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### **Abstract**

*Coalition governments have been a defining feature of India's political landscape, especially since the late 20th century. While coalition politics have allowed for broader representation and inclusive decision-making, they have also posed challenges such as political instability, policy paralysis, and frequent government collapses. This paper explores the evolution of coalition governments in India, analyzing their advantages and disadvantages in maintaining political stability. It examines key coalition eras, such as the post-Emergency Janata Party experiment (1977-1980), the National Front and United Front governments (1989-1998), and the era of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) from 1999 onwards. The paper also evaluates the impact of coalition politics on governance, economic reforms, and national security. By assessing the factors contributing to both stability and instability, this study aims to provide insights into whether coalition governments strengthen India's democracy or weaken it due to internal contradictions and competing interests. The research concludes by recommending policy measures to enhance the efficiency of coalition governance in India.*

**Keywords:** Coalition government, Coalition Politics, NDA, UPA

### **Introduction**

Coalition governments arise when no single political party secures an absolute majority in elections, necessitating alliances among multiple parties to form a ruling government. In India, coalition politics have become a defining feature of the political landscape, particularly since the late 1980s. Unlike the early decades of Indian democracy, where the Congress party dominated, coalition governments have now become the norm rather than the exception. This transition from single-party rule to coalition governance has significantly influenced policymaking, governance stability, and democratic accountability.

The impact of coalition governments on stability and governance is a widely debated issue. On the one hand, coalitions foster inclusivity, regional representation, and power-sharing, strengthening

democratic principles. On the other hand, they also introduce instability due to ideological differences, policy paralysis, and frequent government collapses. The balancing act between stability and instability in coalition politics is, therefore, a critical subject for analysis.

India's experience with coalition politics can be traced back to the late 1960s when the decline of Congress hegemony led to the emergence of multi-party alliances. However, the first full-fledged coalition government at the national level was formed in 1977 when the Janata Party, a conglomeration of multiple parties united against Indira Gandhi's Emergency regime, came to power. The Janata government, though historic, was short-lived due to internal conflicts and ideological incompatibility.

The 1989 general elections marked another turning point, as the Congress party failed

to secure a majority, leading to the formation of coalition governments under the National Front and later the United Front. This era saw political instability, with frequent changes in leadership and short-lived governments. The situation improved with the emergence of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1999 under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, which provided a relatively stable coalition government. This was followed by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) under Manmohan Singh, which also managed to govern effectively, particularly in its first term (2004-2009).

## Significance of Coalition Politics in Indian Democracy

Coalition governments play a crucial role in India's democratic framework, ensuring broader representation by bringing together regional and national parties. Unlike single-party governments, coalitions require consensus-building, encouraging dialogue and compromise among different political entities. This structure strengthens federalism by giving regional parties a voice in national governance.

However, coalition politics also introduces challenges such as policy gridlock, leadership instability, and opportunistic alliances that prioritize political survival over governance. The fall of multiple coalition governments in the past highlights the fragility of such arrangements when they lack strong leadership and ideological coherence.

## Research Objectives

This paper aims to examine the role of coalition governments in India, focusing on their impact on political stability and instability. The key objectives include:

- Analyzing the historical evolution of coalition governments in India.
- Evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of coalition rule.
- Examining case studies of stable and unstable coalitions.
- Identifying policy recommendations to enhance

coalition stability and governance efficiency.

India's coalition politics present a paradox—while they promote inclusivity and democracy, they also create governance challenges. This study seeks to assess whether coalition governments contribute to long-term political stability or whether they inherently lead to instability due to ideological fragmentation. The subsequent sections will delve into historical case studies, policy impacts, and potential reforms to make coalition governments more effective.

## Significance of the Study

This paper aims to explore the nature of coalition governments in India and assess their role in ensuring stability or fostering instability. It examines key historical instances, evaluates their impact on policymaking, and discusses how coalitions have shaped India's democratic framework. The study also aims to address the broader question: Can coalition governments provide a stable and effective political framework, or do they inherently lead to instability?

