


'Mr. Clean' and his 'computer boys': technology, technocracy, and de-politicisation in the Indian National Congress (1981–1991)

Amogh Dhar Sharma 

Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

The trajectory of the Indian National Congress is often narrated as one of progressive and terminal decline. This article focuses on a largely neglected period in the history of the INC from the 1980s when the party was subject to techno-managerial reforms intended to revitalise the party. Launched under Rajiv Gandhi, this modernisation project entailed the use of large-scale data collection, computerisation, and technocrats for managing intra-party affairs. By exploring the interface between technology and politics, this article demonstrates the impact that the reforms had on India's political culture and helps contextualise contemporary processes of intra-party organisational change.

KEYWORDS Rajiv Gandhi; techno-politics; political parties; party organisation; Indian politics; political recruitment

The story of the Indian National Congress (hereafter INC or Congress) has frequently been narrated as one of progressive and terminal decline in the scholarship on Indian politics. There is also a near unanimous agreement that the party's organisational disarray can be traced back to changes introduced under the leadership of Indira Gandhi (Kochanek, 1976; Manor, 1978, 1981; Kaviraj, 1986; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987; Kohli, 1990).¹ Following the split in the party in 1969, Mrs. Gandhi is seen to have presided over a process of 'de-institutionalisation' of the Congress that included, inter alia, centralisation of authority around herself, suspending intra-party elections, and the legitimisation of the principle of dynastic succession within the party – first, through her son Sanjay, and then via Rajiv's ascension. It was this emaciated party structure, scholars tend to argue, that was inherited by successive Congress presidents. Despite some electoral success since the 1980s, it is widely acknowledged that the party is weakened by the absence of intra-party

CONTACT Amogh Dhar Sharma  amogh.sharma@qeh.ox.ac.uk

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democracy, lack of grassroots presence, and ambiguous ideological positions (Hasan, 2012; Palshikar, 2014, 2015; Farooqui & Sridharan, 2016).

In contrast to the foregoing narrative, this article turns its attention to a largely overlooked period from the 1980s when the Congress party organisation was subject to a grand project of modernisation. Launched by Rajiv Gandhi ('Mr. Clean') and his group of advisors (or 'computer boys'), this project of intra-party reform consisted of 'scientific' data-collection, computerisation, and an increased reliance on corporate professionals and technocrats in intra-party affairs. Implicated in these changes, as I shall discuss below, were new imaginaries of expertise, administrative efficiency, and the question of what constitutes 'evidence' in the domain of politics. Although this agenda for reform remained incomplete by the time of Rajiv's death, this article highlights that it was nonetheless a significant moment in India's party politics.

In analysing these developments from the 1980s, this article makes three contributions. Firstly, this article intervenes in the on-going debates on the historiography of the Congress party to highlight the structural weakness in the party organisation that have not received adequate attention. In particular, I argue that the contemporary Congress needs to contend with not only the historical legacy of 'de-institutionalisation' that took place during the Indira years, but also the 'de-politicisation' that took place under Rajiv Gandhi. The Rajiv Gandhi years constitute a de-politicisation insofar as the antagonism inherent in political life was sought to be neutralised by recourse to the ostensibly value-free language of science, technology, and managerialism. Secondly, the impact of Rajiv Gandhi's organisational reforms was limited not just to the Congress party; rather, they came to mark a broader shift in the culture of India's party politics as a whole. Many of the techniques, *modus operandi*, and style of political decision-making that made their appearance in the Congress party in the 1980s diffused to other political parties over the course of the next two decades. These changes also had an impact on the ways in which politics were discussed, evaluated, and imagined in the public sphere more broadly. Given these wider implications, developments in the INC in the 1980s demand renewed scrutiny. Thirdly, a closer analysis of Rajiv's organisational reforms draws our attention to the limits of technological and technocratic solutions in the domain of politics. In recent years various political parties in India have used media technology, spin-doctors, and 'big-data' analytics to 'professionalise' themselves (A. D. Sharma, 2020). Analysing the Rajiv Gandhi period as the pre-history of the current wave of 'professionalisation' in Indian politics allows us to better historicise contemporary political developments.

To reconstruct the key elements of Rajiv Gandhi's plan for intra-party reform, I draw upon periodicals, biographies, memoirs, party publications, and semi-structured interviews. The article begins by discussing the

context of Rajiv's entry into politics and his early experiments with the Youth Congress. Thereafter, I explore the regime of data-collection and computerised analyses intended to make Congress more electorally competitive. I devote special attention to the symbolism of the computer in this new dispensation and how it came to occupy a central place in ideas of political reform. The article concludes by discussing the structural weakness of this modernisation project and reflects upon the wider implications of this historical period for understanding recent processes of intra-party change in contemporary India.

Rajiv Gandhi: beginnings

Rajiv Gandhi's entry into Indian politics was a direct response to his younger brother Sanjay Gandhi's death in June 1980, which left Mrs. Gandhi bereft of one of her closest political aides and the presumptive heir of the Congress. Until the time of Sanjay's death, Rajiv had worked as an Indian Airlines pilot and had maintained a low profile. Many biographers and political memoirs have noted that before his entry into politics, Rajiv had been largely disinterested in the political affairs of the country, if not contemptuous of politics altogether (Sen Gupta, 1989; Nugent, 1990; Merchant, 1991; Kidwai, 2013; T. Singh, 2012). His arrival on the stage of Indian politics was sudden, epitomised by the fact that until the day of his nomination for the Amethi by-election, he was not formally registered as a full member of the Congress party (The Times of India, 1981c). However, it is precisely his status as an outsider in Indian politics that appeared to make him so likeable in the eyes of the general public (and the middle-class in particular). After his comfortable victory in the by-election, a newspaper editorial noted:

Rajiv does not associate himself with the roughnecks with whom Sanjay kept company. *His greatest asset is that he has the image of Mr. Clean* which he needs to guard jealously. This image is particularly important in a country where there is so much political dirt and where the venality of the politicians has assumed staggering proportions.² (The Times of India, 1981b)

