

## POLITICAL PARTIES

Political party forms an important component of a political system.

*A political party is an institution which consists of leaders, followers, policies and programmes.*

- Its followers **may have formal membership** of the party or may support it without being formal members. There are different parties.
- Parties can be differentiated on the bases of leaders, policies and programmes, ideologies and internal functioning.
- The principal feature of a political party which distinguishes it from other organizations is that its **main purpose is to capture power**.
- Political party is only one of so many social agents associated with or responsible for political participation.
- There are **other agents** such as voluntary organisations, institutional groups and socio-cultural communities.
- Political parties are the **important links between individuals, state and society**.
- Political parties provide the **crucial connection between social process and policy-makers, and influence debates and policies** on issues affecting the interests of various social groups in a political system.

## TYPES OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN INDIA

There is a criterion given by the Election Commission of India to categorize the political parties as national, state/regional and registered/unrecognized parties.

### **1. National Party**

According to the Election Commission, for being considered as a national party a political party should atleast have **one of the following qualifications:**

- i. It has to win a minimum of **two percent of the seats in the Lok Sabha from atleast three different States;**
- ii. In general elections, the party must manage to win **six percent of the votes and win at least four Lok Sabha seats;**
- iii. It should be **recognised as a state-level party in four or more states.**

**Examples:** In 2020, there were seven national Parties in India: Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI(M)), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and All India Trinamool Congress.

### **2. State Party/Regional Party**

**Election Commission does not use the concept of regional party. Instead, it uses the notion of state party.**

However, in academic discourse and general parlance, state and regional parties are used interchangeably. But there are differences in ways the Election Commission and academic discourse define state and regional parties.

*The election commission identifies a regional party on the basis of its electoral performance in a number of states.*

*Academic discourse defines a regional or state party in terms of its policies, activities, support-bases and leadership in specific regions or states.*

According to EC, **to be considered as state party**, a party should have one of the qualifications to be acknowledged as a state party:

- i) It must have engaged in **political activity for at least five years**;
- ii) It must have **won either four percent of the seats in a general election or three percent in a state election**;
- iii) In addition, it must have had the **support of six percent of the votes cast**;
- iv) The status of a state party can still be bestowed upon an entity **even if it fails to win any seats in the Lok Sabha or the Assembly** if it manages to win at least eight per cent of the total votes cast in the entire state.

In 2020, there are 36 recognized state parties in India that represent their respective states.

Some of the recognised state parties include Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Biju Janata Dal(BJD), Janata Dal (United) JD(U), Rashtriya Janata Dal(RJD), Samajwadi Party (SP).

### 3. Registered / Unrecognized Party

Registered party is a party that is neither recognised as a state nor a national party, but it is **registered with the election commission**. It is also called **unrecognised** party. At present, there are more than 2000 registered parties in India.

## POLITICAL PARTIES: FUNCTIONS AND ROLE

Political parties are essential for the proper functioning of representative democracy. They perform vital functions in every political system.

The functions performed by the political parties, especially in the context of India, are as under:

- They **nominate candidates** during elections (to act as people's representatives in the legislature);
- They **campaign** to obtain support for their candidates in the elections;
- They place **objectives and programmes** before the voters through their **manifestos**;
- Those securing the majority in elections **form the government** and enact and implement the policies;
- Those not in power form **opposition and keep a constant check** on the government;
- They form **opposition** when they are in minority in the legislature and constantly put pressure on the government for **proper governance**;
- They **educate people** and help in formulating and **shaping public opinion**;
- They **articulate peoples' demands** and convey them to the government; and
- They **provide a linkage between people and governmental institutions**.

In India political parties have been performing the above-mentioned functions quite effectively since independence. They have made representative governments in India both possible and successful for over past seven decades.

They provide effective links between the citizens and the governments on the one hand, and the electorates and their representatives on the other. **They try to cater to people's demands on public matters, and mobilize political participation.**

Elections without parties would have almost been impossible. In fact, **democracy needs strong and sustainable political parties with the capacity to represent citizens and provide policy choices that demonstrate their ability to govern for the public good.**

The experience of functioning of political parties in India during the last several decades indicates that by and large they have been instrumental in **shaping public opinion, creating political awareness, and imparting political education to the people.**

They have contributed towards making the **institutions and processes of government truly democratic and people centric.** We can, therefore, say that **democracy in India has been strengthened by a competitive and multi-party system.**

As **India has a multiparty system where coalition governments have been a norm,** the regional and registered parties have been playing a crucial role, especially after the late 1980s, in formation of coalition of government both in the centre and the states.

**Regional Parties are becoming important determining factors in electoral politics.** Regional parties represent the aspirations of people at state or local levels.

## Rajni Kothari's Perspective on Politics in India and The Congress System

- Rajni Kothari, in the year 1970, published a book with the title '**Politics in India**'. The book was inspired by the System Theory developed by **David Easton** and the concept of power as developed by **Robert Dahl**.
- It described the political processes in India and their impact on Indian society.
- Its opening lines are manifesto-like, putting politics at the centre-stage of human activity and treating politics as a force of nature.
- He examined issue from the **functional point of view**.
- In a plural society like India, with cleavages and divisions both on horizontal and vertical lines, the western models to assess political development are often **inadequate** and that makes him search for a new model to understand the complex nature if Indian polity, by analyzing the key concepts like '**kind of political parties and interest groups**', '**social and national integration**' and '**infrastructure of the society**'.
- He successfully showed the **response of traditional society to modernization**. In Indian society, there had always been a secular element and it survived to this day due to its '**cultural unity**'.
- Starting with the search of factors in nation-building and the meaning of political development, especially in India, he identifies "**administrative-governmental process**" with the "**political process**" as factors of development in India.
- It is one of his views, that the **greatest failure of India throughout its long history was its inability to function politically, to construct a viable political authority and that it failed to build a strong centre**.

