

Deinstitutionalization of the Congress 'party system' in Indian competitive politics

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Abstract

The conference in Poona that led to the foundation of Indian National Congress in 1885 aimed to serve as the germ of a native parliament to provide a reply to the assertion that India was still unfit for any form of representative institution. It spearheaded the Indian independence movement and post 1947 ushered in a 'Congress system' of one-party dominance that represented a historical consensus with few parallels in any political party system in the world. Dialectical contradiction has been a historic recurrence in the Congress as 'personality cults' of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi in the early years and a 'high command culture' later on decimated its hegemonic power in competitive party politics. The Congress declined due to a deficit of political vision, lack of forward-thinking ideas, engagement in competitive pseudo-secularism and diminishing electoral returns of dynastic (Nehru-Gandhi) politics. The institutionalization of BJP as a dominant party in 2014 coincided with the deinstitutionalization of the Congress party system. The grand old party needs to relegitimize itself by revamping its ideology, formulating a populist model of governance, creating son-of-the-soil leadership, revitalizing the party system, re-engaging with citizens, altering its politics to meritocracy and embracing new age electoral grammar.

Keywords

Congress party, deinstitutionalization, Indian politics, one-party dominance, party systems

Introduction

The Indian National Congress (INC), informally called the 'Congress' or 'Grand Old Party of India' in contemporary media parlance, is one of the oldest political parties in the world. It was formed in 1885 and one of its stated objectives was that '[i]ndirectly it will form the germ of a native

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Parliament and, if properly conducted, will constitute in a few years an unanswerable reply to the assertion that India is still wholly unfit for any form of representative institutions'. Lord Dufferin, who served as the Viceroy during its inception, opined that the group of nationalist Indians in the Congress represented 'only an infinitesimal section of people and [was] a "microscopic minority"' with compatible loyalty to England (Chandra, 1964: 199–208). However, the party changed its political gears and soon became the torchbearer of the freedom movement and led India from the front in gaining independence from British rule in 1947. The Congress ruled for more than five decades with brief interludes before it lost its historical domination and political supremacy in General Elections 2014. This election is a momentous milestone as it marked a structural change in India's national politics and competitive party systems. The BJP, empowered by a strong wave in favour of Narendra Modi, registered an emphatic victory by winning 282 of the 543 seats and crossing the majority mark in the lower house of the Indian parliament (Lok Sabha). The saffron surge not only ended the podium finish primacy of the Congress in competitive electoral politics, but also rekindled the tactical debate on the utility and exigency of one-party dominance and a monolithic political system.

The existence of a political party system is an essential feature of democratic countries, as it helps parties in presenting their agenda of governance to enfranchised citizens. This eases voters not only in forming an informed opinion, but also in expressing their choices through balloting. Parties make politics 'user-friendly' for citizens (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000) and play a critical role in canvassing and convincing people to actively participate in the electoral process and cast their valid votes (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). The election results in 2014 were quite dramatic, possibly even epochal, as the electoral patterns of the last quarter of a century underwent a sea change. The world's largest democracy has what appears to be a new party system headed by a new dominant party (Sridharan, 2014). Most political and media intellectuals were sceptical about this political change and dubbed the overwhelming saffron wave as a one-off phenomenon that would fade away with the passage of time (Rai, 2021). However, the verdict of the 2019 national elections proved them wrong, as the BJP, riding high on a repeat 'Modi wave', scripted yet another spectacular victory, hastening the decimation process of the Congress. Since 2014, India has indeed embarked on a new chapter in its political evolution, a key structural break as the Congress lost its dominance, replaced by a new formative political force in the BJP (Milan and Jamie, 2019). The debacle of the Congress in 2019 led to a flurry of fourth estate investigations into its decline and 'Save the Congress' from political extinction became the war cry of Indian left-liberal cohorts. The red flags raised did not stir up the hornet's nest in the Congress and its myopic course corrections failed miserably due to a lack of correctional strategies and the collapse of the party system. The attrition of Congress leaders and cadres that started in 2014 continues unabated, and by the end of 2022 it was reduced to power in only three (Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh) out of the 29 states in India. The competing factionalism in the Congress-ruled states was buttressed with public dissidence by a group of senior leaders, like the tussle between Congress leader Sachin Pilot and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot in the state of Rajasthan, which further deepened its existential crisis and prospects of political longevity. Deinstitutionalization of the party system occurs when it develops irregularity in party competition, disruption in party–citizen linkages, a weakening of the legitimacy accorded by the principal actors and subordination of party organization by strong leader(s). In board terms, it means the paradigm of competitive electoral politics becomes deeply unstable and prominent political parties witness high electoral volatility. Electoral volatility is the net change within the electoral party system because of individual vote transfers, and refers to the aggregate turnover from one party to

