



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Evolution Of India's Party System: From Dominance To Multi-Polarity And Beyond

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Executive Summary

India's political party system is a complex and dynamic entity, reflecting the nation's immense linguistic, cultural, social, and religious diversity. Operating within a robust federal democratic framework, it has undergone profound transformations since its inception in the colonial era. The system's trajectory is marked by distinct phases, beginning with a prolonged period of single-party dominance, transitioning through an era of fragmented multi-party competition and coalition governments, and more recently, witnessing the ascendancy of a new dominant political force. Understanding this evolution requires a deep dive into historical developments, key political actors, ideological shifts, and the profound impact of significant events on party structures and inter-party relations.

The historical trajectory of India's party system originates in the late 19th century with the formation of the Indian National Congress (INC) as the principal vehicle for the independence movement. Following India's independence in 1947, the INC established a unique form of democratic hegemony, often referred to as the "Congress System." This period of singular control gradually eroded, paving the way for an era characterized by the rise of regional parties and the necessity of coalition governments at the national level. In contemporary times, the system has experienced another significant shift with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) establishing a new form of national dominance.

A notable characteristic of India's party system is its cyclical nature of dominance. The initial period of overwhelming control by the Indian National Congress after independence eventually gave way to a phase of multi-party competition and coalition governments. This fragmentation, in turn, has been succeeded by the Bharatiya Janata Party's establishment of a new form of dominance in the 21st century. This pattern suggests that the Indian party system does not follow a simple, linear progression from one-party dominance to a multi-party or two-party system. Instead, it exhibits a recurring pattern where periods of strong single-party control alternate with phases of more fragmented and intensely competitive politics. This inherent dynamism means that no single party's preeminence is permanent, and the system retains a remarkable capacity for significant shifts and

adaptations in response to evolving internal and external pressures. Such adaptability challenges any static conceptualization of the party system, underscoring its fluid and responsive qualities within the democratic framework. This article discussed the evolution of party system in India since Colonial period till the current phase of one Party dominance of BJP led NDA Government which is also marked as “MODI” era.

Foundations of Party Politics in Colonial India (1885-1947)

A. The Genesis of the Indian National Congress (INC): Formation, Early Objectives, and Moderate Leadership

The Indian National Congress (INC) was formally established on December 28, 1885, in Bombay, with its inaugural session attended by seventy-two delegates. This foundational event stemmed from a growing political awakening among educated Indians who recognized the need for an all-India platform to articulate their collective aspirations and assert their political rights under British rule. In its initial two decades, from 1885 to 1905, the INC operated during what is known as the 'Moderate Phase'. During this period, it functioned more as an assembly for politically-minded individuals interested in reform rather than a conventional political party in the modern sense.

Leaders of the Moderate Phase adopted a constitutional and peaceful approach, demonstrating a belief in British justice and fair play. Their primary aim was to achieve greater political autonomy for Indians within the existing framework of the British Empire, rather than demanding immediate independence or complete self-rule. They largely relied on what became known as the "3Ps": Petition, Prayer, and Protest, seeking to persuade the British government through reasoned arguments and public opinion. Their key demands included increasing the representation of Indians in legislative councils, Indianizing the civil services, and implementing administrative and judicial reforms. Economically, they advocated for the protection and promotion of Indian industries through various reforms and sought reductions in land revenue taxes. Prominent figures during this era included Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjee, W.C. Bonnerjee, Pherozeshah Mehta, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale.

This period, therefore, involved a gradual familiarization of Indian elites and a segment of the public with modern political concepts such as representation, the power of public opinion, and structured advocacy. This early engagement served as a crucial "incubation" phase for democratic norms and political modernization in India. It laid the foundational intellectual and procedural groundwork for a future democratic party system by introducing and legitimizing concepts of organized political advocacy, constitutional engagement, and public discourse, even within the constraints of colonial rule. This initial, albeit limited, experience was vital for the eventual transition to self-governance.

B. The Rise of Extremism and Mass Mobilization: Causes, Key Figures, and Transformative Movements

The political landscape in India underwent a significant transformation following the 1905 Partition of Bengal, an act orchestrated by Lord Curzon under the pretext of administrative convenience, but widely perceived as an attempt to divide Hindus and Muslims and check the growing wave of nationalism. This controversial decision ignited widespread anger and disappointment, particularly among younger leaders within the INC, leading to the rise of the 'Extremist' faction. Disillusioned with the Moderates' conciliatory approach and their perceived lack of tangible results, this new leadership advocated for "Swaraj" (self-rule) to be achieved through self-reliance, direct action, and more aggressive methods aimed at compelling the British to concede to Indian demands or even leave India.

