

Chapter- 6

Political Parties

STUDY NOTES

Why Do We Need Political Parties?

A Political Party is a group of people who come together to contest elections and hold power in the government. They agree on some policies and programmes for the society with a view to promote the collective good. Parties reflect fundamental political divisions in a society. Thus a party is known by which part it stands for, which policies it supports and whose interests it upholds. A political party has three components:

- The leaders
- The active members
- The followers

Functions of Political Parties

Political parties fill political offices and exercise political power. Parties do so by performing a series of functions mentioned below:

1. Parties contest elections.
2. Parties put forward different policies and programmes and the voters choose from them.
3. Parties play a decisive role in making laws for a country.
4. Parties form and run governments.
5. Those parties that lose in the elections play the role of opposition to the parties in power, by voicing different views and criticising the government for its failures or wrong policies.
6. Parties shape public opinion.
7. Parties provide people access to government machinery and welfare schemes implemented by governments.

The Necessity of Political Parties

We need political parties because they perform all the functions which are mentioned above. Apart from this, political parties help in representing different

views on various issues to the government. They bring various representatives together so that a responsible government could be formed. They work as a mechanism to support or restrain the government, make policies, justify or oppose them. Political parties fulfil the needs that every representative government has.

How Many Parties Should We Have?

In a democracy, any group of citizens is free to form a political party. More than 750 parties are registered with the Election Commission of India. But not all these parties are serious contenders in the elections. So the question, then is: how many major or effective parties are good for democracy?

In some countries, only one party is allowed to control and run the government. These are called one-party systems. This system is not considered as a good option for democracy.

In some countries, power usually changes between the two main parties. Such a party system is called a two-party system. Eg: The United States of America and the United Kingdom.

If several parties compete for power, and more than two parties have a reasonable chance of coming to power either on their own strength or in alliance with others, it is called a multiparty system. Eg: India.

When several parties in a multi-party system join hands for the purpose of contesting elections and winning power, it is called an alliance or a front.

National Parties

Every party in the country has to register with the Election Commission. It offers some special facilities for large and established parties. The Election Commission has laid down detailed criteria of the proportion of votes and seats that a party must get in order to be a recognised party.

1. A party that secures at least 6% of the total votes in an election to the Legislative Assembly of a State and wins at least 2 seats is recognised as a State Party.
2. A party that secures at least 6% of the total votes in Lok Sabha elections or Assembly elections in 4 States and wins at least 4 seats in the Lok Sabha is recognised as a National Party.

Major National Parties in India

There were 7 recognised national parties in the country in 2018. Here are the details of these parties:

1) All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)

- Launched on 1 January 1998 under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee.
- Recognised as a national party in 2016.
- The party's symbol is flowers and grass.
- Committed to secularism and federalism.
- Has been in power in West Bengal since 2011 and has a presence in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Tripura.
- In the General Elections held in 2014, it got 3.84% votes and won 34 seats, making it the fourth-largest party in the Lok Sabha.

2) Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP):

- Formed in 1984 under the leadership of Kanshi Ram.
- Seeks to represent and secure power for the Bahujan samaj which includes the Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs and religious minorities.
- Stands for the cause of securing the interests and welfare of the Dalits and oppressed people.
- It has its main base in the state of Uttar Pradesh and substantial presence in neighbouring states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Delhi and Punjab.
- Formed government in UP several times by taking the support of different parties at different times.

3) Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

- Founded in 1980, formed by Syama Prasad Mukherjee in 1951.
- Wants to build a strong and modern India by drawing inspiration from India's ancient culture and values, and Deendayal Upadhyaya's ideas of integral humanism and Agyatvad.
- Cultural nationalism (or 'Hindutva') is an important element in its conception of Indian nationhood and politics.

- Earlier limited to north and west and to urban areas, the party expanded its support in the south, east, the north-east and to rural areas.
- Emerged as the largest party with 282 members in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

4) Communist Party of India (CPI):

- Formed in 1925. Believes in Marxism-Leninism, secularism and democracy.
- Opposed to the forces of secessionism and communalism.
- Accepts parliamentary democracy as a means of promoting the interests of the working class, farmers and the poor.
- Significant presence in the states of Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.
- It secured less than 1 per cent votes and 1 seat in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

5) Communist Party of India – Marxist (CPI-M):

- Founded in 1964. Believes in Marxism-Leninism. Supports socialism, secularism and democracy and opposes imperialism and communalism.
- Accepts democratic elections as a useful and helpful means for securing the objective of socio-economic justice in India.
- Enjoys strong support in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.
- The party was in power in West Bengal without a break for 34 years.
- In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, it won about 3% of votes and 9 seats.

6) Indian National Congress (INC):

- Popularly known as the Congress Party. One of the oldest parties of the world. Founded in 1885 and has experienced many splits.
- Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the party sought to build a modern secular democratic republic in India.
- The ruling party at the centre till 1977 and then from 1980 to 1989. After 1989, its support declined, but it continues to be present throughout the country.
- The party's main idea is to promote secularism and welfare of weaker sections and minorities.

7) Nationalist Congress Party (NCP):

- Formed in 1999 following a split in the Congress party.
- Supports democracy, Gandhian secularism, equity, social justice and federalism.
- A major party in Maharashtra and has a significant presence in Meghalaya, Manipur and Assam.
- A coalition partner in the state of Maharashtra in alliance with the Congress. Since 2004, a member of the United Progressive Alliance.

State Parties

The Election Commission has classified some of the major parties of the country as "State parties". These are also referred to as regional parties. Some of these parties are:

- Biju Janata Dal
- Sikkim Democratic Front
- Mizo National Front
- Telangana Rashtra Samithi

Challenges to Political Parties

Popular dissatisfaction and criticism have focussed on 4 problem areas in the working of political parties. These are:

1. Lack of internal democracy within parties. Parties do not keep membership registers, do not hold organisational meetings, and do not conduct internal elections regularly.
2. Most political parties do not practice open and transparent procedures for their functioning, so there are very few ways for an ordinary worker to rise to the top in a party. In many parties, the top positions are always controlled by members of one family.
3. The third challenge is about the growing role of money and muscle power in parties, especially during elections. Since parties are focussed only on winning elections, they tend to use short-cuts to win elections. In some cases, parties support criminals who can win elections.

4. People do not find parties to be a meaningful choice for their votes. Sometimes people cannot even elect very different leaders either, because the same set of leaders keep shifting from one party to another.

How can Parties be Reformed?

Have a look at some of the recent efforts and suggestions to reform political parties and its leaders in India. Some efforts are listed below:

1. The Constitution was amended to prevent elected MLAs and MPs from changing parties.
2. The Supreme Court passed an order to reduce the influence of money and criminals. Now, it is mandatory for every candidate who contests elections to file an AFFIDAVIT giving details of his property and criminal cases pending against him.
3. The Election Commission passed an order making it necessary for political parties to hold their organisational elections and file their income tax returns



Besides these, many suggestions are made to reform political parties. These suggestions have not yet been accepted by political parties.

1. A law should be made to regulate the internal affairs of political parties.
2. It should be made mandatory for political parties to give a minimum number of tickets, about one-third, to women candidates. Similarly, there should be a quota for women in the decision making bodies of the party.
3. There should be state funding of elections. The government should give parties money to support their election expenses.

There are two other ways in which political parties can be reformed.

1. People can put pressure on political parties. This can be done through petitions, publicity and agitations.
2. Political parties can improve if people who want change can join political parties. It is difficult to reform politics if ordinary citizens do not take part in it and simply criticise it from the outside.