- He observed that, “**factionalism and caste cleavages, patterns of alignment and realignment** amongst the various strata, and a continuous striving for social mobility have always been prominent features of the caste system.”
- He also says that “the **unavailability of a nation-wide and united opposition party or parties forced the leadership of the Congress Party to admit to its organization an active and virulent factionalism without any significant reference to ideological or pragmatic issues.**”

## The Congress 'System'

Rajni Kothari writes:

- The Indian system can be described as a system of **one party dominance** (which, it may be noted, is very different from what is generally known as a one party system).
- It is a competitive party system but one in which the competing parts play rather dissimilar roles.
- It consists of a party of consensus and parties of pressure.
- The latter function on the margin and, indeed, the concept of a **margin of pressure** is of great importance in this system.
- Inside the margin are various factions within the party of consensus.
- Outside the margin are several opposition groups and parties, dissident groups from the ruling party, and other interest groups and important individuals.
- In India, the **Congress**, which is (used to be then) the party of consensus, **functions through an elaborate network of factions**

which provides the chief competitive mechanism of the Indian system.

- In 1947, the **Congress**, which functioned as a broad-based **nationalist movement before independence, transformed itself into the dominant political party of the nation.**
- Although a number of opposition parties came into existence, it was recognized that the **Congress** was the **chief party**, representing a **historical consensus** and enjoying a **continuing basis of support** and trust.
- Under the circumstances, **political competition was internalized and carried on within the Congress.**
- There developed an **elaborate system of factions** at every level of political and governmental activity, and a system of coordination between the various levels through vertical "faction chains".
- Structurally, such a party system displays **two features:**
  - There is **plurality within the dominant party** which makes it **more representative, provides flexibility**, and sustains internal competition.
  - At the same time, it is **prepared to absorb groups and movements from outside the party** and thus prevent other parties from gaining in strength.
- It is a system that **concentrates strength within the dominant party** and then builds **internal checks to limit the use of this strength.**
- In this way the party representing a historical consensus also continued to represent the present consensus. This ensured the legitimacy of the system and of the institutional framework under which it operates.

- The **role of the opposition in this system** is to constantly pressurize, criticize, censure and influence it by influencing opinion and interests inside the margin and, above all, **exert a latent threat that if the ruling group strays away too far from the balance of effective public opinion, and if the factional system within it is not mobilized to restore the balance, it will be displaced from power by the opposition groups.**
- By posing a **constant threat, it ensures the mobility and life of the internal power structure** of the Congress. On the other hand, its own strength is continuously conditioned by the strength of the Congress, gaining where the latter loses, and sometimes gaining substantially when the latter has lost grip over the situation or its internal thermostat has failed.
- **Electorate-wise, the Opposition can only hope to function effectively at the local and regional levels.**
- **Legislature-wise, however, it also functions at the national level and performs a very useful role in the maintenance of the system.**
- He also mentioned **five important points about Congress:**
  - The **Congress**, when it came to power, **assigned a positive and overwhelming role to government and politics in the development of society.**
  - It made the **power of the central authority the chief condition of national survival**. This power was not only **consolidated but greatly augmented**.
  - It made **legitimacy the principal issue of politics** and gave to the government and the ruling party an importance of great symbolic value. "Only the Congress could be trusted." This is why only the Congress was the party of consensus.

- The Congress in power made for a concentration of resources, a monopoly of patronage and a control of economic power which crystallized the structure of its power and made competition with it a difficult proposition.
- By adopting a competitive model of development, it made mobilization and public cooperation a function of political participation rather than of bureaucratic control and police surveillance.
- He adds that a significant trend in political development in India is the growth of built-in constraints in the political system which has led to a containment of conflicts at points where excessive conflict is likely to disrupt the intricate balance on which the Congress system is based.
- Hence, there developed over the years a conciliation machinery within the Congress, at various levels and for different tasks, which is almost constantly in operation, mediating in factional disputes, influencing political decisions in the States and districts, and not infrequently backing up one group against another and utilizing the electoral and patronage systems in confirming the former in a position of power.
- He writes that the Congress has also shown great sensitivity on the question of respect for minorities, including political minorities, accommodating them whenever possible, and in general, pursuing a broad-based consensus on national politics.
- He also believed that the delicate balance on which the legitimacy and power of the Congress system rests may be rudely disturbed, and a more authoritarian system might emerge.
- Political systems do change in their nature over time, and there is no particular sanctity in one particular system.

Historian **Ramachandra Guha** writes in one of his articles about Rajni Kothari as follows. It can also be seen as a **criticism** of Kothari's model:

- The bulk of the book by Kothari ('Politics in India') was devoted to the then dominant Congress party. Kothari argued that before and after Independence, the **Congress was successful in presenting itself as the "authoritative spokesman of the nation as well as its affirmed agent of criticism and change".**
- Towards the end of his book, **Kothari offered one judgement and one prediction.**
  - This was the **judgement**: "Because the Congress managed to be in power continuously and there was no united or effective threat to its authority, the country's political process gained incomparable advantages of continuity and unity."
  - And this was the **prediction**: "The Congress still needs to be an organized political party in the country, with a nationwide following and considerable depth in the localities.

This has **two consequences** central to the system's functioning:

- **It can continue to enjoy plurality at the centre** and thus a dominant voice in coalition-making;
- It can continue to control **widespread local presence and patronage even where it is no longer in power** at the state level."

## REGIONALISM

### Regionalism

Regionalism means **to situate the approach and sentiments towards the particular region.**

It is argued that **regionalism can be a form of resistance against the imposition of a particular cultural ideology that is linked to the integration of a nation.**

Regionalism is found to have **connections with the cultural patterns that exist as a part of the dominant culture.**

Sometimes, it does become a **threat to the nation state** by regional groups who struggle for their particular sectional interests and at others it acts like a **force that brings people together, their grievances for the broader nation to address, thus, reinforcing unity in diversity.**

Regionalism is **an ideology and political movement that seeks to advance the causes of regions.**

As a process it plays role **within the nation as well as outside** the nation i.e. at international level. Both types of regionalism have different meaning and have positive as well as negative impact on society, polity, diplomacy, economy, security, culture, development, negotiations, etc.

