



Change and Continuity in the Electoral Strategy of Indian National Congress: An impact on Indian democracy

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Introduction

One party dominated both national politics and the majority of Indian states during the first phase of electoral politics, sometimes known as the Nehruvian phase. Competition was almost always between the dominant Congress party and tiny opposition organisations with regional divisions. The Congress party emphasised the necessity of centralised power to ensure "country building" as well. During this time, the distinction between party and government was gradually but steadily blurred (Shastri 1991: 15). Due to the breakdown of the consensus culture that had been so pronounced in the early years, there were rising tensions between the candidates/parties in the electoral fray during the second phase (1967–1977).

A fractured mandate is predicted to result from the 15th Loksabha elections because the alliances are still standing. The two main coalitions, (UPA) and the National Democratic Stone, will be a key factor in the election. Unlike between 1999 and 2004, poll alliances in 2009 will still exist after the election. Coalitions were created for a variety of regional, national, and international purposes. Allegiances and pending on which formation fluidity may appear surprising or less stayed intact since the government by the left parties the fluidity in the alliances but the continued refusal of the congress party to fully accept that the era of one party rule has long since decided to end (The Congress Party's Enemy, 2009, EPW). Despite the UPA's five-year rule over the Congress, the party's propensity to signal needs to be taken into consideration. Recent statements seem to imply that the party coalition partners share seats. that the partners will persevere, and it is adamant that the elections be held. Due to their strategic locations, some allies have a larger national influence that extends beyond local borders.

India had roaring growth between 2004 and 2008, averaging 8%. The right to information legislation, the employment guarantee programme, and increased funding for the social sector are just a few of UPA-1's many

accomplishments. In contrast, UPA-2 appears uninspired and pointless: there is a sharp decline in economic growth, a resurgence of inflation harming the general populace, stagnation in industry, infrastructural bottlenecks, and a civil society uprising motivated by the middle class against the crooked and greedy political class. With the benefit of hindsight, it is evident that the success of UPA-1 was dependent on the factors outlined below, which represented a political turning point and were the cause of the party's electoral success in the 2009 legislative elections. Since then, UPA-2 has been conspicuously absent.

The popularity of Singh and the UPA among Indians continued to drop throughout Singh's second tenure as prime minister. An important element was the Indian economy, which had originally survived the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 but had since started to deteriorate due to issues like slowing growth and rising inflation, rising prices for food and energy, and high interest rates that discouraged investment. The more major scandals, however, included a number of government figures, including Prime Minister Singh himself in 2013, and the public of the nation grew more and more disgusted with them. Delhi, a longtime Congress stronghold, was one of the crucial state and territory elections the Congress Party lost in 2013. Critics frequently point the finger at the Congress leadership and the two centres of power for the policy inertia under UPA-2, but the same system operated effectively under UPA-1, in part because of the aura surrounding Sonia Gandhi's resignation as prime minister and an apparent attempt to balance growth and equity in order to defeat communalism.

While the UPA-I had its share of issues, the coordination committee scrupulously avoided deviating from the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP), which served as an agreed-upon road map. Sonia Gandhi held a hegemonic position in UPA-I despite the Congress having fewer than 150 seats, and her emphasis on the social agenda served as the government's defining characteristic. Even though UPA-2 appears to be stumbling from crisis to crisis, she does not appear to be taking a comparable prominent role in determining the policy agenda this time. The election success of UPA-1 depended on striking a compromise between Manmohan Singh's pro-market agenda and Sonia Gandhi's emphasis on social welfare initiatives.

Reason behind electoral failure of INC

On the Indian political arena, the apparent growth of regional political parties is a recurrent subject. In India, the number of parties running in parliamentary elections has sharply increased over the past two decades, while the average margin of victory has decreased in tandem. These two data points show the emergence of new

