

THE MAJOR SOCIALIST PARTIES OF INDIA IN THE 1967 ELECTION

LEWIS P. FICKETT, JR.

The two major Socialist parties of India—the Praja Socialist Party (PSP) and the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP)—entered the Fourth Indian General Election of 1967 with an understandable lack of confidence. Both parties had been badly battered through more than eleven years of bitter fratricidal warfare, during which both had suffered intermittent fragmentation. The PSP seemed destined for extinction. The more militant SSP was expected to improve its political status, but with no prospect of playing a significant role in the Indian political system.

When the final election results were tabulated, however, the overall performance of the two parties was surprisingly good. The PSP not only survived but gained significantly as compared with its preelection status, winning 13 seats in the lower house of the Indian Parliament and polling 4.5 million votes (3% of the total popular vote). In state assembly elections, it won 106 seats and 4.7 million votes (3.35% of the total). The SSP made spectacular gains, increasing its parliamentary representation from 6 to 23 seats and polling almost 5% of the national vote (7.2 million). The SSP did even better at the state assembly level, increasing its representation from 64 to 180, while polling in excess of 5% of the total assembly vote cast (7.4 million).¹

Also, after the elections both the PSP and the SSP participated in the formation of several non-Congress coalition governments at the state level. The SSP was a principal component of the United Front Government in

TABLE 1

*Lok Sabha Results*²

		1952	1957	1962	1967
PSP	Seats	21	19	12	13
	% Vote	16.4	10.4	6.8	3.1
SSP	Seats	—	8	6	23
	% Vote	—	n.a.	2.8	4.9

¹India, Election Commission, *Report on the Fourth General Election in India* (1967), Vol. II (Statistical).

TABLE 2

State Assembly Results²

		<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>
PSP	Seats	202	208	179	106
	% Vote	14.8	9.75	7.6	3.4
SSP	Seats	—	52	59	108
	% Vote	—	n.a.	2.5	5.2

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and it also participated in similar coalitions in Kerala and West Bengal. The PSP was included in the United Front governments of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

The significance of this combined Socialist success was obscured by the apparent triumph of the rightist parties, the Swatantra and the Jan Sangh. While this rightist victory was valid in absolute terms—party rank, seats won, and popular vote—the simultaneous success of the Indian Socialist parties, particularly the SSP, was concealed by the intense factionalism among them. A detailed constituency analysis of the election results shows conclusively that had the Socialists been united, they would have emerged as the largest single opposition party in India.³ The two major Socialist parties fought each other in 43 parliamentary constituencies and 299 state assembly districts. If the two parties had been united in all these contests, they would have won at least nine more parliamentary seats and 41 additional state assembly seats.⁴ A reunified Indian Socialist Party would thus have become the second-ranking party in both the Indian Parliament (with 45 seats) and in the state assemblies (with 327 seats). The Socialists would have recaptured their early role as the leading opposition party in India, as the state-by-state analysis of the election results indicates.⁵ As it was, the Socialists fragmented their strength, while the Swatantra and the Jan Sangh worked out electoral adjustments in most constituencies to their mutual advantage.

THE STRONGHOLDS

Bihar: Socialism has deep historical roots in this state, and the overall Socialist strength increased dramatically (see table 3).

²The statistics presented in these tables have been taken from the official *Reports* published by the Election Commission. Figures for 1952 include the totals of both the SP and KMPP seats and vote percentages, since the parties were combined in September 1952 into the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). Since the dissident (Lohia) Socialists—who later became the SSP—lacked official standing in the 1957 Elections and ran as Independents, official election statistics on their accomplishments are not available.

³Probable wins of a united Socialist Party would have included the following: Bihar—6 Lok Sabha seats, 18 Assembly seats; Madhya Pradesh—4 Assembly seats; Maharashtra—3 Assembly seats; West Bengal—1 Lok Sabha seat; Uttar Pradesh—2 Lok Sabha seats, 16 Assembly seats.

⁴*Election Commission Report (1967), op. cit.*

⁵Much of the information in this analysis was obtained in interviews with Socialist Party leaders and MPs conducted by the author in New Delhi, July-December 1967.

