

# Exploring New Political Party Experiments in India: Intra-Party Democracy, Transparency, Candidate Selection, and Mobilization

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## Abstract

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This article examines the emergence of new political parties in India, focusing on their commitment to intra-party democracy, transparent funding practices, inclusive candidate selection, and issue-based mobilisation strategies. Through a comparative framework, this study evaluates emerging political entities like Swaraj India, the Plurals Party, and Loksatta against established players such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Findings indicate that while new parties demonstrate higher adherence to democratic standards, challenges in implementation, funding, and scalability constrain their effectiveness. This study contributes to the discourse on democratic reform, emphasising these new parties' role in promoting a more participatory and transparent political culture in India.

**Keywords:** New political parties, intra-party democracy, political transparency, candidate selection, issue-based mobilisation, Indian politics, democratic reform

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## 1. Introduction

India's political ecosystem has historically been dominated by a small number of large, centralised parties, particularly the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC). Both parties have established hierarchical structures that concentrate decision-making authority among top leaders, typically at the expense of grassroots participation. Additionally, these parties often rely on opaque funding channels and mobilise support through identity-based appeals that leverage caste and religion. While these strategies may secure short-term electoral gains, they limit citizen engagement and foster a political culture that is often unresponsive to genuine democratic needs. The rise of new political entities, such as Swaraj India, the Plurals Party, and Loksatta, presents a significant counterpoint to this traditional political model. Advocating for values such as transparency, intra-party democracy, and issue-focused campaigns, these parties attempt to engage with citizens more meaningfully, offering an alternative framework known as "new politics." This article investigates the effectiveness of these new parties in promoting a more democratic and transparent political system, comparing their practices against those of mainstream parties. By focusing on the potential of these parties to drive political reform, this study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation on democratic deepening within India's political culture.

## 2. Literature Review

### The Traditional Party Model in India

Existing literature on India's political structures critiques the centralization and lack of transparency within mainstream parties. DeSouza and Sridharan (2006) argue that these parties' rigid hierarchies limit intra-party democracy and democratic engagement, creating a political elite largely unaccountable to grassroots members. Kohli (2010) highlights how this centralization produces a "democratic deficit," fostering a political culture that is unresponsive to genuine democratic needs and privileges a small, entrenched elite.

### Emergence of "New Politics" as an Alternative

Globally, the concept of "new politics" emerged to advocate for increased transparency and citizen participation within political organizations. Scholars like Pateman (1970) and Fishkin (1991) stress the importance of participatory governance and deliberative democracy as fundamental to any representative system. In India, Reddy (2016) describes "new politics" as a grassroots-oriented model, directly involving citizens in governance and fostering democratic accountability within political organizations. Yadav (2018) supports issue-based mobilization

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over identity politics as a model that nurtures a political culture of public service rather than divisive rhetoric. These perspectives underline a growing desire for political reform in India, emphasizing transparency, citizen participation, and issue-based engagement.

**NewPolitics as a Reformative Framework:** The concept of “new politics” first gained global traction through movements advocating for greater citizen participation and transparency within political organisations. Rooted in theories of deliberative democracy and participatory governance, new politics prioritises an inclusive political culture, seeking to dismantle the rigid hierarchies that limit individual agency within traditional parties (Pateman, 1970; Fishkin, 1991). In India, this approach has emerged as a direct response to the deficiencies of mainstream parties, with new entities attempting to embed democratic principles directly into their organisational frameworks.

Indira Reddy’s work (2016) defines new politics in India as a bottom-up approach, with citizens actively involved in governance processes. Reddy notes that Indian political parties must embrace the principles of intra-party democracy and transparent funding to maintain legitimacy and address the democratic aspirations of India’s young and increasingly politicised population. Scholar Yogendra Yadav (2018) adds that new political movements should mobilise citizens based on socio-economic issues rather than identity politics, fostering a political culture grounded in public service rather than divisive rhetoric.