The most prominent Extremist leaders were Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Bipin Chandra Pal, collectively known as "Lal, Bal, Pal". Tilak famously articulated the assertive nationalist sentiment with his slogan, "Swaraj is my birth right and I shall have it". Their programs emphasized passive resistance, non-cooperation with British authorities, and extensive boycotts of foreign goods, British schools, colleges, and legal careers. This shift towards more assertive tactics played a pivotal role in galvanizing public support and laying the groundwork for the subsequent Gandhian phase of the independence movement.

A critical turning point in India's struggle for independence was the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre on April 13, 1919. In this horrific incident, British troops opened fire on a large, unarmed crowd gathered in Amritsar, killing several hundred people and wounding many more. This atrocity left a permanent scar on Indo-British relations and was the prelude to Mahatma Gandhi's full commitment to the cause of Indian nationalism and independence from Britain.

Under Gandhi's profound influence, the INC underwent a radical transformation in the 1920s. It evolved from an assembly dominated by Western-educated elites into a genuine mass organization that successfully appealed to diverse sections of the Indian public. Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-1922) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934), which famously included the Salt March, mobilized millions of Indians across regional, religious, and caste divides. These movements significantly increased political awareness and participation, fostering a strong national consciousness, promoting indigenous industries (Swadeshi), and demonstrating the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance as a powerful tool against colonial rule. The Non-Cooperation Movement, in particular, aimed to transform the freedom movement from an elitist to a mass-based one, fostering pride in Indian heritage and language. The Quit India Movement, launched in August 1942, represented a decisive call for the immediate withdrawal of the British. Despite severe British repression, including mass arrests of leaders, it led to widespread civil disobedience, strikes, and protests across the country. This movement further galvanized popular support and underscored the inevitability of India's independence.

The shift from the Moderate to the Extremist phase within the INC was not merely a generational or ideological succession; rather, it represented an internal dialectic that propelled the organization's evolution. While the Moderates' constitutional approach established an initial framework for engagement, their perceived limitations in achieving substantial reforms led to the Extremists' demand for more direct action and self-reliance. This internal ideological evolution and strategic adaptation were critical to the INC's transformation from a limited, elite-driven body into a comprehensive national political party capable of leading a mass movement. The ability to absorb and integrate diverse ideological currents—from constitutionalism to radicalism, and ultimately non-violent civil disobedience—allowed the INC to maintain its "catch-all" character. This unique capacity made it the dominant force that would ultimately inherit governance post-independence, effectively embodying both ruling and opposition functions within its own structure for decades, as it managed internal dissent and competing aspirations.

C. Emergence of Other Political Entities: The All-India Muslim League and Early Regional Formations

While the Indian National Congress emerged as the preeminent nationalist organization, the political landscape of pre-independence India was not monolithic. Prior to the INC's formation, various local and regional political associations existed, though they were often dominated by wealthy and aristocratic elements. Notable examples include the Bangabhasha Prakasika Sabha, formed in 1836 by associates of Raja Rammohan Roy, and the Zamindari Association (also known as the 'Landholders' Society'), founded to protect the interests of landlords. Other early organizations like the East India Association (1866) and the Indian Association of Calcutta (1875) also played roles in political advocacy.

A particularly significant development was the formation of the All-India Muslim League (AIML) on December

30, 1906. Emerging from a conference of the Muhammadan Educational Conference in Dhaka, the AIML became the first distinct Muslim political party in India, with key founders including Khwaja Salimullah and Syed Amir Ali. Its establishment marked a formalization of communal identity in Indian politics.

Beyond these, other political parties and movements arose, reflecting diverse ideological currents and approaches to the independence struggle. Disagreements over strategy within INC led to the formation of the Swaraj Party in 1922 by leaders like C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru, who advocated for entering legislative councils to obstruct the British government from within. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was formed on December 26, 1925, representing a socialist and communist ideological stream. Later, in April 1939, Subhas Chandra Bose established the "Forward Bloc" of the Indian National Congress after leaving the main party, advocating for more radical approaches.

The presence of multiple political associations even before the INC, and the subsequent emergence of ideologically distinct parties such as the Muslim League, the Communist Party of India, and the Swaraj Party, demonstrated that the Indian political landscape was never a singular entity. The formation of the Muslim League, in particular, underscored the growing significance of communal identity in politics, which would eventually become a major fault line leading to partition. These early political formations, though often overshadowed by the burgeoning influence of the INC, represented a diverse array of interests and ideologies—ranging from communal and landholder interests to socialist and those advocating for engagement within the legislative framework. This early diversification, even within a colonial context and under the shadow of the INC's growing influence, foreshadowed the eventual fragmentation of the Indian party system post-independence. It laid the groundwork for the emergence of identity-based politics (including communal, caste, and linguistic identities) and ideological pluralism, which would become defining features of India's multi-party democracy after the era of Congress dominance.

