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Why are multi-party minority governments viable in India? Theory and comparison

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This paper attempts to explain the apparently exceptional pattern of coalition politics in India compared to international patterns – the prevalence of minority governments and among them, minority coalitions, among non-single party majority governments, as well as the predominance of very large coalitions of 6–12 parties – in the light of theorising on coalition and minority governments and the specificities of India's political institutions. It shows that there are two general and three specific circumstances that favour such a pattern and that most of these have been present at government formation since 1989, and particularly since 1996.

Keywords: minority government; minority coalition; legislative coalition; executive coalition; lock-in effect

Introduction: two questions

This paper is an attempt to compare the distribution of types of coalition and/or minority governments in India with those in long-standing democracies and explain India's apparent exceptionalism. The paper attempts, specifically, to explain the following, both of which make India an outlier in comparative terms: (i) why have all but one of the non-single party majority governments, been minority governments, of which again all but two have been minority coalitions?¹ (ii) Why have the world's largest coalitions, consisting of 6–12 government parties, been formed in India since 1996?²

This paper is divided into the following sections. In the second section, which follows, I discuss the definitions and findings of the comparative literature on coalition and/or minority governments. In the third, I profile the main

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parties and outline the history of coalition and/or minority governments in India. In the fourth, I look at the findings of the comparative literature on coalitions, and at India's minority governments in the light of theory, arguing that there are both general and India-specific rationales for the viability of multi-party minority coalitions. In the fifth, I detail the above two key regularities from the data which make India seem exceptional. In the sixth, I attempt to explain them. In the seventh, I conclude that Indian coalition behaviour fits rational-choice logic if one factors in the above general and India-specific rationales for minority governments.

Coalition and/or minority governments: definitions

Before comparing India with other durable democracies in Tables 1 and 2, I begin with the following explanatory preface on definitions and their meaningfulness for party behaviour in India. My definition of government is comparable to the European data in Table 2, in that I use the Council of Ministers, that is, cabinet ministers and Ministers of State (deputy/junior ministers), as equivalent to the term 'cabinet' since in India both levels taken together constitute the political executive that is accountable to parliament. The Council of Ministers is also the locus for coalition formation since some small but crucial parties are accommodated at the Minister of State level only.³ I do not count parties which have not have won a Lok Sabha (Lower House) seat but have a minister who is a Rajya Sabha (Upper House) member since the latter do not participate in Lok Sabha votes of confidence or no-confidence.⁴ Woldendorp *et al.* (1998), on whom I base 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 *et al.*, 1993: 5)

Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006: 13) definitions, 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.⁵

An alternative definition is to define governments by change of prime minister or fresh elections, *ignoring* the exit/addition of parties and independents if it does not lead to resignation of the prime minister. This also fits the legal definition in India, that is, it is considered the same government if the prime

Table 1. World democracies: type and duration of governments 1945–95.

