

POLITICAL PARTIES

Meaning of Political Party

A political party is a group of people who come together to contest elections and hold power in the government. They agree on some policies and programmes for the society with a view to promote the collective good. Since there can be different views on what is good for all, parties try to persuade people why their policies are better than others. They seek to implement these policies by winning popular support through elections.

Thus, parties reflect fundamental political divisions in a society. Parties are about a part of the society and thus involve PARTISANSHIP. Thus a party is known by which part it stands for, which policies it supports and whose interests it upholds. A political party has three components:

- *the leaders,*
- *the active members and*
- *the followers*

Functions of Political Party

Basically, political parties fill political offices and exercise political power. Parties do so by performing a series of functions:

- Parties contest elections. In most democracies, elections are fought mainly among the candidates put up by political parties. Parties select their candidates in different ways.
- Parties put forward different policies and programmes and the voters choose from them. Each of us may have different opinions and views on what policies are suitable for the society. But no government can handle such a large variety of views. In a democracy, a large number of similar opinions have to be grouped together to provide a direction in which policies can be formulated by the governments. This is what the parties do. A party reduces a vast multitude of opinions into a few basic positions which it supports. A government is expected to base its policies on the line taken by the RULING PARTY.
- Parties play a decisive role in making laws for a country. Formally, laws are debated and passed in the legislature. But since most of the members belong to a party, they go by the direction of the party leadership, irrespective of their personal opinions.
- Parties form and run governments. The big policy decisions are taken by political executive that comes from the political parties. Parties recruit leaders, train them and then make them ministers to run the government in the way they want.
- Those parties that lose in the elections play the role of opposition to the parties in power, by voicing different views and criticising government for its failures or wrong policies. Opposition parties also mobilise opposition to the government.
- Parties shape public opinion. They raise and highlight issues. Parties have lakhs of members and activists spread all over the country. Many of the pressure groups are the extensions of political parties among different sections of society. Parties sometimes also launch movements for the

resolution of problems faced by people. Often opinions in the society crystallise on the lines parties take.

- Parties provide people access to government machinery and welfare schemes implemented by governments. For an ordinary citizen it is easy to approach a local party leader than a government officer. That is why they feel close to parties even when they do not fully trust them. Parties have to be responsive to people's needs and demands. Otherwise people can reject those parties in the next elections.

Necessity of Political Party

The necessity of political parties can be understood by imagining a situation without parties. Every candidate in the elections will be independent. So no one will be able to make any promises to the people about any major policy changes. The government may be formed, but its utility will remain ever uncertain. Elected representative will be accountable to their constituency for what they do in the locality. But no one will be responsible for how the country run.

The rise of political parties is directly linked to the emergence of representative democracies. As we have seen, large scale societies need representative democracy. As societies became large and complex, they also needed some agency to gather different views on various issues and to present these to the government. They needed some way to bring various representatives together so that a responsible government could be formed. They needed a mechanism to support or restrain the government, make policies, justify or oppose them. Political parties fulfill these needs that every representative government has.

So, it can be said that parties are a necessary condition for a democracy.

Multi-party System Vs Two-party System

In some countries only one party is allowed to control and run the government. These are called one-party systems. This cannot be a good option because this is not a democratic option. Any democratic system must allow at least two parties to compete in elections and provide a fair chance for the competing parties to come to power.

In some countries, power usually changes between two main parties. Such a party system is called two-party system. The United States of America and the United Kingdom are examples of two-party system.

If several parties compete for power, and more than two parties have a reasonable chance of coming to power either on their own strength or in alliance with others, we call it a multi-party system. Thus in India, we have a multi-party system. In this system, the government is formed by various parties coming together in a coalition. When several parties in a multi-party system join hands for the purpose of contesting elections and winning power, it is called an alliance or a front. For example, in India there were three such major alliances in 2004 parliamentary elections— the National Democratic Alliance, the United Progressive Alliance and the Left Front.

The multi-party system often appears very messy and leads to political instability. At the same time, this system allows a variety of interests and opinions to enjoy political representation.

Party system is not something any country can choose. It evolves over a long time, depending on the nature of society, its social and regional divisions, its history of politics and its system of elections.

These cannot be changed very quickly. Each country develops a party system that is conditioned by its special circumstances. For example, if India has evolved a multi-party system, it is because the social and geographical diversity in such a large country is not easily absorbed by two or even three parties. No system is ideal for all countries and all situations.

Popular Participation in Political Parties

In India the common perception is, political parties are facing a crisis because they are very unpopular and the citizens are indifferent to political parties.

