

CBCS B.A. POLITICAL SCIENCE HONS
SEM-2 CC-4 : POLITICAL PROCESSES IN INDIA
TOPIC-I : Political Parties and the Party System : Trends in the Party System: From the Congress System to Multi-Party Coalitions

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Synopsis:

The origin of the Indian National Congress in 1885 played a significant role in organising the people of India. After Independence the Congress Party attained the status of a political party. The Congress as a national movement represented the heterogeneous character of the Indian society.

The broad consensus about the Indian electoral history can be roughly divided into three electoral orders:

1) 1952 TO 1967: The Congress dominance	2) 1967 TO 1989: Growth of Opposition Parties at the State Level	3) 1989 TO 2014: Beginning of the Coalition Politics:
The one-party rule of Congress lasted for first three decades post-Independence since no other party could offer an effective alternative.	started with new expressions of caste and regional identities indicating India's "first democratic upsurge" — Important landmarks are - Emergency Period and populous OBC groups with demographic economic clout.	Three powerful forces; often termed "Mandal, Masjid, and Market"—disrupted Indian politics, prompting a realignment in politics.

2014 to Present: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity - This ethno-nationalist mobilization helped fuel the 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. Going beyond the Third-Party System, India has entered a new era of politics with the BJP's recent general election victories in 2014 and 2019.

Introduction:

Organised life is the lifeblood of any civilized society. Politically organised societies function through governments. In democracies people are governed by their own representatives elected for a fixed tenure. Elections to the representative bodies are held periodically. In parliamentary democracy the office of all elected government may not complete its full term due to the changing behaviour of people's representatives.

Periodic elections and the principle of majority rule constitute the fundamentals of democratic government. In the actual working of democracy, the role of political parties can never be underestimated. Political parties are seriously concerned with securing majority in the representative bodies or legislatures so as to form a

government of their own. In parliamentary as well as in presidential system a majority government means a party government.

Any democracy can effectively function only with the active participation of the people. This participation is facilitated by the party machinery, party programmes and policies. Essentially a political party is a voluntary association formed by persons holding common views on basic political, social and economic matters. Believing in peaceful and constitutional means, each political party tries to capture power in the elections.

The inauguration of constitutional government and the adoption of parliamentary system paved the way for the active involvement of political parties in Indian politics. The origin of the Indian National Congress in 1885 played a significant role in organising the people of India. After Independence the Congress Party, however, attained the status of a political party.

The Congress as a national movement represented the heterogeneous character of the Indian society. 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 parties play rather dissimilar roles.

At the national level this one-party rule of the Congress lasted for the first three decades of free India since no other party could offer an effective alternative to the Congress. The Congress rule is characterised by many scholars as 'one-party dominant system. India developed neither one-party system, two-party system nor multi-party system. The Indian system is a peculiar type of party system suited to the prevailing conditions of India after independence where the Congress played an unmatched role in shaping the political destiny of this country.

Coalition Scenario in India- At National Level coalitions are fundamentally a result rather than a cause of political unrest. Dissatisfied members of the ruling single party or the opposition party or the parties that have been long away from power centres either shift their stand to form new alliances or form break away groups.

The coalition experiment is not new to India. The era of coalition governance in India first began in 1946, when an Interim Government was formed under the leadership of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Since the new Constitution of India came into force on 26th January 1950, the coalition history at the national level began first when the Congress Party under Smt Indira Gandhi during 1969-70 became a minority Government and kept running with the support extended by the Communist Party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) of Tamil Nadu.

Indeed, the **Janata Government** led by Shri. Morarji Desai (**1977-79**), the **Samaiwadi Janata Government** led by Shri. Charan Singh (**August 1979 - January 1980**); the V. P. Singh's **National Front Government (December 1989 to November 1990)**; or a short lived **Chandra Shekhar's Government (November 1990 to June 1991)** are not regarded as genuine coalition

governments, because in the Janata Government the parties had merged together and other coalition governments were minority governments supported by a large group from outside.

Subsequently, the **United Front Government (July 1996 to March 1998)** led by Shri Deve Gowda and Shri I K Gulrajani and the BJP led Coalition Government (1998 March-) headed by Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee, have been described as the first and second true coalition governments at the Centre, because for the first time in the post-independence history of India, more than a dozen political parties, both regional and national holding different ideologies have joined together to form government with the sole purpose of sharing power and keeping away the Congress from the Government.

However, in 2004 Lok Sabha election, the Indian National Congress, which had governed India for all but five years from independence until 1996, returned to power after a record eight years out of office. It was able to put together a majority of more than 335 members out of 543 with the help of its allies. The 335 members included both the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance.

In May 2014, the BJP claims the first single party majority in Parliament in last three decades. Indian politics is synonymous with coalition politics between 1989 to 2014, following decades of the congress party dominance at the national level.

