



The Territorialisation of Politics: Regional Parties and State Level Political Competition in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

The territorialisation of politics has become one of the defining characteristics of India's federal party system. While national parties remain central to parliamentary politics, state level electoral competition has increasingly developed distinct political logics rooted in sub national identities, regional social cleavages, local leadership, welfare politics and state specific policy preferences. Tamil Nadu represents one of the most significant cases of this process. Since the electoral breakthrough of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1967, political power in the state has been overwhelmingly structured around regional Dravidian parties. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), founded in 1972, subsequently transformed competition into a durable regional-party-centred system. This article conceptualises this trajectory as the territorialisation of politics: the process through which political competition, party organisation, identity formation and policy mobilisation become increasingly anchored in the territorial political community of the state. Drawing on the literature on federalism, regional parties, sub-nationalism, party organisation, social cleavages and welfare politics, the paper develops a multi-dimensional framework for explaining Tamil Nadu's distinctive party system. It argues that regional-party dominance cannot be explained by linguistic identity alone. Rather, it emerged from the interaction of five mechanisms: sub-national political identity, social incorporation, organisational institutionalisation, competitive welfare populism and federal bargaining. The paper also examines the contemporary transformation of this system. The 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly election is particularly significant because the emergence of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) as the largest single party, with 108 of 234 seats, alongside the DMK's 59 and AIADMK's 47, indicates that territorialisation may be enduring even as the traditional Dravidian-party configuration changes (Election Commission of India [ECI], 2026). The paper concludes that the future of Tamil Nadu politics may therefore involve not the decline of regionalism but its reconfiguration into a broader, more competitive and increasingly multi-party form.

Keywords: Territorialisation of Politics, Regional Parties, Dravidian Politics, Sub-Nationalism, Federalism, Welfare Politics, Party System

INTRODUCTION

Indian democracy presents a distinctive tension between national political integration and territorially differentiated political competition. India possesses a common constitutional framework, national political institutions and nationwide parties, yet electoral politics is deeply federalised. State elections frequently generate political outcomes that cannot be adequately predicted from national electoral trends. This phenomenon has contributed to the proliferation and institutionalisation of regional parties, producing what may be described as the territorialisation of Indian politics.

The concept of territorialisation refers here to the process through which political competition becomes increasingly structured around the political, social, cultural and economic interests of a particular territorial community. In a federal system, territorialisation is not necessarily equivalent to separatism. Rather, it can involve the institutionalisation of state-level political identities within the constitutional framework of the Union. Tamil Nadu provides an especially important case because regional parties have shaped the political agenda of the state for nearly six decades. The DMK's electoral victory in 1967 marked a decisive transition



from Congress dominance to regional-party government. The subsequent emergence of the AIADMK converted Tamil Nadu into a highly competitive but predominantly regional-party political arena.

The Tamil Nadu experience challenges explanations that reduce regional-party success to ethnic or linguistic identity. Tamil identity and anti-Hindi mobilisation were important historical resources, but regional-party endurance has also depended upon organisational networks, social mobilisation, welfare policies, charismatic leadership, political communication and the capacity to translate state-level demands into electoral programmes (Subramanian, 1999, 2002; Wyatt, 2013). Research on Indian party systems further demonstrates that variations in party organisation and political institutions significantly influence the development of regional party systems (Chhibber, Jensenius, & Suryanarayan, 2014).

Conceptualizing the Territorialisation of Politics

Territorialisation is closely related to, but analytically distinct from, regionalism, sub-nationalism and federalism. Regionalism refers broadly to political demands and movements based upon the interests of a particular region. Sub-nationalism involves identification with a territorial political community situated within a larger nation-state. Federalism provides the institutional structure through which territorial political interests can be represented. Territorialisation, as used in this paper, brings these dimensions together by focusing on how political competition itself becomes organized around territorial boundaries.

