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# UNIT 7 POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARTY SYSTEMS

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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Party system in a democracy normally refers to the pattern of interaction and competition between political parties. In India the pattern of interaction and competition among political parties has given way to the multi-party system. This kind of characterisation of the party system is, however, more accurate as of now than that existed a few decades ago. What existed then was the impeccable hegemony of the Congress Party and this was well characterised by Kothari and Jones as a 'dominant party system' that is a multiparty system, in which free competition among political parties occurred but it was the Indian National Congress which enjoyed a dominant position both in terms of the number of seats it held in the parliament and the state legislative assemblies, and in terms of its immense organisational strength. Kothari coined the term the 'Congress System' and Jones called it a 'Congress Dominated System'.

Enormous changes have taken place in the party system in recent years. These changes started taking place from 1967 onwards but these have become much more pronounced since the late eighties and early 1990s. The party system has moved away from a one party dominated system to a multi-party system. It is also referred to as a federalised party system or a coalitional party system. This party system is marked by the presence of a dwindled Congress Party, a significant but inadequate growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an enormous increase in the strength of the regional and state parties in national politics. We shall, in this unit, concern ourselves mainly with the party systems that had emerged and developed at the state level in the Indian union. But before doing so, we look at regional and state parties in brief since they have grown enormously in recent years and play a crucial role in shaping the party system in many of the Indian states.

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## 7.2 REGIONAL AND STATE PARTIES

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The question that one confronts in the beginning is how to define a regional and a state based party? Though the definition provided by the Election Commission on regional parties is accepted

widely in it is the academic circles, the Commission does not use the term regional parties. Instead it uses the term state parties. It classifies political parties into three categories — national, state and registered parties. Its definition of state parties is the most elaborate. In this definition a party to be called a state party must have been engaged in political activity for at least five years and must have won either four per cent of the seats in a general election or three per cent in a state election. In addition it must have had the support of six per cent of the votes cast. In its definition of a national party, it says that a party which is recognised as a state party in four or more states is a national party. A registered party is a party that is neither recognised as state or a national party but is registered with the Election Commission. Such parties are also termed as unrecognised parties.

The definition as provided by the Election Commission of a regional party is not very satisfactory. Since the definition takes into consideration the past performance of a political party, it is not accepted as a proper definition by the academicians. They consider those parties as regional parties whose bases and activities are restricted to a particular state and rooted in both regional aspirations and grievances. The support base of a regional party is limited to a particular state because it identifies itself with the region's culture, language, religion, etc. It also presents the regional perspective vis-à-vis the centre and other states. These parties use 'region' and 'language' effectively for electoral benefits. A political party, to be recognised as a regional party must satisfy three specific criteria. First, a regional party restricts its area of action to a single region which, in the prevailing Indian situation means a state. Secondly, the parties of this kind typically articulate and seek to defend a region based-ethnic or religio-cultural identity. And thirdly, by their very nature, regional parties are primarily concerned with the local or state level grievances.

There is a tendency among some scholars to include among the regional parties those parties which have an all India perspective but are confined to one state like the Forward Bloc (FB) in West Bengal or the Workers' and Peasants' Party in Maharashtra. Oliver Heath and Yogendra Yadav consider those parties as regional parties whose social bases are restricted to one or two states. The fundamental problem in this definition is that it does not take into consideration the ideology of parties. This definition takes into consideration only the social base of a party and its area of operation.

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## **7.3 PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIAN STATES**

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State party systems in India have developed in close connection and interaction with the national party system. Closeness of relationships between the state party system and the national party system has been termed as the combination of the state party systems by some observers in the recent years. This is natural considering that India consists of different states. The changes in the national party system have affected the state party systems, and in turn transformation in the nature of party competition at the state level had affected the national party system substantially. The second development, however, is more pronounced in recent years because of the spectacular growth of the regional and state parties in Indian politics. In this section we shall make an attempt to see the transformation that has taken place in the state party systems in the recent times.