others from one election to the next (Pedersen, 1983; Przeworski, 1975; Roberts and Wibbels, 1999). It happens when newly created parties rapidly rise to electoral prominence, traditional parties lose support base and political entrepreneurs and personalities increasingly structure and shape the political process and encroach on functions once fulfilled by parties (Janda, 1993; Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006; Sanchez, 2008). Party institutionalization increases a party's prospects for survival but is never an irreversible linear process and provides no guarantee against regression. Deinstitutionalization has a special relevance in the context of democratic transition from a one-party to a multi-party system, as the regression of the incumbent party has often been a corollary of the institutionalization of new parties. There is an extensive literature on the 'deinstitutionalization' of the Congress party system, but it lacks conceptual clarity or consistency and widely refers to the decline or decomposition of party supremacy (Hardgrave and Kochanek, 1993; Manor, 1981; Randall and Svåsand, 2002; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1981).

Thus, it becomes imperative to theorize the decline of the Congress party system in the conceptual framework of party institutionalization-deinstitutionalization based on the established academic literature. This article will delve into the work record of the Congress from a historical perspective to fathom its current electoral imbroglio and delineate reasons for its fast-declining political graph. This article comprises three major parts. The first focuses on the definition of political parties, theorizations on party system institutionalization and the single-party dominance of the Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru (1952–1967). It explains the concept of 'one-party dominance' in the Indian competitive party system, the intrinsic strength and weakness of the 'Congress system' and the impact of Nehru's domineering leadership in weakening the epistemic egalitarianism within the party. This section traces the role played by ideological groupings and divisionary factions in the decline of the INC, the ramifications of the Congress split in 1967 on its competitive dominance and its stature as a preponderant political force. The second part discusses the deinstitutionalization and personalization of the Congress from 1968 to 1988 due to meteoric rise of Indira Gandhi and the inauguration of cult politics and authoritarianism. It comparatively analyses the dominance paradigm of the Congress after independence and post-Nehruvian polity due to serious challenges from rising regional parties and fragmentation of its all-encompassing countrywide support base. It focuses on signature personalization of politics by Indira Gandhi, systematic decimation of inner-party democracy, the purge of grassroots and local leaders and poor replacements with sycophants and political weaklings. It fathoms the change in traditional base voters and the spatial tweaking of electoral strategies for mobilizing the electorate. The final part deals with a new edition of weakly institutionalized political party system and competition in 1989, with the Congress losing its prominence as it failed in mustering a parliamentary majority and switched to multiparty alliances and coalition government. It deliberates on changes in the party leadership from concentration of power in the hands of one person to a troika (collective), success and failure of 'High Command' culture in dismantling the 'party system' and political oversights in party course corrections and comeback attempts. This section probes the impact perception of institutionalization of BJP's single-party dominance and its echo chamber effects in reinforcing anti-Congressism and creating an adverse political ecosystem for the Grand Old Party in India.

1952–1967: Predominant leadership eclipsed the Congress system

Max Weber outlined the role of a party:

Their action is oriented toward the acquisition of social 'power', toward influencing a communal action no matter what its content may be. In principle, the communal actions of 'parties' always mean 'a

societalization.' For party actions are always directed toward a goal which is striven for in planned manner. (Weber, 1968: 27)

Maurice Duverger, an eminent political scientist, theorized about political party systems based on the number of parties in an electoral system. He said:

the simple majority, single ballot system favours the two-party system while both the simple-majority system with second ballot and proportional representation favour multi-partism. It is thus possible to achieve a stable, well-organized political system rather like the two-party one, where in place of two large unified parties, there are two 'federations of parties' facing one another, their strength depending largely on the state of discipline and organization in the constituent parties. In fact, if the many parties to which the system gives rise coalesce to form two great coalitions in which discipline is strict, and which are clearly separated from each other, there is a definite resemblance to the two-party system. (Duverger, 1951: 340)

The literature on political parties is quite vast, but some prominent proponents have defined it as a political group identified by a label or a team of people seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in a competitive election (Downs, 1957). A party system is a set of two or more parties that interact in patterned ways with some regularities in the distribution of electoral support and continuity-institutionalization of political parties (Sartori, 1976). Parties in India like in other democracies are bureaucratic institutions that function between elections. Their structure is hierarchical collective leadership that is accountable to the members and they govern by rational-legal authority based on a set of written rules and procedures. They mobilize voters based on ideology and public policies to win elections, run a legitimate government representing the will of the majority and articulate their veritable interests. However, barring two prominent national parties, most parties in the largest democracy of the world are inchoate organic entities with dynastic leadership, regional dominance and identification with particular ethnic and caste groups.

