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## Coalition Politics in India: Types, Duration, Theory and Comparison\*

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### I. Introduction: Three Questions

This paper is an attempt to compare and analyse the distribution of types, and the relationship between types and duration, of coalition and/or minority governments in India with those in long-standing democracies against the findings of the theoretical and comparative literature on coalition governments. Written in the context of (a) six consecutive hung parliaments since 1989, and the emergence since 1996 of very large coalitions of 9-12 parties; (b) the extreme paucity of systematic scholarly work on coalition politics in India, the focus of this paper is on the limited issue of coalition government types and duration, in comparative perspective.<sup>1</sup> I also examine the use of an alternative definition of a coalition government that might be more meaningful in understanding party behaviour in the Indian context, and perhaps other large-coalition contexts.

The paper attempts, specifically, to explain the following: (i) why have all but one of the non-single party majority governments, been minority governments?; (ii) Why have the world's largest coalitions, consisting of 9-12 government parties, been formed in India?; and (iii) Why was the thirteen-party Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition stable for a full term?

This paper is divided into the following sections. In the second section, which follows, I outline the concepts and findings of the comparative literature on coalitions and view India in this light. In the third section, I sketch a short history of coalition governments in India, including the use of both standard and alternative definitions. In the fourth section, I present the three key findings from the data which make India seem exceptional. In the fifth section, I attempt to explain the three findings. In the sixth section, I attempt to pull together a conclusion.

### II. Coalition Politics: Theory and Comparison

Before comparing India with the long-standing democracies data in Tables 1 and 2, I begin with the following explanatory preface on concepts and definitions and their meaningfulness for party behaviour in the Indian context. My definition of government is comparable to the European data in Table 2, in that I use the Council of Ministers as equivalent to the term "cabinet" in the literature, that is, including Ministers of State (deputy or junior ministers), since this legally the

executive branch politically accountable to parliament, and also is the key body for management of coalition government since some coalition partner parties, particularly small but nevertheless crucial ones, are accommodated at this level, many with independent charge, not under a (full) cabinet minister.<sup>2</sup>

I also exclude parties which might not have won a Lok Sabha (Lower House) seat but have a minister who is a Rajya Sabha (Upper House) member since Rajya Sabha members of the government do not participate in Lok Sabha votes of confidence or no-confidence.<sup>3</sup> Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998), on whom I base my Table 1, define a government as “any administration that is formed after an election and continues in the absence of: (a) a change of Prime Minister; (b) a change in the party composition of the Cabinet; or (c) the resignation in an inter-election period followed by re-formation of the government with the same Prime Minister and party composition” (Woldendorp, Keman and Budge, 1993: 5). Mueller and Strom definitions (2003:13), on which Table 2 is based and which is also the basis for their Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive on coalition governments in Western Europe, use the following criteria for change of government: any election, any change in the identity of the prime minister or any change in the party composition of the cabinet, this being identical to Woldendorp et al (1993) except for the latter’s category (c) above not being a change of government for Muller and Strom.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1: World Democracies: Type & Duration of Governments 1945–1995**

Country	SPM	MWC	SC	SPMG	MC	Caretaker	Total
Australia	9, 6344, 705	18, 11076, 615	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	27, 17420, 645
Austria	3, 4232, 1411	15, 12144, 810	1, 1420, 1420	1, 548, 548	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	20, 18344, 917
Belgium	3, 139, 464	23, 14817, 644	5, 1581, 316	1, 134, 134	2, 69, 35	2, 399, 200	36, 18392, 511
Canada	12, 14283, 1190	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	7, 3333, 476	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	19, 17616, 927
Denmark	0, 0, 0	4, 3226, 807	0, 0, 0	14, 7938, 567	10, 6689, 669	0, 0, 0	28, 17853, 638
Finland <sup>a</sup>	0, 0, 0	6, 3044, 507	20, 10953, 548	4, 1976, 494	7, 978, 140	4, 739, 185	41, 17690, 431
France	0, 0, 0	6, 1965, 328	38, 12265, 323	4, 2340, 585	5, 1516, 303	2, 68, 34	55, 18154, 330
Germany	0, 0, 0	15, 12232, 815	5, 3513, 1703	1, 501, 501	0, 0, 0	4, 253, 63	25, 16499, 660
Iceland	0, 0, 0	18, 15772, 876	1, 1202, 1202	2, 448, 224	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	21, 17422, 830
Ireland	7, 6026, 861	4, 4845, 1211	0, 0, 0	4, 3488, 872	4, 2734, 684	0, 0, 0	19, 17093, 900
Israel	0, 0, 0	15, 4873, 325	20, 11071, 554	0, 0, 0	2, 321, 161	5, 945, 189	42, 17210, 410
Italy <sup>b</sup>	0, 0, 0	3, 944, 315	28, 10191, 364	11, 3139, 285	8, 2131, 266	4, 626, 157	54, 17031, 315
Japan	23, 12593, 548	1, 373, 373	6, 2504, 417	7, 2336, 334	2, 325, 163	0, 0, 0	39, 18131, 465
Luxemburg	0, 0, 0	15, 17706, 1180	1, 466, 466	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	16, 18172, 1136
Netherlands	0, 0, 0	7, 8400, 1200	9, 8476, 942	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	4, 706, 177	20, 17582, 879
New Zealand	23, 18813, 818	2, 464, 232	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	25, 19277, 771
Norway	6, 5791, 965	3, 2880, 960	0, 0, 0	10, 7865, 787	4, 938, 235	0, 0, 0	23, 17474, 760
Sweden	3, 1478, 493	5, 3542, 708	0, 0, 0	13, 10898, 838	2, 1603, 802	0, 0, 0	23, 17521, 762
Switzerland	0, 0, 0	6, 2185, 364	45, 16436, 365	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	51, 18621, 365
U.K.	17, 15570, 916	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	1, 227, 227	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	18, 15797, 878
Total	106, 86522, 816	166, 120488, 726	179, 80078, 447	80, 45171, 565	46, 17304, 376	25, 3736, 149	602, 353299, 587

*Notes to Table 1:* <sup>a</sup> The three numbers in each cell denote the number of governments, their total duration in days, and the average duration in days per government. 4 X's which are not classified by type hence omitted are totally 505 days.

<sup>b</sup> 1 X = 347 days.

*Source:* Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998).

*Abbreviations used in Tables 1–5:* Caretaker (C) = Govt. formed is not interested to undertake any kind of serious policy-making; only minding the shop. MC = Minority Coalition.

MWC = Minimal Winning Coalition. OC = Oversized Coalition. SC: Surplus Coalition. SMC = Surplus Majority Coalition. SPM = Single Party Majority Govt. SPMG = Single Party Minority Govt.

*Notes to Tables 1–2:* The 3 numbers in each cell represent respectively, no. of government, total duration and average duration (in days).