power centers inside the states. In fact, aside from Modi and the two at the top of the Congress Party, many of the most important political figures in India today are from regional parties. Examples include Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, and Jayalalithaa Jayaram, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. Indeed, over the past two decades, India's electoral system has changed due to the emergence of new regional parties, many of whose supporters are restricted to a single state or even a subregion of a single state. However, it's unclear whether regional parties will be able to amass more power over New Delhi's and India's state governments. By any standard, the 2014 election results were a rejection of the mainstream narrative that portrays regional parties as continuously gaining political clout. In actuality, a number of recent empirical phenomena run counter to ideas of regional parties' unending rise. Indeed, the results of the most recent Lok Sabha elections show that while regional parties' shares of the vote have stayed stable, their shares of seats have declined. The percentage of the popular vote won by regional parties was 51.3 percent in 2004, reached a record-high of 52.6 percent in 2009, and then fell to 48.6 percent in 2014—equal to their vote performance in the 1998 elections. However, the trajectory of their percentage of seats has been considerably different. Following the 2004 election, regional parties held 47.9% of the seats; however, due to severe fragmentation, that number fell to 40% in 2014. This shows that rather than weakening the influence of national parties, the growth of regional parties may cause them to cannibalise the vote share of nonnational parties.

In India, coalition formation was a common occurrence as early as the late 1960s in various states, and it first occurred nationally in the years 1977–1980. However, anti-Congress coalitions predominated up until the late 1990s and were characterised by significant political and governmental instability. Since no single party can command a majority in the Lok Sabha, coalitions have become the only way for parties to exercise executive authority over the past ten years. According to Golder, in such a political setting,

[parties] can compete independently at election time and hope to be part of any government coalition that subsequently forms. Or they can form a pre-electoral coalition with another party (or parties) prior to the election in the hopes of governing together afterwards (2006: 193).

Since no party could command a majority in the Lok Sabha between 1999 and 2009, pre-election coalitions have become the sole way for parties to exercise executive authority at the Centre. Examining the development of the National Democratic Alliance, led by the BJP, and the United Progressive Alliance, led by the Congress, over the course of ten years (Lefebvre and Robin, 2009).

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is now in power, are pitted against one another in this election. The NDA's primary member is the BJP. The BJP is pro-market and aims to combine it with what Prime Minister Modi refers to as *vikashbad*, a Hindi phrase that connotes a sense of inclusive development. In his political rhetoric he presents the programme of the government as *sabkasaath, sabkavikash* (collective effort, development of all).

Those opposed to the BJP see this slogan merely as a veneer to conceal *Hindutva*, the Hindu nationalist cultural, religious and political agenda that seeks to cast India in a Hindu mould. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a social organisation with ties to the BJP and which asserts to have five million members, is actively promoting it. The major opposition coalition in the parliament, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), is headed by the Indian National Congress (INC) and consists of a number of regional parties that have united to oppose the BJP's Hindu nationalism. This alliance has a veneer of intellectual coherence because to a loosely defined social justice and secularism platform that serves as the leitmotiv of Rahul Gandhi, the Congress Presidentelectoral , 's rallies.

By raising concerns about the NDA government's broken promises, the Congress Party planned to undermine the BJP's "India Shining" campaign. The Congress made the common man (aam aadmi) its USP with the tagline 'Aam Aadmi Ke Saath.' It capitalised on the weak link of the BJP campaign—education and employment. It succeeded in getting the Election Commission to issue orders ordering the removal of government-sponsored billboards advertising projects like the Golden Quadrilateral highway project. Congress was thus able to project the use of public money on such hoardings. The result of the 2004 election was decisively in favour of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which ran its full term

In India, sound economics can contribute to sound politics. Macroeconomic realities appear to be becoming more important in elections, despite the long-held belief that local factors play a major influence in determining voters' decisions. Regional parties' growing prominence in Indian politics has been a topic of significant controversy. The balance of power between national and regional parties, however, has been surprisingly stable in recent electoral patterns. Dynastic politics might not be well-liked, but its practitioners are. At least one in five of the lawmakers chosen in 2014 was related to a politician.

Politicians who are the subject of current criminal investigations have frequently been chosen by Indian voters. The 2014 outcomes show an underlying need for politicians who can get things done—even if they are associated with misconduct. Voters may not always cast their ballots according to their caste. Although social prejudices are still pervasive in India, their ability to influence political decisions is uneven and may even be waning.

