



Regional Parties in India: Electoral Stress, Federal Representation and Their Continuing Role in Democratic Politics

Published On: 17-08-2026

Recent Developments:

- The relevance of **regional parties** has become a major political and constitutional debate amid recent electoral setbacks, defections and organisational challenges faced by several State-based parties.
- The apparent decline in the number of States governed independently by regional parties does **not necessarily indicate a proportional decline in their electoral support**, because regional parties continue to exercise considerable influence in State elections and coalition politics.
- The **2024 Lok Sabha election** demonstrated the continuing importance of regional political forces, particularly in States such as Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and West Bengal.
- The Election Commission of India formally recognises political parties as **National Parties and State Parties** under the **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968**; the expression **regional party** is commonly used for parties whose electoral influence is concentrated primarily in one or a few States.
- The debate has gained further importance in the context of **One Nation, One Election**, because simultaneous elections may alter the relative weight of national and State-level political issues. The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections recorded that several political parties expressed concerns about the possible marginalisation of regional parties.

What is the Classification of the Party System in India?:

Political Party and Multi-Party System:

- A **political party** is an association of Indian citizens registered with the **Election Commission of India** under **Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951**. The Election Commission provides for registration of political parties under this provision.
- India follows a **multi-party political system**, in which national and State-level political forces compete at both Union and State levels.
- For electoral purposes, the Election Commission broadly distinguishes between **recognised parties and registered unrecognised parties**.
- Recognised parties are classified as **National Parties and State Parties** under the **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968**.
- A **State Party** is often described as a regional party when its electoral influence is concentrated predominantly within a particular State.
- The Constitution of India did not originally contain a comprehensive constitutional framework for political parties, but the **52nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1985** introduced the **Tenth Schedule**, thereby constitutionally addressing the problem of political defections.

Regional Parties and Federal Politics:

- Regional parties generally emerge from **regional aspirations, linguistic identities, cultural interests, sub-nationalism, State autonomy and State-specific socio-economic concerns**.
- They provide an institutional channel through which regional interests can enter the national policy-making process.
- Their presence therefore strengthens the **federal character of Indian democracy** by preventing political competition from becoming entirely centralised around national parties.

Why is the Political Space for Regional Parties Shrinking in India?:

Rise of Dominant National Parties:

- The expanding **electoral, financial and organisational reach of major national parties** has reduced the independent political space available to several regional parties.
- National parties increasingly possess extensive organisational networks, greater campaign resources and stronger national leadership structures.
- This allows them to compete directly for voters on issues that were previously dominated by State-based political formations.
- However, the exact number of States governed independently by regional parties should be interpreted cautiously because several regional parties also govern through **coalitions with national parties**.

Evolving Role of Regional Parties:

- The evolution of India's party system can broadly be understood through three phases:
- **One-Party Dominance, 1952–1967:** The Congress system dominated politics at both Union and State levels.
- **Rise of Regional Aspirations, 1967–1989:** Linguistic, cultural, caste-based and regional political identities became increasingly significant.
- **Coalition Politics, 1989–2014:** Regional parties acquired greater bargaining power and frequently became **kingmakers** in Union governments.
- The contemporary period has witnessed renewed national-party dominance, which has reduced the bargaining space of some regional parties.
- Nevertheless, the return of coalition dynamics at the Union level in the **2024 Lok Sabha** demonstrates that regional parties can still significantly influence national government formation.

First-Past-the-Post Effect:

- India's **First-Past-the-Post system** converts constituency-level plurality into legislative representation.
- A regional party can therefore lose a substantial number of seats despite experiencing only a modest decline in its overall vote share.
- Conversely, a small increase in votes concentrated in strategically important constituencies can generate a disproportionately large increase in seats.
- Therefore, **seat share alone cannot fully measure the decline or resilience of regional parties**.

Organisational Decay and Dynastic Politics:

- Several regional parties are strongly centred around a **dominant leader or political family**, which can weaken internal democracy and institutional decision-making.
- Limited internal leadership elections and weak mechanisms for leadership succession can produce **succession crises, factionalism and party splits**.
- The concentration of political authority within a family can also restrict opportunities for emerging leaders.
- Capable leaders may consequently migrate towards parties offering stronger organisational structures and greater political opportunities.

