



NATURE OF POLITICAL CHOICES

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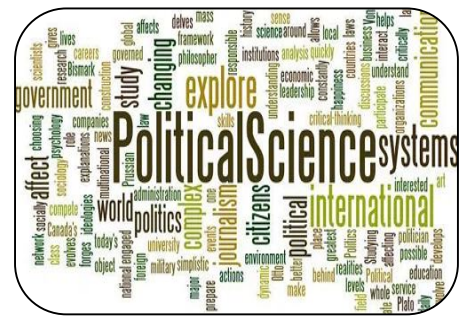
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ABSTRACT

This condition obtains when the different parties offer radically different policy packages that have perceived consequences for the lives of ordinary citizens. This often comes about at the time of the rise of a new political formation that challenges the existing political spectrum on issues of policy and practice (e.g., the rise of the Left Front to power in West Bengal through the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of DMK in Tamil Nadu in the 1960s) or in conditions of deep social upheaval and ethnic strife (UP and Bihar in the 1990s, Punjab in the 1980s Assam during 1980-85) or both (Kerala in the 1950). The voters choose between very different options with long term consequences. This tends to be a short lived phase, for periods of wide options are soon followed by a narrowing range of options. Either the original challenger dilutes its agenda. Eg., AGP in Assam or the rivals adopt the new agenda (e.g., rise of AIADMK as a rival to DMK in Tamil Nadu) or there is a mix of the two (e.g., West Bengal since the establishment of the Left Front dominance).

This is the nodal category of bourgeois democracy often celebrated as the basis of moderation and stability and derided by its radical critics as offering factious choices. There are choices but within defined limits. The main parties do not offer anything that is substantially different except a certain brand image. Usually political competition takes place around rival claims of doing the same thin better than the other. Sharp ideological differences are avoided by the principal political parties. Much of the differences revolve around one or two highly publicized issues of symbolic significances or around major personalities. Rajni Kothari had pointed out that the Congress system, despite being dominated by one party, offered a moderate choice as a result of factional disputes and contestations within the ruling party. In contemporary times, the choice available in states dominated by the Congress BJP contestation (Rajasthan, MP, Delhi, HP, Gujarat) offer a classic instance of this category. Both parties do not even pretend to offer any different economic or social policy. Even on the question of communalism, that ostensibly divides them, both parties make sure that they are not at a great distance from the operational position of the other. The same is true of Congress TDP competition in Andhra Pradesh or Congress Janata DAI contest in Karnataka. This category also includes instances of states where politics of radical choices in on the retreat. The difference between the UDF and the LDF in Kerala today or the choice available in West Bengal. Uttar Pradesh or Bihar can only be described as a moderate choice.

KEYWORDS: Structure of Political, Nature of Political Power, irregular system types, Congress system.



INTRODUCTION

This category includes two very different types of cases. On the one hand there are instances where political choices were forcibly denied by use of undemocratic means (e.g., J and K and Nagaland) and imposition of regimes that lacked political legitimacy. On the other hand, there are cases where the absence of party structures means that there is virtually no systematic choice that the voters get to evaluate. Choice, if any, is available at the local and personal level, and not at the party political level. Democratic theory would have us believe that such instance is exceptions that will be eliminated once competitive mobilization passes initial stages. But the Indian experience shows that such maladies can get institutionalized.

Having discussed the two dimensions separately, we can now discuss their interaction and the cumulative effect on the party system. Summarizes the interaction of the two dimensions and spells out the seven party system types that result from this.

Structure of Political Competition and Nature of Political Power in Indian States

Competitive Format			
Nature of Choices	One-Party Single Dominant Party)	Two-Party (Two-Party or Two Coalition)	Multi-Party (‘Two Plus’ or ‘Four or more’)
Wide and/or substantive choices	EXCLUSION J&K 1987 Assam 1983 Punjab 1992 One-party domination	Tamil Nadu, 1960s West Bengal, 1969-82	Kerala, 1960s and 1970s Bihar, 1989-95 UP, 1989-96
	One Party domination		Competitive Divergence
Moderate and/or limited choices	HEGEMONY Congress system Maharashtra up to 1978 UP, Bihar up to 1967 AP, Karnataka up to 1983 Left Front since 1982 Unipolar hegemony	CONVERGENCE Kerala since 1980s Gujarat since 1991 HP since 1977 Rajasthan, MP since 1989 Orissa, 1990-99 Karnataka 1983-96 AP, 1983-99 Punjab since 1997 Bipolar convergence	FRAGMENTATION UP since 1996 Bihar since 1995 Assam since 1985 Tamil Nadu since 1996 Multipolar convergence
Shallow and/or no choice	CLOSURE J & K, 1953-77 Closed one party system		FLUDITY Haryana 1967-72 Goa in 1990s Manipur Arunachal Pradesh Mizoram before 1985 System less competition

