

The Democratic Beginning and the First General Elections

1. Challenge of Building Democracy after Independence

- Independent India faced simultaneous challenges of **nation-building and democratic institution-building**.
- Many newly decolonised nations abandoned democracy in favour of **one-party rule, military rule, or authoritarian leadership**, often justified in the name of national unity.
- Indian leaders deliberately chose the **more difficult democratic path**, rooted in the ideals of the freedom struggle and belief that **politics is a means of resolving social conflicts and pursuing public interest**.
- The Constitution (effective **26 January 1950**) created the legal framework, but **democratic governance required elected institutions**.

2. Preparing for the First General Election

- Establishment of the **Election Commission of India in January 1950**, with **Sukumar Sen as the first Chief Election Commissioner**.
- Conducting elections in India posed **unprecedented administrative challenges**:
 - Delimitation of constituencies.
 - Preparation of electoral rolls for a vast electorate.
 - Correction of gender bias where millions of women were listed only as relatives rather than individuals.
- The election became the **largest democratic exercise in history**:
 - About **17 crore eligible voters**, most illiterate.
 - Election of **3,200 MLAs and 489 Lok Sabha members**.
 - Training of **over three lakh election officials**.

3. Voting Methods and Democratic Innovation

- **First elections (1951-52)**:
 - Separate ballot boxes for each candidate with symbols.
 - Around **20 lakh steel boxes** used.

- **Later change**:
 - Ballot paper with candidate names and symbols requiring a stamp.
- **Late 1990s onward**:
 - Shift to **Electronic Voting Machines**, completed nationwide by **2004**.

4. Significance of the 1952 Elections

- Critics doubted democracy in a **poor, largely illiterate society**, calling universal franchise a risky experiment.
- Elections held **Oct 1951 – Feb 1952**, with:
 - Competitive contests (average **more than four candidates per seat**).
 - **Over half** the electorate voting.
 - Results accepted as **free and fair**, even by losers.
- The election proved that **democracy could function beyond wealthy Western societies**, becoming a **global landmark**.

Congress Dominance and the Structure of the Party System

5. Congress Victory in the First Three General Elections

- Congress inherited:
 - **Legacy of the national movement**.
 - **Nationwide organisational network**.
 - Leadership of **Jawaharlal Nehru**.
- **1952 results**:
 - Congress won **364 of 489 Lok Sabha seats**.
 - Communist Party of India came second with **16 seats**.
- Congress also formed governments in **almost all states**, maintaining dominance through **1957 and 1962 elections** with roughly **three-fourths of Lok Sabha seats**.

Electoral System and Seat Advantage

- Under **first-past-the-post**, Congress translated **45% vote share (1952)** into **74% seats**.
- Opposition votes were **fragmented among multiple parties**, enabling Congress dominance.

6. Exceptions to Congress Rule

- **Kerala, 1957:**
 - Communist Party formed the **first democratically elected communist government in the world** under **E.M.S. Namboodiripad**.
 - Dismissed in **1959 under Article 356**, widely viewed as misuse of emergency powers.

7. Nature of One-Party Dominance in India

- Unlike authoritarian one-party systems elsewhere, India's dominance occurred **within a democratic framework of free and fair elections**.
- Comparable in form to **post-apartheid South Africa's ANC dominance**, but rooted in:
 - Freedom struggle legitimacy.
 - Early organisational advantage.
 - Broad social acceptance.

8. Congress as a Social and Ideological Coalition

- Transformed from **elite pressure group (1885)** to **mass national movement**.
- Incorporated **diverse social groups**:
 - Classes, castes, religions, regions, peasants, workers, industrialists.
- Functioned as an **ideological umbrella**, accommodating:
 - Left and right, radicals and moderates, revolutionaries and constitutionalists.
- This inclusiveness created a **rainbow-like national coalition**, explaining electoral dominance.

Opposition, Factionalism, and Evolution of the Party System

9. Communist and Socialist Alternatives

Communist Party of India

- Origins in **1920s socialist inspiration** and activity within Congress until **1941 split**.
- Initially supported **violent uprisings** post-independence, later adopted **parliamentary democracy in 1951**.
- Became **largest opposition party in 1952** and later split into **CPI and CPI(M) in 1964**.

Socialist Party

- Emerged from **Congress Socialist Party (1934)**.
- Advocated **democratic socialism** and criticised Congress for favouring elites.
- Faced fragmentation into **multiple socialist parties**, though influencing later regional parties.



Bharatiya Jana Sangh

- Founded **1951** by **Shyama Prasad Mukherjee**.
- Emphasised **cultural nationalism, Hindi promotion, Akhand Bharat, and strong national defence**.
- Limited electoral success in the 1950s but later became the **precursor to the Bharatiya Janata Party**.

10. Factionalism within Congress

- Congress operated like a **coalition within a party**, tolerating internal ideological and personal factions.
- Internal competition:
 - Allowed representation of diverse interests.
 - Reduced incentives for leaders to leave and form opposition parties.
- Result:

- Political competition occurred **inside Congress**, creating the “**Congress system.**”

11. Role of Opposition in a Dominant-Party System

- Opposition parties held **limited seats** but played crucial democratic roles:
 - Provided **criticism and accountability.**
 - Prevented **anti-democratic resentment.**
 - Groomed **future national leaders.**
- Early years marked by **mutual respect between ruling and opposition leaders**, including opposition members in government.

12. Transition Beyond Congress Dominance

- Congress dominance represented **only the first phase** of India’s democratic evolution.
- As its **capacity to accommodate interests declined**, opposition parties gradually gained strength, reshaping later political phases.

