



BEYOND THE KHASI CORE: EXPLAINING THE GARO HILLS–KHASI HILLS ASYMMETRY IN MEGHALAYA'S REGIONAL PARTY POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Regional political parties have played a central role in Meghalaya's politics since the state's formation in 1972. Despite differences in leadership, ideology and organisational structure, most regional parties have displayed a remarkably similar electoral pattern: they have consistently achieved greater success in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills than in the Garo Hills. This geographical imbalance has persisted across successive generations of regional parties, from the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) and the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) to more recent parties such as the Voice of the People Party (VPP). Yet, while scholars have extensively examined coalition politics, regionalism and ethnic mobilisation in Meghalaya, few studies have treated this uneven electoral geography as a research problem in its own right.

This paper examines why regional parties have struggled to establish comparable political support in the Garo Hills despite presenting themselves as representatives of Meghalaya's wider tribal interests. Drawing on a comparative historical approach, the study combines existing scholarship, electoral records and qualitative interviews conducted with political scientists, journalists and party leaders to examine how historical developments, institutional arrangements and organisational factors have shaped political mobilisation in different parts of the state. Rather than attributing the pattern to a single cause, the paper argues that the Khasi–Garo asymmetry reflects the interaction of several long-term processes, including divergent political trajectories after statehood, the differing evolution of the Autonomous District Councils, variations in party organisation, and the strategic choices made by political elites.

The paper contributes to the literature by shifting attention from the general study of regional parties towards understanding why regional political mobilisation has remained geographically uneven. It further argues that this persistent imbalance continues to influence government formation, coalition politics and the electoral prospects of emerging regional parties, making it an important feature of Meghalaya's contemporary political landscape.

KEYWORDS: Meghalaya, Regional Political Parties, Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Regionalism, Electoral Geography, Voice of the People Party, Autonomous District Councils

1. INTRODUCTION

Regional political parties have shaped the political development of Meghalaya since the state was created in 1972. Unlike many Indian states where national parties have remained dominant, Meghalaya has witnessed the continuous emergence of regional parties seeking to represent local identities, tribal interests and demands for greater political autonomy. From the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC), which spearheaded the movement for a separate hill state, to later organisations such as the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), the United Democratic Party (UDP) and, more recently, the Voice of the People Party (VPP), regional parties have remained influential actors in the state's political landscape. Their presence has also contributed to Meghalaya's long history of coalition governments, fragmented electoral competition and frequent political realignments.

Despite their prominence, however, regional parties have rarely enjoyed uniform electoral support across the state. Instead, a striking geographical pattern has persisted over

several decades. Regional parties have generally secured their strongest electoral base in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, while their presence in the Garo Hills has remained comparatively weak. This pattern is evident across different political periods and among parties with varying ideological positions, leadership styles and organisational structures. Although individual parties have occasionally won seats in the Garo Hills, none has developed a sustained electoral base comparable to that found in the Khasi-Jaintia region. Consequently, regional parties have often depended on coalition arrangements with national parties or Garo-based political actors in order to participate in government.

This uneven geography raises an important question that has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. Why have regional parties that seek to represent the interests of Meghalaya as a whole consistently struggled to establish durable political support in the Garo Hills? Existing studies have documented the emergence of regional parties, analysed coalition governments and examined movements for autonomy



and ethnic identity. However, these studies have generally treated Meghalaya's regional party system as a single political arena, paying relatively little attention to the internal differences that characterise electoral competition across the state's regions. As a result, the enduring divide between the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills has often been described rather than explained.

Understanding this asymmetry is important for several reasons. First, it provides insights into the broader dynamics of regional party development in multi-ethnic societies. Political parties do not operate in a social vacuum; they evolve within particular historical, institutional and cultural contexts that influence where and how they gain support. Examining why regional parties have succeeded in one part of Meghalaya but not another therefore contributes to wider debates on political mobilisation, ethnic representation and regionalism in diverse democracies.

Second, the issue has significant implications for contemporary politics in Meghalaya. The state's Legislative Assembly comprises sixty seats, with the Garo Hills accounting for a substantial proportion of constituencies. As a result, no regional party can realistically aspire to govern independently without building meaningful electoral support beyond the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. This has become particularly relevant in recent years following the rapid rise of the VPP. While the party has transformed electoral competition in the Khasi Hills, its organisational presence in the Garo Hills remains limited. Whether newer regional parties can overcome this historical pattern is therefore an important question not only for political practitioners but also for scholars interested in the future of regional politics in Meghalaya.

