

What Political Theory says about “New Parties” like AAP

ALISHA KALRA

A brief analysis of the existing theoretical perspectives on what factors come into play over the survival and success of a “new” party, and do they explain the case of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in India.

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The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) swept the Delhi Assembly elections of February 2015 by winning 67 of 70 seats.¹ It was an unprecedented victory for a party which was formed end of 2012. The AAP was an offshoot of the widely popular India Against Corruption (IAC) movement of 2011 led by Gandhian Anna Hazare and AAP’s current leader Arvind Kejriwal.

This piece looks at the theoretical underpinnings that govern the development of a “new” political party like AAP and what the theory says is required for it to succeed politically.

“New” political parties are not defined only in terms of the years of their formation but by the fact that they represent “new issues” and are capable of changing party politics and systems. They are also defined as those formed after a particularly important historical event or change in environment, for instance, parties formed post-World War II like *Partij van de Arbeid* (the Labour Party, 1946) in Netherlands and the Christian Social Union of Bavaria in Germany (1945) or post-independence in India like the Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam (DMK) in 1949 (Harmel, 1985).

Primarily, “new” parties are formed when they feel that the existing parties are not addressing “new issues” and values (Harmel and Robertson, 1985). For AAP their main reason for entering politics is because they believed the dominant political parties are incapable or unwilling to change the corrupt political system and ensure accountability of those in power. This had become clear to the leaders of IAC movement as some of them then decided to form a political party to address these issues.² AAP unlike most new parties which are often a result of mergers and splits from other parties is a “natural” party (Harmel and Robertson, 1985). For a naturally occurring party building a voter base, at best, is a very difficult task. A base for a new party usually develops only when rapid dealignment³ of voters takes place or when voters lose faith in the dominant parties (Rochon, 1985). But as most AAP members were part of the highly popular IAC movement they already had a strong base in Delhi where the movement was most prominent, and also in the surrounding areas of Haryana and Punjab. They were able to offer an alternative to the voters and work the anti-incumbency factor and

¹ Singh, Darpan, and Neelam Pandey. 2015. “AAP’s Broom Sweeps Delhi Election; BJP Manages Just 3 Seats.” *Hindustan Times*. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/newdelhi/delhi-election-results-bjp-trounced-by-kejrival-s-aap-in-big-blow-for-modi-cong-fails-to-open-account/article1-1315511.aspx>

² “Why Are We Entering Politics?” *Aam Aadmi Party*. <http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/why-are-we-entering-politics> (March 24, 2015).

³ Dealignment is a political term used to describe a trend by which a huge part of the electorate moves away from its existing partisan affiliation without replacing it with a new one. Due to this a vacuum is created which is considered as a conducive environment for new parties to maneuver in.

the involvement of dominant parties in various scams in their favour.⁴

According to Berrington (1985), “socialisation and communication” are one of the key factors which decide whether a political party will “live or die”. AAP’s base built during the IAC movement in Delhi was the main reason why they managed, in the 2013 elections, to enter the state assembly; this was clear when the party decided to contest the Lok Sabha (National Assembly) elections in 2014 in which they failed to make any impact except in Punjab where they won four seats. They won seats in Punjab as they were able to socialise or identify themselves with the voters over the issue of rampant drug abuse in the state and the anti-incumbency against Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) served as a conducive environment. The result of the Lok Sabha elections (contested 432 of 543) and their failure to make an impact even in Delhi forced them to change their earlier position of contesting Assembly elections in Haryana and instead remain focused on their main support base.⁵

During the 2015 Delhi election although AAP’s footprint in the traditional media was marginal compared to the other two biggest parties — Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress Party — it nevertheless, creatively used social media and also introduced interactive sessions to communicate with its

voters in all the 70 constituencies of Delhi.⁶ Social change and movements have served as a fertile ground for the development and success of new parties in India like the Asom Gana Parishad in 1985⁷ and Telugu Desam Party⁸ in 1983.⁹

The First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) electoral system in India rewarded AAP in the Assembly elections as the votes were from a geographically consolidated electorate. In the national election as the votes are from across the country and the threshold to make an impact under FPTP in a multi-party system is much higher.

The IAC movement enabled the existing AAP leaders to emerge as “challengers” to the existing political class and instilled faith in the electorate in their ability to transform the political system. According to Rochon (1985), challenging parties are those which “challenge the legitimacy of existing parties on their own turf by claiming that they no longer properly represent the interests of their support base”. A challenging party does not demand realignment of voters’ interest but to change their support for a different party programme on the same issues. As such, these types of parties are able to convince voters easily but they can also lose them just as easily as it was seen for AAP in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014.

