

# The strengths and weaknesses of coalition government politics essay



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The classical paradigm of parliamentary democracy consists of an elected representative parliament which is supreme, a cabinet collectively responsible to parliament, a prime minister who is supreme within the cabinet and an organized opposition within the Parliament. It was assumed that the majority would form a government and the minority the opposition. Problem arose when no single party could secure enough majorities to form a single party government, and in such situation the alternative was the multi-party system or coalition government.

Political scientists, along with counterparts in other social science disciplines, have sought a number of theoretical approaches to describing, explaining, and predicting coalitional behavior. Coalitions arise in situations with at least three actors (individuals, groups, countries), wherein no single actor can achieve an optimal outcome on its own; rather, cooperation with one or more other actors is necessary. Coalition theories purport to shed light on why alliances emerge, why they take the forms they do, how they endure, and why they collapse.

Much of coalition theory embraces the basic assumptions of rational political behavior. Faced with dilemmas about how to maximize gains through cooperation with one or more other parties, rational political actors will weigh preferentially ordered alternative strategies and consistently pursue coalition options connected with more preferred outcomes.

A coalition is an alliance of parties formed for the purpose of contesting elections jointly and/or forming a government and managing the governance by a process of sharing process. So coalition implies co-operation between

political parties and this co-operation may take place may take place at one of three different levels-

**Electoral-** In which contest election by coalition of two or more parties to fight against a common enemy. This may range from electoral alliance between parties at the National level to a mere understanding at the constituency level.

**Parliamentary-** This coalition occurs when no single party gains a majority and the party asked the party asked to form the Government refers to rule as a minority Government on an agreement on an understanding with another external support.

**Governmental-** The Governmental coalition is a ' power sharing' coalition and it occurs when two or more parties, none of which is able to win a majority of its own, combine to form a majority Government.

Finally, a minority government might survive without support on a basis of toleration by the opposition parties which do not vote it out of tactical reasons.

The composition of cabinet, nature of its working, the style of prime minister/chief minister, the character of electoral politics, the party system and the legislature are likely to be affected to a limited extent.

Many countries in its past and present, has coalition governments running successfully. While some have tasted the bitter part of coalition politics.

Some writers have contributed to the analysis of multi-partyism resulting in that resulting in what they call “ the myth of multi-partyism’ which implies-

Governments in multi-party parliaments must be minority cabinets, coalition cabinets, or both;

Minority and coalition cabinets are, by their very nature, bound to be transient;

Multi-Party systems are undesirable as they produce only transient governments.

Dodd, a political scientist analyses the political scenario of Europe for 55 years and observes:

“ While the durability of cabinets may be low for all multi-party Parliaments, a large number of durable cabinets have survived in multi-party regimes”.

He further says that while some multi-party Parliaments produce durable cabinets, other multi-party Parliaments produce transient Cabinets. He is of the opinion durability depends not merely on the number of parties, but on a variety of factors.

Coalitions may also be classified as- (i) policy pursuit models; (ii) office seeking models based on objectives; (iii) minimum winning models (iv) large sized models based on strategy.[1]

## **DIFFERENT THEORIES OF COALITION POLITICS**

**For the benefit of this project only four types of theories have been studied.**

Consociationalism is a form of government involving guaranteed group representation, and is often suggested for managing conflict in deeply divided societies. It is often viewed as synonymous with power-sharing, although it is technically only one form of power-sharing. Consociationalism is often seen as having close affinities with corporatism; some consider it to be a form of corporatism while others claim that economic corporatism was designed to regulate class conflict, while Consociationalism developed on the basis of reconciling societal fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines. Consociationalism was discussed in academic terms by the political scientist Arend Lijphart. However, Lijphart has stated that he had “merely discovered what political practitioners had repeatedly – and independently of both academic experts and one another – invented years earlier”.

Advantages in a Consociationalist state, all groups, including minorities, are represented on the political and economic stage. Supporters of Consociationalism argue that it is a more realistic option in deeply divided societies than integrationist approaches to conflict management. It has been credited with supporting successful and non-violent transitions to democracy in countries such as South Africa.

Proportional Representation is more parties exist in nations with full representation, making it less likely for a single party to obtain the majority of votes and seats. Coalitions therefore occur, often between two parties, sometimes based on the cooperation of three or more parties. On occasion, a <https://assignbuster.com/the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-coalition-government-politics-essay/>

minority government can be formed. The party or parties comprising such a government hold half the number of seats or less, but are allowed to govern as long as the majority agrees to their actions. The particular system in place matters, as for instance in New Zealand, where two especially large parties result, leaving them with no other options than to form a government together or to form a government of one of the two large parties with several small parties. The system found in most Scandinavian countries delivers many parties, but these include three or four larger parties who can often create a government with just two parties.