D. Constitutional Reforms and Provincial Autonomy: The Government of India Acts (1919 & 1935) and the 1937 Elections

The British administration, in response to growing nationalist demands, introduced several constitutional reforms that gradually expanded Indian participation in governance. The Government of India Act 1919 notably introduced 'dyarchy' (a system of double government) at the provincial level. Under this system, subjects like education, public health, and local self-government were transferred to Indian ministers who were accountable to provincial councils. However, crucial 'reserved' subjects, including law and order, justice, police, and land revenue, remained under the direct control of British governors. This Act also enlarged provincial councils and established a bicameral central legislature, marking the first formal introduction of the democratic principle into the executive branch of British administration in India. Despite these changes, the franchise remained highly limited, primarily based on property qualifications, restricting voting rights to a small segment of the population.

A more significant constitutional reform came with the Government of India Act 1935. This Act substantially increased the number of enfranchised people, granting voting rights to approximately 30 million individuals, which constituted about one-sixth of the adult Indian population, including some women. While still based on property qualifications, this expansion of the electorate was a crucial step towards broader political participation. The Act also granted considerable autonomy to the provinces, creating a significant opportunity for Indian leaders to gain practical experience in governance and administration, thereby paving the way for eventual independence.

Provincial elections were subsequently held in the winter of 1936-37 under the provisions of the 1935 Act. The Indian National Congress achieved a resounding victory, securing 758 out of approximately 1500 seats across the eleven provinces. This enabled the INC to form governments in seven of these provinces: Bombay, Madras,

the Central Provinces, the United Provinces, the North-West Frontier Province, Bihar, and Orissa. In Madras, the Congress achieved its most convincing victory, winning 159 out of 215 seats in the Legislative Assembly.

In contrast, the All-India Muslim League (AIML), despite its efforts to contest the elections, performed poorly. It failed to form a government in any province, winning only 109 of the 482 seats reserved for Muslims. A significant observation from these elections was that most Muslim seats were won by regional Muslim parties rather than the AIML, demonstrating the provincial rather than pan-Indian moorings of Muslim politics at the time. For instance, in Bengal, the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) led by A. K. Fazlul Huq, which focused on rural and agricultural interests, formed a coalition government with the support of the Muslim League, even though the Congress was the single largest party in the province. These elections provided Indian leaders with invaluable practical experience in governing, demonstrating the viability of Indian self-rule and preparing them for the responsibilities of an independent nation.

The 1937 provincial elections, while a democratic triumph for the INC and a significant step towards self-governance, paradoxically contributed to the acceleration of communal polarization and the eventual demand for Pakistan. The Congress's sweeping victories showcased its pan-Indian reach and organizational capacity. However, the Muslim League's poor showing, and crucially, the Congress's subsequent decision to largely exclude the League from coalition governments, inadvertently played into the League's narrative. This narrative asserted that the Congress was primarily a Hindu party and thus incapable of adequately representing Muslim interests, thereby reinforcing the demand for a separate Muslim homeland. The strong performance of regional Muslim parties over the AIML in many areas also highlighted the provincial rather than pan-Indian nature of Muslim politics at the time, a fragmentation that the League then strategically sought to nationalize. This outcome demonstrates how electoral dynamics, even under a limited franchise, can have profound, unintended consequences on the broader political system, shaping national unity and inter-community relations in unforeseen ways. While Indian leaders gained invaluable experience in provincial governance, the political choices made during this period exacerbated divisions that ultimately led to the partition of the subcontinent.

The Era of Congress Dominance (1947-1967)

A. The INC as the Hegemonic Force: Leadership, Ideology, and Nation-Building

Upon India's attainment of independence, the Indian National Congress (INC) seamlessly transitioned from a freedom movement into the ruling political party. Jawaharlal Nehru, a prominent figure in the independence struggle, assumed the pivotal role of India's first Prime Minister. The Congress's unparalleled historical legitimacy, earned through its leadership of the independence movement, positioned it as the undisputed and natural inheritor of governance in the newly independent nation. In the post-independence era, the Congress evolved into a "catch-all, Indian nationalist and secular party," effectively dominating Indian politics for the subsequent five decades. Its foundational values, which had been articulated and refined even before independence, included a strong commitment to democracy, nationalism, secularism, inclusive growth, and social justice. The party's stated objective, enshrined in its constitution, was the establishment of a Socialist State based on Parliamentary Democracy, ensuring equality of opportunity and political, economic, and social rights for all citizens.