Addressing the media after his decision to join politics on a full-time basis, Rajiv claimed there was a need to infuse 'a new style of functioning in the Congress (I) organisation' (The Times of India, 1981a). This 'new style of functioning', which became his leitmotif during his short stint in politics, had three important elements. Firstly, on matters of electoral and party politics, Rajiv Gandhi preferred to rely on technocrats and white-collared professionals who shared a social background and disposition similar to his own. Secondly, Rajiv's modus operandi relied on a particular valorisation of data gathering and analysis for the purpose of political decision-making and strategising. Thirdly, supplementing this 'data-fetishism' was an emphasis on technology –

particularly computers. While each of these changes were introduced in a staggered manner, nonetheless, all three elements had a mutually reinforcing tendency. Thus, on the one hand, an increased emphasis on technology and data-crunching demanded competent professionals who had the necessary skills to carry out these tasks. On the other hand, greater influx of such professionals strengthened the tendency to technocratise routine matters of party politics thereby ensuring that it remained an elite preserve.

From the beginning, Rajiv preferred to work with a small group of advisors and displayed an inclination to work with technocrats and top civil servants, as opposed to other Congress party functionaries.³ Two of his closest advisors were Arun Nehru and Arun Singh. Arun Nehru was Rajiv Gandhi's cousin and was working as the president of the Jensen and Nicholson group of companies before he was persuaded by Indira Gandhi to join politics. He won the Rae Bareilly by-election in 1980. Arun Singh was a childhood friend from the Doon School and they subsequently studied together at the University of Cambridge. He was born into the royal family of Kapurthala and worked as a senior executive at Reckitt and Coleman before he joined politics. The two Aruns, along with other members of Rajiv's coterie of advisors, shared a socio-economic profile. All of them came from relatively privileged backgrounds, had been educated at leading educational institutions, and had enjoyed a successful career in the private sector or worked as civil servants before they entered politics. Urbane, cosmopolitan, and *laissez faire* in their economic orientation, they constituted a foil to the image of the 'traditional' Congress worker who was usually seen to be indelibly linked to *khadi* and socialism. Rajiv and his associates preferred to work out of his personal secretariat at 2A Motilal Nehru Marg, which quickly emerged as an alternate 'power centre' to 24 Akbar Road, the main headquarters of the Congress party (India Today, 1983; Bhattacharya, 1986). They liked to keep their distance from the Akbar Road office since they felt that they got more work done away from the 'hangers-on and idle talk' present at the main party headquarters (Kidwai, 2013, p. 98). At Rajiv's secretariat, one could find large repositories of political information in the form of newspaper clippings, data banks, books, a microfilm library of rare and important documents, and a computer that could tabulate election data, store the profile of voters according to their caste and religious profile, assist in the selection of candidates, as well as analyse the opposition's strategy (Merchant, 1991; Bhatnagar, 2019).⁴ Rajiv was one of the first Indian politicians to own a Toshiba laptop (Frank, 2001, p. 474). In its organisational style, Rajiv's personal office at Motilal Nehru Marg appeared to function less like the office of a political party and more like a 'think-tank [that] focussed on policy oriented research' and employed a 'business management-like approach' (Kidwai, 2013, p. 98). Arguing in favour of the contiguity between business and politics, Arun Nehru claimed that he did not believe that 'the adjustment from the

private business sector to active politics is difficult' and that '... whichever profession [one is] in, one thing is common: the management of men' (Merchant, 1991, p. 104).

Rajiv Gandhi's technocratic and managerial approach to get things done came to the fore in the run up to the 1982 Asian Games. Even though India had won the bid to host the games in New Delhi as early as 1976, the sports ministry and the Special Organising Committee (SOC) had run into multiple roadblocks and was lagging behind with the construction of the infrastructure required for the Asiad as late as 1981. With little more than a year to the games, Rajiv was entrusted with the responsibility of the preparations. As the convenor of the SOC, he was given the autonomy to expedite the process without waiting for any Cabinet clearance (Kidwai, 2013, p. 92). Along with Arun Nehru and Arun Singh, Rajiv 'bulldozed his way through the Indian bureaucracy' and, in the eyes of the public, emerged as 'the man who gets things done' (Tully & Jacob, 1985, p. 86).⁵ In turn, his new image as an efficient and professional 'do-er' was attributed to the fact that he was an outsider in the world of Indian politics and, therefore, not prone to indolence. Surrounding himself with technocrats who were steeped in a culture of corporate professionalism further consolidated this image. During the Asian Games, Rajiv and his team of advisors also developed information networks and computerised cost monitoring systems hitherto unseen in India (de Mellow, 1982, pp. 324–329; Nilekani, 2010, p. 98). Rajiv's emphasis on computers and technology earned him and his team the name 'computer boys' – a term that was used as disparagingly as it was used in earnest. This computer technology was soon brought in to revitalise the Congress party as well.

Experiments with the Indian Youth Congress(I): the regime of data-gathering

In early 1983, Rajiv Gandhi was appointed as the general secretary of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and subsequently given the additional charge of managing the affairs of the Indian Youth Congress(I) (hereafter, IYC or Youth Congress), Seva Dal, National Students' Union of India (NSUI), and the Harijan and Adivasi Cell (The Times of India, 1983b). It is in his capacity as in-charge of the Youth Congress that one can find the earliest articulation of Rajiv's vision of reforming the Congress. Soon after his appointment, in February 1983 he inaugurated a training programme associated with the Youth Congress at New Delhi's Talkatora Stadium (INC, 1984, p. 93). This event was associated with the creation of the Youth Congress Development Centre, which would train young graduates to communicate the party's ideology to the public and help monitor the government's new twenty-point programme in different parts of the country (The Times of India, 1983a; Link,

