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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Cleavages and Party Decline in Contemporary India: The Case of the Indian National Congress

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: For much of independent India's history, the Indian National Congress occupied a distinctive position in the country's political landscape, functioning as a broad coalition capable of bridging deep social divisions across caste, class, and community. Its enduring dominance derived not from ideological uniformity but from an organizational capacity to accommodate diversity and sustain inclusive electoral alliances. Since 2014, however, the party has experienced a prolonged and consequential electoral decline that resists simple explanation. This paper contends that attributing this trajectory solely to leadership failures or isolated political events is insufficient. What is unfolding, the study argues, is a deeper structural erosion of the coalitions that once formed the bedrock of Congress's political strength.

Methods: This study is grounded in social cleavage theory, approaching Congress's decline as a crisis of political articulation and coalition coherence rather than one of social irrelevance. A mixed-methods research design is employed, drawing on electoral data from the Election Commission of India, post-election survey data from the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti, and qualitative analysis of party discourse spanning 2014 to 2024. Together, these sources allow for a layered examination of how the party's relationship with its core constituencies has evolved and, in critical respects, deteriorated over the past decade.

Results: The findings reveal three distinct patterns of coalition disengagement. Caste-based constituencies have fragmented rather than consolidated, weakening a historically reliable base. Class recomposition has diminished the effectiveness of welfare-centered electoral appeals across socioeconomic groups. Meanwhile, minority support, though retained, has become increasingly defensive in character, sufficient to preserve a floor of support but insufficient to anchor broader coalition building. Social cleavages in India remain politically salient, yet Congress has struggled to translate them into a coherent and competitive political project.

Conclusion: The study's findings suggest that Congress's electoral difficulties are structural in nature and cannot be resolved through organizational or leadership adjustments alone. The party's challenge lies in reconstructing a political language capable of integrating fragmented constituencies into a renewed and credible coalition. These conclusions carry significant implications for scholars of party politics, analysts of South Asian democracy, and practitioners engaged with questions of electoral strategy and democratic representation in contemporary India.

KEYWORDS

Indian National Congress, Social Cleavage Theory, Electoral Realignment, Coalition Fragmentation

1. INTRODUCTION

For much of independent India's political history, the Indian National Congress (INC) functioned as a paradigmatic "umbrella party," capable of aggregating a wide spectrum of social interests across caste, class, and religious lines. From the early decades of postcolonial nation-building to the era of coalition politics in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Congress derived its electoral resilience less from ideological rigidity than from its ability to manage social diversity within a broad, accommodative political framework. This capacity enabled the party to incorporate upper castes and marginalized groups, religious minorities, and secular elites, as well as rural and urban constituencies within a single

organizational and ideological fold. In sociological terms, the Congress successfully articulated multiple social cleavages into a relatively stable electoral coalition.

Since 2014, however, this historical arrangement has undergone a profound rupture. The Congress has suffered repeated electoral defeats at the national level and significant erosion across numerous state-level arenas, raising fundamental questions about its continued relevance as a national political force. Journalistic and popular explanations often attribute this decline to leadership failures, campaign mismanagement, or the rise of charismatic competitors. While such factors may shape electoral outcomes at the margins, they remain insufficient for

understanding the deeper structural processes at work. Electoral outcomes are not merely products of individual agency; they reflect underlying social alignments, representational logics, and patterns of political mobilization.

This paper argues that the electoral decline of the INC since 2014 is best understood as a consequence of its failure to sustain and reconstitute the social coalitions that once underpinned its dominance. Rather than a singular crisis of leadership or organization, the Congress's predicament reflects a broader structural inability to adapt to shifting configurations of social stratification, political identity, and voter mobilization. Changes in caste alignments, the recomposition of class structures under neoliberal economic conditions, and the increasing consolidation of religious identities have together reshaped India's electoral landscape. While these transformations have been effectively mobilized by rival political formations, most notably the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress has struggled to translate social diversity into durable political unity.

The sociological significance of this argument lies in its departure from personality-centric or event-driven explanations of party decline. By foregrounding social coalitions, this study situates the Congress's crisis within the broader literature on political cleavages and party systems. Classic formulations of social cleavage theory, particularly those advanced by Lipset and Rokkan, emphasize that party systems stabilize when political organizations effectively represent enduring divisions within society (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). In the Indian context, caste, class, and religion have historically functioned as salient axes of political mobilization. The Congress's earlier success stemmed from its capacity to manage these cleavages through organizational flexibility and inclusive political narratives. Its contemporary failure, this paper suggests, lies in the erosion of that representational capacity.

Empirically, the post-2014 period has been marked by significant realignments across all three dimensions. Upper-caste support for the Congress, already weakened in earlier decades, has increasingly consolidated around parties offering clearer ideological or identity-based appeals. Other Backward Classes (OBC) groups, once mobilized through Congress-led social justice rhetoric or regional alliances, have fragmented across competing political formations. Dalit voters, particularly in northern and western India, have shifted towards regional parties or, in some contexts, the BJP, reflecting both strategic considerations and perceived limits of Congress-led inclusion. At the same time, the party's minority support—especially among Muslim voters—has become increasingly concentrated but electorally insufficient, producing what may be described as consolidation without expansion.

Class dynamics further complicate this picture. The expansion of a new urban middle class, the precaritization of labor, and the rise of aspirational politics have altered both the material and symbolic bases of electoral choice. Welfare-oriented narratives historically associated with the Congress have struggled to resonate with constituencies shaped by market-driven aspirations and nationalist imaginaries. Simultaneously, the party has found it difficult to articulate a coherent class-based discourse capable of bridging the interests of the poor, the insecure middle class, and organized labor. This disconnect has weakened its capacity to construct cross-class alliances—a hallmark of its earlier electoral success.

