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978-1-107-11868-3 - Why Regional Parties?: Clientelism, Elites, and the Indian Party System

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Excerpt

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Introduction

Keeping up with politics in different parts of India often feels like following politics in different countries. The main political parties, important leaders, influential social groups, and relevant political ideologies can differ starkly across surprisingly small distances. Consider, for example, the 2014 national election. Although the media characterized the election as a fight between the ascendant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Narendra Modi, and the Indian National Congress (INC or Congress), the scandal-ridden incumbent, nearly a third of India's 543 electoral constituencies did not even have candidates from both parties running. Furthermore, in more than 60% of constituencies, the BJP and Congress candidates together won less than three-quarters of the vote. Instead, in much of the country, other parties and leaders – whose names rarely appear in newspapers outside of India – hold considerable sway.

In the state of West Bengal, in eastern India, the election was primarily a struggle between a group of Marxist parties, known as the Left Front, and a regional party that had broken away from Congress in the 1990s. Even this characterization glosses over considerable variation within the state. In the constituencies situated in the narrow sliver of land sandwiched between Bangladesh and Nepal, known as the “chicken's neck,” Congress was one of the main contenders, though its candidates could not muster more than single-digit vote shares elsewhere in the state. Meanwhile, politics in the southern state of Tamil Nadu could hardly have been more different. The main parties in West Bengal were either entirely absent or very minor players in Tamil Nadu. The race in Tamil Nadu was a three-way contest in which two of the main players were the ethno-nationalist regional parties that have dominated elections in the state since the late 1970s. The third was an alliance including the BJP and several smaller regional parties.

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governments at the expense of nationally oriented programs (Castañeda-Angarita 2013), and undermine the stability of federal political systems (Filippov et al. 2004). Whether for good or for bad, regional political parties fundamentally alter the politics of the countries where they are present, prompting the question: Why are these parties electorally successful in some places and at some times but not others?

This question is nowhere more relevant than in India, where almost 240 million citizens cast their votes for a regional political party in 2014. Since the late 1990s, regional parties have won at least 40% of the vote, more than in almost any other country in the world. Many of India's regional parties are tiny. The larger ones receive 1% to 4% of the vote, but many others – even those winning legislative representation – win far less. Such parties garner little scholarly attention and even less attention in the international media. Yet, they remain fixtures in Indian politics, wielding power and influencing the lives of tens of millions of people. Why are regional parties in India so successful, especially compared to most other countries in the world? Why has their success varied over time and across space? In answering these questions about India's regional parties, this book advances generalizable claims about regional party success that apply to countries around the world.

This book's other major aim is more general: to explore the formation of party systems in places where policy and ideology take a backseat in electoral politics. This book offers a way to think about the success of political parties in times and places where parties win support primarily through clientelism: the discretionary and individualized allocation of goods, services, and state capacity. When trying to understand the formation and evolution of party systems – that is, the set of political parties that successfully compete in elections – the prevailing approach in political science has long placed voters' policy preferences, identities, and allegiances front and center. To understand a country's party system, political scientists have typically focused on a country's primary social and political cleavages (whether based on ideology, class, sector, religiosity, ethnicity, etc.) and then examined whether a country's electoral institutions readily allow parties representing each of these political and social groups to gain legislative representation. More recently, scholars have begun exploring why some dimensions of difference become politicized while others do not. These approaches implicitly presume that politics is programmatic, that parties win support thanks to their messages and policy proposals, and that voters vote primarily based on their beliefs about which party will best represent their interests, material or otherwise. However, in many places in the world, politics is not predominantly programmatic, nor was politics always programmatic in places where it is today. Consequently, political scientists need a way to think about party systems that rests on clientelistic, rather than programmatic, foundations. In articulating such an approach, I build on party systems research that argues for an elite-centered, or "top down," understanding of party system formation and change.

