

## [The Decline of the Congress Party in Indian Politics](#)

From being the single dominant party in India to its pathetic performance in the recently held assembly elections in five states, the Congress party has been on a steady downhill journey. This article looks at its trajectory post independence and especially in the aftermath of the 2014 general election.

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The 2014 general election dealt the Congress an electoral punch that knocked the wind out of its sails. It also threw up a leader in Narendra Modi that was reminiscent of Indira Gandhi with a larger than life image and that resulted in a tectonic shift of political equilibrium in Delhi from the middle of the centre ideological pinning of the Congress to the right wing brand of politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which rolled out a new political discourse promising to usher in a new India free from the Congress.

In the aftermath of these elections, journalistic and academic narratives focussing on the decline of the Congress party in the country's political arena abounded and red flags were raised within the party circles to arrest its terminal downslide and save it from being marginalised. The party went into a huddle but internal dissensions and lack of visionary strategies failed to revive its electoral fortunes. It lost the state elections held in 2015-2016 in quick succession and conceded the remaining political space to the BJP which was on a roll. The recent assembly elections held in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa in March were a kind of a referendum on demonetisation undertaken by Modi and a midterm appraisal of the BJP government. The issue of demonetisation created a sharp political divide and provided the Congress the much needed opportunity not only in stopping the saffron juggernaut but also in reversing its losing streak and making a political u-turn.

The electorate of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand handed the saffron party one of the biggest state election mandates in independent India. The Congress registered a consolation win in Punjab and emerged as the largest party in Manipur and Goa (in terms of seats, but lagged behind the BJP in terms of popular votes) but still lost the opportunity to form the government in the smaller states. This was largely due to poor negotiations by the party's state interlocutors and the flip flop by its national leadership. The declining wheel turned a full circle and the Congress is in power now in only six states--- Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Mizoram and Meghalaya on its own and in Bihar as a junior partner in an alliance.

On the other hand, the BJP has extended its political reach and rules in 17 states either on its own or in alliance. The electoral map of India has turned almost saffron signalling the rise of the BJP as a dominant player in the country's politics. The electoral shrinkage of the Congress after the elections in the above mentioned five states has once again started the debate in the public domain over its imminent decline with some over-enthusiastic political observers even writing obituaries and penning requiems.

### **Historical Perspective**

It thus becomes contextual to delve into the declining popularity graph of the Congress and ascertain the most plausible reasons that could explain the current downsizing of electoral support for the party from a vantage point. The political journey of the party can be divided into three time frames. It began its first innings officially as the Indian National Congress (INC) after independence and witnessed a rebirth in 1971 when Indira Gandhi broke free from the shackles of powerful leaders who had known her father and formed her own party. The Congress (Indira) continued after her death in 1984 under the leadership of her son Rajiv Gandhi until his assassination in 1991. There was a political interregnum between 1992 and 1997 when the party was not led by any member of the Nehru-Gandhi family. The taking over of the reins of the Congress by Sonia Gandhi in 1997 marked the 3.0 version of the party. She propelled it back to power at the centre in 2004 and ruled for ten years (in alliance with other parties) before taking an electoral bow in 2014.

## **Indian National Congress 1952-1968**

From the first general election in 1952 when Jawaharlal Nehru led it to a landslide victory (it won 364 of the 401 seats), the INC won in the majority of the following state elections and paved the way for a Nehruvian era of single party dominance. Political scientist Rajni Kothari in his book *Politics in India* defines a one-party dominant system as, “a competitive party system but one in which the competing parts play dissimilar roles and one which consists of, parties of pressure and parties of consensus”. The parties of pressure operate within the margin of pressure which comprises opposition parties. The parties of consensus are those which are part of the ruling consensus. The system depends on the sensitivity of the margin of pressure, where the parties of pressure operate, ensure suitable checks and balance on the ruling consensus and ensure the accountability of the parties of consensus. He identified the Congress party as the main consensus and therefore the dominant party with an obligation towards nation building through which the Indian political system operated after independence with back-to-back electoral victories in the 1952, 1957 and 1962 Lok Sabha elections.

The Congress party system during this period worked in a copy book style with leadership at national, state and local level chosen by elected members of the legislative bodies commanding their full support. There was an overlap between the executive and legislative wings but their work profile was neatly demarcated for proper functioning united in purpose and full respect for constitutional propriety. The Congress government under Nehru was the need of the hour for an India that had been totally messed up by British misrule, but its overarching dominance sowed seeds of its self weakening which became evident in the long run. Kothari stated that “in a sense, the Nehru period was an exceptional period in India’s history, one that was so necessary, but not so normal, but it had its effect on the working of the party system. While the congress gained in strength, Nehru in another way weakened the party by concentrating power in his own hands and through acting as if only he could hold the country together”.

