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## Can umbrella parties survive? The decline of the Indian National Congress

Adnan Farooqui<sup>a</sup> and E. Sridharan<sup>b\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India;*

<sup>b</sup>*University of Pennsylvania Institute for the Advanced Study of India, New Delhi, India*

This paper analyses the defeat of the Congress party in the India's 2014 election in which it plummeted to its lowest ever vote share (19 per cent) and seat tally (44 of 543). We argue that the defeat is the end result of a gradual decline punctuated by recoveries that began much earlier. We show that the Congress was gradually becoming less competitive in more and more states and constituencies as indicated by its falling to third position or worse. We try to relate this to the desertion of the party by social groups that once supported it in a number of states and other factors. The larger question is whether a Congress-type, encompassing, umbrella party can survive the sharpened politicisation of social cleavages, in the Indian case, religious, caste and regional cleavages since such a party will tend to lose out to parties based on religious, caste and regional identities in identitarian outbidding.

**Keywords:** umbrella party; party system; social cleavage; competitiveness; decline; India; Congress Party

### Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the decline of the Indian National Congress Party (henceforth Congress Party or Congress) culminating in its catastrophic defeat in the 2014 Indian general election, registering its lowest-ever seat and vote shares. We examine the longer term trends in its gradual decline, punctuated by electoral recoveries, beginning decades earlier, to identify the drivers of decline. We situate our analysis in theories of the relationships between political (including electoral) systems, social cleavages and party systems to pose the question of whether Congress, and more generically, the dominance of a congress-type, encompassing, umbrella party, can survive the politicisation

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\*Corresponding author. Email: [upiasi@del2.vsnl.net.in](mailto:upiasi@del2.vsnl.net.in)

of social cleavages in a heterogeneous society and increasingly federal political system.

### **Political systems, social heterogeneity and party systems**

There are, broadly speaking, two theories of the determinants of party systems – theories that view political systems (electoral rules, federalism, presidentialism) as the key determinants of party systems (the distribution of votes and seats), and theories that view social heterogeneity, or more specifically, the number of salient social cleavages as the key determinants.<sup>1</sup> The best-known political system theory, the electoral rules theory of party systems, postulates that the district magnitude (the number of representatives elected from each electoral district), ballot structure (choosing an individual candidate, party list or a mix of the two), and decision rule or electoral formula to convert votes into seats (proportional representation, simple plurality, variants of each) create varying disproportionalities between votes and seats, and hence, incentives for the coalescing, merging or splitting of political parties which will be reflected in the number, relative weight and ideological positioning of parties, hence, the party system (Lijphart, 1994, pp. 10–21).

For the Indian and other first-past-the-post (single-member district, simple plurality or SMSP) systems, Duverger's law predicts that first-past-the-post systems tend towards two-party systems, a 'law' that applies primarily to the district (constituency) level, which can get translated to the state/province level in a federal system or the national level in a British-type unitary system (Duverger, 1963, 1986).

Another variant of the political systemic theory of party systems is that federalism creates incentives to form state/province-level parties, that is, regional parties, and this is all the more so the greater the powers devolved to the regional level by the system since the fruits of victory at the regional level alone are considerable in terms of being able to make policies on issues which voters care about (Chhibber, 1999; Chhibber & Kollman, 2004, Chapters 2 and 5). The more this is so, the less is the incentive for state-level parties to combine across state boundaries to form a federal party to contest national-level elections (Chhibber, 2005). The alternative of forming coalitions instead of a unified federal party at the national level becomes a viable alternative in the event of no unified federal party getting a majority in parliament (Sridharan, 2012b).

Hence, Duverger's law would predict a two-party system at the national level under parliamentarism if federalism is weak and major policy powers are concentrated at the federal level, or alternatively, if federalism is strong, a range of state-level two-party systems, not necessarily of the same two parties as in the United States but one of multiple bipolarities resulting in a

multi-party system nationally and hence a relatively fragmented parliament. A strong, decentralised federalism would also predict a multi-party system under parliamentarism.

The social cleavages theory of party systems argues that social heterogeneity would tend to produce a multi-party system reflecting that heterogeneity regardless of the electoral system. The classic statement of the social cleavages theory would argue that parties get formed around the salient cleavages in society (what cleavages are salient and why can vary in time and space) (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).<sup>2</sup> For example, in ethno-culturally homogenous industrialised societies, the class cleavage might be the most salient leading to a party system polarised between conservative and socialist/social-democratic/labour parties. Taagepera and Shugart (1989) predict that the number of relevant parties will be one more than the number of salient cleavages. There is an unresolved debate on whether the pull of social heterogeneity will overcome the effects of electoral rules with Taagepera and Shugart (1989) holding that social heterogeneity will mean more effective parties whatever the electoral system while Ordeshook and Shvetsova (1994) hold that Duverger's law will work even under social heterogeneity. What emerges is that while Duverger's law predicts a two-party system, and in a federal system state-level two-party systems leading to a national multi-party system in the case of multiple bipolarities, Duverger's law along with federalism and social heterogeneity logically predicts multi-party systems organised around either regions or social groups such as those based on religion, caste, tribe, class or language.

What is noteworthy is that *none* of the above theories predicts the dominance of an encompassing umbrella party like the Congress, which has ruled India in single-party majority governments from 1947–1989 except for 1977–1979, and since 1989 as either a minority government (1991–1996) or the lead party in a minority coalition, 2004–2014.

### **Congress as an umbrella party**

Where would one place Congress in a comprehensive party typology? Gunther and Diamond (2001) have 'congress parties' as a specific category in their typology. In a fivefold classification – elite, mass-based (ideological/socialist, ideological/nationalist, religious), ethnicity-based (ethnic parties, congress parties), electoralist parties (catch-all, programmatic, personalist), movement parties (left-libertarian, post-industrial extreme right), all these being ideal types, they place congress parties as pluralistic, multi-ethnic parties which are coalitions of distinct ethnic, religious and regional groups that contain conflict through sharing of power and resources among ethnic groups, gain votes through clientelistic loyalties and appeals to national integration, and have

coalitional or federative organisation based on regional elites and local notables. Such a congress-type party can also be described as an umbrella party or an encompassing party, as we do in this paper, spanning cleavages of class, ethnicity (race, caste, religion, language), region and political programme (moderate right, moderate left).

The other nearest type in their schema is the catch-all party that maximises electoral appeal through a broad aggregation of interests but has a weak party organisation, weak civil society linkages and is election-focused (Kirchheimer, 1966). India's Congress in its first two decades, and Malaysia's Barisan Nasional (although this is a stable coalition but not a single party), and Nigeria's People's Democratic Party are described as the archetypes of congress parties. We take the position that the difference between an umbrella party and a catch-all party is that the former is more encompassing and includes contradictory social forces. Thus, the Congress in India includes both big business and the poor, upper castes and Scheduled Castes, as essential components of its support base, whereas a catch-all party is typically a class party in origin which seeks to reach out beyond its traditional base.

Comparatively speaking, the dominance of Congress as a congress-type party in a one-party dominant system in India during its heyday was quite distinct from the dominance of other such parties in various countries in that in countries such as Tanzania, Nigeria, Kenya and Mexico, such dominance came to be associated with authoritarian rule, the only exception being the African National Congress (ANC) in post-apartheid South Africa. In most of these countries, there existed constitutional constraints on the formation as well as functioning of political parties which the ruling parties exploited to maintain their stranglehold. It is only very recently that most of these countries have made a transition from a semi-authoritarian 'hegemonic' party system to democratic one-party dominant system or a multi-party system (SpieB, 2002, p. 7). In Kenya and Tanzania, there existed a constitutionally sanctioned one-party system. This continued right up to 1991 and 1992, respectively, when under sustained popular and political pressure the ruling parties Tanganyika African National Union (TANU)/Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) in the case of Tanzania, and Kenyan African National Union (KANU), accepted the transition to a multi-party system. On the other hand, both in Nigeria in the 4th Republic under the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Mexico under International Revolutionary Party (PRI) the ruling congress-type party maintained its hold either legally through changes to the electoral laws to the disadvantage of opposition parties or through sheer manipulation and deceit. In the case of Nigeria, PDP which came to power in 1999 ruled uninterruptedly right up to 2015 when the party was dislodged by the All Progressive Congress, an alliance of Nigeria's three biggest opposition parties (Aleyomi, 2013). In Mexico, the PRI remained the preeminent party from 1929 to the early

1990s. The PRI's dominance was complete right up to the 1980s, with the divided opposition posing no serious threat. The situation only changed when the opposition parties of the right and the left emerged as serious opposition which eventually led to the party losing its majority in both the houses of the national legislature in 1997. In 2000 after a continuous reign of 71 years, PRI was dislodged from the presidency (Crespo, 2004).