1983b). High levels of educational and professional attainment were stipulated for these 'youth co-ordinators', which consequently yielded a pool of 'well educated, skilled, experienced, efficient and sophisticated men and women, specialising in modern disciplines as business management, sales promotion, systems engineering and motivational psychology' (A. S. Abraham, 1983; Link, 1983a). They had been selected after careful perusal of their curriculum vitae, followed by written and oral tests where they had to write essays on topics such as India's independence movement, poverty, and the ideology of the Congress party. During these assessments, their responses were judged for their 'depth and imagination ... grammar and diction ... (and) psychometric methods were applied to size them up for commitment, loyalty and qualities of leadership'. On the whole, these training sessions were marvelled at for their 'business-like approach' and it was claimed that the co-ordinators had been selected just like a 'personnel department chief of a corporation would interview ... for a managerial post' (Mitra & Chawla, 1983). On their appointment, these 'youth co-ordinators' would visit different parts of the country and report back to the party high command on instances of governmental corruption and inefficiency that they encountered (Link, 1983c; India Today, 1984b). This was intended to resurrect the INC's 'formidable powers as an information agency' that had declined in the 1970s (see Manor, 1990, p. 70). All youth co-ordinators were posted to regions outside of their home state to encourage unbiased and honest reports. They were also given the authority to challenge the state-level Congress governments on their failure to implement the party's twenty-point programme. The reports prepared by the co-ordinators were sent back to New Delhi where a Youth Congress worker named Anuradha Bakshi, a former French lecturer at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, was entrusted with compiling and filing the reports into a computer that had been recently acquired by the party.

The language and vocabulary used by the popular press to describe Rajiv, his team members, and his IYC reforms is highly indicative here. The frequent invocation of 'managerialism', 'business-like' approach, and 'corporate professionalism' that surrounded discussions about Rajiv Gandhi highlights how politics was being thought about, discussed, and re-imagined in new discursive categories and conceptual frameworks. In a context where Indian politicians were seen as corrupt, criminal, and amoral,⁶ the qualities of managerialism and private enterprise came to be seen as inherently desirable. In particular, these attributes were popular among the English-speaking urban middle-class citizens, who read the English-language periodicals where Rajiv Gandhi's organisational reforms were discussed and debated. Kohli (2006a, 2006b) notes that economic policy already had a pro-business orientation in the early 1980s, ahead of the 1991 liberalisation commonly associated with the start of economic 'reforms' in India. Concomitant to the pro-

business reforms under Indira and Rajiv, I argue that a new discursive framework was also emerging in the political imaginary of a section of citizens whereby private enterprise had come to represent ideas of efficiency and efficacy, which the world of politics lacked and urgently needed.

Soon thereafter, Rajiv shifted his attention from the youth wing to the parent party and became closely involved in the preparations for the 1985 general election campaign. In August 1983, Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) and District Congress Committee (DCC) office bearers were brought together for a training camp in New Delhi. However, this was as much a training camp for the AICC delegates as it was an opportunity for Rajiv to rapidly acquaint himself with the various nodes and channels in the party organisation. During this conclave he met nearly 300 Congress Chief Ministers (CMs), Members of Parliament (MPs), Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs), and other office bearers (Mitra & Chawla, 1983). Thereafter, in the December 1983 plenary session of the AICC, he conducted an additional 68 closed door meetings where he once again met all the Congress CMs, PCC chiefs, and office bearers from the different front organisations of the party (Mitra et al., 1984). After this hurried introduction, he and his coterie of advisors became more closely involved in matters such as selection of office-bearers, recruiting election candidates, and the selection of Congress CMs.

Despite paying lip service to the idea of intra-party democracy and promising to restart intra-party elections, there was a marked centralisation of power within the Congress high command. Although it may appear that this was a continuation of the personalisation of political power that Indira had introduced in the early 1970s, crucial differences did emerge in the 1980s. The key difference lay in how Rajiv sought to justify the centralisation of power in his office through a recourse to a de-politicised language of scientific rigour and technological superiority. Access to the right kind of political information and possessing the skills of data analysis, rather than political experience, were used to justify decision-making. Organisational reforms in the Congress in the 1980s did not mark a return to the halcyon days of the 'Congress system'. Rather they signified a break from the past. From here on, party reform was interpreted as large-scale exercises of data collection, triangulation of the data through different sources, and its 'scientific' analysis through computers based at the central high command.

In the lead up to the scheduled 1985 general elections, numerous other training campaigns and coordination committees were constituted as an attempt to reinvigorate the party structure and to improve the ticket allocation mechanisms (see INC, 1986, pp. 40–44). In March 1984, five zonal committees (headed by Pranab Mukherjee, P. V. Narasimha Rao, V. P. Singh, P. Shiv Shankar and Buta Singh) interviewed 17 Congress CMs, 360 MPs, and 3000 MLAs to obtain an assessment of the performance of Congress governments in different states and the electoral prospects for the party

in the upcoming general elections (Chawla, 1984). This was followed by another session in June where DCC office bearers and representatives from the INC's frontal organisations were interviewed to cross-examine the evidence collected from the 3000 odd Congress leaders interviewed earlier (Mitra, 1984). Through this elaborate exercise, the party high command wanted to verify and double-check all sources of information that had been presented before it. The examination and cross-examination at these different party conclaves produced nearly 10,000 pages of typed answers intended to help devise an electoral strategy. It was argued that this information would be used to nominate candidates on a fair and objective basis. This vast amount of data was collated with the help of the computer possessed by the Congress. Sources within the party claimed that after inputting the data collected from interviewing Congress office-bearers, along with information on the dominant castes in different states and the constituency level voting patterns, the computer would be able to generate a list of candidates that had the highest likelihood of being elected in each constituency (Merchant, 1991, p. 158).

