

Party System

The meaning of party system is related to number of political parties in a country.

Based on the numbers of parties present in political system, party systems generally can be categorized as single party system, two-party system or multiparty system. As their names suggest, the single party, two-party and multi-

party systems denote presence of single, two or several parties in a democracy.

The most common way to identify party systems in India generally is the level of

performance of parties in elections and their presence in the governments.

Presence of more than one party is a feature of a democratic and plural society.

Presence of several parties has been an important aspect of party system in India.

However, number of party systems changed in India since the 1950s. As you will

read section 1.3, the party system which existed during the first decades following

Independence was marked by the dominance of the Congress a single party. It

was a period of one party dominance but not of the absence of more than one

parties. The period of 1950s-1960s was described as an era of single party dominance by Rajni Kothari. During this period the Congress was the single

dominant party in India. This period was known as era of Congress dominance.

The single party dominance did not mean that there existed only one party in

India. What it means was that apart from the Congress there existed several

parties such as the Communist Party of India (CPI), different socialist parties,

Swatantra Party, Republican Party of India, Jana Sangha, etc., in different states

of India. But among these, it was only the Congress Party, which had presence in

all states and led governments at the same time at the centre and in most states of

India. From the late 1960s, the Congress did not remain a single dominant party.

It was defeated by the non-Congress parties in eight states in the assembly elections held in 1967. Since then, apart from Congress, non-Congress parties

formed governments in the centre and several states. It signified the presence of

multi-party system in India. Two-party system denotes presence of predominantly

two parties. In India, two-party system generally prevails in some states. Presence

of two-party system does not mean that more than two parties are not present in

such states. What it means that among several parties, two parties are most

influential. In such system, two parties form governments at different times: one

being a ruling party in one government, and opposition in another, and vice-versa. Some scholars such as Sanjay Palshikar and Yogendra Yadav prefer to

categorise party systems in terms of poles. Meaning of party system should not

be confused with categorization of parties such as national, state/regional or

registered. The two are different. The political system, as you have just read is about number of parties, and their performance in elections and participation in

governments. The categorization of parties is done on the basis of their registration

with Election Commission of India. Election commission has categorised three

kinds of political parties in India: National, State/Regional and Registered Parties.

You will read about the categorization of parties in unit 2. At present, India has

almost 2400 political parties of which there are 7 National Parties, 36 state-recognized parties, 329 regional parties and almost 2044 registered/unrecognized parties.