

Critical Elections and Electoral Realignment: A Study of the 1997 Punjab State Assembly Elections

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Abstract

This study explores the 1997 Punjab State Assembly elections through the conceptual lens of critical election theory to assess whether the electoral outcome signified a process of electoral realignment in the state's party system. Critical elections are understood as transformative political events that generate enduring shifts in voter loyalties, party dominance, and patterns of political competition. The paper situates the 1997 elections within Punjab's distinctive socio-political context, shaped by a decade of militancy, political instability, and the subsequent re-legitimation of democratic institutions. Using electoral data, party performance trends, and voting behaviour patterns, the study examines the extent to which the elections marked a departure from earlier alignments and contributed to a restructuring of political power in the state. It evaluates whether the decisive mandate reflected short-term voter reaction to governance failures or a deeper realignment in political preferences with long-term consequences. By analysing continuity and change across successive elections, the paper contributes to the broader debate on the applicability of critical election theory to sub-national politics in India and enhances understanding of electoral transformation in post-conflict democratic settings.

Keywords: Alignment, Assembly Elections, Coalition Politics, Development, Deviating Elections, Electoral Politics, Realignment,

Introduction

The theory of critical elections occupies a significant place in the study of electoral change and party systems. Originating in the works of V. O. Key Jr., critical elections are defined as electoral contests that produce durable and fundamental shifts in voter alignments, party dominance, and the structure of political competition. A concept of critical elections has been developed to cover a type of election in which there occurs a sharp and durable electoral realignment between parties, although the techniques employed do not yield any information of consequences about the mechanisms for the maintenance of a new alignment, once it is formed.¹ Such elections are typically marked by heightened voter participation, intense political polarization, and a clear break from existing electoral patterns. Unlike routine elections, critical elections initiate periods of electoral realignment, the effects of which persist over multiple electoral cycles. Critical elections are generally associated with moments of profound social, economic, or political transformation. These may include crises of governance, legitimacy deficits, economic dislocation, or major conflicts that destabilize

¹ V. O. Key Jr., "A Theory of Critical Elections" 17 *The Journal of Politics* 16 (1955).

existing political arrangements. In such contexts, voters reassess long-standing partisan loyalties, leading to the reconfiguration of party systems and the emergence of new governing coalitions. The concept of critical realignment is an aggregate-level construct that denotes a sudden, extensive, and enduring transformation in dominant electoral patterns. Such change is typically triggered by a critical election and culminates in a substantially altered partisan balance within the electorate. This understanding is well established in the literature on critical realignments. However, what remains less clearly articulated is the need for scholars to account for both temporal and spatial dimensions when analysing the role of critical realignments in structuring electoral behaviour. Accurate identification and assessment of enduring shifts in electoral patterns require the examination of extended time horizons, as enduring critical change may manifest in multiple forms. Equally crucial to the detection and measurement of realignments are spatial considerations, which influence how and where such transformations unfold.² While the concept was initially developed to explain electoral change in advanced democracies, scholars have increasingly applied it to sub-national and post-conflict settings to assess its broader analytical relevance. In order for the notion of critical elections to make sense the party system must be institutionalized. That is, voters must have an enduring sense of party identification and vote repeatedly for their party. Without this there can be no realignment because there would never have been an alignment.³ When examined through this theoretical lens, the Punjab Legislative Assembly election of 1997 exhibits several characteristics consistent with a critical election. The election was held after more than a decade of political turbulence marked by militancy, counter-insurgency operations, President's Rule, and weakened democratic institutions. The preceding 1992 Assembly election, conducted amid widespread violence and boycott calls, had resulted in extremely low voter turnout and a serious crisis of political legitimacy. By contrast, the 1997 election symbolized a decisive return to mass electoral participation and democratic normalcy. The emphatic victory of the AD-BJP alliance marks a decisive turning point in the configuration of political forces that have been party to the Punjab problem.⁴ However, whether the 1997 election constituted a fully critical election remains a matter of scholarly debate. While it clearly marked a rupture with the immediate past and initiated a period of relative political stability, later electoral volatility and the eventual rise of new political forces suggest that the realignment may not have been permanent. Nonetheless, within the context of post-conflict democratic reconstruction, the 1997 Punjab Assembly election stands as a compelling example of how critical election theory can be applied to understand transformative moments in sub-national politics in India.