TABLE 3⁶

	1952	1957	1962	1967	Gain or Loss
PSP Lok Sabha	3	2	2	1	-1
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	1	7	+6
PSP State Assembly	24	31	29	18	-11
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	7	68	+61

This increase was, however, due solely to the striking success scored by the SSP. The PSP has continued to decline, but not as drastically as the statistics in table 3 seem to indicate. As a result of losses suffered in 1964 when Asoka Mehta defected to Congress, and again in 1965 when the proposed merger with the Lohia Socialists aborted, the PSP could claim only 9 seats in the Bihar State Assembly before the 1967 election.⁷ In this light, its rise to 18 seats following the 1967 election is a substantial relative gain.

In the broader perspective, however, the PSP is now completely overshadowed by the gains of its offshoot, the SSP. In Bihar as elsewhere in North India, three factors stood out in the SSP triumph. First, the SSP policy of aggressively pushing the Hindi languages vis-à-vis English and other Indian languages has had a favorable effect on party fortunes. Second, the famine conditions in Bihar in 1966 and 1967 and the SSP's militance in calling attention to the situation were also very effective. Its most appealing campaign platform in Bihar, however, was the demand for the reservation of 60% of government jobs and places in educational institutions for "backward classes"—i.e., untouchables and tribal peoples. This slogan was a great rallying cry among Bihar's lower castes and was unquestionably a major contributing factor in the SSP success in that state.

Following the election the SSP became the leading component of an opposition United Front Government which governed Bihar for several months. The Front includes the PSP, the Communists, the Jan Sangh, and a dissident Congress group, the Jana Kranti Dal. While a dissident Congressman served as Chief Minister of the government, the 86 Socialists comprised the backbone of the coalition in the Assembly and represented 25% of the state's voters. Although the badly divided Congress won 128 seats and polled 33% of the state's vote, the Socialists collectively continue to be the principal opposition party to the Congress, and have significantly strengthened their position in the state.

Mysore: In this conglomerate South Indian state, the PSP held its own as the largest opposition party in the 1967 election, while the SSP picked up marginal support. Significantly, however, the PSP did not make the kind of gains here which might have been anticipated in a time of widespread

⁶*Election Commission Reports, op. cit.*

⁷PSP, *Report of the Eighth National Conference of the PSP*, Bombay, December 26-28, 1965 (New Delhi, 1966), p. 13.

protest voting against the Congress nationally. But again, the statistics (see table 4) are somewhat deceptive on this question.

TABLE 4⁸

	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	Gain or <u>Loss</u>
PSP Lok Sabha	1	1	—	2	+2
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	—	1	+1
PSP State Assembly	11	18	20	22	+2
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	1	6	+5

In 1962, the PSP elected 20 state assembly members, but 11 of these defected to the Congress with Asoka Mehta in 1964. With the addition of some independents, party strength in the Mysore Assembly rose to 12 just before the election. Twenty-two PSP members were elected in 1967, in addition to 2 independents who were elected with PSP support. The PSP has since been instrumental in forming an opposition front against Congress, and has won an additional seat in a by-election in Tiptur District.⁹

PSP strength in Mysore is largely based on the Vokkaliga caste. Indeed, some observers contend that this is the reason for the party's continuing existence in Mysore, since in organizational terms the party is extremely weak in the state. Functioning only at election time to oppose the Lingayat caste (which dominates the state Congress Party), the Mysore PSP seems to lack any meaningful electoral program and any significant growth potential. Its percentage of vote was cut significantly in both the parliamentary and state assembly elections. On the other hand, the Swatantra is emerging as the liveliest competitor to the Congress. If this trend continues, the Socialists could lose their status as the state's principal political opposition.

Orissa: Orissa was the big success story of the PSP in 1967. Building on a solid base in the coastal areas of the state and upon the backward castes, the PSP made spectacular gains over its 1961 showing (see table 5).

The SSP, meanwhile, held its single parliamentary seat and picked up two seats in the State Assembly.

The major explanation of PSP electoral successes in Orissa is that the

TABLE 5¹⁰

	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	Gain or <u>Loss</u>
PSP Lok Sabha	1	2	1	4	+3
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	1	1	n.c.
PSP State Assembly	10	11	10	21	+11
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	—	2	+2

⁸*Election Commission reports, op. cit.*

⁹*Hindustan Times*, November 28, 1967.

