

The turbulent rise of regional parties: A many-sided threat for Congress

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REGIONAL PARTIES CHALLENGE NATIONAL PARTIES

During last two decades, the rise of regional parties has influenced not only state politics; but also the national parties and national politics. With sizeable electoral support, the regional parties have not only managed to win elections and form state governments, they have also influenced the national politics. Together India's two national parties, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have roughly polled a little less than 50 percent votes. The vote share of the Congress has declined sharply during last few elections, from 39.5 percent in 1989 to 28.6 percent in 2009. This decline is much sharper when we compare the vote share of the Congress in recent elections to early elections. At the same time, the vote share of the BJP has declined from 25.6 percent in 1998 (the BJP's best performance) to 18.8 percent in 2009. On the other hand, while all regional parties put together polled a little less than one third of total votes, they managed to win a sizeable number of seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People, lower house of Parliament) in different states. Under these recent conditions, neither of the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP have managed to win a majority of seats in Lok Sabha

THE DECLINE OF THE CONGRESS PARTY

The first few decades of Indian politics witnessed a complete dominance of the Congress until 1996 when its votes plummeted to only 28.8 percent. The Congress managed to form a coalition

government after the 2004 Lok Sabha elections and registered victory during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. However, the Congress victories during the last two Lok Sabha elections provide no clear indication that the Congress is recovering at the national level. The increased share of votes at the national level simply reflects the popularity of various state governments where Congress is in power.

THE SEARCH FOR REGIONAL ALLIES

In states where the electoral contest is between the Congress and the BJP, the vote share of the Congress increases by few percentage points, and this pattern has been consistent over the last seven Lok Sabha elections. During the same period, the vote share of the Congress declined in states where Congress is pitted against regional parties, whether independent or in alliance. The very fact that the Congress had to form alliances with regional political parties in states like Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra indicates that the Congress is no longer a dominant political force in these states.

If seen in terms of caste, Congress had a sizeable presence amongst the Upper Caste, lower caste Adivais and Dalits and the Muslims. While the Congress did get votes amongst other communities, its popularity remained higher amongst Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims. In states where the Congress is locked in contest against the BJP, the votes of the Brahmin and other Upper Caste have slipped away from the Congress to the BJP, although the Congress remains more popular than the BJP amongst the Dalit, Adivasis and the Muslims. The two parties are locked in a close contest for votes among the Other Backward Caste (OBC), with the BJP having a slight edge.

DECLINING POPULARITY WITH DALITS

Although the Congress may have been popular amongst Dalit voters prior to the early nineties, the Dalit vote has changed during last two decades. Nationally, Congress gets a little more than one quarter of the Dalit vote, but in states with a two party contest between the Congress and the BJP, the majority of the Dalits vote for the Congress. However, Congress loses this advantage amongst the Dalit voters in states where the Congress is up against regional parties. Here less than one quarter of the Dalit vote for the Congress. The Dalit vote bank has been threatened by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, the Telugu Desham Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Lok Jan Shakti Party in Bihar, the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, Tamil Nadu and the Left Front in West Bengal among other places

The Adivasi vote for the Congress is quite similar to that of the Dalit vote, the threat is more from regional parties than the BJP. In the two-party contest, majority of Adivasi voters opt for the Congress, but in states where the Congress is contesting against regional parties, the Adivasi vote declines drastically. In such instances, only a quarter of the Adivasi voters vote for the Congress, although the 2009 Lok Sabha election saw an increase in votes for Congress.

GROWING MUSLIM SUPPORT

The Congress is more popular amongst Muslims than amongst the Dalits and the Adivasis. The Congress has received 40 percent of the Muslim votes during last five Lok Sabha elections. The Muslim vote is strongly favour of the Congress in contests against the BJP. However, regional parties have made a dent in the Muslim vote for the Congress. In states where Congress is in contest against regional parties, Congress only receives about one third of the Muslim vote.

