

Coalition Politics in India: An Analysis of Political Alliances

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ABSTRACT: *The research reveals into the evolutionary path of coalition politics in India, focus on the factors behind the Indian National Congress' initial dominance and its subsequent displacement by non-Congress alliances at the national level. It also offers a concise overview of coalition in India, underlining the entrenched norm of coalition politics that has become an integral aspect of contemporary Indian political dynamics. This investigation explores the essence, attributes, and scope of minority coalitions in India. The pattern of coalition formation has been evident in India, the world's largest democracy, where coalition governments have been established both at the state and national levels. Democratic governance within multicultural societies fundamentally entails the art of coalition-building. Over the last seventy-five years, Indian democracy has grown in robustness, and there's a rising anticipation for a greater proliferation of democratic institutions, a positive indicator for the enduring stability of Indian democracy. The accomplished tenures of the National Democratic Alliance-I, United Progressive Alliance-I and II, and National Democratic Alliance-II governments established the coalition system as a viable option within Indian democracy, simultaneously reinforcing the federal framework of the Indian political structure. The article search into the progression of coalition politics and examines potential approaches to mitigate the ambiguities inherent in this form of governance.*

KEYWORDS: *Coalition Politics, Political Parties, General Election, Union, Democracy.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

“A coalition government is a combination of heterogeneous socio-political elements which are susceptible to political turmoil and storms emerging from changing socio-political conditions and compulsions”¹. Coalition politics emerges as a response to an ongoing and dynamic interaction between a political party's inherent aspiration to attain power autonomously and its strategic, potentially interim, engagement with other parties to collectively secure governance. These coalitions are primarily established through the collaboration of two main participants, although there's a possibility of involving more than two entities within a coalition. According to a report in Livemint, political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot has recommended that coalition governments generate more inclusive policies because a coalition represents wider group of political parties².

In today's world, the concept of coalition governments has evolved into a standard practice within parliamentary democracies. Coalition governments have become a regular occurrence, both at the national level and within certain states. India's inaugural encounter with a coalition government transpired on October 25, 1946, when Jawaharlal Nehru made the formation of the interim government, consisting of the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Muslim League. This historic event unfolded in New Delhi against the backdrop of the imminent partition of India, shadowed by the presence of the final British Governor General, Lord Mountbatten. This coalition government worked for a brief period of nine months³. After independence, the Indian National Congress was the only party which commanded popularity, respect, and mass support of the people in India. From 1947 to 1967, the Congress party remained a dominant player in Indian politics, and had monolithic character both at the centre as well as in the states⁴. Subsequent to the general elections of 1967, India entered a new political phase characterized by a significant shift of authority. This marked the transition from the Congress-centric system to a landscape defined by a multitude of parties and party alliances, a transformation that took root in more than half of India's states. Notably, the Congress party retained its predominant role at the national level until the 1977 elections, when it was unseated from power by a coalition of non-Congress parties, collectively referred to as the Janata government. Emergence of Strong regional parties, politicization of various social groups and their struggle for share in power that characterise the political transition and churning in contemporary India have made coalition government inevitable at the federal level⁵.

The first instance of coalition politics in independent India emerged on the national stage in 1977 when non-Congress forces coalesced under the leadership of Morarji Desai, forming the Janata government. A

precursor to this was Ram Manohar Lohia's conception of Anti-Congressism or non-Congressism back in 1963. Lohia's strategy addressed the prevailing notion that Congress, having secured decisive victories in three consecutive general elections, seemed invincible and perennially entrenched in power. His proposition involved uniting all opposition parties to field a solitary candidate against Congress contenders, ensuring that non-Congress votes wouldn't be fragmented. This approach bore fruit during the 1967 general elections, leading to Congress' defeat in seven states and the establishment of Samyukta Vidhayak Dal governments by opposition parties, thereby sowing the initial seeds of coalition politics in India. The first notable coalition materialized under the leadership of Morarji Desai, who became India's oldest prime minister. The Janta government, comprising four parties, governed for a span of approximately two years, spanning from 1977 to 1979. However, internal power struggles within the government hindered Desai's ability to continue his tenure. His resignation came to the fore during discussions on a no-confidence motion in the lower house. This marked the downfall of the Janta government in July 1979, as a cascade of defections saw prominent figures like George Fernandes, H.N. Bahuguna, Biju Patnaik, and Madhu Limaye departing from the coalition, effectively causing its disintegration. The struggle between the Charan Singh and Jagjivan Ram on the one hand and infighting between the BLD and the Jana Sangh on the other hand led to conflicts and confrontation with each other⁶.

