

ENDURING ANTI- INCUMBENCY: A DEEP-ROOTED TREND IN HIMANCHAL PRADESH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

SRISHTI SHARMA¹, SANTOSH KUMAR²

¹Research scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, SIS, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, Punjab, INDIA

²Assistant Professor, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, SIS, Central University of Punjab, Bathinda, Punjab, INDIA

ABSTRACT

Through a long history of elections in the state of Himachal Pradesh, one can observe that there has hardly been a government that has ruled for two or more consecutive tenures; the government in Himachal Pradesh keeps changing after completing a tenure. This study contributes to our understanding of the alternating pattern of government in Himachal Pradesh, emphasizing the emergence and evolution of the bi-polar party system in the state. Anti-incumbency has become more like a tradition in this swing state, where the two main parties, BJP and Congress, keep the bi-polar party system intact, not letting any other political party gain significant recognition. Since 1993, the state has constantly been on a path of anti-incumbency, escaping from Congress domination. The study would emphasize how the administration of the state has been rife with malpractices, inefficiency, red-tapism, and corruption, and to what extent the incumbency has contributed to it. The multiple issues in the state, such as unemployment, ecological fragility, discontentment among government employees, the struggles of farmers in the horticulture sector, and financial burden, are to a great extent related to the constant changes of the government in the state. The study calls for a thorough evaluation of the workings of both parties and therefore also raises the question of whether the state of Himachal Pradesh is ready for the entry of another party into its political landscape. Additionally, the study will examine the state's dependency on the central government and whether the state would benefit from a "double-engine government." Finally, the study will explore whether anti-incumbency will continue to dominate the state's political landscape or if it will eventually subside.

KEYWORDS: Himanchal Pradesh, Anti-Incumbency, Bi-Party, Elections

INTRODUCTION

The first-ever elections to the state legislative assembly were held in Himachal Pradesh in 1952 where the Indian National Congress won by 24 seats therefore giving Yashwant Singh Parmar the title of Himachal Pradesh's first Chief Minister. After the end of Parmar's tenure in 1956, the state was declared as a union territory under the lieutenant governor hence the office of the Chief Minister ceased to exist. In 1971 Himachal Pradesh gained statehood and till 2015 Parmar was the leader of the INC party who was later succeeded by Virbhadr Singh. If one dives into the history of the political pattern of the state, one will find it rather interesting. Till 1989 Congress dominated state politics but in the 1990s it was challenged by the BJP. Since 1993 the state has been through a shift in incumbent every five years. The power has alternated between two major parties, with Virbhadr Singh as the leader of the INC and Prem Kumar Dhumal as the leader of the Bhartiya Janta Party, though in the 2017 elections, the BJP party changed its leadership with Jai Ram Thakur, the former Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh and the congress party had to choose another leader after the

demise of Shri Virbhadr Singh, handing over the party leadership to the current Chief Minister, Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu.

The relevance of patronage politics cannot be ignored and can be regarded as one of the reasons for this interesting pattern. Patronage politics refers to a kind of politics where the politicians once coming to power reward the voters for their electoral support, this kind of politics is evidently played in the state and therefore people's opinions can differ depending on the rewards. Another reason can be social imbalances, though the population ratio is relatively less in Himachal Pradesh there still exists the notion of 'Baradari' (kin or kith) people are way too influenced by the kin or the caste system and hence this affects their political views, this can be backed by looking at the previous leaders, Virbhadr Singh belonged to the royal family of Himachal Pradesh while Prem Kumar Dhumal does not belong to a royal family but is from an upper caste family.

There have been only two main parties in Himachal Pradesh and the alternative pattern of the government only

includes these two parties i.e., the India National Congress and the Bhartiya Janta Party. Although other parties tried to enter the political arena but failed to attain a permanent place in Himachal politics – the Himachal Vikas Party founded by Sukh Ram, which dissolved in 2004, the Communist Party of India (CPI-M), or the recent contender, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), have only made a speck in the political settings of the state. The most popular reason for anti-incumbency is the “inability of successive state governments” (Panwar, 2017). The people of the state are not satisfied with any of the government and thus they resort to change after every tenure.