### 3. Framework for Evaluation

This study establishes a four-dimensional framework to evaluate the democratic practices of both new and mainstream political parties. Each dimension addresses specific aspects of democratic functioning and inclusivity within the political organisation.

- **Intra-Party Democracy:** Intra-party democracy assesses the extent of member participation in decision-making processes, looking at factors like transparency, inclusion, and collective decision-making. This concept, emphasised by theorists such as Carole Pateman (1970), is foundational to participatory democracy and is considered essential for fostering political accountability within a party.
- **Transparency in Political Funding:** A transparent funding model is vital for maintaining public trust and reducing undue corporate influence. This study measures the extent to which parties disclose their financial sources and expenditures. Studies have shown that opaque funding channels can lead to policy capture, where special interest groups exert disproportionate influence over political outcomes (Rosenbluth & Shapiro, 2018).
- **Candidate Selection:** Candidate selection practices reveal much about a party's commitment to inclusivity and meritocracy. An open candidate selection process allows diverse voices within the party to influence electoral representation, providing a counterbalance to elite-driven nomination processes that often exclude grassroots actors (Gallagher & Marsh, 1988).
- **Issue-Based Mobilisation:** Issue-based mobilisation prioritises campaigns centred around socio-economic policies like education, healthcare, and employment over identity-based appeals. Scholars such as Ernesto Laclau (2005) emphasise that issue-focused mobilisation can foster democratic participation and civic engagement, building a political culture oriented toward policy solutions rather than divisive identities.

Each party was scored on a scale from 0 (no adherence) to 1 (full adherence) for each dimension. These cumulative scores enable a comparison of adherence to democratic principles across new and mainstream parties, categorising them as “high,” “moderate,” or “low” in adherence.

#### 3.1 The Scale of New Politics

| Category                     | 1  | 0.5  | 0  |
|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Intra-Party Democracy</b> | The party has an inner democracy system. Most of the decisions are taken by discussion and dialogue. | The party talks and advocates for inner democracy. Some decisions are taken by dialogue and discussion. However, major decisions are taken by top-party leadership only. | No sign of inner democracy in the party at all. All the decisions are taken by top leadership and the structure is completely centralized. |
| <b>Transparency in</b>       | Financial information  | The party advocates a  | The party is not   |

|                                  |  |  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Political Funding</b>         | and a list of donors are publicly available to ensure transparency of political funding.   | transparency model and sometimes makes the donor list public, but doesn't follow the model regularly.  | transparent w.r.t. funding and the donor list is not publicly available.   |
| <b>Candidate Selection</b>       | Equality of opportunity is maintained for all deserving candidates; the selection process is bottom-up.  | Equal opportunity for candidate selection is only tokenistic and followed only as per political convenience.   | Candidate selection is top-down and decided by the central leadership. No role of ground workers in the candidate selection process. |
| <b>Issues-based Mobilization</b> | Mobilization is done on the basis of real issues like unemployment, education, etc. No identity-based mobilization like caste or religion based. | The Party talks about real issues like unemployment, public health, etc. But on the backend, mobilization is also done on the basis of caste, religion, etc. | Mobilization is openly done on the basis of identities like religion and caste. Issue-based mobilization is only tokenistic.         |

#### 4. Party-wise Evaluation and Analysis

##### 4.1 Swaraj India

**Intra-Party Democracy:** Swaraj India, led by Yogendra Yadav, has embraced intra-party democracy through its Presidium model, which encourages collaborative decision-making across party levels. The Presidium, a 16-member body, acts as the highest decision-making authority, ensuring that no single individual holds unchecked power. This decentralised structure allows for inclusivity in party governance and aligns with the principles of participative democracy, which Swaraj India promotes. Even at local levels, the party's constitution requires that decisions be made through consensus, with provisions for secret ballots if requested. Given this robust structure, Swaraj India scores a full 1 for intra-party democracy.