¹⁰*Election Commission Reports, op. cit.*

party has not suffered the enervating fragmentation there which has so weakened it elsewhere. There is a small SSP organization, but Asoka Mehta's defection to the Congress had little effect on the PSP in Orissa. Indeed, the acute factionalism which has prevailed in the Orissa Congress Party has greatly helped the Socialists. In the 1961 election, the Patniak-led Congress Party won 82 seats and 43% of the popular vote. In 1967 the Congress fragmented, with the result that the main group won only 31 seats (30.7% of the total vote), while a dissident group, the so-called Jana Congress, won 26 seats (12% of the total). When the dust had settled, a coalition government had been formed by the Swatantra, which emerged with a plurality by winning 49 seats, and the Jana Congress. The PSP, third-ranking party in the state, decided to remain outside the coalition.

Corruption charges played a major role in the final outcome of the election. The PSP leader, Surendranath Dwivedy, raised the corruption charges initially and pursued them relentlessly, and this had a significant impact in promoting PSP fortunes in Orissa. Local issues such as high irrigation rates in the Cuttack area also contributed to the Socialist victory. Although extremely limited in finances, the PSP is slowly moving out from its core base areas in an "ink blot" manner, and gradually consolidating its support. To the extent that these 1967 gains represented lower-caste mobilization, they augur well for the longer-term prospects of the Socialists in Orissa.

Uttar Pradesh: Uttar Pradesh has always been one of the key strongholds of the Socialist movement in India. In spite of the split in their ranks, the Socialists in general have continued to do well here. Fragmentation hurt the PSP very badly. The Asoka Mehta defection robbed it of 18 members in the State Assembly in 1964. Sixteen MPs remained with S. J. Joshi in the merged SSP in 1965. Just before the 1967 election, the PSP, having been joined in the interim by four independents, held only 8 seats in the State Assembly.¹¹ It emerged from the election with 11 assembly members, and added an additional MP in the national parliament for a total representation of 2.

TABLE 6¹²

	1952	1957	1962	1967	Gain or Loss
PSP Lok Sabha	2	4	2	2	n.c.
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	1	8	+7
PSP State Assembly	20	44	38	11	-27
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	24	44	+20

Gains of the SSP were almost as dramatic in U.P. as they had been in

¹¹*Janata*, March 26, 1967, p. 5.

¹²*Election Commission Reports, op. cit.*

Bihar. The party increased its parliamentary representation from one to 8, and its assembly group from 24 to 44. There are several explanations for this success. The SSP makes its greatest appeal to the lower castes and in the rural areas of the state. A militant party *par excellence*, the SSP is always active, engaging in noisy demonstrations, walkouts, and various other forms of civil disobedience. Ignoring economic policy questions for the most part, the SSP in U.P. laid heavy stress on the Hindi language issue, which was vital there in the Hindi heartland.

The PSP depends primarily upon old, established leaders who have been engaged in the kisan (peasant) and independence movements since the 1930s. Its current status has been described by one commentator as follows:

The PSP, reduced to a rump not so much by electoral defeats as by desertions and splits in its ranks, is now a spent force. It no longer attracts activists or makes efforts to mobilize support among new groups. It survives because a few leaders of long-standing, for one reason or another prefer not to leave its ranks. Until the time they leave the party to join another, or retire from active political life, the PSP may well continue to return a few members to the assembly, but as a force in state politics, it must now be counted out.¹³

The SSP, however, would seem to have a real future in Uttar Pradesh, and Socialist unity would make the Socialists the largest opposition party in the state.

FOOTHOLDS

Assam: The PSP has retained a slight foothold in Assam due largely to the personal following of Hem Barua, one of the party's leading figures in the Lok Sabha. It has also managed to exploit the language issue here more skillfully than elsewhere, championing the cause of Assamese against Bengali. In 1964, all six PSP members of the Assam State Assembly bolted with Asoka Mehta to the Congress, leaving behind a considerable vacuum. In the 1967 election, the PSP virtually regained its previous status by electing 5 members to the State Assembly and 2 members, including Mr. Barua, to parliament.