These two aims – accounting for the success of India’s regional parties and thinking about party systems under conditions of clientelism – are complementary. Given characterizations of India as a democracy where clientelism is widespread (Chandra 2004, Wilkinson 2007, Wilkinson 2014), a satisfactory explanation for the success of India’s regional parties cannot rely on embedded assumptions that politics is programmatic; rather, it requires an approach that takes clientelism into consideration. To foreshadow the main claims developed throughout this book, I argue that in clientelistic democracies, of which India is one example, elites’ preferences, strategic choices, and career ambitions – not voters’ policy preferences or identities – determine which kinds of political parties are electorally successful. Of course, voters determine which party – whether, say, Party A or Party B – wins more votes. However, when parties win votes through clientelism, elites have tremendous latitude over the directions that their parties take. Although voters might determine whether Party A or Party B wins more votes, elites decide whether Party A and Party B are regional or national parties, left-wing parties or right-wing parties, or parties of any other type. Because elites decide whether electorally successful parties are of one type or another, they ultimately decide whether party systems include regional parties or national parties. In other words, in a clientelistic democracy, the presence of successful regional parties means that regional parties serve elites’ interests and career ambitions, not that the voting public has a strong affinity for regional parties or what they stand for.

Using this elite-centered approach, I advance three new elite-based explanations for the success of regional parties, each of which addresses a different kind of variation: cross-national, longitudinal, and subnational. First, the combination of clientelism and political institutions friendly to regional parties explains cross-national variation in regional party success because clientelism raises the costs of building national parties, and permissive institutions allow politicians to establish and join regional parties without suffering career setbacks. Second, a shift from single-party majority to coalition government (or vice versa) results in over-time variation in the success of regional parties because the benefits to membership in a regional party are much higher for politicians when coalition governments are the norm. Third, different factional alignments within a region’s elite account for subnational variation in regional party success. Whereas certain factional alignments ease the formation of national parties (as when a region’s elite sorts into multiple factions concerned mainly with winning the spoils of power), other patterns of factional sorting make the formation of national parties a costlier enterprise (such as when a part of the elite sorts into a highly ideological faction or forms a faction that is unsustainable in the long run). All three of these explanations rely on elites to explain regional party success.

As the pages to come will make abundantly clear, all three of these explanations emphasize the costs and benefits facing ambitious, career-conscious elites. When joining regional parties comes at considerable cost, elites will tend

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to avoid them in favor of national parties. But, when regional parties are cheap, expedient options that allow elites to advance their careers and retain access to important resources and centers of power, then politicians will frequently opt to establish and join regional parties. Meanwhile, conventional explanations that link regional party success either to voters' ethnic or economic grievances cannot adequately account for why, when, and where India's regional parties are electorally successful.

THE PHENOMENON AND WHY IT MATTERS

I define a party as regional or national based on the geography of its supporters. A regional party is a party whose votes are geographically concentrated in a small part of a country. Put another way, when one or a small number of regions monopolizes a party's votes, supplying all or most of its electoral support, then a party is regional. A national party is one whose votes are dispersed across many or all regions. Defined in this way, regional parties are a heterogeneous group. Some defend the interests of an ethnically or geographically defined region or have ties to a regionally concentrated ethnic group. Thus, some could be thought of as ethnic parties, though many could not. Others have ideological commitments that lie elsewhere, ranging from Marxism to religious fundamentalism. This category encompasses parties that are both intentionally and unintentionally regional. Intentionally regional parties consist of those parties that consciously limit their political activity to a specific region, whether out of ideological conviction or shrewd calculation that the cost of expanding the party's scope will be too high. Independent candidates also count as intentionally regional parties since an independent candidate is tantamount to a party contesting in a single constituency but whose party label is her name. Unintentional regional parties are those that ideally aspire to national party status but find their successes limited to a relatively small geographic area. Such parties may be unsuccessful in securing a national reach but quite successful as regional parties.

Differences among them notwithstanding, regional parties together constitute a coherent category of parties worth studying as a group. Regional parties of all stripes share a key characteristic that has profound implications: their absence across much, usually most, of a country. In terms of explanation, regional parties' highly circumscribed geographic support bases may reflect a common set of constraints or opportunities to which they respond, whether overtly or not. Although some parties' failures to win votes in large parts of a country may appear self-imposed thanks to a stated commitment to a particular region's interests, such a decision might actually reflect failed prior efforts at winning a national following, expectations of failure in expanding beyond a party's initial base, or an assessment that the costs of expansion are too high to incur. Moreover, if unhappy with their regional support base, leaders can merge their regional party into an existing national one. In this way, even for

parties that are unintentionally regional, remaining a regional party nevertheless constitutes a conscious choice. Thus, it would be a mistake to automatically assume that the same factors cannot explain both the success of regional parties that consciously limit their geographic scope as well as those that aspire (but fail to achieve) national status.

