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Political Parties in India: Recognition, Symbols and the Party System

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Political Parties in India: Recognition, Symbols and the Party System

A bow and arrow. A clock. Two symbols, two parties, and one election body that had to decide who owned each. This lesson shows how India registers and recognises parties, how symbols work, and which numbers exams love to test.



Results display board at the Election Commission of India office, Nirvachan Sadan, New Delhi, 16 May 2009. Photo: Election Commission of India, GODL-India, via Wikimedia Commons.

Registration Section 29A of the 1951 Act.
Recognition Symbols Order, 1968.
National party Any one of three tests.
Party splits Paragraph 15, open to judicial review.

1 How does a group become a political party in India?

A group becomes a party by registering with the Election Commission of India (ECI). The rule comes from **Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951**. Think of it like enrolling a club with an official register.

A new association must apply within **30 days** of its formation. Its rules must state faith in the Constitution, socialism, secularism and democracy. They must also uphold India's sovereignty, unity and integrity.

Registration is only the first step. Recognition is a higher level. The **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968** sets the recognition rules. It sorts parties into national parties, state parties and registered unrecognised parties (RUPPs). An RUPP is registered but has neither national nor state status.

Many people think registration makes a party "recognised". It does not. Most registered parties stay unrecognised.

The ECI also cleans the register. It delisted 334 RUPPs on 9 August 2025 and 474 more on 18 September 2025. That removed 808 parties in two rounds.

Read more: Election Commission of India: Structure and Independence and The Representation of the People Acts.

Think it through: why keep three categories?

Parties differ in how much voter support they have shown. Recognition rewards that support with reserved symbols and other facilities. Registration only gives a party legal existence.

Quick check 1. A party that registers with the ECI automatically becomes a recognised national or state party. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

2 What makes a party a National Party?

A party must meet **any one** of three tests under **paragraph 6B** of the Symbols Order. Memorise them as a set.

- **Route 1:** at least **6%** of valid votes in each of **four or more states** at general elections, plus **four Lok Sabha seats**.
- **Route 2: 2%** of Lok Sabha seats, with winners from at least **three states**.
- **Route 3:** recognition as a State Party in **four or more states**.

For the seat count in Route 2, a fraction above one-half counts as one seat.

A common trap drops the seat condition from Route 1. Votes alone are not enough there. Another trap swaps “four states” for “two states”. Exams also invent rules, such as a headquarters in Delhi. No such rule exists.

On 10 April 2023, the ECI gave the Aam Aadmi Party national status. On the same day it withdrew that status from the Trinamool Congress, the NCP and the CPI. As of October 2026, the official lists show six

national parties.

Think it through: why does Route 3 need four states?

A national party should have support across the country. Recognition as a State Party in four states shows that spread. It is a shortcut for parties that are strong in several regions.

Quick check 2. A party with 6% of votes in four states becomes a National Party even with no Lok Sabha seat. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Which parties are national parties, and what are their symbols?

A **reserved symbol** is kept for a recognised party's candidates. The ECI's national-party notification of 26 March 2024 was still the one listed in October 2026. It names six parties and their symbols.

- **Aam Aadmi Party (AAP):** Broom.
- **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP):** Elephant, except in Assam.
- **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** Lotus.
- **Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI(M):** Hammer, Sickle and Star.
- **Indian National Congress (INC):** Hand.
- **National People's Party (NPP):** Book.

This lesson only reports the official list. It does not rank or favour any party.

Why do symbols matter? Symbols help voters pick their candidate. The Supreme Court has noted that they help voters who cannot read candidate names. A picture on the ballot is easier to recognise than a name.

A **free symbol** is any symbol not reserved. Independent candidates and unrecognised parties choose from these. Paragraph 10B also gives some registered unrecognised parties a conditional common-symbol concession. That concession does not make the party recognised.

> **Think it through: why are symbols reserved?**
>
> If two parties used the same picture, voters could vote for the wrong one by mistake. Reserving a symbol for each recognised party avoids this confusion.

4 How does a party become a State Party?

A State Party is recognised in one state. Under **paragraph 6A**, a party must meet **any one** of five routes.

