

The turbulent rise of regional parties: A many-sided threat for Congress

REGIONAL PARTIES CHALLENGE NATIONAL PARTIES

The past two decades have seen the rise of regional parties and their influence on both the state and national levels. With sizable electoral support, the regional parties have not only managed to win elections and form state governments, they have also influenced national politics. Together, India's two national parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have roughly polled a little less than 50 percent of the votes. The vote share of the Congress has declined sharply during the past few elections, from 39.5 percent in 1989 to 28.6 percent in 2009. (See Table 1.) This decline is much sharper when we compare the vote share of the Congress in recent elections with early elections. At the same time, the vote share of the BJP has declined from 25.6 percent in 1998 (the BJP's best performance) to 18.8 percent in 2009. On the other hand, although all regional parties together polled a little less than one-third of the total votes, they managed to win a sizable number of seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People, lower house of Parliament) in different states. Under these recent conditions, neither of the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, have managed to win a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha.

THE DECLINE OF THE CONGRESS PARTY

The first few decades of Indian politics witnessed a complete dominance of the Congress until 1996, when its votes plummeted to only 28.8 percent. The Congress managed to form a coalition government after the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, and registered victory during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. However, the Congress victories during the past two Lok Sabha elections provide no clear indication that the Congress is recovering at the national

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level. The increased share of votes at the national level simply reflects the popularity of various state governments where Congress is in power.

THE SEARCH FOR REGIONAL ALLIES

In states where the electoral contest is between the Congress and the BJP, the vote share of the Congress increases by a few percentage points, and this pattern has been consistent over the past seven Lok Sabha elections. During the same period, the vote share of the Congress declined in states where Congress is pitted against regional parties, whether independent or in alliance. The very fact that the Congress has had to form alliances with regional political parties in states like Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra indicates that the Congress is no longer a dominant political force in these states.

If seen in terms of caste, Congress had a sizable presence among the upper caste, lower caste Adivasis and Dalits, and the Muslims. While the Congress did get votes among other communities, its

popularity remained highest among Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. In states where the Congress is locked in contest against the BJP, the votes of the Brahmin and other upper castes have slipped away from the Congress to the BJP, although the Congress remains more popular than the BJP among the Dalit, Adivasis, and Muslims. The two parties are locked in a close contest for votes among the Other Backward Class (OBC), with the BJP having a slight edge.

DECLINING POPULARITY WITH DALITS

Although the Congress may have been popular with Dalit voters prior to the early 1990s, the Dalit vote has changed during the past two decades. (See Table 2.) Nationally, Congress gets a little more than one-quarter of the Dalit vote, but in states with a two-party contest between the Congress and the BJP, the majority of Dalits vote for Congress. However, Congress loses this advantage among the Dalit voters in states where the Congress is up against regional parties. Here, less than one-quarter of the Dalit vote for the Congress. The Dalit vote bank has been threatened by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, the Telugu Desham Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Lok Jan Shakti Party in Bihar, the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha (formerly Orissa), and Tamil Nadu and the Left Front in West Bengal, among other places.

The Adivasi vote for the Congress is quite similar to that of the Dalit vote; the threat is more from regional parties than the BJP. In two-party contests, the majority of Adivasi voters opt for the Congress, but in states where the Congress is contesting against regional parties, the Adivasi vote declines drastically. In such instances, only a quarter of the Adivasi voters vote for Congress, although the 2009 Lok Sabha election saw an increase in votes for Congress.

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GROWING MUSLIM SUPPORT

The Congress is more popular among Muslims than the Dalits and the Adivasis. It has received almost 40 percent of the Muslim votes during past five Lok Sabha elections. (See Table 3.) The Muslim vote strongly favours the Congress in contests against the BJP. However, regional parties have made a dent in the Muslim vote for the Congress. In states where Congress is in a contest against regional parties, Congress receives only about one-third of the Muslim vote.

In states like Andhra Pradesh West Bengal, the vote for Congress among

Muslims declined by nearly 15 percentage points. The Congress faces the challenge of retaining its Muslim support in states like Assam, where the Assam United Democratic Front takes a large chunk of the Muslim vote. The contest for the Muslim vote in Uttar Pradesh is largely between the BSP and the Samajwadi Party (SP); although the 2009 Lok Sabha elections witnessed some reversal, with the Congress managing to win back some Muslim support after a long gap. In Bihar, the majority of Muslims voted for the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), although recent elections saw the Mus-

lim vote split between the RJD and Janata Dal (United) (JD (U)). The Congress could not attract Muslim voters in Bihar. In Jharkhand, which witnessed a multiparty contest with Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), the Jharkhand Liberation Front, a dominant political player, the Muslim vote was largely fragmented.

