



## The Rise of Regional Parties in India

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Today, regional parties are recognized as intrinsic to the functioning of parliamentary democracy in India, at both the Central and State level. Indeed, it has become standard for journalists and political analysts to arouse the interest of people with animated descriptions of how regional parties shoot up in great numbers after an election and how they tend to 'break' politics at the national level by undercutting the votes of the national parties. It is somewhat correct to argue that the exponential rise of regional parties in the last two decades has resulted in some of the most powerful politicians in contemporary India coming from regional parties. The staggering increase in the number of parties contesting elections, particularly over the past two decades, and the shrinking margins of victory in parliamentary elections are direct results of the emergence of new regional power centers. Politicians like Mamata Banerjee and M.K. Stalin have established political bastions in their home regions, which prove very hard to breach for national parties. Regional parties are also prevalent, though not ubiquitous, in other parliamentary democracies with cultural and socioeconomic divisions. For example, parties like Sinn Fein (Ireland) and the Scottish National Party (Scotland) wield significant power over Parliamentary affairs in Great Britain.

In India, there are four ways in which regional parties can be classified, the first are those that exploit linguistic and ethnic differences and identify themselves with a particular cultural, linguistic, religious or ethnic group, hence limiting their electoral base to that particular group. Examples include Shiromani Akali Dal, National Conference, DMK, AIADMK, Telugu Desam, Shiv Sena, Asom Gana Parishad, Mizo National Front, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha etc. The second type includes those regional parties that pursue an all-India platform and run candidates in all regions of the country, but only find success in a few regions or States, such as the Indian National Lok Dal, All-India Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Samajwadi Party, National Congress Party etc. There are those parties which form as a result of a split in a national party, typically termed as 'splinter parties'. Finally, there are some parties that arise as a vehicle to carry individual politicians with personal popularity and name recognition to the ballot box. These parties, however, struggle to define their positions on issues and move beyond the image of their charismatic leader, and hence, do not survive for very long. Some of the more notable examples include the Lok Janshakti Party and the Haryana Vikas Party.

The astounding rise in the political standing of regional parties can be traced back to the late 1980's and early 1990's, which saw major transformative changes occur in India, such as the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, the liberalization of the Indian economy and the rise of Hindutva in the 1980s. These developments were countered by a new wave of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes mobilizing in parts of northern and western India, which questioned the Congress's grip on power in this region. Parties like the Samajwadi Party and Biju Janata Party emerged as a powerful force in the States and challenged India's 'One Party Dominant System'. Regional parties had always exerted significant power on the politics in their home State, but found it hard to challenge the Congress in the Lok Sabha. By increasing their political appeal and concentrating their electoral base, these parties started to gain a significant number of seats in Parliament and fragment the votes of the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Congress, seen by many to be an 'Umbrella' or 'Big Tent' Party that could attract votes from all sections of society, started to concede a significant amount of their votes to parties which propagated a specific message or appealed to a specific social group. As a result, between 1989 and 2014, no single party was able to get a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha, and the formation of coalition governments became the new norm. In 1999, the Bharatiya Janata Party made a pre-poll alliance with 24 smaller/regional political parties of diversified character and won more than 300 seats, forming the NDA government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the helm. It was the largest coalition government

formed at the national level and it served for the full term of the Lok Sabha (1999-2004). Of the 86 registered parties that contested Lok Sabha elections between 1989 and 2019, 64 continue to exist in 2019. Whilst some dropped off, others have merged with other parties. The regional representation of these parties has seen a substantial increase. From 19 parties representing 11 states in 1989, there are 30 parties representing 17 states in the 17th Lok Sabha formed after the 2019 general elections. At their peak in 1999, there were 33 parties representing 28 states. While the number of polity-wide and cross-regional parties has remained stable, there has been a substantial decline in the number of states represented by cross-regional parties.

The emergence of regional parties and coalition politics has resulted in Centre-State relations becoming a cause of tension, with regional parties constantly demanding greater financial and political autonomy from the Central government. For many years after the Constitution came into force, Centre-State relations were largely smooth and without conflict as one party dominated politics at the Central and State. However, after 1967, many Articles of the Constitution concerning federalism began to be examined under a lens, as States began breaking with the Centre on matters ranging from national security to taxation. Supreme Court cases such as *S.R. Bommai vs. Union of India* and *Kuldip Nayar vs. Union of India* further reinforced the federal character of the Constitution. Today, the desire for more autonomy and political freedom is central to the message of these parties, as they draw voters who are concerned with the Central government 'overlegislating' on certain matters.

While it is absolutely certain that regional parties have left an indelible mark on the politics of this country, it is also true that many tend to overstate the on-ground impact of regional parties and devise a false estimate on how much power they exercise. A common myth about regional parties is that their rise, by definition, has eroded—and continues to erode—the stature of national parties. But in reality, after a period of unprecedented growth in the standing of regional parties during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the pattern of electoral competition at the national level has achieved a surprisingly stable balance of power. The share of votes won by regional parties cracked the 50 percent mark for the first time in 1996. Then the engine sputtered somewhat. By 1999, vote share of regional parties had dipped to 48 percent. By 2004, their vote share crept back up to 51 percent, the same level it had been eight years earlier, before modestly rising again in the 2009 elections. What's more, the doomsday scenario in which the rise of regional players directly threatens the status of national players overlooks the possibility that regional parties can also hurt one another. In India's winner-take-all electoral system, where victories are possible with a small minority of votes in any given constituency, increasing levels of political competition have led to a greater fragmentation of the vote. In 2009, for instance, less than a quarter of electoral districts were won with a majority of votes. The net result has often been regional parties crowding out other rival regional parties.

In conclusion, regional parties have contributed to creating a spirit of federalism in our society and have given representation to many downtrodden sections of society that were hitherto unrepresented, it is also accurate to say that the fragmentation of seats in the Lok Sabha has resulted in the formation of unstable coalition governments, which oftentimes hang by a thread, as evidenced by the multiple governments in the 1990's that failed to complete their five year term. Regardless of the opinion different people have on the emergence of regional parties, it is certain that they will continue to play a fundamental role in Indian polity for many decades to come.