

Evolution of Indian Political Party System

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There are three types of party systems in the modern government viz. Single Party, Two party and Multi-party systems.

- In single party system, one political party controls the government. *Examples include: China, Cuba, North Korea.*
- In two party system, two major parties rival for governmental power. Examples of Two party system include: *United States, UK* In these countries political parties other than two major rivals **do exist** but they generally fail to secure substantial votes or seats in elections.
- In multiparty system, several smaller, non-majority parties with divergent interests would seek power and governments are usually coalition governments. Germany and Israel are examples of such systems. Though India has a multiparty system yet, Indian party system is generally considered *unique* and not fitting into any of the classifications used to categorize the party systems as mentioned above.

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Evolution of Party System – Pre-independence Era

According to the argument put forward by Rajni Kothari, the party system of India has evolved from a political centre, which was carved out during the nationalist movement. This centre was comprised of the educated, urban, upper-caste elite. The institutional manifestation of this centre was Indian National Congress established on 29 December 1885 in Bombay by A O Hume. It was congress which formed the indigenous base for political system in the country. It not only accommodated all political groups of importance but also provided a crucial space for political negotiations and bargaining.

The organizational consolidation of congress set in motion the political mobilization of masses in the country. During almost entire pre-independence era, INC worked as a pivot on which India's party system was hinged. The evolution of INC can be divided into three different stages during which it itself not only grew as a movement but also developed Indian party system.

First phase 1885-1905

During the first phase between 1885 and 1905, INC was little more than a talk shop, or a debating society of the elite. It raised several important issues but at the same time petitioned the government for extra privileges. Due to this, this period is sometimes described as era of "*politics of mendicancy*".

Second phase 1905-1916

During the second stage between 1905 and 1916, a great divide between moderates (who had faith in their petitions) and extremists (who wanted aggressive strategy) happened in Indian National Congress {Surat session 1907}. In this phase, the popularity of Lal, Bal and Pal with their self-confidence and militant dimension in strategy {such as Tilak's statement – "*political rights will have to be fought for*" } were able to bring masses to the fold of INC. These two factions came together again in 1916. Thus, if we look from the perspective of evolution of party system, we find that the period 1905-1916 reflects beginning of the process of evolution of party system

- This phase saw evolution of two contrasting ideologies developed within INC during this phase}.
- This phase culminated with the Lucknow pact 1916 between INC and Muslim League, whereby the former accepted the demand of the later for a separate electorate for Muslims and minorities. This was another example of evolution of party system in the country.

During this phase, the formation of Muslim League on 30 December 1906 gradually led to emergence of social contradictions, which shaped the politics of the country till it was broken into two separate nations. Till that time, Muslim league remained one of the most important part of India's pre-independence party system.

Third Phase 1916-1946

The third phase lasted from 1916 to 1946 and ended with formation of interim government in the country. This was most elongated and crucial phase during which many rival groups of congress developed and learnt the rules of the game. The return of Gandhiji in 1915 and his joining the nationalist movement transformed the structure of the struggle as follows:

- it brought in elements of Ahimsa and Satyagraha

- all sections of society now participated in the struggles {including NCM and CDM of 1920s and 1930s} against the payment of land taxes, land reforms in rural areas of Bihar, Gujarat, Andhra and Uttar Pradesh. This brought peasants into its fold. Its agrarian character grew.
 - The INC was hitherto limited in franchise and restricted to upper classes. The peasants and people from small towns and villages widened its base of nationalistic cadre and leadership.
 - Congress now changed from a petitioning organization to mass political party.
- As far as evolution of party system is concerned, following are some of the important events during this phase:

Formation of Swaraj Party

After the Gaya session of 1922, Swaraj Party was formed by C R Das and others over issue of sudden withdrawal of the Non Cooperation Movement and issue of participation in the provincial assemblies. However, the leaders of this party swiftly returned to Congress within next few years. This not only created a culture of dissent but also an atmosphere of tolerance.

Congress Socialist Party, 1934

The formation of Congress Socialist Party group {within congress} in 1934 by Acharya Narendra Dev, Jaiprakash Narayan etc. opposed the Gandhian strategy and tactics {such as Gandhi-Irwin Pact} led to evolution of Congress as multi-stream and multi-ideology party. The most important contribution of Congress socialist party within the Congress was that its *left leaning ideology* led to more democratisation of congress.

Communist Party, 1920s

The formation of communist party of India in 1920s by MN Roy did not play significant role in the freedom movement and was banned for many times before it got British recognition in 1942 {for its support to British wartime home policy and terming Quit India Movement as anti-people}. The party strengthened in the post-independence era.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 1925

In 1925, RSS was established by Dr. Keshav Baliram Hedgewar along with four trusted friends in Nagpur. Dr. Hedgewar was an active congressman from 1916 to 1924 but the increased Islamic fundamentalism in 1920s across the country led him to choose a path of consolidating the Hindu youth to check possibility of Muslim dominance. However, RSS was not such first organization. Prior to RSS, the organizations such as United Bengal Hindu movement, Punjab Hindu Mahasabha etc. which resulted in formation of Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha. One of its leader Syama Prasad Mookerjee, who was actually a congress leader but quit congress due to its lenient attitude towards Pakistan, founded Bhartiya Jan Sangh with active support of RSS.

Evolution of Party System – Post-independence Era

The evolution of party system in Post-Independence era can be suitably divided into three phases viz. Congress Domination (1952-1967), Decline of Congress (1967-1989), Coalition Era (1989-till date).