Country	SPM	MWC	SC	SPMG	MC	Caretaker	Total
Australia	9, 6344, 705	18, 11,076, 615	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	27, 17,420, 645
Austria	3, 4232, 1411	15, 12,144, 810	1, 1420, 1420	1, 548, 548	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	20, 18,344, 917
Belgium	3, 139, 464	23, 14,817, 644	5, 1581, 316	1, 134, 134	2, 69, 35	2, 399, 200	36, 18,392, 511
Canada	12, 14,283, 1190	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	7, 3333, 476	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	19, 17,616, 927
Denmark	0, 0, 0	4, 3226, 807	0, 0, 0	14, 7938, 567	10, 6689, 669	0, 0, 0	28, 17,853, 638
Finland ^a	0, 0, 0	6, 3044, 507	20, 10,953, 548	4, 1976, 494	7, 978, 140	4, 739, 185	41, 17,690, 431
France	0, 0, 0	6, 1965, 328	38, 12,265, 323	4, 2340, 585	5, 1516, 303	2, 68, 34	55, 18,154, 330
Germany	0, 0, 0	15, 12,232, 815	5, 3513, 1703	1, 501, 501	0, 0, 0	4, 253, 63	25, 16,499, 660
Iceland	0, 0, 0	18, 15,772, 876	1, 1202, 1202	2, 448, 224	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	21, 17,422, 830
Ireland	7, 6026, 861	4, 4845, 1211	0, 0, 0	4, 3488, 872	4, 2734, 684	0, 0, 0	19,17,093, 900
Israel	0, 0, 0	15, 4873, 325	20, 11,071, 554	0, 0, 0	2, 321, 161	5, 945, 189	42, 17,210, 410
Italy ^b	0, 0, 0	3, 944, 315	28, 10,191, 364	11, 3139, 285	8, 2131, 266	4, 626, 157	54, 17,031, 315
Japan	23, 12,593, 548	1, 373, 373	6, 2504, 417	7, 2336, 334	2, 325, 163	0, 0, 0	39, 18,131, 465
Luxemburg	0, 0, 0	15, 17,706, 1180	1, 466, 466	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	16, 18,172, 1136
Netherlands	0, 0, 0	7, 8400, 1200	9, 8476, 942	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	4, 706, 177	20, 17,582, 879
New Zealand	23, 18,813, 818	2, 464, 232	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	25, 19,277, 771
Norway	6, 5791, 965	3, 2880, 960	0, 0, 0	10, 7865, 787	4, 938, 235	0, 0, 0	23, 17,474, 760
Sweden	3, 1478, 493	5, 3542, 708	0, 0, 0	13, 10,898, 838	2, 1603, 802	0, 0, 0	23, 17,521, 762
Switzerland	0, 0, 0	6, 2185, 364	45, 16,436, 365	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	51, 18,621, 365
UK	17, 15,570, 916	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	1, 227, 227	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	18, 15,797, 878
Total	106, 86,522, 816	166, 120,488, 726	179, 80,078, 447	80, 45,171, 565	46, 17,304, 376	25, 3736, 149	602, 353,299, 587

Notes: 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; SC (MP), surplus coalition (majority party); SC, surplus coalition; SC (NMP), surplus coalition (no majority party); SPM, single party majority govt; SPMG, single party minority govt.

Source: Woldendorp *et al.* (1998).

^aThe three numbers in each cell denote the number of governments, their total duration in days, and the average duration in days per government. The four X's referring to governments in the original table from which this table is derived which are not classified by type and hence omitted, total to 505 days, one of which lasted 347 days.

Table 2. Coalition cabinets in Europe, 1945–99.

Country	SPM	MWC	SC	SPMG	MC	Total
Austria	4, 5548, 1387	13, 10229, 787	3, 1626, 542	1, 537, 537	0, 0, 0	21, 17,940, 854
Belgium	3, 1393, 469	15, 10,638, 709	11, 4428, 402	2, 141, 71	1, 47, 47	32, 16,647, 520
Denmark	0, 0, 0	4, 3096, 774	0, 0, 0	14, 7806, 558	12, 7890, 658	30, 18,792, 626
Finland	0, 0, 0	6, 3117, 520	19, 10,476, 551	4, 1829, 457	7, 872, 125	36, 16,294, 453
France	1, 611, 611	6, 4484, 747	8, 5611, 701	5, 1804, 361	2, 1243, 622	22, 13,753, 625
Germany	1, 442, 442	16, 14,520, 908	5, 2454, 491	3, 72, 24	0, 0, 0	25, 17,488, 700
Greece	6, 5309, 885	1, 92, 92	1, 141, 141	2, 1309, 655	0, 0, 0	10, 6851, 685
Iceland	0, 0, 0	16, 15,585, 974	4, 2850, 713	4, 444, 111	1, 348, 348	25, 19,227, 769
Ireland	6, 5657, 943	5, 5585, 1117	0, 0, 0	6, 4878, 813	4, 2593, 648	21, 18,713, 891
Italy	0, 0, 0	3, 1431, 477	21, 8974, 427	14, 3044, 217	9, 3170, 352	47, 16,619, 354
Luxemburg	0, 0, 0	14, 17,085, 1220	1, 472, 472	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	15, 17,557, 1170
Netherlands	0, 0, 0	9, 9351, 1039	9, 7782, 865	0, 0, 0	3, 319, 106	21, 17,452, 831
Norway	6, 5775, 963	3, 2790, 930	0, 0, 0	12, 9321, 777	4, 997, 249	25, 18,883, 755
Portugal	2, 2946, 1473	3, 1251, 417	3, 787, 262	2, 984, 492	0, 0, 0	10, 5968, 597
Spain	2, 2489, 1245	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	5, 4209, 842	0, 0, 0	7, 6698, 957
Sweden	2, 735, 368	5, 3520, 704	0, 0, 0	16, 13,450, 841	2, 1569, 785	25, 19,274, 771
UK	18, 18,430, 1024	0, 0, 0	0, 0, 0	1, 200, 200	0, 0, 0	19, 18,630, 981
Total	51, 49,335, 967	120, 102,774, 856	84, 45,601, 543	91, 50,028, 550	45, 19,048, 423	391, 266,786, 682

