

# The Defeat of the Congress

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The Congress Party's defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections reflected not just its failure to retain its vote shares of the previous polls in 2004 and 2009, but also the lack of a clear social profile of its voters. Most social sections had deserted the party (barring the Muslims) as its long-term decline from being India's grand old party was evident in these elections. The lack of adequate leadership and confusion in its ranks played an important role, but there were other systemic reasons for the Congress's defeat.

The defeat of a ruling party after two terms in office would ordinarily not invite great attention. But what happened to the Congress Party in 2014 has all the characteristics of an electoral disaster rather than a defeat. Even then, electoral upsets are not entirely unknown in the life of parties. In the Indian context, smaller and state-level parties have gone through such upsets in many cases. However, the electoral decimation of the Congress Party would still qualify as a seismic shift.

This defeat implies that the Congress may soon be completely devoid of power anywhere in the country. It also means that this is the time when the Congress can either decline further or begin to redefine itself (Palshikar 2014). Thus, the magnitude of the defeat and, more than that, the long-term implications mean that it requires closer scrutiny.

This was of course not the first time that the Congress Party has been defeated at the parliamentary elections. Starting with 1977, it experienced setbacks in 1989 and 1996. In fact, the 1996 defeat ensured its subsequent inability to wrest power in two more elections. It must also be borne in mind that the 1977 and 1989 defeats took place under the leadership of much stronger leaders who were themselves leading the government. While it is commonplace to mark the 1989 defeat as the beginning of the post-Congress polity, the 1977 defeat itself marked the sharp decline in the ability of the party to continue its hegemonic hold over the polity. The two defeats of 1977 and 1989 brought about structural changes in the arena of competitive politics in India. In both 1977 and 1989, various non-Congress parties came together to ensure that the Congress was defeated within the framework of the simple plurality (first-past-the-post (FPTP)) system. During the 1990s, along with structural changes in the system of competition, the process of social reconfiguration occasioned by major churning in terms of social blocs getting redefined and tending to realign also began to take shape.

In that sense, the rout of the Congress in 2014 could be seen only as a continuation of that trend. As we shall see below, there is something in the 2014 defeat that may have long-term implications. Are these implications any different from what the Congress's decline so far has implied? Does this defeat of the Congress bring any new possibilities onto the political scene? This article would first elaborate the nature of the defeat, then attempt an explanation and finally indicate the larger issues that the Congress's performance raises.

## Anatomy of the Defeat

In terms of both seats and votes, the parliamentary elections of 2014 witnessed the Congress dip to a new low: under 20% vote share at the all-India level, and only 44 seats (which account for a

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little over 8% of the total seats in Lok Sabha). In this sense, the 2014 defeat is the party's worst ever defeat so far. In 2009, the party polled 29% of the votes; so within five years, it lost more than 9% votes. Table 1 reports performance of the Congress since its decline began in 1989.

It is clear from the table that in the entire period of last 25 years, the Congress was never able to recover from its downfall – except in 2009. Since the 1996 elections, Congress vote share hovered in the range of 26% and 29%. In fact, it is possible to argue that 2009 was a slight exception because not only did the Congress come close to polling 29% of the votes, it also recorded its best performance in terms of seats since 1996. The party could not build on that “recovery”; in fact, the recovery of the Congress actually takes place between 2004 and 2009 and post-2009, the party begins to stagnate and lose momentum.

Another notable feature of the Congress Party's performance in the period of “post-Congress” politics is that the political ability of the party to ensure maximum success with its moderate vote share has been very limited – again with the exception of the 2009 elections. Historically, the Congress Party always won more seats than its vote share would ordinarily entitle it to. Critics believed that this was an undue advantage the party drew from the electoral system (the FPTP). However, in reality, that advantage accrued as much from the spread of the party as from the systemic characteristics. As the real spread of the party shrunk, the party continued to have presence in all parts of the country and kept getting small vote shares from everywhere but was unable to convert those votes in winning seats. This ability of converting votes into seats is captured by the measure called vote-seat multiplier. While the FPTP system indeed augments the multiplier, for that to happen, the concerned party must in the first place have adequate strength concentrated at constituency level. This combination of systemic feature and political reality favoured the Congress Party historically.