Thus, going by Sartori's category of one-party dominant system, we could argue that Tanzania, Nigeria, Mexico and Kenya have had a dominant-authoritarian party system (Sartori, 2005). This holds true even for countries like Taiwan and Singapore where the principal parties, Kuomintang (KMT), and People's Action Party (PAP) respectively, displayed an authoritarian streak towards the opposition parties. This was distinct from the Malaysian case where the ruling Barisan Nasional is more of an alliance between the dominant party United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and its allies. In all these cases, we see the eventual erosion of umbrella party dominance. This is unlike India and South Africa where the dominance of an umbrella party endured under genuinely democratic conditions and a vibrant multi-party system. Thus, there have been very few durable congress-type parties in full-fledged democracies. How do they emerge and sustain themselves and can they survive the politicisation of social cleavages?

What Gunther and Diamond (2001) do not mention is the historical or path-dependent dimension of the formation of congress parties, particularly India's Congress. It emerged over six decades from 1885 to 1947 as an encompassing party in a very heterogeneous country because of its role as a mass party of the independence movement that sought to unite all Indians against British colonial rule, setting aside all other differences of class, ethnicity, religion, caste, language and region. Forged in this anti-colonial, independence movement context, it acquired its encompassing, multi-ethnic character and federative organisation which was grafted on the provincial structure of British India, and was not challenged by parties based on social cleavages except for the Muslim League which went out of the political arena of independent India due to the Partition of India. Hence, the dominance of Congress after independence for several decades was determined by a *specific colonial-historical trajectory that was quite different from the party system evolution of Western democracies*. Other such dominant umbrella parties have also been the product of either independence movements or revolutions. To an extent, the evolution of Congress can be linked to Lipset and Rokkan's idea of a national revolution.

In the literature on Indian parties and party systems, Kothari (1970, p. 179) has characterised Congress in its heyday, 1947–1967, as an encompassing 'party of consensus' surrounded by smaller and narrower-based 'parties of pressure'. Lijphart (1996) later characterised Congress as a grand coalition of

diverse interests because of which it, and the larger Indian political system in which Congress was hegemonic, conduced to power-sharing (he went so far as to argue that India was a consociational democracy) and hence, to the consolidation of democracy despite inconducive features such as social heterogeneity and poverty.

Chhibber and Petrocik (1990) argued that Congress was not an umbrella party at the state level; at that level, it was based on local social cleavages and particular social groups, varying state by state. Rather it was somewhat like the Democratic Party in the United States in that it was like a coalition of state-based parties that aggregated themselves into one party nationally to compete for the prize of national power. This was supported by later findings in the 1990s that the Congress' base by caste and class differed across states depending on whether it faced the right-wing Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Left parties as its principal competitor (Heath & Yadav, 1999; Yadav, 2003). However, aggregated nationally it fits the concept of a congress-type, encompassing umbrella party.

### **The evolution of the party system and the rise of competition for Congress**

To understand the decline of Congress, we need to trace the evolution of the Indian party system through three major phases, 1947–1967, 1967–1989 and 1989–2014. Duvergerian dynamics played themselves out in state after state over 1967–1989, continuing after 1989 (Chhibber & Murali, 2006; Sridharan, 2002 for detailed accounts), for both Lok Sabha and state assembly elections, leading to either a two-party system, or one party versus a coalition, or a two-coalition system, that is, bipolar party systems with the non-Congress opposition consolidating behind a particular party in each state (with exceptions like Uttar Pradesh). However, this was one of multiple bipolarities – for example, Congress–Jana Sangh (precursor of BJP) in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Delhi; Congress–Left in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura; Congress versus a regional party in Tamil Nadu (after 1972, two regional parties were the top two parties), Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and from the 1980s, Andhra Pradesh and Assam; Congress versus fragments of the Janata Party in Haryana, Karnataka and Odisha. What this implied was the possibility, in the event of an anti-Congress wave across states, of the victory of a motley collection of regional and other parties, which was what happened in 1989.

The fragmentation of the party system in the third (1989–2014) phase in particular reflects three mega-trends: the decline of Congress, the rise of BJP, and the rise and stable presence of regional parties. The net result of these Duvergerian dynamics was the bipolarisation of state party systems, but one

of multiple bipolarities, leading to a fragmented Lok Sabha in which no single party obtained a majority in the seven consecutive elections from 1989 to 2009 until the BJP's narrow majority in 2014.

### **The erosion of Congress competitiveness**

To put Congress' lowest-ever vote and seat shares of 2014 in some historical perspective, let us focus on some facts about the decline of Congress, nationally, state- and constituency-wise.

#### ***Loss of national vote share***

Congress decline is the other side of the coin of the rise of other parties in the period since 1967, especially since 1989. The basic facts are as follows.<sup>3</sup> While the Congress suffered two setbacks in 1967 (when it slid to 40 per cent and a bare majority, losing power in 8 of the then 16 major states), and in 1977 when it lost power for the first time to the Janata Party (the unified opposition), it was able to recover both times with big victories in 1971, 1980 and 1984 (Tables 1 and 2).

While up to the 1984 election, Congress won majorities on the basis of pluralities of over 40 per cent of the vote, in 1989 it fell a fraction below 40 per cent for the first time (except for 1977) and since then declined further to as low as 25.8 per cent in 1998 recovering slightly in the next three elections but remaining under 30 per cent (Table 1). Compared to a majority mark of 273 seats it crossed 200 only twice (in 1991 and 2009) in the eight elections over 1989–2014, losing its status as the single largest party in 1996, 1998 and 1999 despite a slightly higher vote share than the BJP due to the concentration of the BJP's votes in a smaller number of constituencies, mostly in north, central and western India. The space vacated by Congress has been filled by BJP and a range of non-Left regional parties (the Left has remained relatively stagnant), with the non-Congress, non-BJP space being in the 44–53 per cent range over 1989–2014 though divided among a large number of parties. Post-1996, Congress remained below 30 per cent in vote share, the overall slide being from almost 40 per cent to 19 per cent over 1989–2014.

#### ***Competitiveness in states for general elections***

Given the Duvergerian dynamics that have been operating at the constituency and state levels from over 1967–1989 and since then, a party can be considered competitive in an SMS system with bipolarised state party systems, that is, having a serious chance of winning and forming a government singly or in coalition if it is in the first or second position in vote share. If it is in the



Table 1. Performance of Indian National Congress 1967–1984.

State/Union Territory	1967						1971					1977					1980					1984								
	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	CP third or worse	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	CP third or worse	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	CP third or worse	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	CP third or worse	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	CP third or worse
Andhra Pradesh	41	41	35	46.82	1	0	41	37	28	55.73	1	0	42	42	41	57.36	1	0	42	42	41	56.24	1	0	42	42	6	40.81	2	0
Arunachal Pradesh													2	2	1	41.25	1	0	2	2	2	44.13	1	0	2	2	2	43.22	1	0
Assam	14	14	10	45.84	1	0	14	13	13	56.98	1	0	14	14	10	50.56	1	0	14	2	2	51.01	1	0	14	13	4	23.43	1	4
Bihar	53	53	34	34.81	1	0	53	47	39	40.6	1	1	54	54	0	22.90	1	5	54	54	30	36.44	1	7	54	54	48	51.84	1	1
Goa, Daman & Diu	2	1	0	5.47	3	1	2	1	1	24.76	1	0	2	2	1	39.98	1	0	2	1	0	12.19	3	0	2	2	2	46.21	1	0
Gujarat	24	24	11	46.92	1	0	24	23	11	44.85	1	0	26	26	10	46.92	2	0	26	26	25	54.84	1	0	26	26	24	53.24	1	0
Haryana	9	9	7	44.06	1	0	9	9	7	52.56	1	0	10	9	0	17.95	2	1	10	10	5	32.55	1	2	10	10	10	54.95	1	0
Himachal Pradesh	6	6	6	48.35	1	0	4	4	4	75.79	1	0	4	4	0	38.58	2	0	4	4	4	52.08	1	0	4	4	4	67.58	1	0
Jammu & Kashmir	6	6	5	50.52	1	0	6	6	5	54.06	1	0	6	3	3	16.37	2	0	6	1	1	18.68	1	0	6	4	3	30.23	2	0
Mysore/Karnataka	27	27	18	49.02	1	0	27	27	27	70.87	1	0	28	28	26	56.80	1	0	28	28	27	56.25	1	0	28	28	24	51.63	1	0
Kerala	19	19	1	36.15	1	1	19	7	6	19.75	2	0	20	11	11	29.13	1	0	20	11	5	26.32	1	0	20	13	13	33.27	1	0
Madhya Pradesh	37	37	24	40.78	1	0	37	36	21	45.60	1	0	40	38	1	32.47	2	0	40	39	35	47.20	1	0	40	40	40	57.08	1	0
Maharashtra	45	45	37	48.51	1	0	45	44	42	63.80	1	0	48	47	20	47.02	1	0	48	48	39	53.30	1	0	48	47	43	51.24	1	1
Manipur	2	2	0	32.68	1	0	2	2	2	30.02	1	0	2	2	2	45.31	1	0	2	2	1	22.99	1	0	2	2	2	34.95	1	0
Meghalaya													2	2	1	35.92	1	0	2	1	1	74.31	1	0	2	2	2	62.42	1	0
Mizoram													1	1	0	37.07	1	0	1	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC					
Nagaland	1	0	0	0	–		1	0	0	0	–		1	1	0	48.32	2	0	1	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	1	1	1	64.64	1	0
Orissa	20	20	6	33.33	1	0	20	19	15	38.46	1	0	21	20	4	38.18	2	0	21	21	20	56.07	1	0	21	21	20	57.46	1	1
Punjab	13	13	9	37.31	1	0	13	11	10	45.96	1	0	13	13	0	34.85	2	0	13	13	12	52.45	1	0	13	13	6	41.53	1	0
Rajasthan	23	22	10	39.95	1	0	23	23	14	50.35	1	0	25	25	1	30.65	2	0	25	25	18	42.64	1	2	25	25	25	52.72	1	0
Sikkim													1	1	1	Single Contestant	1	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	1	1	0	25.84	1	0

