

Coalition Politics in Indian Democracy: A Journey From 1989 to Contemporary Era

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Indian politics, the coalition government has become an indispensable feature at both the national as well as state levels. The coalition, a predominant phenomenon in present day electoral politics, may occur as a pre-poll or post-poll alliance: varying in its ideology-based or issue-based nature. Multiple political parties coalesce each other in a desperate search to wrest state power in elections; however, India began its journey as a single party dominant multi-party system with a stable Union and State Governments formed by none other than the INC alone for almost over two and half decades. After 1990, a huge socio-political and economic transformation took place under the impact of Globalisation paving thereby a new age for electoral politics not known to India ever before. The challenges, faced by coalition government at both levels in maintaining stability or in formulating and implementing government policies are highlighted by the fact that they are formed in support of political parties with different ideologies. This paper aims to (1) analyze the emergence and development of coalition politics, (2) assess the rise of regional political parties in different states post-1967, (3) find out the transformation of Indian politics from ideology – based to Issue-based politics. The study seeks to reveal answers to the following queries with the help of the historical-analytical method: First, whether ideology has taken a back-seat and sheer pragmatism in Indian politics has become the order of the day? Second, is coalition politics the future of Indian democracy if democracy is to be stable in nature? The study adopts an analytical research methodology and is primarily based on secondary sources such as official documents, scholarly articles, and policy papers. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the inherent plurality that prevails in the Indian social system can also be an important clue for our present quest.

Keywords: Coalition, Government, Election, Ideology, Issue, Politics.

INTRODUCTION

Coalition is an essential aspect of democracy. India has chosen democracy after independence and it is a great achievement for the country to retain the stability of that democracy for almost 75 years. In general, a coalition is a get-together for achieving a specific purpose. But in a political sense, coalition is a phenomenon of multi-party government where two or more political parties join their hands to gain power and form a government which otherwise may not be possible.

The term 'Coalition' is originated from Latin word 'coalitio' where 'Co' means together and 'alescere' means to grow. So, in the etymological sense, coalition means to grow together (Heywood, 2019). But in the strict political sense, the word 'coalition' means the establishment of political alliance between different political parties or groups or sub-parties for the purpose of gaining power. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, "coalition is a temporary alliance for combined action, especially of

political parties forming a government” (Oxford University Press, 2020). The Cambridge Dictionary defines coalition as "the joining together of different political parties or groups for a particular purpose usually for a limited time or a government that is formed in this way" (Cambridge University Press, 2023). A coalition government is formed only when a political alliance comes in power or when no political party gains electoral mandate with ‘Magic Figure’ or single majority after elections. Different political parties with different ideologist may make an agreement to work together and as a result ideology of different allies may be compromised for the goal power politics.

In the democratic system, there are usually two types of government. One is the Presidential form of Government and the other is Parliamentary form of Government. Presidential form of government or single executive system is the form of Government where real power is vested in the president. In this system, the executive is separated from the legislature by 'separation of power'. On the other hand, Parliamentary form of Government or parliamentary democracy is a system in which the Union Council of Minister (UCM) headed by the Prime Minister and originating from the parliament is part and parcel of the same (Finer, 1997). Thus, as an erstwhile British colony, India broadly imitates West Minster System, nevertheless it is a federal state, where powered is shared between Union Government and Constituent Units under a written Constitution.

During mid-1960s specially after the demise of Nehru, the breakdown of the ‘Congress System’ was imminent and as a result a number of regional parties sprang up on caste-class, cultural linguistic or sub-national lines from among the breakaway groups of Indian National Congress. In this context, the votes among political parties began to be polarised with the gradual erosion of singular dominance of Indian National Congress after 1967.

From 1990s, we observe the Indian political parties have become pragmatic in nature. Before 1990 Indian political parties differed ideologically from each other, with an ideological difference between them. But in present India, issue-based politics is becoming more relevant rather than ideology-based politics. At present, the main goal of the political parties or leaders is to seize power at any cost instead of principle and ideology. Therefore, the political parties are negotiating seats with the parties of opposite ideologies only to seize power. One may easily conclude that the era of ideology in Indian politics is almost over barring a few exams of the left parties. It is evident especially since 1990s, when parties formed their tactical line with a pragmatic view; political defections with money and muscle power were at rampant setting aside a party’s ideology.

