Inheriting Victory:  
Congress Dominance and Decline in India

Adam Ziegfeld
Beloit College
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Abstract
What explains the electoral dominance of the Indian National Congress during India’s first four post-independence decades, and what explains its subsequent decline? Traditional explanations emphasize Congress’ legitimacy, leadership, and a centrist ideological consensus. By contrast, I focus on two important features of colonial politics—the issues that animated colonial politics and the relatively modest emphasis placed on elections as compared to mass mobilization—that created the conditions for Congress dominance. These conditions consisted of important organizational and patronage advantages for Congress as well as a fragmented opposition that was ill equipped to navigate the country’s single-member district plurality (SMDP) electoral system. Later, as these advantages diminished and the opposition consolidated, single party dominance gave way to a more competitive national party system.

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The Indian National Congress (or, simply, Congress) is an unusual case, even within the already rare breed of dominant parties. Unlike many of its democratic brethren that governed as the heads of multiparty coalitions or minority governments, Congress governed alone during its tenure as a dominant party. Yet, unlike many of the other dominant parties that governed alone but presided over what are generally considered to be authoritarian regimes, few would classify India’s early post-independence decades as non-democratic. Finally, unlike most of the remaining dominant parties that governed alone in democratic settings, Congress never won a popular majority in national elections. How then did Congress manage to repeatedly win power on its own, in seven out of India’s first eight elections, through democratic means and never with the support of a majority of voters?

This paper argues that the origins of Congress dominance lie in the colonial period. Two features of colonial-era political activity—the overwhelming importance of independence and the religious cleavage in politics as well as the relatively modest interest that most parties had in electoral politics—bequeathed considerable advantages on Congress in addition to creating a highly fragmented political opposition. More specifically, as a result of colonial politics, Congress inherited massive patronage and organizational advantages over its rivals. At the same time, the fragmented opposition was poorly positioned to translate its popular support into legislative strength in a single-member district plurality (SMDP) electoral system. In combination, these factors allowed Congress to repeatedly win single-party majorities with only

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2 According to the Polity IV dataset, India has always been a democracy as its polity scores have always been greater than 5. In all but two years, India’s polity score was 8 or higher. The exceptions were 1976 and 1977, when its polity score was a 7. These years coincided with the Emergency, the period from June 1975 to March 1977, when the national government suspended many democratic freedoms and postponed elections. Although this period is widely described as a descent into authoritarianism, Part XVIII of India’s constitution outlines provisions for the use of emergency powers. In other words, the Emergency was itself constitutional, even if the abuses associated with it smacked of authoritarianism.
a plurality of the vote. As Congress’ advantages in these areas diminished and the opposition consolidated, Congress dominance was no longer sustainable.

This argument about how the legacies of colonial era politics led to Congress’ post-colonial dominance differs in some important ways from existing explanations for Congress dominance. Traditional explanations for Congress’ dominance and decline emphasize the legitimacy that the party won thanks to its role in the independence movement, its leadership, or its embodiment of a centrist ideological consensus, all of which are rooted, in some form or another, in public opinion. In focusing on patronage, organization, and the distribution of support among opposition parties, this paper focuses on factors that have little to do with the electorate’s explicit endorsement of Congress, its policies, or its leaders. Additionally, this paper differs in its assessment of why the colonial era was important. Whereas previous accounts have suggested that the colonial period’s important legacies for understanding single-party dominance involved the legitimacy Congress won as the head of the country’s nationalist movement and the leaders that it produced, I focus on a different set of factors that, while certainly not ignored, have received far less attention.

At the same time, this argument builds on a number of insights from the existing literature on single-party dominance and party system formation. First, this paper’s emphasis on the organizational and patronage advantages that Congress enjoyed after independence is consistent with much existing research on the ways in which dominant parties use state resources to remain in power (Chubb 1982, Magaloni 2006, Scheiner 2006, Greene 2007). Second, the paper builds on recent research on subnational politics in India that draws attention to the opposition as a critical component in understanding single-party dominance (Ziegfeld 2014a, Ziegfeld and Tudor 2014). Third, in identifying the reasons behind Congress’ advantages and the
challenges facing the opposition, I follow Riedl (2014) in looking at pre-democratic politics—or, in India’s case, semi-democratic politics—to understand the subsequent contours of the party system after democratization.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. I begin, in Section 1, with a descriptive account of Congress’ performance in national elections, differentiating between the dominant-party period (1947-89) and the competitive period (1989-present). Next, Section 2 discusses why the two features identified here—the issues animating colonial politics and the emphasis placed on agitational as opposed to electoral politics—mattered for generating important advantages for Congress and equally important challenges for the opposition. Section 3 describes in more detail how and why Congress’ patronage and organizational advantages ensured its electoral success. It also explains how, as Congress lost its monopoly on state patronage and its organization atrophied, its electoral support diminished. Importantly, I view Congress’ electoral decline as a function of factional conflict that gave rise to new parties and mass defections rather than as a result of the public’s declining faith in the party. Next, Section 4 turns to opposition fragmentation, explaining why a focus on Congress’ electoral success is insufficient for explaining Congress dominance. This section shows how opposition fragmentation, which was born of the features of colonial politics describe above, was essential in ensuring that Congress turned its popular pluralities into legislative majorities. Finally, Section 5 situates my argument in the broader comparative literature and discusses the many ways in which Congress dominance was not a foreordained consequence of colonialism, but rather a phenomenon contingent on a number of important political decisions made both by Congress and the colonial authorities.
1. Identifying Dominance and Decline in India

Explaining Congress’ dominance and decline in India first requires identifying when the party was dominant and when it was not. Figure 1 presents Congress’ vote shares (solid gray line) and seat shares (dashed black line) in elections to the Lok Sabha, India’s lower legislative house. The black horizontal line at the bottom of the figure shows when the party held national-level power. Breaks in the line indicate when a party other than Congress held national-level power.

Figure 1. Congress Performance in National Elections

Congress dominance in India began with the country’s independence in 1947; however, three dates are associated with its decline: 1967, 1977, and 1989 (Rudolph and Rudolph 2008). As Figure 1 depicts, the 1967 election resulted in a noticeable drop in the share of legislative
seats won by Congress, as well as a more modest dip in its overall vote share. Although Congress won a legislative majority in the Lok Sabha, it did so with relative few seats to spare. Moreover, in concurrent state-level elections, the party lost power in nine major states that collectively accounted for 65% of Lok Sabha seats.\(^3\) Prior to 1967, Congress had only lost power in one major state, Kerala.\(^4\) Since Congress won a legislative majority at the national level in 1967 and then enhanced its legislative majority in the subsequent election in 1971, the 1967 election is better understood as evidence of Congress’ weakening electoral position than as the end of its dominant position nationally.

