



Rise and Fall of Political Parties in India (1989-2019): Examining the BJP and the Indian National Congress

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Abstract: This paper examines the historical evolution and political dynamics of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India, highlighting the factors that contributed to the decline of the INC and the rise of the BJP from 1989 to 2019. The INC, formed in 1885, played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence and dominated Indian politics in the decades following independence, leading to an era known as the "Congress System." However, the party's influence began to wane after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964 due to several factors including leadership challenges, corruption scandals, policy failures, and the rise of regional parties. Internal factionalism and outdated communication strategies further weakened the INC's appeal. In contrast, the BJP, established in 1980, gained prominence by focusing on Hindu nationalist rhetoric, economic liberalization, and effective use of modern communication tools. Under leaders like L.K. Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Narendra Modi, the BJP successfully mobilized support across the country. The party's emphasis on national security and welfare programs such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and Jan Dhan Yojana further boosted its popularity. The BJP's decisive victories in the 2014 and 2019 general elections solidified its position as the dominant political force in India. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors driving these political shifts and offers insights into the evolving nature of Indian politics, emphasizing the importance of leadership, ideological clarity, and adaptability in achieving electoral success.

Keywords: Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janta Party(BJP), Political evolution, Leadership dynamics, Electoral shifts.

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Introduction

The Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stand as the two principal national political parties in India today. Historically, the INC enjoyed a prolonged period of dominance in Indian politics, often referred to as the 'era of one-party dominance' or the 'Congress system,' a term popularized by political commentator Rajni Kothari (Kothari, 1964). However, this dominance began to wane after the fourth general elections in 1967 due to a combination of internal and external factors that reshaped the Indian political landscape. The INC was established in 1885 and played a pivotal role in the Indian independence movement. Post-independence, it became the dominant political force, governing India for several decades. The era of INC's dominance was characterized by the leadership of figures like Jawaharlal Nehru, whose policies and vision shaped modern India. The party's grip on power remained strong through the 1950s and early 1960s. However, the landscape began to change after the death of Nehru in 1964 and the political turmoil that followed. Several factors contributed to the decline of the INC's dominance. The internal factionalism within the party, the rise of regional parties, and the challenges of governance in a diverse and rapidly changing nation

began to erode its stronghold (Brass, 1994). The 1967 general elections were a turning point, marking the end of the INC's unchallenged dominance as it faced significant losses and the emergence of non-Congress governments in several states.

In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), formed in 1980, quickly rose to prominence in national politics. The BJP's rise was propelled by its adept use of cultural and religious issues to mobilize support. Leaders like LK Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Narendra Modi were instrumental in transforming the BJP from a marginal player into a formidable political force (Hansen, 1999). The party's association with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) provided it with a strong organizational backbone, enabling extensive grassroots mobilization. One of the significant milestones in the BJP's rise was the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This movement, aimed at constructing a temple at the disputed site in Ayodhya, garnered massive support and significantly boosted the BJP's political fortunes. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent communal riots polarized the electorate and consolidated the BJP's support base among Hindu nationalists (Jaffrelot, 1996). The BJP's ascent to power was marked by

strategic leadership and effective electoral campaigns. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, known for his moderate stance and oratory skills, became the face of the party, leading it to form the government in 1998 and 1999 as the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) (Malik, 2019). However, it was Narendra Modi's leadership that marked a decisive shift in Indian politics. Modi's tenure as Chief Minister of Gujarat, known for its development narrative, positioned him as a candidate who could promise economic growth and efficient governance.

In May 2014, the BJP, under Narendra Modi's leadership, won the national elections with a significant majority, marking the first time in nearly 30 years that a single party had secured such a mandate. This victory represented a shift from coalition governments to a single-party majority, highlighting the BJP's dominance in Indian politics (Palshikar, 2015). Modi's campaign, characterized by promises of development, good governance, and a strong stance on national security, resonated with a broad spectrum of voters. The 2019 general elections further solidified the BJP's dominance. The party and its coalition (NDA IV) won more than 350 seats out of 543 in Parliament, with the BJP alone securing 303 seats. This was the most significant victory for any single party since the INC's landslide win in 1984 following Indira Gandhi's assassination (Jaffrelot, 2015). This electoral success underscored the shift in India's political system, with some experts now likening it to the 'BJP System,' where one party becomes very dominant, reminiscent of the INC's dominance in the past (Chhibber, 2014).

Formation and Dominance of the Indian National Congress (INC)

The Indian National Congress (INC), often called the Congress party, was formed in 1885 during British rule with the aim of gaining more rights for Indians and ultimately securing independence. The INC played a crucial role in India's struggle for independence, with prominent leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru leading the charge. After India gained independence in 1947, the Congress party emerged as the most powerful political group in the country. During the 1950s and 1960s, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress party won elections by large margins, leading to an era known as the "Congress System" (Kothari, 1964). This period was characterized by the party's dominance in Indian politics, where it established a stable and enduring political order.