### **7.3.1 The Era of Congress Dominance**

The party system in India before 1967 has been as a system of Congress dominance. It has been also referred to as the “Congress Dominated System” or the “Congress System”. Till the fourth general elections which were held in 1967 state party system in India, like that of the national party system, was dominated by the overwhelming presence of the Congress Party. The Congress Party dominated in almost all the states. But the domination of congress was not uniform in all states. The Congress, for example, had to face the toughest competition in the former princely states that acceded to the Indian Union after 1947 whereas in other states it almost had an impeccable hegemony. It ruled almost all the states except Jammu and Kashmir where the National Conference had a domineering presence. Kerala was also an exception because in the second general elections in 1957, the CPI emerged victorious and formed a government along with its allies for two years till it was dissolved arbitrarily in 1959.

A quick reference to some data will help illustrate this point. The Congress was such a dominant force that it secured comfortable majorities in almost all the elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies in 1952, 1957, 1962. Though it never secured more than 48 per cent of the votes in the Lok Sabha elections (the highest being 47.78 in 1957), it always secured comfortable majority in terms of seats (364 seats in 1952, 371 seats in 1957 and 361 in 1962). In the State assemblies, except for a few, it secured comfortable majorities almost in all the assembly elections. It secured 42.2 per cent of votes and 68.4 per cent of seats in 1952, 44.97 per cent of votes and 64.9 per cent of seats in 1957 and 43.65 per cent votes and 61.3 per cent of seats in 1962. Electoral data thus indicate that the performance of the Congress in the Assembly elections was slightly poorer than the Lok Sabha elections. This was because of the nature of resistance offered by the opposition which included the state and regional formations. Opposition to the Congress for the assembly elections was much more severe than that of the Lok Sabha elections.

Let us briefly refer to this position of dominance across some of the bigger Indian states while referring to its performance in the assembly elections. In Uttar Pradesh assembly elections between 1952 and 1962, the party secured between 47.9 and 36.3 per cent votes. It captured between 390 to 249 seats, out of a total 430 seats. In Bihar, in the same period the party secured between 41.4 per cent to 42.1 per cent votes but between 72.2 per cent and 58.1 per cent seats. Similarly, in West Bengal, the Congress secured between 38.9 and 47.3 per cent of votes and between 63 per cent to 62.3 per cent seats. In Andhra Pradesh, after the state was formed it secured between 41.7 per cent to 47.3 per cent votes in 1955-57 and 1962 and 187 to 177 seats (out of a total 300). In Tamil Nadu the party enjoyed a dominant position in the assembly elections of 1957 and 1962. It secured between 45.3 per cent and 46.1 per cent votes and captured between 67.4 per cent to 73.6 per cent seats. In Maharashtra the party secured 48.7 per cent to 51.2 per cent of votes in 1952 and 1962. Thus it is clear that the Congress Party enjoyed a dominant position in the electoral politics of the states in the Indian Union, even though it was hardly able to secure the majority of the votes. In fact, it won a majority of seats in the assemblies of all the states on the basis of plurality of votes against a fragmented opposition.

### **7.3.2 The Breakdown of Congress System: 1967-1989**

The dominance of the Congress in the states started crumbling from the mid of 1960s; the fourth general elections of 1967 marked the intensification of this change. The party system that emerged in the states after and continued till 1989 may be referred to as a bipolarised one in which a

depleted Congress Party was confronted with a united opposition in most of the states. The following pattern of bipolarisation was seen in the states for the general elections in the period from 1967-1989. In Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi, the competition was between the Congress and the BJS/BJP. In Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal the competition has been between the Congress and Left. In Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Goa, a Congress-regional parties led alliance emerged, though the BJP also gained substantially. In the North-Eastern states the contest was mainly between the Congress and a variety of regional parties or their alliances. In Tamil Nadu, competition has been mainly between the DMK and the AIADMK. Finally in seven major states-Orissa, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Gujarat and Karnataka-the Congress retained preponderance. One can, however, add that even in these states opposition grew stronger as we shall notice later.

So far as the assembly elections are concerned, the following pattern of bipolarisation emerged after 1967. One may note that the votes of the Congress party declined much more drastically in the assembly elections than in the parliamentary ones. In Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi, the non-Congress votes consolidated in favour of the BJS/BJP (Bharatiya Jana Sangha/Bhartiya Janta Party). The latter emerged as the second most important party. In Tamil Nadu, the principal contest was between the Dravidian parties. In Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Goa, a Congress-Regional party bipolarisation came into existence. Similarly in the North-East, a Congress-regional parties bipolarisation came into existence, though in this case the Regional parties were very unstable. Finally, in the seven states — Uttar Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Haryana, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka-Congress remained almost dominant.