Resource Asymmetry:

- Regional parties generally face greater financial and organisational constraints than large national parties.
- Under the current framework, the **candidate expenditure ceiling** for a Lok Sabha constituency in larger States is **₹95 lakh**, while the ceiling for an Assembly constituency is **₹40 lakh**. The corresponding limits in smaller States are **₹75 lakh and ₹28 lakh**, respectively.
- These limits apply to **candidates**, while political parties themselves do not face an equivalent overall statutory ceiling on their aggregate election expenditure.
- Consequently, large national parties with extensive financial networks can possess substantial campaign advantages over resource-constrained regional parties.
- The Election Commission maintains expenditure reporting and transparency mechanisms for recognised political parties, demonstrating the continuing importance of electoral-finance regulation.

Political and Organisational Challenges:

- The **Tenth Schedule** and the **Anti-Defection Law** were introduced to discourage political defections, but their implementation has generated continuing debates over defections, mergers and the role of the Speaker.
- The **two-thirds merger provision** permits legislators to avoid disqualification when a merger is supported by at least two-thirds of the members of the legislature party.
- Critics argue that this provision can facilitate organised political defections and weaken smaller or regional parties.
- Defections can create prolonged **political, constitutional and judicial disputes**, particularly when questions arise regarding the validity of mergers or the authority of the Speaker.
- Allegations concerning selective use of investigative agencies, corruption and the influence of money power can further increase organisational pressure on regional parties.

Shrinking Political Space Through Federal Constraints:

- Regional parties derive much of their political relevance from **State autonomy, fiscal federalism and State-specific policy-making**.
- The discretionary role of Governors, delays in granting assent to State legislation and conditions attached to **Centrally Sponsored Schemes** can affect the policy space available to State governments.
- Greater dependence on Centrally Sponsored Schemes may reduce the flexibility of States to design policies according to their specific developmental requirements.
- **Cesses and surcharges** are not part of the divisible pool of central taxes, and their increasing use can affect the share of resources available to States for discretionary expenditure.
- Article 271 permits Parliament to impose surcharges for Union purposes, but such surcharges are not distributed among States.
- Reduced untied fiscal resources can weaken the capacity of regional governments to deliver State-specific welfare, infrastructure and development programmes.
- National parties can consequently gain political space by presenting themselves as the principal channel through which States access **central resources and development programmes**.

Threats Associated with One Nation, One Election:

- **One Nation, One Election** seeks to synchronise elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, although simultaneous elections do not necessarily require voting across the entire country on a single day.
- Simultaneous elections may increase the visibility of **national security, macroeconomic performance and national leadership** relative to State-specific issues.
- Critics argue that this could disproportionately benefit well-resourced national parties because voters may be more inclined to support the same political formation at both Union and State levels.

- The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections recorded that **15 of the 47 political parties** that submitted views raised concerns about possible anti-democratic effects and the marginalisation of regional parties.
- At the same time, supporters argue that simultaneous elections can reduce electoral expenditure, administrative disruption and repeated enforcement of the **Model Code of Conduct**.
- Therefore, the impact of simultaneous elections on regional parties requires a balanced assessment rather than an assumption of automatic disadvantage.

Shift from Identity Politics to Aspirational Politics:

- Regional parties historically gained support by mobilising around **language, caste, ethnicity, regional identity and State autonomy**.
- Contemporary voters increasingly combine these concerns with expectations relating to **employment, infrastructure, economic growth, public services, welfare delivery and national security**.
- Regional parties that rely exclusively on identity-based mobilisation may therefore face declining appeal among aspirational voters.
- Their long-term survival increasingly depends on combining **regional identity with credible governance and development-oriented politics**.

Evidence of Resilience:

Stable Electoral Support:

- The decline in the number of States independently governed by regional parties does not necessarily establish a corresponding decline in their **electoral relevance**.
- Regional parties continue to command a substantial share of votes in Lok Sabha elections and remain particularly influential in State-level elections.
- The **2024 Lok Sabha election** showed that regional parties and State-based political formations remained central to electoral competition across several major States.
- Vote share should nevertheless be interpreted alongside the number of constituencies contested because parties contesting different numbers of seats cannot be compared solely on aggregate vote share.