In the first three decades following independence, the type of Congress dominance For the political pundits of the day, as well as the average Indian voter, Congress' domination over India's political landscape was not a complete surprise. The four reasons for the congress' overwhelming victory in the first three general elections are listed below. First off, the party's leadership of the nationalist cause helped it gain a tonne of goodwill and political capital. Since the party was symbolized with the legacy of national movement which also added to its strength. The second factor was that the Congress was the only party with an organization extending across the nation and down to the village level. The party's federal structure was based on a system of internal democracy that functioned to resolve disputes among its members and maintain party cohesion. A third factor was that the Congress achieved its position of political dominance by creating an organization that adjusted to local circumstances rather often reaching the village through local "big men" who controlled village "vote banks." The Intraparty competition served to channel information about local circumstances up the party hierarchy. Fourth, patronage was the oil that lubricated the party machine. As the state expanded its development role, it accumulated more resources that could be distributed to party members. The Congress party in India enjoyed the benefits of a "virtuous cycle," in which its electoral success gave it access to economic and political resources that enabled the party to attract new supporters.

Strength and Weakness of Congress party and its impact on Indian Democracy

Given its antiquity and widespread presence, the Congress party has developed a strong national base and has become recognised as a political pioneer in India over the years. The fact that it is a cadre-based party is crucial. Here are some of the party's advantages and disadvantages that have hindered Congress from leaving a lasting legacy. On the plus side, Congress has a significant audience and is more recognisable as a brand thanks to the "Gandhi family" association. Secondly, they have become experts in breaking their opponents politically and in the recent past they are using government machinery like CBI to silence their rivals. The Congress now has sufficient financial resources to vigorously campaign in the 2014 elections thanks to the last decade of

dominance. On the other hand, there are significant divisions among the party's strata, making unity a big problem. Secondly, the hierarchy runs like monopoly and there is not much space to views and opinions. Above all, Congress's biggest weakness is its avid interest in corruption and looting every penny from the people (nikhil, 2019).

John Morris is quoted as saying, "The death of Nehru did less to influence the Indian political system than the discourse about his charismatic leadership may have led us to hope." This statement regarding the congress party's dominance in the political establishment is not an exaggeration. The evaluation of his influence is a topic of considerable complexity; yet, one simplification cannot be replaced by another. Separating his impact on political actors' real behaviour and institutions' actual behaviour from his influence on observers' perceptions of that behaviour may be the most delicate of all the efforts. How much, that is, of what appears novel in the post-Nehru period is merely the coming to light of features which were already present but obscured or unnoticed by virtue of the attention focused on the great man himself? In no area of the Indian political system is this question more important than in the Congress Party. The reasons for the downfall of congress party in India after 1977 were; Many of the senior leaders of the congress party were either no more or had left the party in shambles. • Its demise was also a result of the corrupt policies of numerous congress leaders. The party's newer members lacked sufficient zeal. People ceased voting for congress in a blind manner. High command of congress had also ignored the regional aspirations of people. Splits in congress party were highly responsible for its downfall. The bitter experience of 1975 emergency has added to the downfall of congress party. The development of regional parties and the political clubbing of parties—commonly known as non-congressism—in India's political system paved the ground for non-congress parties to emerge at the national level with the foundation of the Janta Party in 1977. Indicative of Congress's loss of national authority for the second time, the 1989 election. This election was very different from the one in 1977, especially since the 1989 election did not raise a particularly intriguing situation.

After Rajiv Gandhi was overthrown by an organised opposition in 1989, religion and caste identities began to dominate politics rather than other issues. Elections grew increasingly competitive as new political parties constantly emerged when regional, religious, and caste identities became the primary basis of individual identities. During this time, the Congress remained an umbrella-type party accommodating economic views ranging from left-of-centre to the far-right and from Nehruvian secularism to soft Hindutva. Consequently, it kept falling between stools. The BJP's rise as an unabashed Hindu nationalistic party since the 1980s roughly corresponded with the Congress abandoning its principled standpoint on secularism. As a result, the Congress was demoted to the status of the

BJP's "B" Team or an adjunct of a potent anti-BJP front in numerous states, such as UP, where it teamed up as a junior partner with the Samajwadi Party.

The Congress-led campaign in this election was very different. The party tried hard to bring the issue of corruption (Rafale) with a direct attack on the Prime Minister, along with the issues of farmers' unrest, unemployment among youth, inflation, demonetization and goods and services tax (GST). Congress also came out with a proposal of the NYAY scheme to lure the marginalized section of the society. Rahul Gandhi campaigned really hard and aggressively for the election, but the corruption issue had no effect on the electorate in any manner, and the idea of NYAY had no chance of reaching the potential electorate (Sisodia, 2019). In some important states, the Congress party failed to form the pan-Indian coalition needed to defeat the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (Sisodia, 2019).