Let us have a look at how these changes occurred. We shall refer mainly to the party systems that we witness in the state assembly elections. It has been noted earlier that the Congress had never secured more than 50 per cent of the votes either in the parliamentary or assembly elections except in some states but has always secured huge majorities in terms of seats. This is indicative of the fact that though significant opposition to the Congress existed at the state level due to fragmentation in their ranks and because of the rule associated with the “first past the post system,” the Congress always emerged victorious in terms of seats. The 1967 election in fact put an end, at least for a temporary period, to this disunity in the opposition. The post-1967 period saw the emergence of anti-Congress alliances in state after state and this altered the nature of the contests particularly for the assemblies. These developments resulted in the defeat of the Congress in as many as eight out of sixteen states of the Indian Union. There was also a marked decline in the vote share of the Congress party in the parliamentary elections from 44.72 in 1962 to 40.7 per cent in 1967. In the legislative Assemblies, the decline was from 43.65 per cent to 39.96 per cent. As a consequence, the percentage of seats came down from 61.3 per cent to 48.5 per cent. The states entered into a bipolarised system, the principal contenders being the Congress and almost a united opposition in many of the prominent Indian states. This system continued almost till the end of the 1980s though on occasions (for example, in 1971 and 1972) the Congress was able to restore its predominant position at the central and to a lesser extent at the State level.

We also note that in the early 1970s the Congress was able to make a comeback after 1972 for a brief period. This position was soon lost by the party in the late 1970s. Let us have a brief look at the nature and pattern of party competition in some of the leading Indian states since the 1970s. This will help illustrate the point better. In Northern India, in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress,

from the assembly elections of 1974 onwards was never able to secure 40 per cent of the votes; not even in the elections of 1985 that were held after the parliamentary elections of 1984 in which the Congress recorded a landslide victory. One or the other parties like BJS/BJP, Janata Party/ later the various factions of the Janata Party, Lok Dal etc., challenged the hegemony of the Congress. In 1974, the BJS increased its share of votes to 17.1 per cent and secured 61 seats in the Assembly. In the 1977 elections, the Congress was routed by the Janata Party. Through the Congress Party returned to power in 1980, it managed only 37.7 per cent of the votes. In 1985 the Congress could hardly manage 39.3 per cent of votes, though it secured the majority of the seats. The Lok Dal could wrest 21.3 per cent of votes and 84 seats.

In the West, in Maharashtra, strong challenge to Congress hegemony came in 1978 and later from the mid of the 1980s. In the 1978 assembly elections the Congress led by Indira Gandhi was routed. In the 1985 election though it secured a majority, it was the ICS and which that together captured around 24 per cent votes. Gujarat also moved closer to a bipolarised system one from the late 1960s. In the 1970s, the Indira Congress was challenged by the NCO [Indian National Congress (Organisation)] and the Janata Party in the election of 1985. In both the elections that were held in the 1970s, the NCO had secured more than 23 per cent of the votes though its seats tally was not very impressive in 1972. The Janata Party secured little less than 20 per cent votes in 1985 with only 14 seats in the 182 member assembly.

In central India, in Madhya Pradesh, the largest of the Indian states, the Congress was challenged by the BJS/BJP in 1972, 1980 and 1985. It was challenged by the Janata Party in 1977. The BJS secured 28.7 per cent votes in 1980, the BJP secured 30.3 per cent and in 1985 it could secure 32.4 per cent votes. In the 1977 State assembly elections, the Janata Party had secured 47.3 per cent of votes and had formed the government with 230 members. In Bihar, between 1972 and 1985, the Congress never secured more than 35 percent votes except in 1985. There was a considerable challenge to it from the BJS/BJP, NCO, JNP, Independents, Lok Dal etc. In the south, in Tamil Nadu, the party competition since 1967 narrowed down to a two party competition, first between the Congress and the DMK and then between the DMK and AIADMK. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress' popular votes share had started declining from the 1978 elections and entered into a bipolar competition from 1983 onwards. In West Bengal, the Congress lost its hegemonic position from 1967 onwards and saw bipolarisation from the elections of 1971. Thus in the country as a whole barring a few marginal states, that remained effectively under the control of the Congress, a bipolar system of party completion emerged. To a large extent the breakdown of the Congress system was the mair factor behind these developments.

