

# Is coalition government here to stay?

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Context In many democratic countries, such as Germany, France, India, Israel and Italy, government by a coalition of political parties is considered normal. Often in such countries there are many political parties with a significant level of popular support in elections. This means no one party usually can gain more than 30% of the seats in the parliament or national assembly, so it is necessary for several parties to come together to form a viable government, generally under the premiership of the leader of the largest party involved.

In other states, such as the UK, USA and Japan, there are fewer significant political parties and coalitions are rare, as after an election a winning party is able to form an effective government without any help from others. This debate is closely related to issues of voting reform, as countries with some form of proportional representation tend to have more political parties in parliament than those that use a first-past-the-post system, and so are more likely to have coalition governments. Arguments Pros Cons

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. 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. Possible examples of this might include the role of religious parties in Israel, the Greens in Germany and France, and the demand of constitutional reforms by the Lib Dems in the UK as their price of coalition support in a future hung parliament. Democracy may be further undermined if the process of coalition-making is subject to the whim of a monarch or president, able to decide who to ask to attempt to form a government, whether to call new elections, etc.

Coalition government creates a more honest and dynamic political system, allowing voters a clearer choice at election time. In countries where coalition government is very rare, such as the UK or USA, the main parties straddle a wide spectrum of opinion and can be seen as coalitions of competing interest groups and ideologies. At elections, however, such parties present themselves, perhaps fraudulently, to voters as united behind particular views and policies, whereas in power their internal divisions may have a serious, and often unseen, impact upon decision-making.

In countries with coalition governments the greater number of political parties gives the voter a more honest choice and brings differences of opinion out into the open for debate. It is also easier for parties to split, or new ones to be formed, as new political issues divide opinion, because new parties still have a chance of a share in political power. 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.

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Real decisions about political programmes 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 in the USA and UK. 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. 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. 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. It might be agreed that sometimes exceptional circumstances, such as war, require a coalition government (although the USA did not have one in either World War). This does not mean that such governments are better in normal conditions.

Major constitutional decisions are better dealt with through referenda. Coalition government provides more continuity in administration. In countries without a tradition of coalition governments, parties can remain in government or opposition for long periods, and an adversarial political culture develops. When a change does occur, the members of the new administration seldom have any experience of government to draw upon, and often embark upon a wholesale reversal of the previous regime's policies; neither of these things is in the public interest.

In states with coalition politics, however, there are usually at least some ministers with considerable experience under the previous government. A more consensual style of politics also allows for a more gradual and constructive shift of policy between administrations. Coalition governments are very unstable, often collapsing and reforming at frequent intervals – Italy, for example, averages more than one government per year since 1945.

This greatly restricts the ability of governments to deal with major reforms and means that politicians seldom stay in any particular ministerial post for long enough to get to grips with its demands. At the same time, this

squabbling between political parties erodes the confidence of the public in their political system and in their elected representatives. Finally, even forming coalitions can take so long that a country may drift along for months with caretaker governments that lack authority - both the Czech Republic and Belgium took over six months to negotiate new governing coalitions after their last elections.