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Q3(a)

Explain the impact of electoral systems and cleavages in shaping party systems with reference to developing countries

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 2 · 20 marks · Comparative Politics

Comparative Politics: Nature and major approaches; political economy and political sociology perspectives; limitations of the comparative method.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how party systems are shaped by electoral systems and social cleavages in developing countries
- Write at 20-mark length

Revision summary

Duverger links FPTP to two-party district logic and PR to many parties.

Lipset and Rokkan link parties to social cleavages; the South adds caste, language, and religion.

Regionally concentrated groups make Indian FPTP nationally multi-party.

Huntington flags mobilisation without institutions as a party-system risk.

Clientelism and personalism fill the same rules with weaker organisations.

Introduction

Party systems in developing countries are not copies of nineteenth-century Europe. They are products of electoral rules and of social splits that elections organise. Maurice **Duverger** and Seymour Martin Lipset still supply the two levers.

Body

Electoral systems as the first shaper

- **Duverger's law:** first-past-the-post in single-member seats tends toward two large parties at the district level. Proportional representation tends toward many parties.
- Mechanical effects discard small vote-shares. Psychological effects teach voters and elites not to waste a ticket.
- Presidential rules, thresholds, and federal chambers add further mechanical pressure.
- In developing countries, poorly drawn seats, incumbency machines, and weak election commissions can warp the same rule.

Social cleavages as the second shaper

- **Lipset and Stein Rokkan mapped European parties onto frozen cleavages:** class, church, centre-periphery, and land-industry.
- Developing countries add caste, tribe, language, religion, and urban-rural splits that colonial rule often froze into law.

- Ethnic census voting, as in many African and South Asian cases, can turn PR into a parliament of communities and FPTP into a coalition of regional notables.
- Samuel **Huntington** warned that rapid mobilisation of new cleavages without strong institutions produces praetorian politics, not a stable party system.

How the two interact

- FPTP plus many ethnic groups can still yield a multi-party national system, as in India, because groups are regionally concentrated. District two-party logic and national fragmentation sit together.
- The Congress system aggregated cleavages inside one dominant party. After it, social engineering and State parties followed the cleavage map more openly.
- **Giovanni Sartori's distinction between polarised pluralism and moderate pluralism travels:** ideological distance and anti-system parties matter as much as the raw count.

Developing-country specifics

- Parties are often personal and weakly institutionalised. Electoral rules then amplify families, not programmes.
- Military vetoes and one-party independence movements delay the **Duverger**-Lipset sequence.
- Clientelism uses the ballot to trade goods along cleavage lines rather than to freeze a class cleavage in a social-democratic party.

Net pattern

- Electoral systems set the number and size of viable labels. Cleavages set what the labels mean. Developing party systems are the product, not a European delay.

Flow diagram

Electoral system -> Number of viable parties
 Social cleavages -> Identity of parties
 Number of viable parties -> Party system
 Identity of parties -> Party system
 Huntington mobilisation -.strains. -> Party system

Conclusion

Electoral systems mechanically and psychologically ration seats. Social cleavages supply the identities that fill those seats. In developing countries the mix is regionalised ethnicity, weak party organisation, and rules inherited from colonial or independence bargains. **Duverger** and Lipset still explain the levers. **Huntington** explains the strain.

Facts & figures

Duverger

Mechanical and psychological effects of electoral laws on the number of parties.

Lipset and Rokkan

Cleavage structures as the social origin of party families.

Huntington

Political Order in Changing Societies: mobilisation can outrun party institutionalisation.

Sartori

Party-system types by number and by polarisation, a refinement of simple two-versus-many counts.

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