

## **Investigating Coalition Politics in India: Theories in Comparative Party Politics**

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### **Abstract**

Indian party system has been passing through a phase of coalition politics. However, in order to understand and explain the nature and characteristics of the coalition it is imperative to take recourse of the theories of coalition politics in comparative politics. I have tried to explain theories of coalition politics in general and emphasized on those theories which may help in describing the party system during the coalition era.

### **Key Words**

Coalition, comparative, theory, Political, System, approaches, pay off.

Coalition in comparative Party Politics: Approaches

Any attempt at articulation of my argument on coalition era of party system in India would not be possible/ meaningful unless I touch upon theoretical tools and techniques of coalition in the broader ideational framework of theories of party system as both are theoretically complimentary and supplementary to each other. Though, theories of coalition are many and varied but I have tried to focus mainly on two leading traditions; European politics centric tradition, and American Game-Theoretic tradition. Since, none of these theories/approach can unlock the unique contours of complexities of coalition in Indian party system, I, therefore, have limited my theoretical explorations of those theories which are relevant for Indian perspective. I have tried to encapsulate in a nutshell, the basic postulates of following three major approaches followed by relevant theories within each of these approaches to come to a conclusive empirical validation of the Indian trajectory of coalition:

### The Socio-Psychological Approach

Primarily being an empirical theoretical tool and technique of Sociology and Social Psychology it lays stress on identification and explanation of patterns of coalition on the basis of attitudinal properties of real players of coalition in different contextual parameters. The theories built upon this approach has been put forward in simple terms by William Gamson [William A Gamson, "Experimental Studies of Coalition Formation, in "Leonard Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, New York, Academic Press, 1964,p 86].According to him , the 'minimum resources theory' is based on the assumption that coalition formation process is based on relative resources of actors who tries to gain maximum share of payoff in proportion to its resources. Broadly termed as minimum winning coalition theory it predicts that in such a coalition resources may be minimal but still sufficient to win the electoral battle.

Another theoretical development within this approach is 'Minimum power theory' which is an adaptation of game theory. According to this theory players can convert losing coalition into a winning one provided they get pay off in proportion to their 'pivotal power' rather than initial resources.(ibid, p86). However, this theory proved to be full of discrepancies which ultimately gave rise to anti-competitive theory. It assumes that coalition can take place with least resistance among the collaborating actors on the basis of dividing the share of pay off in relative terms .Such a coalition may be larger than minimum size. (ibid, p86) Finally, he refers to random choice theory, which is regarded best as it takes into consideration non availability of situations congenial for rational calculation. (ibid, p 87)

### Game Theoretical Approach

Propounded by scholars like J. Von Neumann and O. Morgenstern, this theoretical approach gained popular currency in the realm of party system/coalition theory courtesy William Riker. Based on games like strategies it assumes that in a given political situation the players try to maximize their gain by using their resources within the framework of defined parameters or rules of fair play. This analogy has been used to understand and explain the nuances Of coalition politics within the broad framework of party system and electoral politics. In this approach the 'Size Theory' or 'Size Principle' occupies the most important

place in terms of analyzing coalition politics. In mathematically oriented explanatory note Riker says that “in n-person, zero sum games, where side payments are permitted, where players are rational and where they have perfect information, only minimum winning coalitions occur.”(W. H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, New Heaven: Yale University Press and IBH, 1962,p 32) In this calculation, n- person denotes that number of individuals participating in a game should be more than two. Zero sum conditions imply that defeat/loss and victory/gain of the participant political players are equal. Assuming that all players are rational it emphasizes that they will attempt to garner maximum gain and minimum loss. It also assumes that knowledge about the adversaries plays crucial role in their move, counter move, pay off and bargaining alternatives. Riker’s theoretical contributions, however has been given a refined dimension by L.C.Dodd particularly in the realm of explaining durability of the coalition governments. He added two specific bargaining conditions in Minimum Winning Coalition theory. Firstly, whether priory willingness of parties to bargain exist or not? In other words, it is important whether all the active political players/parties are willing to tread the path of coalition or not? Secondly, he talks about information certainty on the prior moves like offers, bargains and counter offers etc which plays an important role in coalitional politics. Further, he says that such a coalition of parties is based on reliable majority and yet contains no party in the coalition that is unnecessary to majority status. ( Lawrenc C Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1976, p37)