The general elections held in 1967 under the leadership of Indira Gandhi after the death of Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri proved Kothari’s argument right as the Congress party besieged by internal dissensions and factionalism not only lost in more than 100 parliamentary seats but also shed four percentage points of popular votes. It lost eight state elections thereafter which seriously threatened its dominance, but it continued to remain “the preponderant political force in the country”. Nehru’s strong leadership created insecurities among the powerful leaders in his cabinet and led to the formation of syndicates which surfaced after his death for capturing power and harming the image of Congress party known for its decisive leadership and flag bearers of inner party democracy.

The lack of consensus in choosing a successor led to infighting in the party which was openly aired in the public domain. This could be flagged as the first sign of the moral decline of the Congress party and the dilution of its political legacy leading to gradual loss of the enormous mass support it commanded among the people during the Nehruvian period.

## Lok Sabha Elections: Performance of Indian National Congress

Year	Total Seats	Seats Won	Vote Share (In percent)	Gain/Loss (Vote share)
1952	401	364	45.0	-
1957	403	371	47.8	+2.8
1962	494	361	44.7	-3.1
1967	520	283	40.8	-3.9

Source: Election Commission of India

## Congress (Indira-Rajiv Gandhi) 1969-1991

After the death of the incumbent Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri the leadership issue within the party was sorted out with the elevation of Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister of India in 1966. However, the internecine battle among the two warring factions continued. The infighting finally resulted in a vertical split within the party, with the majority going with Indira Gandhi and the formation of the Congress (I). The general election in 1971 was contested by Indira Gandhi on the slogan "Garibi Hatao" and her pro-poor posturing created an electoral wave in her favour with the party adding 69 more parliamentary seats and increasing its vote share pan-India by 3%. The elections sorted out the leadership issue once and for all with Indira Gandhi acquiring a larger than life image equated with the Indian goddess Durga and starting a new chapter that became known as the personality cult in Indian politics.

The period that followed destroyed the second tier leadership in the party and voice for constructive criticisms as she replaced state leaders with their own standing with people who had no political base and were completely loyal to her. The party's organisational structure was changed from the bottom upwards and weakened its moorings with the common people, shutting the direct line of communication and feedback from the electorate. The isolation of Indira Gandhi was completed in 1972 as the party lost several by-elections including one seat which it had not lost since the first general elections and encountered a host of internal problems like high inflation due to the war with Pakistan, drought in some parts of the country and the 1973 oil crisis.

Her falling popularity ratings combined with the verdict of the Allahabad High Court on electoral malpractices led to the declaration of emergency in 1975. She bypassed the parliament and ruled the country by centralizing complete power in her hands with draconian decrees and presidential promulgations trampling constitutional bodies and democratic rights of the people. The extra constitutional powers appropriated by her son Sanjay Gandhi by passing the party leadership and the excesses committed by him not only squandered the popular mandate bestowed on the Congress but also dealt a severe blow on the party structure that was built and consolidated over the years.

The general elections in 1977 witnessed one of the rare occasions in the political history of the country of opposition parties uniting with the purpose of knocking out the Congress from the throne

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of Delhi by forming the Janata Party. The opposition conglomerate handed the Congress party one of the worst electoral defeats since its inception losing more than 200 seats and nine percent popular votes. The Indira Congress would have declined beyond redemption but the internal bickering within the Janata Party and the subsequent split provided it a window to regroup itself. The low index of opposition unity, the witch hunt of the Congress leaders for emergency excesses and the repositioning of the Congress on stability plank brought it back to power with a big majority in the 1980 national elections. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the leadership baton passed on to Rajiv Gandhi who led the party to a thumping victory in 1984 General elections winning a record of 415 seats mainly due to the sympathy wave created by the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The party came under the cloud of Bofors scam and lost its political pre-eminence and single party dominance in the 1989 General elections.

The Congress returned to power after the 1991 Lok Sabha elections and ruled the country with a clear cut mandate between 1971-1988 and remained the largest political outfit between 1989 and 1996. But its organisational structure and mass support base was substantially strained due to personality cult and the "high command" culture that flourished and eroded the brand ratings of the Congress party. The reasons for the decline of the party are manifold but it could be primarily attributed to the centralised leadership.

The other factors include the consensus in decision making was brushed under the carpet, the broad basing and nurturing of leadership in states and local level came to a grinding halt, the invincibility tag of the party was punctured by two electoral defeats, the ivory tower syndrome of top leadership isolated it from grass root workers and the party workers lost its zeal to connect with the people and keep the momentum going for the party. The winnability ratios of the Congress and the political halo as the only party which could govern India were seriously breached during this period.

