

Why have Congress governments at the centre found it easier to work with opposition governments in the states?

The Indian political system appears to work very differently to those in Europe and the USA, in particular the greater blurring of boundaries between different political parties. In certain cases Congress governments at the centre have had more success in their dealings with opposition state governments than with state governments from their own party. This can be explained by three main factors. Firstly, the Congress party and opposition parties have a great deal in common in terms of personnel, social background and ideology. In such an environment cooperation is likely to be far more easily attained. Secondly, factionalism within both Congress and the opposition parties allows the opposition to influence central government whether they are actually in power in the states or not; the influence they have when actually in power is often weaker than when they are in opposition. This will be explained in due course. Factions within Congress are often harder to deal with for the central leadership than are other political parties. Finally, opposition parties must look to central government (generally Congress) for patronage, so moderate their opinions and demands in order to achieve this.

The Indian party system evolved from a political 'centre' which existed decades before independence. Mainly upper-caste and English-educated, this small elite was homogeneous in social background. Personalised networks were essential to the operation of such a movement. Most dissenters had at one time been part of Congress, and shared much of its intellectual background as well. Dissent was not about competing socio-economic claims, but about fragmentation of the political centre - dissident movements were not so much about upsetting the old order as about finding entry into it. Differences between the government and opposition parties (and dissident factions in both) have tended to be vague and overlapping; with no clear divides, they seemingly merge into one 'ruling class'.

This has led to a limited consensus within the Indian party system. This consensus seems to cut across party loyalties and identities, around common problems of government and political management. In fact, non-Congress Chief Ministers were often easier to deal with for the central Congress government as they were only local politicians and nothing else, while those from the Congress party often held national roles in the party and in national government so had other agendas to pursue.

While Congress is certainly the dominant party¹, almost every major party has access to governmental power somewhere. Participation in government by opposition parties is of two types: direct (by governing a state) and indirect (by influencing factions in Congress). While the latter leads to frustrations, the former gives a heightened sense of efficacy, responsibility, awareness of the problems of government (and hence a degree of realism) and, vitally, a taming of hostile attitudes held as a result of being too long in a minority position. This reduction in extremism may make opposition parties easier to deal with when in government than when out of government.

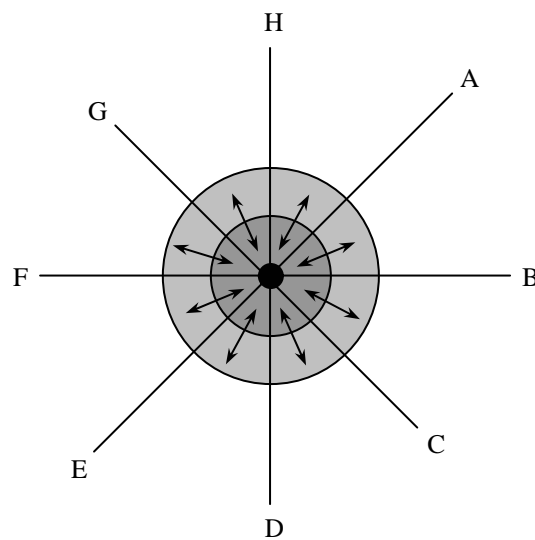
The consensus on policy is often surprisingly strong. Even the Communists in Kerala and the DMK in Madras have boasted of implementing the Congress programme more effectively than Congress could have done. Indeed, much opposition is simply a matter of highlighting those promises of the political elite which have not yet been honoured. The consensus has changed over time, starting with the Nehruvian variety, crystallised within the broad framework of the Congress party. This was followed by the consensus under Lal Bahadur Shastri, where opposition parties were consulted before any major decision was taken. Finally Indira Gandhi demonstrated (before the Emergency) her own form of consensus politics, which was more broad-based and fluid, and relied on the recommendations of experienced senior civil servants. This all suggests a long history of ideological consensus in Indian politics which is generally much weaker elsewhere in the world.