This conceptualization builds on the insight that the distribution of political authority affects the structure of party competition. Chhibber and Kollman (2004) argue that party systems are shaped by the distribution of political and economic authority between levels of government. Where significant political authority exists at the subnational level, politicians have incentives to construct organisations capable of competing for state level power. India's federal structure therefore creates institutional opportunities for regional political entrepreneurs. State governments control significant areas of public policy, including education, health, agriculture, policing, welfare delivery and local development. These policy responsibilities create an electoral market for parties that specialize in representing state-level interests.

The concept also complements the social-cleavage approach to party systems. Chhibber and Petrocik (1989) demonstrate the importance of social cleavages in explaining the transformation of Indian party politics. However, the Tamil Nadu case indicates that cleavages do not automatically generate regional-party dominance. They must be politically organized and translated into durable party institutions. Thus, territorialisation can be represented as: Territorial identity + social cleavages + political institutions + party organisation + policy performance → territorialized party competition

Research Problem and Literature Gap

A substantial literature exists on Dravidian politics, Tamil identity, populism and regional parties. Yet three limitations remain. First, studies of Tamil Nadu frequently examine Dravidianism as an ideological or social movement, rather than analysing the wider process through which state-level political competition became territorially institutionalised. Second, the regional-party literature often treats regional parties as outcomes of social cleavages or elite strategies. Recent research has demonstrated that party organisation itself is crucial: weaker national-party organisations at the state level create opportunities for regional parties to emerge and expand (Chhibber et al., 2014; Park, 2025). Third, existing explanations need to account for the fact that regionalisation can survive leadership and party-system transformation. Tamil Nadu's contemporary politics therefore provides an opportunity to distinguish between the decline of particular regional parties and the decline of territorialized politics itself. The paper addresses this gap by asking: Why has state-level political competition in Tamil Nadu remained territorially anchored despite changes in parties, leaders, social coalitions and national political environments?

Research Objectives

The study has five objectives:



1. To conceptualise the territorialisation of politics within India's federal party system.
2. To examine the historical emergence of regional party dominance in Tamil Nadu.
3. To identify the institutional, ideological, social and policy mechanisms sustaining regional party competition.
4. To examine the relationship between sub-nationalism, welfare politics and electoral mobilisation.
5. To assess whether contemporary political change represents the decline or reconfiguration of territorialised politics in Tamil Nadu.

Research Questions

- Why did state-level politics in Tamil Nadu become dominated by regional parties?
- How did Dravidian ideology transform regional identity into a durable political constituency?
- How have welfare politics and state-level governance reinforced regional-party legitimacy?
- What role have party organisation, leadership and political communication played in sustaining territorialized competition?
- Does the emergence of new political actors represent the decline of regionalism or the reconfiguration of regional-party politics?

Theoretical Framework

Federalism and Multi-Level Party Competition

The first theoretical pillar is federalism. Federal institutions create multiple arenas of political competition. National and state elections consequently generate different incentives for voters and political parties. Chhibber and Kollman's (2004) comparative study argues that the distribution of authority between national and subnational governments influences whether political competition becomes organised primarily through national or regional parties. Tamil Nadu illustrates this mechanism clearly. The state government is not merely an administrative extension of the Union; it is an important political arena with substantial policy responsibilities. Consequently, parties have strong incentives to compete specifically for state power.

Social Cleavages and Political Mobilization

The second pillar is social-cleavage theory. Political parties become electorally durable when they transform social divisions into political identities and organizational networks. Tamil Nadu's non Brahmin mobilization, caste politics, linguistic identity and social-justice discourse provided fertile conditions for regional political mobilisation. However, Dravidian parties did not merely reproduce existing cleavages. They actively reorganised them through political discourse and institutional representation. Subramanian (2002) argues that DMK and AIADMK political subcultures promoted political participation among intermediate and lower social strata and developed cohesive political identities that crossed some ethnic boundaries.