After the adoption of the market economy, that is LPG (Liberalisation- Privatisation- Globalisation) Model in 1991, a radical transformation of public sector took place in India. The private sector is given more importance rather than the public sector. The motto of ‘economic growth with social justice’ of Nehruvian period was discarded. The goal of the expansion of private sector was emphasised even at the cost of age-old public sector. Respective of their ideology, political parties of any stream lie the Indian National Congress, the Bharatiya Janata party including the Left prioritised the growth of private sector as their foremost political /economic programme. Thus, 'issues' marked the difference between the parties rather than their 'ideology' in India. The era of ideology was partially replaced by 'issue-based politics' which eventually became the dominant strength in present-day Indian politics.

EMERGENCE OF COALITION POLITICS

As has been told earlier section (Introduction) coalition politics and coalition governments has come off as an essential feature specially in the case of Union Government since 1998. From 1998 to 2022 all the

Union Governments form the first NDA Government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee to the present NDA Government (third) led by Narendra Modi were coalitions. The UPA1 (United Progressive Alliance) and UPA2 Government led by Dr. Manmohan Singh was no exception in this regard. Contrary to this fact, up to third general election held in 1962, INC have the massive mandate as in all the state elections the party won two-third majority in both parliamentary and state legislature. In the parliamentary election of 1967, Congress won 283 seats with 40.8% of the vote and formed a government in the centre (Chandra et al., 2016). But for the first time in the state elections of 1967, they lost eight States out of sixteen. Congress was defeated by the United Front led by Ajay Mukherjee in West Bengal. After 1967 parliamentary and state elections were never held together.

The next Lok Sabha election was held in 1971 when Congress got 43.7% of the total votes polled and won 352 seats and Indira Gandhi became the prime minister. Now the question can arise if they lose eight out of sixteen state elections in 1967, then what was the reason behind the success of winning a two-thirds majority with 352 seats in the 1971 parliamentary elections. The reason behind Congress getting 43.7% of votes in the elections was Indira Gandhi's active role in the liberation war of Bangladesh (Frankel, 2005). Apart from this, Congress made their election campaign with some populist slogans like 'Garibi Hatao'. Moreover, 'Nationalization of Banks', 'Abolition of Privy Purses' (26 Amendment in 1971) were some of the remarkable measures that brought back Congress with two-third majority under the charismatic leadership of the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

In 1977, sixth Lok Sabha election held after 'Emergency' was based on. In this election, Congress was defeated for the first time at the national level. Janata Party came into power. Jagjivan Ram's Congress for Democracy and CPI(M) supported Janata Party. In fact, the entire opposition, except CPI & DMK, unitedly fought together against Congress. In this election, Congress got 154 seats with 34.5% votes and Janata Party came out victorious with 295 seats & 41.3% votes (Chandra et al., 2016). It was the first coalition government in India, but due to some internal dissidence leaders like George Fernandes, H.N. Bahuguna, Biju Patnaik, and Madhu Limaye broke up with coalition government in 1979. Regional parties like Akali Dal, and AIADMK which supported Janata Dal at first withdraw their support from the government. Consequently, the very first coalition government of independent India in the centre was broken down like a house of cards before its normal tenure of five years was over.

Year of Election	Total Number of Seats	Seats won	Total Voter Turnout in %	Percentage of Vote Share
1952	489	364	45.7	44.99
1957	494	371	55.42%	47.78
1962	494	361	55.42%	44.72
1967	520	283	61.04%	40.78
1971	518	352	55.27%	43.68
1977	542	153	60.49%	34.52

Lok Sabha Seats Secured by Congress in 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1971 and 1977 Election in India

Source: compiled from the Reports of Election Commission of India.

After the decline of the Janata government, the second coalition government led by Chaudhary Charan Singh came into power in the centre in October 1979. He was the only prime minister who did not face the parliament even for a single time. This coalition was supported by CPI(M), CPI, George Fernandes, H.N.

Bahuguna, and also Congress(I). But when President Reddy asked him to seek a vote of confidence in the house within three weeks Mr. Charan Singh resigned before facing the 'vote of confidence' in the parliament (Guha, 2007).

In the next Lok Sabha election, held in 1980, Congress won 353 seats with 42.69% votes and Indira Gandhi became the prime minister for the second time.

In 1984, following the assassination of prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Lok Sabha election held Congress gains a huge vote share (about 48.1% of the total turn out) correspondent by 415 Lok Sabha seats, that is more than three-fourth of the total Lok Sabha seats. Due to the 'sympathy wave' after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister (Chandra et al., 2016).

The 9th general election was held in 1989 Congress shared 39.5% votes winning 197 seats Janata Dal got 143 and BJP 85 seats. Although Congress emerged as single largest party after Lok Sabha election, but National Front led by V.P. Singh came into power and formed the Union Government with the support of BJP and left parties from outside (Yadav, 1999).