The primary role of the INC, founded in 1885 by British civil servant AO Hume, was quite different from the usual defining objectives of a party, as it was formed as a 'safety-valve' to pre-empt another national uprising on the lines of the pan-Indian mutiny of 1857 (Chandra, 1964). The aim of Indian leaders on the other hand was diametrically opposed, as it hoped to use Hume and the INC as a lightning conductor to provide traction for the freedom movement. The Congress Party led by Jawaharlal Nehru contested the first general election in 1952 after the independence of India and registered a massive victory by winning 364 out of the 401 seats in the Lok Sabha. In the following years, it won the majority of the state elections, paving the way for a Nehruvian era of single-party dominance of the Congress in Indian politics.

A dominant party system is midway between pluralism and single party system and is in operation in India as the opposition parties have a real existence, as they bring together a number of important voices, which is closer to a multi-party system than to a single party. (Duverger, 1951: 44)

The one-party dominance (different from one-party system) is a competitive party system but one in which the competing parts play rather dissimilar roles. It consists of a party of consensus and parties of pressure, which function on the margin (concept of a margin of pressure). There are several opposition groups and parties, dissident groups from the ruling party, other interest groups and important individuals outside the margin that do not constitute alternatives to the

ruling party as their role is to constantly pressurize, criticize and censure it. However, they can exert a latent threat that if the ruling group strays too far from the balance of effective public opinion, and if the factional system within it is not mobilized to restore the balance it will be displaced from power by the opposition groups. The Congress was the party of consensus functioning through an elaborate network of factions providing the chief competitive mechanism of the Indian system. A number of opposition parties existed, but the Congress was the chief party representing a historical consensus, internalizing political competition and enjoying a continuing basis of people's support and trust (Kothari, 1964). The Congress Party was the main consensus with an obligation towards nation building through which the Indian political system operated post independence with back-to-back electoral victories in the 1952, 1957 and 1962 Lok Sabha elections.

The pivotal reasons for the Congress dominance were the legacy it inherited from the nationalist movement which provided it legitimacy, and a pluralist organizational structure that assured its political sustainability (Satyanarayana, 1997). It relied for its success on a tacit Hindi heartland strategy that helped it win a disproportionate share of votes and seats from the region's six states that account for 42 per cent of total seats in the Lok Sabha. This disproportionate electoral support was due to en-bloc approval by the principle-disadvantaged minorities, Muslims, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1981). The elements that strengthened the Congress and maintained its popularity includes its strong association with the 'freedom movement' and firm entrenchment of the party organization in almost every village. The Congress leveraged a kind of inertia, prevalent in the socially tightly knit villages of India, and no one and no party has been able to overcome that inertia and legacy of Mahatma Gandhi's mass appeal and mobilization. Due to the weakness of opposition and its fragmentation into innumerable parties, it was able to win seats with a plurality vote and the voters did not find an alternative to it (Weiner, 1954). The party system worked in a copybook style with leadership at the national, state and local levels chosen by elected members of the legislative bodies. There were frequent overlaps between the executive and legislative wings, but a clear-cut demarcation of work areas ensured the smooth functioning of politics and governance. Nehru established his supremacy over the Congress, but his dominant personality led to a diminishment of the democratic hierarchies and organizational culture of the party. The Congress grew from strength to strength, but the higher concentration of power in the hands of Nehru and his belief that he alone could hold the beleaguered country together weakened the party structure (Kothari, 1964). The leadership of Nehru created insecurities and contestations among the powerful leaders in his cabinet and the formation of syndicates. It harmed the political image of the Congress known for unity of purpose, decisive leadership and intra-party democracy.

A fair judgement of the strength and weaknesses of the Congress depends upon its electoral position and the extent of cohesion within the party. The greatest threat to party organization did not come from ideological conflicts but from other divisive tendencies. The drive for status and recognition, even more than caste, communal or provincial urges, was the most powerful force inside the Congress organization and, in fact, inside other Indian political parties as well. This desire for status has been the basis for much of the splintering of political parties and factional rivalries since 1947 (Weiner, 1954). The oppositional movement, especially the socialist movement in the Hindi belt, played a significant role in awakening the social and political consciousness of the people and in catalysing the rise of leadership from the lower sections of the society. The exhaustion of the nationalist legacy led to the ideological diffusion of the Congress and the blurring of dominant image carefully nurtured in the early decades after independence. As a result, the party suffered a series

of splits, which in a cumulative sense led to the steady erosion of the formidable Congress system (Satyanarayana, 1997). The lack of consensus in choosing a successor led to infighting and divisions in the party, with serious loss of face and devaluation. In the national elections held in 1967 after the death of two stalwarts, Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, the faction-ridden party under the stewardship of Indira Gandhi suffered its first major electoral setback as it lost 78 parliamentary seats and around four per cent of popular votes (Table 1).