Sub-Nationalism

Singh (2015) demonstrates that attachment to a subnational political community can contribute to social policy and developmental outcomes. Her comparative analysis of Indian states challenges the assumption that identity politics necessarily produces exclusionary outcomes; under certain institutional conditions, subnational solidarity can generate support for public provision. In Tamil Nadu, Tamil identity became politically compatible with Indian national identity rather than necessarily demanding territorial separation. Rasaratnam (2016) similarly shows how the Dravidian movement's earlier separatist tendencies were accommodated



within the Indian constitutional framework.

Party Organisation

Chhibber, Jensenius and Suryanarayan (2014) demonstrate that differences in party organisation help explain variation in party systems across Indian states. Their analysis shows that weaker organisational structures within national parties can create incentives for politicians to defect, establish new parties or support regional alternatives. This perspective is especially important for Tamil Nadu because the decline of Congress as a competitive state-level organisation created political space for the DMK and subsequently the AIADMK.

Welfare Populism

Tamil Nadu's political competition has involved extensive welfare provision and electoral promises. Wyatt (2013) argues that populism has been a strong feature of Tamil Nadu politics since the 1960s, with both DMK and AIADMK developing political appeals to the people. Welfare politics should therefore not be treated merely as electoral "freebies." It can also be understood as a mechanism through which state governments establish a direct political relationship between public authority and citizens.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, historically informed longitudinal case-study design to examine the emergence, institutionalization and contemporary transformation of territorialized politics in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu is selected as a critical case because the DMK's electoral victory in 1967 displaced Congress dominance and established a durable regional-party-centered political order, later consolidated through competition between the DMK and AIADMK (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018). Territorialisation is conceptualized as a multidimensional process in which state-specific identities, institutions, party organisations, welfare policies, leadership structures and political narratives shape electoral competition (Karthik, 2025; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022). The study combines historical institutionalism, party-system analysis, electoral analysis and discourse interpretation to explain both the persistence and transformation of regional-party dominance (Shin, 2018).

The temporal scope extends from the pre-1967 period to the 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly election. The pre-1967 period is examined to identify the historical foundations of Dravidian mobilization, including the Justice Party, the Self-Respect Movement, Periyar's political interventions and the emergence of the DMK (Karthik, 2025). The post-1967 period is analyzed through successive phases: the DMK's initial breakthrough, the rise of the AIADMK, the consolidation of bipolar Dravidian competition, the expansion of coalition politics, the institutionalization of welfare-centered governance and the emergence of new political actors and forms of digital mobilization (Narayan, 2018). Electoral evidence is drawn primarily from Election Commission of India reports and is assessed through vote share, seat share, government formation, alliance structures and patterns of electoral concentration or fragmentation (Election Commission of India, n.d.). These data are interpreted alongside party manifestos, official policy documents, speeches, campaign materials and scholarly literature to examine the changing significance of Tamil identity, Dravidian ideology, social justice, federalism, welfare, development and state autonomy (Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022; Shin, 2018).

The analysis is organized around five indicators of territorialized politics: electoral, ideological, organizational, policy and institutional territorialisation. Electoral territorialisation refers to the sustained centrality of state-based parties; ideological territorialisation concerns the reproduction of Tamil, Dravidian and social-justice narratives; organizational territorialisation examines party networks, leadership and alliances; policy territorialisation focuses on welfare, redistribution and development programmes associated with regional governance; and institutional territorialisation concerns the consolidation of state-level political autonomy and center - state negotiation (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018). Source and methodological triangulation are used to distinguish short-term electoral fluctuations from long-term political transformation and to avoid treating welfare provision, ideological rhetoric or party expansion as automatically causal. Although the study relies mainly on secondary and documentary sources and therefore cannot fully capture individual voter motivations,



its longitudinal and multidimensional approach enables a systematic assessment of how regional-party dominance became embedded in Tamil Nadu's political institutions and how contemporary electoral diversification may reshape, rather than necessarily displace, the state's territorialized party system (Karthik, 2025; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022).