Obviously, there are severe concerns about the Indian National Congress' political future after its dismal showing in the recently held national election (Ghose and Jha, 2019). The Congress has not weakened overnight. The decline of the party has been in process for almost three decades, though it was in power for half of these years. However, the realisation that it is beyond the capacity of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to resurrect the party is a new phenomenon. With party president Sonia Gandhi's health impeding her from leading the party, son Rahul Gandhi's failure to make a mark either as a charismatic leader or an astute tactician after 13 years in politics and daughter Priyanka Vadra's presumptive ability demonstrated as overhyped, the Congress Party faces an unprecedented crisis (Mukhopadhyay, 2017). The most evident disputed matter that is being vigorously and widely debated is Rahul Gandhi's ability to turn around the already struggling main opposition party in India's electoral fortunes. It is undeniably true that the deep-rooted habitual sycophancy within the party regarding the unrestrained obsession with the Gandhis is appalling. Moreover, the unquestioning authority of the Gandhi family over the party machinery, despite leading the Congress to miserable electoral results in two successive national elections as well as innumerable state elections, thwarts the two most elementary prerequisites of a healthy party system, inner party democracy and electoral accountability.

Supporters of the Gandhi family are adamant that Rahul has what it takes to guide the party out of the electoral wilderness. Party members have been somewhat encouraged by his increasing prominence, frequent interventions in parliament, and newfound assertiveness in challenging the Modi administration, which led to the latter's abandonment of a problematic land acquisition bill. Rahul's sporadic interventions, however, are insufficient to restore the Congress and keep it from becoming politically irrelevant. The Congress will change

how it operates if it is eager to improve its prospects. It will need to “groom state level leaders with a popular base who can galvanize the state units of the party,” Shastri says. Such state level leaders, who “have their ear to the ground,” should be made “part of the central leadership team,” he says, “so that the right inputs can be provided to the party `high command ((**Ramachandran, 2015**)).” Starting from 2004, when he first eased himself into the power circles of the Congress at the beginning of the first UPA government under Manmohan Singh until now in 2019, when he has already led the party to its two worst defeats, Rahul Gandhi has been replicating his father’s style and approach. During this time he has been general secretary, vice-president and then the president of the party. His efforts to reform and democratise the party started with the Youth Congress and the National Students Union of India, two time-tested and bold nurseries for future Congress leaders. However, he ended up reforming the Alsatian into a Poodle. After the Congress won 20 Lok Sabha seats from Uttar Pradesh in 2009, often touted as his first electoral success, Rahul Gandhi replaced the seasoned leaders with ‘lightweight outsiders’ such as Mohan Prakash and Madhusudan Mistry to experiment with ‘Mandal and NGO politics’ and ended up ‘finishing the reversing of the revival’ in the 2012 UP Assembly polls. Ever since he took complete charge in the period between 2013 and 2019, Rahul Gandhi’s evident discomfort in the company of seasoned Congress leaders had been a matter of open gossip in the party circles — as much as his penchant for propping up apolitical rookies and ‘hereditary turks’ (Manoj, 2019)..

Rahul Gandhi's refusal to recognise that politics required total commitment - he often took ill-timed holidays - also had negative effect. He even departed for the US immediately after the UP election results and before governments were formed in other states, to join his mother who was undergoing treatment. In contrast, BJP leaders were pictured as relentless warriors - Amit Shah toured Gujarat, his and Modi's home state, which faces local elections later this year, while victory celebrations were still under way.