The Congress still emerged as the strongest party, but with a strikingly diminished dominance. Internal disenchantment, the consequences of an increasingly critical electorate and the phenomenon of selected electoral coalitions among opposition parties led to rejection of the Congress in eight states (Punjab, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Goa, Kerala and Madras) in the 1967 Assembly elections. Its appeal had declined and both supporters and opposition subjected its performance in the art of governance to harsh judgements. This provided the conditions for internal fissions and frustration of consensus-maintaining mechanisms. There was no replacement of the ultimate arbiter, an overpowering prime minister, in the image of Nehru nor any institutional mechanism developed to serve this vital function. The customary mechanisms and attitudes for achieving consensus on critical intra-party issues eroded in the succession fights after the death of PM Shastri. There was an acceptance of open conflict and the actuality of defeat in 1967 established a national precedent that opposition parties could win and that non-Congress governments could rule in India (Kothari, 1970). This marks the first phase of the decline of the Congress due to dilution of political hegemony, an intense leadership tussle, rampant intra-party contestations and the weakening of organizational discipline and party structure (Rai and Kumar, 2017). Political parties during organizational development tend to go from domination to adaptation with three crucial phases: genesis, institutionalization and maturity. Institutionalization refers to a process by which an organization becomes well established and widely known, with actors developing expectations, orientations and behaviour based on the premise that it will prevail in the future. In politics, institutionalization is a process through which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability, with political actors having clear and stable expectations about the behaviour of other actors (Huntington, 1968; Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006). The political institutionalization and democratization of a party system is high if there is a semblance of stability in the nature of inter-party competition, major parties have secure roots in the society, key political actors accord legitimacy to the electoral process and parties do not face insubordination from ambitious leaders (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995). The more institutionalized a party, the less organized are its internal factions (Panebianco, 1988). The Congress-dominated party system in this period could not achieve the critical mass of institutionalization due to the personal aspirations of its top leadership, and it failed in structuring and formalizing the political process. The party led by Nehru and other stalwarts immensely benefited from the political inheritance of freeing India

Table 1. Predominance of leadership (Jawaharlal Nehru).

Year	Total Lok Sabha 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.

from colonial rule, but it created a duality of paradox in its organizational development, as it continued to function like a 'movement', thereby weakening the democratization process that made it vulnerable and susceptible to an unpredictable future.

1968–1988: Personalization of politics weakened the party structure

The national election in 1971 was contested by Indira Gandhi on pro-poor posturing, and her populist slogan '*Garibi Hatao*' ('eliminate poverty') created a huge electoral wave in India that enabled the Congress to add 69 more parliamentary seats to its tally with a three per cent jump in popular vote share. She started a feminist chapter and 'personality cult' in Indian politics that transcended the structure of the party and created a cult of political followers from a rainbow of caste community groupings (Rai and Kumar, 2017). The cult of personality refers to the idealized, even god-like, public image of an individual consciously shaped and moulded through constant propaganda and media exposure (Wright and Lauer, 2013). The Indira tenure witnessed a purge of second-tier political leaders and a side-lining of critical voices within the party fold. Gandhi replaced regional leaders of the Congress with a strong support base with people without grassroots moorings. The party imposed the authoritarian will and command of Gandhi instead of ventilation of discontent and democratic resolution of conflict of interests. The process of centralization of power substantially weakened the party system, which in the absence of internal democracy failed to address the popular aspirations. This led to the creation of a situation that demanded alternative modes of political expression (Satyanarayana, 1997). The organizational structure of the Congress witnessed a tectonic change from 'bottom-up' to 'top-down', which narrowed the ambit of the decision-making process and restricted communication with citizens. It dealt a severe blow to the existing feedback mechanisms and closed avenues for open dialogues with the sub-altern electorate, which formed its core electoral support base (Rai and Kumar, 2017).