In this elaborate regime of data collection and analysis, it was not any and all kinds of data that was valued and deemed worthy of consideration. Rather, it was only information gathered by supposedly 'neutral' and 'unbiased' actors (like the youth co-ordinators), double-checked through competing sources, and then compiled and presented in the correct format that rendered it permissible enough to be used as 'input' (see for instance, India Today, 1984b). For example, a senior member of Rajiv's team recalled that a plan of action prepared by him was summarily and repeatedly rejected by Rajiv until the memo was redrafted in a 'WWW' format, identifying 'Who will do What and When' (Pradhan, 1995, pp. 187–188). Thus, for Rajiv, political sagacity *eo ipso* did not yield political strategy – the benchmark of what defined usable evidence needed to be achieved first.

It is important to note here that the deployment of sophisticated data collection and computerised analysis in the Congress was neither purely concomitant with nor an inevitable outcome of the wider processes of technological modernisation that was ascendant in India in this period. The 1980s was a period of rapid technological change affected through, inter alia, the liberalisation of trade restrictions on computer products and the progressive computerisation of public services like banking and railways (D. C. Sharma, 2015, Chapter 4). Yet, the computerisation of public administration was qualitatively different from the computerisation of everyday party politics. In the latter case, it was not merely a question of using labour-substituting technology, it also signified a challenge to deeply entrenched ideas of political expertise and judgement. Introducing computers for political management required an imaginative disposition that Rajiv and his advisors possessed; an attitude that did not pervade the Indian

political class more widely in this period. On the contrary, the much-vaunted Congress computer and the 'computer boys' were frequently ridiculed in some newspaper columns and by other political parties.⁷ This shows that the growing data fetishism and computerisation in the Congress was not reflective of a broader embrace of computerisation across party lines produced by a generalised process of technological diffusion. Rajiv and his 'computer boys' were pioneering a new technique of political management. In the next section, I focus more closely on the Congress computer and the ends to which it was deployed.

The computer and the computer boys

After Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in October 1984, Rajiv was sworn in as Prime Minister and two months later the party achieved a landslide victory in the general elections. Although as Prime Minister Rajiv had less time to devote to managing intra-party affairs, nonetheless data-collection and computer-based analysis continued to form the two legs of his plan of professionalising the party. Assisting him in the process was a growing team of advisors composed of technocrats, civil servants, and business and media professionals. In his speech at the Congress centenary celebrations in Bombay in 1985, Rajiv Gandhi lashed out at 'power brokers' in the Congress party and promised to purge them to strengthen the party (Gandhi, 1985). To operationalise this plan Rajiv turned to Sam Pitroda to prepare a detailed vision document charting out a course of reforms in the party (Nugent, 1990, pp. 64–66; Pitroda, 2015, p. 147). Satyanarayan Gangaram 'Sam' Pitroda was an NRI telecom entrepreneur who had returned to India from the US in the early 1980s. Soon after, he was appointed as Rajiv's advisor on the government's 'Technology Missions' and played a major role in India's telecom revolution. A close confidant of Rajiv till the end, Sam Pitroda played a crucial role in managing the Congress election campaigns in 1989 and 1991 (Nugent, 1990, p. 66; Merchant, 1991, p. 283; Pradhan, 1995). Rajiv's reliance on technocrats like Pitroda, who had no formal associations with the Congress, was indicative of his suspicions about the efficacy of most party bureaucrats and his tendency to bypass the party's organisational machinery in the hopes of eventually reforming it.

Soon after being elected Prime Minister, Rajiv introduced a programme for creating a computerised database of all members of the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. In September 1985, a proforma was circulated among all Congress MPs asking them to provide details of their educational qualifications, tax history, language proficiency, marital status, number of children, countries visited by them, previous membership of political parties, history of association with the Congress, public meetings and rallies addressed in their constituency, nature and duration of visits to

their constituency, and their participation in parliamentary proceedings. A similar technique of computerised data-collection had previously been trialled among MPs and MLAs in Bihar (The Times of India, 1984). The purported aim of this exercise was to provide Rajiv Gandhi easily accessible information about all Congress MPs 'at the push of a button', in the hope that '[t]his [would] help remove groupism and prejudiced selection[s]' in the formation of parliamentary select committees (A. Kumar, 1985; The Times of India, 1985c). In other words, the Congress computer was to act, both, as a virtual panopticon that could instil fear and discipline among Congress MPs and as an instrument that could mete out unbiased decisions.

In the 1985 state assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Assam, Congress once again claimed to have used computers for the selection of its candidates. During the elections, rumours circulated that those familiar with modern gadgetry were more likely to be nominated as Congress candidates. In a bid to impress Rajiv and his advisors, many INC ticket aspirants boasted about their familiarity with 'modern management skills' and listed collecting 'electronic gadgets' as their hobby on the neatly typed application forms they submitted to the party high command (Chawla, 1985). In Assam, along with recommendations from the Assam Pradesh Election Committee, a team of twenty observers from the AICC was dispatched to the state to identify eligible candidates and collect details on their family background, political experience, wealth and assets, and the work they had performed in their locality. This information was to be fed into a computer, which (supposedly) made the final selection. It was anticipated that the new selection process would result in the majority of incumbent Congress MLAs being denied re-nomination. AICC spokespersons insisted that only candidates with a 'clean' background and strong track-record of public service would be nominated. Despite the disgruntlement of local leaders, the Congress high command averred that neither the incumbent chief minister (Hiteswar Saikia) nor local politicians would have the power to allocate tickets to their followers unless it was also recommended by the Congress party's computer (The Times of India, 1985a, 1985b). Over 40 per cent of sitting Congress MLAs were indeed denied re-nomination in

Table 1. Composition of INC candidates in the 1983 and 1985 Assam Assembly Elections.

	1983 Assembly Elections	1985 Assembly Elections
Total Incumbent INC MLAs	34 [†]	91
Re-nominated INC Incumbents	21	50
% Re-nominated Incumbents	61.7%	54.9%
Total INC Candidates	109	125

Source: Hangal et al. (2019).

[†]This figure includes MLAs elected under the banner of both 'INC' and 'INC(Indira)' in the 1978 Assam Assembly Elections.