The 1977 election is a more plausible candidate for marking the end of Congress dominance, as it was the first time that Congress lost national-level power. This election took place in the immediate aftermath of the Emergency, during which the Congress-led national government imprisoned political rivals, postponed elections, and embarked on a ruthless campaign of slum clearance and forced sterilizations. As depicted in Figure 1, Congress’ seat share dropped precipitously, and its vote share declined to a new low (35%). Additionally, Congress lost power in all but three major states in the round of state elections that took place in 1977 and 1978. Unlike 1967, Congress’ defeat in 1977 was unequivocal. However, many do not consider this election to represent the end of Congress dominance because the election took place under extraordinary circumstances—following the end of the Emergency and the hasty merger of the country’s main opposition parties into a single party—and because of Congress’ emphatic return to power in 1980. Although Congress lost power after the 1977 elections, the party that

\(^3\) India’s major states (prior to the 2000 creation of three new states) were: Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

\(^4\) Congress also briefly lost power in the states of Travancore Cochin (which was, from 1956 onward, part of Kerala) and Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU), which was relatively small and, after 1956, part of the state of Punjab.
had ejected it from power, the Janata Party, proved itself incapable of offering stable
government. By the end of 1980, the Janata Party had lost power and split into three separate
parties. Arguably, in spite of the outcome of the 1977 election, India did not yet have a credible
governing alternative to Congress, at least at the national level.

The third date associated with Congress’ decline is 1989. The 1989 election marked the
second time that Congress lost power at the national-level. This election differed in a number of
ways from the 1977 election. For one, the 1989 election did not occur under particularly unusual
circumstances. Additionally, whereas Congress returned to power in 1980 with a large legislative
majority after having lost in 1977, Congress failed to win a legislative majority in the next
election after 1989, held in 1991. Finally, by 1989, politics was increasingly competitive across
the country. Credible alternatives to Congress had emerged in most states, meaning that
Congress was no longer the natural party of government in any part of India.

I treat the period from independence through 1977 as being unambiguously a period of
single-party dominance. The period from 1989 to the present is just as unambiguously
characterized by a competitive party system. In between, from 1977 to 1989, was a liminal
period, during which the 1977 election appeared to have been an aberration in what was
otherwise a prolonged period of dominance. When dichotomizing India’s post-independence
history into the single-party dominant period and the competitive period, I treat the 1977-89
period as part of the single-party dominant period. I do so because for the majority of this period

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5 These were the rump Janata Party; the Janata Party (Secular), which was later known as the Lok Dal; and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
6 In 1991, Congress returned to power, but as the head of a minority government.
7 For a different view, see Nigam and Yadav (1999). They divide modern Indian political history into three periods, the first electoral system (1947-67), the second electoral system (1967-89), and the third electoral system (1989-present).
8 There is a parallel with Japan, with many people viewing the 2009 election as the true end of LDP dominance even though the 1993 election produced the first post-war government led by a party other than the LDP or its predecessors.
Congress retained the important features of dominance that it had prior to 1977. For about ten of thirteen years from 1977 through 1989, Congress held a single-party majority in the national legislature; it had no rivals that were close to it in size; and it governed most major states at any given point in time. In other words, during the 1980s, Congress looked little different and no less dominant than it had in the 1960s and early 1970s.

2. The Legacy of Colonial Politics

Colonial era politics in India had two important features that would ultimately confer organizational and patronage advantages on Congress and produce a fragmented opposition that was ill equipped to navigate an SMDP electoral system. The first important characteristic was the issues animating colonial politics: independence and religion. For much of the political class in colonial India, the major political objective was independence from Britain. This overriding interest in independence led many political leaders in colonial India to subjugate other ideological concerns in their efforts to force the British to quit India. The result was that Congress, the country’s primary nationalist platform, functioned as an exceptionally “big tent” that was home to a diverse array of viewpoints—ranging from economic liberals to ardent socialists and from Hindu traditionalists to devoted secularists—as well as members from across the caste hierarchy. In other words, Congress leaders ignored or papered over ideological divisions that might otherwise have divided them. More broadly, Congress’ goal of achieving independence—which was widely shared—meant that relatively few in the political class definitively sat outside of the Congress fold. Indeed, during most of the colonial period, membership in Congress did not preclude membership in other political parties.
The only major division that kept large numbers of political activists out of Congress involved the second major issue in colonial politics: religion. During the colonial period, the British privileged mobilization along religious lines, creating separate electorates based on religion in the early 20th century. This system, akin to Lebanon’s confessional electoral system, required members of a religious group to vote for fellow members of that group, effectively determining in advance the number of legislators from various religions. Religion was also bound up with the primary issue of the day, independence. Religious minorities, Muslims in particular, were deeply anxious about their future in an independent India dominated by Hindus.

Consequently, the largest party that emerged in opposition to Congress was the Muslim League, founded to protect the interests of Muslims. Although the size of the Muslim League’s following across British India was highly uneven—owing to the highly variable Muslim population across India—the Muslim League was, far and away, the largest political force apart from Congress. Another religion-based party was the Akali Dal, a Sikh political party. However, thanks to the geographic concentration of Sikhs in Punjab, the Akali Dal was active in only one major British province. Otherwise, the other notable parties in colonial India were relatively minor. The Communist Party of India (CPI) was highly active in certain, primarily urban, areas but was largely indifferent to electoral politics until independence. The Justice Party was, for some time, the favored party of the elite non-Brahmin castes in the Madras Presidency but essentially retreated from electoral politics when the franchise expanded in the 1930s. Finally, the Unionist Party in Punjab was a multi-religious party representing landed interests. Like the Akali Dal, it was limited to a single province.

The second important characteristic of colonial politics was the relatively weak emphasis placed on elections. Prior to the Government of India Act 1935, the British shared provincial
power with legislatures directly elected by Indians, albeit under a highly restricted franchise, and retained almost complete control over affairs at the all-India level. After 1935, elected legislatures had considerable control over provincial affairs but still shared power with the British at the all-India level. Thus, for much of the colonial era, elected office offered relatively limited power to Indians. Before the Government of India Act 1935, Congress was relatively unengaged in electoral politics, but began to participate in earnest from the elections of 1937 onward. Nevertheless, Congress leaders’ primary strategy for achieving independence was through mass mobilization, not parliamentary politics. Beginning in the 1930s, Congress strove to create a robust organization throughout the country that was capable of enrolling large numbers of members and organizing mass agitations against British rule. Meanwhile, the Muslim League directly lobbied the British first for minority protections and then later for the creation of Pakistan. Its advocacy of Muslim interests did not focus on the provincial legislatures. The CPI and smaller Marxist parties were, for their part, convinced that the class struggle would not be won at the ballot box and were instead far more interested in creating a disciplined cadre of party members than in contesting elections. Indeed, even in Bengal, where they were quite active, the communists fared poorly in colonial elections.

These two facts—the issues motivating pre-independence political activity as well as the non-electoral focus of much of colonial politics—had three important effects that would set the stage for Congress dominance in the post-independence period. The first was Congress’ monopoly over state patronage. The second was Congress’ major organizational advantage over most of its rivals. The third was the fragmentation of the post-independence opposition.
2.1 Congress’ Monopoly on State Patronage

At independence, Congress controlled the reins of power in India. Following the Government of India Act 1935, provincial elections took place in 1937 and then again in 1946. Elections were held in British India’s eleven provinces, seven of which were located exclusively in what would become India and two of which were located partly in India and partly in contemporary Pakistan (Punjab) or Bangladesh (Bengal). In both elections Congress performed exceptionally well. It formed the government in all seven of the provinces located entirely within contemporary India; and it was part of a coalition government in Punjab. Congress’ electoral victories were not surprising. It was, after all, the only major political force competing for votes in the Hindu electorate, which accounted for the vast majority of the seats in the provinces that would ultimately become part of India. Given the primacy that the political class placed on independence and the relatively low salience of electoral politics, few serious political parties had formed to compete for Hindu votes against the organization that had long served as the leader of the independence movement.