Grand coalition is a coalition government in a multi-party parliamentary system where the two largest political parties unite in a coalition. The term is most commonly used in countries where there are two dominant parties with different ideological orientations and a number of smaller parties large enough to secure representation in the parliament. The two large parties will each try to secure enough seats in any election to have a majority government alone, and if this fails each will attempt to form a coalition with smaller parties that have a similar ideological orientation. Because the two large parties will tend to differ on major ideological issues, and portray themselves as rivals, or even sometimes enemies, they will usually find it more difficult to agree on a common direction for a combined government with each other than with smaller parties.

Popular front is a broad coalition of different political groupings, often made up of leftists and centrists. Being very broad, they can sometimes include centrist and liberal (or “bourgeois”) forces as well as socialist and

communist (“ working-class”) groups. Popular fronts are larger in scope than united fronts, which contain only working-class groups.

In addition to the general definition, the term “ popular front” also has a specific meaning in the history of Communism and the Communist Party. During this time, the “ popular front” referred to the alliance of political parties in France aimed at resisting Fascism. The term “ national front”, similar in name but describing a different form of ruling, using ostensibly non-Communist parties which were in fact controlled by and subservient to the Communist party as part of a “ coalition”, was used in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War. It should be noted that not all coalitions who use the term “ popular front” necessarily meet the accepted definition for “ popular fronts”, and not all popular fronts necessarily use the term “ popular front” in their name. The same applies to “ united fronts”.

## **PAST AND PRESENT COALITIONS**

### **INTERNATIONAL**

Coalition building between two parties has been frequent in Europe. Between 1990 and 1995 there were no less than 91 cabinets in office, of which 16 were Single-Party Governments, 68 Multi-Part Government and 4 care-taker Government. The level of political stability achieved in the post 1949 European democracies can be measured by the average life-span of Governments. According to an estimate, the mean survival score in Germany has been 37 months, Italy 13 months, Belgium 22 months and the Netherlands 27 months.

Switzerland is the only exception in Europe with a permanent coalition Government by means of its seven members Federal Council, elected for a fixed four-year term by the Federal assembly on a party proportional basis. Once the results are known in Switzerland, it is question of simple arithmetic as to how the cabinet seats will be distributed among the parties. Since there is no vote of non-confidence, the stability is high in Switzerland.

## **CENTRE**

In Centre the Congress was replaced by Janata Party which was union of several parties in 1977. Again coalition government came to power at the Centre in 1989 when V. P. Singh became prime minister with support both from the Right and the Left. The Central also entered in the coalition phase in 1996, having formed the first United Front Government was coalition in nature. The United Front led by Deve Gowda also did not complete its full life as outside support was withdrawn by Congress. Then Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Government fell after 13 days of its regime due to vote of non-confidence.

The erstwhile States of Travancore-Cochin and PEPSU were the first two states in the country to form coalition Governments in 1952. During 1953-67, three more coalition governments were formed in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Kerala.

In 1967, eight states formed Non-Congress Coalition Governments, and they were: Kerala, West Bengal, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa. In 1997 the Coalition Governments rose to fourteen.

Among states Kerala has had the longest stable Coalition Government with West Bengal standing second.



## **INDIAN SCENE IN 90s**

In 1990's India evidenced a lot of drama in the Central Government stage. Coalitions led by different parties would appear and fall. In 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Government fell due to the ruckus created by Jayalalitha of AIADMK. The coalition Government was ditched by her resulted in vote of non-confidence held on 14th April 1999 where the Government fell short of one vote with 269 and 270 votes against it. The NDA coalition was a single government with the same prime minister and no intervening election or resignation. The stability of the NDA coalition, 1999-2004, can be explained by a combination of the surplus majority of its legislative coalition and territorial compatibility, indeed, mutual electoral interdependence, of the constituent parties of this legislative coalition due to state-level electoral arithmetic, and the impossibility of constructing an alternative coalition, given the lack of necessary numbers, of non-BJP and non-Congress parties, taken together, and likewise, the impossibility of constructing a Congress-led coalition given the rivalry between the Congress and most regional and Left parties at the state level and the fact that the Congress had only 114 seats. The NDA government was in effect a surplus majority coalition by my alternative conceptualization. Earlier, in August 2000, when the Trinamul Congress left the coalition, Prime Minister Vajpayee was unfazed as it did not threaten his legislative majority. Prime Minister Vajpayee was therefore, acting like the leader of a secure surplus majority coalition whose partners and external supporters had no other choice, and not like the leader of an insecure minority coalition. This surplus majority character of the legislative coalition, combined with the territorial compatibility and mutual electoral interdependence of its partners, most having clearly demarcated state

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strongholds not overlapping with others, gave the NDA a de facto surplus majority coalition status and an extraordinary stability.