## Regionalism in India

India emerged as an independent nation state and later regionalism became part of the different states in India. It is linked to the politics of **ethnocentrism**.

For instance, natives of a particular region foreground their **ontological and epistemological priorities** over a particular region. Natives presume that they possess the authenticity over the issues and construction of subject related to that region.

They imagine a sort of **body politics that includes themselves and excludes the 'other' as outsiders**. It is a process of “**othering**” for outsiders.

At the same time, it is the **return to 'self' for the natives**. We can analyze the **tangible and intangible forms of regionalism** through the behavioural and social aspects of the diverse sections of people from the different parts of India.

The Indian state was confronted with demands for the reorganisation of the states (provinces or federating units) **immediately after independence**.

Upon the **recommendation of the States Reorganisation Committee (SRC) of 1953**, headed by Fazal Ali, the **provinces were recognised on the basis of language**.

By the 1960s, the provinces seemed to have settled down within the redrawn boundaries.

- The larger province of **Bombay** was divided into **Marathi-speaking Maharashtra and Gujarati speaking Gujarat**.
- **Punjab** was trifurcated into a Punjabi speaking Punjab, Hindi-speaking Haryana, and Pahari speaking Himachal Pradesh.
- **The Kannad-speaking areas of Bombay** were transferred to the state of Mysore/ Karnataka.
- **Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras province** were transferred to Andhra Pradesh.
- The linguistic reorganisation looked complete and the **first phase** of reorganisation of the states within the Indian union was over.

- Then came the demands for autonomy in the north-eastern region.
- The aspirations of the tribal groups were soon recognised by the Indian state.
- The states of **Manipur, Tripura, and Meghalaya** were formed in the late 1970s.
- The **North Eastern Frontier Agency (NEFA)** was granted statehood under the name of **Arunachal Pradesh** in 1987.
- The restive **Nagas and the Mizos**, however, were granted statehood only after **violent encounters** with the Indian state.

The Naga insurgency continues until the present day, even after the formation of the state of Nagaland in 1956.

The Mizo insurgency subsided after the 1973 agreement which declared the Mizo district of Assam as a Union Territory.

Mizoram was later granted full state status after the 1986 agreement with the rebel leader Laldenga.

However; this did not completely exhaust the aspirations for autonomous administration or statehood by many groups.

The cultural differences within the overarching linguistic unity, in many cases, led to demands for statehood within the primarily language-based federating units of the Indian union.

Today, even the states often get entangled in violent clashes as was seen in **deadly clashes of forces of Assam and Mizoram in 2021**.

## Factors related with emergence of Regionalism

- The existence of **relative deprivation** is one of the most important aspects in constructing the argument for regionalism.

For instance, if the people from any particular region feel that they are more deprived than others in terms of distribution of resources, infrastructures and so on, then it may create regional affiliation.

For example, **Gorkha Nationalist Liberation Forum (GNLF)** started its movement in the Darjeeling. In the view of GNLF, Darjeeling was the most underdeveloped region in comparison to the southern part of West Bengal.

**Growing regional inequalities** in terms of income and consumption in the **post-reforms period** have accentuated the perception of neglect and discrimination.

**Coastal regions/developed regions have invariably benefited more** from the flow of private investment as compared to the regions at peripheral locations, those with disturbed law and order situations, and those with poor economic and social infrastructure.

- The second significant factor for the emergence of regionalism is **the issue of language and culture**. Every individual's identity is based on the categories of language and culture which, once politicized, play an important role in the formation of region.

According to **Edward Sapir**, language plays a vital role in the creation and determination of a region. Thus, the idea of region has to be explored in the context of language debates.

- **Unequal access to political power.**

The **local elites complain of "reverse" discrimination** as often the elites from the other politically dominant regions manage to corner financial grants/deals/lucrative portfolios.

Besides the above factors, there are also many other factors responsible for the growth of regionalism like:

- i) Regionalism made its appearance as a reaction against the efforts of the national government to impose a particular ideology, language, or cultural pattern on all people or groups.

Thus the States of south have resisted imposition of Hindi as official language because they feared this would lead to dominance of the North.

Similarly, in Assam anti-foreigner movement was launched by the Assamese to preserve their own culture;

- ii) Continuous neglect of an area or region by the ruling parties and concentration of administrative and political power has given rise to demand for decentralization of authority and bifurcate of unilingual states.

On occasions "sons of soil theory" has been put forth to promote the interests of neglected groups or areas of the state;

- iii) The desire of the various units of the Indian federal system to maintain their sub-cultural regions and greater degree of self-government has promoted regionalism and given rise to demand for greater autonomy;

- iv) The desire of regional elites to capture power has also led to rise of regionalism. It is well known that political parties like DMK, AIADMK, Akali Dal, Telugu Desam, Asom Gana Parishad etc. have encouraged regionalism to capture power;

- v) The interactions between the forces of modernization and mass participation have also largely contributed to the growth of regionalism in India.

As the country is still away from realising the goal of a nation state, the various groups have failed to identify their group interests with national interests; hence the feeling of regionalism has persisted;

- vi) The growing awareness among the people of backward areas that they are being discriminated against has also promoted feeling of regionalism.

The local political leaders have often fully utilised this factor and

tried to feed the people the idea that the central government was deliberately trying to maintain regional imbalances by neglecting social and economic development of certain areas.

### A Short Note on Why son of the soil?

1. There remains a **competition for job** between migrant and local educated middle class youth.
2. This theory **works mostly in cities**, because here outsiders also, get opportunity for education, etc.
3. In such theories, major involvement of people is due to **rising aspiration**.
4. **Economy's failure to create enough employment opportunity**.