POST 1967 PERIOD: (IN STATE LEVEL)

It has already been said that the elections of States and Centre were not held together after 1967. During the period of 1972-1992 the internal elections were suspended and there was a centralization of power in the Congress party under the leadership of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi (Brass, 1994). Virtually the Gandhi family was the center of all power within the party. It was an umbrella party during the time of Jawaharlal Nehru or Lal Bahadur Shastri. Basically, it was like an umbrella under which many left and right-wing parties got shelter. Basically, it was like an umbrella under which many left and right-wing parties got shelter. During that time internal election of the party held at regular interval and all the party positions were elected rather than 'selected' by the 'Congress Sabhapati' – a post that always occupied by the dependents of the Nehru's.

After 1972 the national leaders of Congress made decisions on the states without discussing with the state leaders. No internal elections held and centralization of power created anger among the Congress leaders and the agitated leaders left the party eventually and formed different regional parties. Thus, the dissolution of the Congress led to the emergence of several regional/state political parties. In India, we see two types of coalition – pre-poll coalition and post-poll coalition. A host of anti-Congress parties emerged in most of the states which eventually culminated into diverse political coalition in a bid to search for stable power. These regional/state parties did not hesitate to build up their 'vote bank' along the line of caste and class, languages and sub-culture, tribes and clans and many others primordial popular sentiments those were considered to be the link to the traditional 'vote bank' of the Indian National Congress. Congress lost its ground and it has to face a resilient opposition from the state or regional forces/parties. Configuration of coalition politics in the state level since 1967:

- Congress vs BJS - Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh and the Union Territory of Delhi
- Left Front vs Congress - West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura
- Regional Parties vs Congress -

Punjab - Akali Dal vs Congress

Jammu & Kashmir - National Conference vs Congress Andhra Pradesh - Telegu Desam Party vs Congress

Assam Assam - Assam Gana Parishad vs Congress

Goa - Nationalist Congress Party vs Congress

- Elimination of the Congress from the top position - Tamil Nadu - bipolar contest between DMK and

AIADMK

- Two alliance or two-party contest between Congress and variety of regional parties - Mizoram, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur and Sikkim
- Congress - Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Gujrat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Orissa

DEVELOPMENT OF COALITION GOVERNMENT:

In December 1989, the third coalition government of India was formed at the centre led by V.P. Singh under the banner of the National Front government. But in the wake of the Rath Yatra from Somnath to Gujarat, the BJP withdrew its support from the third coalition when Advani was arrested despite warnings to withdraw BJP support on the eve of LK Advani's arrest. As a result, the third coalition government collapsed on November 7, 1989, in just 11th months. The Indian President R. Venkatraman then observes, "it is my impression that if V.P. Singh had headed a government with a clear majority instead of depending on a conglomeration of parties mutually destructive to each other, he would have given a good administration to the country. Being dependent on parties with different objectives and ideologies, he could not withstand pressures from discordant groups" (Ramaswamy, V. 1994).

With the fall of V.P. Singh's government, Chandra Shekhar withdrew his support from the Janata Dal with 55 members and formed the Janata Dal (Samajwadi (S)). On November 8, 1990, when all major political parties refused to take over the administration, "Chandra Shekhar had already staked his claim to form the government with the help of Congress(I), AIADMK, BSP, Muslim League, J & K National conference, Kerala Congress(M), Shiromani Akali Dal(panthic) and a few independent members. Despite the criticism that defectors should not be invited to form a government" (Malik, V. & Malik, P. 2014), Chandrashekhar formed the 4th coalition government. Within some days of the formation of the Chandrashekhar government, the Congress and the AIADMK began pressuring the central government to sack the Tamil Nadu DMK government for allegedly violating law and order. The Congress(I) party also disagreed with the fourth coalition government on issues like Punjab, Kashmir, rising prices, and the question of allowing US energy to India. Under such circumstances, Chandrashekhar submitted his resignation letter to the president on March 6, 1991, seeking the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. As a result, then-President R. Venkataraman dissolved the 9th Lok Sabha on March 13, 1991, and ordered fresh elections. However, president R. Venkatraman said in his book 'My Presidential Years'(1994), "during his few months in office, he had handled parliament competently and was responsive to suggestions from the opposition. He was under constant strain from the pressures of the Congress party, which I am afraid, assumed that it was the real government and Chandra Shekhar was a proxy."