In 1975, Gandhi declared a national emergency in India and initiated authoritarian rule, which had a collateral impact – the political personalization of the Congress. Political personalization is a multifaceted phenomenon in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time, while the centrality of the political party declines (Rahat and Sheaffer, 2007). Personalism becomes a crucial criterion for assessing the institutionalization of political parties and decoding the depersonalization of parties and party competition (Mény, 1990). The high degree of personalism affected the voting choices of the Indian electorate, as they preferred candidates based on their personal characteristics instead of party ideology or programme promises. The political party systems with a low degree of institutionalization are fluid or weakly institutionalized, which is a continuous variable that goes from institutionalized to fluid party systems. The fluid system shows less regularity in patterns of party competition, weaker party roots in society, less legitimacy to parties, weaker party organizations and is often dominated by personalistic leaders. Leaders and personalization have become increasingly important in election outcomes, even in countries with a parliamentary system of government (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006). In fluid political systems, personalism devoid of programmatic and ideological components usually plays a much greater role in voting (Silveira, 1998). Parties in weakly institutionalized party systems have precarious resources and are less professionalized, with many parties being personalistic vehicles (Conaghan, 2000). The decay was greatly accelerated by the efforts of Gandhi during her Prime Ministership (1966–1977 and 1980–1984) to deinstitutionalize, eroding the autonomy and substance of institutions in the interests of highly centralized government and personal dynastic rule (Manor, 1981). The authoritarian regime of Gandhi weakened the roots of

the Congress in society, enfeebled the party organization, initiated the deinstitutionalization of the party system and strengthened the personalistic linkages between voters and candidates.

The 1977 general elections witnessed one of the highest indexes of opposition unity as anti-Congressism brought several parties with different ideological hues under the banner of the Janata Party (JP) with the singular objective of defeating Gandhi. The Congress suffered a crushing defeat, losing more than 200 Lok Sabha seats with an electoral reduction of nine per cent votes (Rai and Kumar, 2017). If the Congress were really to lose its grip, the opposition may even be able to form a government in one or more states. If this happened on a large scale, and percolated to the centre, the system would undergo a major change. Even in that case, the question remains whether the new party or coalition provides another party of consensus or is just an expression of accumulated protest on the part of the public that is likely to wither away after a short time in office. The one-party dominance in the 1950s, with its factions, support and communications networks, may be a transitional system, suited for the special period of postcolonial national growth, but one that would transform into a more 'normal' party system later on (Kothari, 1964). The Congress party was in shambles and its downfall seemed imminent, but the internal bickering within the JP and the subsequent split provided it with a golden chance to come back to power in 1980.

The reason for the failure of the JP experiment is ascertainable in Duverger's hypothesis:

Solid and homogeneous coalitions may give a multi-party system a close resemblance to a two-party system and make the opposition more coherent, more moderate, and more distinct. Conversely a two-party system in which the parties are lacking in discipline, centralization and organization may have an opposition often nearer in its operation to the multi-party than to the two-party pattern. (Duverger, 1951: 418)

The decline of JP due to differences in ideology and policy perspectives surfaced among the individual leaders. There were striking parallels between the intra-party differences and splits in the Congress and Janata coalition, as dissensions invariably manifested in the form of individual differences and personality clashes (Satyanarayana, 1997). The unanticipated victory of the Congress in the 1980 national hustings after the collapse of the JP-led government was a superficial resemblance of one-party dominance and a nominal restoration of the political universe that supported it during the Nehru era. The return of the Congress system of dominance masked some fundamental changes that took place in Indian politics. The first was a significant shift in the regional distribution of electoral support for the Congress. This resulted in moving from a traditional reliance on its disproportionate support in the 'Hindi heartland' towards a 'Southern strategy'. The second was the breakdown of the minorities' bloc support for the party that could now no more be taken for granted. Finally, the Congress itself, like other political parties, experienced a progressive de-institutionalization (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1981). Looking back at the 1980 elections reveals it was a critical setback for the Congress system due to a narrowing of national electoral footprints, loss of its substantive core support base and the trust of Muslims in north India, decomposition of party credibility and the beginning of political delegitimization (Table 2).

The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1983 created a political vacuum with no succession plan in place. The leadership baton passed to her son, Rajiv Gandhi, who led the party to a thumping victory in the 1984 General elections. The Congress created a record by winning 415 Lok Sabha seats as five out of 10 electors emotionally voted to pay their political homage to one of the most popular prime ministers of India. However, Rajiv Gandhi could not handle the overwhelming

Table 2. Electoral invincibility breached (Indira-Rajiv Gandhi).

Year	Total Lok Sabha 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.

mandate and his government, besieged by Bofors (Defence) scandal, lost the battle of perception and received a drubbing in 1989 general elections. The Congress lost 115 parliamentary seats and shed around nine per cent of the popular votes, and its organizational decline that started in 1977 became a routinized political process. The emergence and consolidation of alternatives to the Congress in different states and the replacements, instead of being uniform, displayed a regionalized pattern, hence it did not take shape in the form of pan-India parties. The national elections in 1989, 1996, 1998 and 1999 were clearly a manifestation of fractured polity, as no party could obtain a simple majority to form the government and needed the support of smaller parties. The 1989 elections brought a perceptible shift in the pattern of political representation, as it witnessed the emergence of a third force (Satyanarayana, 1997). The nature of party politics changed from one-party dominance of the Congress to multi-party coalitions and the origination of a third axis in the political ecosystem of India.