The advent of a second coalition signaled a new phase, with Mr. Charan Singh taking on the role of Prime Minister in October 1979. Interestingly, he holds the distinction of being the sole prime minister who did not preside over a parliamentary session during his time in office⁷. This coalition received backing from both the Communist Party of India CPI(M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). Within this coalition, there existed a faction led by George Fernandes with a pro-West stance, and another faction led by H.N. Bahuguna that leaned towards a pro-Soviet outlook. While Charan Singh's coalition ostensibly possessed an outright majority on paper, the President requested him to seek a vote of confidence in the parliament within a three-week timeframe. Instead of going through the parliamentary vote, Mr. Charan Singh chose to tender his resignation. In doing so, he became the first Indian Prime Minister to step down without undergoing a confidence vote in the parliament. This coalition government proved short-lived and fell as soon as Congress (I) withdrew its support⁸.

The formation of the third coalition materialized as the National Front, led by V.P. Singh, came into existence in December 1989. Under this banner, V.P. Singh's government garnered support from multiple parties, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, which, as a calculated political strategy, opted not to establish the government. The coalition also secured backing from parties like the CPI, CPI(M), the RSP, and the Forward Block. However, the initial period of harmony was short-lived. The Bharatiya Janata Party withdrew its support from V.P. Singh's government, a move prompted by the impending arrest of L.K. Advani on the eve of his Rath Yatra from Somnath to Gujarat. Despite the BJP's prior warning to withdraw support if Advani was arrested, the coalition's tenure remained intact for only 11 months.

In the fourth coalition development, V.P. Singh's coalition government faced a defeat with 142 votes in favor and 346 against the confidence motion on November 7, 1990, in the Lok Sabha. By November 8, all major political parties withdrew from the responsibility of administration. Chandra Shekhar, having already staked his claim, sought to form the government with the support of the Congress (I), AIADMK, BSP, Muslim League, Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, Kerala Congress (M), Shiromani Akali Dal, and a few independent members. Chandra Shekhar officially established the government on November 11, 1990, despite facing criticism for inviting defectors to take part in the formation of the government. However, Chandra Shekhar's leadership was marked by challenges. He tendered his resignation on March 6, 1991, recommending the dissolution of the house due to the controversy surrounding the surveillance of Rajiv Gandhi by Haryana policemen. Reflecting on Chandra Shekhar's government, R. Venkataraman, then President, observed, "During his brief time in office, he capably managed Parliament and remained open to suggestions from the opposition. He operated under constant pressure from the Congress party, which unfortunately seemed to believe it was the real government and regarded Chandra Shekhar as merely a figurehead"⁹.

The fifth coalition government was led by H.D. Deve Gowda under the banner of the United Front. The United Front comprised a coalition of 13 political parties and garnered external support from the Congress and the CPI. Within this alliance, other notable members included the Samajwadi Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Asom Gana Parishad, Tamil Maanila Congress, Communist Party of India, and Telugu Desam Party. The United Front government, led by H.D. Deve Gowda, faced a dynamic akin to a chariot being pulled in various directions by thirteen different horses. However, the Congress withdrew its support from Gowda's leadership due to dissatisfaction over communication between the coalition and the Congress. As a result, the United Front government ultimately lost the vote of confidence with 190 votes in favor and 338 against. The sixth coalition government was led by I.K. Gujral, serving from April 21, 1997, to March 19, 1998. Gujral held the position of a consensus candidate, drawing support from various quarters including Lalu Prasad Yadav, Mulayam Singh Yadav, the INC, left parties, and others. However, on November 28, the INC withdrew its aid from his government. This decision followed Gujral's refusal to dismiss any DMK leaders, which led to a breakdown in their alliance. In response to the withdrawal, Gujral submitted his resignation, conveying to

President K. R. Narayanan that his government had lost its majority and, for moral reasons, did not wish to continue in office. Although the President accepted Gujral's resignation, he requested Gujral to continue in an interim capacity. However, as no party managed to form a new government, the President dissolved the parliament on December 4, ending this coalition's tenure.