## Important Outcome of various Regionalist Movements

- **Regional identity, culture, and geographical differences now appear to be better recognised** as a valid basis for administrative division and political representation.
- **Separate statehood movements are no longer being stigmatised as parochial, chauvinist and even antinational** as was done in the past.
- The shift is visible in the way the **new states are now being proposed on the grounds of good governance** had development rather than on the language principle that had, ostensibly, guided state formation during the first phase of the reorganisation of states.
- The **dialect communities** of late have been asking for their own "**territorial homeland**" while **underlining the cultural and literary distinctiveness and richness** of the dialectic, i.e., Bundelkhand, Ruhelkhand, and Mithilanchal.

## What could be the criteria, then, for recognising a region?

SR Maheshwari writes quoting the **criteria used by the MP Rasheeduddin Khan** (who has examined this problem quite deeply):

To promote discussion and further classification it is suggested that the criteria for determining a socio-cultural sub-region in India can be formulated as follows:

**"Maximum homogeneity within and maximum identity without"**

Where **homogeneities** are to be established on ten counts:

- 1) language dialect; 2) social composition (communities/jatis); 3) ethnic regions; 4) demo-geographic features; 5) area (geographic contiguity); 6)cultural pattern; 7) economy and economic life; 8) historical antecedents; 9) political background; 10) psychological make -up and felt consciousness of group identity.

A Kumar writing in *Exploring the Demand for New States* says that the underlying principle in various accommodations of identity in India has remained internal self-determination.

**Internal self-determination has remained the predominant form in which regionalism, and even sub-regionalism, has sought to express itself.**

The regional and sub-regional accommodation of identity in India has served to weaken the bases of political secessionism and separatism while not defeating the principle of (internal) self-determination (of nations).

## To Conclude:

Regionalism is a dynamic, pragmatic concept.

It **seldom sustains itself on one single factor**: a coalition of factors and circumstances, including politicisation of the region and sense of economic retardation is the basis of regional revival and assertions.

But the specific factors fostering regionalism are apt to **vary from place to place**, and even in the context of the same place, the precise mix of them and their individual potency do not remain unaltered over a period of time.

The peculiar historical processes have a bearing on regionalism.

Ashok Behuria says that the **Indian federation has temperamentally behaved as a “union” and not a “federation”**. However, the leadership in the country has to take care to adopt federal principles to judge such cases of autonomy and gradually develop powers (especially financial powers) to the units if it is to contain various ethnocultural assertions.

Among all these explanations there is a common thread of argument that says that **the shrinking capacity of the state, underdevelopment, and the politicisation of plural peripheral identities, together with the search for power by neo-elites at the margins, have snapped the interethnic and intercultural bonds that have so far drawn them together**.

This has **created new identities** and led to an overwhelming craze for autonomy or self-legislation.

It is interesting to note that the concessions of statehood in the recent cases seem to be **conditioned by sheer electoral calculations and not by considerations of economic viability**. And these concessions in no way altered the basic constitutionally guaranteed relationship between the federation and the units, which is **lopsided in favour of the federation**.

**Creation of “dependent” states will in no way improve the conditions, and the passion for a greater degree of autonomy will haunt the Indian states until a genuinely developed refederalized system of governance grows out of the present system of Unitarian federal democracy in India.**

## **Important Example:**

### **- Formation of Jharkhand**

The demand for the separate state of Jharkhand, shows the dynamics of the politics of regionalism in India. It was demanded by the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha. The struggle for the separate state of Jharkhand took almost fifteen years. All the political parties have played an active role in it.

**The rationale for creating this state is also based on the uniqueness of its tribal cultural heritage.**

However, the distribution of resources and the politics of development remain significant in the socio-economic structures in Jharkhand due to the **continuing construction as relatively deprived and backward.**

Hence, we can understand **that whenever any state formulation happens with the people's struggle, it has certain aspirations and demands, which may or may not be incorporated in or accommodated by, the formation of the state.**

It is true that **regionalism and sub-regionalism are unavoidable in a vast and plural country like India.** It is not always correct to consider every attempt to support or defend regional or sub-regional interests as divisive, fissiparous and unpatriotic.

The problem begins when these interests are politicized and regional movements are promoted for **ulterior political motives.** Such unhealthy regional or sub-regional patriotism could be cancerous and disruptive. The continuing regional imbalances have **given rise to militant movements in certain parts of our country.**

Separatist demands in Jammu and Kashmir or by ULFA (United Liberation Front of Assam) in Assam or by different groups in the North-Eastern region are matters of grave concern for Indian polity.

## CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SYSTEM

The BJP's victory in 2014 ushered in a debate among political scientists and political analysts over whether the country's **electoral politics was experiencing a paradigm shift**.

Indian politics was synonymous with **coalition politics** between 1989 and 2014, **following decades of Congress Party dominance** at the national level; but for that quarter century, no single party was strong enough to earn a parliamentary majority on its own, relying instead on dozens of pre- and post-election allies to form a governing coalition.

**The debate was therefore about whether India had left the era of multipolarity, fragmentation, and coalitions behind** in favor of a new, dominant-party system in which the BJP assumed the role of central pole that the Congress had once played.

There were scholars who were less hesitant in asserting that India was witnessing the birth of a new party system. In the **Journal of Democracy**, E. Sridharan wrote: "*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

- The BJP's victory in 2014 relied on **near-total sweeps of a relatively small number of states** in the Indian union; in fact, 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.
- Second, although the BJP clinched a majority in the Lok Sabha, it was **nowhere close to a majority in Rajya Sabha**.
- Finally, the BJP's reach was limited at the level of India's states. Prior to the 2014 election, the BJP ruled just five (of twenty-nine) states.

## 2019

- India ushered in a new, **fourth party system**—one that is premised on **a unique set of political principles** and that shows a clear break with what came before.
- In the 2019 general election, the BJP clinched a second consecutive majority in the Lok Sabha, a feat last accomplished by the Congress Party in 1980 and 1984.
- By June 2019, the party **controlled twelve states** while its allies **controlled another six**. And made **significant gains in Rajya Sabha**.