Jawaharlal Nehru, serving as the paramount leader of the party and Prime Minister from 1951 until his death in 1964, profoundly shaped India's trajectory as a modern nation. His vision for India emphasized parliamentary democracy, a staunch commitment to secularism, and the vigorous promotion of science and technology as catalysts for national progress. Economically, Nehru advocated for a mixed economy model, characterized by state-driven industrialization, with significant investment directed towards key public sector industries such as steel, iron, coal, and power. In the realm of foreign policy, he was instrumental in establishing the Non-

Aligned Movement, positioning India as a leading voice among nations that sought to avoid alignment with either of the Cold War's dominant ideological blocs.

The political phenomenon of the "Congress System," a term notably coined by political scientist Rajni Kothari, describes a unique period where a single party, the INC, maintained overwhelming dominance within a multi-party democratic framework for nearly two decades. This was not a one-party state in the authoritarian sense, but rather a system where the Congress effectively absorbed and represented a vast spectrum of ideologies and social groups. It functioned as an all-inclusive social and ideological coalition, accommodating diverse viewpoints ranging from revolutionary to pacifist, conservative to radical, and encompassing various shades of the political center. This internal pluralism meant that many of the political debates and ideological struggles that would typically occur between distinct, competing parties in a multi-party system were instead contained and negotiated within the broad umbrella of the Congress itself. Different "factions" within the party, each with varying goals, served to balance the party's internal dynamics, effectively allowing the Congress to act as both the ruling and, in a sense, the opposition party. This unique mechanism provided crucial stability and facilitated the complex process of nation-building in the nascent years of independent India. By acting as a broad-based social and ideological umbrella, the Congress could manage and integrate India's immense diversity, fostering consensus and legitimizing the newly established democratic institutions. However, this very dominance also meant that a robust external opposition was slow to develop, potentially leading to a lack of effective external accountability and a concentration of power within the party's internal structures.

B. Electoral Supremacy: Analysis of the First Three General Elections (1952, 1957, 1962)

The electoral supremacy of the Indian National Congress in the immediate post-independence period was truly remarkable, establishing a pattern of dominance that profoundly shaped India's early democratic landscape. In the first general election held in 1951-52, the Congress secured a landslide victory, winning an astounding 364 out of 489 seats in the Lok Sabha, which translated to 74.4% of the total seats, with approximately 45% of the popular vote. The Communist Party of India (CPI) emerged as the second-largest party, but with a distant 16 seats, highlighting the vast disparity in political strength.

The consistent and overwhelming electoral victories of the Congress in the first three general elections were not solely attributable to the nascent stage or inherent weakness of opposition parties. A deeper examination reveals that two critical factors underpinned this sustained dominance. **Firstly**, the party enjoyed a tremendous "legitimacy dividend" and popular goodwill, stemming directly from its historical role as the primary organization that spearheaded the independence struggle. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru successfully transferred their nationalist credentials and the emotional appeal of the freedom movement into electoral politics, creating a powerful narrative that opposition parties found exceptionally difficult to counter. **Secondly**, the Congress possessed an unmatched organizational infrastructure that penetrated deep into rural India. Its vast network of local committees, block-level workers, and district organizations provided a significant and unique advantage in mobilizing voters, particularly in an era predating widespread mass media saturation. This combination of historical legitimacy and superior organizational capacity allowed the INC to consolidate democratic institutions while simultaneously maintaining a near-monopoly on political power. The sheer scale of its grassroots reach and the profound emotional connection it forged with the populace through the freedom struggle provided a formidable barrier to the emergence of strong, competitive opposition parties in the early decades of independent India.

C. The "Congress System": Internal Dynamics and the Nature of Opposition

The "Congress System," spanning from 1947 to 1967, fundamentally shaped India's democratic institutions through the Indian National Congress's unique ability to function as a comprehensive "social and ideological coalition". While the party's origins were rooted in an English-speaking, upper-caste, and urban elite, its social base significantly broadened with each civil disobedience movement during the independence struggle. By the time India gained independence, the Congress had evolved into a diverse alliance, representing the vast variety of India in terms of classes, castes, faiths, and languages. This rainbow-colored social alliance allowed the Congress to embody a wide spectrum of interests and viewpoints.