Assam (see [Table 1](#)). This was broadly similar to the pattern in the assembly elections in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh and Maharashtra earlier that year when a large proportion of Congress incumbents (including many state cabinet ministers) had been refused nominations. It appeared that the Congress computer had ruthlessly culled the 'corrupt' incumbents and instead 'young, educated professionals' had been nominated as candidates. However, a careful scrutiny of INC's nominees from these elections revealed that many of the first-time candidates were merely kin members of the disgruntled MLAs who had been denied re-nomination and a number of them also had a track-record of criminal activities (India Today, 1985).

Computers began to inform other aspects of election campaigns – for instance, during the 1989 general elections, Rajiv Gandhi's tour programme for the campaign was allegedly planned using a computer that identified 170 Lok Sabha constituencies where his personal visit would provide the biggest swing in favour of the Congress (Nugent, 1990, pp. 196–197). R. D. Pradhan (1995, p. 187), who served as the 'chief-of-staff' to Rajiv Gandhi during a general election campaign, recalls the overwhelming importance of computers in Rajiv's personal secretariat in the following manner:

For him [Rajiv] the greatest joy was to find that the lap-top [*sic*] was correct and what you had told him was not there or that it was wrong ... Rajiv Gandhi loved his PC. For him it was the most reliable tool. Until the right floppy was in he would refuse to start discussion [*sic*]. I soon found that when I was reporting to Rajiv Gandhi, I was actually reporting to his PC. He was punching everything in. Sometimes I had to tell him, "I can face you but I am afraid of facing your PC. While I can explain to you, how can I do it to your PC? It is not capable of comprehending any explanation!" ... He was a systems man and for him method was as important as substance. The PC was his tool to make sure that we were correct on substance as well as on the methodology of reporting.

However, it would be misleading to interpret Rajiv's fascination for computers as merely a personal quirk. The significance of computers in Indian politics in this period needs to be understood in terms of both its intrinsic utility and its value as a symbolic referent. In intrinsic terms, the Congress party claimed to be using computers to carry out a range of different tasks – storing and recalling data, analysing field reports, collating demographic composition of constituencies, selecting 'competitive' candidates, preparing the most effective campaign strategies and so on. However, James Manor (1985) has argued that claims about computers supposedly playing a significant role in shaping the Congress party's electoral strategy in this period were largely an exaggeration. In the absence of any private papers or archived party documents on this subject it is indeed difficult to double-check the exact role that computers may or may not have played for the Congress in

the 1980s. The only information available emerges from sporadic press reports where the topic was discussed in vague terms. However, notwithstanding the lack of primary sources and archival material, Manor's scepticism seems to overlook the crucial *symbolic* power of computers that was being harnessed to reshape the domain of politics by Rajiv and his team. This *symbolic* power was in many ways more important than the *instrumental* power of computers. To understand this point further, we need to unpack the changing symbolism of computers in the larger narrative of India's postcolonial nation-building project.

Nikhil Menon (2018) has argued that in the 1950s the use of computers in the domain of statecraft was closely imbricated in the ideology of socialism. Under the aegis of the Indian Statistical Institute and P. C. Mahalanobis, the architect of India's second Five-Year Plan, computers were introduced in India to solve the problem of large-scale data analysis that the project of socialist planning in a developmental state necessitated. Far from being geared towards widespread circulation and use, computers remained imbricated in elite politics and state-led planning in the early decades of independence. However, with the entry of the personal computer in the early 1980s, the use of these machines slowly became more widespread outside the domain of statecraft. The production and sale of computers in India more than tripled in the first half of the decade and the price of a personal computer came down to nearly Rs. 20,000 over the same period (Ninan, 1984; Prasad et al., 1986). Despite this uptake, computer literacy in India in the 1980s remained dismally low and the skills required to operate the machines were concentrated in a few hands (Rajaraman et al., 1980; Shah, 1989). However, even though computer technology was not fully understood by the population at large, as modern machines they had come to symbolise the qualities of high modernism, scientific temper, objectivity, and value-neutrality in the public imagination. Such domestic perceptions were of course also being shaped by a more global conversation about the virtues of computer technology.

By introducing computers in the Congress party, Rajiv could capitalise on their symbolic value and thus garner greater legitimacy for his decision-making process. Since the science behind computers was not widely understood by the party rank-and-file, it did not matter whether Rajiv and his advisors *actually* used computers for running the party; they only needed to *appear* to be doing so. The discourse and performative rhetoric of using computers carried considerable weight. For example, by proclaiming that ticket distribution during elections – such as that witnessed in the 1985 state assembly elections – would be facilitated by computerised analysis, Rajiv and his advisors wanted to show that their decision-making was 'scientific' and 'unbiased'. In doing so, they intended to neutralise the antagonism inherent in a contentious process like candidate selection and achieve

acquiescence among warring factional leaders. Under the 'Congress System', party bureaucrats at the PCC and DCC level had played an active role in the candidate selection process, and observers and members of the Congress Parliamentary Board had intervened to quell problems of intra-party conflict, defections, and rebel candidates (Kochanek, 1968; R. Roy, 1966, 1967; Weiner, 1967). Such procedures bestowed legitimacy on the ticket distribution process and provided overall stability to the party in the 1950s and 1960s. Then, in the late 1960s and 1970s, Indira Gandhi's personal intervention in such matters accorded the entire process its legitimacy and broad-based acceptability within the party rank-and-file (Kochanek, 1968; Manor, 1978). Given the de-institutionalised nature of the Congress organisation by the 1980s, Rajiv and his advisors tried to circumvent the structural problems in the organisation and attempted to garner legitimacy by using the language of computers and scientific technology. They seemed to believe that the expertise and functions of party administrators could be substituted by computers because the qualities of scientific rigour and objectivity would keep the final decision beyond reproach or complaints of partisan bias.