## THIRD PARTY SYSTEM

- In the third party system, **no national party served as the central gravitational force** organizing politics.
- Electoral politics was marked by **increasing party fragmentation, intensifying political competition, and a federalization of national politics.**
- Furthermore, national voter turnout appeared to be relatively **stagnant**, painting a stark contrast with rising turnout in state elections—a signal that **states had become the primary venues of political contestation** as opposed to national-level politics.
- Finally, the third party system was characterized by **a changing composition of political elites in which lower castes—Dalits (Scheduled Castes, or SCs) as well as Other Backward Classes (OBCs)—gained political representation**, largely at the expense of upper and intermediate castes.

Today, many of these principles stand altered, and 2014 represents a key structural break.

Some less quantifiable traits suggest Indian electoral politics is operating according to a new set of rules. These factors include the **BJP's ideological hegemony, its organization and fundraising prowess, and its charismatic leadership.**

## INDIA'S ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

There is broad consensus that India's electoral history—from the inaugural post-independence general election in 1952 until the sixteenth Lok Sabha elections in 2014—can be roughly divided into **three electoral orders**.

**Yogendra Yadav** has argued that a new electoral system commences whenever an observer can “detect a destabilization of [an old system] and its replacement by a new pattern of electoral outcomes as well as its determinants.”

### ➤ 1952 TO 1967: CONGRESS DOMINANCE

- Between 1952 and 1967, the **Congress Party dominated** Indian politics, both at the center and across her states.
- As the party primarily responsible for winning India her **independence** and home to many of the most respected **nationalist leaders**, the Congress benefited from widespread popular appeal as the umbrella organization under which India would establish its post-independence identity.
- The **inadequacies of the other players** on the political scene fueled that dominance. **Opposition** forces were badly **fragmented**, which limited their ability to mount a serious campaign to unseat the Congress.

### ➤ 1967 TO 1989: GROWING OPPOSITION AT THE STATE LEVEL

- With the **exception of the election of 1977**—when the Congress suffered due to autocratic excesses during Emergency Rule between 1975 and 1977—the **party remained the default choice** for governance at the center.

- But new expressions of caste and regional identities chipped away at the party's monopoly of subnational politics.
- The year **1967** proved to be a **critical inflection point**, ushering in the dawn of India's second party system.
- Although the **Congress's grip on power in New Delhi remained** firm, its hold on India's state capitals began to fade.

## ➤ 1989 TO 2014: DAWN OF COALITION POLITICS

- **Congress dominance** that remained after 1967, **came to an end** in 1989, which denoted the **start of coalition governance** in New Delhi and the third party system.
- Three powerful forces—often termed “Mandal, masjid, and market”—disrupted Indian politics, prompting a realignment in politics:
  1. **Mandal Commission**, a government task force that recommended that **OBCs be given access to quotas** governing higher education seats and civil service posts.

It was on the backs of the agitation around Mandal that India witnessed what **Yadav** dubbed a “*second democratic upsurge*,” or the **catapulting of traditionally disadvantaged groups into the corridors of political power**. During this period, many caste-based parties representing Dalit and OBC interests firmly entrenched their position among the representative class.

2. The second force was the demolition of the **Babri Masjid** in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by pro-Hindu forces associated with the BJP. This **ethno-nationalist mobilization** helped fuel BJP's sudden rise from a party

that won just two seats in the 1984 general election to the only **national alternative to the Congress**.

3. The third and final factor was the **market**, due to India's decision to **liberalize its economy in 1991**, embrace the forces of globalization, and welcome global economic integration.

## BEYOND INDIA'S THIRD PARTY SYSTEM

In order to evaluate whether India has truly entered a new era of politics with the BJP's recent general election victories in 2014 and 2019, it is necessary to clarify the **precise attributes of the third party system** against which any future change can be measured.

### ➤ PRINCIPLES OF THE THIRD PARTY SYSTEM

There are **six defining attributes** of the third party system:

- First, **the absence of a central pole in national politics** between 1989 and 2009 is the central feature of the third party system.
- Second, the third party system was an era of **political fragmentation**. The number of parties contesting elections surged after 1989 as the Congress order broke down.
- Third, electoral contests became markedly more competitive. **Victory margins came down** and the share of candidates winning an **outright majority of votes in their constituencies dropped**.
- Fourth, the entire **political system became highly federalized**. National-level outcomes were directly influenced by the state-level verdicts that preceded them, but the intensity of the effect depended on the proximity of the two polls. **Honeymoon and anti-incumbency effects at the state level directly impacted national polls**.
- Fifth, **voter turnout surged at the state level while national political mobilization cooled**. As states became the primary venues for political contestation, voter turnout patterns shifted in kind. **In the third party system, the gap between voter**

**turnout at the state and national levels saw unprecedented divergence.**

- Finally, there was a **clear change in the social composition of the representative class**. For instance, in northern Hindi belt states, the combined share of OBC and SC legislators superseded that of upper caste and intermediate castes for the very first time.

## FROM MULTIPOLARITY TO UNIPOLARITY

In terms of aggregate electoral outcomes, the **2014 and 2019 elections stand apart.**

- First, the **BJP won India's first single-party majority** in the Lok Sabha since 1984, the year the Congress Party under Rajiv Gandhi won an overwhelming mandate in the wake of Indira Gandhi's assassination.
- Second, 2014 was the first time in post-independence history that **a single party other than the Congress** had claimed a majority of seats in parliament.
- Third, although the **BJP won a majority of seats**, it **exceeded its previous best performance** by a significant margin.

Headed into the 2019 race, **many election analysts doubted the BJP's ability to replicate its 2014 feat** for at least four reasons:

- The BJP's victory was fueled by virtually running the tables in **a select set of states**. For the BJP to match its 2014 benchmark, analysts thought the party would have to once more sweep this relatively limited swath of territory—especially given its **limited presence in the south and east of India**.
- Second, BJP relentlessly campaigned in 2013 and 2014 on a pledge to usher in *acche din* (good times) for the Indian economy by generating rapid economic growth, creating millions of jobs, and revitalizing India's moribund investment cycle. Yet **large parts of the economic narrative simply did not materialize** during Modi's first term in office.