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## **7.4 TOWARDS FRAGMENTATION OF STATE PARTY SYSTEMS: 1989 ONWARDS**

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The party systems at both levels – national and states moved towards a fragmentation from the late 1980s or more particularly from the 1990s. What are the features of these fragmentary systems? At the national level there has been an end of the one party dominance and the movement towards a multi-party system; as you have read earlier this trend started in 1967 at the state level. However, the systems that exist in the states are different from the national level. Many states have moved towards a two party system and probably this is the most prominent feature of party competition at the state level.

At the national level in recent years competition has narrowed down to two different alliances, one led by the BJP and the other by the Congress. The 'Third Front' has petered out. At the state level the nature of competition differs. The competing parties differ from state to state but in most of the states it is a two party system. In many states it is a multi-party system where the important contenders are the Congress, the BJP and state or regional parties. In some of the states, the competition is primarily between state or regional parties, though national parties also occupy a significant space in those states. Now, let us turn to the reasons behind the emergence of this kind of systems in the states. There are multiple causes but the most important of them are the decline of the Congress in the states, the spectacular growth of the BJP particularly in the Hindi heartland and some other states and thirdly, the growth to prominence of regional and state parties. As mentioned earlier these trends had started much before the 1990s. Let us have a brief look at all these developments which preceded trends of the 1990s in brief and then turn to the salient features of the party systems that have emerged in the states since 1989.

The Congress Party had started declining since the late 1960s in the states but this decline became much more prominent in the late 1980s. We have seen earlier that the Congress that had enjoyed dominance at the state level for more than two decades gradually started declining after the death of Nehru. The decline of Congress became more spectacular after Indira Gandhi assumed the leadership of the party. There are numerous explanations for this. Zoya Hasan, for example, has argued that the Congress decline has complex causes and the central cause was the inability of the party to maintain the political bases of its coalition. It is true that the party's ability to mobilise voters at the lower level during the elections — whether at the state assembly or at the parliamentary elections declined significantly in the late 1980s and in the 1990s. Thus, the Congress became a much reduced force at the state level since the late 1980s.

The share of votes and seats, the Congress captured in the Lok Sabha and more particularly in the Assembly elections in the states sharply declined in the last decade of the twentieth century. Its performance in the Assembly elections in some of the prominent states will help illustrate the point. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, the biggest of the Indian states, the Congress remained a much reduced force with its vote share declining from 15.08 per cent in 1993 to 8.96 per cent in 2002. In Andhra Pradesh, the largest of the South Indian states, the Congress returned to power in 1989 but it lost in the 1994 elections and remained in opposition till of 2004. In Bihar, the votes of the percentage of the Congress slumped from 24.78 per cent in 1990 to 11.06 per cent in 2000 and the seats from 71 to 23 in the same period. Similarly, in Maharashtra it lost its hegemony in the 1990s completely. In 1990, it secured 38.17 per cent votes and 141 seats but this dropped to 27.20 percent votes and 75 seats in 1999. In Tamil Nadu, the Congress had lost its dominant position much earlier to the two regional forces, the DMK and the ADMK. Similarly in West Bengal, its decline was much more rapid in the late 1990s due to the split and the subsequent formation of the Trinamool Congress. In the 2001 elections, it could manage only 7.98 per cent vote and 26 seats against 39.45 per cent votes and 82 seats in 1996.

The expansion of the BJP in recent times has been much more dramatic than the decline of the Congress. The expansion has mainly been due to the decline of the Congress, the aggressive mobilisation strategy based around the ideology of Hindutva which it adopted from the late 1980s and its strategy of alliance formation. At the national level in the Lok Sabha, it increased its seats from a 2 in 1984 to 182 seats in the 1998 elections that catapulted it to the position of a ruling party. In 1999 it secured the same number of seats, though, along with its allies, it was

able to consolidate its position as a ruling party. However, this onward march of the BJP was halted in the 2004 general elections.