### Empirical Approach

Instead of developing a theoretical model for experimentation this approach lays stress on analyzing actual behaviour of political actors in a given situation, whether an event, a process or a relationship. It has been used extensively to explain nitty gritty of coalition, particularly cabinet formation, which are more prevalent in multi party systems. It is being emphasized on certain specific variables of coalition which need to be taken care of in explaining coalitions. Firstly, it refers to situational variable which implies strength and position of parties. Secondly, it refers to compatibility variables implying ideology, social base or leadership of coalitional partners. Thirdly, it refers to motivational variable which takes into account desire for self identity preservation. And lastly, it talks about interaction variable which signifies

analysis of bargaining methodologies. He has provided another sets of variables as well which explains how coalition is maintained or sustained : apparatus variables or leadership and decision making; motivational and communications variables or rewards and losses; situational variables or elections and other pressures; compatibility variables or policy goals, reliability or resources of parties , and strategic variables or strategies, size and ideological positioning etc.

The above described approaches, no doubt, played significant role in understanding the needs and behavioural pattern of coalition in a given situation , but none of these can be accepted as individually sufficient to analyse the phenomena of coalition. While socio psychological approach failed to pass through experimentations due to artificial/abstract settings, the game theory made a mistake in drawing analogy between almost static nature of games and the dynamic process of politics. Similarly, empirical approach may be helpful in explaining formation of coalition and cabinets but it does not explain factors responsible for differences in durability of two governments under similar situations.

Notwithstanding the above discussed primary approaches to the phenomenon and politics of coalition; it is necessary to discuss the two widely prevalent theories for understanding the nature of Indian experience of coalition.

## **THEORIES OF COALITION POLITICS**

Having outlined approaches to coalition politics it is pertinent to discuss theories of coalition. Basically two sets of theories have been propounded in comparative politics which is being used to comprehend coalition politics within the wider framework of party system. The first set which includes Power Maximization and Policy Based theories deal precisely with coalition experiments and their nature. The other set which include the Social Cleavage theory and the Electoral Systems theory deal with party system. I have tried to explain both the sets as these are not only based on different approaches but present opposing perspectives as well.

## Power Maximization and Policy Based Theories

The central idea of Power maximization theory rests on predicting minimum winning coalitions, which is generally formed under compulsions of power. In this exercise all political actors /collaborators not only try to sustain it but also attempt to keep the coalition partners at the minimum for better pay off. Policy based theories, on the other hand, is involved in predicting minimum connected winning coalitions involving coming together of ideologically compatible political parties which also ensures of numerically small congregation of political actors. Unlike these two theories the empirical evidences of party system throughout the world do not corroborate the assumption of minimum winning coalitions. If we follow the documentation of Wollendrop ,it is empirically established that on the one hand only 33 percent of all non-single party majority coalition governments have been formed ,and on the other hand only 42 percent of all coalition governments formed which can be termed as minimally winning.(Japp Wollendrop, Hand Keman, and Ian Budge, “ Political Data 1945-1990: Party Government in20 Democracies: An Update”, European Journal of Political Research,vol.33,No. 1, 1998, pp 125-64) .However, the empirical findings around the globe suggest aberrations in too simple assumptions of both these theories in terms of the overwhelming presence of minority governments including minority coalitions in situations of hung parliament or even in a situation of surplus majority coalitions which makes the presence of coalition partners dispensable for the major party.

As per the documented evidence of twenty long standing democracies between 1945-95 only 33% all non single party majority governments and only 42% of entire coalition governments have reflected properties of minimally winning.( ibid, pp 125-164). In the same time span the electoral results led to formation of minority governments in 21% of representative western democracies which also includes more than half of the governments in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. (E. Sridharan, Principal, Power and Coalition Politics in India: Lesson From Theory, Comparisions and Recent History, in D.D. Khanna, Gert w. Kuck, Principal, Power and Politics, N. Delhi, Oxford University Press 1999,pp 475-503). During 1945-1985 the percentage of minority governments without single party majority rose to 43%. It is, therefore, argued that minority government are more likely to emerge as rational solution/choice in the context of party and parties in minority (single or coalition)