Critical theory and Realignment

Changes in the external realities of politics can influence popular sentiments across all partisan and social groups within the electorate. This becomes evident when we observe that time-varying attitudes toward political objects help explain short-term fluctuations in the partisan

² Peter F. Nardulli, "The Concept of a Critical realignment, Electoral Behaviour, and Political Change" 89 *American Political Science Review* 11 (1995).

³ William G. Vanderbok "Critical Elections, Contained Volatility and the Indian Electorate" 24 *Modern Asian Studies* 82, (1990).

⁴ Gurharpal Singh "The Punjab legislative assembly elections of February 1997: the BJP's regional road to power?" 6 *Contemporary South Asia* 279 (1997).

division of the vote, whereas party loyalties and social characteristics, being relatively stable over time, provide only a limited explanation for such shifts.⁵ In a deviating election, the fundamental division of partisan loyalties remains largely intact; however, short-term attitudinal forces influencing the vote are sufficient to bring about the defeat of the majority party. Once the personalities or events that temporarily divert these forces from expected party-based voting patterns recede, the political balance tends to revert to a level more closely aligned with the underlying distribution of partisan attachments. A deviating election, therefore, represents a temporary electoral reversal occurring within a broader period in which one party enjoys a clear long-term advantage in the preferences of the electorate.⁶ Critical elections and realignment are central concepts in the study of electoral change, particularly when examined through a critical theoretical lens. A critical election is understood as a decisive electoral contest that produces a durable shift in voter alignments, party coalitions, and the dominant ideological framework of politics, often marking the end of one political order and the emergence of another. Unlike routine elections, critical elections are typically preceded by periods of intense social stress, economic crises, institutional breakdowns, legitimacy deficits, or deep cultural conflicts, that existing party systems fail to manage effectively. The rise and decline of political parties may, to some extent, be the result of long-term trends that persist across decades, with elections representing only incremental stages in the gradual formation of new loyalties and the erosion of old ones. The slow pace of this process underscores the strength of resistance to change embedded within the electorate, arising from enduring attachments to established symbols, leaders, and parties. Abrupt transformations tend to occur only in response to events of widespread and intense impact or to issues that evoke deep emotional responses. Conversely, other processes operate steadily and almost imperceptibly across successive elections, gradually reshaping party alignments and consolidating new party groupings.⁷ Realignment, in this context, refers to the long-term restructuring of political loyalties and power relations that follows such elections, as new social groups are incorporated into the political system while others are marginalized. Specific applications of the realignment perspective address institutions, territories, groups, issues, eras, and individual elections.⁸ Critical theory moves beyond the behavioural explanation of voter shifts to emphasize the structural and ideological dimensions of realignment, highlighting how transformations in class relations, state capacity, and hegemonic ideas shape electoral outcomes. From this perspective, critical elections are moments of hegemonic rupture in which ruling elites attempt to reconstruct consent by redefining political agendas, symbols, and alliances, sometimes accommodating popular demands but often reconfiguring domination in more subtle forms. Thus, critical elections and realignment are seen not merely as electoral turning points, but as historically embedded processes reflecting broader struggles over power, representation, and social change. To recapitulate, periods of critical realignment are characterized by brief but intense reorganizations of the mass coalitional bases of the major political parties, occurring at periodic

⁵ Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, et. al., *An Abridgement the American Voter* 31 (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1964).

⁶ *Id.* At 275.

⁷ V. O. Key Jr., "Secular Realignment and the Party System" 21 *The Journal of Politics* 199 (1955).

⁸ Byron E. Shafer (ed.), *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* 142 (The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1991).

intervals at the national level. Such periods are often preceded by major third-party insurgencies that expose the inability of “politics as usual” to integrate, let alone aggregate, emerging political demands. They are closely linked to abnormal levels of stress within the socioeconomic system and are marked by unusually high levels of ideological polarization and widened issue distances between the major parties. Among the variables that determine when, in what form, and on what scale a realignment take place, five stand out as most important. They are the breath and depth of the underlying grievance, the capacity of party leadership, the division of polar forces between the parties, and the strength of the ties that bind voters to the existing parties.⁹ Finally, critical realignments have enduring consequences, functioning as constituent moments that set the broad outer boundaries of public policy, even if they do not determine specific policy outcomes in detail.¹⁰