This paper argues that the uneven electoral geography of Meghalaya's regional parties cannot be adequately explained by campaign strategies or short-term electoral dynamics alone. Rather, it reflects a combination of historical developments, institutional arrangements and organisational choices that have shaped political mobilisation over several decades. The argument does not suggest that the asymmetry is permanent or impossible to overcome. Instead, it proposes that political parties seeking to expand beyond their traditional strongholds face structural challenges rooted in the state's political evolution. These challenges influence voter behaviour, party organisation, leadership networks and patterns of political competition, making statewide expansion more difficult than is often assumed.

The study adopts a comparative historical approach to examine these long-term processes. It draws on three main sources of evidence. First, it reviews the existing literature on Meghalaya's political development, regionalism and party politics. Second, it examines available electoral records to identify broad patterns of regional party performance across different elections. Third, it incorporates qualitative interviews with political scientists, journalists and party representatives to provide contemporary perspectives on the challenges facing regional parties. Rather than treating any one source as definitive, the study triangulates these different forms of evidence to develop a more comprehensive explanation of the observed pattern.

The paper also seeks to make a broader theoretical contribution. Much of the literature on regional parties in Northeast India has focused on questions of identity, autonomy

or coalition politics. Comparatively less attention has been given to the internal geographical variation that exists within regional party systems themselves. By focusing on the persistent divergence between the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills, this paper shifts the analytical emphasis from regional parties as unitary actors to the uneven territorial foundations upon which they are built. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that recognises that political mobilisation within regions can be as diverse and contested as mobilisation between regions.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on regional party politics in Meghalaya and identifies the principal gaps that this study addresses. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and research methodology. The paper then examines the historical evolution of regional political mobilisation, analyses electoral patterns across different regions of the state, and considers the institutional and organisational factors that have contributed to the persistence of the Khasi-Garo divide. The concluding section discusses the implications of these findings for the future of regional politics in Meghalaya and identifies priorities for further research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Regional Party Politics in Meghalaya

Regional political parties have been central to Meghalaya's political development since the movement for a separate hill state. Much of the existing scholarship explains the emergence of these parties as a response to demands for political autonomy, protection of indigenous identity and dissatisfaction with national political organisations. Early studies by Gassah (1992) remain among the most comprehensive accounts of the origins of regional parties in Northeast India. His work demonstrates that the creation of the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) was closely linked to the demand for constitutional recognition of the hill peoples and their aspiration for self-government. Later studies similarly argue that regional parties emerged because national parties were perceived as insufficiently responsive to local concerns (Sen Gupta, 2004; Singh, 2010).

Subsequent research has shown that regional parties continued to influence Meghalaya's politics long after statehood. Rather than disappearing once the demand for a separate state had been achieved, new regional parties emerged to address changing political issues, including governance, corruption, land rights and the protection of customary institutions. Parties such as the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), the United Democratic Party (UDP) and, more recently, the Voice of the People Party (VPP) have each presented themselves as defenders of indigenous interests while adapting their political agendas to contemporary circumstances.

Although these studies provide valuable historical accounts, they generally examine regional parties collectively rather than individually or comparatively. Most discussions focus on why regional parties emerged, how they competed with national parties, or how coalition governments were formed. Comparatively little attention has been given to the geographical variation that exists within Meghalaya itself. Regional parties are often treated as if they operate within a politically homogeneous state, despite clear evidence that their electoral support varies considerably across different regions.



This limitation is important because electoral success is not evenly distributed throughout Meghalaya. While several regional parties have become dominant political actors in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, few have established an equally durable presence in the Garo Hills. Existing literature acknowledges this imbalance but rarely examines why it has persisted across successive political generations. Consequently, one of the most consistent features of Meghalaya's electoral politics remains insufficiently explained.

2.2 Coalition Politics and Electoral Competition

Another important body of literature examines coalition politics and party competition in Meghalaya. Scholars have long recognised that no single political party has consistently dominated the state's electoral landscape. Instead, coalition governments have become the norm, reflecting both the fragmented party system and the diverse political preferences of different communities.

Mohapatra (1988) was among the first to examine coalition formation in Meghalaya, arguing that coalition governments were not temporary arrangements but structural features of the state's political system. Later studies by Warjri (2017) similarly demonstrate that coalition politics has become deeply institutionalised, with governments frequently depending on alliances between regional and national parties.

These studies provide useful insights into government formation and political stability. However, coalition politics is generally analysed at the state level without considering how uneven electoral support across different regions contributes to the necessity of coalition governments. Regional parties rarely obtain sufficient seats to govern independently not simply because the party system is fragmented, but because their electoral support remains concentrated within particular geographical areas.

The relationship between electoral geography and coalition formation therefore deserves greater attention. Understanding why regional parties struggle to gain support in certain regions may help explain why coalition governments have remained a persistent feature of Meghalaya's politics for more than five decades.

