



Coalition Politics in India: Evolution, Challenges, and Implications for Democratic Governance

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ABSTRACT

India's transition from a single-party dominant system to an era of coalition and multi-party governance represents one of the most significant transformations in the functioning of its parliamentary democracy since independence. This article traces the historical evolution of coalition politics in India from the Congress system of the 1950s and 1960s through the fragmentation of the party system in the late 1980s, the consolidation of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) between 1998 and 2014, and the return of coalition dependency for the BJP-led NDA after the 2024 general election. Drawing on coalition theory, federal studies, and the comparative literature on multi-party parliamentary systems, the article examines the structural, social, and institutional drivers that produced coalition politics in India, including the weakening of the Congress system, the rise of regional parties, the Mandal–Mandir realignment of the 1990s, and the increasing salience of state-level and caste-based cleavages. It then analyses the principal challenges associated with coalition governance in the Indian context—cabinet instability, policy incoherence, coalition dharma and the leverage of small allies, corruption arising from patronage bargaining, and the tension between coalition arithmetic and programmatic governance. The article also explores the implications of coalition politics on federalism, representation and democratic accountability and suggests that although the coalition politics has often been linked to instability, it has also led to a more federal approach to governance, increased representation of previously marginalised regions and social groups, and adopted an approach to governance that has been more consultative. The article concludes by evaluating the sustainability of coalition politics in India in the aftermath of the elections of 2024 and examines the Indian experience in the context of the comparative literature on coalition governments.

Keywords – Coalition politics; Indian federalism; National Democratic Alliance; United Progressive Alliance; regional parties; democratic governance; anti-defection law



1. Introduction

For the first four decades after independence, India's party system was frequently described, following Rajni Kothari's influential formulation, as a "Congress system" a form of one-party dominance in which the Indian National Congress functioned less as one competitor among equals than as an overarching arena within which factional and ideological contestation occurred. Opposition parties existed and occasionally formed state governments, but at the national level the Congress commanded parliamentary majorities on its own from 1952 until 1977, and again for extended periods thereafter. Coalition government, where it existed at all, was the exception that proved the rule of single-party dominance.

This pattern altered irreversibly from 1989 onward. The general election of that year produced a fractured Lok Sabha in which no single party commanded a majority, inaugurating what political scientists have since termed India's "coalition era." From 1989 to 2014, India had a series of quick-fix coalition and minority governments, some of which never lasted to the end of their term. In public discourse, it had been a time of drift and instability, but it also reflected a massive economic liberalisation, a strengthening of federalism, and a greater political representation for marginalised regions, castes, and communities. Stable coalitions between multiple party alliances were formed in 1998 with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and again in 2004 with the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), providing a proof point that coalition government in India can be stable and at times effective in attaining policy goals. The BJP's parliamentary victories in 2014 and 2019 seemed, to some commentators, to signal a return to single party rule, and the emergence of a "second dominant party system" led by the BJP. But the upcoming general elections in 2024, in which the BJP failed to secure a majority on its own and had to seek the assistance of allies like the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] to form the government, has again brought coalition politics into the national kitchens of India. This development calls for a re-think about coalition politics in India, particularly in a systematic manner. This article will seek to answer three main questions. First, how has coalition politics in India changed since the Congress era has come to an end and what has been the driving forces of this change? Secondly, which are the major challenges coalition government has brought to present policy making, institutional stability and democratic accountability in Indian context? Third, what are the implications of the continuity of coalition politics for the working of the Indian federalism and democracy? The comparative literature on coalition governments, the Indian party system changes literature and the empirical evidence from the two major coalition experiments of the last three and a half decades are used to address these questions. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical frameworks which were adopted to analyse coalition politics, which is a general comparativist framework adapted to India's unique parliamentary-federal context. Section 3 analyses coalition politics in India, spanning its historical evolution in four broad phases. The structural and social factors that underlie this change are explored in Section 4. Section 5 explores the key difficulties of coalition government in India. The implications of coalition politics for federalism, representation and democratic accountability are explored in section 6. Section 7 places the Indian experience in context and Section 8 brings the book to a close.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Coalition Theory in Comparative Perspective



There are several comparative literatures that can be useful in analysing the Indian situation: that of coalition government. William Riker's well known "size principle" suggests that parties seeking to control government will form the smallest group of winning coalition possible because the fewer parties there are in which to distribute the benefits of office, the better the deal will be for each. Subsequent scholarship, notably by Abram de Swan and later by Michael Laver and Kenneth Shepsle, refined this office-seeking model by incorporating policy preferences, arguing that coalitions tend to form around parties that are ideologically proximate so-called "minimal connected winning coalitions." Giovanni Sartori's typology of party systems, distinguishing moderate from polarised pluralism, further helps explain why coalition systems characterised by centripetal, ideologically proximate parties tend to be more stable than those characterised by centrifugal, polarised competition.

These frameworks illuminate important features of Indian coalition politics but require adaptation. Indian coalitions have rarely been formed purely on office-seeking or narrow policy-proximity grounds; they have instead been shaped decisively by anti-incumbency sentiment, caste and community arithmetic at the state level, personal rivalries among regional leaders, and calculations about parliamentary seat-sharing rather than post-election bargaining alone. Pre-electoral coalition formation parties contesting under a common seat-sharing arrangement and declaring a prime ministerial candidate before the election, as in the NDA and UPA models — has been more prevalent in India than the post-election bargaining scenarios that dominate much of the European coalition literature.

2.2 Coalitions in a Federal, Multi-Level Party System

A further adaptation is required because India's coalition politics cannot be understood in isolation from its federal structure and its increasingly bifurcated party system, in which national parties compete against state-specific regional parties whose organisational base and electoral fortunes are confined to a single state or a small cluster of states. Pradeep Chhibber and John Petrocik's work on the aggregation function of parties, and later scholarship by Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar on the "third electoral system," emphasise that Indian national elections have increasingly become an aggregation of essentially separate state-level contests, each shaped by distinct social coalitions and regional issues. National coalition government in India is, in this sense, less a coalition of ideologically defined parties than a coalition of state-level political machines, each optimising for its own regional support base while bargaining collectively for a share of national office.

This federal logic has two important implications that recur throughout this article. First, the electoral success of national coalitions in India relies heavily on the performance of national coalitions' internal the degree of cohesion among regional allies in their respective states—over which the national coalition leadership has no control—has been a major variable in recent elections. limited control. Second, in India, coalition bargaining is an ongoing process and not just one involving the ministers. Fiscal transfers, special status demands, and state-specific policy concessions, in addition to portfolios, the key role played by federal bargaining in coalition management is reflected.

2.3 Analytical Categories Used in This Article

After this adapted scheme, the article distinguishes between (a) pre-electoral (PE) and (b) post-electoral (PO) context. The article differentiates between (a) pre-electoral (PE) and (b) post-electoral



(PO) context within this adapted scheme. coalitions, which are created prior to an election by specific seat sharing and/or manifesto agreements (e.g., the NDA, UPA); (b) post-electoral coalitions, which are formed after the election, and under which uncertainty abounds regarding their legitimacy. “What is it, Mr. President, that you've got to have the main party or pre-formed alliance come out and prove that it has a majority to govern?” .Any minority or "fluid" government was "sustained" (e.g., the National Front and United Front governments); and (c) minority governments were sustained There are two modes of external, outside support: that of parties not included in the cabinet (e.g., the Chandra Shekhar), and that of cabinet members in the absence of others (e.g., the Vidyalaya). This was during the government of 1990-91, and the first UPA government's dependence on the vote of the Left parties. This distinctiveness is important because the form has different ramifications for bargaining power, cabinet, As demonstrated later, these three dimensions stability, policy coherence, and are among the characteristics of a stable policy process.

3. Historical Evolution of Coalition Politics in India

3.1 Phase One: The Congress System and Its Erosion (1947–1989)

The Indian National Congress governed at the Centre without interruption from 1947 to 1977, and its dominance rested on a combination of nationalist legitimacy inherited from the independence movement, an inclusive social coalition spanning upper castes, Dalits, Muslims, and other minorities (memorably termed the "AJGAR" and "KHAM" coalitions in different regional variants), and organisational penetration into rural India through the Congress party machine. The first crack in this dominance came with the 1967 general election, which saw the Congress lose power in several states even as it retained a national majority; the second and more decisive crack came with the defeat of Indira Gandhi's Congress in 1977, following the Emergency, by the Janata Party itself a merger, rather than a coalition in the contemporary sense, of several older opposition parties. The Janata experiment collapsed within three years amid factional infighting, and Congress returned to power in 1980 and again in 1984-85 under Rajiv Gandhi's landslide majority following Indira Gandhi's assassination.

Nonetheless, the structural conditions that would produce sustained coalition politics were maturing throughout the 1980s: the consolidation of the Left Front in West Bengal and Kerala, the emergence of the Telugu Desam Party and other explicitly regional formations asserting sub-national identity against a perceived over-centralisation of power in New Delhi, and growing social mobilisation around caste identity following the report of the Second Backward Classes Commission (the Mandal Commission), submitted in 1980 but not acted upon until 1990.

3.2 Phase Two: The Onset of Coalition Government (1989–1998)

The 1989 general election, held amid the Bofors corruption scandal that had damaged the Rajiv Gandhi government, produced a hung Parliament in which the Congress remained the single largest party but fell well short of a majority. V. P. Singh's National Front, a loose alliance of the Janata Dal and regional parties, formed a minority government with external support from both the BJP on the right and the Left parties an unusual and ultimately unsustainable arrangement given the ideological distance between its supporting parties. The government's implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendation to reserve 27 per cent of central government jobs for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), combined with the BJP's Ram Janmabhoomi mobilisation culminating in L. K. Advani's Rath Yatra, precipitated the withdrawal of both flanks of support and the



government's fall within eleven months.

A brief, even more fragile minority government under Chandra Shekhar, sustained by outside Congress support, followed and itself collapsed within seven months, triggering fresh elections in 1991. The Congress, under P. V. Narasimha Rao, formed a minority government that, through defections and by-elections, eventually secured a working majority a government notable for having launched India's economic liberalisation programme despite its precarious parliamentary arithmetic, illustrating that minority status need not preclude major policy initiative.

The 1996 election produced a still more fragmented Parliament. The BJP emerged as the single largest party and formed a government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, but could not demonstrate a majority and resigned after thirteen days. The subsequently formed United Front a coalition of thirteen regional and Left-aligned parties under H. D. Deve Gowda and, from 1997, I. K. Gujral governed with external Congress support, but internal rivalries and the withdrawal of Congress backing (following political fallout from the Jain Commission's interim report on the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi) brought the experiment to an end within two years. This period, despite being termed as the "lowest point of the coalition instability" in India, it did produce substantial results. institutional innovations, such as a more consultative pattern of Centre-state relations and the greater autonomy for state chief ministers in terms of role as power brokers in the process of coalition formation.

3.3 Phase Three: Consolidation - The NDA and UPA Alliances (1998–2014)

A turning point in the development not the end of the development of, the 1998 election was for: coalition politics. The BJP, after knowing the futility of getting a parliamentary majority, has decided to take this step. The BJP, which knows that it has no future in the pursuit of a parliamentary victory, has taken this step. By itself, it built a wide pre-electoral coalition the National Democratic Alliance including regional parties, ranging from the AIADMK to the Telugu Desam have also joined the fray. The Shiv Sena, the Samata Party and in Bihar allies including the JD(U), were among the other parties. The 1998 After being in power for a year, the NDA government collapsed due to the withdrawal of support from the AIADMK, When the coalition regrouped, they ran a joint ticket in the 1999 elections and formed a government for the full four-year term. The term of which lasted for five years under Vajpayee the first non-Congress government in India's history to do so. years in office. This is generally attributed to two things: one being an explicit The "National Agenda for Governance" that blocked the BJP's more controversial political ideology assemblage of commitments (like building of Ram temple at the claimed site of Ayodhya, the City of Ram), the Bifocaled solutions like Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and Abrogation of Article 370 in favour of policies acceptable to coalition The formalisation of coordination mechanism between the constituent parties and the partners.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, formed after the 2004 election in which the NDA was unexpectedly defeated, represented a further institutional refinement. The UPA I government (2004–2009) rested on a pre-electoral alliance formalised through a Common Minimum Programme negotiated with coalition partners and, crucially, on external support from the Left parties, who did not join the government but exercised substantial influence over economic and foreign policy, most visibly in their objection to the 2008 India–United States civil nuclear agreement, which nearly brought down the government before it survived a confidence vote. UPA II (2009–2014), formed after a stronger Congress performance reduced dependence on the Left, was nonetheless marked by



allegations of large-scale corruption in the allocation of telecommunications spectrum (the "2G" case) and coal blocks, scandals that became emblematic in public discourse of the patronage costs associated with coalition bargaining, and which contributed materially to the UPA's defeat in 2014.

3.4 Phase Four: Single-Party Dominance and Its Qualification (2014–Present)

The BJP's outright parliamentary majorities in 2014 and 2019 the first instances of any party winning a majority on its own since 1984 led some scholars to characterise this period as a return to dominant-party rule, notwithstanding the BJP's retention of the NDA umbrella for symbolic and Rajya Sabha purposes. This changed with the 2024 general election. The BJP won Led by 240 seats, which are 22 short of the 272 needed to form a government, the NDA's government formation. Narendra Modi, for the third time in his three-term limit, relied on the 'lift of N. Chandrababu'. Among the leaders, are Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (16 seats) and Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) (12 seats), to be included. smaller allies. This has brought back classical coalition dynamics, the regional party Take advantage of cabinet formation, responsiveness to allies' state-specific demands (including, prominently, TDP's demand for special financial aid for Andhra Pradesh), and renewed. To a political climate which had, for a long time, been the focus of public and media attention on "coalition dharma," In the past decade, it has been ruled by a single party with its own majority.

3.5 Summary of Major National Coalition Formations, 1989–2024

Period	Coalition / Government	Prime Minister	Leading Formation	Duration
1989–1990	National Front	V. P. Singh	Janata Dal-led, BJP & Left support (outside)	~11 mo
1990–1991	National Front (Minority)	Chandra Shekhar	Janata Dal (Socialist), Congress support	~7 mo
1996	United Front (I)	H. D. Deve Gowda	13-party non-Congress, non-BJP front	~10 mo
1997–1998	United Front (II)	I. K. Gujral	United Congress Front, outside support	~11 mo
1998–1999	NDA (I)	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	BJP-led National Democratic Alliance	13 mo



Period	Coalition / Government	Prime Minister	Leading Formation	Duration
1999–2004	NDA (II)	Atal Bihari Vajpayee	BJP-led NDA, 20+ parties	~5 yr
2004–2009	UPA (I)	Manmohan Singh	Congress-led UPA, Left support (outside)	5 yr
2009–2014	UPA (II)	Manmohan Singh	Congress-led UPA	5 yr
2014–2019	NDA (III)	Narendra Modi	BJP-led NDA (BJP majority on own)	5 yr
2019–2024	NDA (IV)	Narendra Modi	BJP-led NDA (BJP majority on own)	5 yr
2024–present	NDA (V)	Narendra Modi	BJP-led NDA, dependent on TDP & JD(U)	ongoing

4. Structural and Social Drivers of Coalition Politics

4.1 The Rise of Regional Parties and Sub-National Identity

The emergence of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in the state of Tamil Nadu is a good example of regional parties emerging in the states. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam is an example of regional parties that have emerged in the states. The Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, the Shiv Sena, and (DMK) and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu are among the various parties that have been accused of such actions. In Maharashtra, the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Biju Janata Among the other main caste groups, Dal in Odisha, and many others in the Hindi heartland like Samajwadi. The political assertion of Party, Bahujan Samaj Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal are reflected in it. Linguistic, regional, and sub-national identities which were there from independence but, Congress was able to accommodate social and regional diversities, which helped hold it in check. As that When the capacity was undermined, regional parties took control of state governments, and from 1989 onward, translated that into a more advanced process of "translation". Their relative position within the states has become a determining factor in the national government, in that their presence in state power has been concentrated, and A national party was no longer able to secure a parliamentary majority in its own name. organisation's presence in the whole country.



4.2 The Mandal–Mandir Realignment

The almost-concurrent utilisation of caste identity in the context of the OBC mobilisation in relation to the Mandal Commission. BJP's Ram Janmabhoomi and reservation recommendations and religious identity the movement of 1990 brought about a lasting social and political realignment. OBC assertion Strengthened caste based regional parties in North India in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, At the direct cost of the Congress party's old, more socially diverse alliance. At the same time, the BJP became a party of the masses, as a result of the Hindu nationalist mobilisation (two) By the mid-1990s, Lok Sabha seats in 1984) had shifted to the main stream of non-Congress politics. Both processes facilitated a split in the national party system that created a multiparty system. The social bases of stable single-party majorities came to be structurally impossible. The mobilisation through caste and religious appeals was also concentrated on a geographical scale, not belonging to either of the two national parties.

4.3 Anti-Incumbency, Federal Bargaining, and Economic Liberalisation

The post-1991 economic liberalisation programme, by reducing the discretionary economic powers that have long been central, in New Delhi, as far as industrial licensing, import controls and centrally managed imports go. incidentally supported the bargaining position of state. governments, and by extension, the regional parties which led them, were the ones whose economic policies were being implemented. The state-to-state cooperation in aspects like land acquisition and the execution of the project grew increasingly important, and Infrastructure and investment promotion. This process further strengthened the trend that national coalition formation demanded more than just seat calculations in parliament it also demanded active accommodation. Economic and fiscal requirements of the states.

4.4 Institutional and Electoral Factors

The first-past-the-post voting system and the number of parties involved in the election in India. In most constituencies, it tends to create a lot of disproportionalities in the relationship between votes and seats. It tends to have a disproportionate effect on votes and seats in most of the constituencies. seat share, which can either manufacture artificial majorities for a single large party (as in 2014 and 2019) or, in cases of more balanced support among various formations, create a The truly hung Parliament (1989 to 1998 and rather more specifically –2024). The Anti-Defection Law, introduced through the Fifty-Second Amendment to the Constitution in 1985 and strengthened in 2003, has also shaped coalition dynamics by curbing individual legislator defections that had destabilised earlier coalition and minority governments, while leaving open the possibility of wholesale party splits a route exploited in several recent state-level coalition crises, including the 2022 split in the Shiv Sena and the 2023 split in the Nationalist Congress Party.

5. Challenges of Coalition Governance in India

5.1 Cabinet and Governmental Instability

The most visible cost of coalition politics in India during the 1989–1998 period was sheer governmental instability: five prime ministers governed in less than a decade, several governments lasted under a year, and the credible threat of withdrawal by even a small coalition partner could paralyse policy-making or precipitate a government's collapse, as occurred with the AIADMK's withdrawal from the NDA in 1999 and the Left parties' near-withdrawal from the UPA in 2008.



Even the more durable NDA and UPA coalitions of 1998–2014 required continuous, resource-intensive management of alliance relationships, including regular meetings of coalition coordination committees and constant renegotiation of ministerial allocations.

5.2 Policy Incoherence and "Lowest Common Denominator" Governance

Because coalition partners frequently represent divergent regional interests, ideological commitments, and electoral bases, national coalition governments in India have often been compelled to adopt policies reflecting the lowest common denominator of agreement among constituents, deferring or diluting reforms that any significant partner opposes. The UPA I government's inability to pursue more assertive economic reform in the face of Left party objections, and the difficulty successive coalition governments have faced in enacting labour law reform, land acquisition reform, and agricultural marketing reform in the face of opposition from farm-constituency-dependent allies, illustrate this dynamic. The BJP-led NDA's 2020 farm laws, enacted with a parliamentary majority the party held independently, and subsequently repealed after sustained protest and the withdrawal of the Shiromani Akali Dal from the NDA, illustrate how even majority governments must attend to coalition-partner sensitivities when partners represent constituencies directly affected by contested reforms.

5.3 Coalition Dharma, Patronage, and Corruption

The management of coalition partners in India has frequently relied on the informal norm termed "coalition dharma" an expectation of mutual accommodation and restraint among partners operationalised in practice through the distribution of ministerial portfolios, often including economically significant ministries (telecommunications, coal, civil aviation, and others) to nominees of smaller coalition partners with limited central oversight of their conduct. This pattern has been widely identified, including by India's Comptroller and Auditor General and by the Supreme Court of India, as a contributing factor in major corruption scandals of the UPA era, notably the 2G spectrum allocation case and the coal block allocation ("Coalgate") case, both of which involved ministries held by coalition allies and both of which inflicted substantial reputational and electoral damage on the UPA government.

5.4 Bargaining Leverage of Small Parties ("Tail Wagging the Dog")

One of the frequent criticisms of Indian coalition politics is that small parties in the region have a hold on the government. Can wield power far greater than is necessary to secure a governing majority, pivotal number of seats required, they were to their electoral weight in a joking fashion known as the "tail wagging the dog. The Telugu Desam The political party strength of the two parties after the 2024 elections (Party's and Janata Dal (United) combined 28 seats) This is an example of such dynamics as were crucial to the NDA's majority of 293 and produced wide-ranging public comment. discussion of how far these parties might go for concessions on issues from Special category or special financial assistance status for Andhra Pradesh and Bihar on the ground of caste census Demands and appointments to important constitutional and quasi-constitutional bodies such as the Speaker's chair.

5.5 Federal Fiscal Bargaining and Regional Favouritism

Coalition governments, which are reliant on regional allies, have been criticized, such as by opposition parties and economists, for shifting and manipulating fiscal allocations, infrastructure



investments, and core scheme deployment to key states governed by or electorally important to key coalition partners, in defiance of the idea of horizontal equity among states as expressed in the suggestions provided by the various Finance Commissions. This conflict between coalition the principles of management and principled fiscal federalism are observed in almost all of the coalition periods studied. In this article, we will explore the history of the National Front government from its inception to the post-2024 NDA government.

5.6 Ideological Dilution and Accountability Diffusion

Coalition government makes democratic accountability challenging because of the dispersion of accountability. Policy outcomes across various political parties having different electoral bases and manifestos, making it may seem more difficult for voters to attribute credit or blame at the next election a phenomenon the In comparative coalition literature, the accountability deficit of multi-party government is called the "accountability deficit. In In the Indian context, this sometimes has allowed individual coalition partners to publicly criticize other partners behind the back of the coalition government policies that involved their own ministers, and obscuring the distinctions between collective and individual responsibility. Responsibilities of cabinet, which function more effectively in single party majority government.

6. Implications for Democratic Governance

6.1 The Deepening of Federalism

Despite the governance problems raised above, there is a considerable amount of Rekha Saxena, M. P. Singh and Louise Tillin argue in this scholarship that substantive strengthening of Indian federalism, has been done, in a significant way, by the coalition period, shifting a "quasi-federal" system, which has traditionally been dominated by the Centre, toward one in which the states have more power. national policy is under the genuine influence of state governments and regional parties, Appointments, fiscal transfers. The routine participation of chief ministers and regional party leaders in national coalition bargaining, the establishment (and later reconstitution as NITI Aayog) of consultative federal bodies, and the enhanced salience of the Inter-State Council and the Goods and Services Tax Council as venues for Centre-state negotiation, can all be traced in part to the bargaining norms established during the coalition era.

6.2 Expanded Representation of Marginalised Regions and Social Groups

Coalition politics has also been credited with expanding substantive political representation for regions, castes, and communities that had limited access to national power under Congress dominance. The rise of OBC-led parties in North India, the sustained national relevance of Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, leaders from smaller states being routinely included in national lists etc. "cabinets", it is generally accepted that they have expanded the social base of the governing class of India. It is broadly accepted that 'cabinets' have increased the social make-up of the governing class in India. class and transformed national policymaking to be more responsive to concerns of regional differences, From language policy to agricultural pricing to disaster relief.

6.3 A More Consultative, Negotiated Style of Governance

Coalition Government has, overall, forced a more consultative approach to policy. National formulation in consultation with partnerships (both formal and informal) Prior to key pieces of



legislation and executive measures, a trend that had been noted in accounts of both the The NDA government of Vajpayee and both the UPA governments. Even during the 2014–2024 period of BJP parliamentary majorities, the continued presence of coalition arrangements and the occasional need for the help of allies for a coalition. BJP was not consistently able to command numbers in the upper house of parliament, the Rajya Sabha. majority) action, some analysts contend, and hindered unilateral action. policymaking.

6.4 Risks to Institutional Norms and the Rule of Law

Meanwhile, the coalition government has brought to light and, at times, further highlighted weaknesses in India's institutional mechanisms to prevent defection, corruption and politicalization of its Constitution. The office of the Governor, in inviting parties to form government and in Such doubts about the 'adjudicating confidence' have emerged many times when there was a possibility of a change in the political coalition, The most overtly in a series of coalition crises in Karnataka, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The last decade in Pradesh. These experiences are representative of the fact that coalition politics, when paired with, Lack of effective opposition to the anti-defection rules and discretion of the executive branch of government in appointing the governors. can put considerable pressure on constitutional principles of government, formation and dismissal.

6.5 Coalition Politics and Long-Term Democratic Resilience

Taken as a whole, the Indian experience suggests that coalition politics, despite its governance costs, has not weakened but has in important respects strengthened the resilience and representativeness of Indian democracy, by preventing the excessive concentration of power characteristic of the earlier Congress system, by institutionalising negotiation as the normal mode of national policy-making, and by ensuring that no single social coalition can indefinitely monopolise access to the state. The return of coalition dependency after 2024, following a decade of single-party BJP majorities, may be read in this light as a restoration of a long-term equilibrium in Indian democracy rather than an aberration.

7. Comparative Perspective

India's coalition experience shares important features with, and differs in instructive ways from, coalition politics in other large parliamentary democracies. Like Germany and much of continental Europe, India's coalition formation has increasingly relied on pre-electoral alliance-building rather than purely post-election bargaining, a pattern that provides voters with greater ex-ante clarity about likely governing combinations, in contrast to the pure post-election bargaining model more characteristic of, for example, the Netherlands or Israel. Unlike most European coalition systems, however, Indian coalitions are structured around an overwhelmingly bipolar national contest between two broad alliance blocs (the NDA and, in various forms, Congress-led opposition alliances including the UPA and the more recent INDIA bloc), rather than a genuinely multi-polar bargaining environment in which several mid-sized parties compete to form alternative governing combinations.

India's coalition politics is also distinguished by the centrality of its federal structure: unlike unitary parliamentary systems, Indian coalition bargaining is inseparable from Centre-state relations, since most significant regional coalition partners derive their bargaining power from incumbency in a state government rather than from national ideological positioning alone. This federal dimension gives Indian coalition politics a closer affinity with federal parliamentary systems such as Canada or, in



some respects, pre-1990s Malaysia's Barisan Nasional coalition, than with the unitary coalition systems of much of Western Europe.

8. Conclusion

Coalition politics has been the defining feature of Indian national government for the greater part of the past three and a half decades, interrupted only by the decisive BJP majorities of 2014 and 2019. This article has traced the historical evolution of that experience through four phases the erosion of Congress dominance, the turbulent onset of coalition government between 1989 and 1998, the consolidation of durable multi-party alliances under the NDA and UPA between 1998 and 2014, and the qualified return of coalition dependency after the 2024 election and has examined the social, structural, and institutional forces that produced this trajectory, principally the rise of regional and caste-based parties, the Mandal Mandir realignment, and the federalising consequences of economic liberalisation.

The problems of coalition politics in India such as cabinet un-stability, policy. dilution, patronage-driven corruption, the undue power of small allies are very real. They are well documented and have had a significant impact on coherence and cohesion and are and have been periodically imposed on the coherence and well documented. probity of national policymaking. However, the article has gone on to state that coalition politics has, on the other hand, resulted in: Enhanced, not diminished, Indian democracy in the long term through strengthening, the rule of law. It led to federalism, expand of political representation, and the institution of more consultative rule of law. national governance. In a new era of coalition dependency in India post 2024, Historical record reviewed in this article indicates that the political institutions of the country while was flawed and needed to be further reformed, including in the implementation of the anti-defection rule, The conduct of the office of Governor have demonstrated good ability to include coalition Politics with a minuet touch without sacrificing the essence of democratic India. Future More detailed state-by-state analysis of the dynamics of coalition bargaining would be beneficial for research, and systematic empirical evaluation of the linkage of coalition status and overall legislative productivity over the past 22 years of all Indian governments.

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