India’s partition in 1947 only increased Congress’ influence in the provincial assemblies. In Bengal, the largest party after the 1946 election was the Muslim League, and in Punjab the main non-Congress parties were the Muslim League, the Unionist Party and the Akalis. With partition, the Muslim League and the Unionist Party effectively ceased to exist, leaving Congress in a dominant position in Bengal and with the upper hand relative to the Akalis in Punjab. Consequently, when the British left India, Congress had full control over all of the provinces with elected legislatures.

In preparation for independence, a new national-level body also took shape, the Constituent Assembly. The Constituent Assembly would ultimately draft India’s constitution and
serve as the country’s provisional parliament until the first Lok Sabha took office in early 1952. Unlike the directly elected provincial assemblies, the Constituent Assembly was indirectly elected by the provincial assemblies, which were dominated by Congress. As a result, Congress dominated not only the provincial legislatures but the Constituent Assembly too. Thus, at the time of independence, Congress was in charge of all of India’s major legislative bodies. In effect, it gained sole control of the Indian state and, with it, a monopoly over any and all state patronage.

2.2 Congress’ Organizational Advantage

For the same reasons that Congress gained sole control over the Indian state and its resources, the party also enjoyed a tremendous organizational advantage over its post-independence rivals. With the disappearance of the Muslim League and Unionist Party at independence, India was left with very few parties with anything in the way of electoral infrastructure. Because few parties vying for Hindu votes had taken shape, Congress was one of the few parties that combined both prior experience with elections and a robust organization, which it had forged through the independence movement (Tudor 2013). The CPI had a dedicated cadre of leaders and a well-oiled organization, but the party had never truly invested in colonial elections and in creating a large party infrastructure useful for contesting mass elections across both urban and rural areas. Other Marxist parties also had a base of committed cadres, mainly in

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9 The Constituent Assembly eventually included a number of Indian princes, representing the areas that were previously under indirect rule. Although the princes injected a non-Congress element into the Constituent Assembly, they were not, as a rule, affiliated with other parties.
Bengal, but even less electoral experience. Meanwhile, the Akalis had prior electoral experience but less in the way of party infrastructure.\textsuperscript{10}

Otherwise, the major parties competing in India’s first election, held in late 1951 and early 1952, had little in the way of organizational muscle. Dissident Congress factions established three of the major new parties that emerged after independence: the Socialist Party, Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP), and Krishkar Lok Party. Although Congress personnel formed these parties and therefore had some experience with elections, these leaders did not bring Congress’ party organization into their new parties. The Scheduled Caste Federation, founded by B.R. Ambedkar, the father of India’s constitution, was a continuation of the tiny Independent Labour Party that had had little presence outside of Ambedkar’s native Bombay presidency (now Maharashtra). Finally, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh was founded as the political wing of the Hindu revivalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The Jana Sangh’s ties to the RSS afforded it far more organizational might than the other parties, but the RSS organization was itself limited in its reach and had no experience with elections.\textsuperscript{11} Many other parties were established ahead of the 1951-52 elections, but these were mainly tiny parties typically founded around a handful of locally influential figures. Thus, given the disappearance of Congress’ main rival after partition, the remaining competitors and those that emerged to contest against it were at a major organizational disadvantage.

\textsuperscript{10} That being said, the Akalis benefited from a religious network and association with the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, the body governing Sikh temples.

\textsuperscript{11} The RSS had a network of organizations in small towns, mainly among upper castes, especially traders. Its organization was weak in villages and among lower castes (Graham 1990).
2.3 Opposition Fragmentation

At independence, Congress was, in many places, the only political game in town. In areas of India formerly ruled by princely states, Congress had often been banned but nevertheless able to organize covertly or absorb into its organization those who had been part of the independence movement but officially outside the Congress fold (Sisson 1972). In much of the rest of India, Congress’ main political rival, the Muslim League, had simply disappeared. The only areas that inherited important rivals to Congress were Bengal and Travancore Cochin (now Kerala), where the CPI had a strong presence; Punjab, where the Akalis had been active; and a few parts of Bombay (now Maharashtra) where the Scheduled Caste Federation and a small Marxist party, the Peasants and Workers’ Party had been active. Otherwise, the opposition to Congress was largely a tabula rasa. Further, because most of the colonial political activity—apart from the communists—had revolved around the independence movement, this period had produced relatively few large quasi-political organizations that could readily serve as starting points for large opposition parties. The only organization of note in that regard was the RSS, which gave birth the Jana Sangh.

Given the limited continuity from the colonial period, India’s early elections produced a badly fragmented opposition. The parties founded by Congress dissidents were not the products of major splits within the party that took large parts of the party organization with them or split Congress in half. Rather, the splinters were relatively small, with highly uneven levels of support depending on where the new parties were able to peel away a few Congress leaders. As a result, most of the parties had relatively thin levels of support in most areas, making them much smaller than Congress. In most places, there was therefore no obvious choice for elites or voters seeking to converge on the most viable alternative to Congress. Additionally, virtually all of Congress’
rivals were untested at the time of the first election. Knowing which one posed the most credible alternative to Congress was virtually impossible. Fluidity in the party system further hampered such evaluations in later elections. For instance, immediately after the 1951-52 election, the KMPP and Socialist Party merged to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP), which split again prior to the 1957 election. Thus, fluidity within the opposition did not help in solidifying expectations about which party was the best bet to challenge Congress.

Although Congress in the colonial period encompassed a broad section of the political class—and especially those interested in joining the fight for independence—the party had not recruited all would-be politicians. After independence, former princes, large landlords, local notables, and prominent caste leaders entered politics, many of them plausible competitors to Congress. They often contested as independents or formed small political parties with limited geographic reach. One such example was the Chhota Nagpur Santhal Parganas Janata Party, founded by the Raja of Ramgarh and his associates in Bihar (now Jharkhand) in the area of where his family had been the hereditary landlords. Another was the Ram Rajya Parishad, a loose collection of primarily Rajput landlords and former princes in Rajasthan. Some of these politicians were uninterested in joining Congress because of ideological reasons—as in the case of large landlords who chafed as Congress’ alleged plans to enact land reform—or simply because they saw no need to join a large party in which they would be only minor players.

Plausible challengers to Congress therefore existed in many parts of India. If one or two major parties had successfully recruited the bulk of these candidates and then fielded only one or two challengers to Congress in most electoral districts, then these opposition parties could well have mounted an effective challenge to Congress. But, the major non-Congress parties were not

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12 In India, electoral districts are known as constituencies. Throughout, I use the term district, in keeping with the broader literature on electoral systems.
in a position to identify, recruit, and then field the best challengers to Congress across the country. They lacked the organization to identify high-quality candidates. These untested parties then had little to offer candidates who could otherwise run as independents or from political parties that were little more than vehicles to advance their own political careers. Moreover, the better organized parties were not necessarily among the most likely to recruit the most effective opposition candidates. The Marxist parties, for instance, tended only to field highly experienced and ideologically committed members, while the Jana Sangh also faced pressure to field candidates who had ties to the RSS. Consequently, much of Congress’ high quality competition was not absorbed into major political parties, thereby contributing to the opposition’s fragmentation by adding small parties and independents to the fray.