**Table 2: Coalition Cabinets in Europe, 1945-99**

Country	SPM	MWC	SC	SPMG	MC	Total
<b>Austria</b>	4,5548,1387	13,10229,787	3,1626,542	1,537,537	0,0,0	21,17940,854
<b>Belgium</b>	3,1393,469	15,10638,709	11,4428,402	2,141,71	1,47,47	32,16647,520
<b>Denmark</b>	0,0,0	4,3096,774	0,0,0	14,7806,558	12,7890,658	30,18792,626
<b>Finland</b>	0,0,0	6,3117,520	19,10476,551	4,1829,457	7,872,125	36,16294,453
<b>France</b>	1,611,611	6,4484,747	8,5611,701	5,1804,361	2,1243,622	22,13753,625
<b>Germany</b>	1,442,442	16,14520,908	5,2454,491	3,72,24	0,0,0	25,17488,700
<b>Greece</b>	6,5309,885	1,92,92	1,141,141	2,1309,655	0,0,0	10,6851,685
<b>Iceland</b>	0,0,0	16,15585,974	4,2850,713	4,444,111	1,348,348	25,19227,769
<b>Ireland</b>	6,5657,943	5,5585,1117	0,0,0	6,4878,813	4,2593,648	21,18713,891
<b>Italy</b>	0,0,0	3,1431,477	21,8974,427	14,3044,217	9,3170, 352	47,16619,354
<b>Luxemburg</b>	0,0,0	14,17085,1220	1,472,472	0,0,0	0,0,0	15,17557,1170
<b>The Netherlands</b>	0,0,0	9,9351,1039	9,7782,865	0,0,0	3,319,106	21,17452,831
<b>Norway</b>	6,5775,963	3,2790,930	0,0,0	12,9321 ,777	4,997,249	25,18883,755
<b>Portugal</b>	2,2946,1473	3,1251,417	3,787,262	2,984,492	0,0,0	10,5968,597
<b>Spain</b>	2,2489,1245	0,0,0	0,0,0	5,4209,842	0,0,0	7,6698,957
<b>Sweden</b>	2,735,368	5,3520,704	0,0,0	16,13450,841	2,1569,785	25,19274,771
<b>United Kingdom</b>	18,18430,1024	0,0,0	0,0,0	1,200,200	0,0,0	19,18630,981
<b>Total</b>	51,49335,967	120,102774,856	84,45601,543	91,50028,550	45,19048,423	391,266786,682

*Source:* Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on July 18, 2008, and Wolfgang C. Mueller and Kaare Strom, eds., *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 (paperback edition).

*Notes:* The three numbers in each cell denote the number of governments, their total duration in days, and the average duration in days per government. The cabinets in the database for which either the data is missing (code99999) or is not applicable (88888) or which are still continuing in office in 1999, are not included in the above table. It includes only the cabinets for which complete data is available. Therefore the cabinets omitted in each case are as follows: Finland 7 cabinets, i.e., retaining 36 cabinets for which data are available. In the French case, the database covers only the cabinets formed from Fifth Republic (1958) onwards are included. In the Italian case, there are 3 cabinets with either missing data or data which is not applicable, therefore, 47 out of the 50 cabinets for which data is available. In the case of Netherlands, there is non-applicable data for 1 cabinet hence 21 out of the 22 cabinets for which complete data is available. The same holds true for Portugal where there are 3 cabinets for which data is non-applicable, hence, 10 not 13 cabinets for which complete data is available. In the Spanish case there are only 7 governments for which complete data is available.

**Table 3: Coalition and Minority Governments (by Alternative definitions)**

S No	Coalition and/or Minority Governments (leading party or coalition)	Type of Government	Number of Parties <sup>c</sup>	Date of Swearing In	Date of Resignation or Notification of Fresh Elections	Number of Days
1	Janata Party	OC <sup>a</sup>	2	24.3.1977	15.7.1979	843
2	Janata Party (Secular)	MC	2	28.7.1979	20.8.1979	23
3	Janata Dal-led National Front	MC	5	2.12.1989	7.11.1990	340
4	Samajwadi Janata Party	SPMG	1	10.11.1990	6.3.1991	116
5	Congress	SPMG <sup>b</sup>	1	21.6.1991	27.3.1996	1741
6	BJP-led coalition	MC	3	16.5.1996	28.5.1996	12
7	United Front under H.D. Deve Gowda	MC	9	1.6.1996	21.4.1997	324
8	United Front under I.K. Gujral	MC	10	21/04/1997	28.11.1997	221
9	BJP-led coalition	MC	11	19.3.1998	17.4.1999	394
10	NDA	MC	12	13.10.1999	29.2.2004	1599
11	UPA	MC	9	22.5.2004	-	

Notes:

a Janata Party treated as an oversized coalition due to the Akali Dal being a coalition partner. NDA=National Democratic Alliance led by BJP; UPA=United Progressive Alliance led by Congress. See notes to Table 3 for names and acronyms of parties.

b Congress acquired a majority by merging defectors on 31.12.93

c I exclude parties that have a minister only from the Rajya Sabha (Upper House).

I have placed Oversized Coalitions (OCs) as a separate category outside Surplus Majority Coalitions (SMCs). OCs are those in which a coalition government is formed by a party that enjoys a majority on its own while SMCs are majority coalition governments which have parties or independents not necessary for a majority but in which no single party has a majority. I count an independent as a separate member of a coalition. I define change of governments by the change of Prime Minister or notification of fresh elections. I ignore the exit of parties and independents if they do not lead to government termination due to resignation of the Prime Minister or notification for fresh elections. I classify a government's status by what it began as (for example, government that began as a minority government is classified as such even if it changed status to a majority government by merging, losing defectors or coalition partners). I calculate the duration by calculating the number of days between the dates of swearing in and/or resignation of the Prime Minister, fresh notification of elections, including the former date and excluding the latter date. The criteria differ from Muller and Strom (2003) and Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998).

Source for table: *Asian Recorder, Keesing's Contemporary Archives, Data India.*

**Table 4: Parties in Coalition Governments, Names and Numbers (by Alternative definitions)**

Government	Number of Parties in Ministry from Lok Sabha	Parties in Ministry from Rajya Sabha	Post-electoral allies joining the ministry	Post-election/split parties offering external support to the government	Pre-electoral coalition parties opting to give external support to the ministry
Janata Party led alliance	JP, SAD (2)	-	-	-	-
Janata Party Secular	JP(S), AIADMK (2)	-	-	Congress	-
National Front	JD, DMK, TDP, AGP, Cong(S) (5)	-	-	-	BJP and the Left Parties supporting from outside <sup>@</sup>
Samajwadi Janata Party	SJP(1)	Janata Party	-	Congress supporting from outside	-
Congress	Congress (1)	-	-	-	-
BJP	BJP, SHS, SAD (3)	-	-	-	-
United Front under Deve Gowda	TMC, SP, JD, DMK, TDP CPI, Cong(T), AGP, MGP (9)	Y K Alagh, B. S. Ramoowalia	CPI	CPI(M), RSP, AIFB, Congress	-
United Front under Inder Kumar Gujral	JD, TMC, SP, DMK, TDP, CPI, Cong(T), AGP, MGP, NC (10)	Y K Alagh, B.S. Ramoowalia	-	CPI(M), RSP, AIFB, Congress	-
BJP-led coalition	AC, BJP, SMT, BJD, PMK, SAD, SHS, AIADMK, Ind (Buta Singh), LS, Ind (Maneka Gandhi) (11) BJP, RLD, WBTC, SHS, JD(U)	TRC	AC	JKNC, TDP, HLD(R), Nominated Members, SDF, MSCP, BSMC, Citizen Common Front, RJP (A. M. Singh)	WBTC, HVP, MDMK, Ind (S. S. Kainth)
NDA	DMK, MDMK, JKNC, MSCP, Ind (Maneka Gandhi), PMK, BJD (12)	Ram Jethmalani	NC, RLD,	-	TDP, INLD, SDF, HVC, ABLTC, MADMK <sup>\$</sup>
UPA	Congress, NCP, IUML, PMK, DMK, JMM, TRS, LJP, RJD (9)	-	-	Left Front, SP, BSP, AIMIM, SDF	JKPDP, MDMK, Kerala Congress

Notes: Parties in column 4 are included in column 2, but not parties/independents from column 2 which is there only for information.

