

Coalition Politics in India after 1990: A Historical-Analytical Study of the National Front, United Front, NDA and UPA Experiments

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Abstract

The general election of 1989 marked a definitive break with the Congress-dominated party system that had structured Indian politics for four decades. From that point onwards, no single party commanded a parliamentary majority on its own for a quarter of a century, and the country was governed by a succession of multi-party coalitions: the National Front (1989–1990), the short-lived Chandra Shekhar interlude, the Narasimha Rao minority government (1991–1996), the two United Front ministries (1996–1998), the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (1998–2004), and the two terms of the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance (2004–2014). The Bharatiya Janata Party's unilateral majorities in 2014 and 2019 appeared to close the coalition era, but the verdict of 2024 has reopened it. Through a historical-analytical method that examines each of these coalitions as a discrete case while tracing the connective threads between them, this paper argues that coalition politics in India is neither an anomaly nor a transitional phase but a structural feature of a federalised, socially plural electorate. The paper traces the institutional learning that the Common Minimum Programme, the 91st Constitutional Amendment, and the alliance-building practices of the BJP and the Congress reflect, and concludes that the 2024 mandate has reaffirmed coalition governance as the default rather than the exception.

Keywords: coalition government, Indian federalism, National Front, United Front, NDA, UPA, Common Minimum Programme, regional parties, party system

1. Introduction

For nearly four decades after independence, India's parliamentary politics was structured around the dominance of the Indian National Congress. Rajni Kothari (1964) famously described this as the "Congress system," a single-party-dominant arrangement in which competition was largely intra-party rather than inter-party. That arrangement showed cracks during the Janata interlude of 1977–1979, but it was in November 1989 that it was decisively dismantled. The general election of that year returned a hung Lok Sabha; the National Front, a loose grouping built around the Janata Dal and supported from outside by both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Left, took office under Vishwanath Pratap Singh and inaugurated what scholars now recognise as the coalition era (Sridharan 2014; Ruparelia 2015).

The next twenty-five years saw six consecutive hung parliaments at the Union level. India was governed by minority governments and multi-party coalitions of varying sizes and ideological textures—some sustained by outside support, others bound by formally negotiated common programmes. This period coincided with, and partly enabled, some of the most consequential transformations in Indian political life: the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, the New Economic Policy of 1991, the Pokhran-II tests of 1998, the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement of 2008, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005. The single-party majorities of the BJP in 2014 and 2019 seemed to mark the end of this era. Yet in June 2024, the BJP fell well short of a majority on its own and was returned to power only on the strength of its coalition partners, signalling that the architecture of coalition politics may have been bent but not broken.

This paper offers a historical-analytical survey of the coalition experiments at the Union level from 1989 to 2024. It does not attempt a comprehensive narrative of each government; instead, it isolates each coalition formation as a case and asks what it reveals about three recurring questions: how coalitions are assembled in a federal parliamentary system, what institutional mechanisms sustain or destabilise them, and how their experience has shaped subsequent practice. The argument is that coalition politics in India, far from being a sign of dysfunction, has become an institutionalised mode of governance that reflects the regionalisation of the party system and the increasingly federalised character of the polity.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly literature on Indian coalition politics has expanded considerably since the mid-1990s, when it became clear that the post-1989 multi-party governments were not temporary aberrations. Early theoretical work in the 1970s—particularly Bueno de Mesquita (1975) and Mitra (1978)—applied classical coalition theory derived from Riker's (1962) minimum-winning-coalition framework to Indian state governments but found the European-derived models a poor fit. Indian parties, as Sridharan (2002) later observed, often lacked the stable ideological location and disciplined cadre that Western coalition theory presupposed.

A more grounded body of work has emerged since the late 1990s. Yadav (1999) influentially described the post-1989 dispensation as India's "third electoral system," characterised by the localisation of political competition and the rise of state-based parties. Yadav and Palshikar (2008) developed this further, arguing that the level of political competition had shifted from the national to the state, with regional parties now functioning as the principal mediators of national power. Sridharan (2012; 2014) examined why multi-party minority governments have proved viable in India and identified the strategic incentives that drive regional parties to ally with national formations.

Sanjay Ruparelia's (2015) *Divided We Govern* offers the most sustained book-length treatment of the National Front, United Front, and UPA coalitions. Rejecting the dismissive characterisation of these governments as opportunistic, Ruparelia argues that each represented a distinct attempt to give institutional form to a progressive Third Force, and that their failures were as much the product of internal ideological irresolution within the parliamentary left as of structural constraints. Christophe Jaffrelot's commentary on the same period emphasises the paradoxical role coalitions played in restoring institutional balance after the Emergency and broadening the social base of governance under V. P. Singh (Ruparelia 2015).