The interaction of three categories on each dimension (the two-plus category of competitive format has been merged with ‘bipolar’ for reasons of convenience here) would yield nine cells in all. But the merging of two possible cells with their neighbors has reduced the number to seven. Each of these seven cells represents a certain combination of competitive form and the range of choice available within that system. Each cell mentions the dominant characteristic of the nature of political power in that category. The cell also contains some illustrations that capture the characteristics of that system.

Of the seven party system types that this classification yields, four can be said to belong to the regular types of party systems that are prevalent in post independence India. These are:

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1. System of unipolar hegemony
 2. system of bipolar convergence
 3. system of multipolar convergence
 4. system of competitive divergence

Besides these, there are three irregular system types, each of which is the product of special and unusual circumstances. These are;

5. System of one party domination
6. Closed one party system
7. System less competition

It cannot be overemphasized that each of these is an ideal type, illustrated by a few states and that too in a specific period of history. It is not necessary that each state must fit one of these categories neatly all the time. At any given time, a state may combine elements from different systems. A detailed analysis of these seven categories may help us appreciate this point better.

The discussion of the Congress system in the previous section captured the structural attributes of the system of unipolar hegemony specific to India. It was a unipolar system in that political competition revolved around and was defined with reference to the one dominant actor. The hegemony of the Congress was sustained through its catch all character, through its capacity to forge a rainbow coalition of all kinds of social groups. The system depended on not allowing deep social or ideological cleavages to be politically activated. It is important to emphasize that unipolar hegemony of this kind does not depend on legal or actual elimination of rival political parties from the field of political competition. In that sense it is different from one party systems that came up in many third World countries. More importantly, it differs from these one party regimes in that the Congress system allowed external critique and internal dissent. The various factions within the congress performed the function of opposition. The options available to the citizen were no doubt severely limited, but the range was not much narrower than the one offered by moderate two party systems in the advanced industrial countries. This category is so much intertwined with the Congress system that operated in India it is hardly surprising that most of the classical illustrations should come from it.

Two Lives of the Congress System

After this long but necessary detour, we can now resume our journey of the evolution of the party system in the Indian states and evaluate the usefulness of the revised typology of the party system offered above. We have already noted that the Congress system was a product of the specific context in which democratic politics unfolded and became institutionalized in post independence India. In order to appreciate this point, one needs to be sensitive to the historical contrast between the path of bourgeois democracy in the West and the trajectory of democratic politics in post colonial societies. In the West, enfranchisement was a gradual process. As this process was in progress, social divisions were also taking shape. Thus, the final movement of enfranchisement was also the moment of freezing of party political divisions. This happened because mobilization along various social divisions and evolution of political organizations around these divisions had already taken place. Broadly, the national revolution and the industrial revolution created structures of cleavages that formed political divisions.

In India, the anti colonial struggle that provided a platform for powerful and mass mobilization also foreclosed the entry of many social cleavages into competitive politics. Thus, the introduction of universal adult franchise took place in a situation where structure of cleavages had not evolved and thus, a large part of society was yet to be mobilized. This provided an extraordinary autonomy to politics in 20th century India, for it could activate, institute or mask various kinds of potential cleavages. The national movement played a crucial role in this regard. It was not that various competing cleavages dictated terms to this political movement; it was rather the national movement that played a decisive role in upholding certain cleavages and pushing some other to the background.

At the moment of independence, quite a few social divisions were available for political mobilization. Even a cursory look at these would invite a question as to why many of these were never actualized in

politics. At the micro level, the village community, the jati, locality, were the possible platforms of mobilization. At the macro level, caste blocs, communal divisions, regional divisions within and among states, could become some of the political cleavages. Also, the division between rural and urban interests, division between the agricultural and modern economic sector could have become the bases of political contestations. Or, ideological divisions on the basis of modern vs traditional and Left vs Right were also potential platforms for political mobilization. Mobilization could also take place along issue based or class based divisions.

