RESEARCH ARTICLE

Indian National Congress's Hits and Misses in General Elections 2024

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Abstract

The General Elections 2024 miraculously halted the declining political graph of the Indian National Congress and doubled its presence (seats won) in the lower house of parliament since the national hustings in 2019. The strategies implemented for reviving the party, like 'Bharat Jodo Yatras' (walkathons led by Rahul Gandhi), had an erratic pan-Indian electoral impact; as a result, it partly reclaimed its lost political space. The mandate failed to reverse the deinstitutionalization process of the grand old party, and its fragmentary legitimization seems to be by default rather than design. It failed to register a win and make a comeback primarily due to the absence of party offices in several states and hesitancy in overhauling the Congress system. The way ahead for revivification includes tweaking its archaic ideology, designing a populist model of governance, promoting subaltern leadership, creating a perennial connectivity with citizens, embracing digitalized politicking, and practising aspiration-centric developmental politics.

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Introduction

The Indian General Elections 2024 were a crucial fixture, as the Indian National Congress (Congress), led by a political formation subscribing to centrist-left ideology (INDIA), had an excellent opportunity to defeat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), headed by the right-wing combine (NDA), due to disadvantages of two-term incumbency. It was a referendum on

the Modi government, which propagated the primacy of Hindus and cultural nationalism, against the INDIA bloc's united campaign for saving the constitution and democracy, with both alliances guaranteeing deeper welfarism and freebies. It started in the right earnest, but electioneering turned divisive and communal, as both sides resorted to fear-mongering and dog-whistling for polarization of votes on caste-religious identity. The electoral discourse hit a new low with frequent use of insulting barbs, vicious sarcasms, and anti-religious epithets. But the result was a major surprise, as it negated the prophecy of most popular writings and media opinion polls of BJP coming back to power with a full majority in the lower house of parliament (272 out of 543 seats). It failed to fathom that Congress would reverse its declining electoral trend and add 47 more seats to its tally since the electoral outing in 2019. The grand old party presented the results as a triumphant déjà vu, did a victory lap, and continues to be in a state of celebratory euphoria. The exuberance in the wake of electoral defeat is intriguing, which could be a false perception of victory or a reflex action of its historical domination of politics.

A quick recap of India's political party system shows that Congress, after independence, initiated one-party dominance, ruling both at the Centre and in the majority of the provinces until the 1980s. Its supremacy ended in the 1990s, but it continued to rule through multiparty coalitions. Its electoral diminishment provided a political window for the rise of regional parties and the BJP. Its snowballing downslide reached its lowest point in the 2014 national elections, as it managed to win 44 seats. It failed to revive in the 2019 national elections, as populist demagogy and promising the moon did not appeal to the voters, resulting in a slight increase in parliamentary seats. The debacles raised red flags, but did not stir up a hornet's nest in Congress, and its myopic course corrections failed mainly due to a lack of correct political strategies and widespread erosion of the party system (Rai, 2023). It had a spiralling effect after 2014, as it lost several state elections to the BJP, and it is currently in power without support in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Telangana, while in Tamil Nadu and Jharkhand it is the junior partner of the principal regional parties.

It becomes relevant to situate the revival of Congress in the new evolving political party system and analyse the impact of dynasticism on the high command, leadership conundrums in the provinces, and self-decimating intra-party dissents. The article will have two major sections. The *first* part will be a post-mortem analysis of the national verdict in 2024, with a special focus on performance vis-à-vis its principal competitors. It will fathom the restricted resonance with the electorate, erraticism of political gains, and roadblocks in making a comeback. It will evaluate its reinstitutionalization process by analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the party system. The *second* section will discuss the historical recurrence of contradictions in different phases of organizational development that increased its political capital but simultaneously weakened it. It will explore the value of bloodline central leadership (dynasticism), limitations of rampant factionalism, fractiousness in state leadership successions, and efficacy of grievance settlement mechanisms.

Political Party System and Electoral Performance in 2024

The Congress, founded in 1885, fits the definition of a political party by Edmund Burke, as a body of men united for promoting national interest based upon agreed principles and the adoption of means to put them into practice (Burke, 2002). After independence, it became a 'Big-Tent Party' of members with diverse ideas and beliefs and experienced one-

party dominance. It consisted of a *party of consensus* and *parties of pressure* that functioned on the margins as dissident groups, not as alternatives to the ruling party, but for pressurization, criticism, and reprobation (Kothari, 1964). It did not follow the linear path of organizational development: genesis, institutionalization, and maturity. Institutionalization in party politics involves organizations and procedures acquiring value and stability, with political actors perceiving clear and stable behaviour of others (Huntington, 1968; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006). The failure to transform from domination to adaptation was mainly due to the dominance-oriented leadership of ex-Prime Ministers (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It showed signs of party weakening, fluidity in party competitiveness, meltdown of organizational hierarchies, could not achieve a critical mass of institutionalization, and failed in formalizing the political process. As a result, it developed irregularity in party competition, disruptions in party-citizen linkages, and a loss of political supremacy from the 1990s onwards.