Congress Domination (1952-1967)

The seeds of the multiparty system was sown in the British Era, but for many years after the freedom, Congress remained the dominant party. Nevertheless, in 1951 four major groups of parties existed at the time of first General Elections viz. Congress, Socialist Party, Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP). Apart from that there were Communist Party of India, Bhartiya Jan Sangh, Hindu Mahasabha, Ram Rajya Parishad and so on. Then, there were some regional parties also such as Akali Dal, Scheduled Caste Federation, Jharkhand party, Tamilnadu Congress, Praja Party (Telugu) and so on.

However, none of the parties other than congress enjoyed mass support due to its identification with the independence movement. We note here that a day before his assassination, Mahatma Gandhi had prepared a proposal, which was to be presented before the working committee. This proposal said that congress had outlived its use and it must be kept out of the unhealthy competition with the political parties. Gandhi was in favour of Congress becoming a non-political, non-governmental, social service society concerned with the rural development. However, this proposal was never submitted or discussed.

In the first general elections, Congress won 45% of the votes and 364 out of 489 seats in Lok Sabha. In state assemblies also, Congress won 68% seats with over 42% vote share. In that election, 14 parties had entered into fray but only five (Congress, Socialist Party, KMPP, CPI and BJS) could retain their status as the national party by garnering more than three percentage of the votes polled. Except a non-congress coalition in 1956 in Kerala, the congress dominance continued in the country. The key reasons are as follows:

- Congress was linked to India's freedom movement and had mass support.
- India's democratic system had not fully grown.

Federalisation of Congress Party

During this phase, the regional sentiments were raised by regional satraps (strong chief ministers such as K. Kamraj in Tamil Nadu, S K Patil in Bombay), who were part of the Congress only those days. Some of the regional leaders had grown much larger in status; and congress under the regional pull, worked like a federal organization, and its state units sometimes behaved like regional parties. This is known as federalisation of congress party.

Decline of Congress (1967-1989)

In the fourth General Election in 1967, congress's vote share declined to 41% and seat share to 54.62%. The party lost power in eight states. During Indira Gandhi regime, the congress was characterised as more centralized, pyramidal decision making in which Indira emphasized more on her own image, and undermined the established structure of the party. Some other facts that led to decline during the Indira years are:

- Her confrontational approach leading to imposition of president rule in states ruled by opposition parties.
- Governments in several states where Congress was in power were also pulled down unceremoniously.
- Contradictions and opportunistic elements in the party.
- Emergency led to polarisation of opposition parties into Janta Party.

In 1977, Congress was ousted from power for the first time with Janta government coming in power. However, several issues including dual membership issue of Bhartiya Jan Sangh and RSS led to its split in 1979 by Charan Singh; thus leading to its collapse in two and half years. This was led by return of Indira Gandhi with thumping majority.

The creation of Bhartiya Janta Party in 1980 addressed the problem of dual membership issue. After assassination of Indira Gandhi, the rise of BJP was set in when its leaders such as AB Vajpayee adopted ideals of Gandhian socialism and posture to garner support of Hindu majority in north India. The later events such as Bofors scam further weakened the congress. The 1989 election set the country on path of coalition era.

Coalition Era (1989-till date)

Between 1989 and 1996, India saw three central governments. The VP Singh led National Front Government was first coalition government with outside support of left and BJP. It was pulled down by BJP later. It was followed by Chandra Shekhar and IK Gujaral governments with outside support of Congress. These were followed by PV Narshimha Rao government which began as a minority government but managed the majority through defection {allegedly by bribing the defecting MPs}. This period saw the Mandal Commission, rise of political awakening in Dalits, rise of caste based regional parties such as BSP (dalits in UP), SP (backwards in UP), RJD (Dalit-muslim-yadav in Bihar) etc. These changes, led to a silent revolution in party system of India.

Simultaneously, the BJP's political stock soared due to its relatively clean image, seat adjustment with National Front in 1989 and L. K. Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990 for Ram temple, which made it Main Opposition party in 10th Lok Sabha and emerged as a single largest party in 11th Lok Sabha in 1996 and success in getting an invitation to form Government by President. However, still short of absolute majority, as it could not attract any ally to sustain it, the government fell within the short period. This experience proved crucial for its coalition strategies later.

Subsequently, National Front (a thirteen party coalition led by Janata Dal) with outside support from the Congress (I) remained in power during 1996-98. On fall off the Government in 1998 the BJP itself under leadership of A B Vajpayee, entered into coalition of 18 parties known since then as National Democratic Alliance, which though formed government but fell by one vote as one of the allies pulled out of coalition in 1999. As a result, effort by BJP and NDA to secure the majority in 1999 elections, was far greater. The AB Vajpayee government could not win the next election in 2004 and the UPA coalition led by Congress came to power in which for 10 years, Manmohan Singh led government remained in power at the centre.

During these years, the key features that emerged in India's party system were as follows:

- The Indian party system became highly competitive and more democratized.
- Rise of regional parties, which had more say in not only domestic policy of the government but also foreign policy.
- The regional parties depended a lot on their social bases, internal organizations and ideologies.

During this phase, initially congress decried and detested the coalitions and kept on fighting elections alone. However, it released the reality during first NDA Government and put into practice the coalition strategy better than NDA and came back to power.

Nature of the Party System in India

The significant features of the political party system in India in current times are: weak and multi-party opposition; era of coalitions (even present government is a coalition); ideological commitments overlap with greed for power; increased communal, caste character; increased importance of regional satraps {though presently, they have been eclipsed by 2014 mandate}, personality cult, lack of internal democracy in most parties; groupism and opportunism within the parties; electoral alliances; use of extra-constitutional means to remain in power; opaque funding; populist nature of most parties.