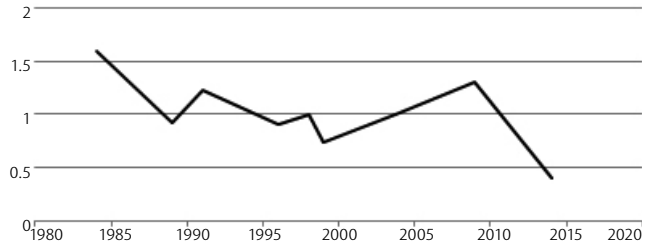
However, once the real strength of the party declined, the systemic advantage quickly disappeared. Figure 1 shows the fluctuations in the multiplier for the Congress Party since 1984. While the Congress did get disproportionately large number of seats in 1984 (more than 75%), it is also clear that this success came in the backdrop of a handsome vote share of 48%. Similarly, in 2014, the Congress was at the receiving end of the vagaries of the FPTP system because it ended up getting much less share of seats than its vote share – which could have at least fetched it a 100 seats. This defeat, however, was not only due to the party being at the wrong end of the systemic characteristic. It represents the real political decline of the Congress Party in the sense that this disproportionality only starkly represents the fact that the Congress in 2014 had lost popularity in the larger sense; it did pick up one vote in every five but this vote share was so frustratingly strewn across constituencies that it was unable to convert them into winning seats.

**Table 1: Seats Won and Votes Secured by the Congress in Different Elections since 1984**

Year	Total Seats	Turnout	Congress	
			Won	Vote
1984	542	64.07	415	48.01
1989	529	61.95	197	39.53
1991	537	55.88	244	36.64
1996	543	57.94	140	28.80
1998	543	61.97	141	25.82
1999	543	59.99	114	28.30
2004	543	58.07	145	26.53
2009	543	58.20	206	28.55
2014	543	66.44	44	19.31

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

**Figure 1: Congress Multiplier (1984-2014)**



If we look at the Congress's performance in different regions, this political inability becomes clearer. Table 2 shows the Congress's performance in the different regions and it has two striking features. One is that in the region where the Congress polled highest vote share (central region), it could win only three seats. In the entire Hindi belt, the Congress won only eight

**Table 2: Electoral Performance of the Congress in Different Regions**

Regions	Total Seats	Turnout	Congress	
			Won	Vote
East	117	69.3	6	12.3
North East	25	79.7	8	29.8
North	151	61.4	6	17.2
Central	40	63.7	3	35.9
West	78	62.0	2	23.7
South	132	72.5	19	18.6
Overall	543	66.5	44	19.3

Source: Calculated by CSDS Data Unit.

seats and its remaining seats all came from the non-Hindi speaking belt. This is partly because of the Congress's historical inability to re-establish itself in the Hindi-speaking region. But this is also because of the nature of competition. In direct confrontation with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress fared dismally. In bipolar contests, most

of which were with BJP, the Congress polled almost 34% of the votes but could win barely 5% of the seats (six out of 113). In contrast, in multipolar contests, the Congress polled only a little over 15% of the votes but bagged 9% of the seats (38 out of 430).<sup>1</sup> Thus, in terms of electoral calculations, we could say that the defeat of the Congress Party could have been made somewhat moderate if the Congress Party had ensured many more multi-cornered contests. However, we must remember that in key states, such as Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and Chhattisgarh, the party competition has already stabilised around only two players and there was little the Congress could have done to alter that.

The Statistical Appendix to this issue (pp 130-34) lists in detail the vote share and seats won by the Congress in each state. It is instructive, however, to note two things here. One is that Congress's vote share in seats where it contested elections (instead of calculating as percentage of all votes polled) is not very different (22%) from its average vote share of 19%. In comparison, the same for BJP is 39% against its overall vote share of 31%. But this does not help the Congress win seats because the BJP's vote share too is very high in those states.

Two, in states where the Congress was the ruling party at the time of Lok Sabha elections, its performance was rather disastrous. It was routed in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Haryana. It was badly defeated in Assam and could not win many seats in Karnataka and could record a reasonable victory only in Manipur, Mizoram and Kerala (incidentally all three states, where the BJP has yet been unable to make its mark). So, the all-India performance of the Congress was very evenly spread irrespective of regional and state-level ingredients. It implies then that this defeat

of the Congress Party was much more “all-India” in character than many of its previous defeats. It was not concentrated in any one region and there were not many exceptions in terms of states. It also indicates that the defeat was not only due to the lacklustre performance of its national government, but equally disappointing performance by its state governments in most cases.

