
UNIT 3 PARTY SYSTEMS IN INDIA*

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Differentiate between single, two-party and multi-party systems;
- Analyse different phases of the party system in India; and
- Explain the limitation of party system in India.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As you have read in unit 1, political parties are important features of a political system. In a democratic political system, they are important tools in strengthening democracy. And their characteristics consist of organizations, leaderships, ideologies, policies and programmes, support bases and patterns of mobilization of support. Party system indicates number of political parties in a political system, and nature of coalition which political parties forge before and after elections, and in forming governments. You also have read in unit 2, about political parties and their types in India. This unit will explain how the political parties in India can be grouped in terms of political systems. The contemporary party system in India originally developed in the context of the struggle for freedom. The purpose of political parties changed after Independence. Before Independence, the political parties were part of national movement with the main purpose of achieving Independence. After Independence, their purpose shifted to gain power and form government. For this purpose, they competed. Consequently, the party system in India underwent transformation from the dominance of a single party to emergence of multiple parties. Although India has a multi-party system, the party system has gone through many phases. For instances, in the first two decades of

independence the country had one dominant party vs multiparty system. The concept of the multi-party system and coalition government at the centre became popular after 1989. Political parties and party system in India have been greatly influenced by cultural diversity, social, ethnic, caste, community and religious pluralism, traditions of the nationalist movement, contrasting style of the party leadership, and clashing ideological perspectives. The Indian Constitution has established a parliamentary form of government both at the Centre and at the State. The members of the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha are elected through elections by citizens of the country. Therefore, the political parties which contest the elections become part and parcel of the political system (party system) of the country. The party system is a link between people and the government.

3.2 TYPES OF PARTY SYSTEM

There are mainly three categories of Party system:

3.2.1 One-Party System

The one-party system or single party system is ruled by only one party; there is no opposition. This authoritarian principle was first found in monarchies and later in a dictatorship, and now this system exists in a few democratic countries. However, elections are conducted even in such regimes only to show the façade of popular support, the voter's choice is limited to only one candidate. The essential function of the one-party system is not to elicit decisions from the mass electorate on the issues concerning people, but to ensure discipline and obedience among them. In a system ruled by single party, the governance is marked the system totalitarian and that curtails democratic rights: the hand of the ruling party or king. In many cases, this system involves the abolition of the freedom of speech and expression, press and associations. In this system, there is no opposition, in terms of opposition party or other means of opposing voice against the ruling government. China has a One-party System.

3.2.2 Two-Party System

A two-party system is one where only two parties, despite the presence of other parties, have substantial support of the electorate. One of them is ruling party, another opposition. It depends on which party gets majority in elections. The United States and the United Kingdom are examples of the two-party system. In the US, the Democratic and Republican parties are main parties, and in the UK, are the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are two main parties.

3.2.3 Multi-Party System

Multi-party system indicates existence of several parties in a political system. India and many European countries have a multi-party system. In a multi-party system, several parties come together to form a coalition government and adopt a common minimum programme for governance. The multi-party system is of two types: unstable and working. The unstable party system does not provide stability, and the best example of this system can be seen in India during 1996-98. The working multi-party system behaves like a two-party system and thereby tends to provide stability to the government, even though they have more than two major political parties. The multiparty system promotes the coalition

government, and since the 1990s India has been governed by the coalition governments. The drawback of this system is that the members of the Council of Ministers instead of working under the leadership of the Prime Minister seek guidance from their party heads, and even a single Member of Parliament tries to blackmail or manipulate government by threatening to withdraw its support. Government instability is a major problem in this kind of party system.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the difference between two-party and multi-party system?