2.3 Ethnic Identity and Political Mobilisation

Ethnicity occupies a central position in the political literature on Meghalaya. Numerous studies argue that tribal identity has shaped political mobilisation since the colonial period and continues to influence electoral behaviour today. Nayak (2015), for example, demonstrates how demands for autonomy have been closely connected to ethnic identity, constitutional protection and the preservation of indigenous institutions.

Similarly, studies of Khasi society have highlighted the relationship between customary governance, clan organisation and political leadership (Lyngdoh, 2019). These works illustrate how social institutions often influence political participation and leadership recruitment. Traditional authorities and customary practices remain important sources of legitimacy within many communities, creating distinctive political environments that differ from those found elsewhere in India.

Despite these valuable contributions, the literature often treats tribal identity as a relatively unified political category.

The considerable historical and cultural differences between the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities are acknowledged, but they are rarely incorporated into explanations of party development or electoral behaviour. Consequently, the literature tends to overlook how different historical experiences may have produced distinct patterns of political organisation in different parts of the state.

The assumption that regional identity produces similar political outcomes across Meghalaya therefore deserves closer examination. While all three major tribal groups have benefited from constitutional protections under the Sixth Schedule, they have experienced political development through different historical pathways. These differences may have important implications for understanding why regional parties have achieved uneven electoral success.

2.4 The Role of the Autonomous District Councils

The Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) represent another important area of scholarship relevant to this study. Established under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council (JHADC) and Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC) were intended to protect indigenous customs and provide a measure of self-government.

Research by Soreide (2018) demonstrates that these institutions perform functions extending beyond administration. The councils also serve as arenas where questions of identity, representation and political authority are continuously negotiated. Their role in shaping local political leadership has therefore become increasingly important.

Studies by Gassah (1998, 2016) further illustrate how customary institutions have interacted with constitutional structures in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. These works provide detailed accounts of traditional governance and demonstrate how indigenous political institutions have adapted to changing constitutional arrangements.

However, comparable scholarship on the institutional evolution of the GHADC remains relatively limited. Whether this reflects genuine historical differences, disparities in institutional capacity or simply uneven academic attention remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the imbalance highlights an important gap in the existing literature. Greater comparative analysis of the three district councils may provide valuable insights into how institutional development has influenced regional political mobilisation.

Rather than assuming that all three councils have produced similar political outcomes, this study examines whether differences in their historical evolution may have contributed to the uneven development of regional parties across Meghalaya.

2.5 Regionalism Beyond Meghalaya

The broader literature on regionalism also provides useful perspectives for understanding Meghalaya's political development. Comparative studies suggest that regional political identities are not fixed but evolve through historical processes involving institutions, leadership, economic change and political mobilisation.

Acharya (2014) argues that regional identities are constructed through sustained political interaction rather than



emerging naturally from geographical boundaries alone. Similarly, Fawcett (2004) emphasises that regionalism is shaped by historical and institutional processes that often produce uneven patterns of political integration. Mansfield and Milner (1999) likewise demonstrate that regional systems frequently contain politically dominant core areas alongside peripheral regions that experience weaker forms of political integration.

Although these studies primarily examine regionalism in international or national contexts, their central insights are relevant to Meghalaya. They suggest that uneven regional development should not be regarded as unusual but rather as a common feature of political systems characterised by historical diversity and institutional complexity.

2.6 Research Gap

The existing literature has made significant contributions to understanding regional politics in Meghalaya. It has explained the origins of regional parties, analysed coalition governments, examined ethnic mobilisation and documented the constitutional importance of the Autonomous District Councils. Nevertheless, three important gaps remain.

First, very few studies examine the territorial variation within Meghalaya's regional party system. Most research assumes that regional parties operate within a single political space, despite considerable evidence that electoral support differs markedly between the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills.

Second, existing scholarship has not systematically investigated why this geographical asymmetry has persisted across multiple generations of regional parties. The continued concentration of regional party support in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills is often acknowledged but rarely treated as a phenomenon requiring explanation.

Third, the literature has paid relatively little attention to the interaction between historical developments, institutional arrangements and organisational strategies. These factors are frequently examined separately rather than as interconnected processes that collectively shape regional political mobilisation.

This paper addresses these gaps by adopting a comparative historical perspective that integrates electoral evidence, institutional analysis and qualitative interviews. Rather than attributing the Khasi-Garo divide to a single explanatory factor, the study argues that the asymmetry reflects the cumulative effects of historical political development, institutional evolution and party organisation. In doing so, it shifts the focus from describing uneven electoral outcomes to explaining why those outcomes have persisted for more than five decades.