A POLITICAL CULTURE OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The net result is that, in the absence of any single party having a majority in Lok Sabha, political parties have had no

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TABLE 1 Vote share of the Congress: Lok Sabha elections 1989–2009

Vote share of Congress	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
	percent						
All India	39.5	36.6	28.8	25.8	28.3	26.5	28.6
In states where Congress is in a two-party contest against BJP	40.8	40.8	33.8	38.6	44.4	39.6	42.3
In states where Congress is in a contest against regional parties	37.7	32.0	26.7	18.9	22.5	22.5	24.9

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

TABLE 2 Challenge to the Dalit vote bank of the Congress from regional parties

Dalit vote for the Congress in different contest type	Year of Lok Sabha Election				
	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
	percent				
Congress (all India)	32	28	31	28	27
In states where Congress is in a bipolar contest against BJP	52	53	59	55	54
In states where Congress is in a contest against regional parties	31	25	25	22	23

Source: National Election Study 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, and 2009.

TABLE 3 Threat to the Muslim vote bank of the Congress from the regional parties

Muslim vote for the Congress in different contest type	Year of Lok Sabha Election				
	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
	percent				
Congress (all India)	31	33	40	37	38
In states where Congress is in a bipolar contest against BJP	67	60	84	69	70
In states where the Congress is up against a regional party	26	28	37	29	33

Source: National Election Study 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009.

single-state or multistate parties on the same platform, have, while recognizing the needs of diversity, also reconciled the demands of national unity. Federal coalitions have enabled multiple diversities, including regional, religious, caste, linguistic, and cultural, not only to be represented at the centre but also to exercise power. In a way, coalitions play an integrating role in bringing together different sections of a diverse polity.


While coalitions have allowed distinctive interests space, they have also tempered uncompromising positions, making the polity more inclusive. While both the Congress and the BJP are actually reluctant coalition-makers, the strategic imperatives of government formation have constrained them to moderate their

stands. Just as the BJP was forced to dilute its extremist positions on numerous issues, so too Congress was pushed into accepting the “legitimacy” of coalitions in order to attract coalition partners. Likewise, many state-based parties have sidelined previously hardline positions to become “coalitionable.”

FEDERAL COALITION AND GOVERNANCE

Federal coalitions have, over time, institutionalized sophisticated coordination and management mechanisms that have helped take care of not only relations between political parties but also issues of governance. For example, the “group of ministers” device—essentially an interministerial panel composed of three

to six ministers—was primarily intended to minimize differences within the council of ministers, but has also been used to engage various coalition partners and to allow state-based actors space in national-level decision making.

Though India’s early federal coalitions were transient and unstable, coalition experiments post-1999 have not only completed their term but have also governed as well as or as poorly as single-party governments. Federal coalitions have allowed for greater representation as well as recognition of diversities and, most important, given state-based interests space in national-level decision making. This most definitely has been the defining feature of the coalition era in India. 

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choice but to form coalition governments. All of India’s national governments since the 1996 Lok Sabha elections have been coalition governments with the regional parties playing a key role in formation of the government at the centre. Indian politics has moved from an era of single-party rule with the absolute dominance of the Congress from 1952–89 (with the brief exception of 1977–80) to an era of coalition politics.

Regional parties have played an important role in Indian politics at both the state and national level for a little over a decade and will continue to play such a role in the coming years. Regional parties have made important inroads into the traditional support base of the Congress among Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis. With its declining popularity among traditional supporters, the Congress is heavily dependent on the OBC and the upper castes for electoral success. While the Muslim, Dalits, and Adivasis do vote for Congress in selective states, depending on the type of electoral contest, their support base has certainly declined compared with the past.

There is now some overlap in the support base for both the Congress and

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the BJP. With the regional parties sure to stay in Indian politics for at least a decade or more, there are only two ways for the two national parties to expand. The Congress and the BJP must either enter into alliances with the regional parties or try to make inroads into the support base of the regional parties. There is no third route available for these two national parties.

On the other hand, while regional parties will continue to play an important role in Indian politics, it is hard to imagine a political scenario in which these parties would combine to form a formidable third front. Even though some


regional parties face a leadership crisis, they would suffer from a leadership surplus if all the regional parties combined to form a third front alternative to the Congress and the BJP. It is hard to imagine a third front with Mayawati, Jayalitha, or Mamata Banerjee together. These are only a few names; there may be many more in the race for the top post, which will put a big question mark on the stability of a third front. 

Table Notes

1. The states classified in the category of two-party contests between Congress and BJP are Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand.
2. The states classified under the category of a contest between Congress and regional parties are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. This classification is valid for all the elections.