The substance of this consensus was generally left-of-centre in Western terms (though entirely centrist from an Indian perspective). Right-wing parties such as the Jan Sangh shed their earlier extremist positions on issues such as language and religion, for example, the protection of the holy cow. Other parties such as the Swatantra faced the decision of moving towards the consensus (for example in Orissa) or losing political influence altogether (as in Bihar). The system could best be described as one of 'competitive dominance' - dominance coexisted with political competition for some time without any trace of alternation. Morris-Jones claims that '(the opposition parties) address themselves not so much to the policy-deaf electorate as to like-minded politician groups in the dominant party'.

The consensus can best be represented by a diagram taken from Morris-Jones (see below). The black circle in the centre represents the Congress leadership, while the dark-shaded circle surrounding it represents the Congress party. The light-shaded circle represents other parties,

¹ Duverger's concept of the 'dominant party' is one which is larger than any other (although it does not necessarily have an

occupying non-contiguous patches within the zone. It is important to note that these are often further away from each other (along the circumference) than from parts of the Congress party (along the radii). The lines like HD and AE represent political cleavages such as right vs. left, modernist vs. traditionalist, all-India vs. regional, communal vs. secular and authoritarian vs. liberal. Obviously far more cleavages exist than are represented on the diagram.



The diagram shows that Congress contains within itself a broad base of political opinion. Opposition parties are difficult to locate as they do not fall distinctly into each sector. In any one sector of opinion, e.g. HOA (which might stand for right-wing modernists) there will be Congressmen and others, and as the arrows show, there is interaction between them. Congress succeeded by shifting its position in relation to opposition parties in order to remain at the centre of Indian politics, reinforcing the consensus. As mentioned earlier, non-Congress parties, once in government, tended to become more 'responsible' and often implemented Congress policy. It was advantageous for the central government to keep 'difficult' regions such as Kerala and West Bengal under stable management, which other parties were more capable of providing. It was better that this management (which could often be quite harsh) was not associated with the government at the centre. For example, when the Chief Minister in Orissa condemned a student protest it was on the grounds of *national* interest, despite his support being largely parochial. Had a Congress state government taken such a stance, it would have affected the popularity of the central party, especially due to India's history of tolerating extra-parliamentary protest.

outright majority) and whose influence dominates the political atmosphere.

The next issue to examine is factionalism within Congress and within opposition parties. The problem of factionalism can be traced back to 1948, after the death of Gandhi, when dissenting parties within the Indian National Congress (such as the Congress Socialist Party) were banned by Patel's constitutional amendment. The Congress became more like a streamlined political party in its operation - dissent was driven underground. This position remained largely stable in the first decade of independence, as political success often came about as a result of proven loyalty to the charismatic 'tall men' or leaders of the party such as Nehru. However, in the absence of well-developed opposition, and before Parliament itself provided effective instruments for the ventilation of grievances and the crystallisation of dissident opinion, the Congress party itself had to perform these functions. Such an all-encompassing movement inevitably produced factional division.

Examining the history of dissidence within the Congress party, it seems that the election defeat of 1967 was not such a turning point as it first appears. There had been an on-going conflict between the 'ministerial' and 'organisational' wings of the party for decades, and there was some continuity between personnel between Congress and the opposition; many of those opposition leaders placed in government in 1967 had previously been dissident members of Congress themselves. Such politicians knew how to work productively with Congressmen; there was little tension due to the inexperience of the state governments.

At a local level, Congressmen aimed to seek popular support not only to win an election, but to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis other factions within Congress. On some issues Chief Ministers had to fight hard against the centre - regardless of party loyalty - in order to shore up local support. Congress leaders tended to be more aggressive in their opposition, possibly to capitalise on the political advantage of not being seen as government 'yes-men'. Congress-led states often worried about being taken for granted by the leadership, and as such needed to 'bare their teeth'. This was more noticeable after the linguistic reorganisation of the states, as local Congress leaders emerged who spoke no Hindi or English and fought exclusively on local issues. An example of this was seen in Bombay, where a group of Marhatta Congressmen known as the Jana Parishad expressed different demands over linguistic laws to the central party. They defied the Bombay PCC and voted for a resolution in the Bombay Municipal Corporation, sponsored by the Praja Socialists, calling for the incorporation of Bombay into Samyukta Maharashtra. Due to the votes of this dissident Congress faction, the resolution passed.