government.( Kaare Storm, ‘Minority Governments in Parliamentary Democracies: The Rationality of Non Winning cabinet Solutions,’ , Comparative Political Studies, Vol.17, No.2, 1984, pp 199-227; Minority Government and Majority Rule, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p8). It clearly reflects that the simple postulates of these theories do not provide any viable argument about presence of minority governments/coalitions in a numerically large parliament. However, many political theorists have tried to develop theoretical postulates on the basis of their empirical analysis. These formulations are based on two variables; size or dominance and ideological locations of parties and coalitions. Based on these two critical components of theoretical postulates comparativists have tried to argue the aberrations in the power and policy coalitions which are following: It is argued that generally a party which is numerically dominant and ideologically placed in the centre have more chances of forming a minority government.( Peter Van Roozendaal, “ The Effect of Central Dominant Party on Cabinet Composition and Durability,” Legislative Studies Quarterly , Vol. 17, 1992, pp 5-35). Such minority governments can also be suggestive of an influential opposition who play considerably important role due to the unstable/vulnerable nature of such governments. (Kaare Storm,op.cit.,p45) In a situation of ideological differentiation, as has been the case of India, leading to aggressive discord against external supporters participating in the governmental coalition minority coalitions are more often than not appear to be rational solutions. The political ring of regionalised multi party system in a multi party system within federal ecology of governance along with first past the poll system always acts as a catalyst in determining the nature of the system as a minor swing in vote share can play havoc with the electoral chances of a party in elections. Thus ,the chances of minority coalitions are increased compared to majority coalitions as parties prefer to go alone rather than diluting its ideological positioning which may be compromised leading to loss of its image and seats as well in the next general elections. On the other hand formation of surplus majority coalition is indicative of hard bargains for the survival of coalitions.( Craig Volden and Clifford J. Carrubba, “The Formation of Oversized Coalitions in Parliamentary Democracies”, American Journal of Political Science, vol. 48,No 3,2004,pp 521-537). It is argued that on certain occasions surplus majority coalitions are the political bi product of their assessment that utility of such coalitions are greater than the opposite or expected utility of the opposition. ( Ann Catherine Jungar, “ The Case of a Surplus Majority Government : The Finnish Rainbow Coalition”, Scandinavian Political Studies ,Vol.25, No.1, 2002, pp 57-

83). It is also argued that surplus coalitions act as a rational choice in a situation when the effectiveness of major policy thrust is improved by accommodating politically redundant parties whose pay off bargaining is less than the policy initiative requirements. It is particularly relevant in certain conditions where parties to the left or right of the dominant coalition partner are accommodated to act as a political insurance policy against defection or political blackmail by factions within the leading party. (Ian Budge and Hans Keeman, *Parties and Democracy: Coalition Formation and Government Functioning in Twenty States*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1990, p 86, and in specific cases of India, Virginia Van Dyke, ‘ ‘ Jumbo Cabinets’, *Factionalism and the Impact of Federalism: Comparing Coalition Governments in Kerala, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh*’, in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace(eds), *India’s 2004 Elections; Grass- Roots and National Perspectives*, New Delhi, Sage, 2007, p 118.) Another dimension of such a system is the dependence of major/dominant partners on the minor partners for transfer of their supporter’s vote in the elections. As far as difference between the oversized coalition and surplus majority coalition is concerned it is based on the positioning of the largest party. In oversized coalition it is the single party which heads the coalition with majority on its own. On the other hand in surplus majority there are redundant parties but no single party has majority on its own. It is also indicated by empirical observations that most of the coalitions are formed around a dominant party which is either Left or Right (ibid, pp36-38)

### Power Theory

This theory is primarily associated with Riker, Gamson and Dodd. In this tradition of theoretical formulations Riker is credited with developing the notion of ‘minimum winning coalitions’ which believes that in such a coalition each constituent party is equally important in ensuring simple/ minimum majority seats of the legislative body. In such a coalition the pay off of constituent is proportionately guaranteed in the ratio of their respective size. However, the size formulation can have various permutations and combinations. On the one hand there may be ‘minimum size coalitions’ and on the other there may be ‘minimum-number of parties coalition’. While the former requires minimising the number of legislators to just enough to win a majority, the later reflects minimising the coming together of parties in the coalition making process.( L. C. Dodd, *Coalition in Parliamentary Government*, Princeton, Princeton University Press,1976)