In terms of their practical impact on democratic politics, because regional parties draw support from only a small portion of a country, as compared to their national party rivals, they face very different pressures when campaigning and in office. Whereas regional parties can lavish resources and attention on a relatively small clientele, national parties must balance the demands of voters across an entire country. This remains true regardless of a regional party's ideological leanings or aspirations. Indeed, whenever a national government must distribute resources across its regions, the outcome preferred by a regional party – with its supporters concentrated in one or a few regions – should almost always differ from that of a national party trying to satisfy citizens across the country. A regional party's ability to press for the interests of a relatively narrow geographic area can have both positive and negative results. On the one hand, small parties that depend solely on votes from a local clientele can potentially offer voice to those who are unrepresented or whose needs might be overlooked by large, national parties that habitually privilege the demands of wealthy, influential, or populous places. On the other hand, a regional party's narrow support base may empower it to pursue parochial policies that harm the national interest.

Furthermore, regional parties raise thorny questions about accountability and the meaning of elections in a democracy. Even as both supranational organizations and subnational governments in many countries have gained power over the past several decades, national governments remain, in most countries, the primary locus of policy-making power. Democratic accountability should therefore require that voters be able to sanction or endorse the activities of their national government. However, regional parties ensure that such accountability is not always possible. A regional party might solicit support in a very small part of a country but then earn a place in the national government. From this position, a regional party can potentially exert influence over the citizenry as a whole. However, the majority of voters would have no way to hold that regional party accountable for its role in government since the party does not compete in most parts of the country.

Regional parties also complicate the meaning of elections. If regional parties are better, more faithful representatives of certain voters than national parties ever can be, then regional parties render elections more meaningful for providing voters with a richer set of choices potentially better able to represent them. However, the presence of strong regional parties make understanding voters' choices that much more complicated. What do national elections mean when all voters do not face the same set of party options? To illustrate, two voters might cast a ballot for the same national party that embraces a center-right politics.

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Suppose, however, that for one voter the main alternative to the center-right national party is a far-right regional party, while another voter's main alternative is a left-wing regional party. In this example, a vote for the center-right party in one region as opposed to the far-right party may mean a push to move policy leftward, while in the other region, where a voter has rejected the left-wing party's appeals, the vote is a push to move policy rightward. When voters face different choices, votes cast for the same party may mean very different things, thereby complicating the already fraught endeavor of trying to discern an election's mandate.

The impact that regional parties have on distribution, responsiveness, accountability, and representation differs from that of even national parties with highly uneven bases of political support – what researchers often call weakly nationalized parties. An example of a weakly nationalized party would be the Worker's Party (PT) in Brazil, whose presidential candidate in 2010 won a low of 24% of the vote in first-round balloting in Acre and a high of 71% in Maranhao. Historically, South Korea's main political parties have also enjoyed widely varying support bases across regions. For instance, in 2012, the New Frontier Party (*Saenuri-dang*) won 60% of the vote in the metropolitan city of Daegu but only 5% in Gwangju. Parties such as these are substantively different from regional parties. Weakly nationalized parties must still balance the interests of voters across the country, even if pressures are more intense from some regions than others; their presence in all parts of a country means that all voters have the opportunity to signal their endorsement for or displeasure with the party by voting for it or withdrawing their support; and understanding the electoral mandate becomes substantially easier when all major parties are active in all corners of the country. In these various ways, regional parties are distinct from their cousins, weakly nationalized parties, and merit particular attention.

Finally, regional parties are relevant across the globe. They are found the world over, whereas indigenous parties are limited mainly to Latin America; Islamist parties are a feature of politics in North Africa, the Middle East, and some parts of Asia; and nativist far-right parties and green parties are found mainly in Europe. In some countries, regional parties rival or even surpass national parties in electoral importance. One such country is, of course, India.

QUESTIONS

One of political science's most enduring preoccupations is why countries have different party systems. Investigating why regional parties are more electorally successful in some places, and at some times, is simply another, more focused, way of asking: What explains why party systems vary over time and space? To better understand the conditions that produce electorally successful regional parties, this book poses three variants of the same question

about regional party success, each of which reflects more specific empirical questions related to regional parties in India.