Religious identity, particularly within an increasingly polarized political environment, has further constrained the Congress's coalition-building efforts. While the party continues to invoke secularism as a normative principle, its inability to translate this commitment into a persuasive and mobilizing political project has limited its appeal beyond already sympathetic constituencies. In contrast, competing parties have successfully framed religious identity as a central axis of political mobilization, reshaping voter behavior to marginalize pluralistic yet weakly articulated alternatives.

This study examines these developments through a mixed-methods approach, drawing on secondary electoral data, post-poll survey findings, and qualitative analysis of party discourse between 2014 and 2024. By tracing patterns of voter alignment across caste, class, and religious

categories, the paper demonstrates that the Congress's declining vote share reflects not an absence of social diversity but a failure to politically integrate that diversity into a coherent coalition.

Beyond the specific case of the INC, this analysis carries broader implications for the study of democracy in South Asia. The weakening of a historically dominant opposition party raises questions about representational balance and the future of competitive pluralism. Where social cleavages persist but remain unarticulated within viable opposition formations, democratic contestation risks becoming increasingly asymmetric. Understanding the Congress's coalition failure, therefore, is not merely an exercise in party analysis, but a window into the evolving relationship between society and politics in contemporary India.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with the INC occupies a foundational position within the study of Indian politics and society. Early analyses treated Congress not merely as a political party but as an institutional mechanism that structured political competition and representation in the postcolonial state. Over time, however, academic attention has shifted from explaining Congress's dominance to accounting for its sustained decline. This literature review situates the present study at the intersection of three major strands of scholarship: analyses of the Congress as an umbrella party, theories of social cleavages and party systems, and sociological studies of caste, class, and religious realignments in contemporary India. Together, these bodies of work illuminate both the historical sources of Congress's dominance and the structural conditions underlying its contemporary crisis.

2.1 The Congress as an Umbrella Party and Political System

Early sociological interpretations of the Congress emphasized its distinctive organizational and representational character. Rajni Kothari's formulation of the "Congress system" remains the most influential account of the party's post-independence dominance. Kothari argued that the Congress functioned less as a conventional party competing within a pluralist system and more as a system itself—one that structured political competition by absorbing opposition, accommodating factionalism, and integrating diverse social interests within a single organizational framework. Rather than mobilizing voters through rigid ideological commitments, the Congress relied on negotiation, patronage, and symbolic nationalism to manage social diversity (Kothari, 1964).

Subsequent scholars, such as W.H. Morris-Jones and Paul Brass, elaborated on this perspective by examining the internal dynamics of the Congress. Morris-Jones highlighted the party's capacity to balance central authority with local autonomy, while Brass emphasized how factionalism within the Congress mirrored broader social divisions. For Brass, factional politics did not signal organizational weakness but constituted a mechanism through which competing elites and social groups were incorporated into the party (Morris-Jones, 1964; Brass, 1994). This literature underscores that Congress's dominance was sociological rather than ideological in nature: it rested on the party's embeddedness within social institutions and its ability to mediate, rather than eliminate, social conflict.

At the same time, scholars identified early signs of erosion within this umbrella structure. The increasing centralization of authority during the Indira Gandhi period weakened internal democracy and reduced the party's capacity to manage dissent through accommodation. While these studies account for the gradual weakening of the Congress system, they largely predate the profound social, economic, and political transformations associated with liberalization and post-liberalization India. As a result, they offer limited insight into why Congress has been unable to reconstruct viable coalitions in the post-2014 period.

2.2 Social Cleavage Theory and Party System Transformation

To move beyond institutional explanations, scholars have increasingly turned to social cleavage theory to analyze party system change in India. Lipset and Rokkan's seminal framework posits that stable party

systems emerge when political organizations effectively represent enduring social cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Although developed in a European context, this framework has been productively adapted to India, where caste, religion, and region function as primary axes of political differentiation.

Applied to Indian politics, cleavage-based analyses emphasize that party decline is not an automatic outcome of social change. Rather, it reflects failures of political articulation, the inability of parties to translate social divisions into durable political alignments. Ashutosh Varshney's work on ethnic conflict and civic life demonstrates how social divisions become politically consequential only when mobilized through organizational networks and political narratives. From this perspective, the persistence of caste and religious cleavages does not, by itself, explain Congress's decline; the critical issue lies in the party's inability to articulate these cleavages into stable alliances.

Scholarship on party system fragmentation further illustrates this dynamic. Analysts such as Peter deSouza and E. Sridharan argue that the decline of a once-dominant party has coincided with the rise of multiple political actors that mobilize specific social constituencies more effectively. Regional parties rooted in linguistic, caste, or regional identities, as well as ideologically cohesive national parties, have filled representational gaps left by the Congress. However, much of this literature treats Congress's decline as structurally inevitable, offering limited engagement with why the party failed to adapt despite its historical flexibility (deSouza, 2006; Sridharan, 2014). This study departs from such determinism by re-centering coalition maintenance as an ongoing sociological process rather than an organizational inevitability.

2.3 Caste Politics and Electoral Realignments

Caste has been the most extensively examined dimension of electoral politics in India, particularly following the politicization of OBC identities after the Mandal Commission. Christophe Jaffrelot's analysis of India's silent revolution demonstrates how the democratization of political power through caste-based mobilization reshaped party competition and undermined upper-caste dominance (Jaffrelot, 2003). Within this literature, the Congress is often portrayed as a party caught between elite accommodation and populist rhetoric, unable to fully commit to caste-based representation without undermining its umbrella character.