Transition to the Theoretical Framework

Having established the limitations of the existing literature, the next section develops the theoretical framework that guides the analysis. The paper draws on three complementary perspectives—political cleavages, historical institutionalism and the territorial organisation of regional party systems—to explain why regional political mobilisation has developed unevenly across Meghalaya. Together, these approaches provide a structured framework for examining the

historical and institutional processes that continue to shape electoral competition within the state.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding why regional political parties have remained electorally stronger in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills than in the Garo Hills requires a framework that goes beyond electoral outcomes alone. Political parties do not emerge or expand in a historical vacuum. Their organisational development, electoral appeal and territorial reach are shaped by long-term institutional arrangements, historical experiences and the social divisions within which they operate. Rather than relying on a single theoretical perspective, this study combines three complementary approaches: cleavage theory, historical institutionalism, and the territorial politics of regional party systems. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for explaining why political mobilisation has developed unevenly across Meghalaya.

Each framework addresses a different dimension of the problem. Cleavage theory explains how enduring social and political divisions influence party competition. Historical institutionalism examines how decisions made at critical moments continue to shape political outcomes over time. Finally, the literature on territorial party politics highlights why regional parties often experience uneven electoral success within the territories they seek to represent. Considered together, these approaches suggest that the Khasi-Garo asymmetry is not simply the product of recent electoral strategies but reflects historical processes that have unfolded over several decades.

3.1 Cleavage Theory and Political Mobilisation

One of the most influential approaches to understanding party systems is the theory of political cleavages developed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Their central argument is that party competition often reflects enduring social divisions that emerge during important historical periods. Once political organisations become associated with particular communities, territories or identities, these relationships tend to persist even as political circumstances change.

Although Lipset and Rokkan developed their theory to explain Western European party systems, its broader insights have been widely applied to societies characterised by ethnic, linguistic or territorial diversity. In such contexts, political parties frequently emerge around historically significant social divisions rather than solely around ideological differences. Electoral competition therefore reflects long-standing patterns of political identity as much as contemporary policy debates.

In Meghalaya, political mobilisation has historically developed within distinct territorial and ethnic settings. While the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo communities shared common aspirations for greater autonomy during the movement for statehood, their subsequent political trajectories differed considerably. Following the creation of Meghalaya, regional political organisations increasingly became concentrated within the Khasi-Jaintia Hills, while political competition in the Garo Hills evolved along a different path. These divergent trajectories created territorial patterns of party support that have remained remarkably stable across successive elections.

This study does not argue that ethnicity alone determines voting behaviour. Electoral decisions are influenced by



numerous factors, including leadership, governance, development issues and candidate selection. Nevertheless, cleavage theory provides a useful starting point for understanding why regional political identities became institutionalised differently across Meghalaya's regions and why these differences continue to influence party competition today.

3.2 Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependence

While cleavage theory explains the origins of political divisions, it is less effective in explaining why these divisions persist over long periods despite changes in leadership and political circumstances. For this reason, the study also draws on historical institutionalism, particularly the concept of path dependence.

Historical institutionalism argues that political institutions shape future political behaviour by creating patterns that become increasingly difficult to reverse (Pierson, 2004). Decisions taken during critical historical moments often generate institutional arrangements that influence later political developments, even when the original circumstances have changed. Political actors adapt to these institutional environments, reinforcing existing patterns rather than creating entirely new ones.

The formation of Meghalaya represents one such critical juncture. Statehood established new political institutions, electoral constituencies and systems of local governance that influenced how political organisations subsequently developed. The creation of the three Autonomous District Councils further reinforced region-specific political institutions and leadership structures. Over time, these institutions became important arenas for political recruitment, elite competition and community representation.

Historical institutionalism therefore suggests that contemporary electoral patterns cannot be understood solely by examining present-day campaigns or party strategies. Instead, they should be viewed as the cumulative outcome of institutional developments that have shaped political competition over several decades. Regional parties attempting to expand into areas where alternative political networks are already well established are likely to encounter structural barriers that cannot be overcome through electoral campaigning alone.

This perspective is particularly useful for understanding why successive regional parties—from the APHLC to the VPP—have encountered similar geographical limitations despite differences in leadership, organisation and political messaging.

3.3 Territorial Politics and Regional Party Systems

A third perspective comes from the growing literature on territorial politics and regional party systems. Much of the scholarship on regional parties assumes that they seek to represent territorially defined populations. However, research increasingly demonstrates that regional parties often possess uneven levels of organisational strength within the regions they claim to represent.

Studies of regional political parties in Spain, Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom have shown that support for regional parties frequently varies across sub-regions because of differences in political history, institutional development,

economic conditions and local leadership. Regional identity therefore does not automatically translate into uniform electoral support.