Furthermore, in the eyes of the wider electorate, the rhetoric of using computers allowed the Congress to re-invent its image as a progressive, forward-looking, modern party. As I noted earlier, during Rajiv's experiments with the Youth Congress, ideas of corporate efficiency, managerialism, technological prowess, and political efficacy were already beginning to converge in the public imagination. By the 1980s, computers had become an important pivot in the emergent ideology of 'tech-libertarianism' in the Global North – digital technology symbolised the renewed aspirations of achieving unfettered, self-governing markets and a death-knell for the interventionist state.⁸ Within a span of three decades, computers transformed from being symbols of socialist high modernism to that of free-market evangelism. The optimism regarding computers was restricted not only to the developed world, but also included the Global South where, it was anticipated, computers held the promise of lifting millions out of poverty through decentralised (and anti-statist) models of development.⁹ This messianic conviction was shared by technocrats like Sam Pitroda whose idealism was forged in the crucible of American enterprise culture and technological utopianism. It is no surprise, then, that barely a decade after his association with Rajiv Gandhi began, Pitroda could unhesitatingly predict that '[p]olitics, as popularly understood, will take the back seat. Technology will be at the wheel. Technocrats will take precedence over politicians' (Pitroda, 1993, p. x). This was a vision of party politics shorn of the professional politician.

Beyond its symbolic importance and utility as a legitimising tactic, the introduction of computers and data-collection failed to provide the Congress a competitive edge. Table 2 shows the results from the 1985 assembly elections in states where the party reportedly used computers for the process of

Table 2. INC's Performance in the 1983 and 1985 State Assembly Elections in Assam, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra.

	1983 Assembly Election			1985 Assembly Election		
	Seat Share (%)	Strike Rate (%)	Vote Share in Contested Seats (%)	Seat Share (%)	Strike Rate (%)	Vote Share in Contested Seats (%)
Assam	83.49	83.49	52.53	19.84	20	23.41
Andhra Pradesh	20.41	20.41	33.58	17.01	17.24	37.77
Karnataka	36.61	37.1	40.89	29.02	29.15	41.03
	1980 Assembly Election			1985 Assembly Election		
	Seat Share (%)	Strike Rate (%)	Vote Share in Contested Seats (%)	Seat Share (%)	Strike Rate (%)	Vote Share in Contested Seats (%)
Maharashtra	64.58	65.03	44.91	55.9	56.1	43.55

Source: Bhogale et al. (2019).

candidate selection and compares them with that of the previous election. In each of the four states, there was a marked decline in INC's electoral success. This was also true of the 1989 general elections when its 'scientific' strategy and a slick advertising campaign could not overturn the anti-incumbency wave against the Congress, which resulted in the party's strength being cut by more than half in the Lok Sabha.

As a result of such patchy electoral results, Rajiv's new approach did not go entirely unchallenged. While younger Congress politicians were broadly supportive of Rajiv's approach, senior Congress leaders resented challenges to their status within the party. Shortly after the 1985 Assembly Elections, Maharashtra chief minister Vasant Rao Patil took a jab at Rajiv's 'computer boys' and their influence in the party (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987, p. 451, fn 44). Similarly, during the 1989 general elections, on being refused a ticket from his home constituency of Nainital, K. C. Pant, senior Congress leader and the Minister of Defence in Rajiv's cabinet, lashed out against 'unwarranted interference of inexperienced, non-political coteries in political decision making' (Malhotra, 1989).

Such protestations, however, were largely ineffective in forestalling Rajiv's technological modernisation of the party as he went on to establish two new departments within the AICC secretariat – the 'Control Room' and the 'Computer Department'. The idea behind the setting up of the Congress Control Room emerged from a chance encounter between Rajiv Gandhi and Major Dalbir Singh, an ex-army officer and current in-charge of the AICC Control Room.¹⁰ In 1987, at a reception hosted at the residence of S. K. Mehra, former Indian Air Force Chief, Rajiv Gandhi was introduced to Dalbir Singh where the two discussed politics at length. During the course of this conversation, Dalbir Singh recommended that Rajiv consider setting up a permanent 'control room' at AICC for around-the-clock management and co-ordination of party affairs. Impressed with his suggestion, Rajiv invited

Dalbir to join the Congress to assist in setting up such a logistical operation. Singh recalls how Rajiv managed to get him onboard:

He told me that politics is not just about going out in the field and contesting elections. He said, 'Politics is like an industry—it has many different facets. We need people who have great administrative acumen, organisation skills, [and] are passionately committed to the ideology' [...] I realised that here was a man with an enormous scientific temper, and that he wanted to change the way elections are fought and handled. As the general secretary to AICC, he had seen that the same old primitive methods of *jhanda*-banner [flag-banner] politics were still being used. Rajiv wanted all this to be modernised.¹¹

Here we find a lucid articulation of Rajiv's vision of professionalising the Congress party, in particular, and Indian politics, in general. Not only did he accord a special significance to how party politics and election campaigns were run behind the scenes, his focus was on introducing a new culture of logistical management that would displace traditional methods of campaigning (what Singh pejoratively terms '*jhanda*-banner politics'). The AICC Control Room soon became the 'nerve centre' for nearly all activities associated with election campaigns. In order to improve communications with PCC and DCC offices, Dalbir helped set up telephone hotlines between the AICC office and remote areas of the country. The control room became the coordinating point for the management and disbursement of all publicity material related to election campaigns (The Times of India, 1989b; Kidwai, 2013, chapter 7). During elections, AICC state-level in-charge officers and observers would be briefed by Dalbir Singh and would be expected to send their reports back to the Control Room. These reports contained ground-level assessment of different constituencies, recommendations of prospective candidates, the likelihood of the local Congress candidate's victory, problems of intra-party conflict, and plans for voter mobilisation.

Rajiv Gandhi also facilitated the establishment of a 'Computer Department' under Vishwajit Prithvijit Singh. Hailing from the royal family of Kapurthala, Vishwajit Singh was a Doon School alumnus, like Rajiv and his other advisors, and had been elected to the Rajya Sabha in 1982. A great aficionado of computers, Vishwajit was put in charge of managing all logistical tasks for the party that would require the use of a computer. These ranged from rudimentary tasks such as printing documents to more technical ones such as maintaining party records (India Today, 1994). During the 1989 general election campaign, Rajiv Gandhi also established a make-shift 'news watch' wing as part of the campaign machinery, where a small group of volunteers tracked news reports and prepared press rejoinders and talking points for party spokespersons (Pradhan, 1995).