The available evidence shows that this belief is only partly true for India. The evidence, based on a series of large sample surveys conducted over several decades, shows that:

- Political parties do not enjoy much trust among the people in South Asia. The proportion of those who say their trust in political parties is 'not much' or 'not at all' is more than those who have 'some' or 'great' trust.
- The same is true of most other democracies as well. Political parties are one of the least trusted institutions all over the world.
- Yet the level of participation in the activities of political parties was fairly high. The proportion of those who said they were members of some political party was higher in India than many advanced countries like Canada, Japan, Spain and South Korea.
- Over the last three decades the proportion of those who report to be members of political parties in India has gone up steadily.
- The proportion of those who say they feel 'close to a political party' has also gone up in India in this period.

(Source: SDSA Team, State of Democracy in South Asia, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007)

National Political Parties

Every party in the country has to register with the Election Commission. While the Commission treats all parties equally, it offers some special facilities to large and established parties. These parties are given a unique symbol – only the official candidates of that party can use that election symbol. Parties that get this privilege and some other special facilities are 'recognised' by the Election Commission for this purpose. That is why these parties are called, 'recognised political parties'.

State Party: A party that secures at least 6 per cent of the total votes in an election to the Legislative Assembly of a State and wins at least two seats is recognised as a State party.

National Party: A party that secures at least six per cent of total votes in Lok Sabha elections or Assembly elections in four States and wins at least four seats in the Lok Sabha is recognised as a national party.

According to this classification, there were six national recognised parties in the country in 2006.

Indian National Congress (INC): Popularly known as the Congress Party. One of the oldest parties of the world. Founded in 1885 and has experienced many splits. Played a dominant role in Indian politics at the national and state level for several decades after India's Independence. Under the

leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the party sought to build a modern secular democratic republic in India. Ruling party at the centre till 1977 and then from 1980 to 1989. After 1989, its support declined, but it continues to be present throughout the country, cutting across social divisions. A centrist party (neither rightist nor leftist) in its ideological orientation, the party espouses secularism and welfare of weaker sections and minorities. Supports new economic reforms but with a human face. Emerged as the largest party with 145 members in the Lok Sabha elections held in 2004. Currently leads the ruling United Progressive Alliance coalition government at the Centre.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): Founded in 1980 by reviving the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Wants to build a strong and modern India by drawing inspiration from India's ancient culture and values. Cultural nationalism (or 'Hindutva') is an important element in its conception of Indian nationhood and politics. Wants full territorial and political integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India, a uniform civil code for all people living in the country irrespective of religion, and ban on religious conversions. Its support base increased substantially in the 1990s. Earlier limited to north and west and to urban areas, the party expanded its support in the south, east, the north-east and to rural areas. Came to power in 1998 as the leader of the National Democratic Alliance including several state and regional parties. Lost elections in 2004 and is the principal opposition party in the Lok Sabha.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP): Formed in 1984 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram. Seeks to represent and secure power for the bahujan samaj which includes the dalits, adivasis, OBCs and religious minorities. Draws inspiration from the ideas and teachings of Sahu Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, Periyar Ramaswami Naicker and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Stands for the cause of securing the interests and welfare of the dalits and oppressed people. It has its main base in the state of Uttar Pradesh and substantial presence in neighbouring states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Punjab. Formed government in Uttar Pradesh several times by taking the support of different parties at different times. In the Lok Sabha elections held in 2004, it polled about 5 per cent votes and secured 19 seats in the Lok Sabha.

Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M): Founded in 1964. Believes in Marxism- Leninism. Supports socialism, secularism and democracy and opposes imperialism and communalism. Accepts democratic elections as a useful and helpful means for securing the objective of socioeconomic justice in India. Enjoys strong support in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, especially among the poor, factory workers, farmers, agricultural labourers and the intelligentsia. Critical of the new economic policies that allow free flow of foreign capital and goods into the country. Has been in power in West Bengal without a break for 30 years. In 2004 elections, it won about 6 per cent of votes and 43 seats in the Lok Sabha. Initially supported the UPA government from outside, but withdrew support in late 2008.

Communist Party of India (CPI): Formed in 1925. Believes in Marxism-Leninism, secularism and democracy. Opposed to the forces of secessionism and communalism. Accepts parliamentary democracy as a means of promoting the interests of the working class, farmers and the poor. Became weak after the split in the party in 1964 that led to the formation of the CPI(M). Significant presence in the states of Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Its support base had gradually declined over the years. It secured about 1.4 per cent votes and 10 seats in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Advocates the coming together of all left parties to build a strong left front. Initially supported the UPA government from outside, but withdrew support in late 2008.