In such a coalition pay off may be guaranteed but it may be disproportionate depending upon the contextual pivotal positioning of party concerned. In fact such parties of pivotal importance may corner more positions of government by threatened blackmail of forming/joining alternative coalition. It is possible, therefore, that relatively smaller parties may secure more and better positions of power compared to larger alliance partner of coalition.(E. Sridharan, Principal, Power and Coalition Politics in India: Lesson From Theory, Comparison and Recent History”, in D.D.Khanna, Gert,W. Kueck, “ Principal, Power and Politics, New Delhi, Macmillan, 1999, p272)

Depending upon contextually inconsequential criteria and situations minimum winning coalitions may be formed by parties who have similar agenda and programme orientations. Such a coalition, however, does not survive for long. In Riker’s scheme, a generalised ‘a-priori willingness of parties’ to bargain implies selling of parliamentary systems where all parties are willing to consider entering a cabinet coalition with any other party.( W.H. Riker, The Theory of Political Coalitions, New Heavens, Yale University Press and IBH, 1962, p 49)

Dodd, however, does not seem to agree with Riker and suggests that size and nature of coalitional cabinet is subject to contextual bargaining conditions within the system. In a highly constrained parliamentary conditions there would be a tendency towards minority governments/cabinets. This exercise of bargaining, which involves available parliamentary parties act as the most crucial/critical component of the coalitional process. In the ultimate analysis this willingness shall determine the nature and size of coalition; minimum winning coalition or an oversized coalition.(Lawrence Dodd,p44)

The size of coalition is also impacted by an equally important determinant which is termed ‘information certainty uncertainty’. According to this proposition the number and size of coalition will be greater in the situation of information uncertainty.( Riker, op.cit.,p49). Unlike him, Dodd contends that increase in information certainty can lead formation of both under sized and over sized coalitions. The reason for this situation is based on his assumption that it can lead to such a situation whereby bargaining, mutual maneuverability, calculations,



negotiations and acceptance by undesirable parties can push for smaller and undesirable coalitions than the best possible coalition.( Dodd,op.cit,p50)

This theory of coalition is apparently reflective of a multi party parliamentary democracy. However, its appearance in dominant one party majority rule cannot be rejected outright. Though, in such a setting it will lead to a minimum winning coalition with low level of bargaining, high information certainty and longer durability.

### Policy Based Theories

This theory is based on assumption of ‘minimum connected winning coalitions’ whereby the aligning parties reflect less incompatibility on major issues due to lesser ideological distance/ideological similarity. Such coalitions need minimum number of parties for a majority.( N. Sridharan,op. cit, p273).Such a coalition is durable as it is backed by ideological stability. Developed by later game theory proponents, Robert Axelord, A. D. Swaan, Micheal Leiserson and Seven Groennings etc, it puts premium on congenial policy construct based on ideological thrust. According to these theorists successful coalition should consist of parties that are “spatially connected” or ideologically similar.

The originators of this theory proclaim that such a governing coalition need to have agreement on general governmental policies. In a way it acknowledges the role of cleavage conflict in the formation of coalition which burdens the partners to formulate consensus on minimised policy range. A reflection of this is seen in what is called minimal policy range coalition which is based on minimum policy distance between the extreme constituents of coalition.( E. Sridharan, op.cit, p273). Such an argument is not based on episodic references rather on careful analysis of regular party competitions followed by formation of government and related activities like formulation and implementation of policies. According to Ajay Mehra , Instances of such successful coalitions in democracies of western European societies are testimony of such ideologically connected coalitions .( Mehra Ajay, ‘Functioning of Coalition Cabinet ; Pressures, Constraints and Compulsion’ , New Delhi, Deep and Deep Publications,1998,p 289 in M.P.Singh, Rekha Saksena(eds.), Ideologies and Institutions in Indian Politics). However, such a coalition is generally subject to crucial behavioural role of

pay off maximisation . (E. Sridharan, “Coalition Politics”, Seminar, 437, January 1996, p54) He further says that politics in general and party politics in particular can be explained in terms of opportunism and partisan politics which is evidently reflected in changing policy to cater the ideological direction of the contesting party/parties as well as the desires of social constituency.