Acronyms: JP(S)=Janata Party (Secular); SAD=Shiromani Akali Dal; JD=Janata Dal; DMK=Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; TDP=Telugu Desam Party; AGP=Asom Gana Parishad; Cong(S)=Congress (Socialist); SJP=Samajwadi Janata Party; BJP=Bharatiya Janata Party; SHS=Shiv Sena; TMC=Tamil Maanila Congress; SP=Samajwadi Party; CPI=Communist Party of India; CPI(M)=Communist Party of India (Marxist); Cong (T)=Congress (Tiwari); MGP=Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party; NC=National Conference; RSP=Revolutionary Socialist Party; AIFB=All India Forward Bloc; AC=Arunachal Congress; SMT=Samata Party; BJD=Biju Janata Dal; PMK=Pattali Makkal Katchi; AIADMK=All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; MDMK=Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; JKNC=Jammu & Kashmir National Conference; MSCP=Manipur State Congress Party; TRC=Tamizhaga Rajiv Congress; HLD(R)=Haryana Lok Dal (Rashtriya); SDF=Sikkim Democratic Front; BSMC=Bodoland State Movement Committee; RJP=Rashtriya Janata Party; HVP=Haryana Vikas Party; HVC=Himachal Vikas Congress; RLD=Rashtriya Lok Dal; WBTC=West Bengal Trinamul Congress; JD(U)=Janata Dal (United); ABLTC=Akhil Bharatiya Loktantrik Congress; MADMK=MGR Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; IUML=Indian Union Muslim League; JMM=Jharkhand Mukti Morcha; TRS=Telangana Rashtra Samithi; LJP=Lok Janshakti Party; RJD=Rashtriya Janata Dal; BSP=Bahujan Samaj Party; JKPDP=Jammu & Kashmir People's Democratic Party; AIMIM=All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen.

<sup>@</sup> Comprehensive seat adjustments without formal coalition

<sup>\$</sup> two BSP splinter groups, Arunachal Congress (AC) and TRC won 0 seats.

Source: <http://www.indian-elections.com/index.html> accessed on 1/05/2008

<http://www.rediff.com/news/elec.htm> accessed on 1/05/2008

**Table 5: Coalitions by Prime Minister (by Woldendorp et al, 1998, definitions of government and duration)**

No	Name	Date of swearing in	Date of Demitting Office	Number of Parties in the Government	Type of Government	Number of Days	Party
1	Jawaharlal Nehru	15/08/47	13/05/52	1	SPM	1733	Indian National Congress
2	Jawaharlal Nehru	13/05/52	17/04/57	1	SPM	1800	Indian National Congress
3	Jawaharlal Nehru	17/04/57	1/04/62	1	SPM	1810	Indian National Congress
4	Jawaharlal Nehru	1/04/62	27/05/64	1	SPM	787	Indian National Congress
5	Gulzari Lal Nanda	27/05/64	9/06/64	1	SPM	13	Indian National Congress
6	Lal Bahadur Shastri	9/06/64	11/01/66	1	SPM	581	Indian National Congress
7	Gulzari Lal Nanda	11/01/66	24/01/66	1	SPM	13	Indian National Congress
8	Indira Gandhi	24/01/66	13/03/67	1	SPM	413	Indian National Congress
9	Indira Gandhi	13/03/67	18/03/71	1	SPM	1466	Indian National Congress
10	Indira Gandhi	18/03/71	24/03/77	1	SPM	2198	Indian National Congress
11	Morarji Desai	24/03/77	28/07/79	2	OC	856	Janata Party
12	Ch. Charan Singh	28/07/79	14/01/1980	2	MC	170	Janata Party Secular
13	Indira Gandhi	14/01/1980	31/10/1984	1	SPM	1752	Indian National Congress
14	Rajiv Gandhi	31/10/1984	31/12/1984	1	SPM	61	Congress I
15	Rajiv Gandhi	31/12/1984	2/12/1989	1	SPM	1797	Congress I
16	Vishwanath Pratap Singh	2/12/89	10/11/90	5	MC	343	National Front led by Janata Dal
17	Chandra Shekhar	10/11/90	21/06/91	1	SPMG	223	Samajwadi Janata Party
18	P.V. Narasimha Rao	21/06/1991	16/05/1996	1	SPMG	1791	Congress I
19	Atal Behari Vajpayee	16/05/96	1/06/96	3	MC	16	MC led by BJP
20	H.D. Deve Gowda	1/06/96	21/04/97	9	MC	109	MC led by Janata Dal
21	Inder Kumar Gujral	21/04/97	19/03/98	10	MC	332	MC led by Janata Dal
22	Atal Behari Vajpayee	19/03/98	20/04/98^^	11	MC	32	MC led by BJP
23	Atal Behari Vajpayee	20/04/98	14/04/99%	10	MC	359	MC led by BJP
24	Atal Behari Vajpayee	14/04/99	13/10/99	9	MC	182	MC led by BJP
25	Atal Behari Vajpayee	13/10/99	5/02/01*	12	MC	479	MC led by BJP
26	Atal Behari Vajpayee	5/02/01	15/03/01**	11	MC	38	MC led by BJP
27	Atal Behari Vajpayee	15/03/01	22/07/01***	10	MC	129	MC led by BJP
28	Atal Behari Vajpayee	22/07/01	1/07/02****	11	MC	344	MC led by BJP
29	Atal Behari Vajpayee	1/07/02	23/12/02*****	11	MC	175	MC led by BJP
30	Atal Behari Vajpayee	23/12/02	23/05/03*****	10	MC	151	MC led by BJP
31	Atal Behari Vajpayee	23/05/03	8/9/03#	9	MC	108	MC led by BJP

32	Atal Behari Vajpayee	8/9/03	21/12/03 <sup>##</sup>	10	MC	104	MC led by BJP
33	Atal Behari Vajpayee	21/12/03	30/12/03 <sup>###</sup>	9	MC	9	MC led by BJP
34	Atal Behari Vajpayee	30/12/03	12/01/04 <sup>####</sup>	8	MC	13	MC led by BJP
35	Atal Behari Vajpayee	12/01/04	22/05/04 <sup>#####</sup>	7	MC	131	MC led by BJP
36	Manmohan Singh	22/05/04	24/07/04 <sup>~</sup>	9	MC	63	MC led by Congress
37	Manmohan Singh	24/07/04	23/09/06 <sup>@</sup>	8	MC	791	MC led by Congress
38	Manmohan Singh	23/09/06	-	7	MC		MC led by Congress

Notes:

^^ Buta Singh forced by A.B. Vajpayee to resign from the cabinet

% AIADMK ministers resigned from the Union Council of Ministers

\*PMK quits NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

\*\* Trinamool Congress quits NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

\*\*\* Rashtriya Lok Dal joins the NDA, Ajit Singh sworn in as the cabinet minister

\*\*\*\* PMK joins the Union Council of Ministers, Maneka Gandhi (Ind) dropped from the Union Council of Ministers. She continues to support the government.

\*\*\*\*\* NC quits the Union Council of Ministers

\*\*\*\*\* RLD quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

# Trinamool Congress joins the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

## DMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

### MDMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

#### PMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers

~ Shibu Soren resigns from the cabinet following the arrest warrant issued against him JMM continues to support the government.

@ TRS leaves the Union Council of Ministers and the UPA

We follow the cross-national definition (and West European) of Muller and Strom (2003) and the Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive ([www.pol.umu.se/ccpd](http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd)), and Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998) and count a new cabinet only when (a) the party composition of the executive coalition changes (b) the prime minister changes (c) there is a general election. We further count independents as separate members of a coalition. We exclude parties which have a minister only from the Upper House. Due to the above reasons we do not classify the 1969 split in the Congress and formation of Congress(R) as leading to a separate government. This is so because there is no change of prime minister, no change of party composition and there is no general election. We do not count the addition of individual MPs to the ruling party as the change of government. For this reason P.V. Narasimha Rao's 1991 government is treated as an SPMG, even though there was a change of status and the government attained a majority in 1993. This was due to the independent MP's joining the Congress. We calculate the total duration of the government by including the date of swearing in and ignoring the date of demitting the office. We further follow Woldendorp et al (1993, 1998) on duration defined as date of swearing in to date of next government swearing in, i.e. demitting office.