Notes: See notes to Table 1 for column heading acronyms. 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.

Source: Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on 18 July 2008, and Mueller and Strom (2000/2003/2006).

minister (and automatically, cabinet) do not resign. It also captures actual *political* behaviour better because governments after all view themselves and their options, constraints and incentives in coalition politics in terms of the existing constitutional rules and not in terms of scholarly classificatory categories. This definition helps to focus on the *manoeuvring* to remain in power, including adding coalition partners, negotiating outside support from other parties, and so forth. This focus is explanatorily important because it *has a bearing on the types, size and ideological diversity* of coalitions formed.⁶ So I use this alternative definition in Tables 4 and 5 but also use, for comparative purposes the international data sets (Tables 1 and 2) based on Woldendorp *et al.* (1998) and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006), respectively, and use these standard definitions applied to the Indian case in Tables 3 and 6.⁷ However, the comparative point made by Table 6 is that the exceptional nature of the size and distribution of types of coalition governments in India is *identical* whether one uses the Indian definition or the standard scholarly definitions of government. By both there is an exceptional prevalence of minority governments and within them, of minority coalitions since 1989, and since 1996, an exceptional prevalence of very large coalitions of 6–12 parties in government.

I define duration as in the notes to Table 4 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 there have been caretaker governments for several months after loss of confidence and formal resignation until the swearing-in of a new government after elections.⁸ However, for comparability with Tables 1 and 2, in Tables 3 and 6, I follow Woldendorp *et al.* (1998), for definitions of duration (till the next swearing-in) as well as Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006).⁹

On types of governments, I use the same categories as the above data sets (Woldendorp *et al.*, 1998; Muller & Strom, 2000/2003/2006), that is, single-party majority governments, single-party minority governments, minority coalitions, minimal winning coalitions, but I differentiate between surplus coalitions (no majority party), henceforth SC(NMP), and surplus coalitions (majority party) (Tables 4–6), not clubbing them together as surplus coalitions as in Woldendorp *et al.* (1998) except in Tables 1–3.¹⁰

The fragmentation of the Indian party system and the evolution of coalition governments

Before describing the evolution of coalition politics, I briefly profile the major Indian parties and distinguish between national and regional parties. Historically, the Indian National Congress (henceforth, Congress) dominated the landscape. It was the umbrella party of the independence movement and won seven of the eight post-independence elections from 1952 to 1984, and has ruled India

Table 3. Indian governments by international definitions, 1947–2009.