The fragmentation that plagued the opposition was directly attributable to the two main features of pre-independence politics described above. Given the overwhelming emphasis on winning independence and on the religious cleavage, alternatives to Congress other than the Muslim League did not develop, ensuring that there was not a ready opposition party waiting in the wings after independence. Moreover, the importance of the independence struggle combined with the emphasis on agitational politics in the colonial era meant that those uninterested in mass mobilization or the possibility of incarceration under the British were largely uninvolved in politics prior to independence and therefore unincorporated into existing parties. Not surprisingly, when such politicians later entered politics and dissident Congress factions left the party, the result was a chaotic, disorganized, and highly fragmented opposition.
3. Congress’ Patronage and Organizational Advantages

Having explained how important features of colonial-era politics produced certain conditions in the post-colonial period, this section explains why two such conditions—Congress’ patronage and organizational advantages—translated into electoral success for Congress. It also explains why Congress’ electoral decline in the late 1980s and early 1990s is attributable to the fading of these advantages. Turnover in state-level governments and Congress’ abandonment of internal democracy in favor of increasing centralization left the party increasingly prone to factional disputes that led to the exodus of large chunks of the party’s leadership into other parties—and with them, popular support.

3.1 The Patronage Advantage

The advantages of having a monopoly over state patronage helped Congress in two ways. The first advantage directly involved voters. Given the number of studies of post-independence Indian politics that point to the important role of patronage in securing popular support (Brass 1965, Weiner 1967, Chandra 2004), Congress’ ability to use state- and national-level governments for its electoral ends played an important part in its ability to win votes in India’s first elections. Having taken the reins of power at independence and then won India’s first post-independence election, some voters could barely distinguish between the Indian state and Congress and saw support for one as support for the other (Bailey 1963). More generally, studies outside of India frequently point to dominant parties’ strategic use of state resources to win electoral support (Chubb 1982, Magaloni 2006, Scheiner 2006, Greene 2007).

The second way in which Congress’ monopoly over state patronage helped it was somewhat less direct, through its ability to hold together a diverse group of politicians under a
single political banner. Congress’ monopoly on the state promised politicians access to state resources for themselves and their associates as well as a built-in means for winning popular support. By effectively purchasing the support of local notables through access to the state, Congress could therefore bring into its fold those voters who supported local notables out of traditional deference, economic dependence, patron-client relations, or fear. Additionally, for ambitious politicians who did not already enjoy local notoriety or benefit from the traditional deference still accorded to many large landowners or princes, Congress’ ability to distribute access to the state in the form of jobs, regulation, the placement of public goods, etc. represented a significant source of appeal.

Other parties could offer no such access to the state. Politicians in other parties could not access the resources of state and national-level power, whether for their own purposes or for the purposes of winning popular support. Opposition parties were therefore populated by those who were staunchly opposed to Congress on ideological terms (such as communists or many former princes)\(^\text{13}\); those who saw little future for themselves within Congress, perhaps because they had poor relations with influential party leaders; and those who were concerned, above all, with winning their own electoral district and had the means to become viable candidates. This last group included local notables who could win local popular support and were interested in remaining powerful through this new, democratic channel but had little interest in tangibly influencing state- or national-level politics.

\(^{13}\) For an argument on how dominant parties’ hyper-incumbency advantages tend to create ideologically extreme opposition parties, see Greene (2007).
3.2. The Organizational Advantage

Congress’ organizational advantage over its rivals was also important in winning popular support, in large part through its effect on elite recruitment. Years of mobilization as part of the independence movement allowed Congress to recruit much of the political class into its ranks before independence. Even in many of the former princely states where Congress was often prohibited from organizing, it nevertheless set up informal Congress affiliates that were later integrated into the broader party organization (Sisson 1972). Thus, Congress was in a position to field locally powerful or well-known candidates in districts across the country by the time of India’s first elections.

Additionally, Congress was one of the few parties with a sufficiently well developed party organization that it could identify and recruit high quality candidates in the future. The recruitment of high quality candidates with local notoriety and power mattered because many such candidates brought with them their own “vote banks” of committed followers. Although not all Congress candidates won their seats, the party’s years of organization ensured that it could almost always recruit and field a credible candidate, no matter the electoral district. As evidence, Congress rarely fielded candidates who forfeited their deposits. Candidates for state and national elections must submit a deposit to the Election Commission of India when they file their papers to contest. Candidates who fail to win one-sixth of votes cast forfeit their deposits. Of the 2,414 candidates that Congress fielded from 1951-52 through 1971, only 20—less than 1%—forfeited their deposits. Meanwhile, when looking at similar figures for the second-place parties in these five elections, 14 about 38% of the candidates forfeited their deposits.

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As further evidence of the importance of elite recruitment for Congress’ electoral success, some of the places where Congress was least able to recruit local notables into the party prior to independence are precisely those places where the party’s performance was weakest. For instance, before independence, the Rajasthan unit of Congress refused to admit into its ranks large feudal landlords who were especially powerful in the state’s western areas (Sisson 1972). Not surprisingly, in the 1951-52 state elections in Rajasthan, Congress won only 26% of the vote and 4 of 35 seats in the Jodhpur division, where these landlords were particularly powerful. Instead, most of the Rajput landlords contested as independents, winning 52% of the vote and 24 seats.

Whereas Congress’ years of organization building helped the party to recruit high quality candidates, the situation was quite different for most other parties. For one, virtually no parties had the organizational wherewithal to even field candidates in most districts. In the 1951-52 election, Congress fielded 479 candidates for a legislature of 489 members. The two parties that fielded the second and third largest numbers were the Socialist Party, which fielded 254, and the KMPP, which fielded 145. In the subsequent four elections, a party fielded more than 200 candidates on only two occasions—once in 1967 by the Jana Sangh and once in 1971 by Congress (O).15 Whereas the Jana Sangh envisioned itself as a national party, it was unable to find viable candidates in many parts of the country (Graham 1990). The poorly organized opposition had few resources with which to seek out and woo high quality candidates into their ranks. Moreover, they could not rely on a long history of activity and organization to endow them with a pool of talented and experience politicians.

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15 Congress (O) was founded in 1969 as a result of a national-level split in Congress.
3.3. Factional Conflict as a Source of Congress Decline

If patronage and organizational advantages help explain why Congress was a major electoral force, can these same advantages help explain Congress’ subsequent decline? Indeed, they can. Explanations for Congress’ decline are typically rooted public opinion. Conventional wisdom suggests three main explanations for Congress’ loss of support over time. First, the legitimacy that Congress gained because of its role in the independence movement waned as those who remembered the colonial era were replaced by generations with no memory of the independence struggle. Second, the party no longer benefited from the charisma of Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi. Third, support for the centrist Congress consensus favoring secularism, national unity, and state intervention in the economy diminished in the face of rising support for Hindu nationalism, overt caste and regional appeals, and economic liberalization.\(^\text{16}\) Explanations for specific election outcomes—most notably 1977 and 1989, when Congress lost power for the first and second time—also invoke public opinion. Congress’ 1977 defeat is widely attributed to the public’s dissatisfaction with the Emergency and the abuses perpetrated during it (Weiner 1977, Manor 1978).\(^\text{17}\) The 1989 electoral defeat is frequently explained in terms of public anger over the corruption scandal in which Congress Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had found himself embroiled (Sisson 1990). Previously known for his clean image, Rajiv Gandhi was, at the time of the 1989 election, accused of taking kickbacks from the Swedish arms manufacturer, Bofors.