**Transparency in Political Funding:** Swaraj India has set an example for financial transparency by openly publishing its donor list on its website, allowing the public to see the sources of its financial support. This practice is nearly unprecedented among Indian political parties, who typically avoid disclosing financial contributors. This transparency has strengthened the party's image as a reform-oriented entity committed to accountability, thus earning Swaraj India a full score (1) for funding transparency.

**Candidate Selection:** Swaraj India implements a multi-layered candidate selection process involving a screening committee, a selection committee, and an integrity committee that assesses candidates on parameters like character, criminality, and communalism. This structure ensures that the selection is based on merit and alignment with the party's values, limiting top-down influence in candidate selection. Given its comprehensive approach to candidate selection, Swaraj India scores a full 1 in this dimension.

**Issue-Based Mobilization:** In its campaigns, Swaraj India has emphasised pressing socio-economic issues. For example, its manifesto in Haryana included policies focused on job creation, welfare for farmers, and healthcare reforms, underscoring the party's commitment to issue-based mobilisation. The focus on issue-centric agendas over identity politics distinguishes Swaraj India from mainstream counterparts, earning it a full score (1) for issue-based mobilisation.

Overall Score for Swaraj India: 4/4, placing it in the "high" category for adherence to new political principles.

##### 4.2 The Plurals Party

**Intra-Party Democracy:** The Plurals Party, founded by Pushpam Priya Choudhary, claims to implement democratic processes through advisory councils, yet in practice, key decision-making remains centralized within the hands of the president and general secretary. Although the party promotes discussion and claims inclusivity, the lack of a structured intra-party democracy mechanism results in limited member influence over major decisions. Consequently, the Plurals Party scores 0.5 for intra-party democracy.

**Transparency in Political Funding:** The Plurals Party has publicly denounced the use of black money in politics and advocates for transparent funding. However, the party does not publish comprehensive financial details or

disclose specific donors, which creates an inconsistency between its stated objectives and actual practices. Given this partial commitment to transparency, the Plurals Party scores 0.5.

**Candidate Selection:** The Plurals Party has developed an inclusive candidate selection process, inviting applications from across society. Candidates are vetted by the Plurals Poll Committee, an independent body tasked with ensuring a transparent and fair selection process. The absence of direct influence from the top leadership in candidate selection supports the party's claims of merit-based selection, earning the Plurals Party a full score (1) for candidate selection.

**Issue-Based Mobilization:** In Bihar, the Plurals Party focused on economic development and governance reforms, emphasising industrialization, job creation, and healthcare improvements in its campaigns. This approach departs from traditional identity-based tactics, as the party seeks to appeal to a broader voter base through substantive policy issues, thus earning it a full score (1) for issue-based mobilisation.

Overall Score for Plurals Party: 3/4, placing it in the “high” category for adherence to new political principles.

### 4.3 Loksatta Party

**Intra-Party Democracy:** Loksatta Party's organisational structure prioritises intra-party democracy, with a six-tier system from local to national levels. Members at each level participate in internal elections, ensuring a decentralised approach to governance. This commitment to internal democracy and inclusivity grants Loksatta a full score (1) for intra-party democracy.

**Transparency in Political Funding:** Loksatta is primarily funded through membership fees and public donations. While the party promotes a strong message of financial transparency, its disclosure practices have been inconsistent, as detailed financial information is not always accessible to the public. As a result, Loksatta scores a moderate 0.5 in this dimension.

**Candidate Selection:** The party employs a merit-based approach in selecting candidates, which includes a transparent vetting process that screens applicants for their alignment with party values. However, Loksatta does not have an open application process accessible to all interested candidates, reducing its inclusivity in candidate selection, which results in a moderate score of 0.5.

**Issue-Based Mobilization:** Loksatta has consistently mobilized voters on issues of public service, governance reform, and anti-corruption, avoiding identity-based appeals. Its campaign focuses on local development, citizen services, and transparent governance, which differentiates it from mainstream parties, earning it a full score (1) for issue-based mobilization.