The difference between old and new “natural” parties is that the older ones have an

⁴ Failure of the then Congress government in power to pass a strong Jan Lokpal Bill which would make the political and bureaucratic class answerable along with ongoing scams like the coal scam, the 2G spectrum scam and CWG scam added to the disillusionment of the voters. “UPA Report Card: Nine Years, Nine Scams.” *India Today*. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/gallery/upa-govt-9-years-9-scams-sonia-manmohan/1/9401.html#photo5>.

⁵ In the 2013 Delhi Assembly elections, AAP won 28 seats seriously cutting into Congress vote-share and partly into BJP’s vote-share. In 2008 elections Congress had won with 43 votes to BJP’s 23 but in 2013 it was reduced to 8 votes for Congress and 31 for BJP. AAP formed the government but without a majority it demanded a re-election after 49 days in power. Malhotra, Aditi, and Eric Bellman. 2015. “Delhi Elections: Witness the Birth of Planet AAP.” *Wall Street Journal*. <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiarealtime/2015/02/10/delhi-elections-witness-the-birth-of-planet-aap/> (February 25, 2015).

⁶ Ramakrishnan, Venkitesh. 2015. “A Famous Victory in Delhi.” *Frontline*. <http://www.frontline.in/cover-story/a-famous-victory-in-delhi/article6901468.ece>

⁷ The Asom Gana Parishad was formally established in October 1985, its leadership developing from the students movement in Assam. In December of 1985, they contested state assembly elections and won 67 of the 126 seats and coming to power in the state. “Asom Gana Parishad: A Brief History” *Asom Gana Parishad*. http://www.asomganaparishad.org/About_Us/party_history.html

⁸ The Telugu Desam Party was formed in 1982 by the very popular Telugu actor Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao and party managed to create a space for itself in the state of Andhra Pradesh and in 1983 state assembly elections won 198 of 294 seats and came to power. “Know the Telugu Desam Party” *Rediff*. <http://www.rediff.com/election/2004/apr/14espec3.htm>

⁹ Rukmani, S. 2015. “AAP Win Biggest in Delhi’s History.” *The Hindu*. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/delhi2015/aap-win-biggest-in-delhis-history/article6879839.ece>

already well-established support base, strong network of members or organisational base across the country, financial strength and mature leadership with political experience. The durability of a new party is dependent to a large extent on the availability of finances, network and internal cohesion. According to Harmel (1985), parties which emerge from a movement often internally struggle in achieving a balance between being an opposition to the establishment and also to be a part of the democracy and win seats in the legislature. Today, AAP is struggling to find a common ground among its leadership as camps have already been created representing competing interests.¹⁰

If we measure success in terms of winning elections, then AAP has managed to be partially successful by coming to power in the capital of India. Success of a new party electorally is still largely dependent on a party managing to enter the national assembly (Lok Sabha). Also, success can additionally be measured in terms of the party's durability and its ability to bring desired

¹⁰ The AAP which came to power on the promise of fighting corruption and unaccountable power has been struggling with internal tensions as there are already questions being raised by party members on the internal democracy of the party. This issue has been relevant since the IAC movement of 2012 as the movement and its leadership (Arvind Kejriwal and Anna Hazare specifically) were to a large extent considered authoritarian. These perceptions have continued well into 2015 as expressed by many party members. Other differences between the top leadership have also continued since the 2013 elections where one camp wants to expand outside Delhi and Arvind Kejriwal's camp wants to remain focused on Delhi. This continues without any solution in sight and the recent electoral victory has strengthened the Kejriwal camp which then punished the differing voices of its other founding members Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav by pushing them out of the party's Political Affairs Committee (PAC). "AAP's Leadership Jinx." 2015. *The Hindu*.

<http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/aaps-leadership-jinx/article6963538.ece?ref=relatedNews>; "Aam Aadmi Party Crisis: Yogendra Yadav, Prashant Bhushan out of Party's PAC; Arvind Kejriwal's Resignation Rejected." 2015. *The Financial Express*.

<http://www.financialexpress.com/article/miscellaneous/aam-aadmi-party-all-set-to-remove-yogendra-yadav-prashant-bhushan/50319/>; "AAP Rift Widens as Kejriwal Demands Resignation of Yadav, Bhushan from Key Body." 2015. *Hindustan Times*.

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policy change and these two will be determined to a large extent by AAP's ability to establish a stable and inclusive leadership that will sustain the party (Harmel, 1985).

This is only a brief look at how new parties succeed and become capacitated to challenge the existing party politics. The literature on the subject is focussed to a large extent on new parties formed in Western-Europe and the United States of America (USA). Cumulative evaluations as done by Harmel and Robertson (1985) of new parties provide further impetus for further research of new parties in the developing world.

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