## Historical Evolution of Coalition Governments in India: Early Years (1950-1977) – Dominance of Single-Party Rule

Congress Dominance Under Nehru, Shastri, and Indira Gandhi

In the early years after independence, India's political landscape was dominated by a single-party system, with the Indian National Congress holding a firm grip on power. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964), Congress won consecutive elections in 1952, 1957, and 1962 with overwhelming majorities. Nehru's vision of a socialist, secular, and democratic India resonated with the electorate, and Congress remained unchallenged at the national level.

Following Nehru's death in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri briefly served as Prime Minister, continuing Congress's dominance. However, his sudden demise in

1966 led to the rise of Indira Gandhi, who initially faced opposition within her party but eventually consolidated her position. Congress maintained its stronghold in the 1967 elections, though with a reduced majority.

## Minimal Presence of Coalition Governments

During this period, coalition politics was largely absent at the national level. Congress's electoral dominance meant that opposition parties remained fragmented and unable to challenge its supremacy. However, at the state level, particularly in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, non-Congress governments and coalitions started emerging, signaling the beginning of a shift in Indian politics. The first non-Congress government in Kerala (1957) was led by the Communist Party of India, though it was dismissed later.

## Decline of Congress in the Late 1960s

By the late 1960s, Congress began to show signs of decline. The 1967 general elections marked a turning point, as Congress lost its absolute majority in several states. This period saw the emergence of coalition governments in states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, where opposition parties formed alliances to challenge Congress rule.

The decline continued as internal conflicts within Congress led to a split in 1969, with Indira Gandhi breaking away to form Congress (R), while the old Congress (O) faction remained separate. This division weakened the party, setting the stage for the coalition era that would unfold in the following decades.

## The Janata Party Experiment (1977-1980): First Coalition Government Post-Emergency

The 1977 general elections marked a historic moment in Indian politics as it led to the formation of the first non-Congress government at the national level. The elections were held after the Emergency (1975-1977), a period of political turmoil under Indira Gandhi's rule. The widespread

discontent against Congress led to the formation of the **Janata Party**, a coalition of multiple opposition groups, including the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Congress (O), the Socialist Party, and the Bharatiya Lok Dal. Morarji Desai became the first non-Congress Prime Minister of India, leading a fragile coalition government. The Janata Party's victory symbolized a shift in Indian politics, demonstrating that a unified opposition could challenge Congress's dominance. However, internal ideological differences soon began to surface.

## Internal Conflicts Leading to Collapse

Despite its initial success, the Janata Party government struggled to maintain stability.

The key challenges included:

1. **Ideological Clashes** – The coalition was made up of leaders with starkly different ideologies, including former Congress members, socialists, and right-wing groups like the Jana Sangh (which later evolved into the BJP).
2. **Leadership Disputes** – There were tensions between Morarji Desai, Charan Singh, and Jagjivan Ram over leadership issues. Charan Singh eventually broke away from the government with his faction, leading to instability.
3. **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Controversy** – The involvement of RSS members in the government caused tensions between socialist and right-wing factions within the Janata Party.
4. **Lack of Policy Cohesion** – The coalition partners had differing views on economic and social policies, making governance ineffective.

By 1979, the government collapsed as Charan Singh withdrew his support and formed a new government with Congress's backing. However, this government lasted only a few months, leading to fresh elections in 1980, where Indira Gandhi and

the Congress Party made a strong comeback.

The Janata Party experiment demonstrated the challenges of coalition politics, particularly the difficulty of sustaining alliances without a shared ideological foundation. Despite its failure, it set the stage for future coalition governments in India.

## The 1989-1999 Era: Rise of Multi-Party Politics

The period from 1989 to 1999 witnessed a significant transformation in Indian politics, characterized by the decline of Congress dominance and the rise of multi-party coalition governments.

National Front and United Front Governments

The 1989 general elections saw the formation of the **National Front**, a coalition led by V.P. Singh and supported externally by the BJP and the Left Front. The National Front government implemented significant policies, including the **Mandal Commission recommendations**, which introduced reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, this move triggered political unrest, including widespread protests and opposition from upper-caste groups.

The government fell in 1990 due to BJP's withdrawal of support, following V.P. Singh's handling of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. After a brief tenure by Chandra Shekhar (1990-1991), Congress returned to power under P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-1996), marking the beginning of economic liberalization.

In 1996, with Congress in decline, the **United Front**, a coalition of regional and leftist parties, formed the government under H.D. Deve Gowda, followed by I.K. Gujral. However, due to a lack of stability and Congress withdrawing support, both governments collapsed, leading to further political instability.

Instability Due to Ideological Differences

The frequent collapse of coalition governments in the 1990s highlighted the challenges of multi-party politics. Key reasons for instability included:

- **Lack of a clear majority** – No single party had a strong mandate, leading to constant negotiations and compromises.
- **Diverse ideological stances** – The coalition partners had conflicting agendas, making governance difficult.
- **Regional aspirations** – The rise of regional parties led to increased demands for state-specific policies, sometimes at the cost of national unity.

BJP's Emergence as a National Player

One of the key political shifts in this era was the **rise of the BJP** as a national political force. Initially a fringe player, the BJP capitalized on the Ram Janmabhoomi movement and Hindu nationalist sentiments to gain electoral strength.

In 1998, the BJP-led **National Democratic Alliance (NDA)**, under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, formed the government. However, due to the withdrawal of support by AIADMK, the government fell within 13 months, leading to fresh elections in 1999.

## The 1999-Present Era: Stability Under NDA and UPA

BJP-Led NDA (1999-2004) Under Atal Bihari Vajpayee

The 1999 elections marked a turning point, as the BJP-led NDA secured a stable mandate. Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government lasted a full term (1999-2004), bringing **relative stability to coalition politics**. Key achievements of this era included:

- **Economic Growth** – Infrastructure development, telecom reforms, and a focus on privatization strengthened the economy.
- **Foreign Policy Advancements** – India's nuclear tests in 1998 and improving relations with the U.S.



and Pakistan shaped global diplomacy.

- **Coalition Management** – Unlike previous governments, Vajpayee successfully managed coalition partners through consensus-driven politics.

However, in the 2004 elections, NDA lost to the **Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA)**, marking another shift in coalition politics.

Congress-Led UPA (2004-2014) Under Manmohan Singh

The UPA, under Manmohan Singh, provided another stable coalition government for a decade. Its first term (2004-2009) focused on social welfare policies, including:

- **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)**
- **Right to Information (RTI) Act**
- **Expansion of economic reforms**

Despite these successes, UPA-II (2009-2014) faced several challenges, including corruption scandals (2G scam, Commonwealth Games scam), economic slowdown, and governance paralysis. This weakened Congress, leading to its electoral defeat in 2014.

Return of BJP's Single-Party Dominance (2014-Present)

The 2014 elections marked a significant shift as BJP, under Narendra Modi, secured a majority on its own—the first single-party majority in three decades. This ended the era of coalition dependence at the national level.

Key features of BJP's governance from 2014 onward include:

- **Strong central leadership** – Modi's leadership reduced the bargaining power of regional allies.
- **Focus on nationalism and economic reforms** – Policies like GST, Digital India, and Make in India shaped the economy.
- **Weakened Opposition** – Congress struggled to revive itself, and

regional parties saw reduced influence.

The 2019 elections further consolidated BJP's dominance, making coalition politics less relevant at the national level, although it still plays a role in state-level governance. The evolution of coalition politics in India reflects the changing nature of democracy in the country. While coalition governments initially faced instability, they eventually contributed to a more inclusive political system by bringing regional and ideological diversity into governance. The shift back to single-party dominance in recent years raises questions about the future of coalition politics in India. However, with regional parties still holding significant influence in various states, coalition politics remains a crucial aspect of Indian democracy.

## Conclusion

Coalition governments have played a crucial role in shaping India's political and governance framework. While they have provided broader representation and inclusive decision-making, they have also led to instability, policy paralysis, and governance challenges. The experience of coalition politics in India demonstrates that stability depends on leadership, ideological compatibility, and institutional mechanisms.

Coalitions can function effectively when managed through structured agreements, strategic governance, and a commitment to long-term political stability. While single-party majority governments offer stability, coalition governments ensure inclusivity, making them an essential aspect of India's democratic evolution. A balanced approach—where coalition governments function with structured reforms—can help India maintain political stability without sacrificing democratic representation.

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