Applying this perspective to Meghalaya suggests that the state should not be viewed as a single political arena with homogeneous regional interests. Instead, it contains multiple political spaces with distinct historical experiences and organisational networks. Regional parties therefore compete not only against national parties but also against historically embedded regional political structures that differ between the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills.

Viewing Meghalaya through this territorial lens shifts attention away from asking whether regional parties represent the state as a whole. Instead, it encourages examination of the organisational conditions under which statewide political representation becomes possible—or remains constrained.

3.4 Integrating the Framework

Each of these theoretical perspectives explains a different aspect of the research problem. Cleavage theory identifies the historical social divisions that influenced the emergence of regional political identities. Historical institutionalism explains how these early political developments became embedded within political institutions and organisational structures over time. The territorial politics perspective demonstrates why these institutional legacies continue to produce uneven patterns of electoral competition within the state.

Taken together, the three approaches suggest that the persistent asymmetry between the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills is unlikely to be explained by a single factor. Rather, it reflects the interaction of historical political developments, institutional evolution and organisational capacity. This integrated framework therefore provides a stronger analytical basis for examining the long-term development of Meghalaya's regional party system than any single theoretical approach considered in isolation.

Importantly, this framework does not assume that the existing electoral geography is permanent. Political systems remain dynamic, and institutional legacies can be reshaped through sustained organisational change, new leadership and changing voter preferences. Nevertheless, understanding the historical foundations of current electoral patterns is essential for explaining why regional parties have repeatedly encountered similar challenges despite changing political contexts.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative-historical research design to examine why regional political parties have consistently achieved stronger electoral success in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills than in the Garo Hills. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to explain long-term political processes rather than test a single causal relationship. The focus is therefore on understanding how historical developments, institutional arrangements and organisational factors have interacted over time to shape regional political mobilisation.

The study compares two broad political regions within the same state. Both operate under the same constitutional



framework, participate in the same electoral system and are governed by the same state institutions. At the same time, they have experienced different patterns of regional party development. This combination of shared institutional conditions and contrasting political outcomes makes Meghalaya a suitable case for comparative analysis.

Rather than treating each election as an isolated event, the analysis examines political developments across multiple decades. This historical perspective allows the study to identify recurring patterns that extend beyond the fortunes of individual parties or electoral cycles.

4.2 Data Sources

The analysis draws upon three complementary sources of evidence.

First, the study reviews published academic literature on Meghalaya's political history, regionalism, coalition politics, ethnic mobilisation and institutional development. These works provide the historical and theoretical context within which contemporary political developments are interpreted.

Second, electoral records are examined to identify broad trends in the performance of regional political parties across different parts of the state. Election results from successive Legislative Assembly elections provide an empirical basis for assessing whether the observed asymmetry has remained consistent over time. Although the study does not seek to conduct sophisticated statistical modelling, descriptive electoral analysis helps establish the persistence of regional differences in party support.

Third, qualitative interview material collected during broader doctoral research on the Voice of the People Party is used to supplement documentary evidence. Interviews were conducted with political scientists, senior journalists and party representatives possessing extensive knowledge of Meghalaya's political development. Although these interviews were not originally designed to investigate the specific question examined here, several respondents independently discussed the challenges faced by regional parties in expanding into the Garo Hills. These observations are therefore used as supplementary evidence rather than as the primary basis for the study's conclusions.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

The study adopts a process-tracing approach that combines historical interpretation with comparative analysis. Evidence from published scholarship, electoral records and interviews is examined together to identify recurring themes rather than isolated events. Throughout the analysis, particular attention is given to three interrelated dimensions:

1. the historical evolution of regional political mobilisation;
2. the development of political institutions, especially the Autonomous District Councils; and
3. patterns of electoral competition across different regions of Meghalaya.

Comparing these dimensions enables the study to assess whether the persistence of the Khasi–Garo asymmetry reflects broader historical processes rather than short-term political circumstances.

4.4 Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on qualitative evidence and therefore does not seek to establish causal relationships through statistical analysis. Second, while electoral data provide important descriptive evidence, they cannot by themselves explain why political behaviour differs between regions. Third, the interview material was collected as part of a wider study on the Voice of the People Party rather than specifically for the present research. Consequently, interview evidence is used cautiously and primarily to corroborate findings emerging from historical and documentary sources.