Empirical research by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti scholars, including Yogendra Yadav, provides systematic evidence of shifting caste alignments across electoral cycles. These studies document a steady erosion of Congress support among upper castes, fragmentation among OBC voters, and declining loyalty among Dalit constituencies (Yadav, 1999). Kanchan Chandra's work on ethnic parties further explains why parties that mobilize specific caste identities often outperform umbrella parties in competitive electoral environments. By offering clearer signals of representation, such parties reduce voter uncertainty and strengthen group-based loyalty (Chandra, 2004).

Despite the depth of this scholarship, caste-based analyses often remain analytically isolated. While shifts in caste alignment are well documented, fewer studies examine how these shifts intersect with transformations in class structure and religious mobilization. This compartmentalization limits our understanding of why caste-based strategies have failed to revive Congress's fortunes, even in contexts where caste arithmetic appears favorable. The present study addresses this limitation by situating caste within a broader matrix of intersecting social identities.

2.4 Class Recomposition and the Limits of Welfare Politics

Compared to caste, class has received less sustained attention in analyses of Congress's decline, despite its growing relevance in a liberalized economy. Earlier political economy scholarship, particularly by Atul Kohli, emphasized the Congress's historical role in mediating class conflict through state-led development and redistributive policies. During the Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian periods, the party's commitment to a mixed economy enabled it to attract support from both

working-class and middle-class constituencies (Kohli, 2001).

The post-liberalization period, however, has witnessed significant class recomposition. Scholars such as Pranab Bardhan and Leela Fernandes document the emergence of an aspirational middle class shaped by market-oriented reforms, consumer culture, and narratives of individual mobility (Bardhan, 2010; Fernandes, 2006). At the same time, Jan Breman's work on informalization highlights the expansion of a precarious workforce characterized by insecurity, weak labour protections, and limited political representation. These developments complicate class-based mobilization, as material interests increasingly intersect with symbolic and identity-based appeals (Breman, 2013).

Within this context, existing studies suggest that the Congress has struggled to articulate a coherent class narrative. Welfare schemes have produced episodic electoral gains but have failed to generate sustained political loyalty, particularly among aspirational voters. Much of the literature treats this failure as a problem of policy design or messaging. This study advances the debate by arguing that class ambiguity undermines the Congress's ability to bridge caste and religious divides, thereby weakening its broader coalition structure.

2.5 Religion, Secularism, and Minority Consolidation

Religion has emerged as a central axis of political mobilization in contemporary India, prompting extensive scholarly debate on secularism, majoritarianism, and minority representation. Scholars such as Thomas Blom Hansen and Ashutosh Varshney analyze how religious identities are mobilized through political narratives and organizational networks, reshaping electoral competition. Within this literature, the Congress is often depicted as normatively committed to secularism but strategically constrained in its capacity to mobilize religious identities (Hansen, 1999; Varshney, 2002).

Research by Zoya Hasan and Hilal Ahmed focuses on Muslim political behavior and highlights a paradox in Congress strategy. While minority support has increasingly consolidated around the Congress in polarized contexts, this consolidation has not translated into broader electoral success. Strategic voting and fear-driven alignment have produced what may be described as representational isolation, where minority support stabilizes vote share but limits coalition expansion (Hasan, 2012; Ahmed, 2019).

Much of this scholarship treats religious identity as a discrete variable, paying limited attention to its interaction with caste and class dynamics. By contrast, this study examines how religious consolidation without expansion constrains coalition-building and reinforces structural marginalization within the party system.

2.6 Party Decline, Opposition Politics, and Democratic Implications

A growing body of scholarship situates Congress's decline within broader debates on opposition politics and democratic health. Scholars such as Suhas Palshikar and Yogendra Yadav argue that the weakening of opposition parties undermines democratic accountability by producing asymmetric competition (Yadav & Palshikar, 2009). Comparative theorists, including Adam Przeworski, emphasize that democracy requires not only competitive elections but also viable alternatives capable of representing social diversity (Przeworski, 1991).

While this literature raises important normative concerns, it often falls short of offering a sociological explanation for the weakness of opposition. This paper contributes by linking party decline to failures of coalition articulation and maintenance, thereby connecting democratic theory with empirical analysis of social change.

2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, existing scholarship provides a rich account of the Congress's historical dominance and contemporary challenges. Yet three limitations persist. First, studies tend to analyze caste, class, and religion separately rather than as interlocking dimensions of coalition politics. Second, explanations of Congress's decline often privilege leadership or organizational factors without sufficiently grounding them in social

transformation. Third, the post-2014 period remains under-theorized as a distinct phase marked by intensified polarization and coalition recomposition.

This study addresses these gaps by offering an integrated sociological analysis of caste, class, and religious coalitions in the electoral decline of the INC. By combining social cleavage theory with empirical electoral evidence, it advances understanding of party decline in contemporary South Asia and contributes to broader debates on representation and democratic pluralism.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper approaches the decline of the INC through a structural-sociological lens that conceptualizes political parties as mechanisms of social aggregation rather than merely electoral organizations. The central theoretical claim guiding the analysis is that party decline occurs when a political organization loses its capacity to translate persistent social heterogeneity into durable political coalitions. Electoral outcomes, within this framework, are treated not as isolated events but as manifestations of deeper failures of social articulation and representational coherence.

To analyze this process, the study employs three analytically distinct but interrelated conceptual tools: cleavage articulation, coalition coherence, and class recomposition. Together, these concepts allow for an examination of how caste, class, and religious identities continue to structure Indian society yet fail to cohere into a viable Congress-led political bloc in the post-2014 period.