Historical Formation of Territorialized Politics in Tamil Nadu

From Congress Dominance to Dravidian Politics

The 1967 Assembly election constitutes a critical turning point in Tamil Nadu's political history, marking the decisive transition from Congress dominance to regional-party-centered political competition. The DMK's electoral victory demonstrated that a regional movement rooted in Dravidian social mobilization could successfully transform itself into a governing political organisation and acquire control over the institutions of the state (Barnett, 1976; Hardgrave, 1965; Ahuja, 2018). The significance of 1967 therefore extended well beyond a conventional change of government. It represented a fundamental transformation in the territorial, social and ideological basis of political legitimacy in Tamil Nadu. The political center of gravity shifted from the nationally organized Congress system towards a political formation rooted in Tamil linguistic and cultural identity, non-Brahmin mobilization, and social justice and regionally articulated social aspirations (Hardgrave, 1965; Barnett, 1976; Washbrook, 1976).

The emergence of the DMK consequently represented the institutionalization of a political project that had previously operated predominantly through social, cultural and ideological mobilization. The transition from the Dravidian movement to electoral government illustrates how a movement initially organized around questions of caste hierarchy, linguistic identity, social representation and regional autonomy could be translated into a durable party organisation and a state-level governing project (Barnett, 1976; Hardgrave, 1965; Ahuja, 2018). In this sense, 1967 may be interpreted as a critical juncture in the historical institutionalization of territorialized politics: it altered the structure of political competition, established a new regional political elite and created institutional conditions under which state-specific identities and political claims could subsequently be reproduced through party competition and government policy (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 1999).

From Dravidian Movement to Dravidian Party System

The formation of the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972 transformed Tamil Nadu's regional party system. Emerging from the split within the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and M. G. Ramachandran's (MGR) mobilization, the AIADMK created a second major Dravidian party capable of competing for state power. Tamil Nadu's political competition consequently shifted from a contest between a dominant regional party and national parties to an intra-regional rivalry between the DMK and AIADMK (Barnett, 1976; Narayan, 2018; Ahuja, 2018). This development consolidated territorialized politics by providing an alternative organizational vehicle for articulating Dravidianism, Tamil identity, social justice, welfare and regional aspirations. Although the parties differed in leadership, organisation and policy emphasis, both operated within the political space established by the Dravidian movement (Narayan, 2018; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022).

The DMK–AIADMK rivalry produced a durable form of competitive regionalism. Regional-party dominance did not result in electoral monopoly; instead, voters alternated between two major Dravidian parties while national parties remained largely dependent on alliances to influence state politics. Thus, the principal axis of competition became DMK ↔ AIADMK, rather than regional party ↔ national party. The alternation of governments demonstrated that territorialisation could coexist with electoral uncertainty and democratic competition. The emergence of the AIADMK therefore represented a second critical stage in Tamil Nadu's political development: while the DMK's 1967 victory established the possibility of regional-party government, the AIADMK transformed that breakthrough into a durable, competitive regional party system (Barnett, 1976; Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018).

