November 21, 2022

Triumph of the Political Party in Public Office

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There is no moral opprobrium anymore to elected representatives switching sides in India. Parties appear to welcome anyone as long as it suits their ends and voters do not seem to care. This must make us think afresh about the role of political parties in India's democracy.

Abdul Sattar, a Congress member, won a gram panchayat election in 1984 and a decade later became the president of the municipal council of Sillod in Maharashtra. He was elected to the Maharashtra legislative assembly in 2009 and successfully returned in 2014. In 2019, he left the Congress, joined the Shiv Sena, and was a minister in the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government.

When the Shiv Sena imploded in June 2022, Sattar was among the first to switch sides to the Eknath Shinde group. Soon after, the then two-person Maharashtra government approved an investment of Rs 15.17 crore in the National Cooperative Spinning Mill. This was nearly 20% of the total share capital of the project that had not decided where to locate, and whose members had until then raised less than 1% of the capital. Sattar is a promoter of the mill and held that this investment would allow for the development of the Aurangabad region. He is now a Cabinet minister in the Shinde-led government.

In the neighbouring state of Telangana, an elected Congress legislator representing the Munugode constituency, Komatireddy Rajgopal Reddy, resigned from his assembly seat and joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Even before the Election Commission of India announced by-polls to fill the vacant seat, the three main parties in the competition – the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), Congress, and BJP – began their campaign.

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The voters of Munugode had great hopes. They expected the state government to announce additional development funds and new schemes. By-elections held earlier in similar circumstances in Huzurabad were a jackpot for voters. In Huzurabad, direct cash transfers and distribution of assets, including sheep and houses, were announced. Munugode voters anticipated money would be distributed during the campaign, as had been the practice. After the nomination process, voters were reported to have said that "cash and freebies" were likely to make a difference. It was reported that liquor sales in Munugode doubled since August. Parties assumed that the key to voters' minds was through their stomachs and treated people to lavish meals for more than a month. Voters, or at least some of them, had a whale of a time.

Meanwhile, K.R. Reddy claimed that he had resigned for his constituency's development and to save democracy. He argued that under the TRS, government development work was not being taken up in areas with non-TRS legislators. If that was the problem, he should have moved to the TRS, not the BJP. A couple of weeks later, it was reported that Reddy had won huge business contracts worth Rs 18,000 crore.

These two recent anecdotes from two states involving two different sets of parties illustrate the working of our political parties and legislators. They also tell us about voter expectations and, more importantly, underline the state's role. Why is there no moral opprobrium associated with switching sides? Neither parties nor voters appear to care about who is coming and going. Parties appear to welcome anyone if it suits their ends, and voters seem to view all the attention they get as a fantastic opportunity till they go back to the business of everyday life. While this new 'normal' raises many questions about the role of political parties and their place in a democracy, it also encourages us to think afresh. We probably need to rethink what we take for granted about political parties and how they are organised, and re-examine their working.

The rest of the paper is as follows. In the next section, I sketch an analytical framework which could help us make sense of why parties do what they do and the relationship between a party, voters, legislators, and the state. The next section traces the change in the nature of party organisation and design in India after the coming of free elections and representative democracy. The final section

summarises the findings.

Party organisation

The answer to why switching parties is normal probably lies in the organisational design of political parties and their links with citizens and the state. A point repeatedly underlined is that parties are central to a representative democracy and that they have been vested with a series of functions, including recruitment of political leaders, mobilisation of groups and interests, articulation and aggregation of demands and interests, and representation of social and political diversity. While parties carry out a series of critical functions that give representative democracy legitimacy, the way these functions are carried out has changed over time.

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I would argue that the functional efficacy of parties depends to a large extent on how they are organised. Our lens is probably based on a dated organisational design and we cannot therefore make sense of what parties now do and why they do what they do. How parties represent the people and are accountable is determined by how they are organised. I begin with two assumptions. First, parties seek to win office and organise themselves in a manner that makes them effective and efficient enough to achieve this goal. Second, parties have a strong tendency to adapt to demands for change from both within and outside.

For heuristic purposes, it may be helpful to disaggregate a party into different faces—the party in public office, the party on the ground, and the party central office (Katz and Mair 1993). The party in public office is the public face of the party. This includes not only those in government but also those elected to assemblies and parliament. This face is dependent on continual electoral success to remain in office.

The party central office is the leadership/administrative wing of the party and is often the intermediary between the party on the ground and the party in public office. Some of the members of the party central office are leaders of the other two faces. The party central office in most parties is a coordinating agency and is dependent on the other faces. At the same time, it plays a balancing role between the other faces. It acts as the central decision-making body of the party though it is not clear whether this face actually makes them or it merely collates what the dominant face of the party wants.