Madras/Tamil Nadu	39	39	3	41.69	1	0	39	9	9	12.51	3	0	39	15	14	22.27	2	0	39	22	20	31.62	1	0	39	26	25	40.5	1	0
Tripura	2	2	2	58.25	1	0	2	2	0	36.30	2	0	2	2	1	39.74	1	0	2	2	0	22.61	2	1	2	2	0	45.61	1	0
Uttar Pradesh	85	85	47	33.44	1	6	85	78	73	48.54	1	0	85	85	0	24.99	2	0	85	85	51	35.90	1	9	85	85	83	53.03	1	0
West Bengal	40	40	14	39.69	1	1	40	31	13	28.20	2	0	42	34	3	29.37	3	0	42	41	4	36.51	2	0	42	42	16	48.16	1	0
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	1	1	1	52.57	1	0	1	1	1	61.48	1	0	1	1	1	58.45	1	0	1	1	1	53.2	1	0	1	1	1	52.85	1	0
Chandigarh	1	1	0	23.04	1	0	1	1	1	66.85	1	0	1	1	0	28.37	2	0	1	1	1	49.65	1	0	1	1	1	66.02	1	0
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1	1	1	50.14	1	0	1	1	1	39.17	1	0	1	1	1	46.93	1	0	1	1	1	61.89	1	0	1	1	0	40.31	1	0
NCT of Delhi	7	7	1	38.79	2	0	7	7	7	39.17	1	0	7	7	0	30.15	2	0	7	7	6	50.40	1	0	7	7	7	68.72	1	0
Lakshadweep	1	NC	NC	NC	NC	NC	1	1	1	Single	0	0	1	1	1	58.59	1	0	1	1	0	3.85	3	1	1	1	1	54.47	1	0
Puducherry	1	1	1	39.83	1	0	1	1	1	66.27	1	0	1	NC	NC	NC	NC	0	1	1	1	66.45	1	0	1	1	1	58.86	1	0
Total	520	516	283	40.78	1	9	518	441	352	43.68	1	1	542	492	154	34.52	2	6	542	492	353	42.69	1	22	541	517	414	49	1	7

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Report of Lok Sabha Elections, 1967–1984.

TS, total number of seats; SC, seats contested; SW, seats won; VS, vote share; PV, position by vote share; CP, constituency position; NC, not contested.

Table 2. Performance of Indian National Congress 1989–2014.

State/Union Territory	1989					1991					1996					1998					1999					2004					2009					2014					
	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	TS	SC	SW	VS%	PV	
Andhra Pradesh	42	42	39	51	1	42	42	25	46	1	42	42	22	40	1	42	42	22	39	1	42	42	5	43	1	42	34	29	42	1	42	42	33	39	1	42	41	2	12	3	
Arunachal Pradesh	2	2	2	50	1	2	2	2	69	1	2	2	0	29	2	2	2	0	24	2	2	2	2	57	1	2	1	0	10	3	2	2	2	51	1	2	2	1	42	2	
Assam	–	–	–	–	–	14	14	8	29	1	14	14	5	32	1	14	13	10	39	1	14	14	10	38	1	14	14	9	35	1	14	14	7	35	2	14	13	3	30	2	
Bihar	54	54	4	28	2	54	51	1	24	2	54	54	2	13	4	54	21	5	7	5	54	16	4	9	4	40	4	3	5	5	40	37	2	10	4	40	12	2	9	3	
Goa	2	2	1	47	1	2	2	2	58	1	2	2	0	35	1	2	2	2	32	1	2	2	0	39	2	2	1	1	30	2	2	2	2	0	37	2					
Gujarat	26	26	3	37	1	26	16	5	29	2	26	26	10	39	2	26	25	7	37	2	26	26	6	45	2	26	25	12	44	1	26	26	11	43	2	26	25	0	34	2	
Haryana	10	10	4	46	1	10	10	9	37	1	10	10	2	23	1	10	10	3	26	1	10	10	0	35	1	10	10	9	42	1	10	10	1	23	3						
Himachal Pradesh	4	4	1	42	2	4	4	2	46	1	4	4	4	54	1	4	4	1	42	2	4	4	0	40	2	4	4	3	52	1	4	4	1	46	2	4	4	0	41	2	
Jammu & Kashmir	6	3	2	39	1	–	–	–	–	–	6	6	4	28	1	6	6	1	19	3	6	5	0	18	2	6	3	2	28	1	6	3	2	25	1	6	3	0	23	2	
Karnataka	28	28	27	49	1	28	28	23	42	1	28	28	5	31	2	28	28	9	36	1	28	28	18	45	1	28	28	8	37	1	28	28	6	38	2	28	28	9	41	2	
Kerala	20	17	14	42	1	20	16	13	39	1	20	17	7	38	1	20	17	8	39	1	20	17	8	39	1	20	17	0	32	1	20	17	13	40	1	20	15	8	32	1	
Madhya Pradesh	40	40	8	38	2	40	40	27	45	1	40	40	8	31	2	40	40	10	39	2	40	40	11	44	2	29	29	4	34	2	29	28	12	40	2	29	29	2	35	2	
Maharashtra	48	48	28	45	1	48	48	38	48	1	48	48	15	35	1	48	41	33	44	1	48	42	10	30	1	48	26	13	24	1	48	27	17	20	1	48	26	2	18	3	
Manipur	2	2	2	45	1	2	2	1	38	1	2	2	2	40	1	2	2	0	19	2	2	2	0	25	1	2	1	1	15	2	2	2	2	43	1	2	2	2	42	1	
Meghalaya	2	2	2	55	1	2	2	2	57	1	2	2	1	54	1	2	2	2	48	1	2	2	1	33	1	2	2	1	46	1	2	2	1	45	1	2	2	1	39	1	
Mizoram	1	1	1	49	1	1	1	1	38	1	1	1	1	43	1	1	1	0	35	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	66	1	1	1	1	49	1						
Nagaland	1	1	1	60	1	1	1	0	44	1	1	1	1	62	1	1	1	1	87	1	1	1	1	71	1	1	1	0	26	2	1	1	0	30	2						
Orissa	21	21	3	38	2	21	21	13	44	1	21	21	16	45	1	21	21	5	41	1	21	20	2	37	1	21	21	2	40	1	21	21	6	33	2	21	21	0	21	2	
Punjab	13	13	2	37	2	13	13	12	49	1	13	13	2	35	1	13	8	0	26	2	13	11	8	38	1	13	11	2	34	1	13	13	8	45	1	13	13	3	33	1	
Rajasthan	25	25	0	27	1	25	25	13	44	2	25	25	12	41	2	25	25	18	45	1	25	25	9	45	2	25	25	4	41	2	25	25	20	48	1	25	25	0	31	2	
Sikkim	1	1	0	22	2	1	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	4	1	1	0	33	2	1	1	0	5	3	1	1	0	27	2	1	1	0	25	5					
Tamil Nadu	39	28	27	40	1	39	28	28	43	1	39	29	0	18	3	39	35	0	5	7	39	11	2	11	3	39	10	10	14	3	39	15	8	15	3	39	39	0	4	6	
Tripura	2	2	2	56	1	2	2	2	83	1	2	2	0	34	2	2	2	0	42	2	2	2	0	14	2	2	2	0	30.8	2	2	2	2	0	15	2					
Uttar Pradesh	85	84	15	32	2	85	80	5	18	3	85	85	5	8	4	85	76	0	6	4	85	76	10	15	4	80	73	9	12	4	80	69	21	18	3	80	67	2	8	4	
West Bengal	42	41	4	39	1	42	39	5	35	2	42	42	9	40	1	42	39	1	15	3	42	41	3	13	3	42	37	6	15	3	42	13	6	14	3	42	42	4	10	4	
Chhattisgarh	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	11	11	1	40	2	11	11	1	37	2	11	11	1	20	2	
Jharkhand	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	14	9	6	24	2	14	9	1	15	2	14	9	0	14	3	
Uttarakhand	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	5	5	1	38	2	5	5	5	43	1	5	5	0	34	1	
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	1	1	1	47	1	1	1	1	51	1	1	1	1	58	1	1	1	1	36	1	1	1	0	43	1	1	1	1	56	1	1	1	1	0	43	2TaT	1	1	0	44	2
Chandigarh	1	1	0	40	2	1	1	1	36	1	1	1	0	30	2	1	1	0	39	2	1	1	1	47	1	1	1	1	52	1	1	1	1	47	1	1	1	1	0	27	2