In the assembly elections the performance of the BJP in the 1990s was equally spectacular. It increased its share of votes and seats in some of the prominent Indian states. In Bihar it increased its share of seats from 39 and votes from 11.61 in 1990 to 14.64 per cent of votes and 67 seats in 2000. In Uttar Pradesh, in the 1990s its vote share and seat share remained almost the same (over 170 seats and 33 per cent votes) though it declined in the 2002 elections. In Gujarat, it increased its vote share from 26.69 per cent in 1990 to 44.81 per cent in 1998 and further to 49.85 per cent in 2002. This increase was also evident in many of the other Indian states. In some other states, it was able to form governments either alone like in Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh in 1990 or in alliance with others like in Maharashtra with the Shiv Sena in 1995.

The third interrelated development that has taken place in the recent times is the expansion of regional and state parties largely at the cost of the Congress in the states. As a result, they have increased their presence in the national legislature since the 1996 elections and due to this they have come to play a very crucial role in the making and unmaking of governments at the central level. Election data indicate that these parties have secured an increasing presence in the Lok Sabha. In 1991, the regional parties (including some state parties) occupied 56 seats whereas in 1996 they came to occupy 137 seats, 161 seats in 1998, and 188 seats in 1999.

The increase in their strength in the state assemblies in recent years is much more remarkable. In 2002, in as many as twelve states of the Indian Union, regional parties (including state parties) occupied a prominent position in the state legislatures. Not only have these parties increased their presence in the state legislatures, but also formed governments at the state level in some of the states in the 1990s. The Shiv Sena (SS) for the first time came to power in Maharashtra along with its ally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 1995. The Assam Gano Parishad (AGP) similarly returned to power for the second time in Assam in 1996. The National Conference (NC) came to power in 1996 with a large majority in Jammu and Kashmir. The Dravidian parties, the DMK and the AIADMK alternated power among themselves in Tamil Nadu in the 1990s. The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) returned to power in 1995 and remained in office till 2004. The Akali Dal (AD) also formed a government in the state of Punjab in 1997 along with its ally, the BJP. Thus these parties were increasingly successful at the national and state level in the 1990s.

It is due to these interrelated developments that the party systems in the states had undergone significant transformation in recent years more particularly from 1989 onwards. From a system that was Congress — dominated (like that of the national party system) it has become fragmented (with features of bipolarity). In this fragmented system, the competition is primarily between two parties whether national or regional but — there are others who occupy a significant position in the party politics of the states. The competition at the state level in recent years and the party systems that has emerged as a result may be classified into four main categories. To the first category belong states like Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. These states are essentially two party states in terms of vote and seat share. Included in this category are West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura, Maharashtra and Punjab which are essentially bipolar states. In these states either two alliances or one-party opposed by an alliance of two or smaller parties dominate party politics.

In the second category belongs to those states like Karnataka, Bihar and Orissa where there are three or more poles though it appears that in future it will drift towards a bipolar system either due to alliances or due to splits in existing parties. Thirdly, there are states like Uttar Pradesh where a four-cornered contest exists between the BJP, Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Indian National Congress. The fourth category belongs to those states in which a bipolar or two-party system exists but there is also an increasing growth of a third party. The third party may not be strong enough to capture large number of seats but has a significant vote share.

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## 7.5 SUMMARY

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In this unit we have principally analysed the party systems that emerged and developed at the state level in the India since independence with a focus on the transformations which has taken place recently. We confined our discussion to the broad features of the state party systems. We have also dealt with regional and state parties in brief since they have grown a great deal in recent years, and are playing a crucial role in shaping the party system in most of the Indian states.

We have noticed that the supremacy of the Congress party that existed for a few decades after independence at the centre and the states has come to an end. The party system changed from one party dominant system to multi – party system at the national level, a system that is noticeable by the presence of a dwindled Congress party, a significant but inadequate expansion of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and an enormous increase in the strength of regional and state parties in national politics. The changes started taking place since 1967 onwards but have become much more pronounced since the last two decades. Parallel to these changes at the national level, significant changes have taken place in recent years at the state level. From a system that was dominated by the Congress it has transformed into a fragmented (essentially with features of bipolarity). In this fragmented system the competition is primarily between two parties whether national or regional. There are indications that this fragmented system will stay and the possibility is that more and more states will move towards a bipolar part system.

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## 7.6 EXERCISES

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- 1) State party systems in India have developed in close connection and interaction with the national party system. Discuss.
- 2) Briefly analyse the era of Congress dominance.
- 3) Examine the developments towards the multiparty system in India. Give an example.