- In the 2014 election, **many opposition parties chose to fight the BJP on their own, as opposed to forming constructive alliances.** As a result, in several pivotal states, divisions within the opposition served to fragment the anti-BJP vote, leading to the former's electoral marginalization. In 2019, the **opposition adopted—at least rhetorically—a strategy of cooperation.** In several key states, such as Uttar Pradesh (India's biggest electoral prize with 80 parliamentary seats), longtime rivals joined forces not due to any common ideological commitment or adherence to a unified leadership, but rather as **an existential impulse to prevent their marginalization.**

An additional sign of the **BJP's** pan-Indian dominance is the fact that, in 2019, it **contested more seats than the Congress Party for the first time** in history. In 2019, the BJP fielded candidates in 436 parliamentary constituencies, compared to 421 for the Congress.

**In 2014, BJP, for the first time, surpassed the Congress in the numbers of MLAs.** As of June 2019, the BJP boasts 32 percent of MLAs compared to 21 percent for the Congress and 47 percent for all other parties.

Another metric of the BJP's hegemonic status is the **party's significantly improved standing in the Rajya Sabha.** From a paltry 5 percent of Rajya Sabha seats in 1984, its representation grew to 22 percent in 2008 before falling back to 17 percent in 2014. Since then, its share has shot up and in **2017, for the first time, the BJP's tally surpassed that of the Congress.** As of July 2019, the BJP's share stood at 32 percent as compared to the Congress Party's 20 percent share.

## REDUCTION IN POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION

- As the dominant-party era gave way to the onslaught of coalitions, there was a surge in the number of political parties contesting elections.
- In India's inaugural general election in **1952, fifty-five parties** fielded at least one candidate. That figure grew exponentially in the mid-to-late **1980s as 117** entered the fray in 1989.
- There were **two factors behind** this growth:
  - First, **regional and caste-based parties multiplied** in proportion to the degree of **popular disenchantment with the Congress Party**.
  - Second, as **coalition governance became the default** position in New Delhi, **political entrepreneurs** had every incentive to strike out on their own and form new political parties. With just a small clutch of seats, a single party could be the pivotal party required to form a parliamentary majority—making the party leader the ultimate kingmaker.
- By **2009, candidates from 370 political parties contested** parliamentary elections.
- Political fragmentation in India today appears to be as strong as ever. The number of **parties represented in Parliament has remained in the upper thirties** for two decades: thirty-six parties are currently represented in the Lok Sabha.
- In order to derive a **more accurate measure of political fragmentation**, political scientists prefer to calculate the effective number of parties, which essentially weighs **parties by the number of votes (or seats) they actually earned**.

## WEAKER, NOT STRONGER, POLITICAL COMPETITION

- One way of **measuring the degree of competition** is to look at **the average margin of victory** – that is the difference in the vote share of the winner and the immediate runner-up – across parliamentary constituencies in a general election.
- In **1962 and 1967**, the average margin of victory was **between 13 and 15 percent**.
- After **1977**, **margins steadily came down** over a period of several decades. By **2009**, the average margin of victory sunk to its **lowest level** in the post-independence era: **9.7 percent**.
- The average margin **in 2014 grew to 15.2 percent** – the highest level since 1989, the first year of the coalition era.
- In **2019, margins touched 17.3 percent**.
- **Another way** is to examine the **vote share of the winning candidate**.
- Between **1977 and 1989**, the average vote share of the winning candidate **never once fell below 50 percent**.
- After falling to a historical low of **44 percent in 2009**, the average winner's vote began to creep back up – first to **47.1 percent in 2014 and once more cracking the 50 percent threshold in 2019** for the first time since 1989.

## WEAKENING FEDERALIZATION OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS

- In the third party system, general election verdicts often resembled a collection of state-level verdicts. This interaction had several components, as laid out by **Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar**:
  - o National-level political competition in each state was a reflection of the dynamics associated with that state's politics.
  - o National elections were regularly influenced by state-level political calendars.
  - o The degree of political participation in Lok Sabha elections largely mirrored participation in state-level politics.
  - o Finally, the performance of state governments was an important determinant of voter behavior in national elections.
- As Yadav and Palshikar pointed out, this does not mean that national political choices were "duplicative" of choices made in the state political arena; however, it does mean they were "derivative."

With respect to the electoral calendar, a certain pattern had taken root in the third party system, as documented by **Nirmala Ravishankar**:

- o If a national election is held in the first year of a state government's tenure, the ruling party in the state has a greater probability of performing well when that state votes.
- o This **honeymoon effect** lingers through the state government's second year in office, after which **incumbency becomes a liability**.
- o In year three of a state government's tenure and beyond, the **shine wears off**.
- o The party then begins to underperform in national elections and this **anti-incumbent "penalty"** grows as the distance from the state election grows.

Recent data points suggest that state and national verdicts have become partially decoupled.

This leads to the second **important break with the past**.

In both the **2014 and 2019** elections, BJP managed to **presidentialize a parliamentary election** by making the election principally a vote on his leadership.

Here, there was **not a single opposition leader who had the stature or popularity** to favorably compete head-to-head with Modi.

- A central component of what people were voting for is **Modi's leadership**—the belief that he is a **decisive leader**, is **incorruptible**, and operates with the **national interest at heart**.
- On the campaign trail, Modi was **explicit in rallying supporters** with the plea that a **vote for the BJP is a vote for Modi**, irrespective of whose name actually appears as the local candidate on the ballot.

- Another aspect of weakening federal character of elections is the change in the balance of power between national and regional parties. Between 1996 and 2014, voters in India have been evenly divided between the two big national parties—the Congress and BJP—and other regional parties.
- As a general rule of thumb, 50 percent of the vote has traditionally gone to the two national parties while the remaining 50 percent has accrued to hundreds of regional players. In 2009, the share of the regional party vote peaked at 52.6 percent. In 2014, that share dipped to 48.6 percent
- While the Congress earned roughly 20 percent of the vote in each of the past two elections, the grip of regional parties has declined sharply—and this has redounded to BJP's benefit. In 2019, the regional party vote share plummeted to 43.2 percent.