Dadra & Nagar Haveli	1	1	0	29	2	1	1	1	62	1	1	1	1	56	1	1	1	0	4	3	1	1	0	15	4	1	1	0	26	2	1	1	0	46	2	1	1	0	45	2	
Daman & Diu	1	1	0	38	1	1	1	0	22	2	1	1	1	51	1	1	1	0	2	3	1	1	1	50	1	1	1	1	50	1	1	1	0	29	2	1	1	0	44	2	
NCT of Delhi	7	7	2	43	1	7	7	2	40	2	7	7	2	37	2	7	7	1	43	2	7	7	0	42	2	7	7	6	55	1	7	7	7	57	1	7	7	0	15	3	
Lakshadweep	1	1	1	52	1	1	1	1	51	1	1	1	1	52	1	1	1	1	54	1	1	1	0	48	2	1	1	1	52	1	1	1	1	52	1	1	1	0	47	2	
Puducherry	1	1	1	50	1	1	1	1	54	1	1	1	1	40	1	1	1	0	32	1	1	1	1	37	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	49	1	1	1	0	27	2
Total	529	510	197	40	1	537	500	244	36	1	543	529	140	29	1	543	477	141	26	1	543	453	114	28	1	543	417	145	27	1	543	440	206	29	1	543	464	44	19	2	

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Report of Lok Sabha Elections, 1989–2014.

TS, total number of seats; SC, seats contested; SW, seats won; VS, vote share; PV, position by vote share.

third or worse rank then it becomes *significantly* more difficult to win, although there have been exceptions such as seven cases, since 1989, of the BJP's rise from a third or worse position to top position by vote share, of which five were in the 2014 election (Uttar Pradesh 1991 and 2014, Goa 1998, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Maharashtra, 2014). Hence, we define *being competitive as being in one of the top two positions by vote share*. Looking at Congress decline in terms of competitiveness at the state and constituency level yields a more fleshed-out picture.

While in elections from 1967 to 1984, Congress slipped to third or worse in only three states for one election each, overwhelmingly retaining second place even where it lost, by contrast, in the post-1989 period Congress has slipped to third or worse position in four major states – U.P., Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu – that total 201 seats or 37 per cent of the seats in the Lok Sabha (Tables 1 and 2) for several elections. In the largest state of U.P., from second position in vote share in 1989, it fell to third in 1991, fourth in 1996 and remained at that except for a recovery to third place in 2009 (second in seats). In Bihar, it slipped from second in 1991 to fourth or worse from 1996. In Tamil Nadu, it slipped from first place (due to the then seat-sharing alliances) in 1991 to third in 1996 and remained at that or worse through to 2014. In West Bengal, following the breaking away of the Trinamul Congress in 1997, Congress slipped to third place in 1998 and finally to fourth in 2014.

In the debacle of 2014, Congress slipped to third or worse position in as many as ten states (including the Union Territory of Delhi), that is, in addition to the four major states above, in Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Sikkim and Delhi, thus becoming uncompetitive in states that totalled 320 seats, or a majority of 59 per cent of Lok Sabha seats!

### ***Competitiveness in state assembly elections***

The pattern is roughly paralleled in Congress performance in state assembly elections (Table 3). In vote shares in state assemblies (held in varying years, mostly not coincident with Lok Sabha elections), Congress had become uncompetitive (third or worse) by the latest assembly elections in as many as nine states including Delhi. Even in states where it remained among the top two in vote share, it lagged behind the leading party or coalition and has not been in power in some states for many years – Gujarat since 1995, Odisha since 1999, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh since 2003, Punjab since 2007, to name major states.

Palshikar (2015, Table 5) divides the states into three categories – Congress states (Delhi, Haryana, Maharashtra, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Mizoram), Congress-presence states (Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh,

Table 3. Congress performance in the state assembly elections (1989–2014).

State/Union Territory	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV
Andhra Pradesh			1989						1994						1999						2004						2009						2014			
Arunachal Pradesh	294	287	181	1	47	1	294	294	26	2	34	2	294	293	91	2	41	2	294	234	185	1	39	1	294	294	156	1	37	1	175	173	0	0	3	3
Assam	60	59	37	1	44	1	60	60	43	1	51	1	60	60	53	1	52	1	60	60	34	1	44	1	60	60	42	1	52	1	60	60	42	1	50	1
Bihar	126	125	66	1	29	1	122	122	34	2	31	1	126	126	71	1	40	1	126	120	53	2	31	1	126	126	78	1	39	1						
Goa	324	323	71	2	25	2	324	320	29	3	16	2	324	324	23	4	11	3	243	84	10	4	5	4	243	51	9	5	6	5	243	243	20	4	8	4
Gujarat	40	40	20	1	41	1	40	40	18	1	38	1	40	40	21	1	39	1	40	40	16	2	38	1	40	32	16	1	32	1	40	33	9	2	31	2
Haryana	182	181	33	3	31	1	182	181	45	2	33	2	182	179	53	2	35	2	182	180	51	2	39	2	182	173	59	2	38	2	182	176	61	2	39	2
Himachal Pradesh	90	90	51	1	34	1	90	90	9	4	21	4	90	90	21	2	31	1	90	90	67	1	43	1	90	90	40	1	35	1	90	90	15	3	21	3
Jammu & Kashmir	67	66	9	3	37	2	68	67	52	1	49	1	68	68	31	*	43	1	68	68	43	1	41	1	68	67	23	2	39	2	68	68	36	1	43	1
Karnataka	87	84	7	3	20	2	87	78	20	2	24	2	87	78	17	3	17	3																		
Kerala	224	221	178	1	44	1	224	221	34	3	27	2	224	222	132	1	41	1	224	224	65	2	36	1	224	222	80	2	35	1	224	224	122	1	37	1
Madhya Pradesh	140	91	55	1	32	1	140	94	37	2	30	1	140	88	62	1	31	1	140	77	24	2	24	2	140	81	38	2	26	2						
Maharashtra	320	318	56	2	33	2	320	318	174	1	41	1	320	316	172	1	41	1	230	229	38	2	32	2	230	228	71	2	33	2	230	229	58	2	36	2
Manipur	288	276	141	1	38	1	288	286	80	1	31	1	288	249	75	1	27	1	288	157	69	1	21	1	288	170	82	1	21	1	288	287	42	3	18	3
Meghalaya	54	54	24	1	34	1	60	60	22	1	29	1	60	47	11	2	18	1	60	58	20	1	26	1	60	59	30	1	34	1	60	60	42	1	42	1
Mizoram	60	60	24	1	35	1	60	59	25	1	35	1	60	60	22	1	30	1	60	60	25	1	33	1	60	60	29	1	35	1						
Nagaland	40	34	23	1	35	1	40	28	16	1	33	2	40	40	6	2	30	1	40	40	12	2	30	2	40	40	32	1	39	1	40	40	34	1	45	1
	60	60	36	1	52	1	60	59	35	1	46	1	60	60	53	1	51	1	60	60	21	1	36	1	60	60	23	2	36	1	60	56	8	2	25	2