The Five Mechanisms of Territorialisation

- The first mechanism of territorialisation is the construction of sub-national political identity, particularly through the political articulation of Tamil linguistic and cultural identity. The Dravidian movement transformed language and regional identity from cultural markers into powerful instruments of political mobilization, while anti-Hindi agitations reinforced the perception that Tamil Nadu possessed distinctive political interests requiring state-level political representation (Barnett, 1976; Hardgrave, 1965). Crucially, however, identity did not remain confined to symbolic mobilization. The DMK and AIADMK translated Tamil and Dravidian political identities into electoral programmes, language policies, social-justice measures, reservations, welfare initiatives and claims for greater state autonomy (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018). The institutionalization of these claims transformed identity into a form of political infrastructure, through which regional parties could connect cultural belonging with representation, public policy and governmental legitimacy.
- The second mechanism is social incorporation. Dravidian parties expanded political participation among social groups that had historically experienced limited representation within the structures of political power. The political subcultures associated with the DMK and AIADMK contributed to the mobilization and incorporation of intermediate and lower social strata into electoral politics (Subramanian, 2002). This process generated a reinforcing political cycle in which political inclusion → representation → policy responsiveness → perceived benefits → continued electoral support. Regional parties thus became more than electoral organisations: they developed into mechanisms through which different social groups could gain political visibility, access state resources and negotiate claims for representation and social justice (Ahuja, 2018; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022).
- The third mechanism is organizational institutionalization, which explains why territorialized politics survived beyond particular electoral moments or charismatic leaders. The DMK developed extensive party networks, communication structures and cadres, while the AIADMK subsequently established a powerful organizational and electoral apparatus around M. G. Ramachandran and, later, J. Jayalalithaa (Narayan, 2018). The durability of regional-party competition therefore resulted from the interaction between ideological mobilization and organizational capacity. As Chhibber et al. (2014) demonstrate in their broader analysis of Indian party systems, organizational structures and elite incentives are central to the stability and reproduction of party competition.
- The fourth mechanism is competitive welfare politics. Since the emergence of Dravidian-party government, welfare and populist policies have become central components of electoral competition, with both the DMK and AIADMK seeking to establish their responsiveness to economically and socially diverse sections of the electorate (Wyatt, 2013; Narayan, 2018). Welfare therefore cannot be treated merely as an electoral inducement; it also became part of a broader territorial political contract, in which regional governments claimed legitimacy by demonstrating their capacity to respond to the distinctive social and developmental needs of Tamil Nadu. The resulting competition encouraged both major regional parties to expand and adapt welfare commitments, thereby linking political legitimacy, state capacity and electoral mobilization (Wyatt, 2013; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022). Recent scholarship further suggests that Dravidian political communication continues to combine regional identity, populism, welfare and political activism in ways that reproduce the distinctive political culture of the state (Thirupathi & Vaddiraju, 2025).
- The fifth mechanism is federal bargaining, through which regional parties extend territorial politics beyond the boundaries of the state government into India's wider federal political arena. Tamil Nadu's regional parties have historically used issues such as state autonomy, language, river-water disputes, fiscal relations, Sri Lankan Tamil concerns, inter-state relations and regional development to position themselves as defenders of Tamil Nadu's interests in negotiations with the Union government (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018). This mechanism is particularly important because territorialisation does not imply political isolation from the national system. Instead, regional parties can convert their state-level electoral strength into bargaining power at the national level, especially during periods of coalition government. The interaction between state-level identity, regional electoral mandates and national coalition politics has also enabled Tamil Nadu's parties to influence policy areas extending beyond conventional state jurisdiction. The Sri Lankan Tamil issue, for example, illustrates how regional political pressures can shape the positions adopted by national governments in foreign-policy matters,



demonstrating the interaction between sub-national identity, partisan federalism and national decision-making (Raghavan, 2010; Jenkins, 2015).

Territorialisation therefore operates simultaneously within and through federal institutions: regional parties derive legitimacy from representing the territorial interests of Tamil Nadu, while their participation in national politics enables them to negotiate resources, policy concessions and political influence for the state.

The Dravidian Model and Territorial Political Legitimacy

The concept of the “Dravidian Model” has increasingly been used to describe Tamil Nadu’s distinctive combination of social justice, affirmative action, welfare provision, human development and economic growth. Although the term has acquired greater prominence in recent political discourse, its substantive foundations can be traced to the longer trajectory of Dravidian political mobilization and governance, particularly the emphasis on representation, redistribution and access to public institutions (Barnett, 1976; Narayan, 2018; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022). Tamil Nadu’s development experience is therefore significant for the study of territorialisation because regional political identity has increasingly been connected to claims about governance capacity and policy performance. Rather than legitimizing regional politics exclusively through language or cultural identity, Dravidian parties have sought to demonstrate that state-level political autonomy can produce distinctive forms of social and economic development. Studies of Tamil Nadu’s political economy highlight the importance of public provision, welfare interventions, social-sector investment and state capacity in shaping the state’s relatively distinctive development trajectory (Drèze & Sen, 2013; Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar, 2021).