An alternative definition is to define governments by change of Prime Minister or fresh elections, ignoring the exit of parties and independents if they do not lead to government termination, provided the leading party, that is, the largest by number of MPs and cabinet members, remains the same. That is, the key criteria remain the same prime minister and same leading party, the emphasis being on how a prime minister and his/her party maintain a coalition, surviving the exit of one or more coalition partners. This also fits the legal definition in India, that is, it is considered the same government if the prime minister and cabinet do not resign. It also *captures actual political behaviour better, by focussing on the manoeuvring to remain in power, including adding coalition partners, negotiating outside support from other parties, etc.*, which in turn has a bearing on the types, size and ideological diversity of coalitions formed.

If one counts a change of government by the exit or entry of even one party or independent from/to a coalition, as per the standard definitions (based on the Woldendorp et al, 1998, and Muller-Strom, 2003, criteria), and given the large coalitions of 9-12 parties in the post-1996 period, then we get a very large number of separate governments, for example, twelve for the NDA government of 1999-2004, from what is legally one government with one prime minister. This *obscures the strategic behaviour* of the prime minister and leading party in such coalitions. So I use this alternative definition but also compare it with the results obtained by using the standard definitions.

I define duration in Table 3 from swearing-in to date of resignation or notification of fresh elections in case of a government completing a full term, whichever occurs first because governments continue as caretaker governments for several months after loss of confidence and formal resignation until the swearing-in of a new government after elections. This is almost identical to Muller and Strom (2006:16 and Table 2) in which government duration is taken as up to the formal resignation date even if it continued in office until the next swearing-in, and unlike Woldendorp et al (1993, 1998 and Table 1) which takes duration up to the next swearing-in. The rationale is that, *politically speaking*, the coalition has either lost the confidence of parliament, or in the case of notification of fresh elections, the Election Commission's restrictions on certain types of allocative and policy decisions become operative (to neutralise incumbency advantage and ensure a level playing field) and hence the government is not one with full powers. For example, the durations (Table 3) of the governments of Janata Party (Secular) in 1979-80, Samajwadi Janata Party in 1990-91, United Front (of Inder Gujral), 1997-98, look extremely extended by the criterion of the date of the next government's swearing-in, since they lost their majority several months before that.<sup>5</sup> However, for comparison, in Table 5, I follow the standard definitions of governments and duration (Woldendorp et al, 1998, for duration till the next swearing-in) for comparability with Table 1. This leads to a much larger number of governments due to counting each exit or entry of a party as a change of government but also extends durations to the next swearing-in, but on average reduces duration.

I classify a government's status by what it began as (for example, government that began as a minority government is classified as such even if it changed status to a majority government by merging defectors; some minority governments have survived by such means without any change in party composition (Congress 1991-96). This also shows how minority and/or coalition governments manoeuvre to survive. These definitional changes have the effect of reducing the number of governments and increasing average duration across types in India.

On types of governments, I use the same categories as the above datasets (Woldendorp et al, 1998; Mueller and Strom, 2003), that is, Single-party Majority Governments, Single-party

Minority Governments, Minority Coalitions, Minimal Winning Coalitions, but I differentiate between Surplus Majority Coalitions and Oversized Coalitions, not clubbing them together as Surplus Coalitions as in Woldendorp et al (1998), nor using the Surplus Majority Coalitions and Oversized Coalitions interchangeably as in Strom (1990) or Laver and Schofield (1998). The latter definitions do not distinguish between surplus coalitions in which a single party commands a majority on its own and those in which no single party does.<sup>6</sup>

Vital for understanding the dynamics and duration of coalition governments in India are the distinctions between formal and substantive minority governments, and related to this, the relationship between executive and legislative coalitions, and pre-electoral and post-electoral coalitions, which are in turn related mutual electoral interdependences between parties at the state level for both state assembly and parliamentary elections in a federal polity.

Following Strom (1990:62), formal minority governments are those that have external support that was (i) negotiated prior to government formation *and* (ii) is explicit, comprehensive and more than short-term, *and* (iii) which makes a difference between minority and majority status. Others are substantive minority governments that have to negotiate support from issue-to-issue. As Strom (1990:61) puts it, "...if the commitment of these external supporters is just as strong as that of parties inside the government, then there would be no reason to expect minority governments to perform differently from majority coalitions".

*I extend this argument to argue that the legislative coalition so formed, on the basis of these explicit commitments can be considered a surplus majority coalition in the Indian case if (i) the external supporters are part of a pre-electoral coalition but opted out of government participation, and (ii) if they are bound to the leading party in the coalition by mutual electoral interdependencies at the state level due to having a common opponent that makes it difficult for them to withdraw support without jeopardising a state-level pre-electoral alliance upon which their parliamentary and state assembly strength depends. These mutual electoral interdependencies are rooted in the vote-pooling incentives of the plurality-rule system, particularly in state level contests between two well-matched parties in the presence of a significant minor party. In such party systems the addition of the votes of the third through an alliance in which the latter is allotted some seats to contest, makes all the difference between victory and defeat in both Lok Sabha and state assembly elections. Hence, what matters is not so much the possibly small number of Lok Sabha seats of the allied regional party but its vote share in its stronghold states which are often crucial for the major coalition partner against a well-matched rival.*

There are strong incentives, which I will elaborate upon later, for regional and national (that is, multi-state parties) in a federal system with strong, regionally limited, but regionally dominant parties, for forming pre-electoral coalitions, particularly if they face a common opponent, for both parliamentary and state assembly elections. However, there are also incentives, to be elaborated upon later, for such pre-electoral allies to remain external supporters, that is, part of the legislative but not executive coalition, particularly if the legislative arithmetic makes them pivotal, even if the formateur adds post-electoral coalition partners in government. For this reason, those minority coalitions which can be considered formal minority governments can also be considered surplus majority coalitions from a behavioural point of view, if the formal supporting parties are bound to the leading party by their committed, pre-electoral, explicit support negotiated prior to government formation, and the mutual electoral dependence, of such external supporting parties.

Coming to theories of coalition formation, power maximisation or office-seeking theories predict minimal winning coalitions, defined as a coalition in which each party is indispensable to the coalition's winning a simple majority of seats, because in such coalitions each coalition member's share of the payoff is maximised.<sup>7</sup> This holds, with variations, whether one assumes fixed or variable payoffs, proportionality in sharing the payoff or side payments by dominant partners, or perfect or imperfect information. Policy-based theories on the other hand, predict minimum connected winning coalitions (Axelrod, 1970), i.e., coalitions that are composed of member parties adjacent on the ideological scale and, at least, not incompatible on major issues, thus minimising the coalition's ideological span, and within this limiting condition, the minimum number of parties needed for a majority.

Empirical evidence from the comparative literature on coalition politics tends to support policy-based theories (Luebbert, 1983:41, Luebbert, 1986). Only 33 percent of all non-single party majority governments, and only 42 percent of all coalition governments, formed in twenty long-standing democracies over 1945-95 (Table 1) or 35 percent and 48 percent, respectively, of seventeen European democracies over 1945-99 (Table 2), have been minimal winning.

Neither set of theories predicts minority governments (which include minority coalitions) or surplus majority coalitions (coalitions with redundant partners, not necessary for a majority). However, 21 percent of governments in twenty Western democracies over 1945-95, and 36 percent of governments in seventeen European democracies over 1945-99, have been minority governments, including the great majority of governments in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, over 1945-95 (Tables 1-2). Minority governments, not majority coalitions, have been the solution to 43 percent of minority situations over 1945-82 (Strom, 1984, Strom, 1990:8, for the above facts). Minority coalitions have been 36 percent (Table 1) or 33 percent (Table 2) of all minority governments in stable democracies.

