

Scindia's Switch and the Role of Ideology in Indian Politics

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Summary

The exit of former Member of Parliament, Jyotiraditya Scindia, from the Congress, along with 22 Congress members of the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly, has resulted in the fall of the state government. Scindia's exit underlines the dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the absence of competing ideologies.

The exit of former Member of Parliament and central minister, Jyotiraditya Scindia, from the Congress has demoralised a party that has not been in the best of health since its heavy defeat in the 2019 Indian general election. Scindia's exit, which was accompanied by the resignation of 22 Congress members of the Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly, has led to the fall of the state government. Madhya Pradesh's Chief Minister, Kamal Nath, resigned on 20 March 2020 ahead of a trust vote.

Scindia's switch to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) can be interpreted in several ways. At one level, his move could be seen as political opportunism. After having lost in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, it was generally accepted that Scindia had been somewhat sidelined in Madhya Pradesh politics. So, it was not unnatural for Scindia to look for greener pastures. That he was promptly nominated by the BJP for a vacant Rajya Sabha seat gives credence to that theory.

At another level, Scindia could be seen as switching to a party with which his family has had deep associations. His grandmother was a founder member of the BJP and two of his aunts are long-time members and Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the BJP. It is less remembered that his father, Madhavrao, also started out as an independent, backed by the Jana Sangh, the predecessor to the BJP, before moving to the Congress for most of his political career.

That the Congress has not been able to halt a steady stream of defections, including high-profile ones such as Scindia, is an example of the steady decline of the party's standing. It is also proof of the party's inability to hold on to and promote younger leaders as well as evidence of the erosion of organisational structures to address factionalism and discontent.

Scindia's switch brings into the focus the role of ideology in Indian politics, a question that has troubled political scientists. There is a long line of scholars who have argued that Indian politics is not driven by ideology. This argument is based on the conventional division between the right and the left, characteristic of Western liberal democracies, which has largely been absent in India. Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have also asserted that one of the characteristics of Indian politics has been its persistent centrism.¹

¹ Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma have recently argued that the two ideological axes along which Indian political parties are divided are the 'politics of statism', namely, the role of the state, and the 'politics of recognition', or the inclusion of ethnic and minority groups in state policies.² While this is a useful distinction, today there is an increasing convergence of political parties on the primacy of statist and welfare policies. This has gone hand in hand with a Hindu majoritarian tilt since the BJP gained power in 2014, which has upended the centrism that Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph wrote about.

On economics, there is little debate among the two national parties and the regional parties which have tried to outdo each other on welfare policies. The Congress and the occasional regional party have tried to contest the majoritarian turn, but this has been a weak challenge. On a range of issues, from the abrogation of Article 370 to the Ram temple in Ayodhya, non-BJP parties have either struggled to articulate a coherent response or just went along with the BJP's stand. It is only on the Citizen (Amendment) Act, 2019 that a range of political and social actors have mounted a concerted challenge.

This one-party dominance and the absence of competing ideologies have made it that much easier for politicians like Scindia to switch sides to the BJP. Of course, changing political allegiances is an old phenomenon in India. According to PRS Legislative Research, between 1967 and 1983, a year before an anti-defection legislation was put in place, there were approximately 2,700 defections at the state level, with 15 defectors becoming chief ministers. In 1967, the flurry of defections occurred due to the Congress dominance being challenged for the first time in several states across India. Currently, it is much more about politicians flocking to the dominant party.

There is a final question as to what voters think about party hoppers or turncoats. Gilles Vernier has analysed data to show that voters tend not to reward those who have switched party allegiances.³ Other studies show that voters are not too bothered by party hoppers and tend to vote for the party rather than the candidate.

Irrespective of what the data says on voter preferences, switching parties will continue. Given the dominance of the BJP, more politicians are likely to switch to the BJP in the foreseeable future. Scindia and the 22 Congress MLAs from Madhya Pradesh are the latest examples of that trend.

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² Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, *Ideology and Identity: The Changing Party Systems of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ Gilles Vernier, "What candidate selection tells us about BJP, Congress strategies", *Hindustan Times*, 18 May 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/analysis-what-candidate-selection-tells-us-about-bjp-congress-strategies/story-AhxmyUiiMxRBM5XTx3AJHM.html>.