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

State/Union Territory	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV	TS	SC	SW	PS	VS	PV													
Orissa	147	145	10	2	30	2	147	146	1990	80	1	39	1	147	145	26	2	34	1	147	133	2000	38	2	35	1	147	146	27	2	29	2	147	147	2009	16	2	26	2										
Punjab	117	116	87	1	44	1	117	105	1992	14	3	26	2	117	105	62	1	36	1	116	116	2002	44	2	41	1	117	117	46	2	40	2	2007	2012															
Rajasthan	200	200	50	2	34	2	199	199	1990	76	2	38	2	200	200	153	1	45	1	200	200	1993	56	2	36	2	200	200	96	1	37	1	200	200	2008	2013													
Sikkim	32	31	0	18	2	32	32	31	1989	2	3	15	3	32	31	0	0	4	3	32	28	1994	1	2	26	2	32	32	0	0	28	2	32	32	0	0	1	3	2009	2014									
Tamil Nadu	234	214	26	3	20	3	234	65	1989	60	2	15	3	234	64	0	0	6	4	234	14	1991	7	5	3	7	234	48	34	3	8	3	234	63	5	5	9	3	2006	2011									
Tripura	60	46	10	2	33	2	60	45	1993	13	2	33	2	60	42	13	2	33	2	60	48	2003	10	2	36	2	60	48	10	2	37	2	2008																
Uttar Pradesh	425	410	94	2	28	2	419	413	1989	46	3	17	3	422	421	28	4	15	3	424	126	1991	33	4	8	4	403	402	25	4	9	4	403	393	22	4	9	4	403	355	28	4	12	4					
West Bengal	294	284	43	2	35	2	294	288	1991	82	2	40	1	294	60	26	3	8	3	294	262	1996	21	3	15	3	294	66	42	2	9	3	2001	2006															
Chhattisgarh	90	90	37	2	37	2	90	87	2003	38	2	40	2	90	90	39	2	40	2			2013																											
Jharkhand	81	41	9	3	12	3	81	61	2005	14	3	16	2									2009																											
Uttarakhand	70	70	36	1	27	1	69	69	2002	21	2	30	2	70	70	32	1	34	1			2007																											
NCT of Delhi	70	70	14	2	35	2	70	70	1993	52	1	48	1	70	70	47	1	48	1	70	70	2003	43	1	40	1	70	70	8	3	25	3	2008	2013															
Puducherry	30	17	11	1	25	1	30	19	1990	15	1	30	1	30	20	9	1	25	1	30	21	1991	11	*	23	1	30	16	10	1	30	1	30	17	7	2	27	2	2006	2011									
Telangana	119	113	21	2	25	2			2014																																								

Source: Election Commission of India.

TS, total number of seats; SC, seats contested; SW, seats won; PS, party position by seats won; VS, vote share; PV, party position by vote share.

Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Tripura, Nagaland, J&K) and non-Congress states (Tamil Nadu, U.P., Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Sikkim). Of the Congress states, Delhi, Haryana and Maharashtra could be considered to have moved to the Congress-presence category. We notice that non-Congress states add up to 216 Lok Sabha seats. If to this we add Congress-presence states in which Congress has not been in power for over a dozen years (Gujarat, Odisha, M.P., Chhattisgarh) we get a total of 303 seats, that is, Congress has become uncompetitive by this broader measure in states adding up to a substantial majority of seats.

### ***Competitiveness at the Lok Sabha constituency level***

From 1967 to 1984, Congress was third or worse in only as few as 45 constituencies over five elections, of which 22 were in 1980 (Table 1) but since 1989 has greatly declined from 28 constituencies in 1989 to 169 in 1998, recovering to only 84 in 2009, to 194 in 2014 marking a sharp erosion and pointing to a sharp contrast between the two periods (Table 4).

Looking at the situation since the elections of the 1990s (Table 5), despite recoveries in 2004 and 2009, Congress has not won 95 constituencies since 1989, another 17 since 1991, another 27 since 1996, another 11 since 1998 and another 7 since 1999 to mention only long-standing (since the end of the 1990s) lack of competitiveness.

Other than these constituencies there have been as many as 34 that Congress has won only once since 1989, eight only once since 1991, 19 only once since 1996, 10 only once since 1998 and six only once since 1999, indicating a long-term erosion of competitiveness in the post-1989 period (Table 6).

Part of this lack of competitiveness at the constituency level is because of slippage of support in the four major states mentioned above, part of it is due to splits in the party in West Bengal since 1997 and Maharashtra since 1999, followed most recently by Andhra Pradesh since 2012, all states which were Congress strongholds, and part of it due to decisions to hand over seats to allies like in Tamil Nadu and Bihar since the 1990s, later in Maharashtra and West Bengal, also an indication of lack of competitiveness and a process of ceding ground (Table 7).

Congress has lost competitiveness in constituencies even outside the four major states; Bihar, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh; in which it has been decimated over the past quarter-century. In states other than these four, the Congress party had fallen to third or worse position in 4 constituencies in 1989, 5 in 1991, 30 in 1996, 22 in 1998, 24 in 1999, 13 in 2004, 13 in 2009, and 60 in 2014. In 22 (of the total of 95) constituencies, other than in the above mentioned four major states, party has not won since 1989.



Table 4. Number of seats where Indian National Congress constituency position has been third or worse (1989–2014).

State/Union Territory	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014
Andhra Pradesh	1	1	2	5	1		1	27
Arunachal Pradesh				1				
Assam		1	2	1	1	2	2	2
Bihar	16	23	42	8	4		33	2
Goa								
Gujarat			2	1				
Haryana			2	2			1	4
Himachal Pradesh								
Jammu & Kashmir				3	4	1		1
Karnataka			7	2		2	3	
Kerala								
Madhya Pradesh	2		6	3		3		1
Maharashtra		2	6		13		1	
Manipur				2	1			
Meghalaya								
Mizoram								
Nagaland								
Orissa						1	1	10
Punjab	2		1	1				2
Rajasthan			2	1			2	3
Sikkim					1			1
Tamil Nadu			3	35	1			38
Tripura					2	1		
Uttar Pradesh	7	54	77	70	58	58	37	58
West Bengal				33	35	29	1	36
Chhattisgarh								
Jharkhand						2	2	2
Uttarakhand						1		
Andaman & Nicobar Islands								
Chandigarh								
Dadra & Nagar Haveli				1	1			
Daman & Diu		1						
NCT of Delhi								7
Lakshadweep								
Puducherry								
Total	28	82	152	169	122	100	84	194

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Report of Lok Sabha Elections, 1989–2014. CP, constituency position.

### *Partial recoveries in 2004 and 2009*

However, the decline of Congress has not been linear. Before the debacle of 2014, there were two important recoveries. The Congress won the 2004

Table 5. Number of seats where the INC has not won since years 1989–1999.

State/Union Territory	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999
Andhra Pradesh	1	1			
Arunachal Pradesh					
Assam		1			
Bihar	22	1			
Goa	-				
Gujarat	3			1	
Haryana					
Himachal Pradesh					
Jammu & Kashmir					
Karnataka		2		2	
Kerala	2				
Madhya Pradesh	5		2	1	
Maharashtra	2		3	1	6
Manipur					
Meghalaya					1
Mizoram					
Nagaland					
Orissa	1		1	4	
Punjab	1				
Rajasthan	1				
Sikkim			1		
Tamil Nadu	5		14		
Tripura			2		
Uttar Pradesh	32		2		
West Bengal	14	12			
Chhattisgarh			2	1	
Jharkhand	5				
Uttarakhand	1				
Andaman & Nicobar Islands					
Chandigarh					
Dadra & Nagar Haveli				1	
Daman & Diu					
NCT of Delhi					
Lakshadweep					
Puducherry					
Total	95	17	27	11	7

Source: Authors own calculations based on Statistical Report of Lok Sabha Elections 1989–2014.

elections in coalition, with 27 per cent votes and 145 seats, and won again, in coalition, improving its performance in 2009 with 28.6 per cent votes and 206 seats, and was in power for 10 years, 2004–2014. These recoveries were on top of an improvement of vote share from 25.8 per cent in 1998 to 28.2 per cent in 1999 (though accompanied by a loss of seats). These recoveries also need explanation as part of the longer term evolution of Congress.

Table 6. Number of seats won by the INC only once since years 1989–1999.