The electoral competition and hunt for votes to secure immediate electoral victories induce parties to relax their ideological baggage and turn into ‘catch-all-parties’. It signals the decline of meaningful opposition in party systems as ideology becomes increasingly irrelevant for structuring political difference across major political parties (Kirchhmeir, 1966). The reasons for the Congress sliding into its second major phase of decline are primarily the change in the public posturing of the party and the authoritarian tendencies of its supreme leaders. It changed its political ideology, its role of socialization and channels for integrating the electorate to become a ‘catch-all party’, which resulted in the attrition of turncoats and power base in future. The ‘personality cult’ that flourished during Indira Gandhi’s regime eroded the brand ratings of the Congress and its partisan support base. The reasons for the harmonic decline are manifold but it can be summarized as authoritarian leadership, the ivory tower syndrome of top leaders, aversion to political change, disregard for inner-party democracy and departure from collective and consensual decision making. The invincibility tag of the Congress in national elections was shattered, communication channels with grassroot workers ruptured and the political zeal to interact with common people dissipated (Rai and Kumar, 2017). The dominance of the Congress in India was breached, its halo effect dimmed and the self-belief that it alone could provide stability and security evaporated during this time span of political uncertainty and electoral churnings.

1989–2014: High-command marginalized political organization

Democratic politics in India witnessed three phases of transformation of the political party system. In the first system, the Congress dominated both national and state elections, from the first elections

of 1952 to the year 1967. The second chapter, from 1967 to 1989, saw the prevalence of the Congress party at the centre (except 1975–1977) and the rise of opposition political outfits, particularly at the state level. In the third phase of the party system, multi-partisan cooperation enters an era of coalition, in which no party could single-handedly govern India owing to the deepening fragmentation of the party system and the electorate (Yadav, 1999). The change in the Indian competitive party system is a reflection of Duverger's political observation that:

Alliances can totally change the aspect of a multi-party system. If two large permanent coalitions, which present to the electorate a common programme and act in concert in parliament, then one is very close to the conditions of functioning of a two-party system. The formation of stable alliances, going into the electoral battle on clear platforms written together, and then applying them in government, brings the multi-party system close to the two-party system. Inversely, when each of the two parties has a flexible structure, when there is no discipline in parliamentary voting, governmental majorities become incoherent and unstable, and the two-party system looks more like a multi-party system. (Duverger, 1951: 34)

The period between 1992 and 1996 witnessed a dynastic interregnum in the Congress, as for the first time the prime minister and party president did not belong to the Nehru-Gandhi family. The distancing of the first family from the Congress and the turbulence caused by '*Mandal* versus *Mandir*' (Reservation for Other Backward Classes versus Ram Temple at Ayodhya) politics led to further shrinking of its electoral space. It marked the rise of regional parties in the Hindi heartland, based on caste identity politics and the surge of the BJP with its Hindutva agenda, which threatened to obliterate the Congress to the political margins. The fears came true for the Grand Old Party, as the BJP emerged as the single largest national party by winning 182 seats in the 1999 general elections and in alliance with like-minded right-wing parties formed the central government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister. The Congress realized that the BJP could emerge as an alternative and consolidate its position as a preeminent national party. It persuaded Sonia Gandhi, who had kept away from party politics after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, to take command and revive the declining fortunes of the party. The national elections in 2004 witnessed a tough competition between the two party combines situated on the left–right political spectrum. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a big tent centre-right coalition of political parties led by the BJP, was up against the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), a catchall centre-left alliance of parties marshalled by the Congress. The NDA led by prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee lost the national hustings despite high governance ratings heralding the UPA to form the government in Delhi. The leadership of the Congress changed from concentration of power in the hands of one individual to a centralized personalization comprising the troika of Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi. The troika popularly known as the 'High Command' evaded inner-party federalism and directly appointed state chief ministers, party presidents and local leaders. In centralized personalization, the focus is on leaders, while in decentralized personalization the primary focus is on individual politicians beyond party leaders (Balmas et al., 2014). The 'High Command' culture worked quite well for the Congress, and it successfully steered the coalition in winning the 2009 national elections with a bigger mandate. However, the political gains made by it were lost midway in its second term, as the UPA II government was beleaguered by several political scams, high inflation, rising unemployment, policy paralysis and logjams in pushing big-ticket reforms and investments (Table 3).