Besides the leadership crisis, which is the most discussed shortcoming of the party, the precipitous decline of Congress should be explained in light of three more fundamental flaws that have facilitated the silent death of the party since the Indira Gandhi era. First, the complete lack of effort to nurture the grassroots level organizational structures of the party, which can help in mass mobilization. The Congress’ *raison d’etre* for a few years now seems to revolve only around the idea of installing a Gandhi as prime minister of the country, around whom fiefdoms of regional heavyweights thrive and exist. It is undeniably true that the unrestrained obsession with the Gandhis is the only glue holding the party together. However, the Indian electorate has come a long way since the times of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, with little appreciation for legacy, elitism, and entitlement. In these conditions, with the Gandhi brand under pressure, the Congress' capacity to contend with the structural and organisational behemoth of the RSS-BJP alliance is severely jeopardised by its blinkered

disregard for organisational growth and development. Second, the gradual shrinking of the social base of the party by alienating ambitious but fiery mass leaders in order to retain the supremacy of the central leadership of the party. Third, the complete lack of any consistent or coherent idea on which the party can build the narrative of its political identity to attract the people (Ghose and Jha, 2019). Since it came to power, the BJP government has failed on multiple fronts. Prices of essential commodities are soaring. The agrarian crisis is deepening. And religious intolerance and anti-minority violence have assumed worrying proportions.

Between 1998 and 2014, alliance and coalition politics were more accepted in Indian electoral politics. Each of the three five-year terms of the coalition administrations elected in 1999, 2004, and 2009 have been marked by strong and consistent economic growth. The Indian electorate has come to accept alliances and coalitions as part of the democratic process and the political parties have adapted to the dynamics of electoral alliances and coalition formation and the compromises and powersharing required to sustain co-operation. Instilling a critical component of responsibility and responsiveness in the political process, Indian elections serve a strong representative role. Although there are still significant problems with how the legislative system works and how public policy initiatives are carried out, coalition politics are widely acknowledged to reflect the country's regional diversity and social complexity. For this reason, electoral alliances and coalition politics are key to the representative role of democracy in contemporary India (McMillan, 2014).

The possibility that regional parties would someday develop into national parties due to their growing influence was another danger that they might pose. While it is true that several regional parties officially made that jump—although none can claim the extensive reach the Congress and BJP boast—it turns out this fear was overblown. Most regional parties have struggled mightily to translate their regional standing into a platform for success at a broader, pan-Indian level—despite being accorded “national party” status by the Election Commission on the basis of their rather limited presence in multiple states.

The amount of support for change among the urban middle class and the bulk of the urban and rural poor was significantly different, as shown by the 2004 elections. Prior to this month's national elections, the Congress Party-led UPA coalition was elected to two consecutive terms in office. Keen to address the continued imbalances in India's economy, the UPA-led governments enacted a number of ‘rights-based’ laws and interventions aimed at the development of broad-based infrastructure, such as the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, rural livelihood missions and a nationwide plan to provide good all-weather roads to unconnected villages. However, observations of some of these key programs on the ground suggest that neither

the UPA governments nor the party cadres were fully committed to ensure implementation. Consider two such programs, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

With the help of the innovative MGNREGA law, the state made a commitment to give unemployed people jobs in infrastructure-building projects for rural and agricultural areas, paying them the minimum wage. Political economist Dilip Mookherjee summarized research on its effects in a recent essay and concluded: “Providing employment to rural unskilled labour is the single most direct and effective way of reducing poverty,” and the MGNREGA was successful “in providing a safety net and reducing poverty for the most vulnerable sections of the rural population.”

Notwithstanding the importance of MGNREGA, and advocacy by one of the top advisers of the UPA for active involvement of village-level cadres, the Congress Party failed to mobilize its cadres to ensure effective implementation of the program. The state of affairs was even more dismal vis-à-vis the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which grants land and forest rights to India’s 100 million indigenous *Adivasis*. The ordinance was enacted in part to combat the Maoist insurgents in India's expanding influence. Field research and interviews conducted by this author in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh revealed that the Congress leaders and cadres had failed to make use of the opportunity the FRA provided for active involvement of elected representatives, resulting in nationwide failures in implementation of the law. These failures are particularly critical because in at least two states the forests and land rights activists had offered to work with the Congress Party if party cadres were asked to mobilize.

MGNREGA is a unique piece of legislation through which the state committed to provide jobs for unemployed people who would work at the minimum wage in programs to build rural and agriculture infrastructure. Political economist Dilip Mookherjee summarized research on its effects in a recent essay and concluded: “Providing employment to rural unskilled labour is the single most direct and effective way of reducing poverty,” and the MGNREGA was successful “in providing a safety net and reducing poverty for the most vulnerable sections of the rural population.”

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