These potential cleavages were mediated by the imperatives of the design of modern democracy. The institutional arrangements adopted by modern democracy coupled with the background of the nationalist movement made it necessary to mobilize people on a macro scale. Political competition too, came to be conducted on the all India basis. This meant that localized, micro level divisions would not gain relevance. The aggregative compulsions of a first past the post electoral system did not encourage the formation of cleavage based politics. Some social categories were recognized constitutionally thus provide space for mobilization on these groups (SCs, STs, OBCs) which some others though not recognized, already existed (Muslims, for instance). The system of reserved seats in joint or single electorates, however, limited the potential of these categories for exclusivist mobilization.

Partition of the country foreclosed the possibility of mobilization on the basis of minority status (particularly in the case of the Muslim community). The minority category was accommodated by including minority rights in the constitution and postponing the issue of reform in personal laws of the minorities. Ironically, these very features were to later become the basis of mobilization both among the majority community and the Muslim minority. In the course of the freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhi, two other social divisions were accepted as more or less authentic. One was the rural urban divide. The other was regional identity based on linguistic states. In the post independence period, the rural urban divide could not develop as a basis of political mobilization, for the Congress began with a support base that cut across this divide. Language did become a platform for mobilization but once again the Congress was well placed to tackle it. By accepting the demand for the reorganization of states on linguistic basis, the Congress rendered the language divide politically harmless.

In the period immediately following independence, political parties attempted to cultivate social support by appropriating the different potential divisions. The map of the party system of this period reflected the different spaces available for mobilization during that period. It also reflected the map of political movements of the first half of the 20th century. The depth of support enjoyed by different parties corresponded to the way in which the Congress in the pre independence period related to the various divisions in the Indian society. Thus, during the first decade of independence, Congress was quite strong in parts of north India where it had accommodated the upper caste landed interests within the scope of its nationalist rhetoric. It was also strong in the areas where, as in Maharashtra, it had amalgamated the middle peasantry castes with a moderate reformist appeal. In other words, the Congress cultivated different social sections in different parts of the country and put them together on the basis of the nationalist ideology. Hence, the nationalist ideology performed an aggregative function.

The Congress sought to mobilize the people on the basis of the pre independence dichotomization based on the idea of the 'nation'. This master cleavage put other more specific cleavage based mobilizations in a position of disadvantage. The socialists were looking forward to an ideology based political division and sought to take advantage of the legacy of the 1942 Quit India movement. The communists were quite strong in West Bengal and the Telangana region as also in Kerala. They pushed the class divisions to the forefront particularly in the context of landlordism. The legacy of the self respect movement and land reform movement along with trade unions industrial centers formed the bases of the communist mobilizations. The Swatantra party made initial inroads in the ex-princely states while the Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), an offshoot of the RSS, sought to construct a Hindu constituency by capitalizing on the anti Muslim sentiment among the upper castes. The social justice movement formed the basis of the Dravida Kazhagan (DM) in South India, while the Akali movement gave birth to the Akali party in the Punjab. This brief summary is indicative of the nature of most of the non Congress parties that operated in the period immediately following

independence. While these parties corresponded to the different potential divisions in the society, they stood in contrast to the aggregative character of the Congress Party. Also, the support base of these parties depended upon the extent to which these divisions were actually explored for mobilization in the course of the nationalist movement. Mobilizations which were either explored by the Congress itself, or which evolved in spite of the Congress (as in the case of the Social Justice movement) or, had sympathizers within the Congress (as in case of the supporters of Hindu nationalism) stood some chance of being relevant in the post independence period as independent political formations or as viable political issues within the Congress party.

'Congress system' was the inevitable product of this period and this torical backdrop. The central cleavage instituted by the nationalist movement (colonial rule vs the Indian nation) was aggregative in nature and strong enough to override almost all other divisions. The Congress project was the creation of a national political community that cut across all divisions. This engagement with the imaginary institution of India continued after independence. The Congress became a rainbow coalition precluding other cleavages from any significant space in the political arena. It must be noted however, that other cleavages were not, at least on the whole, denied legitimate existence; they were instead accommodated. We have already noted the accommodation of regional, linguistic cleavages. By a series of micro designs and localized coalitions, the Congress managed to hold together the macro design called the national political community. This gave the Congress a catch all character constituting cross cutting cleavages. To go back to our typology, the Congress system had the political form of a one hegemonic party that allowed competition, dissent and opposition. Its hegemony never allowed political divisions to be intense, either in terms of exclusiveness of the party structure or in terms of ideological persuasions.

CONCLUSION

Rajni Kothari had pointed out that the Congress system, despite being dominated by one party, offered a moderate choice as a result of factional disputes and contestations within the ruling party.

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