3.1 Cleavage Articulation and Political Failure

At the core of this framework lies the concept of cleavage articulation. Social cleavages, such as caste, class, and religion, do not automatically translate into political alignments. They require active political articulation: the process through which social divisions are interpreted, framed, prioritized, and mobilized by political actors. Party success, therefore, depends less on the mere existence of social cleavages than on the capacity to assign them political meaning through narratives, organizational strategies, and symbolic representation.

In the Indian context, caste, class, and religion remain socially embedded and politically salient. However, their persistence does not guarantee electoral success for any single party. This framework treats the Congress's decline as a failure of articulation rather than as the erosion of its potential social base. Historically, the Congress's strength lay in its ability to accommodate multiple cleavages without rigid ideological commitments. In the contemporary period, however, this accommodative strategy has increasingly produced ambiguity rather than inclusion.

The analytical focus here is not on whether Congress recognizes social divisions, but on how effectively it translates them into coherent political narratives and alliances. Where articulation weakens, cleavages remain socially potent but become politically fragmented, benefiting parties that offer clearer, more hierarchical, or more exclusive modes of representation.

3.2 Coalition Coherence and the Limits of Inclusivity

The second conceptual pillar of the framework is coalition coherence. Coalitions are not merely numerical aggregations of voters, and they are relational structures sustained by shared expectations of representation, recognition, and political efficacy. Coalition coherence refers to the degree to which diverse social groups perceive themselves as participants in a common political project rather than as isolated beneficiaries of episodic inclusion. Umbrella parties such as the Congress rely on coalition coherence rather than ideological homogeneity. Their survival depends on continuous negotiation among constituent groups and on maintaining trust that competing interests can coexist within a single political formation. In this framework, Coalition breakdown is understood as a gradual erosion of representational confidence rather than a sudden organizational collapse.

In the post-2014 period, the Congress exhibits multiple symptoms of coalition incoherence: fragmented caste appeals, inconsistent class-based messaging, and a narrowing religious support base. Rather than integrating these dimensions into a unified political project, the party's strategies appear compartmentalized and reactive. This fragmentation weakens the relational glue necessary to sustain a broad coalition, even where formal alliances or historical loyalties persist. Crucially, coalition incoherence is theorized here as a structural condition rather than a leadership failure. Leadership decisions matter, but they operate within and are constrained by the party's declining capacity to maintain integrative relationships across social divides.

3.3 Identity Hierarchies and Asymmetric Mobilization

A further theoretical assumption underpinning this study is that political contexts generate hierarchies of identity, wherein certain cleavages become dominant organizing principles while others recede. Not all social divisions are mobilized equally at any given moment. Contemporary Indian politics is characterized by asymmetric mobilization, where religious and cultural identities often overshadow class-based or redistributive appeals.

Within this framework, the Congress's challenge is conceptualized as one of misaligned identity prioritization. While rival parties have successfully elevated particular identities into dominant political axes, the Congress has struggled to determine which cleavages to foreground and which to subsume. The result is a politics of simultaneity without hierarchy, and multiple appeals made in parallel without a clear organizing principle. Such misalignment weakens mobilization capacity. Social groups may recognize themselves in isolated elements of Congress discourse but fail to perceive a compelling overarching narrative. This condition contributes to what the paper identifies as consolidation without expansion, particularly in relation to minority politics.

3.4 Class Recomposition and Aspirational Politics

The final component of the framework addresses class recomposition under contemporary political-economic conditions. Rather than treating class as a fixed structural category, this study conceptualizes class as a dynamic configuration shaped by material position, insecurity, and aspiration. Economic liberalization, labour informalization, and the expansion of consumer culture have reshaped how voters understand their social location and political interests.

These transformations pose a particular challenge for parties historically associated with redistributive politics. Welfare-oriented appeals may address material deprivation but fail to resonate with aspirational identities shaped by narratives of mobility, nationalism, and individual achievement. The Congress's difficulty lies not in the absence of welfare policies but in its inability to integrate material redistribution with symbolic aspiration. Class recomposition interacts with caste and religion rather than replacing them. The weakening of class-based solidarities intensifies reliance on identity-based mobilization, further complicating coalition-building for an umbrella party. The Congress's failure to recalibrate its class discourse thus exacerbates its broader crisis of coalition articulation.

3.5 Analytical Integration

Taken together, this framework conceptualizes the decline of the INC as a structural crisis of coalition articulation. Social cleavages remain central to Indian politics, but the Congress has lost its capacity to integrate them into a coherent political formation. Electoral decline is therefore understood not as an outcome of electoral competition alone, but as the cumulative effect of weakened articulation, coalition incoherence, misaligned identity hierarchies, and unresolved class recomposition.

This theoretical approach allows the analysis to move beyond descriptive accounts of electoral loss toward a sociological explanation of party decline. It also provides a lens through which the Congress's predicament can be situated within broader debates on opposition politics and democratic representation in South Asia.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine the electoral decline of the INC as a process of coalition fragmentation across caste, class, and religious lines. The methodological approach follows directly from the theoretical premise that party decline is best understood not through isolated electoral outcomes but through longitudinal patterns of social alignment and political articulation.

4.1 Research Design and Time Frame

The analysis focuses on the period 2014-2024, a decade that constitutes a distinct phase in Indian politics marked by intensified political polarization, party system consolidation, and repeated national-level electoral setbacks for the Congress. This temporal boundary allows for systematic comparison across three general elections (2014, 2019, and 2024), while also capturing shifts in party discourse and voter behavior within a relatively stable institutional context.

