

India's Political Parties

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ABSTRACT

A study of democracy is incomplete without a study of one of its most fundamental components—political parties. In India, works on the country's political parties so far have explored, among other things, the direct and indirect relationship between the nature and type of political parties and the different facets of the state and governance. One such recurring theme is the exploration of the overall structure of federalism i.e relationship between the centre and state governments (Gardner 2013; Jenkins and Roscoe 2014; Borges 2011).

The influence of political parties on the level of centralization and decentralization has not only impacted the federal structure of the country but has also influenced voters in choosing national parties over regional players (Chhibber and Kollman 1998). This ability of the national political parties to overall influence state-level politics has majorly impacted the regional autonomy of states (Gardner 2013).

The transition of the Indian political system into a dominant party system centred around the BJP in the past decade provokes us to see how the changes in the party system are translated across states in India. Initially, we will consider broad and empirical evidence to study the formation, survival and dissolution or exit of parties in India. Here, we show how and when parties in India are formed, what factors impact their survival and what causes their eventual decline and exit. This section is the product of research conducted on a dataset developed over the course of the year. This dataset profiles all parties in all Indian states for legislative assembly elections conducted between 1962 and 2021 inclusive. We first start by looking at periods of high formation and dissolution of political parties and find how many of India's parties fail to last, ending up exiting the competition after a single election. We subsequently differentiate between the types of parties being formed: are they new and organically arising, or are they the product of splintering and shifting within existing parties? Our research does how that many successful parties are not entirely new and there are a significant number of key parties in states that have links to older national parties. This is especially true for the several parties that split from the INC, or ones that emerged from the breakup of the Janata Parivar of parties.

INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus that Indian politics is undergoing a fundamental transformation and, with it, the fate of India's federal compact is also at an important juncture. Indian federalism has always been closely associated with the process of democratisation. The decentralisation of the Indian polity in the late 1980s and the 1990s had much to do with adjusting to the new political reality on the part of national parties, as the growing political strength of state-level parties meant that no government could accede to the Centre without their support (Singh and Verney, 2003). This increased the bargaining power of state-level parties and the federal compact was organically redrawn to give more meaningful powers to the states.

Hitherto unrepresented social groups have found a chance to get integrated in Indian polity through sub-national party systems because the federal structures of India supported them. This deepening of

democracy, especially with the arrival of regional parties, seeded a continuing process of accommodation and negotiation; a system of bargaining between the Centre and the states that have been cited as having a deep stabilising effect on the Indian polity (Mahajan 2012). There are several reasons why this chapter of Indian political history is important to understand India's party system. While databases are now available in the public domain (eg, the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, etc) and past electoral records exist, they still lack fundamental details of when parties are being formed and when they get dissolved (the Election Commission of India does not, or only rarely, de-registers parties).

However, the rise of the single-majority BJP, especially since 2014, reversed this stability. Further, the dismantling of the Planning Commission, the abrogation of Article 370, and the establishment of a Goods and Services Tax are some of the elements that have altered the fiscal and institutional federal landscape and the dynamic of Centre-State relations. Across various domains—finance, agriculture, law and order, health and education—it is the central government which is expanding its footprint and stretching the limits of its power (Aiyar and Tillin, 2019). This moment in India's political landscape, therefore, presents a paradox of federalism: the rise of a dominant party at the Centre, coinciding with increasing fragmentation and assertion of parties at a sub-national level, pushing the appeal of sub-nationalism and cultural identity, that poses a challenge to the BJP. The present re-configuration, therefore, potentially holds profound implications for the future of the Indian political space. However, we first need a systematic and data-driven framework to ground these concepts and have a meaningful discussion

Overview of the dataset

The following are the summary stats, showing the number of unique parties which breached each threshold (1% vote share, 5% seat share, etc.) at least once. As far as total parties in a state are concerned, states such as UP (618) and Bihar (431) have seen the proliferation of a rather large number of parties which is unmatched by almost any other state. On the other hand, among other major states, Himachal Pradesh has a number of parties (50) that is lower than many newer states which have not seen as many electoral cycles and could be comparable in size. The fewest parties, however, remain in the northeastern states—excluding Assam—with Arunachal Pradesh at 16, and many others below 30. Interestingly, there have been a number of parties in Delhi, with about 288 different parties having contested the NCT's assembly elections since 1993.

Age distribution of parties

When we look at the lifespan of all the parties together, it becomes clear how difficult it is to sustain a party in this country. Most parties, as can be seen in the graph below, do not survive more than one election cycle. That is to say, most parties just appear in one election and then cease to exist. The only few parties that have been able to survive for the entire period of India are limited to parties like the INC and the Communist Party.