In states like Andhra Pradesh West Bengal, the vote for the Congress amongst the Muslims declined by nearly 15-percentage points. The Congress faces the challenge retaining its Muslim support in states like Assam where the Assam United Democratic Front takes a large chunk of the Muslim vote. The contest for the Muslim vote in Uttar Pradesh is largely between the BSP and the Samajwadi Party (SP). Although the 2009 Lok Sabha elections witnessed some reversal with the Congress managing to win back some Muslim support after a long gap. In Bihar, the majority of Muslims voted for the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) though the recent elections saw the Muslim vote split between the RJD and Janata Dal United (JD (U)). The Congress could not attract Muslim voters in Bihar. In Jharkhand, which witnessed a multi-party contest with Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), the Jharkhand Liberation Front, a dominant political player, the Muslim vote was largely fragmented.

A POLITICAL CULTURE OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The net result is that, in the absence of any single party having a majority in Lok Sabha, political parties have had no choice but to form a coalition government. All of India's national governments since the 1996 Lok Sabha elections have been coalition governments with the regional parties playing a key role in formation of the government at the Centre. Indian politics has moved from an era of single-party rule with the absolute dominance of the Congress from 1952-1989 (with a brief exception 1977-80) to an era of coalition politics.

Regional parties have played an important role in Indian politics at both the state and national level for a little over a decade and will continue to in the coming years. The regional parties have made important inroads in the traditional support base of the Congress amongst Muslim, Dalits

and Advasis. With its declining popularity amongst traditional supporters, the Congress is heavily dependent upon the OBC and the Upper castes for electoral success. While the Muslim, Dalits and Advasis do vote for Congress in selective states depending upon the type of electoral contest, their support base has certainly declined compared to the past.

There is now some overlap in the support base for both the Congress and the BJP. With the regional parties sure to stay in Indian politics for at least a decade or more, there are only two ways for expansion of the two national parties. The Congress and the BJP must either enter into alliances with the regional parties or try making inroads into the support base of the regional parties. There is no third route available for these two national parties.

On the other hand, while regional parties will continue to play an important role in Indian politics, it is hard to imagine a political scenario, in which these regional parties would combine to form a formidable third front. Even though some parties face a leadership crisis, they would suffer from a leadership surplus if all the regional parties combined to form a third front alternative to the Congress and the BJP. It is hard to imagine a third front with Mayawati, Jaylalitha, or Mamata Banerjee together. These are only a few names, there may be many more in the race for the top post putting a big question mark on the stability of a third front.

Notes

1. The states classified in the category of two-party contests between Congress and BJP are Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, H.P, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Chhattisgarh and Uttaranchal.

2. The states classified under the category of a contest between Congress and regional parties are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand and West Bengal. This classification is valid for all the elections.

Table 1: Vote share of the Congress: Lok Sabha elections 1989 -2009

Vote share of Congress	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
All India	39.5	36.6	28.8	25.8	28.3	26.5	28.6
In states where Congress in two-party contest against BJP	40.8	40.8	33.8	38.6	44.4	39.6	42.3
In states where Congress is in contest Against regional parties	37.7	32.0	26.7	18.9	22.5	22.5	24.9

Source: CSDS Data Unit

Note: Figures for vote share are in percent

Table 2: The challenge to the Dalit vote bank of the Congress came from regional parties

Dalit vote for the Congress in different contest type	Year of Lok Sabha Election				
	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
Congress (All India)	32	28	31	28	27
In states where Congress is in bi-polar contest against BJP	52	53	59	55	54
In states where Congress is in contest against regional parties	31	25	25	22	23

Source: National Election Study 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009

Note: All figures are in percent

Table 3: Some threat to the Muslim vote bank of the Congress has begun from the regional parties

Muslim vote for the Congress in different contest type	Year of Lok Sabha Election				
	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009
Congress (All India)	31	33	40	37	38
In states where Congress is in bi-polar contest against BJP	67	60	84	69	70
In states where Congress is in contest against regional parties states where the Congress is up against a regional party	26	28	37	29	33

Source: National Election Study 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009

Note: All figures are in percent