TABLE 7¹⁴

	1952	1957	1962	1967	Gain or Loss
PSP Lok Sabha	1	2	2	2	n.c.
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	—	—	n.c.
PSP State Assembly	5	8	6	5	-1
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	—	4	+4

¹³Bashiruddin Ahmed, "Uttar Pradesh," *Seminar*, July 1967, p. 47. Another major blow was struck at the PSP in this state with the resignation of Triloki Singh (the U.P. State Chairman and a member of the National Executive), who joined the Congress.

¹⁴*Election Commission Reports, op. cit.*

In a spirit of cautious desperation, and against party policy elsewhere, the Assam PSP entered into a legislative bloc with the Right Communists in the State Assembly after the elections. The party is very uneasy about this new, and limited, opening to the Left. However, the move does seem to be a realistic adaptation to the power realities of Assam, and it may provide a precedent for future cooperation and adjustments among the parties of the Left. It is difficult to visualize more than limited growth potential for the PSP in Assam, since its voting potential has clearly demonstrated a declining pattern.

Madhya Pradesh: Until the 1967 election, Madhya Pradesh seemed to be a fertile area for PSP growth and development, even though, as indicated in table 8, the party's performance in this state had been extremely erratic. The party had focused primary attention on tribal and backward caste communities, and on this basis had scored significant gains in 1962. However, of the 33 MPs elected in that year, 11 defected to the Congress and 3 to the SSP during 1964.

TABLE 8¹⁵

	<u>1952</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>Gain or Loss</u>
PSP Lok Sabha	2	—	3	—	-3
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	1	—	-1
PSP State Assembly	28	12	33	9	-24
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	14	10	-4

The 1967 election was a disaster for the PSP. It lost its 3 seats in the Lok Sabha and more than half of its remaining state assembly seats. The main explanation lies in the extremely effective campaign waged by the Jan Sangh-Swatantra coalition in Madhya Pradesh. Well financed and well organized, this campaign was successfully directed at the backward classes, which had hitherto provided the bulk of PSP support.

The future of the PSP in Madhya Pradesh appears to depend upon external factors such as the viability of the new coalition put together by the Rajmata of Gwalior with the support of Congress Party dissidents. The striking success of the Jan Sangh in this state seems ominous for the PSP, which apparently can survive only as a Congress "satellite." The fate of the SSP, which declined from 14 to 10 in the Assembly and lost its parliamentary seat, is equally unpromising. Socialist unity again appears to be the best hope.

Maharashtra: Maharashtra, and particularly the city of Bombay, was at one time a stronghold of the Socialist movement in India. Now, however, the PSP has become an impotent fragment in Maharashtran politics.

In the Lok Sabha, the PSP retained only the seat held by one of its more

¹⁵*Ibid.*

TABLE 9¹⁶

	1952	1957	1962	1967	Gain or Loss
PSP Lok Sabha	—	5	1	1	n.c.
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	—	2	+2
PSP State Assembly	9	33	9	8	-1
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	1	4	+3

vocal MPs, Nath Pai, while its representation in the State Assembly declined by one. Of more significance, perhaps, was the 50% decline in terms of popular vote. Meanwhile, by waging a vigorous campaign, the SSP gained 2 parliamentary seats, including one held by the powerful Bombay Congress political boss, S. K. Patil.

What explanation is there for the poor performance of the PSP in Maharashtra over the years? The party has had little contact with the peasantry, and because of its predominantly Brahman state leadership it has not developed a substantial popular base. Lack of party discipline, constant disunity among its leaders, absence of a clear-cut ideology, and inadequate resources have all greatly handicapped the party in the state. According to one well-informed observer, when the ruling Congress accepted Socialism as its ideology, the PSP lost its *raison d'être* as an independent party.¹⁷

The "purist policy" of the PSP has also hurt the party badly. It is important to note that in 1957, when it was pursuing a more tolerant attitude toward electoral adjustments, the PSP made a significant impact on the state's politics. The survival of the PSP in Maharashtra depends very much on its future willingness to find common cause with other opposition political groups, including the SSP, even though the latter is still a minor factor in state politics here. Otherwise, it would seem to be headed for political oblivion, which only a sudden—and unlikely—disintegration of the Congress might arrest.

West Bengal: In 1952 the industrial state of West Bengal seemed to be one of the potential strongholds of the Socialist Party, but this promise has never been fulfilled.