Recent theorising on minority governments and surplus majority coalitions can be summarised as follows, and follows from the concepts of size or dominance on the one hand, and centrality or ideological location on the other. Van Roozendaal (1992) predicts that if the same player is dominant (in size) and (ideologically) central it will form a minority government. Crombez (1996) argues that the type of government formed is a function of the largest party's size and ideological location, and predicts that the larger and more central the largest party, the more likely is a minority government, and the smaller and more off-centre the plurality party, the greater the likelihood of a surplus majority coalition, with minimal winning coalitions falling in-between. Minority governments are signs of the largest party's strength, and surplus majority coalitions are due to the possibility of defections in no-confidence motions and signs of the largest party's weakness, deriving from its off-centre location and relative smallness. Strom (1990) argues that minority governments form when the opposition can influence policy and that "the countries most influenced by the Westminster model of democracy seem inclined to turn to minority governments rather than majority coalitions when their two-party systems fragment" (Strom 1990:90) and that "More than anything else it is the anticipation of future elections that predisposes party leaders to opt for minority governments" (Strom 1990:237). Neo-institutional critics of early coalition theory (Bergman 1993, Strom, Budge and Laver 1994) point to the most viable government given institutional constraints, particularly the presence or absence of investiture votes. Surplus majority coalitions are more likely when a vote of confidence is an investiture requirement, and minority governments when there are only votes of no-confidence. Volden and Carrubba (2004) find only mixed support for Crombez's (1996) formulation that surplus majority coalitions are more likely when the largest party is relatively small and more

extreme, but do find support for their minimal necessary coalition concept (Carrubba and Volden, 2000) that surplus majority coalitions tend to occur when maintaining coalition bargains is harder. Jungar (2002) argues that surplus coalitions form when the expected utility of government is greater than the expected utility of opposition, but ignores the formateur's possible preferences for keeping the coalition minimal winning.

We can summarise this discussion and argue that minority governments can be considered to be solutions from the standpoints of both the party or parties in the minority (single-party or coalition) government and those in the opposition, in specific situations characterised by one or more of the following four features: (a) the minority government enjoys a near-majority; (b) the opposition is ideologically divided; (c) opposition parties can get their say in policy without assuming governmental responsibility since the minority government is vulnerable to pressure; (d) parties think ahead about the consequences for the next election of their participation in a given coalition and calculating that participation will harm their prospects, opt to forego the short-term benefits of power and policy influence from participation while negotiating some influence over policy as the price of support.

Surplus coalitions, including both surplus majority coalitions and oversized coalitions (my differentiation), can be considered a solution to minority situations under certain circumstances. The literature tends to use surplus majority coalitions (for example, Laver and Schofield, 1998) and oversized coalitions (for example, Volden and Carrubba, 2004) synonymously to mean what I call surplus coalitions below (following Woldendorp et al, 1998).

I define, for the discussion on India and for Tables 3-5, surplus majority coalitions more narrowly as coalition governments in which parties not necessary for a majority are in the government but in which the largest party does not have a majority on its own. I define oversized coalitions as those coalition governments in which the largest party has a majority on its own and can, if it wished, form a single-party majority government. I define surplus coalitions as the total of these two categories (as used in Tables 1-2).<sup>8</sup>

Surplus coalitions, are rational *inter alia* as a political insurance policy so as to reduce the pivotal power of smaller parties for a majority, as in certain coalitions where parties to the left and right of the dominant coalition partner are kept on board for this reason, and for surplus majority and oversized coalitions, as a political insurance policy against defection or political blackmail by factions within the leading party (Budge and Keman, 1990:86).<sup>9</sup>

How well do coalition theory and the findings of comparative research illuminate India's experience of coalition politics? India differs societally and institutionally from the European experience, in four ways.

First, India's polity is not dominated by a single left-right ideological axis but multiple cross-cutting axes, for example, left-right, secular-(religio-) communal, centralist-regional autonomist, and a variety of caste bloc-based axes, varying regionally. In fact, on economic policy, there is a "strong consensus on weak reforms".<sup>10</sup>

Second, party identification in India is relatively weak both among politicians and voters, with factional defections and splits, and the emergence of new parties being frequent occurrences.<sup>11</sup> For unlike parties in Europe, parties in India are not stable formations. Nor do they neatly fit the social cleavage theory of party systems, each having a well-defined support base based on cleavages of class, religion, language and other ascriptive criteria.<sup>12</sup> While many, especially

regional and ideological parties, do partly fit social cleavage theories, a great many of the non-Congress formations are weakly institutionalised and have a catch-all, clientelistic character, splitting or merging vertically on the basis of the feuds or deals of leaders.

Understanding coalition politics in India today requires a background in the evolution of the major and important minor parties that play an important role today, especially splits and mergers, since an important part of the coalition game in India is not just the forging of alliances between existing parties but the breaking of parties into splinter groups to facilitate alliances.<sup>13</sup> All major parties in India have undergone splits in the half-century of electoral politics since Independence, with not even cadre-based ideological parties proving immune.

Third, a still further implication of the plurality-rule system, and disproportional electoral systems in general, for coalition politics is that its aggregation imperative would tend to give incentives to politicians to form pre-electoral coalitions (Golder, 2006: 198; Clark and Golder, 2006: 693; Laver and Schofield, 1998: 204-06), which in India will tend to be ideologically indiscriminate due to parties of varying ideological complexion dominating different states. Such imperatives towards indiscriminate aggregation in pre-electoral coalitions are accentuated in a federal system with several explicitly or effectively regional parties.<sup>14</sup> National parties, if they are to win enough seats to stand a fair chance of forming a government at the Centre either on their own or in a coalition, have to form pre-electoral coalitions with regional parties in a number of states ignoring ideological differences and also tacitly “ceding” territory to partners. This has not been studied, to my knowledge, and makes the Indian case of very large coalition governments of 9-12 parties unique. Thus, Golder (2006:195, fn. 10) admits that her dataset of 237 pre-electoral coalitions in 292 elections in twenty democracies over 1946-98 includes only two cases (German and Australian) of coalitions between parties with different geographical bases of support.

Fourth, the implications of the plurality-rule electoral system are quite different from that of the PR or mixed-member systems of most of Europe. A small swing in popular support can hugely increase or alternatively decimate a party in terms of seats, potentially either putting it in power on its own or destroying any chance of it being in the government. This would tend to encourage minority government rather than majority coalitions. This is because the seat-vote disproportionality causes greater electoral volatility in terms of seats, and also holds out the chance of a party now in the opposition coming into power in the next election either on its own or in a coalition. Therefore, there is greater incentive for major opposition parties with a longer time horizon to stay in the opposition or be external supporters of a minority government, whether single-party or coalition, and remain “untainted” by its policy record (or failure) to present themselves as a credible alternative in the next election. The fact that the vote of confidence, which has gradually become a convention since 1989 in the event of a hung parliament, is one in which the government parties have *only to show that the majority does not oppose them, rather than demonstrate a simple majority*, facilitates minority governments based on abstention of part of the opposition in such votes.

### **III. The Fragmentation of the Party System and the Evolution of Coalition Governments in India**

The first four general elections to the Lok Sabha (Lower House), 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967 coincided with elections to all the state assemblies. In the first three of these, the Congress party won an over two-thirds majority of seats in the Lok Sabha on the basis of only a plurality of votes of 44-48 percent. It also won a majority of seats in nearly all state assembly

elections from 1952-62, again on the basis of mostly a plurality of votes against a fragmented opposition. From 1967 onward, a consolidation of the non-Congress opposition took place, state-by-state, in tandem with such consolidation in state assembly elections. *This bipolar consolidation was the key feature and driving force of the fragmentation of the national party system.*<sup>15</sup> But this bipolar consolidation has been one of *multiple bipolarities* (for example, Congress-BJP, Congress-Left, Congress-Regional Party, in different states), thereby contributing to fragmentation at the national level.

Duvergerian dynamics were the drivers of these multiple bipolarities. The proposition known as Duverger's law, viz., that the first-past-the-post system (single member-district, simple plurality system) tends towards a two-party system because of the tendency over time for third and more parties to get eliminated due to the combination of two effects - a "mechanical effect" of over-representation or under-representation of parties, depending on whether they get more or less than a certain (varying) threshold of votes; and a "psychological effect" whereby voters tend to not "waste" their votes on parties which have no realistic chance but vote "sophisticatedly" (or strategically/tactically) for the party which they feel has the best chance of defeating their least-liked party.<sup>16</sup> These two effects taken in combination will tend to aggregate votes around the leading party and its principal rival. Duverger's law argues that the first-past-the-post system produces an imperative of consolidation of voters (and politicians) around a principal rival party to have a realistic chance of winning against a dominant party, thus leading to the elimination of third parties or at least an alliance of other parties against a leading party.