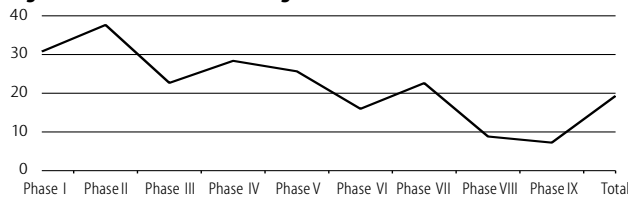
**Explaining the Defeat**

When some social sections desert a party and cause an electoral upset, that makes the explanation of defeat somewhat complex and challenging. But the defeat of the Congress in the 2014 elections could be boiled down to a boringly simple rationale. As we saw in the previous section, it was spread evenly across states and regions. In this section, we shall see how that defeat was constituted by an overall shrinking of social base of the Congress Party. The party lost over 9% of its voters compared to its performance in last elections. This loss was not confined to any one social section, rather it occurred across social sections.

In the first place, during the long-drawn elections, the perception that a particular party is doing much better than others can affect the prospects of the competitors. The fact that counting does not take place for earlier phases, for good reason, means that popular perceptions fuelled by media reports and word-of-mouth relay of “information” can make an impact on voter’s minds. As the National Election Study (NES) 2014 reported, a large number of voters agreed that they were influenced by perceptions of who would win this election because they tended to vote for a “winning” candidate or party. Almost 43% of the voters thus tended to be affected by the political bandwagon, and of those, more than one-third voted for the BJP.

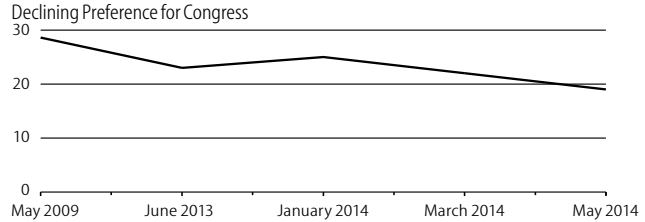
In view of this, the Congress may have fared a little worse in subsequent phases of election as perceptions that BJP was doing well began to spread. Though there is no definitive evidence to that effect (because in each phase, the regions that went to polls had varying political histories), the Congress’s performance was much worse in the last few phases as seen from Figure 2. The pattern is somewhat skewed but the Congress did fare very poorly in last two phases where 152 seats were at stake. Also in phase six, there were as many as 117 seats at stake and the Congress did pretty badly there too.<sup>2</sup> In fact Congress lost the plot (whatever was left of it) by the middle of the election process.

**Figure 2: Phase-wise Vote of Congress**



Not that the Congress could have done very differently had elections been conducted in only three or four phases. The tracking of popular preferences from June 2013 onwards undertaken by Lokniti through its (CNN-IBN-Lokniti) Tracker Surveys (Figure 3) makes it clear that the Congress had already hit the wall much before the campaign began, and thus, the phase-wise performance only added to the woes of the Congress.

**Figure 3: Lokniti Tracker Surveys** (Preference in % Points among Surveyed)



In June 2013, almost a year before the elections, the contest was still somewhat open and less negatively tilted against the Congress. Though down by almost 5 percentage points from its actual vote share of 2009, the party was still preferred by 23% of the respondents and this proportion marginally increased to 25% by January 2014 (during that same period, however, the preference for BJP shot up from 23% to 32%!). Rather than recovering from this downslide, the Congress Party ended up with an even lower share than was estimated during the pre-election surveys.

Broadly speaking, two political factors ensured that the Congress vote share would decline in these elections. One was the performance of the government and the other was the issue of leadership. The NES 2014 clearly brings out both these factors. Ever since the anti-corruption agitation took place, the popular perception about the union government became negative. As is only natural, close to elections, all parties opposed to UPA stepped up the campaign about the non-performance of the government and the various corruption scandals involving coalition partners. Besides, the downslide in the economy and resulting inflation could easily be blamed on the government. The cumulative effect of these factors was that the popular dissatisfaction with the government only increased. The Congress Party could not run away from the blame since it was seen as the main party in the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA). In June 2013, 27% of the respondents were reported to be “fully dissatisfied” with the performance of UPA as opposed to only 10% who were “fully satisfied”. In this sense, the Congress entered the electoral fray with a disadvantage. The disadvantage was not only of being an incumbent, it was in fact also one of a pre-existing popular disaffection. This dissatisfaction only grew between June 2013 and January 2014 – when almost 34% were then saying they were “fully dissatisfied” with UPA, only 8% said they were “fully satisfied”.<sup>3</sup>