A parallel strand of literature has examined the federal dimension. Arora (2010) and Tillin (2013) have shown how coalition arithmetic at the Centre has been inseparable from electoral competition in the states; the rise of the Telugu Desam Party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Trinamool Congress, the Janata Dal (United), and others has made state-level outcomes the building blocks of Union governments. The Common Minimum Programme, which became the operative document of every major coalition from 1996 onwards, has been the subject of separate scrutiny as both a governance instrument and a discursive innovation.

What unites this literature is a shared recognition that coalition politics in India is not simply about

the arithmetic of seats. It is about the structural transformation of a centralised polity into a federalised one, and about the everyday negotiations between national and regional actors that this transformation has required.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a historical-analytical method, supplemented by case studies of the principal coalition formations at the Union level between 1989 and 2024. The choice of method is deliberate. Quantitative approaches that treat each coalition as a data point in a comparative dataset risk flattening the contextual particularities—the assassinations, scandals, judicial interventions, and external shocks—that have shaped each formation's trajectory. A purely theoretical analysis, on the other hand, would lose sight of the institutional learning that the cumulative experience represents.

The paper therefore proceeds chronologically through five case clusters: the National Front and its immediate aftermath (1989–1991); the Narasimha Rao minority government (1991–1996); the United Front governments (1996–1998); the NDA under Vajpayee (1998–2004); the UPA under Manmohan Singh (2004–2014); and the BJP majority and partial coalition return (2014–2024). For each, the paper identifies the formation logic, the principal partners, the governance instruments adopted, the points of internal stress, and the manner of dissolution. The sources include the secondary academic literature reviewed above, contemporaneous news reporting, official records of the Election Commission of India, and the published accounts of participants. The aim is not to adjudicate counterfactuals but to draw out the patterns that recur across cases.

4. Analysis: The Coalition Sequence, 1989–2024

4.1 The National Front and the Inauguration of Coalition Governance (1989–1991)

The Janata Dal, formed in October 1988 through a merger of Jan Morcha, the Janata Party, the Lok Dal, and the Congress (Jagjivan) faction, was the cornerstone of the National Front that contested the 1989 elections. The Front won 143 of 543 Lok Sabha seats and formed a government on 2 December 1989 with V. P. Singh as Prime Minister, supported from outside by the BJP (which had 85 MPs) and the Left Front. The arithmetic was unusual: the ruling formation included parties whose ideological poles were diametrically opposed, held together by little more than a shared determination to keep

the Congress out of office (Ruparelia 2015).

The government's eleven-month tenure compressed two of the most consequential decisions of the period—the implementation of the Mandal Commission's reservation recommendations in August 1990, and the response to L. K. Advani's Rath Yatra. Each ruptured the coalition from a different direction. The BJP withdrew support in October 1990, and the government fell on 10 November of that year. A short-lived breakaway ministry under Chandra Shekhar, supported by the Congress, lasted only until March 1991 before fresh elections were called. The National Front episode established what would become a defining feature of Indian coalitions: ideologically heterogeneous formations could be assembled around negative consensus, but they could not survive policy choices that activated the underlying differences.

4.2 The Rao Minority Government and Institutional Adaptation (1991–1996)

The 1991 elections, conducted in the shadow of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, returned the Congress as the single largest party with 232 seats, well short of the 272 needed for a majority. P. V. Narasimha Rao formed a minority government on 21 June 1991 and, contrary to the prevailing expectation that it would be short-lived, completed a full five-year term. His government's survival was made possible by a series of issue-based arrangements with regional parties, supplemented by tactical splits in opposition formations.

The Rao years are analytically important because they demonstrated that minority government in India did not necessarily imply paralysis. The New Economic Policy of July 1991, which dismantled the licence-permit-quota regime, was implemented by a government that did not command a working majority in Parliament. Sitapati's biographical study and the testimony of Manmohan Singh, who served as Finance Minister, confirm that the absence of a coalition formally bound by a written common programme actually gave Rao greater room to manoeuvre on contentious economic questions (Sitapati 2016). The Rao interval thus served as a kind of bridge: it showed that the post-Congress dispensation could produce stable governance, and it prepared the ground for the more formalised coalitions that followed.

4.3 The United Front and the Rise of the Common Minimum Programme (1996–1998)

The 1996 election produced another hung parliament. The BJP, with 161 seats, was invited to form the government first; Atal Bihari Vajpayee was sworn in on 16 May 1996 but resigned thirteen days later after failing to muster a majority. The United Front, a thirteen-party formation built around the

Janata Dal and the Left, then took office under H. D. Deve Gowda on 1 June 1996, with the Congress (140 seats) extending support from outside. When the Congress withdrew support in April 1997, the Front replaced Deve Gowda with Inder Kumar Gujral; when the Congress withdrew support a second time in November 1997, the government fell and fresh elections were called for February 1998.

The United Front's principal institutional legacy was the Common Minimum Programme, formally titled "A Common Approach to Major Policy Matters and a Minimum Programme." For the first time, an Indian coalition published a comprehensive negotiated document setting out the policy framework to which all partners committed. The CMP became the template for subsequent coalitions and arguably the single most important governance innovation of the period.