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3.3 DIFFERENT PHASES OF PARTY SYSTEM IN INDIA

The party system in India evolved in different phases from the dominance of single party, the Congress to multiplication of several parties. The following section discusses different phases of the system:

3.3.1 Congress Dominance Era (One-party Dominance vs. Multiple Parties)

As you have read in unit 1, various political parties had emerged before independence. After Independence, except a brief period of the Janata Party rule (1977-1980), it was the Indian National Congress (INC) that remained one of the most popular all India level parties in the first half of the twentieth century. According to Rajni Kothari the concept of One-party dominance explained India's party system during the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, he described the Congress party as 'Congress System'. As the leading party, the Congress had obtained an absolute majority of seats in parliament in the first four general elections. Congress party enjoyed this position till 1967. The Congress was such a dominant force that it secured comfortable majorities in the almost all the elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies in 1952, 1957 and 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 majorities 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. First three general elections saw Congress domination in the system that was marked by multiparty system vs one dominant party in the country. This trend had changed after the fourth General election, Nehru's demise and split in the party had affected the Congress dominance in party system. Even though the Congress was the single dominant party at the centre and in most states, it faced competition from

the non-Congress parties in several states. There are several instances of it. The strongest opposition it came from the CPI in Kerala in the second general election held in 1957. During the 1960s, the socialist parties, BKD/BLD/LD, left parties, the Jana Sangha, Republican Party of India, DK, and several other parties in different states posed a challenge to the dominance of the Congress as a single party system. They mobilized people on social, economic and political issues. This resulted in the defeat of the Congress in eight states and formation of the non-Congress government. With this, ended the dominance of the Congress which it had enjoyed at the same time both at the centre and in most states. However, it did not result in complete erosion in the support base of the party. The Congress continued to enjoy support in several states and at the centre on several occasions. But it ceased to be a single dominant party after the 1960s.

3.3.2 Breakdown of Congress System and Emergence of the Non-Congress Parties (1967-1989)

From the fourth general election of 1967 onward, there was a change in the Indian political system. This change was indicated in the decline of Congress party dominance in Lok Sabha elections and assembly elections, emergence of regional parties and leaders in several states. The regional parties and leaders not only challenged the dominance of the Congress, they also represented aspirations and interests of different regions and groups. The strongest challenge came from the leaders and parties that represented farming communities and backward classes. In north India, Bihar and UP, Charan Singh-led parties bearing different names such as BKD, BLD, or LD and socialists emerged as alternative to Congress. They gave priority to the issues of farming communities and backward classes. The introduction of reservation for backward classes in Bihar and UP in the 1970s, and setting up of Mandal Commission to introduce reservation for backward classes in the central government institution were the example of agenda which was different from that of the Congress. During 1967-1989, bipolarisation of political parties in the states formed a significant feature of political system. In Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi, the competition was between the Congress and the BJS/BJP. In Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal it had been the Congress and the left the principal competitors. In Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh, Assam and Goa, Congress or a regional party- 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.

Besides, split in the Congress in 1969, erosion of the credibility of public institutions during Indira Gandhi's regimes, student's movement led by Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1974 and imposition of emergency in 1975-1977 added to the decline of the Congress. For the first time, the challenge to the Congress at the centre level was posed by the Janata Party. It defeated the Congress. The Janata Party which was formed out of merger of five parties on the eve of general election of 1977. The defeat of the Congress in this election was considered as the harbinger of a new era in the party system. However, there was a temporary ascendancy of the Congress during the post-Janata Party phase in the 1980s. Congress' popularity reached peak with its victory in 1984 Parliamentary election after Indira Gandhi's assassination. Following the

Congress victory in this election, Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister of the country. But within a few years of the formation of Rajiv Gandhi government, the government was beset with several challenges. These challenges included agitation for creation of temple at Ayodhya, led by ex-Minister in the Rajiv Gandhi government, V.P Singh against corruption in purchase of guns from Bofors. Since the government was led by Congress leader, the challenges to it impacted the Congress adversely. Besides, some traditional supporters of Congress such as Dalits and some other marginalised communities rallied behind the newly formed party the BSP (founded in 1984). In 1989, the Congress party lost the Lok Sabha election, and Janata Dal-led coalition known as National Front formed government at the centre with VP Singh as Prime Minister. Since the late 1980s, The Congress party has failed to generate a popular leadership capable of accommodating varied interests and blunting the counterattack of its rivals. In the following decades while the BJP emerged as the most dominant political party in India, unlike in the preceding decades the Congress needed allies to retain its influence. This set a long process of formation of coalition governments in India. You will read about coalition politics in the sub-section given below.