The Congress paid a heavy price for its political follies and undemocratic centralism in the general elections in 2014, as a combination of strong anti-incumbency sentiments against it and

Table 3. Political footprints diminished (Sonia-Rahul Gandhi).

Year	Total Lok Sabha seats	Seats won	Vote share (in percent)	Gain/loss (vote share)
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
2019	543	52	19.5	0

Source: Election Commission of India.

a huge groundswell of support for the BJP led to a crushing defeat. The presence of the party in the lower house of parliament hit rock bottom, as it could barely manage to win 44 seats, with only two out of 10 voters supporting it in the national electoral competition (Rai and Kumar, 2017). It faced a debilitating crisis regarding its social base, as the election defeats since 1989 had eroded its core support among the poor, religious minorities, SC and ST communities with no corresponding gains among other social sections. In the period of ‘post-Congress’ politics, the party’s ability to ensure maximum success with its moderate vote share has been very limited. Historically, it has always won more seats than its vote share would ordinarily entitle it to, as the advantage has accrued as much from the spread of the party as from systemic features. However, once the real strength of the party declined, the systemic advantage quickly disappeared, and in the 2014 elections it failed to convert them to winning seats. The larger issues at the root of the decline of the Congress were twofold: one was the party’s policy and the other was reforming the party. The Congress kept oscillating throughout the second term between a pro-poor position and a neo-liberal policy in matters of state policy. As a result, it could neither win new supporters nor retain the middle class that had supported it in the 2009 national elections. The issue of reorganization of the party was perhaps an even more complex issue, as it kept repeating reformist platitudes while indulging in routine pragmatism. This not only made the party’s claims rather hollow, but also created internal tensions in the party and made it less cohesive (Palshikar, 2014).

The institutional decline of the Congress coincided with the worldwide phenomenon of the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1968), which made weakly institutionalized party systems commonplace in competitive political regimes. These systems have different characteristics and dynamics from well-institutionalized systems where voters are more likely to identify with a party, and parties dominate patterns of political recruitment and deliberation. In fluid systems, many voters choose personality over the party, more anti-party politicians win office, populism and anti-politics are common and personalities more than party organization (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006). The reasons for deinstitutionalization of the Congress include the discrediting of parties which opened the doors to personalistic anti-party crusaders and parties in competitive regimes that are programmatically diffuse, making it difficult for voters to determine which party is closest to their own positions (Kitschelt et al., 1999; Ostiguy, 1998). The high electoral volatility in many less-developed countries like India has been due to frequent supply-side changes, as political elites shift from one party to another (Rose and Munro, 2003) or become unreliable, undertaking radical shifts in ideological positions. The process of institutionalization is not linear or teleological; weak institutionalization with high political volatility can be for an extended period and party systems can deinstitutionalize (Mainwaring and Torcal, 2006), as is happening with the Congress system in contemporary India.

The seeds of political deterioration that were sown in the party in the Nehru era germinated during the tenure of Indira Gandhi and became a full-blown crisis under the leadership of Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. The Congress is on the verge of a catastrophic collapse due to a sustained and debilitating politics of dynastic rule and self-destruction. The reasons for the internal strife and discontent that were publicly visible in the party during the rule of Indira Gandhi and thereafter were either lip-serviced temporarily or kept in protracted limbo. The dialectical reasons that led to the diminution of political footprints of the Congress are largely the deficit of political vision, the bankruptcy of forward-thinking ideas, engagement in competitive pseudo-secularism and ever-diminishing electoral returns of dynastic (Nehru-Gandhi) politics. The other important reasons for the decline include the culturally incongruent leadership, the dual chain of party high command (Sonia versus Rahul Gandhi power play), the high attrition of competent local leaders and cadres, the widening of the elite–grassroots divide and the wide disconnect with aspirational India. If the 2014 general elections marked the arrival of the fourth party system in India, the outcome of the 2019 national elections cemented the BJP-led dominant party system in which the Congress was largely marginalized, the Left Front was decimated and many regional parties lost further ground (Chhibber and Verma, 2018). The spoils system (patron–client relations) and intricate structure of conflict, mediation, bargaining and consensus that existed in the Congress broke down during this period. Political parties that inherited the legacy of freeing their countries from the colonial rule have a history of prolonged political incumbency that eventually led to routinization and democratic stagnancy. This resulted in a petering out of party dominance and an electoral decline, with the Congress in India being no exception, but such national parties were ousted from seats of power when an existing or new political party enthralled the electorate with its paradigm of alternative governance. The principal contradiction that accelerated the spiralling down of the Grand Old Party is the sunrise of the BJP and the origination of a new dominant party system in India.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Congress under Nehru was an omnibus party, which co-opted the ideological shades of left-right-centre to build a national consensus to rule postcolonial India, providing no political leeway to parties wedded to a left or right political agenda to spread their electoral wings. The leadership and party were in calibrated equilibrium with minimal conflict of interests or governance overlaps. The ascendancy of Indira Gandhi after a fight to finish with the right-wing faction in the Congress resulted in populist authoritarianism, the end of consensual decision making and internal elections. However, the single-party dominance of the Congress and its politics of clientelism continued to hold sway as four out of 10 Indian voters committedly supported the Congress from Independence until after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The party lost its ideological supremacy in the 1990s but continued to be in power by forging alliances with like-minded parties. The numerical marginalization of the Congress in terms of occupying parliamentary space happened in 2014, largely due to its own internal contradictions and emergence of the BJP as a new dominant national party. The perception of party identification has played an important role in Indian electoral politics in guiding voting behaviour and structuring election competitions. The scholarship on partisan dealignment reveals that it is eroding substantially due to the globalization of social and political modernization. As a result, there is a steady decline in the electoral support base of political parties, which is not due to public dissatisfaction with political establishments but with the general weakening of partisanship (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). When parties become fragile and vulnerable, politics is defined by extreme volatility, executive-legislative conflict, policy ineffectiveness and the rise of ‘outsider’ or anti-system candidates (Levitsky, 2003). The weakening of