The seventh coalition, led by A.B. Vajpayee, governed from March 19, 1998, to October 10, 1999. This BJP-led coalition received support from a range of parties, including the AIADMK, BJD, Akali Dal, Shiv Sena, PMK, TRC, and others. However, this multi-party coalition encountered a short-lived existence due to unmet demands from the AIADMK, notably including Jayalalitha's insistence on the removal of Defense Minister George Fernandes. It was almost expected that she would withdraw her support, and this decision did not come as a surprise to many. When Vajpayee moved a confidence motion, it was narrowly defeated by a single vote, with 269 in favor and 270 against. Consequently, A.B. Vajpayee submitted his resignation to the President of India, marking the end of a fragile and unstable coalition government.

The eighth coalition came into being following the 13th Lok Sabha elections, with A.B. Vajpayee at the helm as Prime Minister from October 11, 1999, to May 21, 2004. This coalition operated under the banner of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), spearheaded by the BJP and fortified by the support of 24 diverse political parties. Notable members of this alliance included the AIADMK, Telugu Desam Party, National Conference, Trinamool Congress, Shiv Sena, Shiromani Akali Dal, among others. The coalition led by Mr. Vajpayee constituted a harmonious amalgamation of various viewpoints, cultures, social constructs, and religious affiliations. Above all, it symbolized a convergence of distinct regions. However, it's worth noting that the NDA predominantly represented upper and middle castes. The presence of the BJP as a strong pillar within the coalition, coupled with the charismatic leadership of A.B. Vajpayee, and a deft approach towards accommodating divergent interests, all contributed to the remarkable stability observed within the coalition government during its tenure. In contrast with past experiences of national coalition governments in New Delhi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)- led National Democratic Alliance (NDA-I) that formed the national government in Delhi in 1999 is a remarkable experiment with no parallel in India's political history. Not only was the NDA-I government stable, it also ushered in an era of coalition in probably the best possible way of governance in a multi-dimensional society like India¹⁰.

The ninth coalition came into existence in May 2004, guided by the expertise of distinguished economist Dr. Manmohan Singh, operating under the banner of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The UPA- I replaced NDA-I- I which successfully completed its full five year term in office¹¹. This alliance received support from the Nationalist Congress Party with 9 MPs, Rashtriya Lok Dal with 5 MPs, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference with 3 MPs, Indian Union Muslim League with 3 MPs, Kerala Congress (Mani) with 1 MP, along with other parties, including those from the left-wing. Outside support was extended by the Samajwadi Party with 22 MPs, Bahujan Samaj Party with 21 MPs, and Rashtriya Janata Dal with 4 MPs, further fortifying the coalition's structure.

In 2009 the fifteenth general elections of India were held. This time the Congress party and allies were in power. However, the Left parties and some of its allies withdrew support from the Congress government led by Manmohan Singh. There were many surprises this year and some disappointments as well. Around 714 million people exercised their vote, which led to around 58% turnout in the whole country¹². During the 15th Lok Sabha elections in 2009, the political landscape showcased the Congress and its allies retaining power. Simultaneously, a coalition emerged comprising Left parties, the BJP, and the Trinamool Congress. This election was unique due to the anticipation of a high voter turnout, given the substantial increase in the number of voters. The magnitude of this event generated considerable excitement. In this election, the voters once again chose to elect the UPA government, resulting in Dr. Manmohan Singh securing a second term as the Prime Minister. Sonia Gandhi assumed leadership of the UPA. The UPA secured around 261 seats out of the total 543, securing their lead. Following closely was the NDA with 158 seats, while the Left parties secured 23 seats.

