

Coalitions: Permanent instability or reinforcing democracy?

THE CONGRESS SYSTEM

A quarter century has passed since a single-party, majority government emerged from a general election in India. With the transformation from the one-party dominated “Congress system” to a more competitive multiparty system, the chances of electing a single-party government have almost ceased, leading to a continual succession of coalition or minority governments since the 1989 general election.

In the Congress system, the Congress was the dominant party at both the national and state levels. Much of the politics of the country took place within the Congress, with its opponents reduced to side roles. In the new party system, the Congress became one of many players. When it comes to evaluation of multiparty governments, the negative rather than positive perception about coalitions has dominated. While critics have primarily focused on issues of durability and instability, the more optimistic have argued that the coalition era has reinforced democracy in India. This article presents a brief examination of both sides of this argument.

COALITION GOVERNMENTS IN INDIA: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The Congress government between December 1993 and May 1996 was the last single-party government before a series of coalitions that followed at the national level. This P.V. Narasimha Rao-led government actually began as a minority government in 1991, dependent on the support of other parties for its survival; however, around the middle of its term, the Congress party controversially encouraged defectors and gained a majority of its own. Barring this phase, all federal governments, or central government as it is called in India, since 1989 (see Table 1) have been coalition or minority governments.

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Short-run governments, none of them completing their full term, marked the first decade of the coalition era, as can be seen in Table 1. Another feature of this period was the formation of mid-term governments. Governments that formed the 9th, 11th, and 12th Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) did not complete their terms and most of them fell because of internal dissension. Furthermore, while the 9th Lok Sabha had two governments, the 11th experimented with three. Notwithstanding this initial decade of instability, post-1999, two multiparty governments have completed full terms and the United Progressive Alliance became the first government of any form—single-party or coalition—in nearly three decades to be elected back into power.

THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF COALITION GOVERNMENTS

The federal government in the first four decades after independence was a monopoly of the Congress party. However, with the emergence of a competitive multiparty system almost all parties across the political spectrum have been involved in government in some way or the other. Note that in the new party system, the space occupied by single-state or region-based parties has increased substantially, and those parties form the “coalitionable” core. Over time, the

Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have become the two dominant coalition-makers and the “nodes” around which coalitions have formed.

The party system and subsequent coalition formation in India has been greatly influenced by the territorial organization of the political system with its division of powers between the centre and the states. Consequently, electoral coalitions and alliances, in an attempt to make up for geographic deficits, have been an integral feature of coalition experiments in India.

COALITIONS AND ENDEMIC INSTABILITY

The short-lived nature of the early coalitions naturally raised questions about the longevity and stability of coalition experiments. On almost similar lines as the Anglo-Saxon critique of multiparty governments when they were formed in Europe, in India, too, coalitions have been associated with endemic instability, parochialism, short sightedness, and populism, and have been viewed as marriages of convenience carried out for the sake of achieving power.

Much of this criticism is based, however, on a set of unfounded assumptions about the superiority of single-party governments. First, it assumes that a single-party majority is necessary for a strong and efficient government, because a government composed of numerous parties is likely to be mired in “unholy” bargaining and compromises of principles, and therefore likely to be weak. In reality, negotiation and accommodation are an integral part of everyday politics, which is not specific to coalitions. Furthermore, while bargaining may be visible in coalition experiments, divisions and factionalism can tear apart governments run by single parties.

Second, because durability indicates stability, critics assume that durable

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governments are effective. Again, there is nothing specific that makes full-term governments more effective than short-lived ones. Despite lasting a full term, a government can still end up being declared a non-performer by the voters. Findings from coalition studies, both theoretical and empirical, clearly show that coalitions are not non-performing, weak, unstable, and unrepresentative, as has been popularly conceived.

REINFORCING DEMOCRACY AND INCREASING REPRESENTATIVENESS

The argument that coalition politics has reinforced Indian democracy is primarily based on the contrast between the coalition era and the contiguous period before it. With the democratic transformation that began after Independence gathering pace, the Congress used every available means to continue its dominance. It assumed that it had a monopoly

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over representation. Consequently, the period toward the end of one-party dominance was marked by deep stress and strain within the political system. The high tension in centre–state relations, with Congress not allowing any other party to settle into power, is a conspicuous feature of this period.

It is in the light of this background that coalitions are seen as being more representative where they are a power-sharing device intended to accommodate multiple territorially based identities. Here, coalitions are seen as an institutional

solution to mitigating problems of diversity in heterogeneous societies. They are not seen merely as a form of government arising in a multiparty competitive situation, but as a democracy-reinforcing solution that increases representativeness and makes governments more inclusive.

