

75 Coalition Government

MEANING OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The term 'coalition' is derived from the Latin word 'coalitio' which means 'to grow together'. Thus, technically, coalition means the act of uniting parts into one body or whole. Politically, coalition means an alliance of distinct political parties.

Coalition politics or coalition government has been defined in the following way:

When several political parties join hands to form a government and exercise political power on the basis of a common agreed programme/agenda, we can describe the system as coalition politics or coalition government¹.

Coalitions usually occur in modern parliaments when no single political party can muster a majority of votes. Two or more parties, who have enough elected members between them to form a majority, may then be able to agree on a common programme that does not require too many drastic compromises with their individual policies, and can proceed to form a government².

Coalition denotes a co-operative arrangement under which distinct political parties, or at all events members of such parties, unite to form a government or ministry³.

Coalition is a direct descendant of the exigencies of multi-party system in a democratic set-up. It is a phenomenon of a multi-party government where a number of minority parties join hands for the purpose of running the government. A coalition is formed when many splinter groups in a House agree to join hands on a common platform by sinking their broad differences and form a majority in the House⁴.

FEATURES OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The features or implications of coalition politics or coalition government are very well summarised by J.C. Johari in the following way⁵ :

1. Coalitions are formed for the sake of some reward, material or psychic.
2. A coalition implies the existence of at least two partners.
3. The underlying principle of a coalition system stands on the simple fact of temporary conjunction of specific interest.
4. Coalition politics is not a static but a dynamic affair as coalition players and groups dissolve and form new ones.
5. The keynote of coalition politics is compromise, and rigid dogma has no place in it.
6. A coalition government works on the basis of a minimum programme, which may not be ideal for each partner of the coalition.
7. Pragmatism and not ideology is the hallmark of coalition politics. In making political adjustments, principles may have to be set aside.
8. The purpose of a coalition adjustment is to seize power.

In our country, we have seen coalitions coming up either before the elections or after the elections. The pre-poll coalition is considerably advantageous because it provides a common platform to the parties in order to woo the electorate on the basis of a joint manifesto. The post-election union is intended to enable constituents to share political power and run the government⁶ .

FORMATION OF COALITION GOVERNMENTS

In the first four Lok Sabha elections (1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967), the Congress party secured the required majority to form the government at the Centre. Even though there was a split in the Congress party in 1969, the minority government of Indira Gandhi managed to continue with the outside support of the CPI, the DMK and other parties. Again, the Congress party won the 1971 elections and formed a single-party government.

However, the dominant Congress party was badly defeated in the 1977 elections. Since then, there have been a number of coalition governments at the Centre. The details are mentioned in [Table 75.1](#).

Table 75.1 *Formation of Coalition Governments at the Centre*

Sl. No.	Period	Coalition	Prime Minister (Party)	Partners
1.	1977–1979	Janata Party	Morarji Desai (Congress (O))	Congress (O), Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Bharatiya Lok Dal, Socialist Party, Congress for Democracy, Chandra Shekhar Group (former congressmen) and others.
2.	1979–1980	Janata Party (Secular)	Charan Singh (Janata(S))	Janata (S) and Congress (U). Congress (I) supported from outside.
3.	1989–1990	National Front	V.P. Singh (Janata Dal)	Janata Dal, TDP, DMK, AGP and

				Congress (Socialist) BJP and Left parties supported from outside.
4.	1990–1991	Janata Dal (Socialist) or Samajwadi Janata Party	Chandra Shekhar (Janata Dal (S) or Samajwadi Janata Party)	Janata Dal (S) and Janata Party. Congress (I) supported from outside.
5.	1996–1997	United Front	H.D. Deve Gowda (Janata Dal)	Janata Dal, CPI, Congress (T), DMK, TDP, TMC, AGP, SP and others. Congress and CPM supported from outside.
6.	1997–1998	United Front	I.K. Gujral (Janata Dal)	Janata Dal, CPI, TMC, SP, DMK, AGP, TDP and others. Congress supported from outside.
7.	1998–1999	BJP-led Coalition	A.B. Vajpayee (BJP)	BJP, AIADMK, BJD, Shiv Sena, Lok Shakti, Arunachal Congress, Samata, Akali Dal, PMK, TRC and others. TDP and Trinamool Congress supported from outside.
8.	1999–	National	A.B. Vajpayee	BJP, JD (U),