While Duverger's law applies essentially at the constituency level, where strong local/state parties exist as in a federal polity, particularly one like India's where the states are linguistic and cultural entities reflecting such social cleavages, Duvergerian dynamics can lead to two-party or bipolar systems at the state level due to the consolidation of the state-level opposition to the principal party at the state level, whether a national or regional party, in a principal rival, while at the same time leading to a multi-party system nationally because the state-level two-party systems do not consist of the same two parties (Rae,1971). Indeed, they can consist of a variety of parties, some national, some purely state-level. The systemic properties of the first-past-the-post electoral system working themselves out in a federal polity, reinforced by the delinking of national and state elections since 1971, and the division of powers making state-level power politically attractive, drives the bipolarisation of state-level party systems.

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The major trends of 1989-2004 are the relative decline of the Congress and the rise of the BJP and regional or single state-based parties.<sup>18</sup> In 1989, the erosion of the Congress party's plurality to under 40 percent led to a situation where this no longer converted to a majority of seats. This process has resulted in an evolving national party system, still in flux, in which no party has achieved a parliamentary majority in the last six general elections (1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004) necessitating minority and/or coalition governments. The party system at the national, i.e., parliamentary level has become increasingly fragmented since 1989; even while party systems at the state level have become bipartisan or bipolar, hence less fragmented, in more and more states.

An indicator of the fragmentation of the national party system is the Laakso-Taagepera index (N) (of the effective number of parties). The values of N by votes/seats were 4.80/4.35, 5.10/3.70, 7.11/5.83, 6.91/5.28, 6.74/5.87 and 7.6/6.5 in 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004 respectively, whereas in the eight general elections between 1952 and 1984 the effective

number of parties by seats exceeded three only once (3.16 in 1967) and the effective number of parties by votes exceeded five only once (5.19 in 1967).<sup>19</sup>

The party system till 1989 was characterised by single-party majority governments (of the Congress party, except for the Janata party, 1977-79, and the Janata Party (Secular) of Charan Singh). In the period since 1989, coalition and/or minority governments have been in power at the Centre. There have been eleven cases of coalition and/or minority governments in India since independence (Tables 3-4) by my alternative criteria or 26 cases by standard criteria (Table 5).

The evolution of coalitions in India can be summarised as follows.<sup>20</sup> The first phase of broad-front anti-Congressism in the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by intra-state coalitions. The component parties of these coalitions, for example, the Jana Sangh, BKD/BLD, Socialists, Swatantra, and Congress (O) had their state units, strongholds and interests while having no programmatic glue.<sup>21</sup>

The second phase, again of broad-front anti-Congressism, was that of the Janata Party, which unified ideologically disparate non-Congress parties so as to have one-on-one contests aggregating votes at the constituency level so as to win, reflected the imperative of aggregation to win regardless of ideology. This also consisted of intra-state alliances of disparate parties within the overall umbrella of unification of those parties at the national level.

The National Front coalition, 1989-90, led by the Janata Dal and with four regional parties, supported from the outside by the BJP and the Left Front, was a new departure in three senses. First, that learning from the Janata experience, it did not try to unify very different parties but put together a coalition of distinct parties based on a common manifesto. Second, it brought in the explicitly regional parties like the DMK, TDP and AGP, and the Left parties (Tables 3-4 for party acronyms), unlike the late 1960s/1970s experiments. Third, it also marked the beginning of inter-state alliances of parties or spatially compatible alliances where parties do not compete on each other's turf.

In 1996, the nine-party United Front (UF) minority coalition government of Prime Minister Deve Gowda, with another three (Left) parties formally part of the UF coalition but opting to support it from outside, and also supported by the Congress, was formed. The UF was a territorial coalition but had a certain secular ideological mooring, ranged as it was against a Hindu nationalist, "anti-system" BJP. The Congress withdrew support in April 1997, forcing a change of prime minister, and then once again withdrew support in November 1997, precipitating early elections in February 1998.

In March 1998, a eleven-party BJP-led minority coalition government based on a coalition consisting of thirteen pre-electoral (including three Independents) and one post-electoral members of the government, and ten post-electoral supporters and three pre-electoral allies who opted out of the government, assumed power for a year.

In October 1999, the twelve-party BJP-led NDA won a decisive victory and formed a minority coalition along with post-electoral allies, despite some NDA constituents opting to support from the outside (the legislative coalition, pre- and post-electoral including those who opted to stay out of the government, including independents, consisted of twenty parties).

In May 2004, the nine-party Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) drawn from a pre-and post-election alliance consisting of seventeen parties including eight new allies and minus two old allies, formed a minority coalition government with the external support of the four Left parties and two others, plus external support of two pre-electoral allies who opted to stay out.

The major difference between 2004 and earlier elections was that the Congress, for the first time, became coalitionable in a large number of significant states under the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is a friend”.<sup>22</sup> Following this logic, the Congress could be an attractive coalition partner to first and second parties in states (for example, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, potentially Uttar Pradesh) in which it was a third or fourth party or coalitionable where it faced a direct contest with the BJP/NDA and there was a third or fourth minor party present. This does not mean that if these conditions obtain such coalitions will necessarily be formed. And likewise for the BJP under similar conditions where it is a first or second party facing the Congress with an available third party, or where it is third or fourth party. These conditions should be viewed as merely necessary and *not* sufficient for the formation of state-level coalitions. One or other of the situations mentioned above came about in seven significant states – Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar and Tamil Nadu (in the last two of which the same situation existed earlier).

All the coalitions since 1996 have been inter-state territorial coalitions. The period since 1991 has also seen the growth and sustenance of intra-state alliances based on ideology (like the BJP-Shiv Sena) and based on territorial compatibility of two kinds. First, intra-state alliances in which the regional party allies with the state unit of the national party with the regional party getting the lion’s share of both Lok Sabha and assembly seats.<sup>23</sup> Second, the reverse of this pattern, viz., an alliance between a minor state party and a national party in which the latter gets the lion’s share of both Lok Sabha and assembly seats, the key being territorial compatibility in which the national party does not contest in the smaller regional party’s intra-state strongholds.<sup>24</sup> The clear emphasis of alliances since the nineties has been on *territorial compatibility at the expense of ideological compatibility*, particularly the BJP’s alliances of 1998, 1999 and 2004, and the Congress alliances of 2004, but even the UF coalition. However, the most important point to be noted in this history of coalitions is that, with the exception of the Left Front limited to three states, coalitions have been driven by the imperative to aggregate votes to win and not by ideological or programmatic cleavages except for differences between the Congress and the BJP on secularism.<sup>25</sup>

#### **IV. Three Key Findings on Indian Coalition and/or Minority Governments**

The pattern compared to the international data on the distribution of types and duration by type of non-single party majority governments and the number of parties in coalition governments (for both, see Tables 1-2 compared to Table 5 by Mueller-Strom definitions and Tables 3-4 based on my alternative definition), and shows three important divergences between India and the world.<sup>26</sup>

First, India *diverges sharply* from the international data in that there are *no* minimal winning coalitions, and one oversized coalition (Janata Party, 1977-79) and all the rest minority governments, of which all but two were minority coalitions. Ten out of eleven non-single party majority governments or 91 *percent are minority governments by my alternative definition*. By standard criteria, there were 25 non-single party majority governments, of which 22 were minority coalitions, two single-party minority governments and one an oversized coalition, or 96



percent minority governments compared to 26 percent internationally. Not even Denmark, Norway and Sweden, have been so dominated by minority governments as a percentage of non-single party majority governments as India (96 percent by standard criteria, Table 5), and no country has had so large a percentage of minority coalitions in minority governments (92 percent by standard criteria, Table 5). If we compare India with Single-member, Simple Plurality (SMSP) countries, UK, New Zealand and Canada, the common pattern has been domination by single-party majority governments, but India diverges from this from 1989, all governments from then being minority governments, whether single-party or coalition. If we compare India with federal countries then, unlike Australia, where all non-single party majority governments have been minimal winning coalitions and Canada where they have been single-party minority governments, all but two of India's minority governments have been minority coalitions. Federal Germany and Belgium, which use mixed-member and PR electoral formulae, have been dominated by minimal winning coalitions. The Swiss case of near-total domination of surplus coalitions is also exceptional but that is another story.