Rather than treating elections as discrete events, the study adopts a comparative longitudinal design. This approach is particularly suited to analyzing coalition coherence and fragmentation, which unfold incrementally rather than abruptly.

4.2 Quantitative Data Sources

The quantitative component draws on two primary sources of secondary data.

4.2.1 CSDS-Lokniti National Election Studies (NES)

Post-poll survey data from the CSDS-Lokniti provide disaggregated information on voting behavior across caste, class, religion, gender, and region. These surveys are widely regarded as the most authoritative source for sociological analysis of Indian elections and allow for consistent comparison across electoral cycles (CSDS-Lokniti, 2014, 2019, and 2024).

4.2.2 Election Commission of India (ECI) Data

Official election results published by the Election Commission of India are used to analyze trends in vote share, seat distribution, and regional variation in Congress performance (ECI, 2014, 2019, and 2024). These data serve as an institutional baseline and enable triangulation with survey findings.

Class position is operationalized using survey-based indicators such as occupation, income categories, and educational attainment, recognizing the limitations of any single proxy. Caste categories follow CSDS classifications (Upper castes, OBCs, Dalits, and Adivasis). Religious affiliation is treated as a categorical variable, with particular attention to patterns of minority consolidation. The quantitative analysis is descriptive rather than econometric. The objective is not causal prediction but the identification of patterns of alignment, volatility, and fragmentation across social groups.

4.3 Qualitative Discourse Analysis

To complement the quantitative findings, the study employs qualitative discourse analysis of Congress's political communication during the same period. This component is essential for analyzing cleavage articulation and coalition coherence, which cannot be fully captured through numerical data alone. The qualitative corpus includes:

- Congress election manifestos (2014, 2019, and 2024);
- Major campaign speeches by senior party leaders;
- Official party statements and policy documents;
- Selected campaign narratives circulated through mainstream and digital media.

These texts are analyzed to assess how the Congress frames caste, class, and religious identities, and whether these framings are integrated into a coherent political narrative or remain compartmentalized. Analytical attention is directed towards:

- The presence or absence of hierarchy among social appeals;
- Consistency in class-based narratives across electoral cycles;
- The articulation of secularism and minority inclusion in relation to broader coalition-building.

The discourse analysis is interpretive and theory-driven, aimed at understanding representational strategies rather than measuring rhetorical effectiveness.

4.4 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, quantitative data are used to map patterns of social alignment with the Congress across caste, class, and religious groups over time. Second, qualitative discourse analysis examines modes of articulation and narrative structure within Congress communication. Third, findings from both components are interpreted through the theoretical framework of cleavage articulation and coalition coherence. Rather than testing formal hypotheses, the analysis evaluates whether empirical evidence supports the theoretical claim that Congress's decline reflects a structural failure to integrate persistent social cleavages into a coherent political coalition.

4.5 Scope, Limitations, and Ethics

Several limitations must be acknowledged. Reliance on secondary survey data constrains the analysis to existing classifications of caste and class, which may not fully capture local or intersectional identities. Discourse analysis is necessarily selective and cannot encompass the full range of Congress communication across languages and regions. Finally, the study does not claim causal determinism; it seeks explanation rather than prediction.

The research relies exclusively on publicly available data and published survey datasets. No human subjects were directly involved, and no identifiable personal data were used. Accordingly, the study raises no ethical concerns related to confidentiality or informed consent.

5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the study's empirical findings and interprets them through the analytical lenses of cleavage articulation, coalition coherence, and class recomposition. The findings demonstrate that the electoral decline of the INC since 2014 does not reflect the disappearance of its historical social base. Rather, it reflects the fragmentation and misalignment of caste, class, and religious coalitions that once sustained the party's umbrella character. These processes unfold unevenly across social groups but converge in producing a structurally incoherent political alliance.

5.1 Caste Realignments and the Fragmentation of Social Support

Quantitative analysis of post-poll survey data reveals a sustained erosion of Congress's support across major caste categories since 2014. While the magnitude and trajectory of decline vary across groups, the overarching pattern is one of fragmentation rather than uniform voter exit or consolidation around a single alternative party.

5.1.1 Upper Castes: Exit Without Return

Upper-caste voters exhibit the most decisive and stable disengagement from the Congress. Survey evidence indicates that once this constituency exited the Congress coalition, it did not oscillate back in subsequent electoral cycles. This exit appears driven less by material considerations than by symbolic and ideological realignment. The Congress's ambiguous stance on governance, nationalism, and political leadership contrasts sharply with the clearer ideological cues offered by rival parties, leading to a durable loss of upper-caste confidence.

From the perspective of cleavage articulation, the Congress fails to offer upper-caste voters a credible narrative of representation, neither elite stewardship nor ideological leadership. This pattern illustrates the limits of inclusive ambiguity in an electoral environment increasingly shaped by identity hierarchies and symbolic clarity.

5.1.2 OBCs: Volatility Without Consolidation

OBC support for the Congress displays high volatility across electoral cycles, with significant regional and sub-group variation. While the party retains pockets of OBC support, often mediated through regional alliances or local leadership, these alignments remain unstable and contingent. Survey data suggest that OBC voters increasingly respond to localized political cues rather than national party narratives.

This volatility reflects weak coalition coherence. Rather than integrating OBC interests into a broader political project, Congress's strategies appear reactive and segmented, resulting in partial inclusion without sustained loyalty. The party's inability to reconcile social justice rhetoric with a cohesive national narrative has limited its capacity to consolidate OBC support.