3.3.3 Rise of Coalition Politics

The intensification of competitive politics has changed the party system. The competition shifted from rivalry between national parties into rivalry between alliances and coalitions of national and state parties. Although coalition governments in the states and at the centre were formed in 1969 and 1977 led by the SVD alliances and the Janata Party respectively, it was since 1989 that coalition politics became a pattern in Indian politics. Political parties made pre- and post-election alliances. In 1996, 13 non-BJP parties formed an alliance known as the United Front. Some of the parties which formed this alliance included Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Telugu Desam Party, Asom Gana Parishad, and Left Front. The United Front ran two governments at the centre with H.D Devegowda and I.K. Gujaral as the Prime Ministers in 1996 and 1997-98 respectively. Similarly, in 1999 coalition government of National Democratic Alliance (NDA)' was formed with BJP as the largest member of the coalition. The Governments formed in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 consisted of several parties. However, from 2004 there emerged predominantly two poled-alliance of political parties which formed governments at the centre and in states.. One of the alliances has been led by the Congress known as the United Front Alliance (UPA), another led by the BJP known as National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The UPA formed two central governments with Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister from 2004-2009 and from 2009-2014. The NDA also formed two governments with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister, from 2014-2019, and in 2019. There also emerged the alliance of parties excluding the members of the UPA and NDA, especially the Congress and the BJP. This came to be known as the Third Front. But the Third Front has not been a stable alliance unlike the UPA and the NDA. There also emerged alliances in the states such as Assam, Bihar, MP, Nagaland and Sikkim.

3.4 LIMITATIONS OF INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM

A well-knit organisation, ideology, internal democracy, democratic leadership and policies and programmes are important features of a political parties in

democracy. Most political parties in India generally do not satisfy these criteria. Even though some parties have organisations, all kinds of parties – national, state or unregistered parties have rallied behind a personality. Most parties in the states are known by their leaders, not by their policies or the parties as such. Political parties largely lack internal democracy in which decisions are not taken in democratic way or an individual or group of individuals within the parties take major decisions. Some parties articulate interests of specific sections of the society, rather than those of the all. In India, weakening of party structure started in the post-Nehru era. Factionalism and internal rivalries within the parties have resulted in split and multiplication of parties in India. Nexus between political parties, criminals, corporate sector and the corrupt also constitute a limitation of party system in India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) What do you understand by ‘one dominant party vs multiparty system’ in the Indian context?

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2) What is coalition government?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

Indian political system has features to all the three kinds of party system. However, the basic characteristics are different from the conventional concept. India had a One-party dominance system but not a one-party system. In the era of post-Congress dominance, there are both a two-party system and a multiparty system in India. The two-party system is more prevalent in States (assembly) and multiparty (coalition government) in the centre. The emergence of many regional parties and their active participation in General and Assembly elections make the political institutions more democratic and pluralist. Now, many marginalised sections, social group, and minorities have their representative and parties that represent their interests. In one multiparty system has made party system more transparent and accommodative, in another way it has made existence of e coalition government unstable. The coalition governments always face constant threat of withdrawing support by the coalition partners from the government. Despite this limitation, the multi-party system has made political institutions more democratic and inclusive.

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3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) A two-party system is one in which only two parties, despite the presence of other parties, have substantial support of the electorate and expectation of forming the government. Under this, the majority of the elected candidates at a given time belong to any one of the two major parties which form the government, while the other party remains in the opposition. The United States and the United Kingdom are good examples of the two-party system. Multiparty System is a system in which more than two major parties exist, which compete for power. India and many European countries have a multi-party system. In a multi-party system, several parties form coalition government and adopt a common minimum programme for governance.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Since independence except for a brief period of the 1970s, Congress had enjoyed the dominant position in the party system with the multiparty system in India. This system is known as one-party dominance vs multiparty system.
- 2) In a multiparty system, many parties come together to form a government on the basis of alliances that is called coalition government. Since the 1990s, India has witnessed many coalition governments. Failure of major national parties like Congress and BJP to win majority seats in elections has brought numerous small parties to the forefront. The Governments formed in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014 were coalitions of many parties. The advantage is that this kind of government does not run on a particular ideology but the common minimum programme, so it makes the system more democratic. The disadvantage of this system is instability in government because of manipulation and withdrawn of support of parties from the ruling party.