These limitations do not undermine the study's central argument but indicate that its conclusions should be interpreted as historically informed explanations rather than definitive causal claims. Future research incorporating constituency-level electoral data, voter surveys and fieldwork in the Garo Hills would provide valuable opportunities to examine these issues in greater depth.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 The Electoral Geography of Regional Parties in Meghalaya

The electoral record reveals a clear and enduring geographical pattern in Meghalaya's regional party system (Table 1 and Figure 1). Since the state's formation in 1972, regional political parties have consistently performed more strongly in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills than in the Garo Hills. Although the parties themselves have changed over time—from the All Party Hill Leaders Conference (APHLC) in the early decades of statehood to more recent parties such as the United Democratic Party (UDP), the People's Democratic Front (PDF) and the Voice of the People Party (VPP)—their electoral support has remained geographically concentrated. The persistence of this pattern across more than fifty years suggests that it cannot be explained simply by the popularity of individual leaders or the campaign strategies adopted during particular elections. Instead, it reflects deeper historical and institutional processes that have shaped political competition across Meghalaya.

The first Assembly election in 1972 presents an important point of departure. The APHLC, which had led the movement for the creation of Meghalaya, secured substantial representation in both the Khasi–Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills, winning 15 and 17 seats respectively. At this stage, the party functioned as a genuinely statewide regional movement that successfully united the major hill communities around the common objective of achieving statehood. The relatively balanced electoral outcome reflected the broad coalition that had developed during the hill state movement and suggested that regional political mobilisation had not yet diverged significantly across the state.

However, this broad territorial support proved difficult to sustain after statehood had been achieved. By the 1978 election, the APHLC's representation had declined in both regions, while the newly established HSPDP secured fourteen seats exclusively in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills. Although the APHLC continued to retain an equal number of seats in the Garo Hills, the emergence of the HSPDP indicated that regional politics had begun to develop along distinct territorial lines. Rather than replacing the APHLC as a statewide regional



organisation, the HSPDP established itself primarily as a party representing the political aspirations of the Khasi–Jaintia region.

The elections of the 1980s reinforced this emerging pattern. In 1983, the APHLC further declined to five seats in the Garo Hills and ten seats in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills, while the HSPDP strengthened its position by winning fifteen seats, all located within the Khasi–Jaintia region. The Public Demands Implementation Convention (PDIC) also secured representation exclusively in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills. By contrast, the 1988 election witnessed the near disappearance of the APHLC from the Khasi–Jaintia Hills, where it failed to win a single seat, while retaining only two seats in the Garo Hills. The electoral space once occupied by the APHLC had become fragmented, with different regional parties establishing support within specific geographical areas rather than across the state as a whole.

The emergence of the Hill People's Union (HPU) in 1988 briefly interrupted this trend. Unlike most regional parties that followed, the HPU secured substantial representation in both regions, winning nine seats in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills and ten seats in the Garo Hills. Nevertheless, this broad electoral base proved temporary. By the following election in 1993, all eleven HPU victories were confined to the Khasi–Jaintia Hills, while a new regional formation, the Meghalaya People's Party (MPPP), secured two seats in the Garo Hills. Rather than creating a durable statewide regional party, the HPU's experience further illustrated the difficulty of maintaining balanced support across Meghalaya's distinct political regions.

The formation of the United Democratic Party (UDP) in 1997 marked another important phase in the evolution of regional politics. As a merger of several regional political organisations, the UDP initially appeared capable of re-establishing a statewide regional platform. Its impressive performance in the 1998 Assembly election, where it won nineteen seats in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills and one seat in the Garo Hills, demonstrated considerable electoral strength. However, despite becoming the dominant regional party in Meghalaya, its support remained overwhelmingly concentrated within the Khasi–Jaintia region. This geographical concentration continued in subsequent elections. Although the UDP remained electorally competitive, its representation in the Garo Hills never expanded beyond two seats and, after 2013, disappeared entirely.

The same territorial pattern is evident among smaller regional parties. The Meghalaya Democratic Party (MDP), Khun Hynniewtre National Awakening Movement (KHNAM), People's Democratic Front (PDF) and North East Social Democratic Party (NESDP) all secured representation exclusively or almost exclusively within the Khasi–Jaintia Hills. Conversely, the Garo National Council (GNC) remained confined to the Garo Hills and failed to establish a meaningful

organisational presence elsewhere. Rather than creating statewide alternatives, these parties reinforced the territorial segmentation of Meghalaya's regional political landscape.

The emergence of the Voice of the People Party (VPP) in the 2023 Assembly election provides perhaps the clearest contemporary illustration of this enduring asymmetry. The party rapidly established itself as a significant political force by winning four Assembly seats and later increasing its representation through the Sohiong by-election. Yet every one of these victories occurred within the Khasi Hills. Despite its growing popularity and organisational momentum, the VPP did not secure representation in either the Garo Hills or the Jaintia Hills during the general election. This outcome mirrors the earlier experiences of the HSPDP, UDP, PDF and KHNAM, suggesting that newer regional parties continue to encounter the same territorial constraints that affected their predecessors.