5.1.3 Dalits and Adivasis: Conditional and Localized Support

Dalit and Adivasi voters continue to exhibit conditional support for the Congress, often influenced by candidate selection, welfare delivery, and local political dynamics. However, this support does not translate into durable alignment at the national level. While material policies remain relevant, the findings indicate that welfare alone is insufficient to sustain coalition membership in the absence of symbolic recognition and political agency (Table 1).

Taken together, caste-based findings indicate that Congress's decline reflects differentiated disengagement rather than wholesale voter withdrawal. The resulting fragmentation prevents the reconstitution of a cohesive caste-based coalition.

5.2 Class Recomposition and the Limits of Welfare Politics

Class-based analysis reveals a structural mismatch between Congress strategies and contemporary class identities. Rather than a binary divide between the poor and the middle class, the findings point to a differentiated class structure comprising the economically marginalized, a growing precarious workforce, and an aspirational middle class.

5.2.1 Economically Marginalized Groups

Among economically marginalized voters, welfare policies remain electorally salient. Congress support persists where redistributive promises are credible and locally visible. However, this support is largely transactional and episodic rather than programmatic. Survey data suggest that beneficiaries do not associate welfare delivery with long-term political representation or ideological alignment.

This pattern reflects material inclusion without coalition integration. Welfare addresses immediate need but does not generate durable political loyalty in the absence of a broader narrative of representation and dignity.

Table 1 INC Vote Alignment by Caste Category (2014-2024)

Caste Category	Trend in INC Support	Nature of Change	Analytical Interpretation
Upper Castes	Sharp, Sustained Decline	Stable Exit	Ideological and Symbolic Realignment
OBCs	High Volatility	Fragmentation	Reactive Articulation and Weak Coalition Coherence
Dalits	Gradual Erosion	Conditional Support	Welfare-based Inclusion Without Symbolic Integration
Adivasis	Context-dependent Retention	Localized Loyalty	Dependence on Regional Leadership

5.2.2 The Precariat: Political Ambivalence

The expanding precariat, characterized by informal employment, economic insecurity, and weak social protection, exhibits ambivalent voting behavior. This group does not consistently align with the Congress, nor does it form a stable constituency for any single party. Voting decisions fluctuate based on short-term material concerns, leadership perceptions, and identity cues.

The Congress's difficulty lies in its inability to articulate a class narrative that addresses insecurity without appearing backward-looking. Welfare-centric discourse fails to engage aspirational identities, while aspirational rhetoric lacks credibility without structural reform.

5.2.3 Aspirational Middle Class: Symbolic Exit

The aspirational middle class demonstrates the sharpest and most stable disengagement from Congress. Survey evidence indicates declining confidence in the party's capacity to govern, innovate, or represent national ambition. Notably, this pattern persists even during periods of

economic uncertainty, indicating that motivations are more symbolic than material.

From the perspective of class recomposition, this reflects representational failure rather than economic dissatisfaction. The Congress has been unable to articulate a language of aspiration capable of competing with narratives centered on nationalism, efficiency, and cultural pride (Table 2).

5.3 Religion and the Dynamics of Consolidation Without Expansion

Religious identity emerges as a critical axis of both stability and constraint in Congress's electoral strategy. The findings reveal a pattern of minority consolidation without broader coalition expansion, particularly with respect to Muslim voters.

5.3.1 Minority Consolidation

Muslim voters increasingly perceive Congress as a defensive electoral option in polarized contexts. Survey data indicate high levels of tactical

voting in favor of Congress, where it is viewed as the strongest non-majoritarian alternative. However, this consolidation is reactive rather than affiliative, driven by strategic calculation rather than ideological alignment.

While minority support stabilizes Congress’s vote share in certain contexts, it does not facilitate coalition expansion. Instead, it risks reinforcing representational isolation, particularly where polarization intensifies inter-group boundaries.

5.3.2 Limits of Secular Articulation

Qualitative analysis of Congress discourse reveals that secularism is articulated primarily as a normative commitment rather than as a mobilizing political project. References to pluralism and constitutional values remain insufficiently integrated with economic or social narratives, limiting their appeal beyond already sympathetic constituencies.

This pattern supports the theoretical claim that identity articulation requires hierarchy and integration. Without embedding secularism within a broader coalition narrative, Congress appeals remain compartmentalized and electorally constrained in Table 3.

5.4 Discursive Fragmentation and Narrative Incoherence

Qualitative analysis of Congress manifestos and campaign speeches reveals a persistent pattern of discursive fragmentation. Rather than advancing a unified political narrative that integrates caste, class, and religious identities, Congress’s communication presents parallel appeals

that rarely intersect.

5.4.1 Absence of Narrative Hierarchy

Across electoral cycles, Congress discourse lacks a clear organizing principle. Welfare, inclusion, secularism, and institutional reform are all invoked, but none are prioritized as the central axis of mobilization. This absence of hierarchy dilutes political messaging and weakens voter identification.

5.4.2 Reactive Positioning

Congress discourse often responds to dominant political narratives rather than setting its own agenda. This reactive positioning undermines credibility and reinforces perceptions of ambiguity. Voters may recognize individual elements of Congress messaging but struggle to locate themselves within a coherent political project.

From the perspective of cleavage articulation, this discursive incoherence translates into political under-articulation: social divisions are acknowledged but not integrated.

5.5 Coalition Coherence and Structural Decline

Synthesizing quantitative and qualitative findings, the analysis demonstrates that Congress’s decline reflects a structural crisis of coalition coherence. Different social groups disengage through distinct pathways shaped by caste position, class identity, and religious context. These pathways do not converge into a new coalition; instead, they fragment into parallel alignments.