## Lok Sabha Elections: Performance of Congress (Indira-Rajiv Gandhi)

Year	Total Seats	Seats Won	Vote Share (In percent)	Gain/Loss (Vote share)
1971	518	362	43.7	+2.9
1977	543	154	34.5	-9.2
1980	543	353	42.7	+8.2
1984	543	415	48.1	+5.9
1989	543	197	39.5	-8.6
1991	543	244	36.4	-3.1

Source: Election Commission of India

The period between 1992 and 1996 could be seen as an interregnum for the party as the leadership changed hands and it was the first instance when the Congress president was not from Nehru-Gandhi family. The party's political fortunes dipping further south as the post Mandal and Mandir phase of politicking witnessed the rise and growth of identity based regional parties and the Hindutva based BJP. The mandate in the 1996 general elections was against the Congress which conceded political space to the BJP. The saffron party made further inroads into the Congress citadel by winning 182 seats in 1999 general elections and emerge as the single largest party. It formed an alliance with like-minded parties under the banner of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and formed the first right wing government at the centre with Atal Bihari Vajpayi as the new prime

minister.

The Congress which realised that the BJP could steal its thunder and emerge as a viable national party alternative, invited Sonia Gandhi who had kept away from politics after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, to take command and steer the party back into reckoning. This marks the third phase of Congress party politics which arrested the imminent decline and brought the party back to power at the centre in 2004.

## **Congress (Sonia-Rahul Gandhi) 1998 onwards**

The Lok Sabha election in 2004 was a battle between the NDA led by its popular Prime minister Vajpayi and the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) stitched together under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. The NDA government had performed reasonably well, but the riots in Gujarat and its "India Shining" campaign did not go down well with voters and it lost the elections to its main adversary. Manmohan Singh became the prime minister of the UPA government. The leadership was diluted from a single person to Manmohan-Sonia-Rahul troika which worked well for five years (2004-09) and in the 2009 national elections was able to retain power winning over 200 seats on its own. The impressive performance of the congress was due to the combined leadership of Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), farm loan waiver scheme, pro poor policies of the UPA government, confidence of stability and victory of secular forces.

The gains made in 2009 by the Congress were lost midway as the UPA II government was besieged by numerous scams, high inflation and unemployment rates, price rise and the policy paralysis that hit the country in the last two years of its regime. The general election in 2014 marked the real decline of the Congress as it witnessed a "wave" election with a new dimension as there were two currents running simultaneously in the country. The first current was a strong anti incumbency wave against the Congress which pushed it tally of seats to 44 which is the lowest and its vote share fell below 20% . The second wave was in favour of the BJP PM designate Narendra Modi which propelled the saffron party back to power in Delhi with a comfortable majority for the saffron party signalling the beginning of the BJP dominance in national spectrum of power politics.

## **Lok Sabha Elections: Performance of Congress (Sonia-Rahul Gandhi)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Total Seats</b>	<b>Seats Won</b>	<b>Vote Share (In percent)</b>	<b>Gain/Loss (Vote share)</b>
1998	543	141	25.8	-3
1999	543	114	28.3	+2.5
2004	543	145	26.5	-1.9
2009	543	206	28.6	+2.1
2014	543	44	19.5	-9.1

*Source: Election Commission of India*

The seeds of the deterioration of the Congress party which were sown during the period of Nehru germinated and grew during the Indira regime before becoming a full blown tree in the Sonia-Rahul era which is most likely to fall due to its overbearing weight. The reasons for the decline of the Congress party which surfaced during the Indira period were not addressed by the current leadership

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and kept in limbo. The working of the Congress government and party gave birth to new problems which hastened its downslide further. The dual control of the Manmohan Singh government and the Congress party by the Gandhi family worked was calibrated properly and worked well initially but it ran into rough weather in the second term.

The remote control of the government and managing the alliance partners created frictions which snowballed into a serious of political crisis and electoral backlash in 2014 hustings. The high command syndrome which decided party matters earlier at national and state matters was extended at local levels with no connect with party functionaries at ground zero. The absence of a strong leader within the Congress is another significant factor.

The Congress under Nehru was an omnibus party which co-opted the ideological shades of the right-centre-left and built a consensus to rule India giving no leeway to political parties of left and right orientation to spread their political and electoral wings. The leadership and party organisation were in equilibrium and equally strong with no major opposition to challenge its supremacy. The ascendancy of Indira after a tough fight with right leadership in the Congress and subsequent expulsion paved the way for centre to left policies making her one of the most popular leader of her time. The charismatic leadership of Indira weakened the party rank and file and she banked on centralised and authoritative decisions to rule the country and maintain the single party dominance of the Congress.

The party at present does not have a strong leader and workable structure and its ideological agenda of leftist-welfareist policies for the poor has been hijacked by the BJP which is using it cleverly to position itself as the single dominant party in Indian politics. The Congress needs to rewrite its ideological agenda and open the entry gates of the party for people with rightist views within its broad spectrum of secular politics to counter the BJP surge in the country. The party can revive itself by rebuilding the party organisation by repopulating its cadres with foot soldiers and flag bearers at the grassroots level and set up realistic goals to do a political rebound in the distant future.