The next Lok Sabha elections were held in May-June, 1991 at the behest of the President. In this election, the Congress(I) party emerged as the single majority party with 224 seats, and with the support of some other smaller parties including AIADMK formed a minority government at the centre under the leadership of P.V. Narasimha Rao. But when the TDP and Ajit Singh's Lok Dal broke up and some MPs joined the Congress, the minority government gained the majority in the middle period (Kashyap, S. C, 2016).

In the 1996 elections, Congress lost to the BJP for the first time. The Congress party won 141 seats, while BJP won 161 seats. At this time no political party or political alliance could gain the majority. That is why the President called on BJP's Atal Bihari Vajpayee to form the government on May 15, 1996. But on May 31, 1996, Vajpayee to resign as BJP could not prove its majority in the house by a vote of confidence and the BJP government collapsed. However, this time the BJP realized that they have to ally with other political parties of different regions because, in the 1996 elections, the BJP got 143 out of 161 seats from

North India. In June 1996, the United Front government led by Deve Gowda rose to power with the support of Congress from outside but it could not last long. Deve Gowda was replaced by I.K. Gujral though his government also collapsed very soon leading to a fresh election in February-March 1998. In this election, BJP and its allies won total 280 seats. Congress reduced to only 141 states. Congress lost its face and it was no longer trustworthy as a political partner of any alliance. The dubious role of the Congress in the name of support from outside an alliance was only exposed to all other parties. The BJP on the other hand extended its support then. Thus, the BJP's electoral success in 1998 could be attributed to two main reasons:

1. Congress lost its image in the eyes of almost all parties.
2. Various regional parties and state-based parties agreed to ally with the BJP as a considered BJP no longer untouchable to them.

However, the Union government led by Vajpayee had to face a 'vote of confidence' soon and his defeat for just one vote led to another general election, that was held in 1999. In this election, NDA got 299 seats and BJP as a single party got 182 seats. After the election, Ajit Singh's Lok Dal party joined the NDA and the total number of seats in the NDA stood at 303. On the other hand, the Congress party alone got 111 seats in the elections and as an alliance its total number of seats reached to 134. TDP which had 29 MPs and also other five smaller parties supported NDA from outside and NDA formed the government under the leadership of A.B. Vajpayee. This coalition government lasted a full five years in power. "The presence of the BJP as the strong pillar in the coalition, the charismatic leadership of A B. Vajpayee, and the skillful way in which diverse interests were accommodated ensured the stability of the coalition government" (Kashyap, 2016).

In the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won 138 seats alone, and the total number of NDA seats was 189. The Congress, on the other hand, won 145 seats and as a alliance the UPA's total number of seats in Lok Sabha rose to 222. Despite winning 222 seats, the UPA still fell short of the 'magic figure'. However, the UPA managed to form the government under the leadership of Dr. Manmohan Singh with the support of Lefts, SP, and BSP from outside (Brass, 2010). Although the Manmohan Singh-led coalition government remained in power for five years but one of its important allies, the Lefts withdrew their support over the issue of Indo-U.S. Nuclear deal.

The 15th Lok Sabha elections were held from 16 April 2009 to 13 May 2009. In this election, the UPA won 263 seats, and Congress alone got 206 seats. The BJP won 116 seats in this election. Though the UPA failed to win a majority but UPA II government was formed with the support of outside political parties and Manmohan Singh became the prime minister consecutively for the second time.

In the next general election, held in 2014, the BJP won 282 seats and the NDA had 336 seats, while Congress won 44 seats and the UPA finished its race with just 60 seats. On 22 May 2014, the NDA government was formed again. Congress virtually reduced to the level of a regional party in terms of its total seats won in Lok Sabha. Naturally, a question arises as to what is the reason behind this huge success of the BJP? These are the things that are emphasized as the reasons for the success of the BJP:

- A. Modi Wave
- B. Growth rate which was 8% down to 5%
- C. Youth frustrated by unemployment and communal politics
- D. Technology played an important role especially the social media.
- E. Infrastructure improvement in Gujrat
- F. People disgusted by the instability of coalition politics

G. No PM Face

In the 2019 elections, the BJP got 303 seats and the total number of NDA seats was 352. Congress won 52 seats and the UPA only 91 seats. The reason behind the huge popularity of the BJP in the 2019 elections are:

1. Government scheme of toilet and LPG
2. Balakot air strike
3. Opposition failed to present an alternative narrative to the voters
4. Brand Modi
5. Divided opposition – No PM face

In the 18th Lok Sabha elections held in 2024, all the parties in the NDA alliance together won a total of 292 seats; out of which the BJP alone got 240 seats. Congress won 99 seats in this election. On the other hand, despite winning 234 seats, the INDIA alliance could not achieve a majority. As a result, the BJP-led NDA formed a coalition government at the Centre and Narendra Modi took over as the Prime Minister for the third time.