Overview of Punjab State Legislative Assembly election since 1952

The electoral history of the Punjab Legislative Assembly prior to 1997 reflects the complex interaction of regional identity, national politics, agrarian interests, and periods of political instability. Following Independence and the traumatic partition of 1947, Punjab's early electoral politics were dominated by the Indian National Congress, which emerged as the principal political force in the state. The Congress secured decisive victories in the first Assembly elections of 1952 and 1957, benefiting from its central role in the freedom movement and its organizational strength during the formative years of democratic consolidation. Roughly, from 1950 to mid-1960s, there was slow beginning of interest in political happenings in the states. In this phase, the organization of states and linguistic problems drew attention.¹¹ A significant transformation occurred in the 1960s, particularly after the linguistic reorganization of the state in 1966, which led to the creation of a Punjabi-speaking Punjab. This reorganization strengthened the political relevance of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) as a representative of Sikh religious and regional interests. The 1967 Assembly elections marked the first major challenge to Congress dominance, resulting in a fragmented mandate and the formation of the first non-Congress government in Punjab. The first election to the Punjab Vidhan Sabha, after reorganization, was held in February 1967. With the Sikhs gaining majority in the reorganized Punjab, and the creation of almost seventy-five Sikhs dominated constituencies, the electoral prospects of the Akali dal, exclusively a Sikh party, had improved considerably.¹² However, this period was characterized by political instability, frequent defections, and short-lived coalition governments. The early 1970s witnessed a temporary restoration of Congress dominance, particularly after the 1972 elections, which were held in the aftermath of the Bangladesh War and benefitted from the popularity of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Nonetheless, tensions between the Congress-led central government and the Akali Dal intensified, culminating in the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973), which articulated

⁹ James L. Sundquist, *Dynamics of The Party System: Alignment and Realignment of Political Parties in the United States* 28-29 (The Brookings Institution, Washington, 1973).

¹⁰ Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* 10 (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1970).

¹¹ Bhupinder Singh, *Punjab Politics: Retrospect & Prospect* 198 (Readworthy Publications, New Delhi, 2015).

¹² Lakhwinder Singh Sidhu, Gurpreet Singh Brar, et. al., *Politics in Punjab: 1966-2008* 210 (Unistar Books Pvt. Ltd., Chandigarh, 2009).

demands for greater federal autonomy and strengthened Sikh political consciousness. The Emergency period (1975–77) and its aftermath constituted another critical juncture in Punjab's electoral politics. In the 1977 Assembly elections, the Akali Dal, in alliance with the Janata Party, secured a decisive victory, reflecting widespread opposition to authoritarian central rule. This election reinforced the pattern of bipolar competition between the Congress and the Akali Dal, though governance challenges and centre–state conflicts persisted. The 1980s represented a period of profound political crisis. The resurgence of militancy, escalating violence, and the breakdown of constitutional governance severely disrupted electoral processes. Though the Akalis have always claimed that they alone represented the Sikhs of Punjab, until the early 1980s the Congress Party too had a substantial social base in the state, particularly among the Sikhs. The rise of militancy and the crisis of 1980s, whereby identity politics came to occupy the foreground of state politics the Congress nearly completely lost ground among the Sikhs, almost everywhere in the country.¹³ The 1985 Assembly elections, held under the framework of the Rajiv–Longowal Accord, brought the Akali Dal to power under Surjit Singh Barnala. While the election was significant in restoring an elected government, it failed to stabilize the political situation, and President's Rule was reimposed in 1987 amid renewed insurgency. The prolonged absence of representative government during the late 1980s and early 1990s culminated in the 1992 Assembly elections, which were conducted under extraordinary security conditions. The elections were marked by widespread boycott calls and low voter turnout, particularly among Sikh voters. Although the Congress formed the government under Beant Singh, the legitimacy of the electoral process remained contested due to the exceptional circumstances under which it was held. Thus, the period preceding 1997 was characterized by alternating phases of Congress dominance, the rise of the Akali Dal as a regional force, recurring political instability, and a prolonged disruption of democratic normalcy due to militancy and central intervention. Within Sikh politics, violent counterinsurgency eliminated the militants, marginalized the radicals, and ultimately succeeded in strengthening the moderates.¹⁴ These historical developments provide essential context for understanding the significance of the 1997 Assembly elections, which are widely viewed as marking a return to stable and competitive electoral politics in Punjab.