## **COALITION ADVANTAGES**

The disadvantage of single party majority leadership is that the Government of the time being confident of its own strength allows the laws it frames a passage through Parliament and these are made functional with insufficient debate, majority having already consented to the “ leaders” views. Coalition politics over comes this defect by having to reconcile a much wider public opinion, both in terms of policy and geography, as reflected in the covenants of different parties coming together to provide the Government of the country.

Political Homogeneity: In a coalitional Government ministers are invariably drawn from different political parties and hence they represent different and even contradictory viewpoints. In coalition politics different policy advocacy groups, who are also part of the Government, bring to bear on Government pressures that finally impact on its policy initiatives and make way for good of the maximum. If all those who are in charge of policy framework are indoctrinated by the same leadership and by the same doctrine, the possibility of merger of various thoughts and possibilities becomes remote and this leads to possible adverse implications of various policy initiatives as may have been the case in first few decades of India’s freedom. It appears that whereas coalitions may be a burden to the lead party in politics, those could be an asset in the area of economics and nation building, in general.

Multi-party Governments may be seen as a possible solution to vertically raise the level of growth, as has actually been observed in India over the past few years. The weakening of single party Governments has been accompanied by strengthening of the economy, since there has been greater inter-play of diversity of opinion, and greater reconciliation between divergent policy orientations.[2]

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Coalition government is more democratic, and hence fairer, because it represents a much broader spectrum of public opinion than government by one party alone. In almost all coalitions, a majority of citizens voted for the parties which form the government and so their views and interests are represented in political decision-making.

Coalitions provide good government because their decisions are made in the interests of a majority of the people. Because a wide consensus of opinion is involved, any policy will be debated thoroughly within the government before it is implemented. Single-party government is much more likely to impose badly thought-out policies upon parliament and people, perhaps for narrowly ideological reasons (for example, the poll tax in the UK). When difficult or historic decisions have to be taken, for example in wartime, or

over an issue such as membership of the European Union or NATO, the consent of politicians representing a wide range of interests and opinion is important in committing the country and its people to difficult but necessary courses of action.[3]

## **DISADVANTAGES**

**The Role of the Head of State:** In a coalition system the Head of State is always liable to find him playing a more active role in Government formation.

**Collective Responsibility:** It is possible to maintain collective responsibility within a coalition cabinet with Prime Minister as the keystone. But it is harder to achieve this ideal in a coalition Government than in a single party Government.

**The Role of the Prime Minister:** The Prime Minister of a coalition Government is neither able to select his colleagues nor exercise control over him.

**The need for party discipline:** A coalition Government is likely to be less able to afford breaches of party discipline than a single-party Government. The coalition partners are bound by agreement, tacit or open, on policy and performance, and dissenting votes by any backbencher may threaten the Government's majority as well as the very basis of coalition.[4]

**The bargaining power of the political parties** is a function of the distribution of parliamentary seats, and the distribution of the parties' policy preferences.

A. Lawrence Lowell argues that the parliamentary system will give a country strong and efficient Government only in case of a single majority party.[5]

Maurice Duvenger asserts that multi-partyism weakens the Government in a parliamentary regime. The absence of a majority party necessitates the creation of heterogeneous cabinets with ' limited objectives' and ' lukewarm measures'. [6]

The jumbo sized coalition only results in arbitrary decisions of the head of the state. He is always under pressure by those members who are key role in the formation of coalition.

The jumbo sized Kalyan Singh coalition Government in Uttar Pradesh is a good example of big cabinets which had 94 ministers. Big cabinets are formed only to accommodate all the allies of coalition. This causes more money of the taxpayers.

Similarly, members of a coalition government have to depend on each other to maintain the coalition and, thus, further their individual interests. In a coalition government, a party with the highest number of MPs needs to depend on the allies with much lesser MPs for the sake of the coalition.