EMERGENCE OF BI-PARTY SYSTEM IN HIMANCHAL PRADESH

Himachal Pradesh with no doubt has a two-party system as the state has not elected any party except BJP and Congress in the elections. The state is divided into two divisions upper and lower division, the upper division is the tribal area characterized by extensive horticulture, this area traditionally supported the Congress party. The lower division consists of the plains which are neglected and have minimum agriculture, BJP gained the favour of the masses in this area. The main reason for this bi-party system is dependent on the nature of the state, Himachal Pradesh being a poor state was or still is mainly dependent on financial backing by the centre, and therefore the state most of the time has voted for the same party which was ruling at the centre so that the state is in centre's favour and has an adequate amount of financial support by the centre. The evolution of bi-party system can be traced back to 1967 when Jan Sangh started to gain support in the state. Before 1967 it was only Congress that had gained tremendous support in the state, Jan Sangh failed to even secure one seat in the state elections. Though apart from Congress some independent candidates managed to win some seats in the state legislative assembly. In 1967 the state witnessed another growing party, the Jan Sangh who managed to secure 13.9% seats (Sharma, 1999) in the 1967 state assembly elections. Further development in party popularity took place when some districts from Punjab were merged into Himachal Pradesh and here out of seven, five seats were won by the Jan Sangh in “Shimla, Bhota, Mewa, Hamirpur and Sulah.” (Sharma, 1999). By 1972 Jan Sangh attained some kind of support and credibility in the state though it was still not enough to tackle the congress party. Moving forward, in 1977 the Janta party was established, and it gained immense support of the people, the results depicted the congress loss, whose votes decreased to the lowest it had ever encountered i.e., 38.6% managing to only secure 9 seats in the Vidhan Sabha while Janta party won with massive majority of 53 seats (Sharma, 1999). The next years were not very fruitful for the Jan Sangh party, and it added to their misery when in 1980 the BJP was established. In 1985 Vidhan Sabha elections were conducted and Congress came to power in Himachal Pradesh, some people say the main

reason behind this victory was the assassination of Indira Gandhi as most of the votes were attained by Congress out of sympathy. In the following years in 1989, Jan Sangh only gained one seat and lost all its previous seats while the BJP devoured the seats which were under the Jan Sangh Party, thus winning by a massive majority in 1990 state elections where BJP carried out an alliance with the Janta Dal. In this election, the Janta party allied with the Congress, but both parties lost miserably, congress stooped from 58 seats to just 9 seats (Sharma, 1999) in the Vidhan Sabha. The BJP had set a firm upper hand in the state elections and people started realizing the Congress party is in fact not invincible in Himachal Pradesh. The glorious victory of the BJP did not last long as in the 1993 elections, the Congress Party came to power with 52 seats while BJP acquired only 8 seats in the Vidhan Sabha (Sharma, 1999). The main reason behind this huge BJP loss was the ruling party at the centre, the Congress party under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao was ruling at the centre and hence the state thought it was best to vote for Congress to gain financial support and favours. Another reason for the BJP's fall in the 1993 elections could be the apple market, the BJP chief minister in 1990 Shanta Kumar intervened a lot in the apple market and “pulled out from apple support prices scheme” (Sharma, 1999). There was barely any development in horticulture and the government's agenda of guaranteed jobs was not fulfilled, there were protests and agitations when the government did not adhere to its promises and the BJP government established a rule called ‘No Work no Pay’ which further led to discontent among the citizens. After winning the election in 1993 the Congress party realized that the competition was fierce and thus, they stepped up their game. The Congress government encouraged cultivation, steps were taken to build schools in the new districts to gain the people's confidence, and radio stations were set up in Dharamshala and Hamirpur. In 1998 the Congress party completed its tenure, and the election results were rather shocking as both parties acquired the same number of seats, but the BJP eventually managed to form a government through an alliance with the Himachal Vikas Congress. In the following years same bi-party system made a permanent place in Himachal Pradesh.