4.4 The NDA under Vajpayee: The Maturing of Pre-Poll Coalition Practice (1998–2004)

The BJP's response to the lessons of 1996 was to construct, ahead of the 1998 election, a formal pre-poll alliance—the National Democratic Alliance—with parties such as the Samata Party, the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Biju Janata Dal, and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. The NDA won 259 seats in 1998 and, with post-poll additions including the Telugu Desam Party, was able to install Vajpayee as Prime Minister with 272 of 543 MPs. That government fell in April 1999 when the AIADMK withdrew support; the subsequent vote of confidence was lost by a single vote, in one of the most dramatic episodes of the coalition era.

The 1999 election returned the NDA with a working majority, and the third Vajpayee ministry lasted a full term—the first non-Congress coalition government to do so. Two institutional developments deserve particular notice. First, the NDA adopted an "NDA agenda" that explicitly set aside the BJP's three most contentious commitments—the Ram temple at Ayodhya, the abrogation of Article 370, and the Uniform Civil Code—in deference to the concerns of its partners. Second, the 91st Constitutional Amendment Act of 2003 strengthened the anti-defection regime by deleting the one-third "split" exemption and barring defectors from ministerial office. The amendment, passed in a coalition context, was specifically designed to reduce the instability that defection-driven realignments had repeatedly produced.

4.5 The United Progressive Alliance and the Politics of Outside Support (2004–2014)

The Congress-led UPA emerged from the 2004 election with the Congress at 145 seats, the BJP at 138, and a sharply fragmented field below them. The UPA was formed around a National Common

Minimum Programme, with outside support from the Left Front—which had won 64 seats and constituted an unusually large bloc of external supporters. A UPA-Left Coordination Committee was established to manage policy disagreements; it functioned as a kind of permanent negotiation forum.

The UPA's first term coincided with sustained economic expansion and the passage of significant rights-based legislation, including the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005) and the Right to Information Act (2005). The Left's withdrawal of support in July 2008, over the Indo-US civil nuclear agreement, brought the government to a confidence vote which it narrowly won. The UPA was re-elected in 2009 with the Congress at 206 seats, a remarkable improvement that briefly suggested a Congress revival. UPA-II, however, was marked by a series of corruption controversies, friction with allies such as the Trinamool Congress, and what came to be characterised as "policy paralysis." The 2014 election returned the BJP with 282 seats, ending the coalition era—or so it appeared.

4.6 The Majority Decade and the 2024 Return (2014–2024)

The BJP's 282-seat victory in 2014 and 303-seat sweep in 2019 produced two consecutive single-party majorities, the first such outcomes since 1984. The NDA continued to exist as a formal alliance, but its smaller partners commanded little leverage. Some scholars characterised this period as the consolidation of a new dominant-party system, akin to the early Congress system but built on a different social coalition.

The verdict of June 2024 has complicated that reading. The BJP won 240 seats, falling 32 seats short of a majority on its own. The NDA aggregate of 293 was sufficient for government formation, but the BJP's reliance on the Telugu Desam Party (16 seats) and the Janata Dal (United) (12 seats) is now structural rather than ornamental. The third Modi ministry was sworn in on 9 June 2024 as a genuine coalition government. The 2024 outcome suggests that the underlying conditions which produced the coalition era after 1989—a regionalised party system, plural social cleavages, and a federalised polity—remain in place and continue to shape the upper bound of any single party's electoral reach.

5. Conclusion

The thirty-five years between November 1989 and June 2024 are best understood not as a coalition "phase" sandwiched between periods of single-party rule, but as the era in which coalition governance became the standard architecture of the Indian Union. The single-party majorities of 2014 and 2019

are visible as the exceptions in this sequence, not the coalition years. Each coalition formation contributed something to the institutional repertoire: the National Front showed both the possibilities and the fragility of negative-consensus alliances; the Rao minority government demonstrated that fractured mandates need not produce policy stasis; the United Front bequeathed the Common Minimum Programme; the NDA under Vajpayee normalised the pre-poll coalition and produced the 91st Amendment; the UPA showed how outside support and coordination committees could sustain a full-term coalition; and the 2024 NDA has reintroduced the discipline of partner accommodation into a party accustomed to majoritarian governance.

The deeper insight that emerges from this sequence is that India's coalitions are not the product of accident. They reflect a polity in which power is genuinely distributed across regions, identities, and parties, and in which national majorities increasingly require the consent of state-based actors. Whether the next election restores single-party dominance or extends the partial coalitionalism of 2024, the institutional infrastructure that the post-1990 experience has built—negotiated common programmes, pre-poll alliances, anti-defection discipline, coordination mechanisms—will continue to define how governments are formed and how they govern. Coalition politics, in short, is no longer the exception that proves the rule. It is the rule.

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