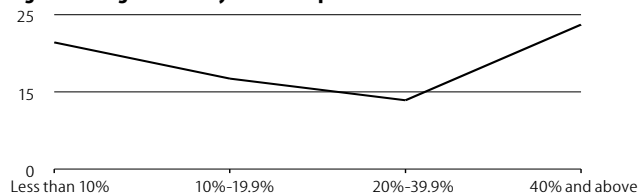
Since elections are as much about, or even more about, perception, as they are about “facts”, it is not enough to debate about the actual performance of the UPA government and the “factual” condition of the economy. The impression that the UPA government was not able to handle the economy, and it was not able to handle issues of governance contributed to the popular dissatisfaction about the government. During this period, the election also turned more personal as the leadership issue became central to the choices voters would be making. Here too, the Congress faced a disadvantage because its leader, Rahul Gandhi, was not seen by voters as an equal to the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in terms of experience, ability to solve problems facing the nation and representing the different social segments. This double disadvantage, resulting from incumbency and leadership failure, meant that the Congress could not hope to pick votes from across different social sections.

The Congress's performance was poor across constituencies reserved for scheduled castes (scs)/scheduled tribes (sts) and constituencies with varying proportion of adivasi, dalit or Muslim communities. Yet Congress did perform a little better in constituencies reserved for sts and also in constituencies with sizeable Muslim populations. Similarly, it performed equally poorly in urban and rural constituencies. It performed a little better in mixed constituencies rather than in either rural or urban constituencies.<sup>4</sup> In the 84 constituencies reserved for scs, Congress polled 17.6% and won only seven seats. In the 47 constituencies reserved for sts, the party polled 27.5% of the votes, winning five seats.

But the more dramatic failure of Congress can be seen if we look at its performance in terms of actual share of sc population in the constituencies. Where scs account for 20% to 29%, the Congress could poll 15.4% of the votes winning 10 of the 118 such constituencies and in the 28 constituencies where the sc population is more than 30%, the Congress polled only 14% of the votes winning just one seat. This suggests two possibilities. One, the polarisation of votes in constituencies with high proportion of sc population went against the Congress (and in favour of the BJP). Two, the Congress's relatively strong base among the scs has finally crumbled.

In case of the adivasi population, however, the Congress did well when the proportion of adivasi population increased at the constituency level. Thus, in constituencies with more than 50% of the population being among sts, the Congress polled 34% of the votes. In case of the Muslim voters, as we shall see below, the Congress continues to be the main choice; and yet the polarisation of vote across religious lines resulted in a somewhat mixed performance of the Congress (Figure 4). This ability of the Congress to attract Muslim votes did help the party to some extent in the 23 constituencies with Muslims constituting more than 40% of the population. It was the performance in these 23 constituencies that helped the Congress win as many as seven constituencies.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 4: Congress Vote by Muslim Population Share**



In spite of the relatively better performance of the Congress in constituencies with numerical preponderance of st and Muslim voters, the performance of the Congress was very dismal across social sections. The above discussion only indicates that compared to constituencies numerically dominated by non-st and non-Muslim voters, the Congress did somewhat better in st and Muslim constituencies. However, the erosion of Congress Party's social base was not confined to any particular social group; it was across-the-board. Nor could a better vote share among some groups (compared to other groups) help the Congress compensate for its losses elsewhere.

Table 3 brings this out very clearly. The only group among which the Congress did not lose votes this time is the Muslim

community. On the other hand, the Congress lost heavily among those above 56 years of age, the college educated, metro-dwellers, upper class, and adivasis. However, Table 3 also makes two more things clear. One, that there is no social section (except Muslims) within whom the Congress retained its vote share, even closely, since 2009. Two, there is no social section that can be identified as a strong supporter of the Congress (again with the exception of the Muslim community). Sectional vote share rose only in the case of three groups – adivasis, Muslims and Christians as compared to 2009. This practically gives the party the shape of a party of minorities.