This coalition-like character was instrumental in enabling the Congress to tolerate and even absorb a wide range of beliefs and philosophies within its own structure. This unique capacity effectively placed external opposition parties in a difficult position, as much of the ideological and political competition that would typically occur between distinct parties in a multi-party system was instead contained and negotiated internally within the Congress. Groups with opposing ideas, rather than abandoning the party, often engaged in political competition *within* the Congress, forming various "factions" that served to balance the party's internal dynamics. This internal balancing act meant that the Congress effectively served as both the ruling party and, in a significant sense, the internal opposition, managing dissent and diverse demands under a single umbrella.

The system's reliance on the Congress's internal capacity to manage dissent ultimately led to a situation where the party became, in effect, both the "ruling and opposition" force. The eventual weakening of this internal consensus, coupled with the rise of external challenges and new social groups entering the political process, would expose the vulnerabilities of a system heavily reliant on one party's internal dynamics, paving the way for a more competitive and fragmented political landscape in the decades that followed.

The Decline of Congress Dominance and the Emergence of Multi-Party Competition (1967-1989)

A. The Watershed 1967 Elections: Cracks in the Congress System and Formation of Non-Congress Governments

The general elections of February 1967 marked a profound turning point in Indian politics, unequivocally signaling the end of the unchallenged supremacy of the Indian National Congress. This year is widely recognized as the moment when the Congress Party's long-standing grip on power, particularly in India's states, began to sharply wane. While the Congress managed to retain power at the national level, its majority in the Lok Sabha was significantly reduced, securing 283 out of 520 seats with a diminished 40.78% of the popular vote. This was a stark contrast to the overwhelming majorities it had commanded in the previous three general elections.

More critically, the Congress suffered major setbacks at the state level, losing its absolute majority or being ousted from power in nine states. These included key regions such as Gujarat, Madras (which would later become Tamil Nadu), Orissa, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Punjab. In Madras, for instance, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) decisively displaced the Congress, winning 25 out of 39 seats. Similarly, in Kerala, the **Communist Party of India (Marxist) emerged as the dominant force.**

These unprecedented state-level defeats led to the formation of the first multi-party coalition governments in several states. Most notably, the **Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD), or 'United Legislators Party,'** emerged in several north Indian states. These coalitions were typically composed of ideologically diverse parties, including the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, the Samyukta Socialist Party, the Praja Socialist Party, and the Jana Sangh, often joined by Congress defectors. Their primary unifying factor was their opposition to the Indian National Congress, which had hitherto single-handedly dominated Indian politics. The formation of these SVD governments, such as the one led by Charan Singh in Uttar Pradesh, represented a significant shift in the political landscape. This period

marked the definitive end of the "Congress System" as a one-party dominant system, ushering in an era of more competitive and fragmented politics, particularly at the state level. It compelled opposition parties to overcome their differences and coalesce, even if temporarily, to challenge the incumbent, thereby laying the groundwork for a more pluralistic and competitive party system in India.

B. Political Instability and the Emergency (1975-1977)

The period following the 1967 elections was characterized by increasing political instability, particularly at the state level, as the Congress's dominance waned and coalition governments struggled to maintain cohesion. Economic growth had slowed significantly, and the country faced severe crises, including the economic strain of the 1962 and 1965 wars and subsequent famine years. A leadership vacuum emerged within the Congress after the deaths of Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru (1964) and Lal Bahadur Shastri (1966), leading to internal divisions and a rift between Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and senior party members. This internal weakening, combined with growing external challenges, created a volatile political environment.

This culminated in the declaration of a state of Emergency from June 1975 to March 1977 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The decision was prompted by a combination of factors, including widespread protests against her government, allegations of corruption, and a High Court verdict finding her guilty of electoral malpractices. Citing "internal disturbance" as the ground, a provision under Article 352 of the Constitution, the government suspended civil liberties, imposed severe press censorship, and arrested thousands of political opponents, including prominent leaders like Morarji Desai, Jayaprakash Narayan, Charan Singh, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and L.K. Advani. The declaration effectively transformed India's federal structure into a unitary one, granting the central government immense control over state governments and legislative powers.

The experience of the Emergency, with its curtailment of fundamental rights and democratic processes, served as a powerful reminder of the importance of civil liberties and a vibrant multi-party system. When elections were unexpectedly called in 1977, the public's strong rejection of the Emergency regime demonstrated a renewed and strengthened commitment to democratic principles, ultimately leading to the first non-Congress government at the center.

C. The Janata Experiment and its Aftermath (1977-1980)

Various opposition parties, including the Congress (Organisation), Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal, and Socialist Party, coalesced to form the Janata Party. This newly formed alliance campaigned vigorously against the abuses of the Emergency regime. In the subsequent elections held on March 24, 1977, the Janata Party achieved a decisive victory, capturing 43% of the votes and a clear majority of 295 seats in the Lok Sabha, while the Congress Party secured only 153 seats and 34% of the vote. This marked a historic turning point, as it was the first time since India's independence in 1947 that the Indian National Congress was not in power at the national level. Morarji Desai, a veteran leader, was sworn in as India's first non-Congress Prime Minister.