First, why are regional parties more successful in some countries than others? Figure 1.1 depicts the varying success of regional parties in 111 countries, all of which have half a million inhabitants or more and held at least minimally competitive elections at some point in the 2000s. Non-democracies, countries with small populations, and countries for which data are not available are not depicted on the map. Of the remaining countries, darker shades of gray indicate higher vote shares won by regional parties. Lighter shades of gray indicate lower vote shares for regional parties. White indicates countries in which regional parties did not win any votes. Figure 1.1 reveals considerable variation across countries in the vote share won by regional parties. At one extreme, countries such as Indonesia, Mexico, and Russia do not have regional parties. At the other extreme, regional parties win vote shares on par with national parties. In total, nine countries in Figure 1.1 have regional party vote shares greater than 40%: Argentina, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Comoros, India, Malawi, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. Why are regional parties so successful in this highly heterogeneous group of countries? In particular, what explains the persistently high levels of electoral success that regional parties have long enjoyed in India? Since India's first post-independence elections held in late 1951 and early 1952, regional parties have never won less than 19% of the national vote. This record of electoral success over sixteen successive elections is nearly unparalleled.

Second, why does the success of regional parties vary over time within a country? Figure 1.2 shows regional party vote shares in Indian national elections over time. During India's first four decades as an independent country, the vote share for regional parties ebbed and flowed but remained between about 20% to 30% of the vote. In the 1990s, however, regional party vote shares quickly increased, reaching approximately 45% of the vote. Since 1998, the regional party vote share has remained stable, with no signs that it is likely to return to its pre-1990s levels (Jaffrelot and Verniers 2011). Even in the 2014 national election, whose predominant narrative has involved the BJP's striking success, regional parties still won more than 40% of the vote. What explains the sudden, swift (and ultimately durable) party system change involving the rise of regional parties in India in the 1990s?

Third, what accounts for subnational variation in regional party success? Figure 1.3 depicts the vote shares won by regional parties in the 2014 national election across India's states. As with Figure 1.1, dark shades of gray indicate higher regional party vote shares; lighter shades of gray indicate lower regional party vote shares. In some of India's states, such as Gujarat in west India or Madhya Pradesh in central India, regional parties are marginal forces. In a handful of states – Tamil Nadu in the south and West Bengal in the east – regional parties dominate party politics, with national parties relegated to secondary roles. Finally, in the plurality of states, regional parties occupy an

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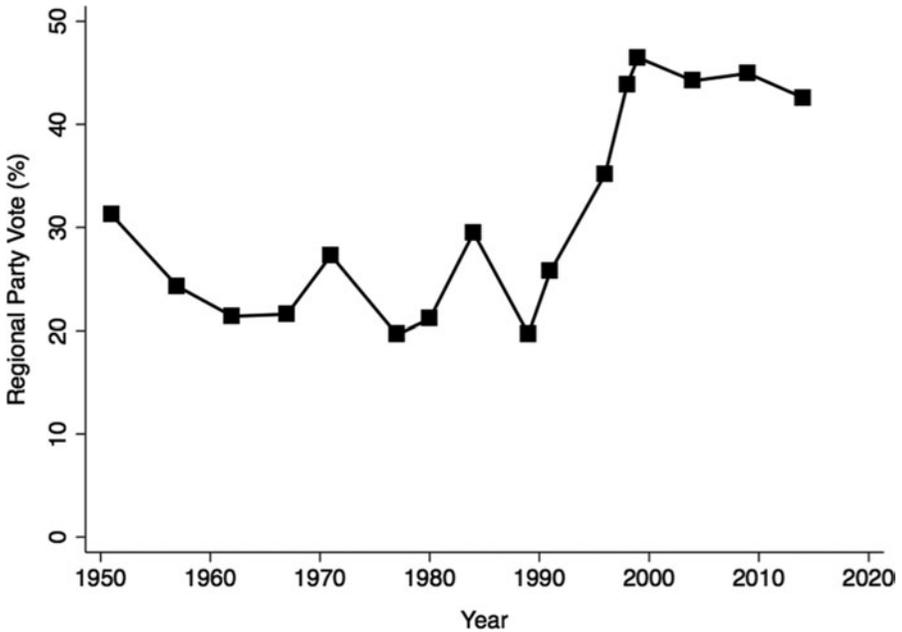


FIGURE 1.2 Regional Party Vote Shares in India over Time

intermediate position, where a regional party is often one of the state's two major parties. What can account for this tremendous spatial variation in the success of regional parties within the same country?