Taken together, the electoral evidence demonstrates that the uneven geography of regional party politics is not associated with any single organisation. Instead, it represents a persistent feature of Meghalaya's political system that has survived changes in leadership, ideology and party organisation. Since the late 1970s, virtually every major regional party has developed a primary electoral base in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills while experiencing limited or inconsistent success in the Garo Hills. This continuity across successive elections strongly suggests that the observed asymmetry reflects structural characteristics of Meghalaya's political development rather than temporary electoral circumstances.

Importantly, the electoral record also reveals one notable exception. Unlike most regional parties, the National People's Party (NPP) has successfully expanded its organisational presence across both the Khasi–Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills. While the NPP originated under the leadership of Purno Agitok Sangma and initially derived much of its support from the Garo Hills, it subsequently broadened its appeal to become the only regional party with a genuinely statewide electoral presence. This distinction is significant because it demonstrates that the territorial asymmetry identified in this study is not inevitable. Rather, it suggests that statewide expansion is possible, but only under particular political and organisational conditions that differ from those characterising most regional parties in Meghalaya.

The persistence of the Khasi–Garo electoral divide therefore raises a broader analytical question. If successive regional parties have consistently encountered similar geographical limitations despite differences in ideology, leadership and organisational structure, what historical and institutional processes have contributed to this pattern? The following sections address this question by examining the political developments that transformed a once-unified regional movement into a territorially differentiated party system.



Table 1: Electoral Performance of Regional Political Parties in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills (1972–2023)

Election Year	Regional Party	Khasi–Jaintia Hills (Seats)	Garo Hills (Seats)	Observation
1972	APHLC	15	17	Strong electoral presence in both regions following statehood.
1978	APHLC	8	8	Electoral support declined but remained present in both regions.
	HSPDP	14	0	Emerged as a predominantly Khasi–Jaintia Hills party.
1983	APHLC	10	5	Continued decline, particularly in the Garo Hills.
	HSPDP	15	0	Consolidated its support in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	PDIC	2	0	Limited success confined to the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
1988	APHLC	0	2	Reduced to a minor force confined to the Garo Hills.
	HSPDP	6	0	Continued as a Khasi Hills-based party.
	PDIC	2	0	Maintained a limited Khasi-centred presence.
	HPU	9	10	Demonstrated strong support in both regions.
1993	APHLC	3	0	Electoral influence confined to the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	HSPDP	8	0	Continued dominance in selected Khasi constituencies.
	PDIC	2	0	Limited regional influence.
	HPU	11	0	Electoral support shifted to the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	MPPP	0	2	Emerged as a small regional force in the Garo Hills.
1998	HSPDP	3	0	Retained a limited Khasi Hills support base.
	UDP	19	1	Emerged as the dominant regional party with marginal Garo presence.
	PDM	2	1	Limited presence in both regions.
	GNC	0	1	Electoral support confined to the Garo Hills.
2003	HSPDP	2	0	Continued decline but remained confined to the Khasi Hills.
	UDP	7	2	Maintained statewide presence, though concentrated in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	MDP	4	0	Electoral success limited to the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	KHNAM	2	0	New Khasi-centred regional party.
2008	HSPDP	2	0	Continued limited Khasi representation.
	UDP	10	1	Principal regional party with minimal Garo representation.
	KHNAM	1	0	Retained a small Khasi Hills presence.
2013	HSPDP	4	0	Electoral support remained confined to the Khasi Hills.
	UDP	8	0	No representation in the Garo Hills.
	GNC	0	1	Maintained a limited Garo Hills presence.
	NESDP	1	0	Won a single seat in the Khasi Hills.
2018	HSPDP	2	0	Continued as a Khasi Hills party.
	UDP	6	0	Electoral support remained concentrated in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills.
	KHNAM	1	0	Limited Khasi Hills representation.
	PDF	4	0	New regional party confined to the Khasi Hills.
2023	HSPDP	2	0	Continued limited presence in the Khasi Hills.
	UDP	12	0	Strengthened its position in the Khasi–Jaintia Hills but remained absent from the Garo Hills.
	PDF	2	0	Continued as a Khasi Hills-based regional party.
	VPP	4	0	Emerged as a major regional force with victories confined to the Khasi Hills.