partisanship led to significant disenfranchisement of traditional voters of the Congress and demotivated them to step into the polling booths and press the 'Electronic Voting Machines' tabs with a hand symbol assigned for the party. The new force permeating the public sphere in democratic countries and undermining deliberation in the broadest sense is the regulated rivalry of political parties. The new additions to the usual menu of political obstructions (self-interest, insufficient information, partisan bias, the distortion of dark money etc.) include the forces of conspiracy and disinformation. Parties are creating an epistemic chasm among citizens as significant as partisan polarization, making it impossible not only to compromise and negotiate but even to disagree gracefully (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2020). The Congress continues to be the largest opposition party, with two out every 10 Indian voters supporting it, but the current political dispensation in power, the BJP, does not accord it the norm of a legitimate opposition. The delegitimation of the Congress is squarely attributable to a political party system at work, which is epistemically polarizing, non-inclusive and non-compromising in accommodating the voice of opposition parties.

The political slide of the Congress is explainable by the rational choice theories of competitive party behaviour, as it changed from a 'policy-seeking party' propagating its ideology in the Nehru era to a 'vote-seeking party' (Downs, 1957) seeking to maximize its electoral support only for the purpose of controlling the government. The delicate balance on which the legitimacy and power of the Congress system rested had the potential to be rudely disturbed, and a more authoritarian system might emerge, through a purposive coalition of either dissident and opposition groups. Political systems do change in their nature over time, and there is no sanctity in one particular system (Kothari, 1964). The prophecy of Kothari in 1964 came true, as the BJP emerged from the shadows of the Congress and replaced it as the new dominant party. The BJP, like the Congress earlier, is the preferred political party nationally which has successfully created a consensus around ethno-political majoritarianism, thereby relegating advocacy of political plurality to parties of pressure. The fourth party system anchored around the BJP is here to stay, as its social coalition seems stable for the foreseeable future (Chhibber and Verma, 2019). The 'deinstitutionalization' of the Congress system had serious implications for the party, as due to high extra-systemic electoral volatility it appreciably lost hegemonic power and organizational impact, paving the way for the BJP to emerge as a new dominant national alternative. It lost several elections after 2014, which minimized its political constituency and led to unpredictable politics, lowered the quality of electoral representation, weakened checks and balances on top leadership, provided greater space for authoritarian decision making and led to a decline in democratic governability. The contemporary politicking and priorities of the Grand Old Party are archaic and inconsistent and its revival strategy so far has been politically inefficacious and irremediable. The nationwide campaign of '*Bharat Jodo Yatra*' (Walkathon to Unite India) traversing 12 Indian states had limited success in building a resurgence for the Congress, as its focus was on legitimizing the leadership of Rahul Gandhi. It can plebeianize top decision making, reinvest in collective leadership, strengthen internal democracy, re-establish the mechanism of conflict articulation and resolution, continually re-engage with the electorate, reconnect with turncoats and alienated foot soldiers and switch to democratic language and new age political grammar. It will need an electoral miracle to make a political comeback, which is not entirely impossible. As Otto von Bismarck said: 'politics is the art of the possible, the attainable – the art of the next best' (Bismarck O, 1895).

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