FEDERAL COALITIONS: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Coalition studies in India have argued that federal coalitions, which bring together polity-wide parties and numerous

TABLE 1 Federal governments in India since 1989¹

	Lok Sabha	Government	Coalition	Prime Minister	Begin	End	Election/Mid Term
1	Nine	National Front	Yes	V.P. Singh	Dec. 1, 1989	Nov. 7, 1990	1989 Election
2	Nine	Janata Dal (Breakaway)	Yes	Chandrashekar	Nov. 10, 1990	Mar. 6, 1991	Mid-term
3	Ten	Congress	No	P.V. Narasimha Rao ²	Jun. 21, 1991	May 16, 1996	1991 Election
4	Eleven	BJP + Four	Yes	A.B. Vajpayee	May 16, 1996	May 28, 1996	1996 Election
5	Eleven	United Front I	Yes	H.D. Gowda	Jun. 1, 1996	Mar. 30, 1996	Mid-term
6	Eleven	United Front II	Yes	I.K. Gujral	21.04.1997	Nov. 28, 1997	Mid-term
7	Twelve	BJP + Allies	Yes	A.B. Vajpayee	Mar. 19, 1998	Apr. 17, 1999	1998 Election
8	Thirteen	National Democratic Alliance	Yes	A.B. Vajpayee	Oct. 12, 1999	May, 22, 2004	1999 Election
9	Fourteen	United Progressive Alliance I	Yes	Manmohan Singh	May 22, 2004	May 22, 2009	2004 Election
10	Fifteen	United Progressive Alliance II	Yes	Manmohan Singh	May 22, 2009	Continuing	2009 Election

Source: Compiled from media reports and government of India press releases.

1. A change in prime minister has been counted as a change in government. 2. This was a minority government until December 31, 1993.

single-state or multistate parties on the same platform, have, while recognizing the needs of diversity, also reconciled the demands of national unity. Federal coalitions have enabled multiple diversities, including regional, religious, caste, linguistic, and cultural, not only to be represented at the centre but also to exercise power. In a way, coalitions play an integrating role in bringing together different sections of a diverse polity.


While coalitions have allowed distinctive interests space, they have also tempered uncompromising positions, making the polity more inclusive. While both the Congress and the BJP are actually reluctant coalition-makers, the strategic imperatives of government formation have constrained them to moderate their

stands. Just as the BJP was forced to dilute its extremist positions on numerous issues, so too Congress was pushed into accepting the “legitimacy” of coalitions in order to attract coalition partners. Likewise, many state-based parties have sidelined previously hardline positions to become “coalitionable.”

FEDERAL COALITION AND GOVERNANCE

Federal coalitions have, over time, institutionalized sophisticated coordination and management mechanisms that have helped take care of not only relations between political parties but also issues of governance. For example, the “group of ministers” device—essentially an interministerial panel composed of three

to six ministers—was primarily intended to minimize differences within the council of ministers, but has also been used to engage various coalition partners and to allow state-based actors space in national-level decision making.

Though India’s early federal coalitions were transient and unstable, coalition experiments post-1999 have not only completed their term but have also governed as well as or as poorly as single-party governments. Federal coalitions have allowed for greater representation as well as recognition of diversities and, most important, given state-based interests space in national-level decision making. This most definitely has been the defining feature of the coalition era in India. 

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choice but to form coalition governments. All of India’s national governments since the 1996 Lok Sabha elections have been coalition governments with the regional parties playing a key role in formation of the government at the centre. Indian politics has moved from an era of single-party rule with the absolute dominance of the Congress from 1952–89 (with the brief exception of 1977–80) to an era of coalition politics.

Regional parties have played an important role in Indian politics at both the state and national level for a little over a decade and will continue to play such a role in the coming years. Regional parties have made important inroads into the traditional support base of the Congress among Muslims, Dalits, and Adivasis. With its declining popularity among traditional supporters, the Congress is heavily dependent on the OBC and the upper castes for electoral success. While the Muslim, Dalits, and Adivasis do vote for Congress in selective states, depending on the type of electoral contest, their support base has certainly declined compared with the past.

There is now some overlap in the support base for both the Congress and

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the BJP. With the regional parties sure to stay in Indian politics for at least a decade or more, there are only two ways for the two national parties to expand. The Congress and the BJP must either enter into alliances with the regional parties or try to make inroads into the support base of the regional parties. There is no third route available for these two national parties.

On the other hand, while regional parties will continue to play an important role in Indian politics, it is hard to imagine a political scenario in which these parties would combine to form a formidable third front. Even though some


regional parties face a leadership crisis, they would suffer from a leadership surplus if all the regional parties combined to form a third front alternative to the Congress and the BJP. It is hard to imagine a third front with Mayawati, Jayalitha, or Mamata Banerjee together. These are only a few names; there may be many more in the race for the top post, which will put a big question mark on the stability of a third front. 

Table Notes

1. The states classified in the category of two-party contests between Congress and BJP are Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand.
2. The states classified under the category of a contest between Congress and regional parties are Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Punjab, Sikkim, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. This classification is valid for all the elections.