The fact that the Congress gets only 16% of the votes among Hindus also means that there is a hidden religious polarisation between the BJP and the Congress. In spite of the overall erosion of the Congress's vote share, it is noteworthy that almost six of every 10 Congress voters are sc/st/Muslim/Sikh or Christian, while these social groups account

for only about three in every 10 BJP voters. It is another matter that the BJP has been able to both forge a political consciousness among the Hindus as Hindus and also extend that consciousness to large sections of the sc and st communities.

In contrast, the Congress has failed to transform the sc-st-Muslim communities into a conscious political community. This polarisation is clear when we examine voters' identification with parties. In the NES 2014, we asked the respondents if they feel close to any political party. Only 32% of the respondents reported party identification. A total of 6% felt close to Congress while 8% felt close to the BJP. Among those who identified with the BJP, 75% came from caste Hindu backgrounds while for the Congress 42% were from such backgrounds.

Similarly, while only 13% of the Hindus thought that the Congress cared for their "religious" interests, 32% of the Hindus thought so about the BJP. Thus, polarisation along religious lines benefited the BJP more than the Congress. In fact, such a polarisation did not help the Congress to build a strong social base for itself.

In this sense, the elections of 2014 have left the Congress Party without any social constituency of its own. At the same time, the defeat has also meant that voters from practically every social section have turned away from the party and thus, the strength of the party has become weak across all

**Table 3: Congress Vote Share among Different Social Groups (2009-14)**

Voter Type	2009	2014
<b>Age</b>		
First time voters	27	17
23-35	28	20
35-55	28	19
56 and above	31	20
<b>Education</b>		
Non-literate	30	20
Primary	29	22
Matric	28	19
College and above	28	17
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	28	19
Women	29	19
<b>Location</b>		
Rural	28	19
City/town	29	20
Metros	31	17
<b>Media exposure</b>		
Low	28	17
High	29	21
<b>Economic class</b>		
Poor	27	20
Low	29	19
Middle	30	20
Upper	32	17
<b>Caste/community</b>		
SC	27	19
ST	39	28
OBC	24	15
Intermediate	25	15
Upper	26	12
Muslim	38	38
Sikh	41	21
Christian	38	29

Sources: NES 2014; CSDS Data Unit.

social sections. This is comparable to what was previously observed as the weakening of the Congress's rainbow coalition (Yadav 2003; Heath and Yadav 1999: 2525-26). We take this point up in the concluding section below.

### State-Level Disaggregation

The foregoing section gives an overall picture of the social bases of the Congress Party. However, during the past 25 years of the post-Congress polity, variation across the states has become a key feature of not only the structure of political competition but also of the social bases of parties. This has been described in terms of salience of the state as the unit at which political competition gets shaped (Yadav and Palshikar 2008).

However, for the Congress vote, state-level disaggregation does not show any pattern in terms of social composition of states. If we classify states by ST or SC population or share of Muslim population, no particular pattern emerges. The Congress does slightly better in states where there is higher concentration of adivasis and Muslims, but that is also mediated by the structure of competition and political history of the state during the past couple of decades. So, we can surmise that more than the social composition (or at least along with it), the political history and structure of competition affected the voting outcomes.

As far as the Congress is concerned, we can imagine three different groups of states for assessing its performance. One, where the party was in power at the state level at the time of parliamentary elections; two, where it was in opposition in direct confrontation with BJP; and three, where it had been out of power for some time and was singularly weak. Do we find any difference in the social bases of the party in these three groups of states?

If we consider the scale of its defeat, there is not much difference across these three groups. Except Kerala and partly Karnataka, the party has lost soundly everywhere irrespective of whether it was in power at the state level and irrespective of who the competitors were. But, we do find some variation in its social base from state to state and from one group of states to another.

Broadly speaking, four patterns emerge: one, in states where the Congress was in power, it drew a little more support from the rural voters and also from women more than men and failed to attract the poor voters much. But, two, when it was in competition with BJP, almost invariably it drew more support from the poor and lower classes. Three, in terms of caste, the Congress seems to have lost almost all its base among upper, intermediate and even Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This left the party extremely vulnerable since it had to rely only on SC, ST and minority voters and it was not easy to win seats with such a limited pool of voters. Four, in states where there were other parties to compete with the Congress (besides BJP), the social profile of Congress became even more flat, faceless and ineffective. This is the case in West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and more notably in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The overall all-India picture of the social base of Congress, as depicted in Table 3 above, in effect, is flat and unimpressive.