State/Union Territory	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999
Andhra Pradesh			5£	1©	1h
Arunachal Pradesh					
Assam					
Bihar	2×				
Goa					
Gujarat	4€				1.
Haryana		1∞			
Himachal Pradesh					
Jammu & Kashmir				1□	
Karnataka			7μ		
Kerala				2°	
Madhya Pradesh	6#				
Maharashtra	3+		1π		3η
Manipur					
Meghalaya					
Mizoram					
Nagaland					
Orissa	1\$			4»	
Punjab				1æ	
Rajasthan					
Sikkim					
Tamil Nadu			4±		
Tripura					
Uttar Pradesh	12^				
West Bengal		4Σ			
Chhattisgarh				1ğ	
Jharkhand	5@		2ē		
Uttarakhand	1!	3α			
Andaman & Nicobar Islands					1t
Chandigarh					
Dadra & Nagar Haveli					
Daman & Diu					
NCT of Delhi					
Lakshadweep					
Puducherry					
Total	34	8	19	10	6

Source: Authors own calculations based on Statistical Report of Lok Sabha Elections 1989–2014. Notes: ×Nawada was won again in 2004; €Rajkot, Porbandar and Junagadh were won again in 2009, and Amreli in 2004; #Ujjain, Mandsaur and Hoshangabad were won again in 2004, Rewa, Indore and Khajuraho in 1999; †Parbhani was won in 1998, Aurangabad in 1999 and Mumbai South Central in 2009; §Jajpur was won again in 1998; ^Aligarh, Mathura and Varanasi were won in 2004, Bareilly, Unnao, Sultanpur, Barabanki, Faizabad, Bahraich and Mahajganj were won again in 2009, Muzaffarnagar and Meerut were won in 1999; @Dhanbad, Singhbhum, Khunti and Lohardarga were won in 2004, Kodarma in 1999; †Garhwal was won in 1989; Warangal, ∞Hisar was won again in 2004; ΣHowrah, Srerampur and Tamluk were won again in 1996, Purulia in 2004; °Tehri Garhwal, Almora and Hardwar were won again in 2009; †Warangal, Srikakulam, Anakpali, Chittoor and Karimnagar were won in 2009; †Belgaum, Bagalkot, Shimoga, Hasan and Bangalore North were won again in 1999, Davnagere was won in 1998 and Chamrajnagar in 2009; †Satara was one again in 1998; ±Nilgiris and Thenkasi were won again in 2004, Tiruchirappalli and Cuddalore in 2009; †Rajnandgaon and Raigarh were won in 1998; ©Mahbubnagar was won in 2004; †Ladakh was won again in 2009; †Iduki was won in 2009 and Kotayam in 1999; †Balasore and Sundargarh were won again in 2009, Sambalpur in 2004 and Dhenkanal in 1999; †Gurdaspur was won again in 2009; †Sarguja was won in 1999; †Guntur was won again in 2004; †Chota Udaipur was won again in 2004; †Dhule was won again in 2004 and Ramtek in 2009; †Andaman and Nicobar Islands were won again in 2004.

Table 7. Ceding ground: congress allies since 1991.

Year	Allies
1989	Kerala Congress (M), Indian Union Muslim League
1991	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Indian Union Muslim League, Kerala Congress (M)
1996	Kerala Congress (M), Indian Union Muslim League
1998	Kerala Congress (M), Indian Union Muslim League
1999	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Indian Union Muslim League, Kerala Congress (M), Rashtriya Janata Dal
2004	Nationalist Congress Party, Indian Union Muslim League, Pattali Makkal Katchi, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Telangana Rashtra Samiti, Lok Janshakti Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Jammu and Kashmir Peoples Democratic Party, Kerala Congress (M), Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
2009	Nationalist Congress Party, Indian Union Muslim League, Kerala Congress (M), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, All India Trinamool Congress, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Bodo People's Front, All India Majlis-e-Ittihadul Muslimeen.
2014	Bodo People's Front, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Nationalist Congress Party, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Indian Union Muslim League, Socialist Janata Dal (Democratic), Revolutionary Socialist Party, Kerala Congress (Mani), People's Party of Punjab, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Mahan Dal.

Source: Authors' own compilation from news reports.

It has been argued that the best explanation for the Congress', and its UPA coalition's very narrow victory (UPA won a fraction of a percentage point more than the BJP-led NDA) in 2004 was that the Congress recognised its weakness in many states and went in for a pre-electoral coalition (Table 7) while the BJP went alone without a coalition in several states (Sridharan, 2004; Wilkinson, 2005; Yadav, 2004). In other words, it was a victory which in some ways was an admission of weakness (Wilkinson, 2005). Likewise, the Congress and UPA victory in 2009 owed more to *fortuna* (luck) than to *virtu* (prowess) according to Yadav and Palshikar (2009), a combination of a larger and more effective coalition than the eroded NDA, five years of record economic growth and some social welfare measures that were made possible by the revenues from growth.

### Decline in Congress competitiveness: possible explanations

What are the possible causes of Congress decline as indicated by this erosion of competitiveness at the state level for both Lok Sabha and assembly elections, and at the Lok Sabha constituency level? We also need to take into account

the Congress recovers in 2004 and 2009; it was not a linear decline. The following explanations can be put forward.

### ***General explanations, 1967 onwards***

A generic and Rikerian explanation applying coalition theory to congress-type, encompassing, umbrella parties in general, conceiving of such parties as internal grand coalitions of interests, and assuming primarily office-seeking motivations and power as a fixed sum, or even with some upward flexibility, would imply that without the resources to keep all major interests satisfied, a large umbrella party would be fated to disintegrate. This logic can be applied to the Congress from the late 1960s, particularly its inability to accommodate newly mobilised interests such as the intermediate-caste, newly rich agrarian interests in north India after the Green Revolution. If the processes of internal democracy were undermined, such disintegration would be accelerated.

Following Sridharan (2002), the fragmentation of the national party system was due to Duvergerian dynamics at play since 1967 in a federal system with states with significant powers, and importantly, states which were distinct linguo-cultural units with their specific identities, which created incentives for mobilisation of single-state parties. These incentivised ethno-regional parties that reacted against the perceived insensitivity of the Congress to their demands; it also incentivised intermediate-caste agrarian parties in northern Indian states in response to upper-caste hegemony and the lack of internal democracy in Congress, particularly after the 1969 split after which the Indira Gandhi-led Congress suspended the processes of internal elections and became a more centralised, top-down party. The de-linking of national and state elections in a growing number of states since the early national election of 1971 also had the unintended consequence of furthering the prospects of regional parties which could take on Congress in state elections on state-level issues not overshadowed by a national election in which Congress had no polity-wide challengers and could project itself as the only party capable of leading the nation. These explanations can account for the gradual growth of a principal regional opposition party in state after state and a loose national opposition in the period of Congress hegemony before 1989, continuing since then, creating bipolar if not two-party systems in most states.

### ***The post-1989 period***

However, there are explanations for Congress decline – and for the rise of the BJP and some caste-based regional parties – that are specific to the post-1989 period. These can be divided into:

*Organisational decay of Congress and the relative organisational vigour of the BJP*

Chhibber, Jensenius, and Suryanayaran (2012) find that party organisation or the lack of it has a significant impact on the party system. Based on data from 15 Indian states they find that the less parties are organised the more politicians have an incentive to defect. This would lead us to relate the lack of internal democracy and generally weak organisation of the Congress to its further decline by defection by politicians representing newly mobilised social constituencies to other parties or new parties. Manor (2007) and Hasan (2012) make the same point in a different way, emphasising the fact that the party now depends on government spending programmes as a substitute for a party organisation that can mobilise voter support as well as, related to the lack of organisation, the lack of a clear ideology or position on what Congress stands for. As Chandra (2000, p. 52) put it: 'The institutional decay of the Congress party over a period of time transformed the party system by gradually creating newer opportunities for the sections which the party had failed to accommodate over the years'.

*Greater powers to the states in Indian federalism, linked to economic liberalisation and the rise of regional parties*

Chhibber (2005), in an essay on the decline of the Congress (despite its victory in 2004), also emphasises the role of the changing nature of Indian federalism. He emphasises that compared to the 1980s state governments in India play a larger role in their economies compared to the Central government in the post-1991, post-liberalisation period with the end of Central licensing of economic activity and states competing for domestic and foreign private investment in an increasingly private investment-driven economy. There were also other developments that made state governments more secure such as the prevalence of multi-party coalition governments since 1996 in which regional parties played a key role, and the Supreme Court's *Bommai* judgement (1994) which made it much more difficult to dismiss state governments and impose Central rule under Art. 356. The result of these developments, for Congress, was that 'party aggregation . . . is more difficult to achieve when voters' preferences are mostly "state"-based and candidates do not have to coordinate with politicians in other states' (Chhibber, 2005, p. 53).

Sridharan (2012b) makes a similar argument in that he argues that while the Indian system remains a power-sharing one among all significant groups, the nature of power-sharing has shifted in the post-1996 coalition era from one of power-sharing within an internally grand-coalitional party like Congress in its heyday to one of power-sharing in a coalition of parties at the Centre, each party representing particularistic interests. This makes Congress simply less relevant to voters in achieving their objectives.