Explanations rooted in public opinion generally suffer from two weaknesses. One is that some of these explanations—particularly those related to legitimacy and Congress’ centrist position—assume that electoral politics in India is programmatic in nature. However, both older

\(^{16}\) On these conventional explanations, see Kohli (2001, pp. 6-10). On Congress as a party of consensus, see Kothari (1964), and on Congress’ centrist positioning, see Riker (1976).

\(^{17}\) For an alternative view, consistent with the argument in in Section 4 on opposition coordination, see Pehl (2008).
(Weiner 1967) and more recent studies (Chandra 2004, Thachil 2009) of Indian electoral politics focus on the important role of patronage and service provision in winning popular support. Additionally, the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project\textsuperscript{18} undertaken by Herbert Kitschelt and colleagues finds that India’s parties exhibit little programmatic effort and that its party system is weakly structured by programmatic considerations. Admittedly, this characterization reflects India’s recent party system; however, as education levels have risen and poverty rates have fallen since the early post-independence decades, there is little reason to assume that Indian voters have become less programmatic over time. If anything, Indian politics should have been more clientelistic in earlier decades.

A second important weakness is that most of these explanations should be predict fairly uniform declines in Congress support across India. In particular, waning legitimacy, poor leadership, and the Bofors scandal should apply equally to public opinion across India. Yet, Congress’ decline was remarkably varied across India. Figure 2 presents vote shares won by Congress in national elections, broken down by major state. Because India’s internal boundaries were substantially redrawn in 1956, Figure 2 includes election results from 1957 through 2009.\textsuperscript{19} The gray reference line indicates a 35\% vote share.\textsuperscript{20} Although Congress has, on the whole, declined across in India from its position in 1957, that decline did not occur in a uniform fashion across India as we would expect if Congress owed its decline to generational replacement, national-level leadership, or national-level scandals.

\textsuperscript{18} See https://web.duke.edu/democracy/.
\textsuperscript{19} Observations for Gujarat and Maharashtra are missing for 1957 because both states were then part of the state of Bombay. Similarly, there are no observations for Haryana in 1957 and 1962 because it was part of Punjab. In all cases, the observation refers to the vote share in the state, according to its boundaries in that election. Thus, because of the creation of Chhattisgarh (from Madhya Pradesh), Jharkhand (from Bihar), and Uttarakhand (from Uttar Pradesh) in 2000, observations in 1999 for Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh refer to larger geographic areas than they do for these same three states in 2004.
\textsuperscript{20} Ziegfeld’s (2014) study of Congress dominance in state elections notes that with less than 35\% of the vote, Congress rarely remained dominant, whereas above 35\% it sometimes remained dominant, depending on the extent to which the opposition was fragmented and uncoordinated.
Rather than treat Congress’ decline as a question of public opinion—why did voters increasingly prefer other parties to Congress?—I consider Congress’ decline to be the result of factional politics. Sharp declines in Congress support reflect the exit of important factions from the party. When important leaders leave the party, either for an existing party or to start a new party, they take with them their clients, loyalists, and followers. Viewing Congress’ decline in this way is not only consistent with longstanding characterizations of Congress as highly factionalized (Brass 1966), it is also far more consistent with research describing India’s electoral political as largely clientelistic, with parties essentially functioning as coalitions of patrons and their followers. A factional perspective also helps make sense of Congress’ erratic decline, both over time and across space. As Figure 2 demonstrates, Congress has not witnessed a secular decline over time. Rather, the decline has occurred in fits and starts and to varying
degrees across India. The exit and entry of important factions in different parts of India at various times accounts for these patterns. For example, Congress’ massive decline in West Bengal in the 1990s was preceded by the exit of Mamata Banerjee and her followers from Congress to form the Trinamool Congress in 1996. Similarly in Tamil Nadu, the departure of much of the state’s top leadership to form the Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) robbed Congress of most of its following in the state. Factional conflict can even explain the 1977 and 1989 election outcomes at least as convincingly as a public opinion-based account. In both elections, major declines in Congress’ vote share were preceded by mass defections of major Congress leaders. In 1977, Jagjivan Ram, a Congress leader from Bihar formed the Congress for Democracy along with former Uttar Pradesh chief minister H.N. Bahugana. Eventually, the CFD merged into the Janata Party. Additionally, many other prominent Congress leaders defected directly to the Janata Party. Thus, another explanation for Congress’ decline in 1977 was that the party’s top leadership in many states quit the party. Without credible leaders, Congress’ support declined. If Congress’ top leaders were more likely to defect in states where Congress’ excesses were greatest during the Emergency, then a public opinion argument and a factional argument would produce the same observable implication. Moreover, a factional argument better accounts for Congress’ electoral comeback in 1980. Over the course of the Janata Party’s term in power (1977-80), a large number of former Congress leaders returned to Congress. Their return explains why, only three after the disastrous post-Emergency election, the party’s vote share bounced back to pre-Emergency levels.

21 This approach does not rule out voters responding to factors such as improved public goods provision or (in)effective response to natural disasters from one election to the next. Rather, I propose this perspective in lieu of viewing Congress’ decline (or dominance) mainly as a function of voters’ loyalty to Congress or endorsements of its policies.
The 1989 election was similarly preceded by a major factional conflict in Congress, in which a number of important leaders, particularly in north India, founded the Jan Morcha, which later merged into the Janata Dal. Not surprisingly, states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, which were home to most of the Jan Morcha’s top leaders were among the states where Congress fared worst in 1989. This factional explanation better explains Congress’ losses in 1989, which were limited to fewer than half of India’s major states.

3.4. Patronage, Organization, and Factional Conflict

If one understands Congress’ decline as a story of factional conflict, then focusing on Congress’ initial patronage and organizational advantages at independence can help explain the party’s eventual decline. From the beginning, Congress was a highly factionalized party. Factionalism was not something new to the party that became increasingly acute from the 1980s onward. Rather, what changed within Congress was its ability to deal with these factional conflicts and prevent them from becoming sufficiently serious that they resulted in party splits or mass defections. Congress’ ability to contain factional conflict decreased over time as its patronage and organizational advantages diminished.

First, Congress’ patronage advantage declined. Although the party retained a near monopoly on national-level power for almost forty years, its stranglehold on state-level patronage was far weaker. Around the time of the 1967 elections, Congress saw significant defections from the party—the Jana Congress in Orissa, Bangla Congress in West Bengal, Jan Kranti Dal in Bihar, and Jana Congress in Uttar Pradesh—that helped bring to power opposition governments at the state-level, albeit briefly (Sharma 1989). Although Congress dominance in these states did not irrefutably end until much later, these brief experiments with opposition
government at the state-level ensured that Congress no longer had a monopoly on state-level bureaucracies and resources. Once it was clear that Congress was no longer the sole means through which to access state resources and patronage, the incentive to remain in Congress—particularly among those who saw themselves on the losing end of factional fights or with uncertain prospects for upward mobility—became much lower. A frequent strategy adopted by disaffected members of Congress was to break away and establish a small party, with the aim of demonstrating the new party’s ability to either win seats in the areas where it is strongest or to at least prevent Congress for winning those seats. So long as Congress had a monopoly on state resources, this strategy was only useful as blackmail, demonstrating a faction’s power so that it could return to Congress on more favorable terms. However, once politicians realized that Congress was no longer the inevitable winner and defection did not necessarily mean giving up access to resources at the state-level, defection became a far more attractive strategy.