Karnataka's case in the 2014 elections is thus instructive. The Congress was expected to do well in view of the residual goodwill for the newly elected state government that had come

to power just 10 months earlier. But the return of the rebel group of former Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa to the BJP, the charm offensive of Modi and the triangular competition in the state meant that the Congress could not post an impressive victory there. In terms of social base, it still won more votes among women than among men (43% among women as opposed to 39% among men) but this was neutralised by the fact that BJP too performed well among women (42% of the women voted for the party). Among the young voters, the Congress did not fare as poorly as in some other states (polling 41% among the under-35 voters against BJP's 44%). But it did badly among urban voters and moreover, could not get strong support either from Lingayats or Vokkaligas – two of the state's key communities. More interestingly, BJP got a larger share (49%) of the poor voters in the state than the Congress (42%). The Congress Party which has been in power only for less than a year launched schemes for the OBC and the poor, and attempted to forge an alliance of OBC, dalits and minorities. But this did not materialise in the state as it only saved the party (with 40% vote share and nine of the 28 seats) from a humiliating outcome as in neighbouring Maharashtra.

Kerala presents a slightly different picture. The BJP surge is evident here too, but ironically, it seems to have affected the left parties (Left Democratic Front) more than the Congress. This is understandable because the Congress – leading the United Democratic Front – is in power and as such, the opposition vote would tend to fragment if there is more than one challenger. Benefiting from this factor, the Congress retained its hold over both Muslim and Christian communities in the state; performed much better among rural voters than urban voters; and got a large share (42%) of votes from the lower income group.

The third state where the Congress was in power and lost very badly was Maharashtra. The party suffered from the "double incumbency" effect here (being in power both at the centre and in the state). Besides, it did not have a very cordial relation with its ally, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The erosion of support among the state's dominant and numerically large caste group of Marathas has been afflicting the Congress for more than two decades now. So, the defeat and its thin social base in the state are not very surprising though they produced a dramatic outcome in terms of seats. In a sense, the social profile of Congress in Maharashtra has suddenly began to look like its profile in Bihar and UP – the figures may vary somewhat since the Congress still manages to get almost one vote in every five voters in Maharashtra whereas in Bihar it gets barely one in every 10. The similarity is in terms of flatness of its voter base. In Maharashtra, where the dominance of the Congress Party has had a long and almost textbook-like existence, we now find that, even though Congress voters are likely to be slightly more among the illiterates and the poor, there is no "sharpness" to this profile. In community and caste terms, adivasis voted for the party in larger numbers (35%) and of course, the party drew to its side almost three Muslims in every four. But excepting these factors, the party simply drew similar level of support from all social sections. If we took into account the combined vote shares of the two coalitions (Congress + NCP and BJP + Shiv Sena), then the picture of the vote shares among poor and adivasi voters changed further. While

the monumental loss encountered by the Congress in Seemandhra can be explained away in terms of the issue of division of the state and also the split at state level, Maharashtra perhaps represents the real decline of the Congress Party in a stark manner.

At the same time, the Congress was also unable to take the advantage of being an opposition party. In UP and Bihar, though in opposition, it has long lost the initiative and this time also it was unable to make any impact. Yet, among the four states where the Congress was wiped out in a bipolar contest (Rajasthan, Gujarat, MP and Chhattisgarh), the most prominent factor is that the performance of the Congress among poor voters has been impressive. It got much more vote from poor than the rich and middle classes. The gap between Congress vote and BJP vote narrows among lower class and poor voters – the Congress in fact surpasses the BJP by 8 percentage points among poor voters of Gujarat. However, in all these states, the Congress's base lacks sharp social character in terms of caste and community. While Muslims have supported the Congress everywhere, the votes of SC and ST communities got divided everywhere and OBCs were more in favour of the BJP than the Congress. The Congress in effect posed a very limited challenge to the BJP in the “bipolar” party systems of these states.