The party on the ground represents the activists, supporters, and even loyal voters. Much of their attachment to the party is for symbolic and psychic reasons. While some of them may be rewarded with patronage or office, for a large section the incentives are "public purposive (policy), symbolic, and solidaristic" (Katz and Mair 1993: 598). In reality, there is a great deal of overlap between the three faces. The demands of these different faces and whom they represent vary, and there is an inbuilt tension that gives the party its dynamism.

The popular "ideal" party is the mass party model. Here, the party on the ground, which represents the members at large, mobilises voters, and is also the major financier, is in command. It is also assumed that it is the party on the ground that gives the party its legitimacy as it is composed of those sections of society that the party claims to represent. This face always assumes that electoral success is a result of its efforts. Consequently, it expects the party in public office to work in a manner that suits the interests on the ground. This is a bottom-up model where the base runs the party.

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This mass party model assumes a great deal of internal democracy in the party where the central and public office faces represent and are accountable to the party on the ground. Much of our understanding of parties and their representative and accountability functions is based on the mass party model. This model, however, is a product of particular contexts and circumstances. Parties are dynamic entities – to survive and advance, they must adapt to contingent requirements. Comparative studies show that given the functions that parties are expected to undertake, the party in public office has triumphed and diluted the significance of the other faces.

This role reversal between different faces and the resultant dynamics within parties may help explain why parties do what they do. Further, the changing dynamics may also have modified voter expectations. So, an Abdul Sattar or a K.R. Reddy moves easily to

parties with contradictory ideological persuasions. This is expected when the party in public office is in control because winning elections and holding office, or returning to it, is its top priority and this is what gives it meaning.

Since there is no significant difference in what parties are offering and the party on the ground is only an instrument of the party in public office, the voters in Sillod or Munugode were not perturbed by the shifts of their representatives. Since the first-past-the-post system encourages candidates to cultivate a personal vote, they probably identify less with the party and more with the representative. Therefore, any change from this state of affairs depends on the party organisation and the dynamics within it.

Party in public office dominates

First, we should be clear that parties in India did not develop in the same way as in advanced industrial democracies. Here, democracy was inaugurated with universal adult franchise and there was no restriction on participation when it came to choosing representatives or contesting as a representative. Consequently, unlike in the West, where societal transformation preceded democratisation, here, change and democratisation happened concurrently (Kothari 1970; Sheth 1975).

India's developmental transformation took place alongside monumental political change, which saw the breakdown of unequal social structures and the increasing participation of hitherto marginalised sections in political activity. The breakdown of social hierarchies and reform came primarily through the state and legislation, which was possible because of a broadening and deepening of the participatory culture. Therefore, India's journey to democratisation was atypical—it was not the development of the advanced West, of other regions like Latin America, or of even the post-Communist states in Europe.

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Quite naturally, the origins, development, and course of political parties were also different. The mass party model, often assumed to be the prototype for party organisation, originated in the pre-democratic era when parties were vehicles of movements attempting to extend the franchise to a broader section of society. Mass parties had distinct aims and established linkages and were organised according to the requirements of the time.

In its pre-independence avatar, the Congress used the mass party mechanism to play an integrationist role and incorporate many groups that sought access to the new political system. It was, therefore, not surprising that most opposition parties that emerged immediately after independence existed before as groups within the Congress (Weiner 1957: 13). However, this organisational model is neither a natural fit nor the first design preference for political parties in India. It was a product of a particular context and was geared to fulfil specific requirements that democratisation demanded at a particular time.

We now know that parties as organisations are adaptable entities. For their own existence and continued success, parties remodel themselves according to their circumstances and are not necessarily attached to a particular configuration. Two immediate demands pushed the Congress away from the mass party model—the requirements of government and elections. In the early years, the Congress had to play the dual role of taking forward the democratisation process and holding office simultaneously. The tensions between these two requirements were quickly settled by an organisational tweak that had far-reaching implications.

The tussle between Jawaharlal Nehru as head of the party in government and J.B. Kripalani first and Purushottam Das Tandon later, who were heads of the central office of the party, were early indications of the tension between different faces of the party (Weiner 1967). Nehru's control of the central office and the party in government resolved the unease and underscored the party's priority. It was settled for time to come that the party in public office was supreme, and that the party on the ground and the party in central office existed to serve it.

A second factor that brought about organisational change was elections. The Congress, as numerous studies of the early era tell us, was a well-oiled electoral machine. It glided over contradictions, manipulated factional, caste, and linguistic differences, held society together, and attempted to control the pace and direction of social and economic transformation solely to win elections (Weiner 1967: 15). The purpose of the party revolved around winning and holding power and all actions were geared towards that goal.