	SPM	MWC	SC	SPMG	MC	Caretaker	Total
India govts (Woldendorp <i>et al.</i>)	10, 14,337, 1434	0, 0, 0	1, 856, 856	2, 2014, 1007	19, 4680, 246	6, 455, 76	38, 22,342, 588
India govts (Muller and Strom)	13, 13,845, 1065	0, 0, 0	1, 843, 843	2, 1849, 925	22, 4445, 202	–	38, 20,982, 552

Notes: See notes to Table 1 for column heading acronyms. The three numbers in each cell denote the number of governments, their total duration in days, and the average duration in days per government. This table shows Indian governments from 1947 to 2009, excluding the government formed in 2009, according to the Woldendorp *et al.* (1993, 1998) definitions and the Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006) definitions, for 1947–2009, derived from the relevant columns of Table 6. These rows were not inserted into Tables 1 and 2, but shown here as a separate table since the period is different and more up to date, which is important for the argument about coalitions in India. The caretaker governments are government no. 5, 7, 12, 14, 19 and 24 of Table 6.

Table 4. Coalition and minority governments (by Indian definition of government).

S. no.	Coalition and/or minority governments (leading party or coalition)	Type of government	Number of parties ^a	Date of swearing in	Date of resignation or notification of fresh elections	Number of days
1	Janata Party	SC(MP) ^b	2	24 March 1977	15 July 1979	843
2	Janata Party (Secular)	MC	2	28 July 1979	20 August 1979	23
3	Janata Dal-led National Front	MC	3	2 December 1989	7 November 1990	340
4	Samajwadi Janata Party	SPMG	1	10 November 1990	6 March 1991	116
5	Congress	SPMG ^c	1	21 June 1991	27 March 1996	1741
6	BJP-led coalition	MC	3	16 May 1996	28 May 1996	12
7	UF under H.D. Deve Gowda	MC	9	1 June 1996	21 April 1997	324
8	UF under I.K. Gujral	MC	10	21 April 1997	28 November 1997	221
9	BJP-led coalition	MC	11	19 March 1998	17 April 1999	394
10	NDA	MC	12	13 October 1999	29 February 2004	1599
11	UPA I	MC	9	22 May 2004	2 March 2009	1745
12	UPA II	MC	6	22 May 2009	–	–

Notes: See notes to Table 1 for type of government acronyms. I have placed surplus coalitions (majority party) and surplus coalition (no majority party) as separate categories of surplus coalitions (SCs). SC(MP)s are those in which a coalition government is formed by a party that enjoys a majority on its own while SC(NMP)s are majority coalition governments which have parties or independents not necessary for a majority but in which no single party has a majority. Alternative (Indian) definition of government: change of governments is defined by the change of prime minister. 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. This fits the Indian legal definition of government. I count an independent as a separate member of a coalition. I classify a government's status by what it began as (e.g. 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). This is because it shows that a minority government can secure and extend its duration by change of status to majority status while remaining the same government by the Indian definition. I calculate duration by calculating the number of days between the dates of swearing in and resignation of the prime minister or fresh notification of elections, whichever is earlier, including the former date and excluding the latter date, despite the government continuing until the next swearing in by the Indian legal definition, including its 'caretaker' phase.

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

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

^bJanata Party government treated as a surplus coalition (majority party) 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 5 for names and acronyms of parties.

^cCongress acquired a majority by merging defectors on 31 December 1993.

Table 5. Parties in coalition governments, names and numbers (by Indian definition of government).