TABLE 10¹⁸

	1952	1957	1962	1967	Gain or Loss
PSP Lok Sabha	—	2	—	1	+1
SSP Lok Sabha	—	n.a.	—	1	+1
PSP State Assembly	15	21	5	7	+2
SSP State Assembly	—	n.a.	—	7	+7

¹⁶*Ibid.*¹⁷Ram Joshi, "Political Parties in Maharashtra," in Iqbal Narain (ed.), *State Politics in India* (Meerut: Meenaskshi Prakashan, 1967), p. 480.¹⁸*Election Commission Reports, op. cit.*

The 1957 elections marked the high watermark for the PSP in West Bengal, due to the party's participation in a broad leftist coalition which included the Communists. By 1962 the party was pursuing its "purist" line, and going it alone proved to be disastrous. Although the PSP won one parliamentary seat in the recent election, and 2 additional assembly seats, its percentages of popular vote (1.7% and 1.74%) reveal its true and minimal strength in the state.

The SSP, which was a negligible force in 1962, welcomed 3 PSP defectors in 1965, and won a total of 7 seats in the 1967 election. After the election, both the PSP and the SSP joined a 14-party United Front, headed by Congress dissident Ajoy Mukerjee. The Front collapsed and was replaced by a coalition government supported mainly by the Congress; the coalition in turn gave way to President's Rule in early 1968. Three PSP members defected to the coalition government, leaving the party an even more hapless political fragment than before. At a stormy party meeting on April 12, 1968, the West Bengal unit of the PSP voted (118-103) to break with the United Front. This decision could well lead to the virtual extinction of the party in this state.

Other States: In the other states of the Indian union, the PSP and the SSP are not major political forces. The PSP, although sufficiently powerful in Kerala to form a minority government in 1954, has now been virtually wiped out there. The SSP has inherited PSP strength, and now has 19 seats in the Kerala State Assembly.

In Andhra Pradesh, the Socialists have been a negligible force ever since the parent Congress Socialist Party was successfully infiltrated by the Communists there in the late 1930s. The SSP has a single member in the present legislative assembly. In Gujarat, the PSP elected three members to the assembly in 1967, but has no real roots or organizational structure. In Madras, the now ruling DMK Party made minor electoral adjustments with the PSP and the SSP in the 1967 elections, thereby permitting them to win 6 marginal seats, 4 for the PSP and 2 for the SSP, which they had lost by narrow margins to the Congress in 1962. Again, the Socialists have never had any real base in the state, except for certain ephemeral support which they gained in 1952 by their merger with the KMPP. By 1957 this support had completely evaporated.

In Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan, the PSP has been and continues to be an insignificant political force. Although it did win 2 seats in Rajasthan in 1962, and one in the Punjab in 1957, it was completely shut out in these states in the 1967 election. The SSP, however, picked up marginal support in these areas in 1967 by winning 8 legislative seats in Rajasthan and one in the Punjab.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Two major conclusions emerge from this state-by-state analysis of the Socialist vote in the 1967 election. The first is that, in spite of their mar-

ginal support in some states, the Socialists, if considered collectively, constitute a genuine All-India party. This is an asset which cannot be matched by any other Indian political party except the Congress.¹⁹

The second conclusion is that reunification is imperative for Socialist survival in the Indian political system. That system is now in a state of great flux.²⁰ The huge, umbrella-like Congress is disintegrating, but still very slowly. No effective national political alternative has yet emerged. Nevertheless, there is a clear trend toward polarization, under which there is likely to be little scope for minor parties. It seems unlikely that a two-party system will emerge, as India is probably too vast and diverse a nation to tolerate such a development. Far more probable is a multi-party system with 4 or 5 major parties. In such a system, a reunified Socialist party could be a major component. If the Socialists cannot achieve unity, they will probably be pulverized between the millstones of a centrist Congress and the Communists.

¹⁹The Communists have significant strength only in West Bengal and Kerala; the Swatantra only in Orissa, Rajasthan, and Gujarat; the Jan Sangh only in the Hindi-speaking states of North India.

²⁰For an excellent analysis of the overall political situation in India following the election, see Rajni Kothari, "India's Political Transition," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Special Number, Vol. II, Nos. 33, 34, 35 (August 1967), pp. 1489-97.

LEWIS F. FICKETT, JR. is Associate Professor of Political Science at Mary Washington College, University of Virginia.