Second, Congress’ organizational advantage also declined over time. Beginning in the late 1960s, Indira Gandhi increasingly centralized power in her own hands, making advancement within the party contingent on close ties to her or one of her close associates (Kohli 1990). In 1972, the party suspended internal elections, which had been used to fill posts within the party for decades. The centralization of power led to a progressive atrophying of Congress’ organization. If advancement depended on proximity to leaders in New Delhi or the state capitals, the incentive to maintain a robust party organization at the local level diminished. Moreover, if positions within the party were no longer dependent on one’s ability to win the loyalty of members of the organization at lower levels, there was little reason to focus on enrolling and recruiting new activists at lower levels of the party.
The weakening of Congress’ organization had several important effects on the party’s ability to contain factional conflict. For one, internal party democracy gave disgruntled members of Congress a means through which to redress their grievances and defeat their rivals. A politician could always hope to get ahead in the next internal election by securing the support of others within the party. Without this means for resolving factional conflict, leaders who were out of favor with important power brokers within the party had little way to address their plight other than through leaving. Additionally, as Chandra (2004) has argued, the lack of internal democracy prevented Congress from recruiting new politicians from rising social groups. As a result, when new parties came along that more clearly championed the interests of groups underrepresented in Congress, these parties were particularly appealing, not only to voters expecting patronage doled out along ethnic lines but also to politicians. Thus, Congress’ diminishing organizational advantage meant that the party was less able to solve factional conflict, which resulted in splits and mass defections.

In sum, as Congress’ patronage and organizational advantages declined—thanks to brief spells of opposition power at the state-level and the centralization of power within the party—Congress was increasingly prone to damaging party splits. Importantly, Congress’ increasing fragility made it prone to defections and splits across India but did not guarantee that the party would decline in all places at the same rate. Actual decline required unsolvable factional conflict, which was not necessary equally severe in all parts of the country. Thus, a decline in Congress’ patronage monopoly and organizational strength would predict that the party would be increasingly unable to contain factional conflicts where they occurred but retain a strong following in places where such factional conflict did not occur, thereby leading to an uneven decline over time and across space.
Admittedly, this account of Congress’ decline based on patronage and organization does not explain the specific times and places when splits and defections occurred. Moreover, this account cannot explain some of the early party splits in the mid-1960s that first unseated Congress from power at the state-level. However, this explanation can help us better understand why, from the late 1960s onward, Congress was increasingly fragile and prone to party splits. By the late 1980s and early 1990s—after more than twenty years of withering organization and a loss of its monopoly on state patronage—this fragility resulted in a massive loss of personnel in several key states. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the party lost support to rival parties such as the BJP, Janata Dal (and its eventual successors), and the Bahujan Samaj Party, and in Haryana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal, large factions split to form the Haryana Vikas Party, Nationalist Congress Party, Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar), and Trinamool Congress, respectively.

4. The Opposition’s Response to the Electoral System

The previous section argued that one key to understanding Congress dominance and decline was the party’s inherited patronage and organizational advantages. These advantages ensured that Congress was far and away the largest party in the party system at the time of independence. However, as these advantages faded, factionalism that had always been endemic in Congress posed a greater threat to the party’s electoral integrity, causing it to lose large portions of its support base in several large states.

However, an explanation for single-party dominance that focuses only on the dominant party is insufficient when the dominant party never won a popular majority. Given Congress’ repeated failure to win a popular majority, its dominant position was not a foregone conclusion.
Figure 3 presents the share of single-member district seats won by Congress candidates with an absolute majority of the vote. Because the 1951-52 and 1957 elections include double-member districts, the first two data points do not represent the full legislature. Of all fifteen national elections held through 2009, Congress won absolute majorities in more than half of single-member districts in 1957, 1971, and 1984. In the other elections, the opposition won a majority of the vote in a majority of seats, meaning that a highly consolidated (or coordinated) opposition could have prevented Congress from winning successive single-party majorities.

Figure 3. Share of Seats Won by Congress with 50%+

Congress dominance therefore rested, in large part, on the shoulders of the opposition, which was unable to translate its popular support into proportional legislative strength. From 1951 to 1984 (with the exception of 1977), Congress routinely won a large number of seats in

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22 I exclude double-member districts because the districts in these elections were not conventional double-member districts in which the top two vote-getters win seats. One of the seats was guaranteed for a member of a historically marginalized group, meaning that in some instances the third- or fourth-place candidate might win a seat because she received the most votes among those candidates from the group for which the seat was reserved.
which opposition candidates won a majority of votes because the opposition vote was fragmented across multiple candidates. To illustrate this point, consider a simple logistic regression analysis presented in Table 1, in which the dependent variable is *Congress Winner*, which takes a value of 1 if a seat was won by Congress and a 0 if not. I consider all contested single-member district seats in which Congress fielded candidates. The models in Table 1 include only two predictors. The first is *Congress Vote Share*, which ranges from 0 to 1, and the second captures the opposition’s level of fragmentation. In model 1, the second predictor is *Opposition ENP*, which is the effective number of parties (ENP), counting only opposition parties. In other words, I calculate the ENP excluding the Congress candidate. In model 2, the other main predictor is *Index of Opposition Unity*, which is the share of the opposition vote won by the largest opposition candidate in the district (Butler et al. 1997). If the opposition won a total of 60% of the vote, and the most successful opposition candidate won 30%, then the IOU would be 0.5. The models include no controls because they are intended to capture a relatively straightforward process—the translation of votes into seats, which should only depend on Congress’ vote share and the extent to which the remaining non-Congress vote was fragmented or not.

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23 I include observations from all fifteen general elections; however, the results are substantively identical if I only include observations from the dominant-party period.
Table 1. Predictors of Congress Candidate Victory

<table>
<thead>
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<th>DV: Congress Winner (1)</th>
<th>DV: Congress Winner (2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Congress Vote Share</td>
<td>94.601 (3.561)</td>
<td>236.917 (13.537)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition ENP</td>
<td>7.989 (.311)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of Opposition Unity</td>
<td>-84.576 (4.852)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-54.132 (2.041)</td>
<td>-36.472 (2.131)</td>
</tr>
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N = 6,867
Pseudo-R^2 = .8375 .9323

In both models, both predictors are substantively and statistically significant. To provide a sense for just how the fragmentation of the opposition was in shaping Congress victory or loss, I simulate predicted probabilities using CLARIFY (Tomz et al. 2003). First, consider Opposition ENP in model 1. Holding Congress’ vote share at its mean during the dominant-party period (.4625, or 46.25%), when decreasing the value of Opposition ENP by one standard deviation from its mean value (or, from 1.99 to 1.09) the predicted probability of Congress winning the seat declines by 83.72% (s.e. 0.0145). Put another way, Congress is predicted to win the seat with near certainty when the opposition’s ENP is 1.99 and to have almost no chance of winning the seat when the opposition’s ENP in 1.09. Turning to the same exercise but with the index of opposition unity in model 2, increasing Index of Opposition Unity by one standard deviation from its mean value (or, from .7000 to .9049) increases the predicted probability of Congress winning by 96.78% (s.e. .0072). In other words, as the opposition becomes less fragmented—evidenced either by the opposition ENP declining or the index of opposition unity increasing—
Congress’ likelihood of winning a seat declines dramatically, even in simulations in which the Congress candidate does quite well.