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However, elections also meant competition. Once different groups found access to the system, either newer entities came up to represent them or they moved from the Congress to other parties that claimed to better represent their interests. This increased participation and the emergence of newer options gradually diminished the hegemony of the Congress.

Since democracy was inaugurated with full universal adult franchise, a democratic institutional framework that allowed for free competition was already in place, and this meant the focus was on the competition for votes in elections. New parties that emerged in the second decade plunged straight into the electoral game with the primary purpose of winning elections and displacing the Congress. Elections became the be-all and end-all of all political parties.

This is not surprising. Studies of party politics in other recently democratised countries in different parts of the globe demonstrate that there is no given linear path of development. We see that parties could leap forward, bypassing stages, because the contextual and institutional features determine the nature of organisational possibilities (Biezen 2003, Loxton and Mainwaring 2018). This means that parties do not necessarily begin as mass parties and their design is likely to be influenced by the given structure of opportunities.

For the parties that emerged in the 1960s capturing office became the only game in town and the successful organisational "model" was the Congress. By then, the Congress had rebooted itself from an integrationist party to an electoral machine. Under Indira Gandhi, the Congress organisation saw a hardening of some trends already in place and additional changes that made the party more centralised. The party's requirements in government during her tenure further marginalised the central office of the party and the party on the ground. She personalised the already centralised model, weakening challengers, stymieing potential competitors, and intervening directly at the local level, especially when choosing people in critical positions (Kochanek 1976).

> While Mrs Gandhi's radical rhetoric was enticing, it was simultaneously meaningless and hollow. The party in public office was now almost on its own, cut from its roots it had to increasingly rely on the government and bureaucracy to push its agenda.

Parallel to this organisational shift, there was also discursive change, where "hyperbole" destroyed the ideological and programmatic glue that held the party together (Manor 1981). While Mrs Gandhi's radical rhetoric was enticing, it was simultaneously meaningless and hollow. The party in public office was now almost on its own, cut from its roots it had to increasingly rely on the government and bureaucracy to push its agenda. There was also a financial turn, with the party relying more on big business and wealthy individuals for resources (Kochanek 1987). In all, the party organisation's relationship with society changed and the party was now more linked to the state.

The "polymorphous" state was playing a massive role in independent India (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987). It was responsible for order, justice and security, provided welfare and social goods and benefits, and, at the same time, protected the interests of property and attempted to eradicate poverty. In essence, the state was everywhere, and it quite naturally raised a multitude of expectations while attempting to carry out a whole set of contradictory tasks. At the same time, it also created conditions for compromise and the coming together of different groups and interests, thus controlling change and continuity.

Given this role of the state, it naturally influenced the growth, development, and organisation of political parties. As the role of the government increased, so did the influence of the party, and the government's expansion, in many ways, proved to be an asset for the party. Weiner (1967) showed that the link between local Congress units and local administrations was a crucial factor in the party's success. He further noted that the Congress often sold government performance rather than actual economic outcomes to bolster its chances of success. Even for voters, what the government did or demonstrated mattered more than the actual results. This pattern was established even before Mrs Gandhi's centralising thrust and again demonstrates how the party in public office outweighed the other faces of the party.

With the goals of the party in public office in the forefront, it is not surprising that the party's links with the state increased. Comparative studies show that parties have adapted themselves to make the state benefit them. It might appear trivial, but appointments to state-controlled bodies, enterprises, autonomous boards, and agencies are a good example. Here appointments are not an "electoral"

resource where citizens are rewarded but an organisational resource intended to influence the party's working (Kopecký et al. 2012). These state appointments are controlled by the party in public office and serve the party organisation in multiple ways.

The new parties that emerged adopted the centralised organisational model, the vacuous rhetorical mobilisation strategy, and the election-first model used by the successful winning machine. The Congress thrust on leadership compelled other parties to demonstrate that they too had adequate leadership potential. Organisationally, parties began to look increasingly similar. They revolved around a leader, programmatic content and meaning were less significant, and performance, management, and governance came to the forefront.

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Even parties like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which in its previous avatar had links with the pre-Independence Self-respect Movement, or a party like the Shiv Sena, which began as a movement, have over time adapted to the dominant centralised party model. And this despite the dense organisational structures both parties have in place. The identity-based parties that came out from the Janata family, such as the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, and Janata Dal, among others, have all taken a similar path. The parties that came out from the Congress, such as the Nationalist Congress Party, All Trinamool Congress Party, and Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress, which were critical of the lack of internal democracy in the party, have gone on to create even more centralised set-ups revolving around single individuals. Even the new kid on the block, the Aam Aadmi Party, has quickly adapted to the dominant personality-based centralised model.

The BJP is no different from the other parties. The party not only has a 'high command' culture and a personality-centred strategy in place but also has further refined the centralised model. The 'double engine sarkar' model diminishes the federal idea and basically puts the party in public office at the national level in control. It implicitly makes the point that the same party at both levels will lead to better developmental outcomes for the states. Further, the central office dictates almost everything at all levels, including a change of chief ministers, choice of ministers, candidates for elections, and so on.

The BJP in office has now prioritised the interests of the party in government over the other faces. A rather bizarre case highlights the power of the party in public office. Earlier this year, the party suspended its national spokesperson Nupur Sharma and expelled its Delhi unit's media head Naveen Jindal for making controversial remarks about Prophet Mohammed. This was surprising given that the party always looked the other way when unabashed 'othering' of the Muslim community took place almost continually after it came to power. In some states, the everyday violence against the community is condoned, and there are executive orders allowing the bulldozing of Muslim-owned properties and banning the hijab.

This unusual agility against the office bearers had to do with the negative international attention the remarks received. It forced the head of the party in public office, the prime minister, to reach out to several countries in different parts of the world and assuage their feelings. Obviously the party in public office is acutely conscious of its image and has little control over the narrative outside, which necessitated an intervention from the highest level.

> Parties are now more concerned about influencing the average voter rather than activating and reinforcing their core supporters. Party leaders stress performance and are not stuck on party principles and often modify them depending on whom they are addressing.

Once parties began to compete and distinguish themselves based on their performance in government, there was a marked change in the election campaign strategy. Parties are now more concerned about influencing the average voter rather than activating and reinforcing their core supporters (Rohrschneider 2002). Party leaders stress performance and are not stuck on party principles and often modify them depending on whom they are addressing. Consequently, most parties are chasing voters and this strategy gives more heft to negative campaigning, which seeks to primarily discredit the opponent as a valid alternative.

When parties chase voters, the party machinery, especially on the ground, is further side-lined. There is an increasing reliance on professionals and technology for campaign purposes. While the party on the ground is still used for traditional door-to-door campaigns, street corner meetings, and processions and rallies and so on, the actual content and strategy are often dictated by contracted professional agencies. These agencies have an upper hand over the party on the ground because they are contracted and report to the

central leadership. This loss of autonomy, on one hand, weakens party ties and, on the other hand, incentivises entrepreneurial individuals to create their own local bases.

It is now established that most parties prefer candidates who can fund themselves and the party. Election campaigns are expensive, and the probability of winning is tilted in favour of wealthier candidates (Sirkar 2018). Given that ticket distribution is centralised and uncertain, there is an incentive to be in the good books of the centralised party elite. Legislators are therefore expected to continually finance party activities. In the Munugode by-election, for instance, the TRS appointed 14 ministers and 86 members of the assembly MLAs to cover every corner of the constituency. Each of them was reportedly given the target of reaching out to a specific number of voters and holding road shows and meetings and so on, meeting all the campaign expenditure themselves.

It is now possible to summarise certain key features of the political parties in contemporary India. Their organised design has certain distinctive features—a high degree of centralisation, which revolves around a single leader or a leadership elite; a focus on holding public office and winning elections, where voters matter more than supporters; a reliance on professional agencies for campaign advice and strategy; an enhanced use of technology; and a hunger for resources; which is crucially linked to the state and dependent on it. In this organisational set-up, it is the party in public office that sets the priorities and goals for the party. The other two faces, the party in the central office and the party on the ground, have become instruments of the party in government. The shifts of Sattar, K.R. Reddy and many others and the expectations of voters can be understood only if we understand how parties are organised.

Winning elections above all

Our tenets about the working of political parties and our expectations are based on a model of political parties that has been long abandoned by the groupings now seen. The traditional and popular organisational design was the mass party model. In this model, the party on the ground called the shots and the party in public office was supposed to follow them. Today, in most parties the roles have been reversed and it is the party in public office that is in command. While the central office of the party still plays an intermediary role, it is more constrained and tied to the demands of the party in government.

The party in public office has a single goal – win elections and hold office. Everything else is secondary. Organic links between the party and its supporters, members, and legislators are tenuous. Parties are no longer carriers of any grand transformative and programmatic agenda. It is another matter that there is very little space for change in the dominant economic framework of our times. Parties have become vehicles for leadership advancement, and legislators remain in parties for electoral gain. More importantly, parties are no longer tied as much to society as they are linked to the state. Then whom do parties represent and whom are they accountable to?

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