2022 ELECTIONS IN HIMANCHAL PRADESH

Congress won by a vast majority in the 2022 elections, mainly due to the “Old Pension Scheme (OPS)” manifested by the party. These elections also proved once again that the state is keeping the bi-polar legacy alive, with AAP securing less than 1% of the votes. The long history of anti-incumbency is still intact in the state as seen in the 2022 elections. However, after the 2017 elections where the BJP government won by 23 seats, it could not hold on to power for more than five years. The 2022 elections were the first elections without the former Chief Minister, Shri Virbhadr Singh which along with the anti-incumbency factor also added a sympathetic element to the 2022

elections. Without Singh, the party's internal struggle and rivalry came to the forefront. Irrespective of the party's internal turmoil, Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu, the present Chief Minister was chosen as the party head. The triumphant win of the Congress party can also be the result of Singh's great influence in the Shimla constituency.

Further looking at the campaign wherein both parties rigorously manifested their agendas. The BJP with their slogan "rivaaz badlega," fully concentrated on the mission to achieve a 'double engine' government and end this legacy of anti-incumbency in the state. The party along with the Prime Minister and other cabinet ministers made speeches about all that the party has achieved not only within the state but the whole nation. Countering this, the Congress party with their slogan "taj badlega" pointed out all the corrupt practices, inflation, and unemployment in the state during the government led by Jai Ram Thakur. The Congress party also promised to revive the old pension scheme, which gave them a little edge during the campaign. OPS was reintroduced in the state in April 2023. However, the scheme has sparked a lot of controversy and did not expect the feedback it was hoping for. Another reason for the BJP's loss in the 2022 elections was "party rebel". As mentioned before, after the demise of Virbhadra Singh the Congress party faced a rebellion within the party. However, the internal disturbances of Congress were toned down in comparison to the BJP's internal party rebellion. The party's decision to replace some of the sitting members of the assembly did not sit well with many party members and hence it affected the electoral polls to a large extent. The party's internal instability was further enhanced by the two factions which were formed in the party. The one headed by Anurag Thakur and the other one by the former Chief Minister Jain Ram Thakur. On the contrary, the Congress party divided its groups within the party sensibly, the upper region was represented by Pratibha Singh and the lower region was represented by Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu. Thus, proving that one of the reasons for the BJP's loss was because they hardly were able to fill up the gaps of ideological differences in the party.

The discontent among the apple growers can also be considered as one of the reasons for BJP's devastating performance in the 2022 elections. A protest by the apple growers in front of the state secretariat was witnessed in August 2022, the protest was the biggest one after the 1990 or 1987 agitation. The unfulfillment of the demands of these farmers, such as- lawful adherence towards the "Agriculture Produce Marketing (Regulation) Act, 2005" or the massive exploitation by the mandis were some of the major matters on which the BJP government failed to act.