4.1 Opposition Coordination

Fragmentation of the opposition in the context of India’s SMDP electoral system is an integral component of understanding Congress dominance. Congress dominance could have been thwarted in three ways. First, the opposition could have been fully consolidated, with most opposition votes amassed behind a single candidate from the same party in each electoral district. Second, the opposition could have been consolidated at the district-level and coordinated in post-election politics. If opposition voters were amassed behind a single party in each district, then the opposition could have efficiently translated its popular majorities into a much larger number of legislative seats, even if Congress had faced different opponents in different regions of the country. So long as the many parties winning seats were willing to form a coalition government after the election, then a large number of small parties each of whose electoral support was concentrated in a small number of electoral districts could have unseated Congress from power. In light of the features of colonial politics that produced a highly fragmented opposition in most electoral districts, neither of these first two scenarios was likely.

However, a third possibility was that the opposition was highly coordinated both before and after elections. Even if the opposition were highly fragmented in most electoral districts, the opposition still could have deprived Congress of a legislative majority by artificially consolidating opposition support behind a single candidate through seat-sharing agreements. In a seat-sharing agreement, parties coordinate so as to allocate one party in the alliance to each seat being contested. In this way, the various parties to the agreement ensure that they do not split the
vote against a common rival. In theory, voters for a party that is not contesting are supposed to transfer their support to the party contesting on behalf of the alliance. This third scenario requires coordination before elections so that the opposition fields a single credible candidate in each seat and then after the election so that the many parties winning seats can form a government.

Attending to the role of the opposition and the ways in which it could potentially defeat Congress through coordination helps make sense of the puzzlingly different outcomes produced by India’s 1967 and 1989 elections. In both cases, Congress won about 40% of the vote (40.8% in 1967 and 39.5% in 1989). But, in 1967 its seat share far exceeded its vote share (54%), whereas in 1989, Congress won a somewhat smaller seat share than vote share (37%). The nature of the opposition that Congress faced explains these very different outcomes. In 1989, the opposition was not only more consolidated, but also more coordinated. In some states, such as Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, the opposition was increasingly consolidated behind a single non-Congress party (the TDP in Andhra Pradesh and the CPM in West Bengal). More importantly, coordination produced even greater electoral dividends for the opposition. The two largest parties in 1989, the BJP Party and Janata Dal, negotiated a seat-sharing agreement in much of north India where the two parties were both relatively successful. The BJP contested 225 seats throughout India and the Janata Dal 244. In 317 seats, only one of the two parties contested, while in 76 seats they contested against one another. As a result, the two parties won the vast majority of seats in the states where they arrived at a seat-sharing agreement. The fact that Congress’ vote share declined in many of these seats certain helped the BJP and Janata Dal

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24 For more on seat-sharing agreements, see Ziegfeld (2014b).
25 The parties did not compete against one another in the majority of seats in Bihar (38 of 54), Delhi (6 of 7), Gujarat (all 26), Haryana (all 10), Karnataka (22 of 28), Kerala (19 of 20), Madhya Pradesh (34 of 40), Maharashtra (26 of 48), Odisha (18 of 21), Rajasthan (20 of 25), and Uttar Pradesh (64 of 85).
to win in many of these seats; however, Congress could potentially have won a much larger seat share had it faced both the BJP and Janata Dal in most districts. Indeed, in the next national election, Congress’ vote share declined further, but its seat share rose thanks to the breakdown of the BJP-Janata Dal alliance.

More generally, a major difference between the Congress-dominant period and the more competitive period was the level of electoral coordination and, to a lesser extent, consolidation of the opposition. In the Congress-dominant period, the opposition coordinated across most states in only one election, 1971. However, in this election, Congress won most seats with more than 50% of the vote, effectively ensuring that no amount of coordination could have prevented a Congress victory. In 1977, the opposition parties actually merged, consolidating the opposition into a single major party. In combination with Congress’ poor performance, the Janata Party easily won a majority of seats.

By contrast, in the competitive period, electoral coordination has become increasingly common. In addition, a growing number of states—though still a small number—enjoy increasingly bipolar competition, thereby obviating the need for coordination. As already noted, in 1989, the BJP and Janata Dal coordinated. The Janata Dal also brokered alliances with some smaller parties as well. In 1996, as in 1991, the BJP and Janata Dal contested separately, but each negotiated alliances with a handful of regional parties. Finally, from 1998 onward, with the Janata Dal effectively defunct, the BJP has successfully negotiated a fairly large number of seat-sharing agreements with regional parties. This tactic, combined with the consolidation of the opposition behind the BJP in several states has meant that the opposition was far more coordinated far more often than it had been in the past. Ultimately, disentangling the exact

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26 Today, these include Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Until relatively recently, Andhra Pradesh was also one such state. Karnataka may be moving towards bipolarity.
weight of opposition coordination in bringing about the end of Congress dominance is difficult, given that increased coordination coincided with a slide in Congress’ popular vote below 30%—a point at which it would be almost impossible to remain dominant nationally. Nevertheless, as the comparison with 1967 highlights, opposition coordination was absolutely critical in unseating Congress from power in 1989.

4.2 Variation in Opposition Coordination over Time

If coordination could have overcome the colonial legacy of a fragmented opposition, why was the opposition unable to consistently coordinate? Opposition parties coordinated on some occasions (1971, 1989, 1998-2009) and even merged once (1977), meaning that coordination is not impossible. However, the challenges to coordination were initially much greater in the immediate post-independence decades than they were in later decades. First, coordination became easier over time because less coordination was actually necessary to reduce fragmentation of the opposition. The left panel in Figure 4 presents a box-plot depicting the opposition ENPs at the state-level across India’s national elections. The median opposition ENP is noticeably higher prior to 1977 than it was afterward, meaning that the opposition consisted of more actors than it did in later elections. Even though the median stays roughly the same after 1980, the number of outliers disappears. Consequently, reducing fragmentation required coordination with a smaller number of actors, which is presumably easier than when there are many actors. Furthermore, since the late 1990s, Congress has also sought out alliance partners, meaning that much of the “opposition” ENP actually includes parties allied with

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27 This figure excludes Assam in 1984. In that election members of the newly formed Asom Gana Parishad contested as independents. As a result, the opposition ENP was close to 25, when, in fact, most of the more successful opposition candidates belonged to a single party. The figure only includes states electing more than two MPs to the Lok Sabha.
Congress. Since the late 1990s, the true opposition to Congress has thus consisted of even fewer actors.

The opposition ENP declined both thanks to a diminishing number of major parties as well as increasingly less successful independent candidacies. The right part of Figure 4 presents a similar box and whisker plot to the left portion of the figure, but instead of the opposition ENP, it depicts the absolute number of opposition parties winning more than 5% of the vote in a state. Prior to 1977, the median was four or more, whereas from 1977 onward, it was usually below four. This decline in the number of major national parties in most states occurred thanks to the thinning ranks of India’s national parties. Prior to the formation of the Janata Party, most states were home to a number of national parties, most of which were small or medium-sized. Many of these parties eventually merged into the Janata Party. However, when the Janata Party disintegrated in 1979 and 1980, it produced a smaller number of national parties than had existed before. As a result, in many states, there were somewhat fewer parties that needed to come to the bargaining table from the 1980s onward in order to ensure effective coordination among the opposition.