### **Regional parties are a highly heterogeneous category.**

Broadly, they can be divided into two groups:

- On the one hand, parties that are only electorally relevant in a specific region but may have larger national ambitions.
  - E.g. caste-based parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and the Janata Dal (United) (JD[U])—largely concentrated in the Hindi belt.
- On the other hand are “regionalist parties” that may have a geographically circumscribed catchment area but whose political mobilization rests on appeals to their state’s regional pride, culture, language, and customs.

## HEIGHTENED VOTER MOBILIZATION IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS

- A fifth characteristic of the third party system was the relatively subdued level of voter turnout in national elections, especially compared to the level of voter interest activation in state elections. Voter turnout in India's first party system averaged 60.1 percent, with high turnouts in the first two general elections.
- Turnout over this period (1967–1984) averaged around 59.6 percent. In the third party system (1989–2009), turnout averaged around 59.1 percent.
- From this perspective, **2014 exhibits a clear break in voter turnout, when India recorded its highest turnout, at 66.4 percent.**

This degree of voter mobilization was undoubtedly a reflection of **two factors:**

- **Widespread frustration with the incumbent Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime and**
- **The excitement around the candidacy of Narendra Modi.**

In **2019**, according to data provided by the Election Commission of India (ECI), **67.2 percent of eligible voters cast** their ballots. An average turnout of 66.8 percent in the past two elections demonstrates a clear break with the third party system and what came before.

- **Narrowing gap between national turnout and state turnout.**
- **Before the start of the third system, national turnout regularly exceeded state turnout.**
- In the **coalition era, state turnout skyrocketed** while national turnout remained steady. By the **mid-2000s, state turnout was exceeding national turnout by an average of 10 percentage points.** This gap shrunk, to less than 4 percent between 2013 and 2017.

A final aspect of voter turnout is the **gender breakdown**.

Since electoral statistics began accounting for gender in 1967, there has been a clear gender gap in turnout whereby **women's participation has lagged far behind men's**.

- **From 1967 to 2004 : Women's turnout 8-12 percent points lower than men's.**
- As the third party system waned, the gap between 2004 and 2009 decreased by 50 percent.
- The decline grew more intense in **2014**, when the **gap shrank to 1.8 percent**.
- In **2019**, for the first time in Indian electoral history, **male and female turnout rates were virtually at parity** (the gap was a negligible 0.1 percent).
- This change is likely a combination of **demand-side and supply-side shifts**:
  - o Growing female education and empowerment
  - o A more dense information environment
  - o ECI's stepped-up efforts to reduce the gender turnout gap

However, conditional on being registered, women are now turning out to vote at rates equal to men.

This is having important **impacts on the nature of political campaigning** in India as parties are increasingly tailoring their outreach and messaging to cater to female voters.

## CASTE AND SOCIAL COMPOSITION

- As Yadav points out, in the **first electoral system**, the most salient social category for politics was **jati** (one of thousands of discrete caste groups that reside within the umbrella categories of upper caste, OBC, SC, and so on).
  - o In the **first party system**, **jati** was highly embedded within a particular local context.
  - o **Second party system**- as Yadav notes, jati-level identities retained their importance, but changes in the political environment meant that political parties worked to build **state-wide alliances of individual jatis** in order to construct a minimum winning coalition.
  - o **Third party system**- jatis lost their salience as the debate shifted to the **umbrella-like varna groupings in the wake of the Mandal Commission** report and its aftermath. During this period, categories of “OBC” and “Dalit” took on newfound importance.
  - o The **fourth party system**- these larger umbrella groupings consisting of multiple jatis appear to have lost their import. Instead, politics has returned to the construction of **jati-level alliances, as in the second party system—but with a twist**. One of the BJP’s great successes in many north Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh, has been to undermine the larger caste categories in **an effort to create a wedge between dominant jatis and subordinate groupings**.
  - o But the fourth party system **also heralds a shift on a second dimension of social identity**. The rise of Mandal politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with pro-

Dalit parties like the BSP, had a clear effect on the sociology of power.

- What is also striking is the **dwindling numbers of Muslims elected to the Lok Sabha from these states**. In 2019, the BJP did not give a single ticket to a Muslim candidate in the Hindi belt (for comparison's sake, the Congress nominated eleven Muslims from the same set of states).

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE BJP'S POWER

### ➤ BJP AS SYSTEM-DEFINING PARTY

- One of the **defining characteristics of the second party system** in which the Congress featured as the dominant power was that **national election verdicts functioned as referenda on Congress rule**.
- As **Yadav** explains, “[a] typical verdict in this period took the form of a **nation-wide or sometimes state-wide wave for or against the Congress**.  
**The local specificities of the constituency simply did not matter.**”
- **Major parties contesting the 2019 elections**, with relatively few exceptions, positioned themselves as **either supportive of Modi and the BJP or vehemently opposed** to them.
- While the **opposition did not succeed in either creating a nationwide coalition** to tackle the BJP, it **did forge** a series of **state-specific alliances** that were explicitly constructed on an anti-BJP platform.
- In the end, the opposition’s machinations utterly failed to contain the BJP’s rise, but the political formations on display were largely in reaction to the **BJP’s own standing- The very definition of a system-defining party**.
- State elections held **between 2014 and 2019-** For the **BJP**, the party more often than not refused to project a chief ministerial candidate, instead preferring to **campaign on the backs of Modi’s personal popularity** as prime minister.