Assembly-Level Strength:

- Regional parties often perform more strongly in **State Assembly elections** than in simultaneous or separate national elections.
- This reflects the continued importance of **State-specific political identities, local leadership and regional governance performance**.
- Voters can distinguish between their preferences for Union and State governments, demonstrating that Indian electoral behaviour is not necessarily determined by a single national political narrative.

Coalition Relevance:

- Regional parties remain important **coalition partners** at both Union and State levels.
- Their importance becomes particularly visible when no single national party obtains sufficient seats to form a government independently.
- Regional parties can therefore influence **government formation, ministerial allocation, legislative bargaining and policy priorities** even without independently leading a government.
- The 2024 Lok Sabha election again demonstrated the strategic importance of regional allies in the formation and functioning of the Union government.

Federal Representation:

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- Regional parties provide institutional representation to **State-specific interests** that may not receive adequate emphasis in national party agendas.
- They can raise issues relating to **language, culture, State finances, resource allocation, regional infrastructure and Centre-State relations** at the national level.
- Their presence therefore contributes to **cooperative and competitive federalism**.

Why Regional Parties Remain Important for Indian Democracy?:

Protection of Regional Aspirations:

- Regional parties provide political representation to communities whose interests may be geographically concentrated in particular States or regions.
- They can convert regional grievances into **constitutional and democratic political demands** rather than allowing such grievances to remain outside institutional politics.

Strengthening Federalism:

- Regional parties act as an important political counterweight to excessive centralisation.
- Their participation in Union governments can strengthen the bargaining position of States on issues involving **tax devolution, centrally sponsored schemes, language, resources and development priorities**.
- They therefore contribute to the practical functioning of **Indian cooperative federalism**.

Political Competition:

- Regional parties increase the number of viable political alternatives available to voters.
- Competition between national and regional parties can encourage governments to improve **governance, welfare delivery and responsiveness to local concerns**.

Accommodation of Diversity:

- India's linguistic, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic diversity makes political accommodation essential for democratic stability.
- Regional parties can provide an institutional mechanism through which this diversity is incorporated into the political system.
- Strong regional representation can therefore support the constitutional principle of “**Unity in Diversity**”.

What Measures Can Strengthen Regional Parties?:

State Funding of Elections:

- **Partial State funding of elections**, as recommended by the **Indrajit Gupta Committee, 1998**, can reduce the financial disparity between large national parties and smaller regional parties.
- Public funding should be accompanied by strong **transparency, auditing and disclosure requirements** to prevent misuse of public resources.
- Such reforms can shift electoral competition towards **policies, governance and organisational capacity rather than financial power**.

Curbing Wholesale Defections:

- The **two-thirds merger provision** under the Tenth Schedule should be examined because organised defections can weaken regional parties.
- Removing the merger exception or introducing stricter safeguards could reduce incentives for large-scale political defections.

- The objective should be to protect legislators from coercive party control while preventing **engineered defections for political gain**.

Independent Adjudication of Defection Cases:

- The **Dinesh Goswami Committee, 1990** recommended that questions of disqualification should be decided by the President or Governor on the advice of the Election Commission rather than by the Speaker or Chairman.
- The **Law Commission's 170th Report, 1999** recommended transferring adjudicatory authority to an independent tribunal.
- The **National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, 2002** also supported an institutional mechanism independent of the legislature.
- An independent adjudicatory mechanism can reduce perceptions of **partisan decision-making** in defection cases.

Enhancing Intra-Party Democracy:

- Regional parties should strengthen **internal elections, transparent candidate selection, collective decision-making and institutionalised leadership succession**.
- Developing a second rung of leadership can reduce dependence on a single political family or personality.
- Institutionalisation can prevent party fragmentation during leadership transitions.

Re-evaluating One Nation, One Election:

- Any implementation of **simultaneous elections** should consider its potential consequences for regional political competition.
- Constitutional and institutional safeguards should ensure that **State-specific issues are not overshadowed by national narratives**.
- The High-Level Committee proposed constitutional changes involving **Articles 82A and 324A** for implementing simultaneous elections.
- Any reform should therefore balance the objectives of electoral efficiency with **federal representation and political pluralism**.