The afterlife of Rajiv's reforms

Despite the zeal with which these organisational reforms were introduced, in the second half of his prime ministership Rajiv appeared to de-prioritise them. The primary reason behind his hasty retreat were multiple controversies that came to dodge his administration, such as the 'Shah Bano Judgement' and the 'Bofors Scandal', which necessitated the need for maintaining party unity and cohesion. Since these intra-party reforms antagonised entrenched interests within the party, the timing was not opportune to push ahead with them. The concern for stability and unity overshadowed the concern for reform. Hereon, intra-party reforms were substituted by a narrower focus on creating a team of election campaign warriors that worked behind-the-scenes. Thus, while the Congress high command formally appointed 'campaign coordination committees' for the management of elections, real power continued to reside with Rajiv Gandhi himself and his team of professional advisors and technocrats such as Sam Pitroda, Satish Sharma, Mani Shankar Aiyar, Romi Chopra, and Arun Nanda.¹²

In addition to the inopportune circumstances, several structural reasons also prevented Rajiv's modernisation agenda from taking effect. Rajiv's attempt to professionalise the Congress tended to conceive of the role of the party organisation in narrow terms. Far from empowering party officials, such organisational reforms were only intended to resurrect the party's status as an 'information-gathering' machine that could assist in the selection of candidates and ticket distribution during elections. In this new dispensation, demands driven by this 'data-fetishism' prioritised certain types of reforms over others. Even though Rajiv may have correctly diagnosed the malaise afflicting the Congress and the need to strengthen the party organisation, his solutions entailed erecting parallel structures of authority and control rather than reforming and working within the existing organisational framework (Sen Gupta, 1989). Rajiv's modernist vision was one that tried to by-pass the party hierarchy rather than actually reform it.

No effort was made to empower party officials, and internal elections, which could have achieved a modicum of intra-party democracy, were persistently deferred. As a result, other roles that Congress party officials had performed in the past – such as controlling party defections, mediating local conflict, expediting local service delivery, socialisation of party workers – fell by the wayside. Thus, Kothari (1988, p. 2226) rightly noted that, under Rajiv, India witnessed a 'shrinkage of politics rather than its expansion'. Even though the 1980s was a period where political mobilisation of different socio-economic groups was increasing, the emphasis within the Congress remained '... on depoliticisation rather than politicisation, on managers rather than radicals ... on the computer kids around Rajiv rather than the grassroots upsurge of the poor and the peasantry' (ibid).

Although, after Rajiv's untimely death in 1991, much of the rhetoric around computers and scientific data analysis was abandoned by the party high command, successive Congress presidents did not entirely jettison the techniques. This is not least because many of Rajiv's close associates had ensconced themselves within the party structure. Thus, under both P.V. Narasimha Rao and Sitaram Kesari, Vishwajit Singh continued to be in-charge of all things requiring computer proficiency (India Today, 1994; Mitra, 1997). Once Sonia Gandhi assumed control of the party in 1998, many of Rajiv's former associates assumed an even greater influence within intra-party affairs and assisted Sonia with tasks ranging from providing inputs in her campaign speeches to managing her campaign tours (Ved, 1998). Dalbir Singh recalls multiple instances when Sonia Gandhi called upon the expertise of the Control Room for data collection and analysis to make crucial political decisions, such as adjudicating between rival competitors for the position of the Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee President.¹³ In the lead up to the 2004 general election, Vishwajit also helped set up the Congress party's official website and took steps to increase the party's digital footprint (Das, 2004). By this point, however, Congress was no longer the sole party that had embraced newer techniques of political management and campaigning.

The most notable transformation in this regard was that of the BJP. As predicted by Kavanagh (1995) and Gibson and Römmele's (2009) model of party professionalisation, electoral losses encouraged opposition parties like the BJP to take up organisational modernisation and internal reform. After ridiculing many of Rajiv's early experiments, the BJP soon came to use similar techniques. More generally, the changing media landscape in the 1990s and the growing popularity of psephology created a demand within political parties for professionals skilled in emergent technologies and data science who would help target voters during election campaigns.¹⁴ With the advent of twenty four-hour news channels, parties also began investing in media cells to master the art of the political spin (N. Mehta, 2008; Pradhan, 2014, Chapter 19). Indian politics entered a new phase of professionalisation and the Congress, harbinger of many of these developments, no longer found itself at the forefront of these changes.

Conclusion

Commenting upon Mrs. Gandhi's organisational prowess in managing the Congress party, journalist Romesh Thapar once described her as a 'human computer'. This was a telling observation on Indira's ability to act as a repository of information on political affairs across the length and breadth of the country and her ability to take optimal decisions.¹⁵ By the late 1980s, however, Indira as the 'human computer' had made way for the personal computer popularised by Rajiv Gandhi and his computer boys.

While in the current scholarship on Indian politics the 1970s and 1980s are described as a prolonged period of de-institutionalisation in the Congress party, this article has revisited the crucial years of the latter decade to analyse developments in the domain of intra-party politics that have hitherto been overlooked. The 1980s in the Congress party was not a period of stasis, but one of active experimentation and dynamism. Although the centralisation and personalisation of power that Indira had introduced in the INC in the early 1970s continued, the Rajiv Gandhi years are nonetheless distinct for the 'de-politicisation' that took place under the guise of a techno-managerial reform of the party. This project of reform, as I have demonstrated in this article, was constituted by the growing presence of technocrats and white-collar professionals among the Congress elite, and a regime of rigorous data-collection and computerisation of routine political tasks.