The Punjab Legislative Assembly elections since 1997 mark a significant phase in the state's political history, characterized by post-insurgency stabilization, shifts in party dominance, and changing patterns of electoral competition. It resulted in a decisive victory for the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)–Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance, which secured an overwhelming mandate, while the Indian National Congress suffered a major electoral setback. This election is often interpreted as restoring political normalcy and re-legitimizing democratic institutions in the state. The 2002 Assembly elections marked a reversal of fortunes, with the Indian National Congress returning to power under the leadership of Captain Amarinder Singh. Voter discontent with the incumbent SAD-BJP government, particularly over issues of governance and economic distress, played a significant role in shaping the outcome. This election indicated the persistence of anti-incumbency as a dominant feature of Punjab's electoral politics rather

¹³ Surinder S. Jodhka, "Decline of Identity Politics" 35 *Economic and Political Weekly* 880 (2000).

¹⁴ Gurharpal Singh, "India's Akali-BJP Alliance: The 1997 Legislative Assembly Elections" 38 *Asian Survey* 402 (1998).

than long-term partisan realignment. In 2007, Punjab witnessed a notable deviation from this pattern when the SAD-BJP alliance was re-elected, becoming the first incumbent government in the state to secure a consecutive term since the reorganization of Punjab in 1966. This outcome suggested a degree of electoral consolidation, attributed to welfare-oriented policies, improved law and order, and strategic coalition management. The 2012 elections reaffirmed the dominance of the SAD-BJP alliance, marking a second consecutive re-election and underscoring the temporary stabilization of a bipolar party system dominated by the SAD and the Congress. However, growing concerns over corruption, agrarian distress, and unemployment began to erode public confidence in the ruling coalition during this period. The elections also witnessed a most virulent form of competitive populism as the two contending 'relevant'/'effective' parties, both lacking in terms of ideological content and organisational presence, indulged in patronage, clientelism and hollow promises mainly targeting their core social constituencies without any programmatic efforts to back them for electoral gains.¹⁵ The 2017 Assembly elections signalled another major shift, with the Congress achieving a decisive victory under Captain Amarinder Singh. The elections also marked the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a significant political force in Punjab, reflecting voter frustration with traditional parties and the growing appeal of alternative political narratives centred on governance reform and anti-corruption. Keeping in mind the deteriorating economic conditions, particularly for business and equally for the farmers, voting in the assembly elections resulted in a win for the Congress. It is due to this reason people considered development, unemployment and drug addiction as among the important issues when deciding whom to vote for.¹⁶ The most recent election in 2022 represented a profound transformation in Punjab's electoral landscape. The Aam Aadmi Party secured a landslide victory, displacing both the Congress and the SAD from their historically dominant positions. More importantly perhaps, the current elections reflect a clear decline of the earlier hegemonies, particularly of the landed aristocracy of the region, which has controlled the state politics over the past five decades or so. The prolonged crisis of agriculture and its declining value as an occupation have only contributed to this process.¹⁷ This outcome reflected widespread anti-incumbency, leadership crises within established parties, and a strong public demand for political renewal. The election underscored the transition from a largely bipolar system to a more competitive and fluid multiparty configuration. Overall, Punjab's legislative elections since 1997 reveal a pattern of cyclical electoral change shaped by anti-incumbency, evolving party strategies, and shifting voter expectations. While moments of consolidation have occurred, the broader trajectory points to increasing volatility and realignment in the state's electoral politics.

Party wise performance of Punjab state Assembly election of 1997

The 1997 Punjab State Assembly election marked a decisive party-wise realignment in the state's politics, with the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) emerging as the principal beneficiary of widespread anti-incumbency against the Congress government.

¹⁵ Ashutosh Kumar, 2012 Assembly Elections in Punjab: Ascendance of a State Level Party 19 *Journal of Punjab Studies* 257 (2012).

¹⁶ Jagrup Singh Sekhon and Sunayana Sharma, "Dynamics of Electoral Process of 2017 Assembly Elections in Punjab" 25 *Journal of Sikh and Punjab Studies* 140 (2018).

¹⁷ Surinder S. Jodhka, "Political and Electoral Dynamics in Punjab" 57 *Economic and Political Weekly* 22 (2022).