In fact, minority governments, including minority coalitions, were the solution to ten out of eleven minority situations which have arisen: in 1969, following the Congress split, and in the ten other minority governments listed earlier in Section III. The Janata party was formally a single party formed by merger and hence not itself a coalition, although it was an oversized coalition which included the Akali Dal, not part of itself, in government. However, on duration by type, India (Tables 1 and 5 compared) fits the international data (Tables 2 and 3 compared) quite well in that minority governments, which are all but one of the coalition and/or minority governments formed at the Centre by both international dataset and my alternative definitions, were on average, much less durable than single-party majority governments, and minority coalitions the least.

Second, the period since 1996, has seen six coalition governments formed (by my alternative criteria, Table 3), or twenty (by standard criteria, Table 5): the twelve-day BJP-led coalition, the two United Front governments, 1996-98, the BJP-led coalition of 1998-99, and NDA, 1999-2004, and the UPA, 2004 continuing. The last five (or by standard definitions, nineteen) have been among the *world's largest coalition governments in the terms of the number of parties in government*, 9-12 parties by my alternative criteria, or by standard criteria (Table 4), 8-12 parties, not to speak of supporting parties (since all were minority coalitions).<sup>27</sup> Why have such large coalitions been formed?

Third, the most important exception that needs to be explained is the BJP-led, twelve-party NDA government (by my criteria), drawn from twenty pre-electoral and two post-electoral allies, formed in 1999, which has been the *largest coalition in any country in terms of the number of parties and counter-intuitively, was exceptionally stable* for essentially a full term since it voluntarily called for early elections in 2004, six months before the end of its term.

## **V. Explaining the Three Findings**

*i) Why have all but one of the non-single party majority governments been minority governments?*

The minority situations which have arisen in India have been ones which fit one or more circumstances, listed earlier, in which it is rational for the formateur party, and in some cases also the external supporting party, to form a minority government, including on all but two occasions, minority coalitions. In cases like 1979 and 1990, when the Janata Party and the Janata

Dal, respectively, split, the rump faction that emerged formed a minority government dependent on the support of the Congress party. The latter, in both cases, had no interest in being a coalition partner in an inherently unstable arrangement but wanted to keep the government going until a politically appropriate moment for precipitating an election. In 1991, when the largest party, the Congress, lost its majority due to a split or managed only a plurality of seats, but was not far short of a majority and faced a divided opposition, it was rational to form a minority government and maneuver from issue to issue.

In 1996, the BJP-led government formed a minority coalition due to force of circumstances; it could not muster any additional support. The five other minority coalitions, the Janata Dal-led National Front of 1989 (supported separately by the BJP and the Left), two UF governments of 1996 and 1997 (both supported by the Congress and the CPI(M)), BJP-led coalitions 1998-99 and 1999-2004 (supported by the TDP), and the UPA (supported by the Left), were formed because significant ideological/policy differences (on secularism or economic liberalisation) between them and their supporting parties made it rational for both the formateurs and the supporters to form a minority coalition in which, on the one hand, the main enemy of both (either the Congress for the NF and the BJP, or the BJP for the Congress and the Left) was kept out of power, but in which the supporting parties were not “tainted” with sharing power with the formateur party but derived policy payoffs. Thus, the BJP faced no obstacles to its communal mobilisation during the V.P. Singh government until the last moment, the TDP got generous allocations for its state, and the Left was able to check the economic reforms of the UPA and influence its foreign policy.

*ii) Why have the world's largest coalitions consisting of seven to twelve parties been formed in India since 1996?*

Since 1996, the national party system had become so fragmented due to the decline of the Congress, the rise but still very limited parliamentary strength of the BJP, and the rise of a large number of single state-based other parties with relatively few seats each, that the only coalitions that were possible were very large ones, even those enjoying only a minority status, which were at least territorially if not ideologically compatible with one or the other major party. This was an artefact of the pattern of fragmentation of the national party system due to the operation of Duvergerian dynamics at the state level producing multiple bipolarities in which many single state-based parties competed territorially with either the BJP or the Congress but not both. This resulted in both major national parties getting well under 200 seats (majority mark, 273) in all elections since 1996, and under 150 seats in 2004, with the rest of the field dominated by regional parties which did not exceed 60 seats (the leading party of the UF governments, 1996-98, the Janata Dal), or 40 seats (in 1998, 1999 and 2004), typically under 20 seats, necessitating large, multi-party coalitions which still needed external support.

*iii) Why was the twelve-party NDA coalition stable for essentially a full term despite its extraordinary size?*

By my alternative criteria, 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 conceptualisation, because of its surplus majority legislative coalition with its pre-electoral allies who opted to be external supporters, the TDP, INLD, SDF, HVC, ABLTC and MADMK, but who were formally part of the NDA coalition and accepted its manifesto, the National Agenda for Governance, combined with the fact that the TDP and INLD at least, in their sole home states of Andhra Pradesh and Haryana, were dependent on pre-electoral coalitions with the BJP to avoiding splitting of the vote against their common rival, the Congress party, *and were thus tied to the BJP in a way that would make it very difficult for them to withdraw support without damaging their own electoral prospects*. Likewise, the BJD of Orissa, JD(U) of Bihar, SAD of Punjab and Shiv Sena of Maharashtra, who were part of the executive coalition, were so tied to the BJP by mutual electoral interdependence. Hence, the leading party in the NDA, the BJP, could have great confidence that the coalition would not lose its majority by the withdrawal of support by these external supporters. For example, the TDP, despite its disapproval of the NDA's handling of the Gujarat riots in 2002, did not withdraw support since it knew that it would lose policy influence without bringing down the government.

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*, which is what the NDA governments (for they were eleven governments by standard definitions) were! 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 strongholds not overlapping with others, gave the NDA a *de facto* surplus majority coalition status and an extraordinary stability. This did not apply to any of the other minority coalitions since 1989; none had pre-electoral allies as external supporters who could be relied upon due to their mutual electoral dependence on the coalition's leading party in their stronghold states. Indeed, in the two UF coalitions, the external supporter, the Congress, had electoral rivalries with the TDP, SP, AGP and its co-supporters, the Left parties, and in the UPA, the Left and Congress are the principal rivals in the three Left stronghold states.

## **VI. Conclusion**

From the explanations above, we can conclude that the apparently counter-intuitive patterns in India, that do not seem to fit theory or comparative experience, actually *do fit* the rational choice expectations of behaviour if one takes into account the institutional features of the Indian political and electoral system such as the SMSP electoral system, multiple cross-cutting cleavages, federalism, and the existence of strong regional parties.

The prevalence of minority governments, both minority coalitions and single-party minority governments, can be explained by the pattern of fragmentation of the national party system due to the operation of Duverger's law under federalism into a territorially compatible, multi-party system with numerous small regional parties with strong incentives for pre-electoral coalitions. This, when combined with ideological differences between parties on key issues like secularism and economic liberalisation, and expectations of instability, tends to give rise to minority coalitions since 1996 rather than to minimal winning or surplus majority coalitions. On the

longevity of the NDA, what was a formal minority coalition was in effect a secure surplus majority coalition due to the mutual electoral interdependence between the BJP and its external supporters as well as principal coalition partners, and the impossibility of an alternative coalition.