Rajiv Gandhi's role (and that of his advisors like Sam Pitroda) has been acknowledged in accounts describing the promotion of computers in Indian public administration and the wider telecommunications revolution of the 1980s (I. Chakravartty, 1999; Abraham, 2017). In contrast, his missionary zeal for introducing computers *within* the Congress party, and the wider implications of this process, has received inadequate attention. As a consequence, scholars have failed to account for how Rajiv and his computer boys had a far-reaching impact on the nature of party politics beyond the Congress.

Most crucially, Rajiv Gandhi's modernisation of the Congress party came to mark an inflection point in India's political culture insofar as the confluence of corporate managerialism, technological proficiency, and professional competence came to be seen as valued qualities for politicians in the imagination of middle-class citizens. This was clearly apparent in the media discourse of the English-speaking public sphere where these qualities coalesced and cohered around the symbolism of computers and the white-collar professionals who used them. Rajiv is known to have had a pro-business and pro-technology tilt which resulted in the gradual dismantling of the Nehruvian model of economic development. This article shows that this attitudinal shift was not limited to the economic domain, but also shaped the domain of politics. In the utopian imagination of the 1980s, techno-managerialism held out the promise to not only unfetter the economy but also clean up the inefficiency, internecine factionalism, and power-brokering that had come to characterise the Indian political class. Although this project did not go uncontested by the older party elite, notions of what constitutes political expertise and useful evidence were nonetheless reformulated.

In recent years, the Congress party has shown a marked return to the techno-managerial approach of party institutionalisation. In preparation

for the 2019 general election campaign, the Computer Department established by Rajiv Gandhi in the late 1980s was rebranded as the 'Data Analytics Department' by his son Rahul Gandhi (PTI, 2018). Under the chairmanship of Praveen Chakravarty, this AICC department is expected to produce 'big data' solutions. The department is involved in collecting granular booth-level data from different election cycles, analysing and mapping trends in the data, conducting surveys to gauge the mood of the party workers and citizens on political issues, and using this data to provide feedback to the party president.¹⁶ Reportedly, the impulse behind this initiative came from Rahul Gandhi's desire to reduce his dependence on party leaders and to directly connect with people at the grassroots (Anshuman, 2018). During 2018 and 2019, the party high command also used the digital platform 'Shakti' to gather data from booth-level workers to assist the ticket allocation process for various elections. The parallels from the 1980s are strikingly evident here. Unlike the 1980s, however, the Congress is joined by a wide range of national and regional level parties who have replicated similar techniques and, in many cases, perfected them (Neyazi et al., 2016; Safi, 2017; Dutta, 2019; A. D. Sharma, 2020; S. S. Singh, 2019). Today, computers, opinion polls, and data analysis has become the *sine qua non* of all political decision-making across party lines. Parties like the BJP derive much of their vitality from social media campaigns and techniques of voter targeting, which are designed and managed by a team of professional party employees (Sardesai, 2014; Ullekh, 2015). This article illustrates the contested history through which such professionals carved a niche for themselves within party politics. To this extent, the period analysed in this article is the pre-history for many of the ongoing technological changes taking place in party politics in contemporary India. Turning to the Rajiv Gandhi years allows us to historicise and better understand the promises and structural limitations that a return to techno-managerialism holds for India's political parties.

Notes

1. For more sociological accounts of the decline of the Congress, see Hasan (2012) and Palshikar (2015).
2. Emphasis added.
3. Interview with Mani Shankar Aiyar, New Delhi, 17th May 2016. Aiyar was a close associate of Rajiv Gandhi during his tenure as Prime Minister and a key advisor in the PM's official secretariat.
4. See also, India Today (1983, 1984b) and Vasudev (1985/6).
5. On the special role of Rajiv Gandhi, Arun Nehru, and Arun Singh in the 1982 Asian Games, see also Merchant (1991, p. 110) and Nair (2008, p. 192).
6. For instance, in an opinion poll from August 1979, most respondents seemed to believe that politicians are corrupt, undependable, and useless (India Today,

1979). In particular, in the late 1970s Sanjay Gandhi had patronised a legion of party workers who were frequently described as ‘thugs’, ‘criminals’, ‘bad characters’ and ‘anti-social’ elements (V. Mehta, 2012, p. 109).

7. This comes to the fore clearly in political cartoons, editorials, and letters to the editor found in many periodicals. See for instance: Dixit (1985); India Today (1984a); Raghunath (1984); The Times of India (1985d). For a partisan critique of Rajiv’s computer-based party reforms by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), see A. D. Sharma (2020).
8. For an excellent overview (and critique) of the confluence of techno-utopia and libertarianism in the United States, see Barbrook and Cameron (1995). The broadly anti-statist sentiment and optimistic outlook on technology appeared in many bestselling books of the period such as those by Toffler (1980) and Gilder (1989). I am grateful to Ralph Schroeder and Daniel McAteer for bringing this literature to my attention.
9. One prominent advocate of this view was the French journalist-turned-politician, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber. In an interview, he recalled meeting Indira Gandhi circa 1980 and noting her relative disinterest in computer micro-processors and its potential for India’s economic development. In contrast, Servan-Schreiber found a more receptive audience in Rajiv (Servan-Schreiber & Branfman, 1985).
10. The following discussion is based on: Interview with Dalbir Singh, New Delhi, 11th April 2019.
11. Ibid.
12. A rare, insider account on the working of election campaigns in this period is provided by R. D. Pradhan (1995). See also: The Times of India (1989a).
13. Interview, Dalbir Singh, New Delhi, 11th April 2019.
14. On the impact of televisions and media technology on political parties in India, see Kidwai (2013, Chapter 9) and Rajagopal (2001). On the growing interest of Indian political parties in psephology during the 1990s, see S. Kumar and Rai (2013) and P. Roy and Sopariwala (2019).
15. Romesh Thapar quoted in Tully and Masani (1988, p. 211).
16. Interview, INC Data Analytics Department, 10th April 2019, New Delhi.

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ORCID

Amogh Dhar Sharma  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2653-5866>

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