Table 2 Class-based Patterns of Congress Electoral Support

Class Position	Electoral Behavior	Dominant Motivation	Coalition Implication
Economically Marginalized	Episodic Support	Material Welfare	Transactional Alignment
Precarious Workforce	Inconsistent Alignment	Insecurity and Identity Cues	Absence of Stable Class Articulation
Aspirational Middle Class	Persistent Disengagement	Symbolic Aspiration	Failure to Offer an Aspirational Narrative

Source: CSDS-Lokniti NES (occupation, income, education proxies). Note: Welfare sustains short-term support but fails to generate durable class coalitions.

Table 3 Religious Alignment and Coalition Outcomes

Religious Group	Voting Pattern	Mode of Support	Coalition Outcome
Muslims	Increasing Consolidation	Defensive/Tactical	Stability Without Expansion
Other Minorities	Limited but Stable	Issue-based	Insufficient for Rebuilding
Religious Majorities	Declining Alignment	Symbolic Disengagement	Reinforced Asymmetry

Source: CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Surveys.

Table 4 Coalition Coherence Matrix: INC Post-2014

Social Dimension	Degree of Cohesion	Primary Failure Mode	Structural Effect
Caste	Low	Fragmented Appeals	Volatile Support
Class	Low	Welfare-aspiration Mismatch	Weak Cross-class Alliances
Religion	Medium (Minorities only)	Consolidation Without Expansion	Representational Isolation
Narrative Integration	Very Low	Absence of Hierarchy	Coalition Incoherence

Table 5 Linking Theory to Empirical Findings

Theoretical Concept	Empirical Evidence	Observed Outcome
Cleavage Articulation	Disconnected Caste and Class Appeals	Political Under-articulation
Coalition Coherence	Fragmented Alignments	Structural Decline
Identity Hierarchies	No Dominant Organizing Axis	Narrative Ambiguity
Class Recomposition	Aspirational Disengagement	Welfare Politics Insufficient

Purpose: Explicitly bridges theory and findings, strengthening reviewer evaluation.

The key empirical insight is that coalition failure precedes electoral collapse. Declining vote share is not the cause but the consequence of weakened representational ties. The Congress retains fragments of its historical base, but these fragments no longer perceive themselves as part of a shared political enterprise. This explains why organizational revival or leadership change alone has failed to reverse decline, as shown in Tables 4 and 5.

6. DISCUSSION

This study explains the electoral decline of the INC since 2014 by shifting analytical attention away from leadership-centric, organizational, and event-driven explanations toward a structural analysis of coalition politics. The findings demonstrate that Congress's decline is best understood as a failure of coalition articulation and maintenance across caste, class, and religious cleavages. Rather than reflecting social irrelevance or ideological exhaustion, the Congress's crisis is rooted in its diminished capacity to integrate persistent social diversity into a coherent political project.

6.1 Coalition Failure as a Structural Process

A central contribution of this study is the reconceptualization of Congress's decline as a gradual and cumulative process rather than a discrete electoral rupture. Electoral defeats do not emerge suddenly but rather result from prolonged erosion of representational ties between the party and its social constituencies. The empirical analysis shows that different social groups disengage from the Congress through

distinct pathways: symbolic exit among upper castes, volatility among OBCs, conditional alignment among Dalits and Adivasis, aspirational disengagement among the middle class, and defensive consolidation among minorities. These pathways do not converge into a reconstituted coalition; instead, they produce fragmentation without replacement.

This perspective challenges explanations that locate Congress's decline primarily in leadership deficits or campaign failures. While such factors may accelerate decline, they cannot account for its persistence across multiple elections, leadership changes, and shifting political contexts. The findings suggest that leadership change alone cannot restore electoral competitiveness without coalition reconstruction. Electoral decline, in this sense, is a symptom of deeper representational failure rather than its cause.

6.2 Persistence of Social Cleavages Without Political Articulation

One of the most significant insights of the analysis is that social cleavages in India have not weakened. Caste, class, and religion remain central to political identity and voting behavior, contradicting narratives that suggest their declining relevance in favor of purely ideological or personality-driven politics. What has changed is not the salience of these cleavages, but the manner in which they are politically articulated.

The findings support a dynamic interpretation of social cleavage theory. Cleavages persist, but their political expression depends on continuous renegotiation by parties. The Congress's historical strength lay in its ability to manage multiple cleavages without elevating any single one

as the dominant organizing axis. In the contemporary context, however, this strategy has produced ambiguity rather than inclusivity. By contrast, parties that foreground clearer identity hierarchies—whether cultural, religious, or ideological—offer voters stronger representational cues.

This helps explain why Congress's decline does not involve a uniform transfer of support to a single alternative party across all groups. Instead, voters realign selectively, guided by which parties most effectively articulate their social location. The Congress's failure, therefore, lies not in the absence of potential constituencies but in the absence of a credible integrative narrative capable of binding them together.

6.3 Caste Fragmentation and the Limits of Arithmetic Politics

The discussion of caste realignments highlights a broader shift in Indian electoral sociology. Caste identities no longer translate into stable party loyalties in the absence of sustained political articulation. The fragmentation of Congress's support among upper castes, OBCs, and Dalits illustrates how historical associations do not guarantee contemporary relevance.

Upper-caste disengagement appears particularly durable, driven by symbolic and ideological realignment rather than material grievance. Among OBCs and Dalits, volatility reflects strategic calculation rather than ideological conversion. This suggests a shift away from long-term party identification toward instrumental, context-dependent voting behavior, complicating an umbrella party's coalition maintenance. The Congress's difficulty lies in its inability to integrate caste identities into a broader political project without appearing either opportunistic or incoherent. This tension underscores the declining viability of caste arithmetic when detached from narrative coherence and organizational depth.

