

Political Parties in India

Political Parties are a crucial topic in the Polity segment in the UPSC CSE Exam. In India political parties assume different dynamic features. What they are will be elaborated upon in this article.

Definition and Types of Political Parties

Political parties are voluntary associations or organised groups of individuals who share the same political views and who try to gain power via constitutional means and who desire to promote national interests.

In modern democratic states, there are four types of political parties

1. Reactionary parties which cling to the old socio-economic and political institutions
2. Conservative parties that believe in status-quo
3. Liberal parties that aim to change and reform the existing institutions
4. Radical parties which aim at establishing a new order by overthrowing the existing institutions

Political parties are also classified as per the ideologies. Political scientists have placed radical parties on the left, liberal parties in the centre and reactionary and conservative parties on the right.

In India, CPI and CPM are examples of leftist parties, Congress of centrist parties and the BJP is an example of rightist parties.

There are three kinds of party systems in the world:

- (i) The one party system in which only one party rules and no opposition party is permitted. The Soviet Union was an example of one party system.
- (ii) Two-party system on which two major parties exist. For example the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States.
- (iii) Multi-party system on which there are a number of political parties lead to the formation of coalition governments. India, France and Switzerland are examples of multi-party systems.

Characteristics of Party System in India

The following are the characteristics of the party system in India:

1. Multi-Party System: The continental size of the, the diversified characteristics of the Indian society, the adoption of universal adult franchise, the peculiar type of political processes have given rise to a large number of political parties. In fact, India has the largest number of political parties in the world.

Further, India has all categories of parties - left parties, centrist parties, right parties and so on. Consequently the hung Parliaments, hung assemblies and coalition governments have become a common phenomenon in Indian politics.

2. One-Dominant Party Systems: In spite of the multiparty system, the political scene in India was dominated for a long period by the Congress. Hence, Rajni Kothari, an eminent political analyst, preferred to call the Indian party system as 'one party dominance system' or the 'Congress System'.

The dominant position enjoyed by the Congress has been on the decline since 1967 with the rise of regional parties and other national parties like the Janata Dal and BJP.

3. Lack of Clear Ideology: Except the BJP, the CPI and CPM, all other parties do not have a clear-cut ideology. They (i.e., all other parties) are ideologically closer to each other. They have a close resemblance in their policies and programmes. Almost every party advocates democracy, secularism, socialism and Gandhism. Moreover, this, every party, including the so-called ideological parties, is guided by only one consideration - power capture.

Thus, politics has become issue-based rather than ideology and pragmatism has replaced the commitment of its principles.

4. Personality Cult: Quite often, the parties are organised around an eminent leader who becomes more important than the party and its ideology. Parties are known by their leaders and their ideology. Parties are known by their leaders rather than by their manifesto. It is a fact that the popularity of the Congress was mainly due to the leadership of Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi.

It is the same case for the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and TDP in Andhra Pradesh which got recognition with MG Ramachandran and NT Rama Rao respectively.

5. Based on Traditional Factors: In the western countries, the political parties are formed on the basis of socio-economic and political programmes. On the other hand, a large number of parties in India are formed on the basis of religion, caste, language, culture and so on. For example, Shiv Sena, Muslim League, Hindu Maha Sabha and so on. These parties work for the promotion of communal and sectional interests that undermine the general public interest.

6. Emergence of Regional Parties: Another significant feature of the Indian party system is the emergence of a large number of regional parties and their growing role. They have become

the ruling parties in various states like BJD in Orissa, DMK or AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Akali Dal in Punjab and so on. In the beginning, they were confined to regional politics only. But of late they have come to play a significant role in the national politics due to coalition governments at the Centre.

7. Faction and Defections: Factionalism, defections, splits, mergers, polarisation and so on have been an important aspect of the functioning political parties in India. Lust for power and materialistic conditions have made political parties leave their party and join another party.

The practice of defections gained greater currency after the fourth general elections in 1967. This phenomenon caused instability both at the Centre and in the states and led to disintegration of the parties.

8. Lack of Effective Opposition: An effective Opposition is very essential for the successful operation of the parliamentary democracy prevalent in India. It checks the autocratic tendencies of the ruling party and provides an alternative government. However, in the last 50 years an effective, strong, organised and visible national Opposition could never emerge except in flashes.

The opposition parties have no unity and very often adopt mutually conflicting positions with respect to the ruling party. They have failed to play a constructive role in the functioning of the body politic and in the process of nation building.

Recognition of National and State Parties

The Election Commission registers political parties for the purpose of elections and grants them recognition as national or state parties on the basis of their poll performance. The other parties are simply declared as registered-unrecognised parties.

The recognition granted by the Commission to the parties determines their right to certain privileges like allocation of the party symbols, provision of time for political broadcasts on the state-owned television and radio stations and access to electoral rolls.

Every national party is allotted a symbol exclusively reserved for its use throughout the country. Similarly, every state party is allotted a symbol exclusively reserved for its use in the states in which it is so recognised. A registered-unrecognised party, on the other hand, can select a symbol from a list of free symbols.

In other words, the Commission specifies certain symbols as 'reserved symbols' which are meant for the candidates set up by the recognised parties and others as 'free symbols' which are meant for the other candidates.

The conditions for recognition as National Party and State Party are as follows:

National Party:

1. If it secures six % of valid votes polled in nay our or more states at a general election to the Lok Sabha or to the legislative assembly and in addition it wins four seats in the Lok Sabha from any states
2. If a party wins two % of seats in the Lok Sabha at a general election and these candidates are elected from three states. An additional criteria includes if the party is recognised as a state party in four states.

State Party:

1. If the party secures 6% of the valid votes polled in the state at a a general election to the legislative assembly of the state concerned and in addition wins 2 seats in the assembly of the state concerned.
2. The state party secures 6% of the valid votes polled in the state at a general election to the Lok Sabha from the state concerned. In addition if it wins 1 seat in the Lok Sabha from the state concerned.
3. If it wins 3% of the seats in the legislative assembly at a general election to the legislative assembly of the state concerned or 3 seats in the assembly, whichever is more.
4. If it wins 1 seat in the Lok Sabha for every 25 seats or any fraction thereof allotted to the state at a general electron to the Lo Sabha from the concerned states
5. If the state party secures 8% of the total valid votes polled in the state at a General Elections to the Lok Sabha from the state or to the legislative assembly of the state. The condition was added in 2011.

Frequently Asked Questions about Party System in India

What is a multi-party system in India?

In political science, a multi-party system is a political system in which multiple political parties across the political spectrum run for national elections, and all have the capacity to gain control of government offices, separately or in coalition.

How many political parties are there in India?

As per latest publication dated 23 September 2021 from Election Commission of India, the total number of parties registered was 2858, with 8 national parties, 54 state parties and 2797 unrecognised parties.

What is meant by the party system?

A party system is a concept in comparative political science concerning the system of government by political parties in a democratic country.

In the 1984 elections, the TDP emerged as the largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha