

# POLITICAL PARTIES

## CHAPTER COVERAGE

### ◆ Political Parties

Vehicles of federal sharing of political power

Negotiator of social division

### ◆ Nature and working of political parties.

### ◆ Types of Political Parties

National Political Parties

Regional Political Parties

### ◆ Challenges faced by political parties.

### ◆ Reforms in Political Parties.



## WHY DO WE NEED POLITICAL PARTIES

### Meaning :

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 other. They seek to implement these policies by winning popular support through elections.

Thus parties reflect a fundamental political division of 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 interest it upholds.

**A political party has three components : -**

**(A) the leaders      (B) the active members, and      (C) the followers**

### (i) What does a political party do ?

**(a) 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. In some countries, such as the USA, members and supporters of a party choose its candidates. Now more and more countries are following this methods. In other countries like India, top party leaders choose candidates for contesting in elections.

## ➤ HOW MANY PARTIES SHOULD WE HAVE ?

### (1) One-Party System :

In some countries only one party is allowed to control and run government. These are called one-party system.

In China only the Communist party is allowed to rule. Although, legally speaking, people are free to form political parties, it does not happen because the electoral system does not permit free competition for power. We cannot consider one party system as a good option. Any democratic system must allow at least two parties to compete in elections and provide a fair change for the competing parties to come to power.

## (2) Bi-Party System :

In some countries power usually changes between two main parties. Several other parties may exist, contest elections and win a few seats in the national legislatures. But only the two main parties have a serious chance of winning majority of seats to form government. Such a party system is called two-party system. United Kingdom are examples of two-party system.

## (3) Multi-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 other, we call it a **multiparty system**. Thus in India, we have multi-party system. In this system, the governments is formed by various parties coming together in a coalition. When several parties in a multiparty system join hands 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 alliance 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.

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 :

- (a) 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.
- (b) The same is true of most other democracies as well. Political parties are one of the least trusted institutions all over the world.
- (c) Yes the level of participation in the activities of political parties was fairly high. The proportion of those who said they were members of any political party was higher in India than many advanced countries like Canada, Japan, Spain and South Korea.
- (d) Over the last three decades the proportion of those who report to be members of political parties in India has gone up steadily.
- (e) The proportion of those who say they feel 'close to political party' has also gone up in India in this period.

## ➤ NATIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES

There are some country wide parties, which are called 'national parties'. These parties have their units in various states. But by and large all these units follows the same policies, programmes and strategy that is decided at the national level.

Every party in the country has to register with 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 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. The Election Commission of the proportion of votes and seats that a party must get in order to be a recognised party. A party secures at least 6 per cent of the total votes in an election to the Legislative Assembly of State and wins at least two seats is recognized as State party. A party that secures at least 6 per cent total votes in Lok Sabha elections or Assembly elections in four states and wins at least four seats in the Lok Sabha is recognized as a National Party.

According to this classification, there were six national recognised parties in the country in 2006. Let us learn something about each of these parties.

## (i) National Parties with their Symbols :

### (a) Indian national Congress (INC) :

- (1) Popularly known as the Congress Party.
- (2) One of the oldest parties of the world. Founded in 1885 and has experienced many splits.

- (3) 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.
- (4) 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.
- (5) A centrist party (neither rightist nor leftist) in its ideological orientation, the party espouses secularism and welfare for weaker section and minorities.
- (6) 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.
- (7) Currently leads the ruling United Progressive Alliance coalition government at the Centre.

**(b) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) :**

- (1) Founded in 1980 by reviving the erstwhile Bharatiya Jana Sangh. Wants to build a strong and modern India by drawing inspiration from India ancient culture and values.
- (2) Cultural nationalism (or 'Hindutva') is an important element in its conception of India nationhood and politics, full territorial and political integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India, a common civil code for all people living in the country irrespective of religion, and ban on religious conversions.
- (3) In 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.
- (4) Came to power in 1998, as the leader of the National Democratic Alliance including several state and regional parties.
- (5) Lost elections in 2004 and is the principal opposition party in the Lok Sabha.

**(c) Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) :**

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

**(d) Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) :**

- (1) Founded in 1964.
- (2) Believes in Marxism Leninism. Supports socialism, secularism and democracy and opposes imperialism and communalism. Accepts democratic election as a useful and helpful means for securing the objective of socio-economic justice in India.
- (3) Enjoys strong support in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, especially among the poor, factory workers, farmers, agricultural labourers and intelligentsia.
- (4) 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.
- (5) In 2004 election, it won about 6 per cent of votes and 43 seats in the Lok Sabha.
- (6) Currently supports the UPA government from outside, without joining the government.

**(e) Communist Party of India (CPI) :**

- (1) Formed in 1925, believes in Marxism-Leninism, secularism and democracy.
- (2) 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.
- (3) Became weak after the split in the party in 1964 that led to the formation of CPI (M).
- (4) Significant presence in the states of Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.
- (5) 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.
- (6) Advocates the coming together of all left parties to build a strong left front. Currently supports UPA government from outside.

**(f) Nationalist Congress party (NCP) :**

- (1) Formed in 1999 following a split in the Congress party.
- (2) Espouses democracy, Gandhian secularism, equity, social justice and federalism wants that high offices in government be confined to natural born citizens of the country.
- (3) A major party in Maharashtra and has significant presence in Meghalaya, Manipur and Assam.
- (4) A coalition partner in the state Maharashtra in alliance with the Congress, Since 2004 a member of the United Progressive Alliance.

**➤ STATE PARTIES**

Most of the major parties of the country are classified by the Election Commission as 'State parties'. These are commonly referred to as regional parties. Yet these parties need not be regional in their ideology or outlook. Some of these parties are all-India parties that happen to have succeeded only in some states. Parties like the Samajwadi Party, Samata Party and Rashtriya Janta Dal have national level political organisation with units in several states. Some of these parties like Biju Janata Dal, Sikkim Democratic Front and Mizo National Front are conscious about their state identity.

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 a majority in Lok Sabha. As a result the national parties are compelled to form alliances with state level parties. Since 1996 nearly every one of the state level 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**

- (i) **Lack of internal democracy** within parties. 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 have open list of its members, do not hold its routine organisational meetings, fail to conduct its internal elections regularly and refuse to share information. 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 a few leaders exercise paramount power in the party, those who disagree with 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.
- (ii) **Challenge of Dynastic succession** relates to the first one. Since most political parties do not practice open and transparent procedures for their functioning, there are very few ways for an ordinary worker to rise to the top in a party. Those who happen to be the leaders are in a position of unfair advantage to favour people close to them or even their family members. In many parties, the top positions are always controlled by members of the 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. But its effect is stronger in India and its neighbouring democracies.

- (iii) **The growing role of money and muscle power in parties** especially during elections. 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 given 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.
- (iv) **Very often parties do not seem to offer a meaningful choice** to the voters. 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.

For example, the difference between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party in Britain is very little. They agree on more fundamental aspects but differ only in details on how policies are to be framed and implemented. In our country too, 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. Some times people can not even elect very different leaders either, because the same set of leaders keep shifting from one party to another.

## ➤ **HOW CAN PARTIES BE REFORMED ?**

- (i) **The constitution was amended to prevent elected MLAs and MPs from changing parties.** This was done because many elected representatives were indulging in defection in order to become ministers to for cash rewards. Now 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.
- (ii) **The Supreme Court passed an order to reduce the influence of money and criminals.** Now it is mandatory for every candidate who contests elections to fill 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. As yet we do not know if it has led to decline in the influence of the rich and the criminals.
- (iii) **Hold organisational election and file their income tax return.** The election commission passed an order making it necessary for political parties to hold their organisation elections and file their income tax returns. The parties have started doing so, sometimes only in formality. It is not clear if this step has led to greater internal democracy in political parties.

### ◆ **Some of the suggestions to reform political parties :**

- (i) **A law should be made to regulate the internal affairs of political parties.** It should be made compulsory for political parties to maintain a register of its members, to follow its own constitution , to have an independent authority to act as a judge in case party disputes to hold open elections to the highest post.
- (ii) **Reservation for women :** It should be made mandatory for political parties to give minimum number of tickets, about one-third to women candidates. Similarly there should be quota for women in the decision making bodies of the party.

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.

◆ **Some of the other ways to reform political parties are as under :**

- (i) **People can put pressure on political parties :** This can be done through petitions, publicity and agitations. Ordinary citizens, pressure groups and movements and the media can play an important role in this. If political parties feel that they would lose public support by not taking up reforms, they would become more serious about reforms.
- (ii) **Political parties can improve if those who want this join political parties :** The quality of democracy depends on the degree of public participation. It is difficult to reform politics if ordinary citizens do not take part in it and simply criticise it from outside. The problem of bad politics can be solved by more and better politics.

---

## GLOSSARY

1. **Political Party :** It is a political association or a voluntary group of people who come together to contest elections and hold power in the government.
2. **Election commission :** It is an independent multi-member body which is constituted for the superintendence, direction and conduct of elections.
3. **Partisan :** A person who is strongly committed to a party, group or faction. Partisanship is marked by a tendency to take a side and inability to take a balanced view on an issue.
4. **One party/Mono party :** It means a system in which only one party operates in the political system for various reasons. In this system there is no opposition, e.g. China.
5. **Two party or Bi-party system :** A political system where there are two major parties. In this system power usually changes between two main parties. e.g. U.K. & U.S.A.
6. **Multi Party system :** It is a political system where more than two parties exist and contest elections to come to power.
7. **National Parties :** Parties that are present in only one of the federal units and are country wide Parties known as national parties. These parties have their units in various states.
8. **State or Regional Parties :** The parties that are present in several or all units of the federation known as state or regional parties.
9. **Recognised Political Parties :** The parties which get recognition by the election commission gives election symbols, Privileges and some other special election facilities are known as the recognised political parties.
10. **Leftist Parties :** Parties which are radical, ideological conservative in nature known as Leftist Parties.
11. **Rightist Parties :** Parties which want a status quo and are conservative in nature known as Rightist parties.
12. **Opposition :** The political party or group of parties that form part of a legislature but are not in government. They check the activities of the government.
13. **Defection :** It signifies changing party allegiance from the party on which a person gets elected to a different party. i.e. members change a party for money post etc.
14. **Affidavit :** It is a signed document submitted to an officer, where a person makes a sworn statement regarding his/her personal information.
15. **Ruling Party :** Political party that runs government.