Overall Score for Loksatta Party: 3/4, placing it in the “high” category for adherence to new political principles.

### 4.4 Mainstream Parties: BJP, INC, and AAP

The mainstream parties exhibit varying levels of adherence to democratic principles across the framework parameters:

- **Intra-Party Democracy:** Both BJP and INC have highly centralised structures, with decision-making power concentrated among a few leaders. Leadership positions are rarely contested openly, resulting in a score of 0 for both parties in this dimension. AAP, initially formed with an emphasis on internal democracy, has gradually adopted more centralised decision-making, resulting in a moderate score (0.5).
- **Transparency in Political Funding:** BJP and INC rely significantly on corporate donations and electoral bonds, without making donor details public. AAP has also reduced its disclosure practices in recent years, despite its original commitment to transparency. Both BJP and INC score 0 in transparency, while AAP scores 0.5.
- **Candidate Selection:** Candidate selection within BJP and INC emphasises winnability over other qualities, often favouring candidates with established political networks. This centralised selection approach earns them a score of 0. AAP, which initially used an open application system, now mirrors a more selective approach, leading to a moderate score (0.5).
- **Issue-Based Mobilisation:** BJP mobilises extensively on religious lines, while INC often relies on caste-based appeals. AAP emphasises issues but has increasingly adopted identity-based appeals, leading to scores of 0.5 for both INC and AAP, while BJP scores 0.

Overall Scores:

- BJP: 0/4 (Low adherence)
- INC: 0.5/4 (Low adherence)

- AAP: 1.5/4 (Moderate adherence)

## 5. Discussion

This analysis underscores the divergent democratic practices within India's political system. New political entities like Swaraj India, the Plurals Party, and Loksatta exhibit higher adherence to democratic principles, with stronger commitments to intra-party democracy, transparency, and issue-based mobilization. Their structural emphasis on inclusivity and public accountability reflects a dedication to reshaping the Indian political landscape, aligning with the broader discourse on democratic reform. However, these new parties face substantial obstacles in terms of scalability, resource mobilization, and consistent funding, limiting their reach and operational stability.

In contrast, mainstream parties continue to rely on centralized decision-making and opaque funding practices. Both BJP and INC exhibit low adherence to democratic standards, with limited commitment to transparency and inclusivity, revealing a significant disconnect between their internal practices and democratic ideals. The shift in AAP's practices further illustrates the challenges faced by parties attempting to balance democratic ideals with pragmatic political realities, as demands for scalability and electoral success often lead to centralized practices that undermine initial commitments to democratic engagement.

The findings suggest that while new political entities embody potential for reform, their impact remains limited by resource constraints and structural challenges. To sustain this democratic shift, these parties will need to enhance their organizational capacity, broaden public engagement, and develop robust funding models that maintain transparency without compromising operational viability.

| Political Party | Total Score | Category |
|-----------------|-------------|----------|
| Plurals Party   | 3           | High     |
| Swaraj India    | 4           | High     |
| Loksatta Party  | 3           | High     |
| BJP             | 0           | Low      |
| Congress        | 0.5         | Low      |
| AAP             | 2           | Moderate |

## 6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the discourse on democratic reform in India, highlighting the role of emerging political parties in fostering intra-party democracy, transparency, and issue-based engagement. New political entities like Swaraj India, the Plurals Party, and Loksatta offer promising models for a more inclusive and transparent political culture, challenging the entrenched practices of mainstream parties. However, the persistence of centralized, opaque practices in established parties underscores the complexities of achieving widespread democratic reform within India's political landscape.

The success of new politics in India will depend on the ability of these emerging parties to overcome scalability challenges, resource limitations, and operational constraints while preserving their democratic ideals. Future research could explore the long-term impact of these parties on mainstream political practices, examining whether their commitment to transparency and inclusivity will influence broader political reform. Additionally, studies could investigate public perceptions of new versus mainstream parties, assessing how citizens' support for democratic values may shape the future of political engagement in India.

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