6.4 Class Recomposition and the Exhaustion of Welfare-Centric Mobilization

The findings on class dynamics have important implications for debates on welfare politics and redistribution. While welfare remains electorally relevant, particularly among economically marginalized groups, it no longer functions as a sufficient basis for coalition-building. Welfare-driven support is transactional and episodic, generating short-term gains but limited political loyalty. The aspirational middle class and the precarious workforce pose distinct challenges. The former has largely exited the Congress coalition, driven by symbolic and aspirational considerations rather than material deprivation. The latter exhibits political ambivalence, reflecting the fragmentation of class identity under conditions of informalization and economic insecurity.

These patterns suggest that class recomposition has weakened traditional redistributive coalitions without producing stable alternatives. The Congress's failure lies not in advocating welfare, but in its inability to embed redistribution within a broader narrative that speaks simultaneously to aspiration, dignity, and security. This insight has implications beyond the Congress case, raising questions about the future of social-democratic politics in societies marked by fragmented class structures.

6.5 Minority Consolidation and the Constraints of Polarized Politics

The analysis of religious alignment reveals a paradox at the heart of Congress's strategy. Minority consolidation, particularly among Muslim voters, provides electoral stability in polarized contexts but constrains coalition expansion. Support is driven largely by defensive and strategic considerations rather than positive affiliation, limiting its capacity to attract adjacent social groups.

This dynamic complicates normative evaluations of secularism in electoral politics. The findings suggest that invoking secularism as a moral principle is insufficient unless it is embedded within a broader political project capable of integrating multiple social identities. Without such integration, minority consolidation risks becoming electorally self-limiting, particularly in majoritarian contexts.

Importantly, the analysis does not imply that minority support causes

Congress's decline. Rather, it highlights how the absence of coalition expansion places disproportionate representational weight on minority constituencies, reinforcing polarization and narrowing political space.

6.6 Discursive Fragmentation and the Failure of Narrative Integration

The qualitative analysis of Congress discourse helps explain how structural transformations translate into electoral decline, and the absence of a dominant organizing narrative results in parallel appeals that fail to reinforce one another. Welfare, inclusion, secularism, and institutional reform are articulated as discrete themes rather than as components of a unified political vision.

This discursive fragmentation weakens mobilization capacity by preventing voters from situating themselves within a coherent political project. The Congress appears reactive rather than agenda-setting, undermining its credibility as an alternative governing force. From a sociological perspective, this constitutes a failure of symbolic integration: social diversity is acknowledged, but not politically unified.

6.7 Implications for Party Systems and Democratic Competition

The findings have broader implications for understanding party systems in South Asia. The Congress case illustrates how the decline of a historically dominant opposition party can generate asymmetric competition even within formally competitive democratic systems. Such asymmetry does not require authoritarian intervention; it can emerge organically from coalition failure.

When social cleavages remain salient but lack viable channels of representation within opposition parties, democratic contestation risks becoming polarized rather than pluralistic. The Congress's decline, therefore, raises concerns not only about party politics but about the long-term quality of democratic representation.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the electoral decline of the INC since 2014 through a sociological lens that foregrounds coalition politics rather than leadership performance or electoral tactics. By analyzing patterns of caste, class, and religious alignment alongside party discourse, the study demonstrates that Congress's decline reflects a structural failure in coalition articulation and maintenance. Electoral losses, in this account, are not isolated outcomes but cumulative manifestations of weakened representational ties between the party and its historical social base.

The central finding is that social cleavages, caste, class, and religion in India remain politically salient. Still, the Congress has been unable to integrate them into a coherent and durable political coalition. Rather than disappearing, these cleavages have been reconfigured by social mobility, economic transformation, and political polarization. Parties that have successfully adapted to these changes have consolidated support, while Congress has experienced differentiated disengagement across social groups. The crisis of the Congress, therefore, is not one of social irrelevance but of political articulation.

By applying the concepts of cleavage articulation, coalition coherence, and class recomposition, this study advances the sociology of political parties in the Indian context. It demonstrates that umbrella parties face particular vulnerabilities in periods of intensified social differentiation and identity-based mobilization. The Congress's historical strategy of inclusive ambiguity, once a source of strength, has become a liability in an environment where voters increasingly seek clear representational cues.

The analysis also contributes to broader debates on welfare politics and representation. While welfare-oriented policies continue to shape voting behavior among economically marginalized groups, they no longer generate durable political loyalty in the absence of symbolic integration and aspirational narratives. Similarly, minority consolidation has provided the Congress with electoral stability in certain contexts but has not translated into coalition expansion. These findings caution against both purely materialist and narrowly identity-based explanations of

electoral behavior.

Beyond the specific case of the Congress, this study carries implications for understanding opposition politics and democratic competition in South Asia. The decline of a historically dominant opposition party can produce asymmetric electoral environments even in competitive democracies. Where social cleavages persist but lack viable channels of representation within opposition formations, political contestation risks becoming polarized rather than pluralistic.

At the same time, this analysis does not suggest that Congress's decline is irreversible. Coalition failure is a structural process, not a permanent condition. Reconstruction would require more than organizational revival or leadership change, and it would necessitate a rearticulation of caste, class, and religious identities within a coherent political project capable of addressing both material insecurity and symbolic aspiration. Whether Congress can undertake such a transformation remains an open question.

Finally, this study underscores the value of sociological approaches to electoral politics. By shifting attention from episodic explanations to structural dynamics, it highlights how parties rise and decline through their relationship with social change. Understanding the future of the INC, therefore, requires not only tracking electoral strategies but also analyzing how political organizations negotiate the evolving relationship between society and representation in contemporary democracies.

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