The Janata Party's success, primarily driven by strong anti-Emergency sentiment, demonstrated the potent power of a united opposition in a democratic system. It proved that the long-standing Congress dominance could be broken, and that voters were willing to punish perceived authoritarianism. However, the subsequent collapse of the Janata government due to internal bickering and ideological differences revealed the inherent instability and fragility of ideologically disparate coalitions. The internal bickering within the Janata Party and its eventual split provided a crucial window for the Congress to regroup, leading to Indira Gandhi's return to power with a significant majority in the 1980 national elections.

D. The 1980s: Brief Congress Resurgence and Seeds of Further Decline

Following the collapse of the Janata government, the Indian National Congress, under Indira Gandhi, made a remarkable comeback, securing a stunning two-thirds majority in the January 1980 general elections. This resurgence demonstrated the continued resilience of the Congress and the public's desire for stability after a period of political turbulence.

The assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards triggered widespread anti-Sikh riots across India, instigated by nationalist mobs and political figures from the Indian National Congress. In the aftermath, her son, Rajiv Gandhi, reluctantly entered politics and assumed the leadership of the Congress Party and the Prime Ministership. Riding a massive sympathy wave generated by his mother's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi led the Congress to an unprecedented victory in the 1984 General Elections, winning a record 415 seats in the Lok Sabha. This marked the largest mandate any government has ever received in independent India.

The deaths of Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri exposed leadership vacuums, and the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and later Rajiv Gandhi created profound shocks that reverberated through the party's structure. The Bofors scandal, for instance, significantly damaged Rajiv Gandhi's image and contributed to the party's electoral defeat in 1989. This pattern illustrates that while personalized leadership can be a source of immense strength, it also introduces a fragility that can undermine the party's organizational structure and mass support base in the long term, contributing to its gradual decline and the erosion of its "invincibility tag".

The Era of Coalition Politics and Regional Ascendancy (1989-2014)

A. Rise of Regional Parties and Fragmented Mandates (1990s)

The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a definitive shift in India's party system, moving away from single-party dominance towards an era of coalition politics and the significant rise of regional parties. A crucial development in this period was the decentralization of power through constitutional reforms.

Several factors contributed to the proliferation and growing influence of regional parties during this time. Socioeconomic disparities and uneven development across states fueled grievances and demands for greater autonomy and decentralization, providing fertile ground for regional outfits to articulate these demands and mobilize local support. Furthermore, the perceived failure of national parties to adequately address region-specific issues and cater to local interests created a political vacuum that regional parties effectively filled. The decline of single-party dominance, particularly that of the Congress, and the fragmentation of the polity since the 1990s, made coalition politics increasingly the norm at the national level. This shift meant that regional parties gained significant bargaining power, becoming crucial players in the formation of governments at the center and influencing national policies.

The implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments and the subsequent rise of regional parties fundamentally transformed India's federal structure, leading to a significant decentralization of power. This shift brought local issues and aspirations to the forefront of political discourse, allowing diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic identities to find greater representation. The growing influence of regional parties, advocating for state autonomy and local governance, further deepened federalism by bringing regional concerns directly into national policy-making, making the Indian democratic fabric more nuanced and multi-layered.

B. The BJP's Consolidation and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)

Amidst the fragmentation of the 1990s, a new national political force, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), began its ascent. The BJP was founded in 1980, evolving from its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which itself had roots in the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The BJP's core ideology, Hindutva,

defines India's cultural identity in terms of Hinduism and seeks to establish India as an overtly Hindu nation-state, often criticized for challenging the secular principles of the Indian Constitution.

The late 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by a series of short-term coalition governments at the national level, reflecting the fragmented mandates of the era. Prior to 1999, no coalition government had completed its full term. These governments faced challenges stemming from ideological conflicts, leadership issues, and the growing importance of regional parties in coalition formation.