Why National Parties Have Struggled to Capture State Power

The territorialisation of Tamil Nadu’s politics also requires an explanation of the relative difficulty experienced by national parties in independently capturing state power. Their limited success cannot be attributed to a single factor; rather, it reflects the interaction of organizational weakness, the absence of a sufficiently compelling state-level political narrative, entrenched regional-party networks, leadership structures and the institutionalization of Dravidian political competition. In a state where regional parties have historically been able to combine identity, social justice, welfare and developmental claims, national parties have often been required to operate through alliances with established regional actors rather than independently displace them (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018).

Weak State-Level Organization

One important explanation is the relative weakness of state-level organizational structures within national parties when compared with the deeply institutionalized networks of the DMK and AIADMK. Regional parties that have governed Tamil Nadu for extended periods have developed extensive party organisations, local leadership networks, electoral cadres and mechanisms for connecting state-level political demands with constituency-level mobilization (Narayan, 2018). By contrast, national parties may possess substantial organizational resources at the national level without necessarily having equivalent organizational penetration at the state level. Comparative research on Indian party politics suggests that the territorial configuration of social cleavages and the strength of subnational political organizations can constrain the ability of national parties to establish durable electoral dominance in particular states (Chhibber & Verma, 2019; Ahuja, 2018). Park (2025) similarly argues that national parties are more vulnerable to competition from regional parties where their state-level organizational capacity is comparatively weak. In Tamil Nadu, therefore, the organizational advantage of established regional parties has constituted an important structural barrier to the independent expansion of national parties.

Absence of a Competing State-Level Narrative

A second constraint concerns the construction of political narratives. National parties typically possess strong national-level ideological and policy platforms, but electoral success in a highly territorialized political environment also requires the ability to articulate a credible state-specific political project. The DMK and



AIADMK have historically been able to frame themselves simultaneously as governing parties and as representatives of Tamil Nadu's distinctive political interests. Their political narratives have incorporated Tamil identity, social justice, state rights, welfare, development and regional interests, thereby allowing them to connect broader national issues with a specifically territorial political imagination (Barnett, 1976; Wyatt, 2013; Narayan, 2018). This creates a distinctive electoral niche in which regional parties can present themselves as defenders of Tamil interests, advocates of state autonomy, representatives of social justice, providers of welfare and protectors of the state's political distinctiveness. National parties consequently face a dual challenge: they must compete on conventional national issues while simultaneously demonstrating that they understand and can credibly represent Tamil Nadu's specific political aspirations. Where national parties fail to establish such a state-level narrative, regional parties can portray them as less capable of protecting the state's interests within India's federal political structure (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018).

Leadership and Political Personalization

A third factor is the importance of leadership and political personalization in Tamil Nadu's regional-party competition. The political trajectories of M. G. Ramachandran (MGR), J. Jayalalithaa, M. Karunanidhi and, subsequently, M. K. Stalin demonstrate the extent to which charismatic or highly personalized leadership has shaped party identification, electoral mobilization and organizational continuity (Narayan, 2018; Wyatt, 2013). MGR and Jayalalithaa in particular constructed highly personalized political brands around welfare, populism and direct connections with voters, while Karunanidhi's long leadership of the DMK provided ideological, organizational and electoral continuity across several decades. Leadership personalization has consequently strengthened regional parties by giving voters identifiable political figures through whom broader territorial and policy claims could be communicated. At the same time, however, personalization creates a potential succession problem: when highly dominant leaders disappear, parties may experience organizational uncertainty, factional competition and changing voter alignments. The deaths of Jayalalithaa in 2016 and Karunanidhi in 2018 therefore represented significant turning points in Tamil Nadu's political landscape, creating leadership transitions and opening political space for new actors and alternative political formations. The post-Jayalalithaa and post-Karunanidhi period consequently illustrates an important paradox of territorialized politics: strong regional leadership can reinforce party-system stability while simultaneously creating vulnerabilities when personalized political authority has to be transferred to a new generation (Narayan, 2018; Ahuja, 2018).