India does appear ushered in new 4th Party System - i) One that is premised on a unique set of political principles and that show a clear break with what came before. In the 2019 General Election the BJP did the unthinkable; the party clinched the 2nd consecutive majority in Lok Sabha, a feat that was accomplished by congress part in 1980 and 1984 respectively. 2014 represents a key structural break.

There is a broad consensus that Indian electoral history - the inaugural post-independence general election in 1952 until the 16th Lok Sabha election in 2014 can be roughly divided into three electoral orders.

1) 1952 - 1967 : The 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. As an all-encompassing party that sought - in theory if not always in practice - to provide a pan-Indian representation for all of India's diverse caste, linguistic, and religious groups, the Congress Party's penetration into Indian society was unmatched.

The inadequacies of the other players on the political scene fuelled that dominance. While a raft of opposition parties keenly contested elections, opposition forces were badly fragmented, which limited their ability to mount a serious campaign to unseat

the Congress. Instead, the most salient political competition often occurred between factions within the Congress Party representing different ideological viewpoints. Despite the party's reputation as a big-tent party, the Congress was significantly controlled by the upper castes, who accounted for the major share of its elected representatives at the state and national levels and its most prominent, visible national leaders.

2) 1967 TO 1989: Growing Opposition Parties at the State Level:

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. With the exception of the election of 1977—when the Congress was badly punished for then prime minister Indira Gandhi's autocratic excesses during Emergency Rule between 1975 and 1977—the party remained the default choice for governance at the centre. But new expressions of caste and regional identities chipped away at the party's monopoly of subnational politics. The 1960s gave rise to India's "first democratic upsurge"—to borrow Yadav's term—when populous OBC groups first mobilized to ensure that their political power was in greater alignment with their demographic weight and their increasing economic clout.

3) 1989 TO 2014: Beginning of the Coalition Politics:

Whatever semblance of Congress dominance that remained after 1967 would come to an end in 1989, which denoted the start of coalition governance in New Delhi and the third-party system. Although the Congress's grasp on national power had gradually weakened in the 1960s and 1970s, by the end of the following decade it had completely given way to a multipolar gathering of forces in which the Congress was no longer the single pole around which politics revolved. Three powerful forces—often termed "Mandal, masjid, and market"—disrupted Indian politics, prompting a realignment in politics.

The first of these forces was the Mandal Commission, a government task force that recommended that OBCs be given access to quotas governing higher education seats and civil service posts. Until this point, quotas—or "reservations," as they are known in Indian parlance—were restricted to Scheduled Castes/Dalits and Scheduled Tribes. 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.

The second force was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, by pro-Hindu forces associated with the BJP. They sought to replace the mosque with a mandir (temple) marking the birthplace of the Hindu deity Ram. This ethno-nationalist mobilization helped fuel the 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. As the successor to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) and a party driven by a Hindu

nationalist worldview, the BJP was initially limited to the heartland of the country. Its main votaries hailed from the relatively privileged communities of Brahmins and Banias. The new political context allowed the BJP to make inroads among lower castes and extend its appeal beyond its traditional core geographies.

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. This rupture with the past redefined the boundaries of mainstream economic discourse in India, creating both new alignments in favor of opening up as well as reactionary forces who worried about the adverse consequences for India's poor and its limited industrial base.

2014 – Present: From Unipolarity to Multipolarity: Between 1952 and 1989, the Congress Party has fulfilled the role of the supreme power. From 1952 to 1977, the Congress Party controlled the reins of power in New Delhi without interruption. Although the Janata coalition ousted the Congress following Indira Gandhi's termination of a twenty-one-month period of Emergency Rule, its reign was short-lived. By 1980, the Congress Party was back in power in New Delhi and it further improved its strength in the 1984 polls in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. There were shifts during this period at the state level, where the Congress Party's position post-1967 sharply declined, but the Congress hold on national politics was more or less intact. But the privileged position of Congress in New Delhi however evaporated after the 1989 elections. The BJP's share of the vote peaked in 1998 and but subsequently experienced a secular decline. In India's 2009 general election, the BJP won 116 seats and on its way to a second consecutive election defeat at the hands of the Congress.

Beyond India's Third Party System: India has entered a new era of politics with the BJP's recent general election victories in 2014 and 2019. Broadly, there are six defining attributes of the third party system.

First, the absence of a powerful central pole i.e. Congress in national politics between 1989 and 2009 is perhaps the central feature of the third party system. Thus, BJP would soon emerge as the only other truly national party to give the Congress a serious fight across multiple states although it too had limitations of demography, geography, and ideology.

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 for good and overall moving ahead towards the coalition age.

Third, electoral contests became more competitive on nearly every dimension. 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 elections were no longer truly national in nature; they were more akin to a collection of state-level verdicts.

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.

Finally, there was a clear change in the social composition of the representative class. Example: 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.

Discontinuities across all six of these hallmarks of the third party system were on display in the electoral outcomes of the two most recent general elections—2014 and 2019—not to mention in the shifting dynamics at the subnational level.