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	JP, SAD (2)	—	—	—	—
Janata Party Secular	JP(S), AIADMK (2)	—	—	Congress	—
National Front	JD, TDP, Cong(S) (3)	DMK, AGP	—	—	BJP and the Left Parties supporting from outside ^a
Samajwadi Janata Party	SJP(1)	Janata Party	—	Congress supporting from outside	—
Congress	Congress (1)	—	—	—	—
BJP	BJP, SHS, SAD (3)	—	—	—	—
UF under Deve Gowda	JD, TMC, SP, DMK, TDP, CPI, Cong(T), AGP, MGP (9)	Y K Alagh, B. S. Ramoowalia	CPI	CPI(M), RSP, AIFB, Congress	—
UF under Inder Kumar Gujral	JD, TMC, SP, DMK, TDP, CPI, Cong(T), AGP, MGP (9)	NC, Y K Alagh, B. S. Ramoowalia	—	CPI(M), RSP, AIFB, Congress	—
BJP-led coalition	AC, BJP, SMT, BJD, PMK, SAD, SHS, AIADMK, LS, Inds (Buta Singh, Maneka Gandhi) (11)	TRC	AC	NC, TDP, HLD(R), SDF, MSCP, BSMC, Citizen Common Front, RJP (A. M. Singh)	WBTC, HVP, MDMK, Ind (S. S. Kainth)
NDA	BJP, RLD, WBTC, SHS, SAD, JD(U), DMK, MDMK, NC, MSCP, Ind (Maneka Gandhi), PMK, BJD, IFDP (14) ^b	Ram Jethmalani	NC, RLD, IFDP	Independents (S. K.Bwismuthiary, Vanlalazawma)	TDP, INLD, SDF, HVC, ABLTC, MADMK ^c
UPA I	Congress, NCP, IUML, PMK, DMK, JMM, TRS, LJP, RJD (9)	—	—	Left Front, SP, BSP, AIMIM, SDF	JKPDP, MDMK, Kerala Congress

(Continued)

Table 5. Continued.

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
UPA II	Congress, WBTC, DMK, NCP, NC, IUML (6)	–	–	SP, BSP, RJD, JD(S), SDF, NPF, AUFD, JVM(P), BVA, Inds (M. Koda, S. Mandlik, G. H. Khan)	JMM, AIMIM, BPF, Kerala Congress, VCK

Notes: For alternative definitions see notes to Table 4. Parties in column 4 are included in column 2, but not parties/independents from column 2 which is there only for information. 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; NC, 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; BPF, Bodoland People's Front; 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; JKPD, Jammu & Kashmir People's Democratic Party; AIMIM, All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen; IFDP, Indian Federal Democratic Party; NPF, Nagaland People's Front; AUFD, Assam United Democratic Front; JVM(P), Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (Prajantrik); Bahujan Vikas Aghadi; VCK, Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi.

Source: <http://www.indian-elections.com/index.html>, accessed on 1 May 2008; <http://www.rediff.com/news/elec.htm>, accessed on 1 May 2008.

^aComprehensive seat adjustments without formal coalition.

^bFourteen parties were part of the BJP-led NDA at various times but they were not there at the same time; the largest government was of 12 parties.

^cAC, TRC and two BSP splinter groups won no seats.

Table 6. Coalitions by prime minister (by Woldendorp *et al.*, 1998; Muller & Strom, 2000/2003/2006, definitions of government and duration).

No.	Name of prime minister	Date of swearing in	Date of resignation or dissolution of Lok Sabha or notification of elections whichever is earliest	Date of demitting office	Number of parties in the government (Lok Sabha only)	Type of government	Total number of days by Muller and Strom	Number of days by Woldendorp <i>et al.</i>	Party or leading party and coalition)
1	Jawaharlal Nehru	15 August 1947	14 November 1951	13 May 1952	1	SPM	1552	1733	Congress
2	Jawaharlal Nehru	13 May 1952	19 January 1957	17 April 1957	1	SPM	1712	1800	Congress
3	Jawaharlal Nehru	17 April 1957	13 January 1962	1 April 1962	1	SPM	1732	1810	Congress
4	Jawaharlal Nehru	1 April 1962		27 May 1964	1	SPM	787	787	Congress
5	Gulzari Lal Nanda	27 May 1964		9 June 1964	1	SPM	13	13	Congress
6	Lal Bahadur Shastri	9 June 1964		11 January 1966	1	SPM	581	581	Congress
7	Gulzari Lal Nanda	11 January 66		24 January 1966	1	SPM	13	13	Congress
8	Indira Gandhi	24 January 1966	13 January 1967	13 March 1967	1	SPM	353	413	Congress
9	Indira Gandhi	13 March 1967	27 December 1970	18 March 1971	1	SPM	1385	1466	Congress
10	Indira Gandhi	18 March 1971	10 February 1977	24 March 1977	1	SPM	2156	2198	Congress
11	Morarji Desai	24 March 1977	15 July 1979	28 July 1979	2	SC(MP)	843	856	Janata Party
12	Ch. Charan Singh	28 July 1979	20 August 1979	14 January 1980	2	MC	23	170	Janata Party Secular
13	Indira Gandhi	14 January 1980		31 October 1984	1	SPM	1752	1752	Congress
14	Rajiv Gandhi	31 October 1984	20 November 1984	31 December 1984	1	SPM	21	61	Congress
15	Rajiv Gandhi	31 December 1984	23 October 1989	2 December 1989	1	SPM	1788	1797	Congress
16	Vishwanath Pratap Singh	2 December 1989		10 November 1990	3	MC	343	343	Janata Dal-led NF
17	Chandra Shekhar	10 November 1990	6 March 1991	21 June 1991	1	SPMG	116	223	Samajwadi Janata Party
18	P. V. Narasimha Rao	21 June 1991	19 March 1996	16 May 1996	1	SPMG	1733	1791	Congress