Decline of the Congress Party

Despite its initial dominance, the influence of the Congress party began to decline after Nehru's death in 1964, and various factors contributed to its eventual downfall. Leadership challenges were significant, with the party struggling to find strong and charismatic leaders who could effectively connect with a diverse electorate (Varshney, 1999). The void left by Nehru's death was not adequately filled, and subsequent leaders could not match his stature or appeal. The 1967 state elections marked a turning point in Indian politics, witnessing a decline in Congress's influence due to the formation of various non-Congress governments in eight states. This period saw the rise of regional political parties, which challenged the hegemony of the Congress at both state and national levels (Brass, 1994). These regional parties capitalized on local issues and identities, which the Congress failed to address effectively.

Corruption scandals played a critical role in eroding public trust in the Congress party. High-profile cases such as the 2G spectrum scam and the Commonwealth Games controversy severely tarnished the party's image (Manor, 2014). These scandals highlighted the pervasive corruption within the party, leading to widespread disillusionment among voters. Policy failures also contributed to the decline of the Congress party. The inability to effectively address pressing issues such as inflation, unemployment, and economic reforms led to significant voter dissatisfaction (Kohli, 2004). The party's failure to deliver on its promises and address the economic concerns of the populace weakened its support base.

Over time, the INC's ideology and messaging became less clear, making it challenging to convey a compelling vision to the electorate (Yadav, 2000). The party struggled to articulate a coherent policy agenda, leading to confusion and lack of direction among its supporters. This ideological ambiguity made it difficult for the party to differentiate itself from its competitors. The Congress party suffered significant electoral defeats in various state and national elections, losing power in several key states (Jaffrelot, 2015). The rise of regional parties further eroded the INC's dominance, as these parties were more attuned to local issues and concerns. The Congress's inability to form effective alliances with these regional parties contributed to its decline (Chhibber & Kollman, 2004). India's changing demographics, with a young and aspirational population seeking new political alternatives, also impacted the INC's appeal (Thachil, 2014). The younger generation, in particular, found the Congress party's leadership and policies outdated and out of touch with their aspirations and needs. Internal factionalism and disputes within the party further hindered its ability to present a united front and a clear agenda to the electorate (Hasan, 2012). Infighting and lack of cohesion within the party leadership weakened its organizational strength and effectiveness.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Narendra Modi, successfully presented itself as a dynamic and credible alternative to the INC, significantly contributing to the latter's decline (Jaffrelot, 2015). The BJP's focus on development, national security, and Hindu nationalism resonated with a broad spectrum of voters, particularly the youth. The INC's communication strategies and election campaigns were often criticized for being outdated and ineffective. In contrast, the BJP adopted more modern and tech-savvy techniques, including extensive use of social media, which proved highly effective in engaging and mobilizing voters (Palshikar, 2015). The Congress party's inability to adapt to these new communication strategies further alienated it from the younger, tech-savvy electorate. The perception of the INC as a party of the past, associated with a bygone era of Nehru and Indira Gandhi, made it less appealing to younger voters seeking contemporary leadership (Chhibber, 2014). This generational shift in voter preferences underscored the need for the Congress to reinvent itself to stay relevant in modern Indian politics.

In conclusion, the decline of the Indian National Congress from the late 1960s onwards can be attributed to a combination of leadership challenges, corruption scandals, policy failures, and the rise of regional parties. The party's inability to adapt to changing political dynamics, internal factionalism, and outdated communication strategies further exacerbated its decline. In contrast, the BJP's modern approach, strong leadership, and effective use of

technology positioned it as a formidable alternative, leading to a significant shift in the Indian political landscape.

The Rise of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Indian Politics

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), formed in 1980, marked a significant shift in Indian politics with its focus on supporting the cultural and religious identity of Hindus in India. Over the years, the BJP emerged as a formidable political force by promoting economic improvement, national pride, and Hindu beliefs. The period from 1989 to 2019 witnessed a dramatic transformation in Indian politics, characterized by the rise of the BJP and the decline of the Indian National Congress (INC). The leadership of L.K. Advani, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Narendra Modi was instrumental in propelling the BJP to the forefront of Indian politics. These leaders addressed common issues and effectively used religion as a tool to mobilize masses.

One of the pivotal factors in the BJP's ascent was its active involvement in the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement. This movement aimed to reclaim the site in Ayodhya where many Hindus believe Lord Ram was born. The BJP's support for this movement gained widespread backing, particularly among Hindu nationalists (Jaffrelet, 1996). The demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 and the subsequent communal riots significantly boosted the BJP's political fortunes, consolidating its support base among Hindus. The BJP began to win seats in national and state elections, initially facing challenges in securing an outright majority but playing a crucial role in coalition governments. The formation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) allowed the BJP to forge strategic alliances with regional parties, enhancing its electoral prospects and enabling it to form coalition governments. This strategy of coalition politics was essential in broadening the BJP's appeal and reach.