IDEOLOGY VS ISSUE-BASED POLITICS

Electoral politics in post-independent India was initially conducted ideologically, with an ideological difference between the political parties. Gradually the whole scenario changed and since the 1970s, political parties of all shades compromised their ideology both at the state and the national levels in a bid to seize power. Nowadays, it is observed that Indian political parties have become more pragmatic in their tactical line. In 1977, the Janata party was formed under the initiative of Jayaprakash Narayan where opposition political parties' defined ideologies were united. But in reality, the Janata party was more a coalition than a single-party. The chief aim was to defeat the authoritarian Congress government and the Restoration of democracy. Similarly, the coalition government that was formed in 1989 was actually a gathering of the parties with different ideologies and political beliefs (Chandra, 2016). It is noteworthy that in both the cases, Congress failed to secure a majority to form the government.

One may conclude here that the present political context of our country is almost akin to the USA where two major parties - mainly the Democratic and Republican are agreed upon the goal of the US political system while the difference is only over electoral issues (Brass, P. R., 2010). In India, the left is mostly known as ideologically oriented than any other party with the fact that they are more inclined to participate in parliamentary democracy and to seize State Power than to follow the so-called Marxist revolution. One may be surprised also how Shiv Sena, a staunch supporter of Hindutwabad, can be a political ally up secularist NCP & INC to form a state government. There is no doubt that in India thus political pragmatism based on 'electoral issues' rather than political ideologies at present dominates the whole situation.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COALITION GOVERNMENT & SINGLE PARTY GOVERNMENT

With the existence of multiple political parties in the coalition government, the government has to face many hurdles in making big decisions and it is relatively easy to make big decisions when there is a single-party government in power. For example, the NDA government's decision on the abolition of 370 on the Kashmir issue was made possible by the fact that the BJP has a single majority in the NDA. But at the time of the nuclear deal, Manmohan and also the government had to defend itself in an unethical way by seeking political support outside from the coalition (Kashyap, S. C., 2016).

The biggest problem of the coalition government is instability. Especially in the 1990s, the frequent collapse of coalition governments at the centre, creating instability (Kohli, A. 2001). But if there is a single-party government, there is no doubt in the minds of the people about its sustainability and the people have a clear idea of what programmes this government can take in five years. But with the formation of a coalition government, there is public concern about the stability of that government, although all coalition governments that have been in power since 1989 have been in power for a full term.

In a single-party government, the monopoly power of one party often gives rise to authoritarianism. But different parties in the coalition government represent different sections of the people. As a result, it is possible to make a deliberate decision instead of making a hasty autocratic decision, and through it, the statements of almost every section can be made public. A coalition Government prevents 'dictatorship'. 'Political Pluralism' spreads through coalition politics (Lijphart, A., 1999).

FUTURE OF COALITION POLITICS

The fact that coalition government will be the future form of government in India, had been established since 1998. Since 1998, no political party has been able to form a government at the center with a single majority, and the reason lies in the Indian social system. Indian society is fragmented into so many primordial factors like castes, languages, nationalities and sub-culture (Kothari, R., 1970). In a society with diversity, like India, it is very difficult to a political party to win with the support of the whole society. As a result, a coalition government can be a compatible form of government with this fragmented society of India and in this government, there will be political representation of different sections through their political parties. For that, single party government is very difficult here. Following Rajni Kothari, it can be said that India is still under the process of Nation-building and also State-building even after independence. A coalition government in true sense of the term in the Indian context can facilitate the process of State and Nation-building, In Indian Federal structure, coalition governments may serve as an effective mechanism and can contribute for making Indian democracy stable and sustainable.

CONCLUSION

Alliance politics has emerged as a permanent feature of contemporary Indian politics. Although the early coalition governments in India lacked stability, the situation changed significantly after 1990s. Since then, coalition governments have played a crucial role in sustaining and strengthening Indian democracy and also have proved to be comparatively more stable than earlier experiment. Major national political parties like Congress, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) have shown their willingness to form alliances with various regional parties with an eye to seize power. Consequently, regional parties have increasingly gained substantial importance in national politics. It is often observed that a coalition whether at national or state level, become more stable when it is led by a strong party such as BJP or INC. Therefore, Coalition Government as emerged as a suitable form of stable government providing stability to that democratic political system in Indian context.

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