Addressing Delimitation Concerns:

- The impending **delimitation exercise** has major implications for the federal balance because population-based representation can alter the relative political weight of different States.
- States that achieved greater success in **population stabilisation** should not be disproportionately disadvantaged for their demographic achievements.
- Delimitation should therefore balance the principles of **democratic representation, federal equity and population-based representation**.

Governance Innovations:

- Regional parties should move from exclusive dependence on primordial identities towards **developmental regionalism**.
- Developmental regionalism can combine regional cultural identity with measurable governance outcomes.
- Regional governments should focus on **infrastructure, health, education, employment, investment, fiscal prudence and efficient public service delivery**.
- Strong State-specific governance models can enable regional parties to remain relevant even when national parties expand their organisational presence.

Way Forward:

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Institutional Reforms:

- Strengthen **intra-party democracy, financial transparency and independent adjudication of defection cases.**
- Reform electoral financing to reduce excessive resource asymmetry between national and regional parties.
- Ensure that political reforms do not unintentionally weaken **political pluralism and federal representation.**

Federal Reforms:

- Strengthen **cooperative federalism** through predictable fiscal transfers, greater consultation with States and greater flexibility in centrally sponsored programmes.
- Establish clearer constitutional conventions regarding the **Governor's role** in matters involving State legislation and government formation.
- Maintain an appropriate balance between national priorities and State-specific developmental requirements.

Political Reorientation:

- Regional parties should combine **regional identity, good governance and developmental performance.**
- Leadership should become more institutional rather than being concentrated entirely around a political family.
- Regional parties should build durable organisations capable of surviving changes in individual leadership.

Conclusion:

- Regional parties are **not necessarily losing their political relevance; rather, they are undergoing a major structural stress test.**
- Their electoral challenges arise from the growing organisational strength of national parties, resource asymmetry, defections, leadership concentration and changing voter aspirations.
- However, their continuing importance in State elections, coalition governments and Centre–State bargaining demonstrates that Indian politics cannot be understood solely through the lens of national parties.
- A healthy democracy requires **strong national parties as well as effective regional voices** so that India's social, linguistic, cultural and economic diversity receives meaningful political representation.
- The future of regional parties will depend on their ability to transform from **personality-driven and identity-centred organisations into institutionally strong, development-oriented and democratically accountable political formations.**

Value Addition for UPSC:

Constitutional Linkages:

- **Article 324:** Provides for the superintendence, direction and control of elections by the Election Commission of India.
- **Article 271:** Permits Parliament to impose a surcharge on certain taxes and duties for Union purposes; such surcharge is not distributed among States.
- **Article 263:** Provides for an **Inter-State Council**, which can facilitate coordination between the Union and States.
- **Seventh Schedule:** Distributes legislative subjects between the Union and States and forms a core component of India's federal structure.
- **Tenth Schedule:** Provides the constitutional framework for dealing with **disqualification on grounds of defection.**

Important Committees and Reports:

- **Indrajit Gupta Committee, 1998:** Recommended State funding of elections.

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- **Dinesh Goswami Committee, 1990:** Recommended reforms relating to electoral law and defection adjudication.
- **Law Commission, 170th Report, 1999:** Recommended an independent mechanism for deciding defection cases.
- **National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, 2002:** Supported an independent mechanism for adjudicating defection cases.
- **High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, 2024:** Examined the constitutional, administrative and electoral implications of simultaneous elections and proposed a phased approach.

UPSC Mains Analytical Framework:

- **Political relevance:** Regional parties remain important because electoral support and governmental power are not identical indicators of political influence.
- **Federal relevance:** Regional parties institutionalise State-specific aspirations within India's federal framework.
- **Democratic relevance:** They promote political competition and provide alternatives to national parties.
- **Governance relevance:** Their long-term survival increasingly depends on measurable development outcomes rather than identity mobilisation alone.
- **Reform relevance:** Electoral-finance reform, intra-party democracy, anti-defection reform and balanced simultaneous-election design can strengthen political pluralism.

Possible UPSC Mains Question:

“The apparent decline of regional parties in electoral power does not necessarily signify their decline in political relevance.” Discuss in the context of Indian federalism and coalition politics.