The run-up to the national elections in 2024 saw two contrasting political scenarios,*one* a strong BJP alliance riding high on Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's strong popularity and the frenzy created by the inauguration of the Ram temple, *two* a trivial Congress-led combine of 30 parties struggling with seat sharing and building a consensus on a PM candidate. It finally managed to strike a seat-sharing deal in 350 seats while contesting 75 seats against its own alliance partners in the states of West Bengal, Kerala, and Punjab. The campaign focused on 'Paanch Nyay' (five pillars of justice), justice for youth, farmers, women, labourers, and job opportunities as per the share of the population. It raised issues of economic distress: unemployment, price rise, agrarian distress, the legal guarantee of minimum support price (MSP) for farm produce, and discrepancies in electoral bonds as a public corruption issue.

Despite the odds, the grand old party won 99 parliamentary seats, an increase of 47 seats since the previous electoral outing, with a 2 percent increase in votes. It gained by scaremongering in a few states that the BJP would end existing reservations (affirmative action) for backward castes, scheduled castes (SC), and scheduled tribes (ST). The resurgence was spatially sporadic, as it failed to reach the coveted three-figure mark in parliament, and the INDIA bloc fell short by 38 seats to form the central government. The 'Band-Aid strategies' for the revival of the party, like Mallikarjun Kharge's election as the new party president and 'Bharat Jodo Yatras' (walkathons for voter outreach) by Rahul Gandhi (RG), were not fully efficacious (Rai & Chowdhury, 2024). It won 40 out of the 105 parliamentary constituencies visited by RG during walkathons, with a winning strike rate (seats contested and won) of 38 percent, as compared with 26 percent in the remaining seats. The overall winning strike rate improved from eight percent in 2019 to thirty percentage points. It was victorious in 20 out of 84 seats reserved for SC and 12 out of 47 seats earmarked for ST, with higher margins as compared with the BJP in these two social segments.

Seats Performance in National Elections

Years	Seats Won	Seats Change	Vote Share	Vote Share
2024	99	+ 47	21	+ 2
2019	52	+ 9	19	0
2014	44	- 162	19	- 10

Source: Election Commission of India. Total Seats: 543

The disaggregation of Congress seats reveals that it won 62 seats out of 215 seats in direct contest with the saffron party, while in the provinces of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu, it triumphed in 31 seats with the support of regional parties. The deinstitutionalization of the party led to the closure of several Congress offices at the grassroots level that severely affected its revival plans, particularly in eight states and two union territories. It drew a blank in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Uttarakhand, and Himachal Pradesh and won solitary seats in Chhattisgarh and Odisha. It won nine out of 28 seats in Karnataka and prevailed in eight out of 17 seats in Telangana. The dismal election performance in Congress-ruled states of Karnataka, Telangana, and Himachal Pradesh, due to the onset of political incumbency and electoral erraticism, dashed its hope of dethroning the BJP from the power corridors of Delhi.

Contradictions and Inherent Instabilities in Party Politics

The Congress witnessed recurrence of contradictions since inception, as the motives of British and Indian founders were divergent, subsequently personalism of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi strengthened as well as weakened the party system. Similarly, dynastic central leadership proved to be a boon as well as a bane, which in tandem with other negative inherencies continues to play a crucial role in limiting its resurgence in contemporary Indian politics.

Dynastic Control of Central Leadership

The dynastification of the Gandhi family after the succession of Rajiv Gandhi as PM in 1984 turned Congress into a privileged establishment, widening the proximity gaps between elites and party cadres. A political dynasty is a 'family that retains power by controlling an elective position for more than one or successive generations' (Albert et al., 2015). It replaces a family member holding a constitutional or elected post, but in the Indian context, it extends to intergenerational leadership positions in political parties. Political dynasties are mostly trust networks based on reciprocity, centred around a politically adept player and face disquieting disruptions only while multiplying across generations (Ruud & Nielsen, 2018). After Rajiv Gandhi's demise, Congress apex leadership went outside the first family for a minuscule period, before his spouse, Sonia Gandhi, became the party president (1998-2017, 2019-2022). After her exit, the generation next is actively involved in party affairs, with RG becoming party supremo for a short time.

Erosion of Congress Support Base

Year: National Election	Total: Parliamentary Seats	Seats Won	Vote Share (In percent)
Rajiv Gandhi (Dynastic Prime Minister)			
1984	543	415	48.1
1989	543	197	39.5
1991	543	244	36.4
Sonia-Rahul Gandhi (Dynastic Party Presidents)			
1998	543	141	25.8
1999	543	114	28.3
2004	543	145	26.5
2009	543	206	28.6
2014	543	44	19.5
2019	543	52	19.5