In 16th Lok Sabha election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) within the NDA coalition secured a resounding victory, attaining an absolute majority with an impressive 282 seats out of a total of 543, marking a substantial increase of 166 seats from the previous 15th Lok Sabha¹³. The Indian National Congress (INC) under the UPA banner could only secure 44 seats, while the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) from Tamil Nadu closely followed with 37 seats. The anti-incumbency sentiment against the UPA government, which had held power for a decade, grew more pronounced due to a slew of scandals and corruption allegations. The ascent of Narendra Modi as the Prime Ministerial candidate for the BJP, coupled with the successful track record of his governance model in Gujarat, galvanized the "Modi Wave." This wave resonated across the nation, attracting people from all corners. A yearning for change from the existing administration spurred the populace, as they sought a reinvigorated India and a comprehensive transformation in governance. The 2011 India Against Corruption movement, spearheaded by Anna Hazare, a deft new era of citizen participation in politics. This led to the emergence of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which vowed to combat corruption by reforming the very system itself. The landscape witnessed a significant shift, notably with

the three-time Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit of the INC stepping down following a humbling defeat in the Delhi Legislative Assembly election of 2013. Additionally, the BJP triumphed in the Vidhan Sabha elections in states like Goa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and Punjab. M. Karunanidhi, the president of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), severed ties with the INC ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, further reshaping the political alliances¹⁴.

In 2019, the BJP orchestrated a triumphant return to power at the national level, marked by a resounding victory in the Lok Sabha elections. The party, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah, achieved an even more substantial mandate than it did in the 2014 General Election. Securing an impressive total of 303 seats in the 17th Lok Sabha, the BJP emerged as the dominant force. In contrast, the Congress, positioned as the primary opposition party, marginally increased its vote share from the 2014 elections, though the increment was minimal. The party secured a final count of 52 seats. Notably, for the second consecutive term, the Lower House have not a designated Leader of Opposition.

The preceding analysis of coalition governments at the central level underscores the growing prevalence of hung parliaments in India, primarily attributed to the fragmentation within political parties. This trend highlights the inadequacy of political parties in forming and sustaining enduring coalitions. In the realm of Indian democratic politics, there has been a notable absence of the skill and tradition required for coalition-building and coalition management. However, the experience of NDA-I, UPA-I & II and NDA-II, where two major national parties, the BJP and Congress, alternately led coalition governments, has gradually contributed to the development of a coalition-building culture. Consequently, it can be observed that coalitions in India still have a considerable journey ahead of them. (Table 1)

Table1: The Expansion and Longevity of Coalition Partnerships in India

Year of Coalition	Alliance	No. Of Partners in Alliance	Period of Alliance
1977	Janata Party	5	1977 – 1979
1979	Janata (S)	2	1979 – 1980
1989	National Front	7	1989 – 1990
1990	Janata Dal (S)	8	November 11, 1990 – July 21, 1991
1996	United Front	13	June 1, 1996 – April 20, 1997
1999	NDA-I	24	October 11, 1999 – May 21, 2004
2004	UPA- I	19	2004 – 2009
2009	UPA-II	14	2009- 2014
2014	NDA-II	25	2014-2019

Source: Compiled from the Reports of Election Commission of India

MAJOR OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY: In the light of above discussion, the major findings of the study are discussed here. Throughout the span from 1952 to 1967, a prevailing trend persisted in India wherein the Congress party held both at the central level and across all states. During this period, non-Congress parties predominantly occupied opposition roles. In some selected states, the political landscape under the parliamentary framework exhibited a significant imbalance, nearly marginalizing opposition parties. This scenario was a residual effect of the political atmosphere that stemmed from India's struggle for independence, wherein the Congress managed to preserve its widespread political resonance.