- **Assembly votes and seats:** 6% of valid votes and **two** Assembly seats.
- **Lok Sabha votes and seat:** 6% of valid votes in the state and **one** Lok Sabha seat from it.
- **Assembly seats only:** 3% of Assembly seats or three seats, whichever is greater.
- **Lok Sabha seats only:** one seat for every 25 seats allotted to the state, or any fraction of 25.
- **Votes only: 8%** of valid votes at the Assembly or Lok Sabha election in the state.

The last route is the surprise. It needs no seat at all. A party with 8.2% of valid Assembly votes can qualify without winning a single seat.

Recognition is not lost at once. Under paragraph 6C, a party that misses the criteria at the next general election after recognition keeps its status. Later, it must meet the criteria to continue.

Students often confuse “State Party” with “regional party”. “Regional” is a media word. The ECI uses National, State and Registered Unrecognised.

> **Think it through: why have a votes-only route?**
>
> In a first-past-the-post system, a party can have wide support but lose every seat narrowly. The votes-only route recognises such support.

Quick check 3. Every route to State Party recognition requires winning at least one seat. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 What happens when a party splits? Paragraph 15 explained

When a recognised party splits, both groups may claim its name and symbol. **Paragraph 15** of the Symbols Order lets the ECI settle this. It can decide which rival group is the party. It can also decide that neither group is.

The ECI must follow a fair process. It looks at the facts and circumstances. It must hear the groups' representatives and anyone else who wants to be heard.

The key case is **Sadiq Ali v. ECI**, decided on **11 November 1971** and reported at (1972) 4 SCC 664. The Supreme Court upheld paragraph 15. It also accepted that numerical strength is relevant.

A common misconception says the ECI's word is final. It is not. Paragraph 15 decisions remain open to judicial review. The ECI decides first, and courts can still examine the decision.

Numbers are not the only evidence. Support in the organisation, support among legislators and the party constitution can all matter. Legislator numbers do not automatically settle every case.

Read more: Article 324 and The Supreme Court.

Think it through: why did Sadiq Ali stress numbers?

A party is a group of people. Counting who stands with which group is a practical first test. The Court accepted it as relevant, not as the only test.

Quick check 4. Courts cannot review an ECI decision made under paragraph 15. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

6 What happened in the Shiv Sena and NCP disputes?

Both disputes show paragraph 15 at work. Here we report only the official decisions and court steps.

Shiv Sena: on **17 February 2023**, the ECI gave the Shiv Sena name and the Bow and Arrow symbol to the Eknath Shinde faction. The Thackeray faction challenged this in the Supreme Court.

NCP: on **6 February 2024**, the ECI gave the NCP name and the Clock symbol to the Ajit Pawar faction. The Sharad Pawar faction got the name Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar). On 19 March 2024, the Supreme Court let it use the Man Blowing Turha symbol.

The same order let the Ajit Pawar faction use the Clock for the time being. It had to publish a notice that the symbol dispute was still before the Court. On 24 October 2024, the Court again directed compliance with this Clock disclaimer.

These arrangements are interim. They are not a final endorsement of either side. We have not confirmed a final judgment in either dispute.

> **Think it through: why does an interim symbol exist?**
> Elections cannot wait for long court cases. An interim symbol lets both groups contest while the main question stays open.

7 What did the Supreme Court say in 2023 and October 2026?

A symbol fight is not the same as the anti-defection law. The Tenth Schedule deals with disqualifying individual legislators. Paragraph 15 asks which group is the party.

In **Subhash Desai**, decided on **11 May 2023**, the Supreme Court separated the political party from the legislature party. It said a legislative majority cannot automatically decide the political party's identity. Winning a symbol dispute also does not itself settle disqualification.

The Shiv Sena appeal came up again in October 2026. These points were questions from the bench or arguments by lawyers. They were not rulings.

- On 6 October 2026, the Court asked whether reversing the Speaker's disqualification decision could force the ECI's symbol decision to be revisited.
- On 7 October 2026, it asked whether the ECI had considered denying the symbol to both factions.
- On 8 October 2026, Shinde's counsel argued that finding his faction the real party meant awarding it the symbol.
- The case was listed again on 29 October 2026. A listing does not tell us what was decided.

Read more: The Anti-Defection Law.

> **Think it through: why do hearing questions not count as law?**
> Judges ask questions to test arguments. Only the final written judgment binds. Exams and notes should wait for that judgment.