The 2026 Election: Territorialisation without the Traditional Duopoly

The 2026 Tamil Nadu Assembly election is theoretically significant because it challenges the assumption that territorialized politics necessarily depends upon the continued dominance of the traditional DMK–AIADMK duopoly. The Election Commission of India's official results for the 234-member Assembly indicate a substantial restructuring of the state's party competition, with the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) emerging as a major regional political actor alongside the DMK and AIADMK, while national parties such as the Congress and BJP remained comparatively limited in their independent representation (Election Commission of India, 2026). The significance of this outcome lies in the distinction between party-system change and territorial political continuity. The weakening of the traditional two-party Dravidian configuration does not necessarily imply the decline of territorialisation. Rather, the emergence of a new state-based political organisation may indicate a process of re-territorialisation, in which the political arena remains structured primarily around organisations that articulate state-specific political aspirations. From this perspective, the 2026 election represents not the disappearance of regional politics but its possible reconfiguration around a new generation of regional political actors.

Regional Party Dominance to Regional Party System Transformation

- The first stage, Regionalization (1967–1972), began with the DMK's electoral breakthrough in 1967, which displaced Congress dominance and established a regional party as the principal governing force in the state. This represented a critical transformation in the structure of political competition, as Dravidian political mobilization was converted into institutional electoral power (Barnett, 1976; Ahuja, 2018).



- The second stage, Institutionalization (1972–2016), followed the creation of the AIADMK in 1972. The emergence of a second major Dravidian party transformed regional-party dominance into a competitive regional party system, in which the DMK and AIADMK alternated in government while national parties generally operated through alliances rather than independently controlling state power (Narayan, 2018; Ahuja, 2018). This period demonstrated that territorialisation does not require electoral monopoly; instead, competition between regional parties can itself institutionalize the territorial political arena.
- The third stage, Reconfiguration (2016–2026), reflects the changing structure of Tamil Nadu's regional party system following the deaths of J. Jayalalithaa in 2016 and M. Karunanidhi in 2018, together with the emergence of new political organisations and changing forms of electoral mobilization (Narayan, 2018; Wyatt, 2013). The 2026 Assembly election is particularly significant in this regard because it indicates that the traditional DMK–AIADMK configuration cannot necessarily be treated as the permanent institutional form of Tamil Nadu's territorial politics (Election Commission of India, 2026).

The trajectory can therefore be conceptualized as Regionalization → Institutionalization → Reconfiguration. This framework shifts the analytical focus from the survival of individual regional parties to the persistence of a territorially structured political arena. Territorialisation is consequently best understood as a continuing political process through which state-specific identities, organisations, policy claims and electoral alliances are reproduced, adapted and renegotiated over time. The central implication is that the decline of a particular regional party or the emergence of new competitors does not automatically signify de-territorialisation; instead, new regional actors may transform the organizational expression of territorial politics while preserving its broader political foundations (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018).

Broader Theoretical Implications

The Tamil Nadu case provides several broader theoretical insights into the relationship between regional parties, territorial identity and party-system development.

- First, regional parties should not be understood simply as substitutes for national parties; under conditions of sustained territorialisation, they can become institutional representatives of particular sub-national political communities. The DMK and AIADMK illustrate how regional parties can translate linguistic identity, social-justice claims, welfare preferences and state-specific political aspirations into durable organizational and electoral structures (Ahuja, 2018; Narayan, 2018).
- Second, regional identity by itself is insufficient to explain long-term regional-party dominance. Tamil Nadu demonstrates that territorial identity becomes politically consequential when it interacts with social incorporation, organizational capacity, welfare provision, leadership and institutional access. The transformation of Dravidian identity into an enduring political system therefore resulted from the interaction of cultural mobilization with party-building and state governance rather than from linguistic identity alone (Barnett, 1976; Subramanian, 2002; Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022).
- Third, strong sub-national identities can coexist with national political integration. Tamil Nadu's experience demonstrates that the assertion of Tamil linguistic and cultural distinctiveness did not necessarily translate into permanent opposition to the Indian Union. Instead, regional political actors increasingly negotiated their territorial claims within India's constitutional and federal framework, illustrating how sub-national identity can be accommodated within a broader conception of Indian citizenship and national belonging (Rasaratnam, 1973; Ahuja, 2018).
- Fourth, regional-party dominance can become institutionally self-reinforcing. Once electoral competition, welfare expectations, political discourse and organizational networks become structured around regional parties, subsequent political entrants face strong incentives to adapt to the established territorial political vocabulary rather than simply reproduce nationally oriented political agendas. The institutionalization of the regional party system can therefore shape not only established parties but also the strategies adopted by new political organisations seeking electoral relevance (Chhibber et al., 2014; Ahuja, 2018).
- Fifth, the principal contemporary challenge to established regional parties may therefore come not only from national parties but also from new regional political entrepreneurs capable of appropriating,