PREVIOUS EXPLANATIONS

To date, few political scientists have sought to explain the success of regional parties as defined by the geography of their supporters. Most prior studies instead focus on one of two related phenomena, regionalist parties or party system nationalization.

The Sociological Approach to Regionalist Parties

Regionalist parties are a subset of regional parties. A regionalist party is defined by its regional message, not its regional geography. It is a party that overtly represents itself as a champion of one particular region or set of regions to the exclusion of others, and that makes such a representation central to its strategy of mobilizing voters.¹ Thus, regionalist parties are regional parties that also

¹ This definition comes verbatim from Chandra's (2004) definition of an ethnic party. Where she uses the term "ethnic category," I use "region."

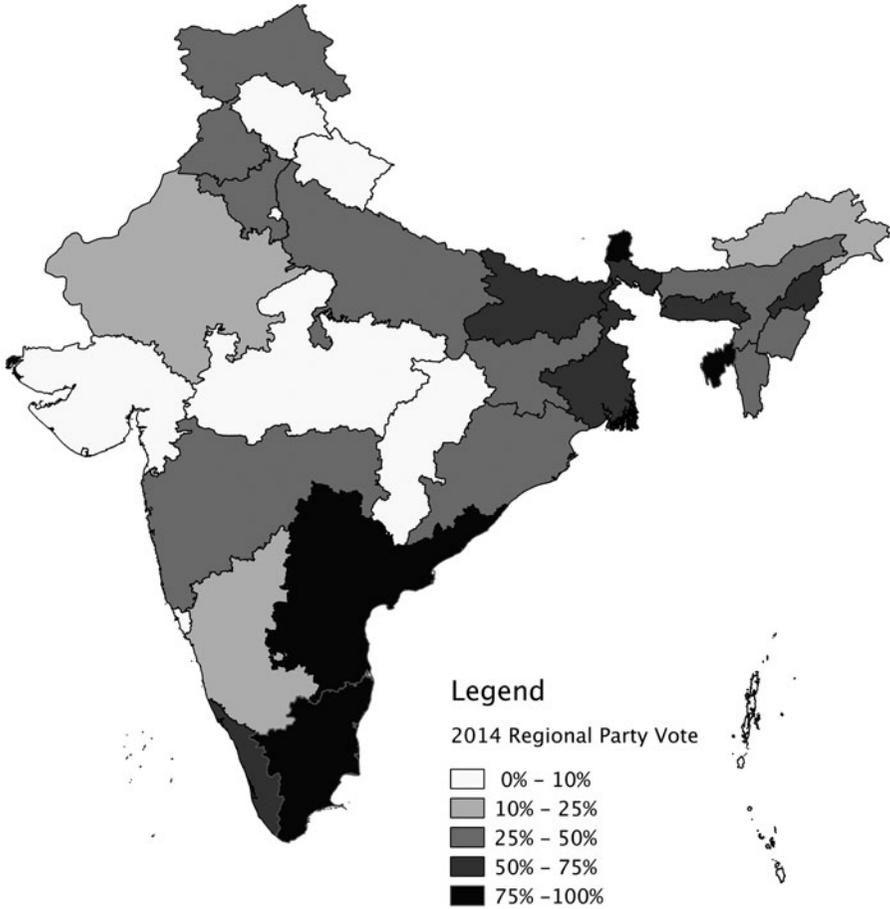


FIGURE 1.3 Regional Party Vote across Indian States (2014)

have regional messages. However, many regional parties are not regionalist, as they do not make representation of a region or regions central to their messages. To explain regionalist party success, scholars have looked primarily at the sociological underpinnings of voter support for parties that position themselves as advocates for their regions, paying much attention to the grievances that motivate the desire to vote for a regionalist party.

The grievances thought to fuel support for regionalist parties are usually cultural, economic, or some combination of the two. Ethno-cultural arguments draw attention to grievances associated with geographically concentrated ethnic minorities that often reflect a longstanding center-periphery cleavage that survived political and economic modernization (Caramani 2004). In many instances, histories of discrimination against ethnic minorities and attempts to culturally homogenize the country further politicize minority ethnic identities.