### Continued Decline

The malaise facing the Congress in 2014 appears quite sudden in the light of signs of recovery for the party since 2004. Ironical though it may appear, the party made a record of sorts when for the first time in past 25 years, it became the first government to complete its term and return to power. Against that backdrop, the downfall of the party and its decimation to win merely 44 seats certainly raises questions about the future of the party as perhaps they were never before. But as the following discussion would indicate, this moment – though dramatic – is not an isolated moment of defeat as far as the Congress Party is concerned and secondly, the critical questions we list below too are not fresh ones but have been asked about the party for quite some time. These of course are symptoms of the larger phenomenon, the decline of the Congress, which has been unfolding for quite some time now.

Apart from the party's electoral defeat in national elections (1989, 1996, 1998, 1999 and now in 2014), the other striking thing about the Congress is that its performance at the state level is the real cause for worry for the party. In states like Assam, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala, the party has been “in and out” of power a number of times. In Maharashtra, it returned to power after losing in 1995.

But then, there are quite a few states where the Congress has never made a comeback once it was defeated – Tamil Nadu is the key example, but to it now one can add West Bengal (though one could argue that a Congress faction has replaced the Left Front there). In UP and Bihar too, the Congress is going the same way after losing power in those two states in the late 1980s. The third group of states about to join this category would include Odisha, MP, Chhattisgarh and Gujarat. Thus, rather than electoral defeat, a permanent exile of the party to the opposition characterises its limitations in these states. Such defeats make it

much more difficult for the party leadership to take consistent ideological positions, to train its activists and even retain their enthusiasm. In a rapidly changing political scenario with the multiparty system providing genuine opportunity structures for the first time outside the Congress, repeated electoral setbacks can only have a demoralising effect on party cadres.

More importantly, the Congress Party seems to be faced with a crisis regarding its social base. Historically, the party was never a party dependent on social cleavages. It was more of a catch-all party. Indira Gandhi tried to give a specific character to the party by emphasising the support of the poor and backward classes along with minorities. That effort alienated the middle peasantry and OBCs in most states. But as the party faced defeats since 1989, the core base of the party among the poor, the minorities, the SCs and STs began to erode. This erosion has not been compensated by corresponding gains among any other sections. This process has different expressions in each state, but the main story is the same: the thinning of support among almost every social section, but more so among the lower rungs of social hierarchy. For a party that reshaped itself during the Indira-era as a party of the poor and the backward people, this development has been most debilitating.

Just as in the 1990s, in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections too, Congress has not only failed to secure robust vote share, it has failed to retain any social character. That is why we have emphasised the flatness of its base across social groups. Polling only under 20% of the vote is bad enough; but not polling more among any social group is really the worse part of Congress's failure in 2014. This failure indicates the larger decimation of the party than the overall vote share indicates. In a sense, this defeat might be better understood if we compare the Congress of 2014 with the Congress of 1998-99. The ephemeral victory in 2004 and the slight recovery of 2009 were, in retrospect, only temporary features. They did not bring a trend or a reversal of the decline of the Congress. Just as the Congress was faceless in 1998-99, this election too has underscored the facelessness of the Congress Party.

The small recovery that the Congress made in 2009 had more to do with its overall better performance across most states and a very weak tide in its favour in Maharashtra and UP. But if we look at long-term patterns, the Congress has not been able to recover in both these states. The political trajectory of these two states is very different from each other, but the net result appears to be the same. Maharashtra has been one of the strongest bastions of the Congress. However, after its debacle in 1995, the Congress in Maharashtra has failed to really recover in social terms and in terms of its hegemony.

After the split of 1999, neither the Congress nor the NCP has been able to become a dominant force in the state. Neither of them won the battle for the “Congress legacy” in the state. In this sense, the Congress in Maharashtra, while contributing momentarily to the victory of 2009, could not contribute to the overall rejuvenation of the party. The story in UP is perhaps even more dismal. Since 1984, the party has been consistently unable to sustain itself as an electoral force in the state. There is not even a single state in which the Congress genuinely recovered ground in the post-1989 period.

Two, in the times of its setback, Congress could never adapt itself to the changed structure of competitive politics. As India's party system moved from a one-party dominance to intense multi-party competition without one centre, coalition politics became the key to political success. The Congress was late to join that game and weak in decoding it. As a result, it always remained a reluctant player in the era of coalition politics. Not only did it not grasp the change theoretically, it was also not empirically prepared to adjust to the change and actually run coalitions successfully. This inability produced severe limitations on its ability to manoeuvre a space within the new multiparty competition.