Another part of the diminishing opposition ENP involved a decrease in the vote shares habitually won by independent candidates. During India’s first five elections, just under a third of all candidates were independents. But, only about 27% of independents won even 10% of the vote in their districts. In other words, independents relatively rarely won seats (winning only about 6% of the total seats during these five elections) but contributed to the opposition fragmentation that frequently helped Congress candidates win their seats. Even when independents were viable candidates, including independents in seat-sharing agreements is difficult. Because knowing which candidates are viable ex ante is often difficult, parties have a
hard time knowing which independents to include in seat-sharing negotiations. Moreover, including independents in negotiations quickly increases the number of actors at the bargaining table. Thus, the presence of many independent candidates, whether successful or not, contributed to difficulties in coordinating the opposition. Over time, the share of the vote won by independents decreased considerably. The average independent vote share during the dominant-party period was 11.2%, whereas that share dropped to 4.3% in the competitive period.

**Figure 4. Opposition Fragmentation in India**

![Graph showing opposition fragmentation in India over time.](image)

In addition to the number of actors, a second major challenge to coordination in the dominant-party period was the absence of a leading opposition party that could spearhead negotiations over coordination. During the dominant-party period, the opposition consisted of a handful of national parties of roughly equal size, each hoping for a major electoral breakthrough.
that would position it as the leader of the opposition. Consequently, the opposition parties often saw each other as bitter rivals, nearly on par with Congress. Such rivalries made coordination more difficult. The absence of a large opposition party also meant that there was no opposition leader. Effective coordination required that all of the medium-sized opposition parties negotiate with one another over seat sharing. Such negotiations were only successful twice in the dominant-party period, once in 1971 and then again in 1977, when the parties had merged and negotiations took place between factions within the Janata Party.

By contrast, from 1989 onward, the opposition has consisted of only one or two largish parties. In 1989, 1991, and 1996, there were two main opposition parties, the BJP and Janata Dal. In 1989, the two managed to coordinate, perhaps in part because the Janata Dal’s electoral strength was unknown as it had only been founded the previous year. In the next two elections, seat-sharing agreements failed to materialize. Since then, the BJP has been the only major opponent to Congress. Parties seeking to ally against Congress have, in most states, gravitated toward the BJP as the leader of the non-Congress alliance. In addition, as the main opponent to Congress, the BJP deals bilaterally with its (mainly regional party) alliance partners, brokering deals with each one individually, rather than requiring that all the parties in the alliance negotiate with each other. Thus, in addition to the larger number of opposition actors in the initial post-independence decades, the opposition also lacked a focal point for coordination; many national opposition parties during this time were almost as interested in jockeying for the position of the leading opposition party as they were in defeating Congress.
5. Lessons from India’s Experience with Single-Party Dominance

The preceding sections of this paper have, in effect, made three claims. The first is that the issues that mattered most in colonial politics and the means through which parties sought to achieve their ends produced considerable patronage and organizational advantages for Congress as well as a fragmented opposition. The second is that Congress’ patronage and organizational advantages and the fragmented opposition explain Congress’ dominance in India’s first several independent decades. The third is that as both Congress’ monopoly on state patronage and organization vigor diminished and the opposition better coordinated, Congress dominance ended. Although previous studies have alluded to Congress’ organization, its access to state patronage, and the fragmented opposition, this paper differs from previous accounts of Congress dominance in the emphasis that it places on these factors. It also differs in tracing these factors to specific characteristics of colonial-era politics.

Emphasizing patronage, organization, and opposition fragmentation does not mean that explanations privileging Congress’ legitimacy, leadership, and centrist ideological position are incorrect or irrelevant. Indeed, ruling out these conventional explanations is virtually impossible, since the requisite public opinion data needed to corroborate or refute these explanations simply do not exist. Rather, this paper suggests only that these traditional explanations may matter less than has previously been assumed. The argument presented here also leaves room for further, complementary accounts of Congress dominance. Dasgupta (2014), for example, has recently argued that the Green Revolution, associated with a massive increase in agricultural productivity in India, undermined Congress’ ability to engage in clientelism, thereby pushing the Indian party system away from single-party dominance. Dasgupta’s explanation is entirely compatible with
an argument about Congress’ decline that involves the party’s diminishing monopoly on state patronage.

Importantly, although this paper links post-independence party system outcomes to pre-independence politics, the argument presented here is not a deterministic one. It is tempting to look at India’s political history and conclude that Congress dominance was an unavoidable product of India’s struggle for independence. Such a conclusion would be mistaken. Neither the overriding importance of independence or religion nor the emphasis on agitational politics was inevitable. These features of colonial politics in India were the products of choices made both by the British and by India’s indigenous political elite. Any one of a number of different decisions by either group could have produced a politics oriented around a different set of issues or a politics focused more squarely on elections, either of which could have altered the landscape of India’s post-colonial party system.

For instance, had the Indian political elite been convinced that the British would quit India of their own volition in the relatively near-term (as occurred in some colonies after World War II), the Indian elite might have directed its attention during the late colonial period toward other pressing issues. Had the elite been less focused on independence, Congress would almost certainly have faced greater challenges in holding together its heterogeneous membership. The party could easily have divided along ideological or caste lines, potentially producing multiple organized, viable parties that would have survived independence and constituted the basis for a competitive party system. Even if independence had remained the elite’s chief political concern, the British might have opted instead to institutionalize caste to a far greater degree instead of religion. Many colonial political movements focused on caste (Gokhale 1990, Lele 1990, Pandian 2007). Had the British created separate electorates based on caste instead of religion, the
main rival to Congress might have come in the form of a caste-based party that would not necessarily have disappeared at partition, perhaps sowing the seeds for a competitive party system immediately upon independence.

Lastly, political parties’ emphasis on agitational rather than electoral politics was a tactical decision that was hardly inevitable. Congress could have gone the way of the Muslim League and never truly engaged in the kind of mass mobilization that was later so important in generating its competitive edge over other parties. It would perhaps have still had some advantage over newer rivals because of its long experience in contesting elections, but Congress would not necessarily have had the robust organization that helped it to survive its endemic factionalism. At the same time, the communists suffered from a very different problem that resulted from their emphasis on agitational politics. The CPI largely ignored elections to a point that it was ill prepared to face the electorate after decolonization. Had greater emphasis been placed on electoral politics, the CPI might have developed an organization that was election-ready after independence. The British authorities could also have done their part to enhance the salience of colonial elections by giving both provincial and all-India elected bodies greater power. All of this is to say that the features of colonial politics that mattered for the creation of a dominant party system depended on specific decisions made by both the British and the Indians in the first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. These characteristics were not inevitable.

To conclude, Congress’ experience with single-party dominance speaks to the broader comparative literature on dominant parties in several ways. For one, it further corroborates an already large literature highlighting the importance of state resources in sustaining single-party dominance. It also lends support to Riedl’s (2014) argument that the origins of democratic party systems frequently lie in patterns of political competition under (semi-)authoritarianism.
Additionally, this account of Congress’ dominance and decline suggests that, particularly in countries where program and ideology only weakly structure electoral politics, looking within dominant parties to understand the ways that they maintain their coalitions of elites is just as important, if not more so, than understanding how and why dominant parties continue to garner support from the public. Finally, this paper shows that the opposition merits considerable attention. Although oppositions alone are seldom responsible for single-party dominance, in many democratic contexts they bear as much responsibility for single-party dominance as the dominant party itself.
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