Source: Compiled by the authors from the Election Commission of India and the Chief Electoral Officer, Meghalaya (1972–2023).
 Abbreviations:

- **APHLC** – All Party Hill Leaders Conference
- **HSPDP** – Hill State People's Democratic Party
- **PDIC** – Public Demands Implementation Convention
- **HPU** – Hill People's Union
- **MPPP** – Meghalaya People's Party
- **UDP** – United Democratic Party
- **PDM** – People's Democratic Movement
- **GNC** – Garo National Council
- **MDP** – Meghalaya Democratic Party



- **KHNAM** – Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement
- **NESDP** – North East Social Democratic Party
- **PDF** – People's Democratic Front
- **VPP** – Voice of the People Party

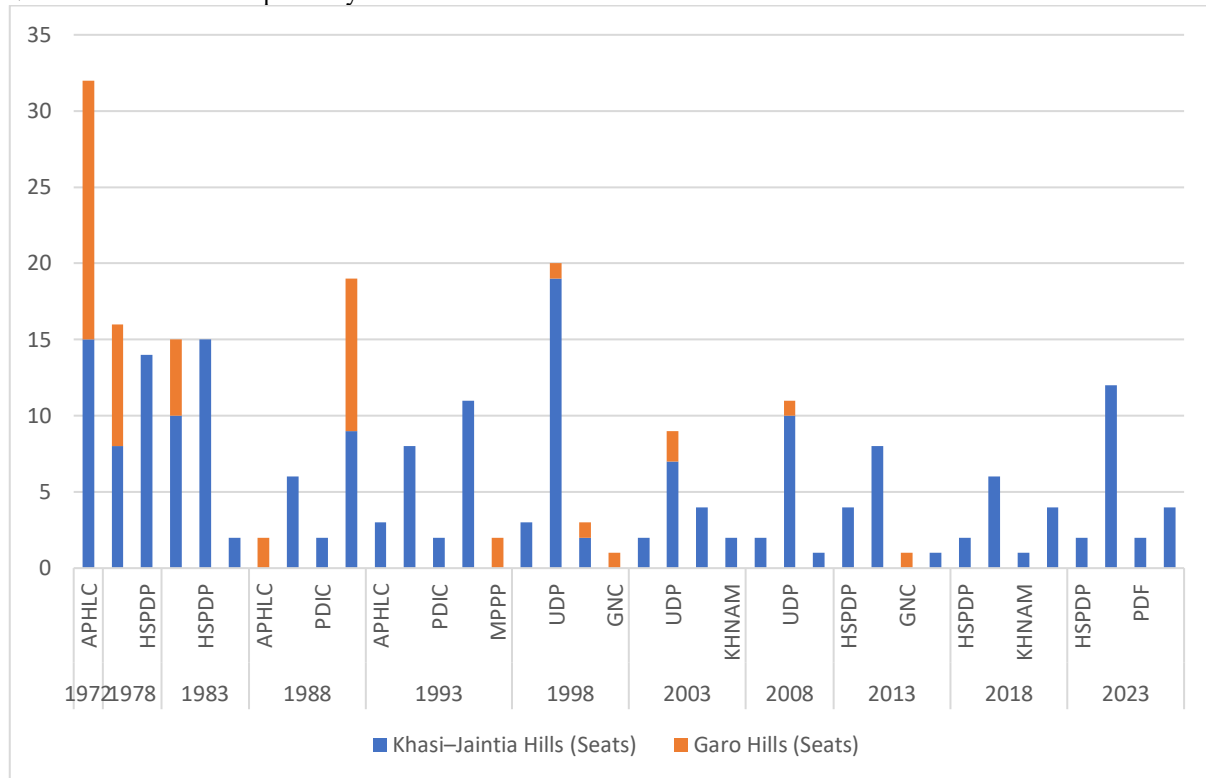


Figure 1: Graphical representation showing the Electoral Performance of Regional Political Parties in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills (1972-2023)

6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined why, despite their shared origins in the movement for statehood, regional political parties in Meghalaya have consistently struggled to maintain a presence in the Garo Hills compared to the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. By analysing electoral records and historical developments since 1972, the paper argues that this persistent geographical asymmetry is not merely a consequence of recent campaign failures. Instead, it is the result of long-term processes, including the divergent evolution of local institutions, the development of distinct regional political networks, and the path-dependent nature of party organisation in a multi-ethnic state.

The findings suggest that the Khasi-Garo electoral divide has become a structural feature of Meghalaya's political landscape. While the case of the National People's Party demonstrates that statewide expansion is not impossible, most regional parties have remained confined to their traditional territorial strongholds. Understanding this imbalance is essential for comprehending the state's enduring reliance on coalition governments and the inherent challenges that emerging parties face when attempting to build a truly statewide base. Ultimately, this research highlights that regional identity in Meghalaya is not a monolithic force; rather, it is deeply rooted in the varying historical and institutional trajectories of the state's different regions.

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