Three, at the state level, the Congress's governance record could not compare well with its main rival, the BJP. Both Haryana and Maharashtra reflected the Congress government's reckless cronyism. Andhra was lost through its state-level dynamics – both pertaining to party and to the division of the state. Once its erstwhile leader Y S Rajasekhara Reddy departed, the party in that state also lost an ability to govern effectively. The mishandling of the anti-corruption agitation not only cost the party heavily in the Delhi elections, it also adversely affected its national government. In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the key issues that voters perceived as crucial were pertaining to the performance of the government. As a result, public opinion about the UPA government became very negative as discussed earlier. But more crucially, the assessment of Congress's state governments was also almost invariably negative. If we take into account only responses in the survey that recorded "full satisfaction" and "full dissatisfaction", the gap in the case of the Congress governments in many states was huge. In united Andhra Pradesh, for every three fully satisfied voters, 33 were fully dissatisfied (1:11); in Haryana, this proportion was at least 1:3.5, in Kerala 1:2, and in Maharashtra 1:3.4.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the perception of governance failure and the consequent adverse media publicity ensured the downfall of the party.

Finally, the Congress Party also suffered from the limitations of its leadership. The "contest" between Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi meant that the Congress was at a disadvantage. The NES 2014 brings this out in more ways than one (for more details and discussion, see Shastri 2014; Chhibber and Verma 2014; Chhibber and Ostermann 2014 (forthcoming)). Part of this failure can be attributed to cleverer handling of the leadership issue by the

BJP. Rather than the issue of who led the party, the issue of what the leadership wanted to do with the party constantly plagued the Congress. In 2004, the decision of Sonia Gandhi not to claim the office of prime minister earned her goodwill. However, Rahul Gandhi's decision before elections not to be designated as party's candidate for prime minister did not similarly help the party. That decision came rather too late and by then the BJP had already converted the election into a plebiscite on leadership.

But the critical issue was not perhaps whether Rahul Gandhi was going to be the party's prime minister candidate. The issue was twofold. One was about party policy and the other was about reforming the party. All through the second term of the UPA, the Congress Party kept oscillating between a pro-poor position and neo-liberal policy in matters of state policy. This gave confusing signals to different social constituencies. The oscillation meant that the middle classes got the impression that the party was turning back to its old "socialist" ways while in reality, the poor did not receive benefit from its government's policies.

The party could not therefore win new supporters, nor could it retain the middle class that had turned to it in 2009. The issue of reorganisation of the Congress Party was perhaps an even more complex issue. It is clear that Rahul Gandhi did not have the support of the majority in the party for his efforts to rejuvenate the party through its reorganisation. So, the party kept repeating reformist platitudes while indulging in routine pragmatism. While the party leadership talked of a new party, the party functioned exactly as the old one. Both these factors not only made the party's claims (about caring for the poor and moving for intra-party democratisation) rather hollow, they also created internal tensions in the party and made it more non-cohesive.

In a sense, both these factors have been troubling the party since Rajeev Gandhi's leadership and have repeatedly led to its defeat. It is of course true that since the demise of Indira Gandhi, Congress Party has been struggling to overcome the leadership void. But it would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that only the leadership issue is at the heart of its problems. As the foregoing discussion suggests, larger issues and processes are at the root of the decline of the Congress Party. The outcome of 2014 is only a continuation of that pattern and the causes of this outcome are only a reminder of the larger issues that stare the party in its face.

#### NOTES

- 1 Calculation by nature of contests provided by CSDS Data Unit.
- 2 This and other information based on voters' survey, unless otherwise mentioned, is from National Election Study (NES), 2014. Data provided by CSDS Data Unit.
- 3 Lokniti-CNN-IBN Tracker Polls, conducted in June 2013 and January 2014; these consisted of a Panel Study. Source: CSDS Data Unit. For more details of the Tracker Polls, see [www.lokniti.org](http://www.lokniti.org)
- 4 For this discussion, rural constituencies are those with 75% or more rural population, urban means constituencies with 75% or more urban population and the remaining are mixed constituencies. Estimates of population shares of urban and rural populace as also of SC, ST and Muslim populations are based on the work being done at Lokniti Programme of CSDS for

identifying the social profiles of constituencies as per 2001 Census and 2004 Delimitation. Source: CSDS Data Unit.

5 Ibid.

6 Lokniti-CNN-IBN Tracker Poll, conducted in January 2014; Source: CSDS Data Unit.

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