The concerned parties of a coalition may call themselves as allies but are actually opportunists. You present them with an issue which, if pursued, can put them in an advantageous position, they will not think twice to grab it, pressurize the government, bargain to their advantage, and then tom-tom about their achievement to secure larger vote banks. In the process, one party gets side-lined while the other takes the driver's seat.[7]

Compromise is another name for coalition. In any coalition, members of one party often have to compromise with their ideologies and ethics to stay together

The biggest disadvantage of a coalition government is that the end product depicted is very unstable and vulnerable as the core element of the coalition has to keep up with all the promises made to its partners and do the impossible – make everyone happy with the platter offered to him or her. By doing so the government has to sacrifice on various key policies and important programs. A succession of undisciplined activities, horse-trading events and defection take place which lowers the public morality, all just to serve to each party's narrow political interests.

Coalitions provide bad government because they are unable to take a long-term view. Sometimes an ideological compass is necessary for governments to navigate in difficult political and economic waters, and coalitions lack such a unifying philosophy. In addition planning for the long-term often requires decisions to be made that are unpopular in the short-term. Coalitions often fail such tests because temporary unpopularity may encourage one of the parties involved to defect, in search of a populist advantage.

Coalition government is actually less democratic as the balance of power is inevitably held by the small parties who can barter their support for concessions from the main groups within the coalition. This means that a party with little popular support is able to impose its policies upon the majority by a process of political blackmail.

Coalition government is less transparent. Because a party has no real chance of forming a government alone, the manifestos they present to the public become irrelevant and often wildly unrealistic. Real decisions about political programs are made after the election, in a process of secretive back-room negotiation from which the public is excluded. This undermines accountability, as voters cannot expect individual parties in a coalition to deliver upon their particular manifesto promises, unlike the single-party governments. Accountability is also absent when a coalition government falls, either after an election or through the defection of some of its supporters. Any new administration will tend to include most of the parties and politicians from the previous government, with just a little shuffling of coalition partners and ministerial jobs.

## **ANTIVIRUS**

Enacted by the Rajiv Gandhi Government, only to curb viruses of the different political bodies combining to form a better and larger virus, which would wait and take its turn on the Government, was an important antivirus, still being used with some improvements. It is the Anti-Defection Bill, 1985[8] which is being used as a tool to mend the members of various parties from defecting to other parties, away from their original party, for their hunger of power. Coalitions and defection go hand-in-hand, where the former is built by a junk of the latter. This was introduced keeping in view of the unethical defections which happened during the past. Political leaders often being referred as opportunist tend to change their parties in search of money and power. Members who are elected only because of the party will

turn rebel against their own party to join a party which is short of members to form a Government.

This antivirus has been used many a times in the past to curb defections. It has only got better by scraping the defection of 1/3rd members called as 'split', making it 'wholesale defection allowed but not retail defection'. In past there have been instances where coalitions fell due to defection by its members to form a new Government. The introduction of Anti-Defection law has decreased the number of defectors and reduced the fall of Governments.

## **CONCLUSION**

Having gone through different theories and having read different coalition Government's fate I am of the opinion that-

Since 1980's where coalition government cropped up, there is no looking back till date to single party majorities.

Having multi-party democracy has its plus points but as desi coalition politics goes some minority parties with bargaining power become rogues and subvert democracy to their gains extracting a larger share than they deserve. The dominant partner bends over backwards just to please that rogue partner one more time just so that they don't rock the boat!

Our politicians use the coalition name to safeguard their vested political interests and to blackmail each other in the coalition. Recent years we have seen coalition governments getting threats from the coalition party of ditching the Government to fulfill their political goals.



A coalition with a common manifesto without any threatening from any sides, working with a common goal is a dream of today and tomorrow.

National parties often tend to exploit the weaker regional parties as they have had less action in the national scene before.

At the root of it all is the fact that the public votes for regional parties often born on shoddy principles of caste, religion, language, region and gender.

Caste politics should see an end to experience the brighter light of democracy.

Minority coalitions propped up by external support whether conditionally or unconditionally, are not likely to be stable.

Factional splits tend to be accommodated in the pursuit of office-seeking interest.

Surplus majority or large-size coalitions are stable than minimal-winning coalitions.

Coalition between an anchor party and satellite parties tend to be stable.

With these even though coalition represents the democratic face of the Nation, a coalition with a long lasting life would not at all be a problem for Governance. Repeated elections do not show the democratic face of the country but shows the poor sustainability of coalitions Government and vulnerability of Governments to give in to allies which also causes tax payers money.