The rise of the BJP, fueled by a distinct ideological platform of Hindutva and complemented by strategic coalition-building through the National Democratic Alliance, created a new and powerful pole in Indian politics. This development fundamentally challenged the Indian National Congress's traditional secular-socialist narrative and ushered in a more ideologically diverse and competitive coalition era. The BJP's ability to mobilize support around a strong cultural-nationalist identity, particularly through movements like the Ram Janmabhoomi under the Leadership of L.K. Advani, allowed it to carve out a significant space in the political landscape. Recognizing that single-party majorities were becoming rare, the BJP strategically formed the NDA, uniting disparate parties under a common anti-Congress objective. This move demonstrated a pragmatic adaptation to the evolving multi-party system, allowing the BJP to leverage its ideological core with the necessity of broad alliances to achieve power. This period marked a significant ideological re-alignment in Indian politics, moving beyond the Congress-centric model to one where distinct ideological blocs and their ability to form stable coalitions became central to national governance. Under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the NDA contested the 1999 parliamentary elections and secured a governing majority, with the BJP winning 182 of the coalition's 294 seats. Vajpayee became the first non-Congress Prime Minister to complete a full five-year term.

The Contemporary Party System: BJP's Ascendancy and a New Dominance (2014-Present)

A. The 2014 General Elections and Modi's Rise

The 2014 Indian general elections marked a transformative moment in the country's political history, signaling a decisive shift away from the era of fragmented mandates and coalition governments. For the first time in thirty years, a single party secured an outright majority in the Lok Sabha, and for the first time since independence, that party was not the Indian National Congress. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the charismatic leadership of Narendra Modi, achieved a resounding victory, winning 282 out of 543 seats on its own, and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secured 336 seats.

Narendra Modi's ascent to power was underpinned by several key factors. His image as a strong, decisive leader, cultivated during his long tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat, where the state had experienced high growth and an investment-friendly environment, resonated with the electorate. His pro-business stance and promise to revive a struggling economy, coupled with a compelling personal narrative as a leader from a modest background, appealed to a broad spectrum of voters. The BJP's campaign was highly effective, leveraging Modi's gifted public speaking and saturating the public sphere with his image.

Conversely, the incumbent Congress Party was severely beleaguered. It faced widespread allegations of corruption, slowing economic growth, rampant inflation, and a pervasive sense of "policy paralysis". The Congress's internal leadership troubles and its inability to connect with ordinary voters, particularly through its dynastic leadership, further contributed to its staggering defeat. The 2014 elections also saw a significant surge in electoral participation, with 66% of the electorate casting a ballot, the highest ratio since independence, indicating a new era of electoral mobilization.

The BJP's decisive victory in 2014 represented a re-emergence of single-party dominance, achieved through a powerful combination of ideological and populist mobilization. After a quarter-century of coalition politics, the

BJP effectively overcame the fragmentation by presenting a strong, coherent narrative. This narrative integrated its core Hindutva ideology with a compelling populist development agenda, promising economic revival and good governance under a charismatic leader, Narendra Modi. This approach allowed the BJP to transcend traditional caste and regional divisions in many parts of the country, attracting new groups of voters, including the youth. The party's ability to project a unified vision and a strong leadership figure provided a clear alternative to the perceived indecisiveness and corruption of the previous Congress-led government. This marked a significant shift from the previous era, demonstrating that a single party could once again command a national majority by effectively blending a distinct ideological platform with a broad-based populist appeal, thereby establishing a new form of political dominance in India.

B. BJP's Continued Dominance and Expansion to States

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ascendancy was not a one-off event in 2014; its dominance continued and deepened in the subsequent general election and extended significantly to state-level politics. In the 2019 General Elections, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) further consolidated its power, winning 353 seats, with the BJP alone securing 303 seats. This marked the first time in history that a BJP-led government was re-elected after a full five-year term, and it left India without an official opposition party for the second consecutive time. The Congress Party, in contrast, suffered a second consecutive humiliating defeat, improving only marginally to 52 seats.

Following its national victory in 2014, the BJP embarked on a strategic expansion into various states, achieving notable success in assembly elections. In the year that followed the 2014 general elections, the BJP successfully contested and formed governments in states like Haryana and Jharkhand (October 2014), and Maharashtra and Jammu & Kashmir (December 2014). This state-level success continued, with the BJP winning assembly elections in "state after state". For instance, it achieved significant victories in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka in subsequent years.

The BJP's strategy for continued dominance and expansion relies on several key elements.

- It has successfully consolidated its traditional support base among upper castes while also attracting new voters from most segments of the electorate, with the notable exception of Muslims.
- The party has shown a remarkable capacity to mobilize record numbers of voters in cities and has effectively appealed to the youth.
- A significant aspect of its strategy involves policy symbolism, where government initiatives are named to evoke nationalistic sentiments, creating an "illusion of a government working in national interest, rather than in local interest". This approach, exemplified by schemes like 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' and 'Make in India', helps direct public psyche in favor of the national government and translates ideological benefit into electoral gains.