Political Parties	Seats Won	Percentage of vote Share
Indian National Congress (I)	14	26.59
Akali Dal (Badal)	75	37.64
Bhartiya Janta Party	18	8.33
Communist Party of India	02	2.98
Bahujan Samaj Party	01	7.48
Akali Dal (Mann)	01	3.10
Communist Party of India (M)	00	1.79
Independents and Others	06	12.09
Total	117	100

Punjab Assembly Election Results, 1997¹⁸

Contesting the election in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the SAD secured an overwhelming mandate by winning 75 seats, thereby re-establishing itself as the dominant regional force in Punjab. Its success was rooted in strong rural and Sikh support, effective mobilization around issues of governance, federalism, and regional identity, and the projection of Parkash Singh Badal as a credible alternative leader. The BJP, as the junior partner in the alliance, performed impressively within its limited urban and semi-urban constituencies, winning 18 seats, and thus played a crucial role in consolidating the coalition's comfortable majority. In sharp contrast, the Indian National Congress (INC) suffered a historic electoral collapse, securing only 14 seats, a dramatic fall from its dominant position in the previous Assembly. This defeat reflected deep public dissatisfaction with Congress rule, allegations of corruption, governance failures, and erosion of its traditional support base. Smaller parties registered marginal performances: the Communist Party of India (CPI) won two seats, maintaining a limited presence confined to specific pockets, while the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), despite polling a notable share of votes and contesting a large number of seats, managed to win only one seat, highlighting the gap between vote share and seat conversion. The Shiromani Akali Dal (Amritsar) also secured a lone seat, indicating factional fragmentation within Akali politics without substantial electoral impact. Additionally, a few independents and minor parties won seats, underscoring the continued relevance of local leadership and constituency-level dynamics. Overall, the party-wise performance in the 1997 election decisively reshaped Punjab's political landscape, ending Congress dominance and inaugurating a new phase of coalition-led governance under the SAD-BJP alliance.

The 1997 Punjab Legislative Assembly election was critical different than previous elections

Firstly, the 1997 Punjab Legislative Assembly election produced an overwhelming electoral verdict and political realignment. These elections deliver a decisive and unambiguous verdict, marking a clear political realignment in the state. The electorate delivered an overwhelming mandate in favour of the Shiromani Akali Dal–Bharatiya Janata Party alliance, decisively rejecting the incumbent Congress government. This election thus qualifies as a critical electoral moment, as it fundamentally altered the balance of political power and ended the Congress

¹⁸ Election Commission of India, "Statistical Report on General election, 1997 to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab" (New Delhi, 1997).

party's dominance that had been restored in the early 1990s. During the 1997 assembly elections, however, nearly 43 per cent of the upper caste Hindu voters interviewed had voted for the SAD allies and only 39 per cent among them voted for the Congress.¹⁹

Secondly, one of the most salient features of the 1997 election was the historic decline of the Indian National Congress. From a commanding position in the previous Assembly, the Congress was reduced to a marginal presence. This dramatic fall reflected intense anti-incumbency sentiment, public dissatisfaction with governance, allegations of corruption, and fatigue with centralized leadership. The outcome exposed the party's weakened organizational base and erosion of its social coalition in Punjab.

Thirdly, the election signified a consolidation of Akali politics under the leadership of Parkash Singh Badal. The Shiromani Akali Dal successfully mobilized Sikh and rural constituencies while projecting itself as the principal representative of Punjab's regional aspirations. The verdict reaffirmed the centrality of regional parties in Punjab politics and underscored the enduring appeal of identity-based and federalist narratives within the state's electoral discourse. These developments raise critical questions about the capacity of the Akali Dal to seize the political initiative and foreground issues of development. While the party now appears better positioned to challenge the Congress, it may still be constrained in its ability to engineer a decisive shift away from traditional forms of emotive and identity-based politics. Paradoxically, despite its shortcomings and limitations, the Akali Dal remains the only political force with the potential to effect a meaningful transformation in Punjab's political agenda.²⁰

Fourthly, another important feature was the success of the SAD–BJP alliance, which demonstrated the effectiveness of coalition politics in Punjab. The alliance combined SAD's rural and religious support with BJP's urban and trader base, creating a broad and complementary social coalition. This election reinforced the legitimacy of pre-poll alliances and set a precedent for coalition governance in subsequent state elections. The 1997 elections are widely regarded as the first elections that can be described as “normal” following the end of militancy in Punjab. Moreover, in the period from the 1997 to the 2012 elections, there was a notable transformation in the political agenda of parties in the state, commonly interpreted as a shift from identity-based politics toward a development-centred orientation. During this phase, the electoral discourse moved away from ethnic concerns and increasingly emphasized peace, stability, and Hindu–Sikh unity. The 1997 elections also marked the beginning of the long-term alliance between the Akali Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party.²¹ It redefined party competition, strengthened coalition politics, and institutionalized a pattern of alternating power between Congress and the Akali-led alliance. As such, the election stands out as a watershed moment in Punjab's post-militancy democratic consolidation and electoral history.