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP): Formed in 1999 following a split in the Congress party. Espouses democracy, Gandhian secularism, equity, social justice and federalism. Wants that high offices in government be confined to natural born citizens of the country. A major party in Maharashtra and has a significant presence in Meghalaya, Manipur and Assam. A coalition partner in

the state of Maharashtra in alliance with the Congress. Since 2004, a member of the United Progressive Alliance.

Rise of Regional Parties

Over the last three decades, the number and strength of these parties has expanded. This made the Parliament of India politically more and more diverse. No one national party is able to secure on its own a majority in Lok Sabha. As a result, the national parties are compelled to form alliances with State parties. Since 1996, nearly every one of the State parties has got an opportunity to be a part of one or the other national level coalition government. This has contributed to the strengthening of federalism and democracy in our country.

Challenges to political parties: Popular dissatisfaction and criticism has focussed on four problem areas in the working of political parties. Political parties need to face and overcome these challenges in order to remain effective instruments of democracy.

Lack of Internal Democracy: All over the world there is a tendency in political parties towards the concentration of power in one or few leaders at the top. Parties do not keep membership registers, do not hold organisational meetings, and do not conduct internal elections regularly. Ordinary members of the party do not get sufficient information on what happens inside the party. They do not have the means or the connections needed to influence the decisions. As a result the leaders assume greater power to make decisions in the name of the party. Since one or few leaders exercise paramount power in the party, those who disagree with the leadership find it difficult to continue in the party. More than loyalty to party principles and policies, personal loyalty to the leader becomes more important.

Dynastic Succession: In many parties, the top positions are always controlled by members of one family. This is unfair to other members of that party. This is also bad for democracy, since people who do not have adequate experience or popular support come to occupy positions of power. This tendency is present in some measure all over the world, including in some of the older democracies.

Money and Muscle Power: Since parties are focussed only on winning elections, they tend to use short-cuts to win elections. They tend to nominate those candidates who have or can raise lots of money. Rich people and companies who give funds to the parties tend to have influence on the policies and decisions of the party. In some cases, parties support criminals who can win elections. Democrats all over the world are worried about the increasing role of rich people and big companies in democratic politics.

Being a Meaningful Choice: In order to offer meaningful choice, parties must be significantly different. In recent years there has been a decline in the ideological differences among parties in most parts of the world. In our country the differences among all the major parties on the economic policies have reduced. Those who want really different policies have no option available to them. Sometimes people cannot even elect very different leaders either, because the same set of leaders keep shifting from one party to another.

Way to Reform Political Parties:

following are some of the recent efforts and suggestions in our country to reform political parties and its leaders:

1. Anti-defection Law: This law was passed during Rajiv Gandhi's Premiership. The law says that if any MLA or MP changes parties, he or she will lose the seat in the legislature. This new law has helped bring defection down. At the same time this has made any dissent even more difficult. MPs and MLAs have to accept whatever the party leaders decide.

2. Details of Property and Criminal Proceedings During Nomination: It is mandatory for every candidate who contests elections to file an AFFIDAVIT giving details of his property and criminal cases pending against him. The new system has made a lot of information available to the public. But there is no system of check if the information given by the candidates is true.

3. Mandatory Organizational Elections and IT Returns: The Election Commission passed an order making it necessary for political parties to hold their organisational elections and file their income tax returns. The parties have started doing so but sometimes it is mere formality.

Suggestions for Future:

- A law should be made to regulate the internal affairs of political parties.
- It should be made mandatory for political parties to give a minimum number of tickets, about one-third, to women candidates.
- There should be state funding of elections. The government should give parties money to support their election expenses. This support could be given in kind: petrol, paper, telephone etc. Or it could be given in cash on the basis of the votes secured by the party in the last election.

These suggestions have not yet been accepted by political parties. If and when these are accepted these could lead to some improvement. But we must be very careful about legal solutions to political problems. Over-regulation of political parties can be counterproductive. This would force all parties to find ways to cheat the law.

There are two other ways in which political parties can be reformed:

1. People's Pressure: As per an old hindi saying a public gets the leadership it deserves. Most of the people in India have indifferent attitude towards happenings around them. Once public becomes aware and starts asserting its thoughts it will be easier to reform the political landscape of India.

2. People's Participation: If nice people will continue shunning politics then we will continue to get leaders with criminal backgrounds. Off late eminent personalities from other fields have started joining politics. This is good sign for the future of Indian politics.