

Article Title: “Autumn of the patriarch: Dynasty has its uses in politics, but is being supplanted by modern media”

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The internal civil war in the Samajwadi Party (SP) got enormous media coverage in recent months, along with analysis of its potential to impact upcoming Uttar Pradesh elections. Separately, it should also interest us for the possible implications on the future of dynastic political parties in India.

This is only the second time that a dynastic successor in modern Indian politics has seized control from the patriarch. The only other time was in 1995, when a young N Chandrababu Naidu took over the Telugu Desam Party and chief ministership of undivided Andhra Pradesh from NT Rama Rao.

Modern Indian political dynasties got off to a fledgling start in 1929, when Jawaharlal Nehru succeeded his father Motilal as president of the Congress party, and got another boost when Indira Gandhi secured that post in 1959 while Nehru was still prime minister. But it was not even when Indira Gandhi herself became PM in 1966 that dynasty took hold – in fact that was not to happen until the mid 1970s.

Since then, of course, India has seen a proliferation of political dynasties. This can be seen through two contrasting perspectives. On the one hand, it is a turning back of the clock, with feudalistic principles now guiding many ostensibly democratic political parties. On the other hand, it can counter intuitively be viewed as a work in progress, since two dozen dynasties having influence over the country is arithmetically more democratic than just one.

There has been plenty of analysis on why dynasties work in this most competitive of professions. In summary, two reasons stand out: the brand value of a dynasty, and its grip over party machineries. The journalist and author Mark Tully has written, “dynasticism appeals to notions of inherited charisma.” Similarly, business and non-profit writer Ranjani Iyer Mohanty describes dynastic candidates as giving voters the comfort of “knowing what to expect, offering a sense of continuity and stability.”

That is instantly understandable to anyone involved in the field of marketing and familiar with the compelling power of brands. Yet it may be the lesser of the two reasons, with grip over parties counting for even more. Though there had been a time when the power of a dynasty’s brand was far stronger than that of the party, it may no longer hold true. For instance, Indira Gandhi had split the Congress, not once but twice, and yet, despite new party symbols, managed to prevail.

But that era may have passed. According to New York University professor of politics Kanchan Chandra, “Parties are important. No dynast in these three Parliaments (2004, 2009, and 2014) who has fought outside of a party structure has won.” That, irrespective of the relative brand strengths of SP’s founder vis-à-vis his son, explains the bitter tussle for control of the party symbol, which the Election Commission has now awarded to the latter.

Control over parties is also important because of the powerful networks they have built over years. These party networks, nurtured with patronage as well as personal relationships, have traditionally played a vital role in campaigns.

They organise political rallies and put up posters. They also mobilise voters during elections, arranging everything from feasts to enthrone them to transportation for getting them to voting booths. One reason why nepotism works in politics is that dynasts have long, inter-generational bonds with these party networks.

Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence that successful modern campaigns must go beyond reliance on such party networks. In western democracies, the trend has been visible for more than three decades, with the UK’s Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan of the US having famously gone over the heads of their party networks to connect directly with voters.

More recently, technology has provided new tools to relative outsiders to seize control of political parties in innovative ways. Barack Obama in 2008 and Donald Trump last year exemplified this trend, relying much more on social media (SM) than on their party networks to both take control of their parties and to galvanise voters.

India, too, has begun seeing similar examples. Narendra Modi and Arvind Kejriwal stand out for their leveraging of technology and SM to both transform and transcend their parties. It is no surprise that they, and other SM pioneers like Shashi Tharoor, are mostly first generation politicians.

Neither should it be surprising that dynastic politicians have been among the least enthusiastic users of SM in India. Even younger, tech savvy scions of political families have been laggards on this front, taking to SM only lately, when its impact could no longer be ignored.

With the inherent advantage of having traditional networks, dynasts have not felt compelled to find new ways to take control of parties or connect with voters. Newcomers with the proverbial fire in their bellies, by contrast, thrive on disruptive alternatives. Using technology to build party support, engage voters, even arrange ‘flash mobs’ via SM, is entirely natural to this cohort.

None of this signals the impending end of political dynasties in India. The strength of dynastic brands and control of traditional party networks will continue to matter. But equally, it is increasingly feasible to scale up alternative new brands and networks, and far more rapidly than before. The implications could be momentous.