¹⁹ Ashutosh Kumar, “Electoral Politics in Punjab: Study of Akali Dal” 39 *Economic and Political Weekly* 1519 (2004).

²⁰ Neera Chandhoke, Praveen Priyadarshi, “Electoral Politics in Post-Conflict Societies” 41 *Economic and Political Weekly* 817 (2006).

²¹ Hardeep Kaur, “Shift within Shift: Panthic Agenda to Agenda for Development and Good Governance (Analysis of the Shiromani Akali Dal Manifesto's from 1997 to 2012)” 12 *Journal of Political Studies* 7 (2016).

Fifthly, the relatively high voter turnout in the 1997 election was itself a significant feature,²² indicating a process of democratic normalization after years of political instability and violence in Punjab. Active participation by voters suggested renewed public faith in electoral institutions and a collective desire to resolve political issues through democratic means rather than extra-constitutional methods.

Sixthly, the limited success of smaller parties such as the CPI, BSP, and Akali splinter groups highlighted the dominance of major political formations in the electoral arena. As far as the political equations at the state level are concerned, perhaps the most important segment of the electorate in the near future are going to be the dalits, who, for the time being at least have deserted their own political formations, the BSP and BSM, and have chosen to go with the Congress.²³ While these parties managed to retain pockets of influence, they failed to emerge as serious challengers, indicating a polarization of electoral politics around the two principal contenders, the SAD-BJP alliance and the Congress.

Seventhly, unlike earlier elections held under the shadow of militancy and security concerns, the 1997 election was largely shaped by issues of governance, development, corruption, and administrative efficiency. The 1997 assembly elections were held in conditions far removed from the hype, the contestation, the fear, and the voter apathy that marked the 1992 elections. This should have motivated the parties to turn their attention from the "big picture" of peace to the everyday problems of the citizens.²⁴ This shift reflected changing voter priorities and signalled a transition from crisis-driven politics to performance-oriented electoral evaluation.

Conclusion

The Punjab State Legislative Assembly election of 1997 brought about a new political realignment that fundamentally restructured the state's party system and electoral coalitions. Most significantly, it consolidated a durable Shiromani Akali Dal–Bharatiya Janata Party alliance as the principal governing alternative to the Indian National Congress. This realignment marked a shift from fragmented and crisis-driven politics of the early 1990s to a more stable pattern of coalition-based bipolar competition. The Akali Dal emerged as the dominant regional force representing rural, Sikh, and agrarian interests, while the BJP consolidated its influence among urban, trader, and middle-class voters, especially in towns and cities. Together, they formed a complementary social coalition that replaced Congress's earlier cross-sectional dominance. At the same time, the 1997 election signified the collapse of Congress hegemony and a long-term erosion of its traditional social base in Punjab. The dramatic decline of Congress reflected voter disillusionment with centralized leadership, governance failures, and the party's inability to adapt to post-militancy political aspirations. Smaller parties and ideological formations were further marginalized, indicating a realignment toward major-party polarization rather than multi-cornered competition. Importantly, the election also represented a shift in political priorities, from security and militancy-related concerns to governance, development, and federal-regional issues, thereby normalizing

²² Ashutosh Kumar, *Electoral Politics in Punjab: Factors and Phases* 50 (Routledge, New York, 2020).

²³ *Supra* note 13 at 882.

²⁴ *Supra* note 20 at 816.

democratic politics in the state. In this sense, the 1997 election functioned as a critical election, inaugurating a new alignment characterized by stable alliances, regional assertion, and an alternation of power between the Congress and the Akali-led coalition in subsequent decades. Partisan stability in Punjab was significantly challenged by the Aam Aadmi Party after it secured a thumping majority in the 2022 Punjab Legislative Assembly elections. A crucial question that arises is whether this election should be interpreted as a deviating election or whether the Aam Aadmi Party will be able to consolidate and sustain its newly acquired political power. In this sense, the 2022 election represent a new experiment undertaken by the electorate of Punjab, reflecting both a break from established party alignments and an ongoing search for alternative modes of governance.