An interesting case-study on factionalism can be seen in Maharashtra in the 1950s-60s. Congress was truly dominant with no major threat from other parties; an ideal breeding ground for

factional rivalry. The same leaders often occupied different positions in the Congress party, cooperative industry boards and 'panchayati raj' bodies, and often had close allies doing the same. Most leaders came from the numerically, socially and economically dominant Maratha caste and were well-off sugarcane growers, so competed for profits and status. Factions arose mainly due to disputes over the control of local cooperatives; they are rarely (and were not in this case) to do with ideological or policy differences. So divided were the factions that local people referred to them as 'parties', and they held 'party meetings', had 'parliamentary boards' and exercised 'party discipline'. The 1963-66 period saw intense factional conflict in all elections between the group led by Kale and that led by Rohmare. In 1967 the two politicians competed for the Congress ticket for the National Assembly. Congress were in a dilemma, but gave the ticket to Kale. Rohmare then declared 'open revolt' to work for Kale's defeat, garnered the support of the opposition parties, and campaigned about local issues. Eventually the opposition appointee Gade won the National Assembly election, and the central party had been defeated by factional rivalry. It seems likely that had Congress given the ticket to Rohmare, Kale would have pursued the same course of action and the opposition would still have triumphed.

In the 1980s factionalism in Congress has become all-pervasive. Indira Gandhi's centralising and authoritarian tendencies caused strain on the federal consensus, and factions have developed around social class, regional diversity, modern and traditional values and simple personal ambition - described by Banfield as 'amoral familism'.

In some ways opposition governments had *more* influence when the authority of the government was stable and continuous due to a large majority. This is because in stable times, factionalism within government is possible and permitted, and because a small majority would increase the temptation to be uncooperative and topple the ruling party completely. It was largely due to the very dominance of Congress at a central level that it was easily able to work with opposition state governments. Opposition parties were able to affect the balance of dominant-dissident relations within Congress; more support for a leftist opposition would generally move the centre of Congress leftwards.

Factionalism was of course not limited to Congress; opposition parties had their own factions as well. Often these were closer in ideology to factions of Congress than the other wings of their own parties, and this undoubtedly benefited centre-state relations. A divided opposition would have made the central Congress party more comfortable with the idea of sharing power and responsibility. Competition within the aspiring elite meant that the dominant elite could play one off against the other, reducing their overall power. Were the opposition parties to have spoken

with one voice, central Congress would have been far more afraid of being totally dominated and would probably have adopted a less cooperative stance towards state governments.

One other reason why Congress governments at the centre have found it easier to work with opposition state governments relates to patronage. Congress gave the country a coherent, unified leadership for the first time, and as such took a role as a national spokesperson and national critic. As Congress was so interlinked with the government bureaucracy, it was necessary for political survival to maintain links with the party, whether one was a dissident faction, opposition party or protest movement. Without links to Congress, opposition parties could quickly end up in the political wilderness. This led to a very open system of dialogue between the rival parties - a phenomenon quite peculiar to India.

Federalism can be seen as a kind of political bargaining - the initiatives are delivered by the centre, while the implementation must be pursued at a regional level. State governors (especially long-serving ones such as B.C. Roy and Kamaraj) would arrive at the national Congress conference well aware of their value to the party and their degree of independence from central support. Opposition leaders were less valuable to central Congress, and as such could not make the same demands on their resources.

Over time the amount of power which could be shared has grown - there is plenty of 'room' for other parties to take a small share of power. Existing elites can share power without fear of being completely displaced. This would not be the case in a nation with limited power to give away, such as one with only a weak central government.

In many other countries the suggestion that a central government from one party would work more effectively with regional opposition governments would seem unusual. In India however, Congress had little to fear from allowing opposition parties some share in power, and due to personal and ideological similarities, the name of the actual controlling party in any particular region did not make as much difference as might be imagined. Indeed, due to the power balance between central government and Congress state governments on the one hand, and opposition state governments on the other, the central party often found it easier to work with the opposition. Other parties were more susceptible to the promise of patronage and their factional division was a benefit to central Congress parties (as it allowed for easier manipulation) rather than a threat, as it was in regional Congress governments. The boundaries between regional factions and opposition parties often seem somewhat blurred - it is no wonder that central Congress governments show no particular preference for either.