats, and making deep inroads into rural and urban local bodies. The parliamentary elections were fought on national issues, unlike the local body elections focuses on the party's organisational strength, candidate's quality, local issues like waste management, road infrastructure and water supply, etc. The Congress party has effectively exploited local anti-incumbency against the LDF, mobilising discontent over issues of bureaucratic inefficiency, financial mismanagement and the big brother attitude of the second Pinarayi Vijayan government.

The Congress Party in Kerala is at a strategic crossroad characterised by the interplay of emerging organisational renewal and coalition resilience. The 2025 local body election result provides a blueprint for the Congress that it needs to combine its strength to transform the local body victory into capturing state power in 2026. To succeed in the 2026 Assembly election, it must go beyond simply criticising the LDF and must make use of its revitalised grassroots presence. Additionally, the Congress party needs to handle its social coalition carefully by

attending to the needs of its traditional vote base while reaching out to the section of Hindu voters who have shifted to the BJP or the LDF.

At last, Kerala's unique bipolar political landscape has provided the Congress with an opportunity to stay relevant in Kerala politics, shielding it from the existential crisis facing it in the national scenario. However, the bipolar nature of Kerala's politics appears to be slightly diminishing with the emergence of the BJP. The local body election in 2025 indicates that the party's future depends on its capacity to address its core issues: it has to put a clear ideology, strong organisation and motivating leadership rather than navigating anti-incumbency national binaries. The 2026 assembly election will be the final test for the Congress party, whether the renewal witnessed in the 2025 local body election can be developed into a comprehensive political resurgence.

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