ADMINISTRATION OF BOTH THE PARTIES IN HIMANCHAL PRADESH

The administrative situation is hardly affected due to the bi-polar party system in Himachal Pradesh, though both parties have different administrative strategies the situation of the state is much more dependent on the central administration than the state. It can be seen that both BJP and Congress have had problems in managing the farming and horticulture of the state. Farming has become less profitable through the years, especially for the middle-class population. Due to poor weather conditions and damage by wild animals, the farmers have suffered a lot, and the government has not done much to cater to the needs of these farmers. Due to a lack of financial assistance, a considerable number of farmers have given up on agriculture which is one of the main sources of income in the state. In 2001 the maize crop in Dharampur and Solan was damaged by 50% and thereafter a new trend was witnessed, as the economic conditions of the farmers worsened, they started looking for other occupations. The chairman of the Panchayat of these blocks had stated that no compensation and relief had been provided by the government (Singh,2001). Although both parties in their manifesto talked about improving the agriculture conditions, there have been cases where due to lack of finance for the farmers a slump in the market has been witnessed, both governments were not very successful in upgrading the transport to trade produce especially from the rural places. BJP and Congress both have been accused of red-tapism and corruption. Modi government during the state rally election of 2017 alleged that Congress through the last 20 years has kept "Bemani property" i.e., corrupt property justifying it with the high land prices during the rule of the Congress party in the state. Modi during this rally also stated that there still is a lot of mafia business in the state and the Congress government has done practically nothing against mafias whom he designated as "Danav" in "Dev Bhoomi" (Elections.in,2017). Apart from this in the year 2017, serious corruption charges were levied on the former chief minister Virbhadra Singh, which added to Congress's defeat in the last legislative assembly elections. Singh was investigated by the income tax department on the charges of a "disproportionate assets case" (Jolly,2017). Prime Minister Modi even passed a comment about how the previous state government under Singh did not effectively use funds provided to them by the centre and also expressed his views on how the party imbalances within the Congress party led to further disturbances in the party and affected the state. The juxtaposition of statistics of 2003-2004 and 2007-2008, when Congress was in power the gross domestic product grew 8.4% but declined to 7.6% over the next five years (Jain,2017). Thereafter the GDP again rose to 7.8% in 2013-2014 and 2016-2017 (Jain,2017). These statistics depict that the Congress party has made certain changes in GDP but not on a very successful scale.

However, the recent protests against the ruling Congress government have put into perspective how inefficiency in the state is increasing along with resident's discontentment

against the government. The protest on 23rd August, 2024 outside the secretariat building was a joint protest by the unemployed nurses and the secretariat employees. The joint disagreement witnessed was a clear depiction of the state resident's discontentment against the administrative working of the CM's office. The "Secretariat Employees Association" has been since a while now demanding the release of their pending arrears and dearness allowance, the release of these dues was assured by Chief Minister Sukhu during his campaign. The frustration of the employees was seen during this protest as the President of the association, Mr. Sanjeev Kumar Sharma, stated that the employees were not asking for any charity but for their "rightful, hard-earned dues" (ANI, 2024). On the other hand, the unemployed nurses in the state protested against the constant private outsourcing and not enough seats in the government sector. The rightful acceptance of these demands was ensured by the Congress government, but the protest showcased how the demands were not being met and the growing discontentment against the state government. Another protest earlier this year, on 18th January was carried out by the young job seekers of the state, the protest was specifically against red-tapism and corruption among the HPSSC- Himachal Pradesh Staff Selection Committee, wherein the committee examined the post of "Junior Assistant Office" (IT), in 2021 and the results are yet to be declared. This maladroitness action by the government of withholding the results for four years has sparked a debate on the malpractices taking place in the Sukhu administration. Apart from this, the residents have an array of grievances with the central government, the state government after the massive floods witnessed in last year's monsoon, stated that there were no relief packages sent from the centre. The CM allegedly delivered his disgruntlement against the central government for only allotting Rs. 433.70 Crore to the state, even when the damages to the state were devastating. The Himachal government's demand of Rs. 9000 Crore was not accepted and as a result, the state had to release approximately Rs. 4,495.43 Crore, which took a huge toll on the state's budget (Mullick, 2024). The CM also claimed that no separate mention of relief assistance to Himachal Pradesh was mentioned in the union budget, blaming the biased BJP government. It should be noted that how the state cannot help but prefer a 'double-engine government', the growth rate in the state is at par with the central growth and no party is better than the other, both are the same when it comes to development and furthermore it cannot be denied that Himachal Pradesh has trespassed many states when it comes to healthcare and education. It has been observed that sustainability, irrespective of the state's ruling government, has been maintained in some issues. Issues such as social inclusion in respect of jobs and land ownership have been sustained. The concept of high caste people getting white-collar jobs is not that prevalent in Himachal Pradesh and also land ownership of Dalits in the state is much more in comparison to many other states of

India. Another common sustainable goal is efficient services in remote areas, both governments during their rule have made sure that all public services are systematically provided to all the rural areas.