modifying or reconstructing existing territorial political narratives. This makes the 2026 electoral transformation particularly significant: the emergence of new state-based political actors suggests that territorialisation may persist even when its organizational carriers change (Election Commission of India, 2026).

CONCLUSION

The territorialisation of politics provides a useful framework for explaining the durability and adaptability of regional parties in Tamil Nadu. Regional-party dominance cannot be attributed to a single factor such as linguistic identity, anti-Hindi mobilization, welfare populism or charismatic leadership; rather, it has emerged through the interaction of sub-national identity, Dravidian ideology, social mobilization, organizational institutionalization, welfare governance and Centre–State bargaining (Subramanian, 1999; Rasaratnam, 2016; Kalaiyarasan & Vijayabaskar, 2021). Tamil linguistic and cultural consciousness was transformed into political mobilization through the Dravidian movement, while demands for social justice, representation and state autonomy broadened its electoral and institutional foundations (Chandran, 2011; Vaidyanathan, 2022). Regional parties subsequently converted these foundations into durable political organisations, linking territorial identity with welfare provision, developmental performance and the representation of Tamil Nadu's interests within India's federal system (Swenden, 2016). Thus, territorialisation produced not merely regional-party dominance but a distinctive territorial party system in which state-specific identities, institutions and policy expectations substantially structure political competition.

The contemporary period, however, demonstrates that territorialisation should not be equated with permanent DMK–AIADMK dominance. The 2026 Assembly election indicates a significant reconfiguration of Tamil Nadu's party system, with TVK emerging with 108 seats, while the DMK and AIADMK secured 59 and 47 seats respectively; Congress won five seats and the BJP one. The significance of this transformation lies not simply in the decline or rise of particular parties, but in the possibility that territorialized politics can survive through the transformation of its organizational carriers. New political formations may appropriate established territorial languages—Tamil identity, social justice, welfare, development and the defence of State interests—while introducing new leaders, organisations and social coalitions. The key theoretical question, therefore, is no longer simply why regional parties dominate Tamil Nadu, but how territorialized politics reproduces and renegotiates itself when the parties, leaders and coalitions that historically institutionalized it undergo transformation. In this sense, the 2026 election should be interpreted as a potential transformation of territorial politics rather than necessarily its decline.

Tamil Nadu consequently offers a valuable laboratory for understanding the future of India's federal party system. Its experience demonstrates that regionalism need not constitute an alternative to national integration; under democratic and federal conditions, strong sub-national identities can coexist with constitutional unity by providing institutional channels for representation, welfare delivery and Centre–State bargaining (Rasaratnam, 2016; Swenden, 2016). The broader implication is that India's party system is better understood not as a uniform national system but as an interconnected set of territorial party systems operating within a common constitutional framework. Tamil Nadu illustrates how historical identity can generate political consciousness, mobilization can produce organisation, organisation can generate governmental legitimacy, and governance and federal bargaining can subsequently reproduce territorial political identity. The enduring significance of Tamil Nadu's regionalism therefore lies less in the permanence of any particular party than in the continuing capacity of political actors to reconstruct the relationship between territory, identity, representation, welfare and federal power.

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