	2004	Democratic Alliance (NDA)	(BJP)	Trinamool Congress, Shiv Sena, BJD, LJP, DMK, PMK, INLD, MDMK, National Conference, Akali Dal, RLD, AGP and others.
9.	2004–2009	United Progressive Alliance (UPA)	Manmohan Singh (Congress)	Congress, NCP, DMK, RJD, LJP, PMK and others. CPI and CPM supported from outside.
10.	2009–2014	United Progressive Alliance-II (UPA-II)	Manmohan Singh (Congress)	Congress, NCP, DMK, Trinamool Congress, National Conference and others.
11.	2014–2019	National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	Narendra Modi (BJP)	BJP, LJP, TDP, Shiv Sena, Akali Dal, Rashtriya Lok Samata Party, Apna Dal (S) and others. TDP left NDA in 2018.
12.	2019- till date	National Democratic Alliance (NDA)	Narendra Modi (BJP)	BJP, Akali Dal, LJP, Shiv Sena and others. Shiv Sena left NDA in November 2019.

MERITS OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The various advantages or strengths of the coalition governments are as follows:

1. There is an accommodation of diverse interests in the functioning of the government. A coalition government acts as a channel to meet the expectations and redress the grievances of different groups.
2. India is a highly diversified country. There are different cultures, languages, castes, religions and ethnic groups, and all these get represented in the coalition governments. This means that a coalition government is more representative in nature and it better reflects the popular opinion of the electorate. In other words, it represents a much more broader spectrum of public opinion than the single-party government.
3. A coalition government comprises different political parties having their own ideologies or agendas. But, the governmental policy requires the concurrence of all the coalition partners. Therefore, a coalition government leads to consensus-based politics. In other words, there is consensual decision-making in the coalition governments.
4. Coalition politics strengthens the federal fabric of the Indian political system. This is because a coalition government is more sensitive and responsive to the regional demands and concerns than the single-party government.
5. A coalition government reduces the tyranny of government (despotic rule). This is due to the reduced domination of a single political party in the functioning of the government. All the members of the coalition participate in the political decision-making. In short, the decisions made are more balanced.

DEMERITS OF COALITION GOVERNMENT

The various disadvantages or weaknesses of the coalition governments are as follows:

1. They are unstable or prone to instability. The difference of opinion among the coalition partners on policy issues leads to the collapse of the government.
2. Leadership of the Prime Minister is a principle of parliamentary form of government. This principle is curtailed in a coalition government as the Prime Minister is required to consult the coalition partners before taking any major decision. The critics have called them as 'Super Prime Ministers' or 'Ultra Prime Ministers'.
3. The Steering Committee or the Co-ordination Committee of the coalition partners acts as the 'Super-Cabinet', and thereby it undermines the role and position of the cabinet in the functioning of the governmental machinery.
4. There is a possibility of the smaller constituents of the coalition government playing the role of a 'King-maker'. They demand more than their strength in the Parliament.
5. The leaders of regional parties bring in the regional factors in the national decision-making. They pressurise the central executive to act on their lines; otherwise, they would threaten to withdraw from the coalition.
6. The size of the Council of Ministers in a coalition government is generally quite large. This is because the ministry has to reflect all the constituents of the coalition. For example, the A.B. Vajpayee ministry of 1999 had 70-plus ministers and it was called as 'Jumbo Ministry'. This creates the problem of distribution of portfolios as well as the proper coordination among the members.
7. The members of coalition governments do not assume responsibility for the administrative failures and lapses. They play blame games and thereby escape from both collective responsibility as well as individual responsibility.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ghai, K.K., *Indian Government and Politics*, Eighth Edition, Kalyani Publishers, Ludhiana, 2012, p. 508.
2. Robertson, D., *The Penguin Dictionary of Politics*, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 73.
3. Ogg, F.A., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 2, New York, 1957, p. 600.
4. Sahni, N.C., The theory of coalitions. In Sahni, N.C. (Ed) *Coalition Politics in India*, Jullundur, 1971, pp. 17–18.
5. Johari, J.C., *Reflections on Indian Politics*, New Delhi, 1974, pp. 3–5.
6. *The Journal of Parliamentary Information*, September 2000, XLVI(3), p. 394.