The leadership of prominent figures like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani was vital in establishing the BJP's political credibility. Vajpayee's image as a moderate and statesmanlike leader helped the BJP gain acceptability among a broader electorate, while Advani's strong organizational skills fortified the party's grassroots presence. Vajpayee served as India's Prime Minister multiple times, providing stable governance and enhancing the party's stature (Malik, 2019). The BJP adopted pro-business and economic liberalization policies, appealing to a broader section of the population beyond its traditional base. These policies resonated with the middle class and the business community, who were eager for economic reforms and development. The BJP's focus on economic growth and modernization helped it garner support from various segments of society, including urban voters and the youth (Ganguly, 2007). The BJP became known for its effective election campaigns, utilizing modern communication tools, public rallies, and a strong social media presence. The party's ability to connect with voters through innovative campaigning techniques played a significant role in its electoral successes. The use of technology and social media allowed the BJP to reach a wider audience, particularly the younger demographic, who were increasingly influenced by digital platforms (Chhibber, 2014).

Emphasizing national security was another crucial factor that contributed to the BJP's appeal. Events such as the Kargil War in 1999 and the Balakot airstrikes in 2019 highlighted the party's strong stance on national security, which resonated with a segment

of the population concerned about India's defense and sovereignty. The BJP's focus on national security issues helped it project an image of a decisive and strong government (Malik, 2019). The BJP's decisive victory in the 2014 general elections, securing a majority on its own, marked a significant turning point in Indian politics. This victory was the first time in nearly 30 years that a single party had achieved such a mandate. Narendra Modi's leadership, characterized by promises of development, good governance, and a strong stance on national security, resonated with a broad spectrum of voters. In the 2019 general elections, the BJP repeated its success, winning more than 350 seats out of 543 in Parliament, with the BJP alone securing 303 seats. This electoral triumph was the most significant for any single party since the INC's landslide victory in 1984 following Indira Gandhi's assassination (Jaffrelet, 2015). These victories cemented the BJP's position as the dominant political party in India, shifting the political system towards a 'BJP System' where one party becomes very dominant.

The BJP introduced various social and economic welfare programs aimed at improving the living standards of the population. Initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission), Jan Dhan Yojana (financial inclusion scheme), and Ujjwala Yojana (free LPG connections to poor households) significantly impacted the lives of millions. These programs helped the BJP build a connection with the masses and demonstrated its commitment to development and welfare (Desai, 2017).

The BJP's ideology of Hindutva, combined with a focus on development and nationalism, appealed to a significant portion of the electorate. The party's emphasis on promoting Hindu cultural identity and values, along with its vision of a strong and prosperous India, struck a chord with many voters. This ideological appeal, coupled with effective governance and development initiatives, solidified the BJP's position in Indian politics (Hansen, 1999). The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party from 1989 to 2019 marked a significant transformation in Indian politics. Several factors, including its involvement in the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement, strategic coalition politics, strong leadership, pro-business policies, effective election campaigns, and emphasis on national security, contributed to its ascent. The BJP's decisive victories in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, along with its social and economic welfare programs and ideological appeal, established it as the dominant political force in India. This period of political change provides valuable insights into the dynamics of party competition and the shifting allegiances of the Indian electorate.

Conclusion

The decline of the Indian National Congress (INC) from its dominant position in Indian politics can be attributed to a complex interplay of leadership challenges, corruption scandals, policy failures, and the rise of regional parties. The party's inability to adapt to the changing political landscape and demographic shifts, characterized by a younger and more aspirational electorate, further accelerated its downfall. The INC struggled to present strong, charismatic leaders who could effectively connect with a diverse voter base, and its internal factionalism weakened its organizational strength and cohesion. High-profile corruption scandals eroded public trust, while policy failures in addressing economic issues such as inflation and unemployment led to widespread voter dissatisfaction. Additionally, the party's

ideological ambiguity made it difficult to convey a compelling vision to the electorate.

In contrast, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the dynamic leadership of figures like Narendra Modi, capitalized on these weaknesses. The BJP's effective use of Hindu nationalist rhetoric, focus on development, and strong communication strategies, including the use of modern technology and social media, resonated with a broad spectrum of voters. The BJP's emphasis on national security and economic liberalization further solidified its appeal. By presenting itself as a credible alternative to the INC, the BJP successfully attracted a significant portion of the electorate, particularly the youth, who were looking for contemporary leadership.

The period from the late 1960s to the present has seen a significant transformation in Indian politics, marked by the decline of the once-dominant INC and the rise of the BJP. This shift underscores the importance of strong leadership, clear ideological messaging, and the ability to adapt to changing political and demographic dynamics. For the INC to regain its former stature, it will need to address its internal challenges, rebuild public trust, and develop a coherent policy agenda that resonates with today's electorate. This analysis provides valuable insights into the factors driving political change in India and offers lessons for political parties and analysts worldwide.

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