FUTURE OF ELECTIONS IN HIMANCHAL PRADESH

BJP with finishing its five-year tenure and the constant, non-changing anti-incumbency factor, it only seemed fair that the Congress government would form the state government in the 2022 elections. However, this pattern of anti-incumbency is hardly seen in the parliamentary elections. The BJP party since 2014 has been on a trajectory of winning all four seats to the Lok Sabha. This year too, Himachal Pradesh was set to vote for the parliamentary elections on June 1st, the last phase of the general elections. The BJP government as we all witnessed won all four seats in Shimla, Mandi, Kangra, and Hamirpur. Though it was rather shocking for the Congress government, earlier in the year Chief Minister Sukhwinder Singh Sukhu seemed pretty confident about their chance of winning. The Congress government put shade on the Agniveer scheme introduced by the central government. It stated that considering a large faction of the residents of the state are ex-army officials or workers, this scheme resulted in providing irregular jobs to the youth in the army along with the pension matter. The Congress government also campaigned their progress so far in the state, they mentioned the revival of the OPS scheme, the INTRODUCTION of the "Rajiv Gandhi start-up scheme", the promise to provide women with 1,500 rupees, and the hike in milk procurement prices. The party also emphasized how the BJP government in the centre did not provide any relief packages or assistance to the state during the monsoon season when the state was in shambles because of the massive rains, floods, and landslides. Countering this the BJP government nitpicked the failure of the Congress government to generate adequate jobs for the youth, to grant free electricity of 300 units per month to all households as was promised, and to non-fulfilment of the promise to provide 1,500 rupees to the women of the state. The BJP government also channelled their success for scrapping Article 370 of the Constitution, the building of Ram Mandir, and the boost in the economy.

The BJP government backed a massive win in the parliamentary election, with Anurag Thakur from the Hamirpur constituency winning by the margin of one lakh votes and Rajeev Bhardwaj from the Kangra constituency winning by the margin of two lakh votes. Apart from this the elections for the Mandi constituency were quite interesting with Vikramaditya Singh, son of the late Shir Virbhadra Singh, representing the Congress party, and Bollywood actress Kangana Ranaut contesting with the BJP government. Ranaut managed to win the seat with a massive number of votes was a whiplash for the Congress party as the influence of the royal family seemed to have faded in the state. Further earlier this year in February six

members of the legislative assembly from the Congress party rebelled and turned sides by merging with BJP and contested assembly by-elections representing BJP. Although this move did sit well with the assembly and led to the disqualification of these six members on the grounds of “defying party whip”. This incident caused a lot of instability within the assembly as well as the ruling party. The next state election in Himachal Pradesh will be held in November 2027. As far as the next elections are concerned it can be speculated that Himachal Pradesh will remain a bi-polar state not allowing any other competition to join this race, as seen in the performance of different parties like AAP in the 2022 election, who only managed to get less than 1% votes by the state. It has become imperative to rethink the suitability of a “double engine government” in the state, Double-engine government is one of the significant reasons for anti-incumbency and this can be done away with if the GDP flow is more in the state and making tourism and agriculture one of the main sources of income in the state.

CONCLUSION

Anti-incumbency in Himachal Pradesh has set what seems to be like permanent foot in the state and there are little possibilities to do away with this tradition. One of the main reasons for this incumbent nature is the bi-polar party system. Although the bi-polar party system is not the only reason for this changing pattern of government in Himachal Pradesh, issues such as corruption, lack of agricultural assistance, unemployment, and the nature of administration by both parties contribute to this pattern of government and elections in the state. Last but not least it can be speculated that a double-engine government is more suitable for Himachal Pradesh as the state is partly dependent on the centre for financial assistance and if one party is in power in both the centre and the state then it becomes easier for the state to get funds by the centre. Other parties are emerging to contest and get recognition by the state, but it is highly doubtful if Himachal Pradesh is ready to abandon this bi-polar party system and break its trail of anti-incumbency.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal bias that has impacted the present work. The Author(s) declares that there is no conflict of interest involved.

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