The rise of influential regional parties, the politicization of diverse social factions, and their pursuit of a stake in governance collectively define the ongoing political evolution in modern India. These dynamics have rendered coalition governments an unavoidable and recurrent aspect, manifesting at both the national and state levels. The elections of 1967 served as a pivotal juncture that ushered in a new era of non-Congress coalitions. This electoral shift led to the formation of Samyukta Vidhayak Dal governments in various Indian states, including Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Bihar, and West Bengal. This election marked a profound transformation in India's political terrain. Moreover, the outcomes of the 1967 elections draw attention to a two fold process. On one hand, they revealed a noticeable fracture in the Congress' regional foundation. On the other hand, the election results also marked the commencement of a significant development wherein fragmented regional parties converged around distinctly regional interests, a realm in which the Congress had failed to effectively represent. An additional factor contributing to this shift could be attributed to the Congress'

inability to effectively reconcile the divergent socio-political interests of the voters, which had previously been a central pillar of strength for the Congress System. The disintegration of the Congress system became apparent in 1967, nonetheless the party maintained its hold on central power until 1977.

The turning point arrived when a coalition government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (a confluence of five political parties) successfully ousted the Congress. This transformative event was precipitated by the declaration of a national emergency in 1975 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, resulting in the detention of numerous political leaders, including parliament members. These undemocratic measures generated an unprecedented wave of anti-Congress sentiment against the central government. During Indira Gandhi's tenure, the character of the Congress party underwent significant change. The internal factional competition dwindled, paving the way for monopolistic dominance and a decline in transparency within the party structure. Institutionalized politics eroded, making space for a populist style of leadership. The emphasis shifted from consensus to ideological coherence. Party building gave way to a charismatic, pyramid power structure, causing the Congress to lose its grassroots connections and gradually erode its social support base. This backdrop led to the emergence of a new phase of coalition politics in the 1977 national elections, marked by collaborations between national and regional parties. This marked a symbolic shift towards a coalition culture within Indian politics.

From 1989 onward, India witnessed the formation of minority coalition governments, primarily under the banner of the United Front and National Front. These coalitions, however, struggled to maintain stability and effectiveness due to ideological clashes, personal rivalries, factionalism, and defections. Although these fronts failed to fully realize the potential of a third front, their brief existence created a significant chapter in India's post-independence political history. These transient coalitions played a crucial role in revitalizing and restructuring national bodies like the National Development Council and the Inter-State Council, entities established to safeguard India's federal character. As the Congress party's influence waned, it created a void that the BJP was able to exploit, a party that initially leaned heavily on the Hindutva ideology. However, as time progressed, the BJP recognized the evolving dynamics of Indian politics. This realization prompted the party to moderate its positions on key matters like the Uniform Civil Code and Article 370. This strategic shift played a pivotal role in expanding the BJP's appeal and enabling it to forge alliances with a broader spectrum of partners.

In light of the aforementioned analysis, it becomes evident that coalition governments, regardless of whether they are under the leadership of the Congress, BJP, National Front, or United Front, consistently operate on a precarious balance. This is due to their inherent challenge of reconciling a wide array of divergent and often competitive demands from their supporters within the government.

II. Conclusions:

Until 1977, the landscape of Indian politics was dominated by the Indian National Congress, maintaining its central stronghold as well as its prominence within the states until 1967. The electoral proceedings of 1967 created an opening for non-Congress parties to establish short-lived coalition governments across various Indian states. Subsequently, the fourth general elections not only shattered the single-party dominance paradigm but also paved the way for diverse political entities to collaborate in forming governments. Despite their disparate ideologies, these parties shared a common objective to dislodge the Congress party from its position of power. This shift propelled Indian politics into the realm of coalition dynamics, a phenomenon now entrenched in the country's political sphere. Beginning in 1989, India embarked on a journey characterized by the emergence of multi-party coalition governments. These coalitions, despite encompassing a wide spectrum of political parties with varying ideological orientations, spanning from regional to national scopes, united under a comprehensive coalition framework. While India witnessed fleeting instances of minority coalition governments, the successful completion of tenures by formations such as the NDA-I, UPA-I and II and NDA-II highlighted the coalition system as the primary viable alternative within the framework of Indian democracy. This development simultaneously strengthened the federal structure inherent to the Indian political system.

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