The BJP's continued success has created a "wave" phenomenon that extends from national to state elections, leading to a significant centralization of the political narrative. This means that national issues, and particularly the image and policies of the central leadership, often overshadow local concerns in state assembly elections. This centralization has electoral benefits, as it helps in directing the popular vote towards the party at the center, even in states where it might have traditionally been weaker. This trend has implications for the balance of power within India's federal structure. While regional parties continue to play a crucial role, especially in states where the BJP faces strong opposition, the overarching narrative and policy agenda are increasingly set at the national level. This shift suggests a potential re-balancing of federal dynamics, where the national party's strength can significantly influence state-level outcomes, potentially obscuring the nuanced local issues that once defined state politics. The BJP's ability to project a strong national identity and leadership has enabled it to maintain and

expand its dominance, reshaping the competitive dynamics of India's multi-party system.

Conclusion

The party system in India has undergone a remarkable and complex evolution, transforming from a nascent political landscape under colonial rule to a vibrant, albeit dynamically shifting, multi-party democracy. Its development can be broadly characterized by a cyclical pattern of dominance, interspersed with periods of intense multi-party competition and coalition governance.

The foundations of this system were laid in colonial India with the emergence of the Indian National Congress. Initially a moderate, elite-driven assembly, the INC's consistent engagement with constitutional reforms, even within a colonial framework, inadvertently served as an "incubation" phase for democratic norms and political modernization. The internal dialectic between its Moderate and Extremist factions, and later Mahatma Gandhi's transformative leadership, propelled the INC into a mass organization. This ability to absorb diverse ideologies and mobilize broad sections of society allowed the INC to become a "catch-all" party, effectively embodying both ruling and opposition functions within its own structure. However, the simultaneous emergence of other political entities, notably the All-India Muslim League, sowed the seeds of future fragmentation and identity politics, foreshadowing the communal divisions that would culminate in partition. The 1937 provincial elections, while a democratic triumph for the INC and a crucial experience in self-governance for Indian leaders, paradoxically accelerated communal polarization due to the Congress's political choices regarding coalition formation.

Following independence in 1947, the INC established a unique "Congress System," characterized by overwhelming electoral supremacy. This dominance, underpinned by its historical legitimacy from the freedom struggle and an unmatched organizational depth, provided critical stability for nation-building in a newly independent and diverse country. The Congress functioned as a "party of consensus," managing internal pluralism and absorbing dissent, which facilitated national cohesion but also limited the emergence of a robust external opposition.

The watershed 1967 elections marked the definitive end of this unchallenged Congress dominance at the state level, ushering in an era of competitive pluralism and the genesis of "Anti-Congressism." The subsequent period saw increased political instability, culminating in the 1975-1977 Emergency. This authoritarian interlude, an attempt to centralize power in response to decentralizing pressures, ultimately backfired, strengthening democratic resolve and leading to the Janata Party's historic victory in 1977. However, the ephemeral nature of this anti-incumbency coalition highlighted the inherent instability of ideologically disparate alliances. The brief Congress resurgence under Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s, driven by a sympathy wave, also exposed the fragility of power centralized around charismatic leadership, making the party vulnerable to crises and scandals.

The 1990s ushered in the era of full-fledged coalition politics and the significant ascendancy of regional parties. Constitutional amendments in 1992, decentralizing power to local self-governments, deepened India's democracy by bringing local issues to the forefront. This federalization of power, coupled with the decline of single-party majorities, made regional parties crucial players in national governance. Concurrently, the Bharatiya Janata Party, propelled by its Hindutva ideology and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, strategically consolidated its position by forming the National Democratic Alliance. This represented a significant ideological re-alignment in Indian politics, creating a new pole that challenged the Congress's traditional narrative.

In the contemporary period, the 2014 and 2019 general elections marked a new phase with the BJP's decisive ascendancy under Narendra Modi. This re-emergence of single-party dominance, achieved through a powerful blend of ideological appeal, populist development agenda, and charismatic leadership, effectively overcame the

coalition era. The BJP's continued success and expansion into states have created a "wave" phenomenon, centralizing the political narrative around national leadership and policies. This shift has significant implications for India's federal dynamics, potentially re-balancing power towards the center while maintaining a vibrant, though increasingly polarized, multi-party system.

In essence, India's party system is characterized by its remarkable adaptability and resilience within a democratic framework. It has navigated periods of hegemonic control, fragmentation, and the rise of new ideological forces, consistently demonstrating its capacity for transformation while upholding the foundational principles of a multi-party democracy. The cyclical nature of dominance, the enduring impact of social and communal divides, the increasing federalization of power, and the pivotal role of charismatic leadership remain defining features of this complex and evolving political landscape.

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