8 Who is the Leader of the Opposition, and does the ECI recognise one?

The Leader of the Opposition leads the opposition party with the greatest numerical strength in a House of Parliament. The Speaker of the Lok Sabha or the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha gives the recognition. The Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977 defines the post in Section 2.

Many students repeat a “10% seat threshold”. Section 2 of the 1977 Act contains no such number. Do not add it to your notes.

Another mix-up links this post with the ECI. The ECI recognises political parties for elections. It does not recognise the Leader of the Opposition. That recognition comes from the presiding officer of the House.

Keep the two ideas apart. Party recognition is an election matter under the Symbols Order. Opposition leadership is a parliamentary matter under the 1977 Act.

> **Think it through: why does ‘largest opposition party’ matter?**
> The post goes to the leader of the biggest party not in government. This gives the opposition one clear voice in the House.

Quick check 5. The 1977 Act sets a 10% seat threshold for recognising the Leader of the Opposition. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

9 How have exams tested political parties?

Past questions mostly test the national-party routes and the official categories.

- **CDS (I) 2018:** for the third route, a party must already be a State Party in at least four states. See the question.
- **NDA (I) 2017:** conditions for National Party status. Statements 1 and 2 alone were correct. Statement 3 said “2 states” instead of 4. Statement 4 invented a headquarters-in-Delhi rule. See the question.
- **CDS (II) 2020:** which is not a real ECI category? “Regional Parties”. See the question.

The pattern is clear. Examiners change one number or add one fake rule. If you know the exact routes, the wrong option stands out.

Use this checklist before an exam. Registration comes from Section 29A. Recognition comes from the Symbols Order, 1968. Splits fall under paragraph 15. Courts can review the ECI.

Think it through: how can you spot a fake rule?

Compare each option with the routes you memorised. Any condition not on the list, such as a Delhi headquarters, is a trap.

Practice MCQs

1. On 17 February 2023, which faction did the Election Commission recognise as the real Shiv Sena, awarding it the "Bow and Arrow" symbol?

A. The Eknath Shinde faction

B. The Uddhav Thackeray faction

C. The Sharad Pawar faction

D. The Ajit Pawar faction

See answer ↓

2. On 6 February 2024, which faction did the Election Commission recognise as the real NCP, awarding it the "Clock" symbol?

A. The Uddhav Thackeray faction

B. The Sharad Pawar faction

C. The Ajit Pawar faction

D. The Eknath Shinde faction

See answer ↓

3. What is the main test the Election Commission applied in both the Shiv Sena and NCP symbol disputes?

A. Which faction commanded a legislative majority among elected MLAs and MPs

B. Which faction was founded first

C. Which faction had more party funds

D. Which faction had more social media followers

See answer ↓

4. Under current Election Commission criteria, which of these qualifies a party for National Party status?

A. Being registered for at least 50 years

B. Having a headquarters in New Delhi

C. Winning any single Lok Sabha seat nationwide

D. Polling 6% of votes in four or more states, plus winning 4 Lok Sabha seats

See answer ↓

5. To be recognised as a 'National Party' by the Election Commission, a political party must have recognised State Party status in at least how many States?

A. Five states

B. Seven states

C. Three states

D. Four states

See answer ↓

6. Why do election symbol disputes matter more than they might first appear?

A. Symbols are assigned randomly and hold no political significance

B. Election symbols have no practical effect on voting behaviour at all

C. A recognized symbol carries real electoral value, since voters often associate a party strongly with its symbol

D. Only unrecognized parties are ever given election symbols

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** On 17 February 2023, the EC recognised the Eknath Shinde-led faction as the real Shiv Sena, awarding it the Bow and Arrow symbol. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** On 6 February 2024, the EC recognised the Ajit Pawar-led faction as the real NCP, awarding it the Clock symbol. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The EC applied a 'legislative majority' test in both cases, looking at which faction commanded more elected MLAs and MPs. ↑ Q3
4. **D.** A party qualifies as a National Party by polling 6% of votes in four or more states plus winning 4 Lok Sabha seats, among other alternative criteria. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** A political party must have State Party recognition in at least four States to qualify as a National Party under Election Commission criteria. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** Symbol disputes matter more than they might first appear. A recognized symbol carries real electoral value. Voters often associate a party strongly with its symbol, especially in areas with lower literacy. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **False.** ↑ 4
5. **False.** ↑ 5

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