Furthermore, coalitions at the Centre since 1996 gave incentives for the rise of regional parties (Wyatt, 2002; Ziegfeld, 2012); so does the absence of meaningful internal democracy within Congress, leading to the breakaway of significant parts or even the bulk of the state unit in major states like West Bengal (1997), Maharashtra (1999) and Andhra Pradesh (2012), with these new splinter parties enjoying the flexibility to participate in diverse central coalitions, in the process greatly weakening Congress and forcing it to rely even more on pre-electoral coalitions, sometimes with these same splinter parties.

### *New communal, caste and class dynamics since 1989*

Since 1989, new communal, caste and class dynamics that are often state-specific, with class dynamics related to caste and to economic liberalisation and growth, particularly the rise of the middle classes, including the seeming maturing of a 'new social bloc' and the emergence of aspirational voting in 2014, have eroded the Congress base.

The major development for the Congress in the post-1990, post-Mandal era, compared to the 1980s is the rise of Hindu nationalist/anti-Muslim mobilisation by the BJP in the Ramjanmabhoomi/Ayodhya movement and the mobilisation by the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (in effect, backward castes that are not Scheduled Castes), as well as later in the 1990s and 2000s, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) with its principal support base of Scheduled Castes eating into the traditional Congress base (Heath & Yadav, 1999; Yadav, 1999, for the composition of the Congress voter base; 2014a, 2014b, for the Congress and BJP bases in 2014; Varshney, 2002, pp. 60–86; Varshney, 2014, for an overview of the BJP's ideology and politics). The BJP was able to mobilise in several states of northern and western India, but most of all in U.P., its traditional support among the upper castes from the late 1980s, partly due to Hindu anxieties arising from separatist movements in Punjab (1980s) and Kashmir (post-1989), and a sense that Congress was overly sympathetic to the Muslim minority, a fallout of the Shah Bano case (1986), as well as go beyond its traditional upper-caste support. The BJP was also able to mobilise, at least substantially because of the backlash to the Mandal decision to reserve 27 per cent of public sector jobs and college admissions for OBCs in 1990, the upper castes, particularly in north India, and thus eat into the Congress base.

The loss of Congress vote share since 1989 among various major segments of the electorate, according to CSDS/Lokniti post-election survey data is shown in Table 8. As can be seen, from 1991 to 1999, the Congress vote share among Hindu upper castes plummeted steadily from 36 per cent to 16 per cent, recovering partially to 21 per cent and 26 per cent in 2004 and 2009, before plunging to 12 per cent in 2014. Among peasant proprietor castes, the support level of roughly a quarter of the group in 2004 and 2009, the only elections for which

Table 8. Congress vote share among different social groups Lok Sabha elections 1991–2014.

Caste/community	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014
Hindu upper	36	27	20	16	21	26	12
Peasant proprietor					23	25	15
Hindu OBC	32	22	21	27	-	24	15
Upper OBC's					23	22	
Lower OBC's					23	27	
SC	39	32	27	32	28	27	19
ST	45	41	38	40	35	39	28
Muslim	38	34	43	50	37	38	38
Christian					39	38	29
Sikh					25	41	21

Source: National Election Study, various years, Centre for Study of Developing Societies, 1996–2014.

this was a separate category, plunged to 15 per cent in 2014. Among Hindu OBCs as a whole, support declined from 32 per cent in 1991 to 21 per cent in 1998, recovering partly to 27 per cent in 1999, 24 per cent in 2009, and plunging to 15 per cent in 2014. There has been somewhat of an erosion even among traditionally Congress voters (in most states) like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and even before the dips of 2014, the erosion among Scheduled Castes at least partly being due to the rise of the BSP in several states (in terms of vote share). Only among Muslims, at 38 per cent has the Congress support remained steady between 1991 and 2014.

In 2014, according to the CSDS National Election Survey, the BJP led Congress among upper-caste voters (54 per cent to 12 per cent), peasant proprietor castes (33 per cent to 15 per cent), upper OBCs (30 per cent to 15 per cent), lower OBCs (42 per cent to 16 per cent), Scheduled Castes (24 per cent to 19 per cent) and Scheduled Tribes (38 per cent to 28 per cent) and among all four social classes though with a declining lead as one went down the ladder – upper (32 per cent to 17 per cent), middle (32 per cent to 20 per cent), lower (31 per cent to 19 per cent) and poor (24 per cent to 20 per cent). The BJP also led Congress both in rural areas (30 per cent to 19 per cent) and urban areas (33 per cent to 20 per cent).

What this reveals about the Congress base is that it has lost significant sections of its erstwhile base to the BJP and other, primarily caste-based, state parties, mainly in U.P. and Bihar, and become *less of an encompassing umbrella party* over the past two and a half decades. A rough calculation based on actual population shares and turnout taken together with group-wise Congress support estimates in Table 8 indicates that over half the



Congress vote in 2014 came from Muslims, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Heath and Yadav (1999) and Yadav, Kumar, and Heath (1999) have outlined the profile of the Congress voter at the end of the decade (1990s) of the ‘second democratic upsurge’ of higher turnout among the relatively deprived (lower castes and tribes, minorities, the poor and rural areas) as well as put forward a conception of the emerging BJP base as a loose ‘new social bloc’ (Yadav et al., 1999) of upper and dominant castes including rising peasant castes, and of upper classes including the rising middle class, united by relative economic and social privilege. The Congress profile over the 1990s had become increasingly dependent on minority, Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, rural and poor voters while losing upper castes, OBCs and the upper and middle classes to the BJP and other parties. The BJP’s ‘new social bloc’ seems to have come to fruition in 2014, a year in which as high as 49 per cent of the population self-identified as middle class (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2015), and in which the BJP got more votes than Congress in all caste and religious groups except Muslims, even among the poor, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Further buttressing the ‘new social bloc’ argument is the emergence of what can be called aspirational voting, in which voters identify ‘upwardly’ in class terms and vote accordingly. This is particularly so in the 2014 election, which we analyse below. The Congress plunged from 28.2 per cent to 19.3 per cent vote share, going below 20 per cent for the first time ever and no longer being the single largest party by votes, and to a derisory 44 seats, the first time it plunged below 100 seats (for attempts at analysis, see Palshikar, 2014, 2015; Sridharan, 2014a, 2014b). The BJP’s rise from 19 per cent to 31 per cent vote share as part of the NDA coalition’s 38 per cent, and to a majority of 282 on its own, 336 with the NDA, was due to a regionally highly concentrated sweep in the entire Hindi belt of northern and central India and the western states of Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa, plus Karnataka in the south and Assam in the northeast. This was a more concentrated performance than earlier such performances in 1996, 1998 and 1999 when it won more seats than the Congress despite a smaller vote share precisely because its votes were geographically concentrated in the northern, central and western states. As we noted earlier, the emergence of a principal opposition party in every state opens up the possibility of an anti-Congress sweep that benefits such opposition parties.

In 2014, it was the BJP that benefited from a combination of factors that kicked in after 2010 – economic slowdown and slow growth of jobs, persistent high inflation which neutralised the effects of populist welfare spending, and loss of legitimacy due to exposure of multiple corruption scandals to which Congress had no answer, the party split in Andhra and exit of the Trinamul

in West Bengal from the UPA coalition, and the party's organisational weakness and decay resulting in a weak mobilisation effort in the campaign (Sridharan, 2014b). By contrast, the BJP had corruption, inflation and unemployment as weapons and a seemingly effective and inspiring leader in Modi, plus extremely effective organisational machinery. There also seemed to be a change of mood and expectations on the part of the electorate, with the Congress' populist, pro-poor message not working with a seemingly aspirational electorate that wanted more than anti-poverty slogans and programmes – for the first time according to the Lokniti/CSDS post-election survey, more of the poor, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes voted for the BJP than for the Congress, representing a significant downward expansion of the former's base.

The survey finding that 49 per cent of the population in 2014 self-identify as middle class (Kapur & Vaishnav, 2015), contrary to estimates by economic, occupational and educational criteria (Kapur, 2010), makes sense only if a large part of the population is aspirational in that it identifies itself with higher social levels. Also, three CSDS/Lokniti post-election survey findings of 2014 that makes sense only if the electorate is aspirational, are the responses to three questions on economic policy and conditions.

First, more voters of each of the four classes including the poor said they strongly agreed or agreed that government should spend on infrastructure rather than on subsidies for the poor than strongly disagreed or disagreed, something that went counter to the redistributivist Congress line in the election campaign and was more in line with the 'growth and jobs' Modi pitch (responses to Question 23d of the CSDS National Election Survey 2014).