Nature of emerging parties

Under this category, we determined whether a party was a new, splinter or successor party. Out of 272 parties, we were able to find information on 246 parties. A caveat to mention here is that successors are generally few and far in between. This seems plausible because rarely can a new party lay sole claim to the legacy of an older party without conflict. What is remarkable, however, is the idea that many emerging parties are not fully new. As the graph below shows, the number of new emerging parties (117) and splinter

groups(118) is identical among those that have at least achieved a 1% vote share. The graphs also imply that there are a significant number of key parties in states that have links to older national parties. This is especially true for the several parties that split from the INC or the ones that emerged through the break-up of the Janata Parivar of parties.

How Indian Parties Differ Ananalysis of Expert Opinion

Introduction

Indian Politics has transformed in the past decade. At the present moment when the dominant party occupies centre stage in the nation's polity, we observe state-wise variation in terms of how parties are organizing themselves. In the studies of political parties at the global level, the most recurrent themes that set parties apart include their organizations (Fabre 2011; Dupont et al., 2022), the degree of their populist appeal (Norris, 2020), and political clientelism (Kitschelt 2014). In this chapter, our focus remains on studying how parties vary at the subnational level in India. In a multi-level polity like India, the organization and functioning of political parties—that includes winning elections and mobilizing their support base—varies greatly. Our study aims to broaden the understanding of inter-state variations among parties by including their organization, ideological positions, and mobilization techniques to identify the subnational variations impacting the survival of parties and party systems.

Political issues

Caste has remained a strong force in Indian politics. Caste-based associations have a long story in Indian society, and with the rise of electoral democracy, many of these associations have transformed (Arnold et al,1976). One such drastic shift in caste-based politics in India was the implementation of the Mandal Commission report which mandated another 27% reservation to Other Backward Classes(OBCs),who roughly form 52% of the population. These changed reservation policies benefitted the dominant OBCs, which further led to decades of agitations, showing how considering them one homogeneous bloc would be erroneous(Sen 2012).High incidences of protests across states in past decades have kept the issue of reservation relevant in electoral politics.

Social issues

Parties are also divided in their views and support of certain social issues that vary across states and their unique societies. We see state-wide variations between the two national parties in their support of social issues such as the inheritance rights of women, the position of women in households, and accepting inter-caste marriages. The INC is far ahead of the BJP when it comes to women's position in society and accepting inter-caste marriages, as per the responses provided by the various state experts.

Economic issues

The economic reforms of1991were a watershed moment in Indian history. As license raj retreated, there was more foreign direct investment followed by higher revenue by the Indian state. The period also sawan increase in public investment in social sectors and welfare schemes(Deshpande et.al, 2017). The ability to invest more by the government through subsidies also resulted in demand for welfare and subsidies from the population, which essentially became the precondition for effective power mobilization (Esping Anderson 2017).

Party finances

In addition to personnel, running effective political organizations requires money. Political parties draw diverse sources of finances to establish and maintain party offices. Both the BJP and the INC rely on big businesses to fund their organizational and day-to-day activities. However, the BJP has a clear edge in obtaining finances from big businesses compared to the INC. Also, when it comes to smaller businesses, the BJP has a natural advantage as their primary support base is derived from small businesses and traders (Sitapati, 2020).

Conclusion

While there exists significant literature on parties and party systems in India, less attention has been paid to assessing the influence of federal structure on the Indian polity and the varied sub-national social cleavages that have on political parties in India. The strategic policy position staked by parties at the national level and across states stand crucial in understanding the transformations undergoing in the Indian polity and their possible outcomes that will further shape the federal structure of the Indian state.

In the first section, we identified and classified parties to understand the factors behind their proliferation and survival at the sub-national level. One of the necessary but not sufficient determinants for the proliferation of parties stood the size of the legislature at state levels. Factionalism and fragmentation in the sub-national party systems prompted by social cleavages in attempts to capture electoral space emerge as prominent causes in the formation of new parties. However, electoral performance and survival are dependent on the links the new parties have to established parties from the past.

In the subsequent section, we studied, based on the opinions of scholars and experts, the varying positions parties take up to capture political space at state levels. We found out that the extent of ideological disposition, positions on key issues, and organisational and social mobilisation are dependent on the socio-political contexts of those states. Major parties remain client list at their fundamental level, driven by social cleavages, and funded by big businesses. The core uniting base for BJP stands for religion while that for INC remains leadership and patronage.

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