## IDEOLOGICAL HEGEMONY

- Suhas Palshikar characterized BJP under Modi as a classic example of a hegemonic political party.
- He defined **hegemony** as having **two components**:
  - o **Ideology**
  - o **Electoral Performance**
- According to Palshikar, **BJP's twin emphases on Hindu nationalism** and what he calls a "*new developmentalism*" have allowed the party to **saturate the political space in India**.
- This has been made possible, in part, by the fact that the **Congress Party's legacy of secular nationalism appears to have fallen out of favor** and that the **BJP has adopted many of the Congress Party's welfarist policies**.
- The party has **developed a new, nationalist narrative**. To reduce this narrative to one of **Hindu nationalism would be inaccurate**; the party's pro-Hindu views are but **one element of its overall nationalist discourse**.
- Broadly, this narrative has **three elements**:
  - o In the 2014 and 2019 general election campaigns, the party **selectively deployed Hindutva** (Hindu nationalism) in parts of the country where the party felt it would help **consolidate their electoral base**. Over the past two decades, the BJP has made sincere efforts at broadening its demographic base beyond a small sliver of Hindu upper castes and trading communities to include Dalits (Scheduled Castes), OBCs, and Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) by using memes such as **Ram Mandir**,

**cow protection, and illegal immigration to transcend caste divisions among Hindus.**

- In recent years it has made use of **a more amorphous nationalism centered on territorial sovereignty, loyalty to the nation, and resentment towards traditional liberal elites.**

**Devesh Kapur** noted, *“Its nationalism is unapologetic about India’s Hindu roots, and it is prepared to be more assertive in defense of what it regards as its national interests – even if it means redefining the idea of the ‘nation.’”*

Modi, towards the conclusion of the 2019 campaign, boasted of his independence from the elite **“Khan Market gang”** that had dominated the corridors of power for decades.

- The **final strain of nationalism** has to do with a **muscularity abroad and a reclaiming of India’s rightful place in the world.**

For the first time in recent memory, voters on the campaign trail routinely told reporters that this **election was more than a battle between partisan contenders, it was a battle “desh ke liye”**

**Aside from nationalism**, the BJP has also managed to dominate the discourse on the economy and economic development.

- Three ideas have been central to the BJP's posture:
  - First, the Modi government is **unabashedly pro-business** and the prime minister has contrasted this with the **Congress'** record—particularly in the final years of its second stint in office between 2009 and 2014—of **policy paralysis and burdensome regulation**. Although Modi has not emerged as the pro-market reformer, he has been much more consistent about hewing a pro-business line, especially with regards to indigenous Indian business.
  - Second, Modi has **brandished his bona fides as the ultimate anticorruption reformer**. The hallmark of this fight was his government's decision in November 2016 to invalidate 86 percent of India's currency in an effort to squeeze black money circulating in India.
  - Third, he has also refashioned his own image as the **architect of India's modern welfare state**. If Modi's first pivot was to transition from Hindu strongman to **vikas purush** (development hero) in the latter years of his tenure as Gujarat chief minister, his second pivot has been to shift from a leader who talked incessantly about the middle class, jobs, investment, and growth to one whose main message centers on welfare.

**Modi's pro-welfare emphasis** has placed the **Congress on the back foot** for a simple reason: many of the schemes he has invested in were **essentially schemes the Congress set up**. What **Modi** did was **rebrand** them, **scale them up**, and give them **priority status** in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). At root, many of these welfare schemes emerged from Congress Party blueprints.

## ORGANIZATIONAL AND FINANCIAL PROWEES

- A political machine gave the BJP the ability to project Modi as **a leader with unimpeachable credentials**, to deliver its nuanced messages of nationalism to different target audiences, and to parry the opposition's jibes.
- Under the tutelage of BJP President Amit Shah, the party has built **a well-oiled party machine** that is organized down to the level of the *panna pramukh*—literally a party worker who is in charge of **an individual panna (page) of the voter roll linked** to a neighborhood polling station.
- Furthermore, the BJP owns a first-mover advantage insofar as **integrating technology with campaigning** is concerned. E.g.: **Facebook** to **SMS** to **WhatsApp** to build cohesion among its workers, between voters, and between workers and voters.
- **BJP's financial advantage-** BJP's advantage over Congress when it comes to corporate funding stood at twenty to one in 2018.
- In 2018, the government also formally unveiled a new mechanism of political giving, known as **electoral bonds**. Based on information acquired through a Right to Information Act request, 95 percent of the bonds purchased in 2017-2018 accrued to the BJP's accounts.

## CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

- It could be argued that both the **2014 and 2019 elections were Modi's victories rather than the BJP's.**
- In the **2014** race, the BJP encountered a perfect storm of **anti-incumbency against the ruling Congress, economic malaise, a pervasive sense of policy paralysis, and lackluster leadership** on the part of the Congress.
- At that time, **Modi** also enjoyed (apart from being a charismatic opposition leader) a well-regarded **reputation as a no-nonsense, pro-business economic reformer**—was able to take the country by storm.
- Modi's favorability has to be seen in the context of **a general dearth of popular, charismatic leaders among opposition forces.**

## CONCLUSION

Since 2014, India has embarked on a new chapter in its political evolution.

Gone are the days of Congress dominance, but **India's grand old party has clearly been replaced by a new, formative political force** in the BJP.

With the **2019** general election, it is now clear that India is in the midst of a **new, dominant-party system**.

The dawn of this **fourth party system raises important questions** that deserve greater exploration by political scientists in the years to come.

- First, **how do economic indicators shape voting behavior?** For decades, it was believed that good economics did not make for good politics in India.
- A second issue that deserves greater scrutiny is the **role of caste**.

There are broadly **two conceptions of Indian electoral politics**:

- First- is that **elections are mainly about arithmetic**, or the ability of political parties to amass support from a sufficient number of castes or communities to get a minimum winning coalition.
- The second conception is that **elections are about chemistry**, rather than arithmetic. In other words, leadership, messaging, coalition dynamics, and so on trump purely identity-based calculations in which a party's popularity can be measured merely with reference to the vote banks that have traditionally supported it.
- A third area relates to **role of political campaigns**. Both the 2014 and 2019 elections suggest that campaigns have a material impact on voter behavior. For instance, it is indisputable that the **tensions between India and Pakistan helped bolster the BJP's case for re-election** even while it is very much disputed how significant this factor was in terms of votes and seats.