Second, in response to a question on the improvement or otherwise of the economic condition of India over the past five years (Question 8, CSDS National Election Survey 2014) 40 per cent said it was much better or better, and only 17 per cent said it was worse, seemingly indicating an endorsement of the ruling party that ran against the actual voting results. However, if one factors in 24 per cent who said it was the same and gives bad marks for a 'same' response, that is, for an aspirational electorate 'same' is stagnation and hence poor performance, this would fit better with the electoral result. The striking result of this table is that for three of the four classes (Rich, Lower and Poor, except Middle), the responses Much Better and Better combined were much larger than the response Worse, but if one added the response Same to Worse it was larger than Much Better plus Better. If one makes the assumption that the electorate was aspirational and considered Same to be poor performance, the survey result fits the electoral outcome.

Third, in response to a question on the improvement or otherwise of the economic condition of 'your household' over the past five years (Question 16, CSDS National Election Survey 2014) one gets exactly the same result

as for Question 8 above, for the overall sample as well as for the Lower and Poor classes, again fitting the voting pattern by these classes (more voting for BJP than Congress) only if one assumes that Same is poor performance. For the Rich and Middle Class, even adding Same to Worse left these responses smaller in percentage than Much Better plus Better. Given that these classes voted even more for BJP than for Congress, it would seem that these classes, other factors being equal, were even more aspirational and dissatisfied by their perceived improvement in household economic condition.

It would appear that Congress misread the mood of an increasingly impatient, aspirational middle class and young electorate in addition to other factors like corruption scandals, growth slowdown and inflation.

In essence, since 1989, a centrist umbrella party like Congress could not compete in upping the ante in religion- and caste-based political mobilisations with parties that were explicitly Hindu nationalist (BJP), or caste-based like OBC parties or the BSP or some regional parties. In class terms, while the poor could also be mobilised by competing lower-caste parties, the middle classes that burgeoned with economic growth, which were disproportionately upper or dominant caste in composition, were mobilised by appeal of Hindu nationalism or upper caste resentment against reservations for the lower castes, primarily by the BJP. An aspirational electorate also means that poorer and disadvantaged groups might vote 'upwardly' for the BJP's 'new social bloc'.

Taken together, these factors led to a steady erosion of the Congress base despite a limited recovery in vote share in 2004 and 2009, and electoral victories in those years that were heavily dependent on formation of pre-electoral and post-electoral coalitions which involved giving up turf, eroding its umbrella character, making it a party *more* dependent on some segments of its erstwhile broad bases, viz., minorities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the poor.

### **Can Congress survive as an umbrella party? Or has the social cleavages theory of party systems won out?**

Finally, this brings us back to the question of whether an umbrella party like Congress is viable in the long term once the pre- and post-independence historical momentum that created its dominance peters out, particularly in the context of the continuing operation of the above factors, particularly the growing and perhaps entrenched salience of regional identities, and varying state-level caste and religious cleavages. Is it possible to reconstruct an expanded umbrella party in the context of such cleavages? Or has the social cleavages theory of party systems won out? Or is the electorate evolving towards rewarding good governance and economic performance with identity politics around

social cleavages assuming a back seat over time? Can Congress recover again as it did after 1967, and again after 1977, and rebuild a new social coalition around a new political economy, and win back the social segments it seems to have lost – the upper and dominant castes and middle classes – while retaining its remaining base among minorities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and the poor? Can it build a sufficiently broad social coalition in a sufficient number of states to make it an umbrella party nationally, given the erosion of its competitiveness and even presence in a large number of states and constituencies over the past quarter of century?

As Chhibber (2005) has argued, after 1967, particularly after the split of 1969, there was a centralisation of economic powers by Indira Gandhi as well as several political interventions in state governments, plus the centralisation of the Congress organisation, all of which helped to build support coalitions based on centralised dispensation of patronage to substitute for a vibrant, grass-roots-based organisation. This system helped maintain Congress as a coalition of state-based party units as well as recover support after the setback of 1967 and the defeat of 1977. However, this sort of centralisation is no longer possible after the deregulation of the economy from the early 1990s, after the bulk of investment in the economy is from private capital, both domestic and foreign, since that time, after the *Bommai* (1994) judgement made it far more difficult to dismiss state governments and impose President's Rule, and after the rise and consolidation of multi-state opposition parties like the BJP and powerful regional parties in a range of states since the 1990s. Most recently, the acceptance of the Fourteenth Finance Commission's recommendations for raising the states' share in the divisible pool of Central tax revenues from 32 per cent to 42 per cent will over time make states, and hence state-based parties including the state units of Congress (and BJP) more independent of the Central party leadership. Rebuilding a social base while being out of power and without tight control of state party units (which can defect as in West Bengal, Maharashtra and Andhra) promises to be that much more difficult.

One ray of hope for the Congress is that the CSDS/Lokniti post-election survey of 2014 indicates fairly robustly that the secular consensus as regards the treatment of minorities seems to be intact. Large majorities of 58–68 per cent strongly agreed or agreed with the proposition that minorities should be treated equally and also with special provisions for minorities, while only about a sixth disagreed or strongly disagreed (Sridharan, 2014b). This seems to indicate that the BJP victory was not a victory for ideological Hindutva but for the promise of 'better days' against the backdrop of economic slow-down, inflation and corruption over 2011–14. The Congress' weak recoveries of 2004 and 2009 in which it did well among the upper castes, urban and rural middle class and urban seats seems to indicate that a Congress recovery of lost social and geographical turf is possible under certain circumstances.

A broad centrist social coalition built around economic reforms for growth combined with targeted social expenditure within fiscal limits is a possibility, which is in fact what the Modi government appears to be attempting to build a broader BJP base. However, adopting such a strategy would need the Congress not to try to cast itself as only or mainly a pro-poor party (in an aspirational electorate in which 49 per cent self-identify as middle class, and those Below Poverty Line are a minority of the population) catering only to its post-2014 *remaining* base, but a broad-based growth-cum-social justice party that does not upset the fine balance between growth-oriented policies and redistributive policies that seems to have been upset in the 2014 campaign (Sridharan, 2014b) and beyond.

However, for such a make-over it will have to address the issues of internal democracy and organisational rebuilding along with a new political economy that balances growth and equity in a way that does not alienate the growing middle class, urban and younger sections of the electorate whose weight will increase over time. The reorganisation and revival of the Congress party organisation is indeed quite a difficult task, especially after the party's poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections and the subsequent assembly elections, but it is not necessarily impossible. Manor (2003) has argued that paradoxically it might be easier to attempt an organisational rejuvenation especially at the state level when the party is in opposition than when it is in power because when in power the state leaders have to contend with and resolve issues between different factions vying for their share in spoils of power. This further weakens the party organisation and simultaneously encourages factionalism.

To sum up, if the Congress cannot rebuild an encompassing coalition, as it arguably did in 2009, and recover *as an umbrella party*, there are two other possibilities – its disintegration and eventual demise by further splits and loss of social base, *or* its revival but as a broad, left-of-centre coalition of the disadvantaged, not an umbrella party, facing a broad, BJP-led, right-of-centre coalition. However, in the latter scenario, it would not be an umbrella party but a centre-left party, and the social cleavages theory of party systems would have won out.

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## Notes

1. See Lipset and Rokkan (1967) for the classic statement of the social cleavage theory of party systems, and Bartolini and Mair (1990) for a modified version which argues essentially that social cleavages do not translate automatically into party systems but offer easy mobilisation opportunities. Much the same is argued by Kothari (1997, p. 58): 'Those who complain of "casteism in politics"' are really looking for a sort of politics which has no basis in society ... Politics is a competitive enterprise ... and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging allegiances in order to mobilise and consolidate positions ...', thus making the social cleavage theory of party systems appear somehow natural. For works within the electoral rules theory of party systems, see Lijphart (1994), Taagepera and Shugart (1989), Grofman and Lijphart (1986), and for older classics, Duverger (1963) and Rae (1967).
2. Of the four cleavages discussed by them in the context of European party systems, two, the centre-periphery cleavage and the state-church cleavage were the product of 'national revolutions'. It is this tension between the core nation-builders and political, ethnic or cultural peripheries, along with the secular and religious forces to some extent, that explains the emergence of the party system in post-independent India. In the initial years, major tension between the Centre and the periphery, and the issue of secularism, was resolved within the Congress party. In that sense, the Congress-dominated party system was the outcome of the 'national revolution/movement'.
3. All votes and seats data in this paper from Election Commission of India ([www.eci.nic.in](http://www.eci.nic.in)).

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