Hence, the Indian case of coalition behaviour is actually rational choice theory-confirming if adjusted for institutional features, particularly federalism, the electoral system and social heterogeneity with multiple cross-cutting cleavages.

Lastly, I argue that my alternative criteria are meaningful in a political-behavioural sense, not only because the Woldendorp et al (1993) definition distorts duration by magnifying the duration of coalitions by extending them to the next government's swearing in, but also because the former better capture the behavioural dynamics of leading, lesser and external supporting parties in coalitions. The focus shifts to *how a prime minister and leading party maintain a coalition despite actual and threatened exits by coalition partners and/or external supporters*, including as in the case of the NDA, behave in a manner that resembles a secure surplus majority coalition more than a minority coalition.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> The early scholarly work on coalition politics in India focused on the coalition governments in the States from 1967-74. For pioneering theoretically informed work, see Bueno de Mesquita (1975) Mitra (1978). For more recent, theoretically informed work analyzing the post-1989 period see Wyatt (1999), Sridharan (1999, 2003, 2004b, 2005), Nikolenyi (2002, 2004) and Macmillan (2005). For detailed accounts sensitive to the federal dimension and to history, see Arora (2000, 2002), Singh (2004) and Chakrabarty (2005), particularly for the comprehensive bibliography on coalition politics in India.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, in the two United Front governments of 1996-98, two small but electorally important parties at the state level, MGP and Congress (Tiwari), only had Ministers of State; the same applied to Arunachal Congress and National Conference in the first and second Vajpayee governments, and to IUML in the Manmohan Singh government. The large and crucial ally, BJD, of Orissa state, had no cabinet minister in the Vajpayee government from early 2000 its end in 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Three prime ministers, H. D. Deve Gowda, I. K. Gujral and Manmohan Singh were/are Rajya Sabha members; this is constitutionally acceptable in India though the government is accountable to the Lok Sabha.
- <sup>4</sup> I acknowledge use of the Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on May 2008, and Wolfgang C. Mueller and Kaare Strom, eds., *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 (paperback edition).
- <sup>5</sup> The Charan Singh government, 1979-80, lost the confidence of parliament and resigned in 23 days but it carried on as a caretaker government until the swearing in of the next government for over four times as long!
- <sup>6</sup> This follows from consistency requirements deriving from the fact that this paper is part of a larger study of Indian coalitions at both national and state levels, and the relevance of this distinction for party behaviour in state government coalitions. At the national level (Table 2) there is only one Oversized Coalition.
- <sup>7</sup> For seminal theorizing on coalitions see (for power maximisation theories) Riker (1962), Gamson (1961) and Dodd (1976), and (for policy-based theories) Axelrod (1970) and de Swaan (1973). For a survey of the evolution of theorizing on coalition formation from office-seeking to policy-seeking assumptions and explanations see Budge and Keman (1990:10-19) and Strom (1990: 29-37), and for more recent comprehensive analyses see Muller and Strom (2000), Laver and Schofield (1998), Budge and Keman (1990), Strom (1990), Laver and Shepsle (1996).

- <sup>8</sup> In this paper, in Table 1, Surplus Coalitions follow from this definition. However, in Tables 2-4 on India, I have placed Oversized Coalitions as a separate category outside Surplus Majority Coalitions, the latter being those which have redundant parties but in which no single party has a majority.
- <sup>9</sup> For the argument, in the Indian context, that surplus majority coalitions can be an insurance policy for party leaderships against factional defections or blackmail, see Van Dyke (2007:118).
- <sup>10</sup> Montek S Ahluwalia, "Economic Reforms in India: Has Gradualism Worked?" in Mukherji (2007), 109-111.
- <sup>11</sup> For an account of the splits and mergers in Indian parties, see Sridharan (2004a).
- <sup>12</sup> For a classic statement of the social cleavage theory of party systems see Lipset and Rokkan (1967). For a modified version, perhaps more relevant to post-1990 India, that argues that social cleavages do not translate automatically into party systems but offer easy mobilisation opportunities, see Bartolini and Mair (1990).
- <sup>13</sup> Coalition theory in the European politics literature tends to implicitly assume stable parties with well-defined social bases, rather than clientelistic parties centred around individual leaders, which split easily.
- <sup>14</sup> For the incentives of India's regional parties to coalesce with national parties, see Sridharan (2003:135-52).
- <sup>15</sup> For an account and explanation of the Duvergerian dynamic of bipolarization at the district and state level, see Chhibber and Murali (2007).
- <sup>16</sup> See Duverger (1963) for the full argument.
- <sup>17</sup> See E. Sridharan, "Duverger's Law, its Reformulations and the Evolution of the Indian Party System", Centre for Policy Research, May 1997, and IRIS India Working Paper No. 35 (February 1997), IRIS Center, University of Maryland, for a detailed version of the argument presented in capsule below.
- <sup>18</sup> Regional party is something of a misnomer as it implies a party strong in two or more states in a region. All the regional parties, however, are single state-based parties except the Janata Dal (United), strong in Bihar and Karnataka, and the CPI(M), strong in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala, if one considers them regional parties. These sets of states do not constitute recognizable regions. The JD(U) and the CPI(M) are really national parties with a limited geographical spread, the former being a rump of the once much larger Janata Dal.
- <sup>19</sup> For the Laakso-Taagepera indices of the effective number of parties see *Journal of the Indian School of Political Economy*, XV/1-2 (Jan.-June 2003), Statistical Supplement, Tables 1.1-1.13, 293-307. For 2004, the index as calculated by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi.
- <sup>20</sup> See Table 4 for the details of the names and numbers of parties in the Council of Ministers and Sridharan (2002:475-503) for a detailed account of coalition dynamics.
- <sup>21</sup> BKD/BLD=Bharatiya Lok Dal/Bharatiya Kranti Dal, farmers' parties of North India in the 1960s and 1970s. See notes to Tables 2 and 3 for the names and acronyms of parties.
- <sup>22</sup> For an argument explaining why the Congress became coalitionable in many states in 2004, see Sridharan (2004b).
- <sup>23</sup> The examples are the BJP-AIADMK-smaller parties in 1998 and 2004, the BJP-DMK-smaller parties in 1999, Congress-DMK-smaller parties in 2004, the BJP-TDP in 1999 and 2004, the BJP-Trinamul Congress in 1999 and 2004, BJP-BJD in Orissa in 1998, 1999 and 2004, BJP-Haryana Vikas Party in 1996 and 1998 and the BJP-INLD (Chautala) in 1999, and also the BJP-Shiv Sena since 1991, RJD-Congress in 2004, and Samata-BJP in 2004.
- <sup>24</sup> Examples are the BJP-Lok Shakti in Karnataka in 1998 and 1999, the BJP-Samata in Bihar over 1996-99, the BJP-HVC in H.P., and the Congress-JMM-smaller parties in 2004.
- <sup>25</sup> For a detailed overview of state-level coalition politics in India, see Sridharan (1999, 2002, 2003). For a detailed state-wise analysis of the BJP's coalition strategies since 1989, see Sridharan (2005). For a detailed analysis of the Congress' coalition strategies and their criticality in the 2004 elections, see Sridharan (2004b).
- <sup>26</sup> The figures in Tables 2-4 are from data collected from *Asian Recorder*, *Data India*, and *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* for the years concerned, and from contemporary newspaper reports for more minute details.
- <sup>27</sup> The other largest cases being two of 10 parties (one of which lasted three years) and one of 9 parties in Israel, one of 7 parties in Italy and of upto 6 parties in Belgium). Data from Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998) and for Israel from [http://www.knesset.gov.il/faction/eng/FactionGovernment\\_eng.asp](http://www.knesset.gov.il/faction/eng/FactionGovernment_eng.asp) and from Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on May 28, 2008, and Wolfgang C. Mueller and Kaare Strom, eds., *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 (paperback edition).

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