Source: Election Commission of India

Dynastic succession requires public projection of dynastic heirs as extraordinary human beings, with special qualities - the extraordinary capacity of the original dynast in changing the world. It needs to invisibilize inherited dynastic ties that make the scion vulnerable to negative public opinion of nepotism and illegitimate privileges (Das et al., 2023). The dynastic conservation labyrinth makes it improbable for a son of the soil leader to either lead the party with free will or become a PM or chief minister. Bloodline leadership of parties is acceptable until it keeps bringing them to power, but turns into a liability if it fails to add political capital and win electoral competitions. The dynastic leadership of RG remains a liability as it failed twice in winning national elections, but Congress reposed faith in him. In the 2024 elections, the party went to lengths to neutralize the negativity of his personality traits and minimize the impact of inherited family legacies, but he once again failed in bringing back the party to power. The sectional and uneven political appeal of RG reveals that his PM candidature was not acceptable to a large section of the electorate. The appointment of RG as leader of the opposition in parliament and Sonia Gandhi as chairperson of the Congress Parliamentary Party perpetuates the first family hegemony of the high command. The non-formal reservation of top leadership posts in the Congress for dynastic ascension provides unequal access and acts as a major roadblock in the natural growth of grassroots state leaders and subaltern party torchbearers.

Party Leadership Transitions in Provinces

The leadership succession in states ruled by Congress in the last ten years witnessed fratricidal feuds and defections. Democratic elections are succession in a narrow sense, as every vote carries with it a chance to reaffirm the existing leader or effect a change in the head of government or party leader (Farah, B. et al., 2020). Leadership transitions in parties at decentralized levels are complex, as smooth successions increase legitimacy and stability, while poor handling leads to decline or downfall. 'Managed transition' is initiated by a party leader in a position of power, often in close

consultation with the party's ruling elite, seeking to control the timing of the incumbent's exit and the identification/selection of a new successor (Bynander & t Hart, 2006). The long tenure of a leader creates 'taken for grantedness' among party faithful as it is their style-profile appeal that dominates the party's political memory (Horiuchi et al., 2015). The Congress high command's 'taken for grantedness' of regional and grassroots leaders and general apathy in dealing with their genuine grievances is a major reason for desertions from the party. The decline after losing power in 2014 made it difficult for smooth leadership successions in provinces, as incumbent elites openly faced challenges from party factions, particularly from young and aspirational members. The leadership dilemmas continue to fuel rivalries between veterans and emerging leaders and act as impediments in the real-time recovery of the party.

Breakdown of Reconciliation Mechanisms

The Congress internalized political competition by developing an elaborate multi-level system of factions in political and governmental activity, and a system of coordination between various strata through vertical 'faction chains'. There was a multi-level conciliation machinery for resolving factional disputes through various executive committees, consultative committees, and 'inner groups' in leadership hierarchies (Kothari, 1964). Factionalism became disruptive when rival groups discarded traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution and relied on mediation by impartial arbitrators (Brass, 1964). The national elections in 1989 witnessed a democratic shift in party politics and electoral representation due to the emergence of a third political force (Satyanarayana, 1997). The party system changed from one-party dominance to multi-party coalitions in the 1990s, which weakened the Congress system and the efficacy of conciliation mechanisms, leading to serious factionalism and a reduction of footprints in states. It lost its dominance in the coalitional party system as strong leaders broke ranks and founded their own political outfits, which in tandem with the rise of regional parties led to rampant factionalism and political downgrading. The simmering intra-party dissensions were kept in check after the Congress-led UPA alliance came to power in 2004, mostly pacified by adhocism and temporary improvisations. Its defeat in the 2014 national elections reactivated factionalism and a leadership succession crisis in states. The generational infighting and attrition of Congress flagbearers is one of the key reasons for the grand old party's hat-trick vanquishment in this round of hustings. There is no one-size-fits-all reconciliation mechanism for parties, but a viable apparatus for containing factionalism is the need of the hour for finding harmony and balance to reinvigorate the Congress.

Conclusion and Way Ahead for Political Reinvention

To conclude, political parties that led independence movements in South Asia, often led by first families, paved the way for populist leaders-confessional politics, representing new constituents and aspirations (Candland, 1997). The primary reasons for the decline of Congress are not only personalism and organizational decay, but also dynasticism, factionalism, leadership succession, and defunct conciliation mechanisms. Exogenous factors like partisan dealignment, erosion of party identification, and a polarizing non-inclusive and non-compromising party system led to a steady erosion of Congress's support base. It changed its politicking from ideological policy-to-power seeking that led to the 'deinstitutionalization' of the party system and the end of domination in politics.

The depreciation of its political constituency led to unpredictable politics, lowered the quality of electoral representation, weakened checks and balances on dynastic leadership, provided space for authoritarian decision-making, and created a deficit of democratic governability. The grand old party has revived partially, but for a political comeback, it needs to distance itself from dynastic dilemma-limitations, realign its social-cultural ideology with aspirational India, and bring back defected heavyweights and alienated party cadres. The ghost of dynasty remains omnipresent, but the sublimity of the dynast's personal qualities and inherited family legacies can neutralize its political negativity. It should give primacy to party members based on merit and social diversity, design a conflict management edifice to consolidate its cadres, and increase the robustness of the party system. The next round of state elections will be a litmus test for the Congress, as victories will prove that the national elections in 2024 initiated a reinstitutionalization process, while failures will vindicate that it was not a political revivalism, but a temporary electoral gimmick.

Statements and Declarations

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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