### Social Cleavage Theory

This theory is based on assumption that politics, being part of the larger system called society, cannot remain insulated from numerous societal cleavages. It is being argued that social cleavages are clearly reflected in the electoral playground of ‘ethno-culturally homogenous industrialized societies’ which generally witness the politico-ideological positioning of ‘ Left-Right Spectrum’ indicating two opposite cleavages, labour and capital.( E. Sridharan, “Fragmentation of Indian Party System,1952-1999, Seven Competing Explanations” ,in Zoya Hasan(ed.) , Parties and Politics in India, New Delhi, Oxford University Press,2002, p476). It assumes that in a stratified/segmented society there is close relations between social cleavages and political parties. Thus, it is argued that this theory can act as an effective tool of mapping the role of social cleavages/social essence in the evolution of Indian party system which has changed its colour from predominance to coalition .

### Coalitions and Electoral Systems Theory

The main thrust of this theory is to establish a correlation between electoral systems and coalitions. According to this theory it is likely that behavioural features of coalition governments may reflect distinct attributes under proportional representation and plurality ruled systems of electoral representation. As far as proportional representation is concerned hardly any party is found to be in a position to secure majority on its own as parties get seats in the legislative bodies in proportion to the votes secured in the general election. The resultant impact in general is formation of coalition government on the one hand and attempted positioning of each constituent party for improving its electoral gain in the next election .As a logical corollary there is always a tendency of conflict among the participating member parties.

Unlike proportional representation, the plurality rule system does not lead to coalition as a norm rather as an exception. However, in case of coalition there is much more intense competition among the constituent parties as minor swing in popular vote can significantly alter the electoral outcome leading to majority for some and decimation of others. It can, therefore, bring a party to power on its own; conversely it can eclipse any chances for being in the government.( E.Sridharan, op.cit., p279)

The general rule therefore is that the chances of stability is greater in proportional representation system as the constituent parties are convinced that there are remote chances of electoral swing affecting their political fortune .Such structural features of the system provides stability to the coalitions despite mutual suspicion and conflict of political interests. On the other hand plurality rule system has reflected some unique implications which hold good for India as well. One of the features is the instability and short lived character of coalitions in such a system due to inherent incentives/payoff created by the structural features of the system. The fear of being wiped out certainly has its impact on coalition and minority governments which tend to be unstable. In fact strong incentives/access to state power for members or external supporters ,who perceive themselves to the losing strength to terminate the arrangement or constantly blackmail the government about withdrawing the support.( ibid,pp, 279- 280) Moreover, this system is prone to minority governments rather than stable majority coalitions as there is comparatively significant electoral disparities/volatility in terms of seats which is disproportionate to the votes. Such a situation gives opposition a choice of either keeping themselves out of the government or extending support from outside which is utilized in the next election as an alternative with probable credibility.

The above mentioned attributes of the plurality system, which is closer to the case of Indian party system, is not only uniquely distinct from the proportional representation system in terms of coalition formation and behaviour but also provides powerful support to the extension of coalition theory to ‘party competition’ as a whole. Thus plurality system provides an empirical as well theoretical mirror to look at the impact of politics of coalition on future elections as well as government formations.(ibid, 279-280). Yet another discernible feature of this system is reflected in indiscriminate, power oriented and ideologically

contradictory pre-poll coalitions and seat sharing. Such ideologically incoherent and conflict ridden pragmatic alliances generally produce unstable coalitions or minority governments. Moreover, when organizational strength and identity of party remain weak then the chances are that it will be more client oriented which induces splits and defections in the party concerned.( ibid , 281). Though, the electoral systems theory has many postulates which may explain various features of coalition politics in India but as a matter of fact it cannot claim to explain all the features on its own.

Having discussed in detail the diverse theoretical traditions of coalition politics it can be concluded that these theories are general/ universal in nature which may act as an analytical tool of investigation for those political systems which have long been passing through the phase of coalition. Though these theories may not be adequate to provide an accurate causal explanation for all the existing political systems but these certainly are very critical components of explaining the nature and character of coalition on any given political system.

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