(Continued)

Table 6. Continued.

No.	Name of prime minister	Date of swearing in	Date of resignation or dissolution of Lok Sabha or notification of elections whichever is earliest	Date of demitting office	Number of parties in the government (Lok Sabha only)	Type of government	Total number of days by Muller and Strom	Number of days by Woldendorp <i>et al.</i>	Party or leading party and coalition)
19	Atal Behari Vajpayee	16 May 1996	28 May 1996	1 June 1996	3	MC	12	16	BJP-led coalition
20	H. D. Deve Gowda	1 June 1996		21 April 1997	9	MC	109	109	Janata Dal-led UF
21	Inder Kumar Gujral	21 April 1997	28 November 1997	19 March 1998	10	MC	221	332	Janata Dal-led UF
22	Atal Behari Vajpayee	19 March 1998		20 April 1998 ^a	11	MC	32	32	BJP-led coalition
23	Atal Behari Vajpayee	20 April 1998		14 April 1999 ^b	10	MC	359	359	BJP-led coalition
24	Atal Behari Vajpayee	14 April 1999	17 April 1999	13 October 1999	9	MC	3	182	BJP-led coalition
25	Atal Behari Vajpayee	13 October 1999		5 February 2001 ^c	12	MC	479	479	BJP-led NDA
26	Atal Behari Vajpayee	5 February 2001		15 March 2001 ^d	11	MC	38	38	BJP-led NDA
27	Atal Behari Vajpayee	15 March 2001		22 July 2001 ^e	10	MC	129	129	BJP-led NDA
28	Atal Behari Vajpayee	22 July 2001		1 July 2002 ^f	11	MC	344	344	BJP-led NDA
29	Atal Behari Vajpayee	1 July 2002		23 December 2002 ^g	11	MC	175	175	BJP-led NDA
30	Atal Behari Vajpayee	23 December 2002		23 May 2003 ^h	11	MC	151	151	BJP-led NDA
31	Atal Behari Vajpayee	23 May 2003		8 September 2003 ⁱ	10	MC	108	108	BJP-led NDA
32	Atal Behari Vajpayee	8 September 2003		21 December 2003 ^j	11	MC	104	104	BJP-led NDA
33	Atal Behari Vajpayee	21 December 2003		30 December 2003 ^k	10	MC	9	9	BJP-led NDA
34	Atal Behari Vajpayee	30 December 2003		12 January 2004 ^l	9	MC	13	13	BJP-led NDA
35	Atal Behari Vajpayee	12 January 2004	29 February 2004	22 May 2004 ^m	8	MC	48	131	BJP-led NDA
36	Manmohan Singh	22 May 2004		24 July 2004 ⁿ	9	MC	63	63	Congress-led UPA
37	Manmohan Singh	24 July 2004		23 September 2006 ^o	8	MC	791	791	Congress-led UPA

38	Manmohan Singh	23 September 2006	2 March 2009	22 May 2009	7	MC	891	972	Congress-led UPA
39	Manmohan Singh	22 May 2009	–	–	6	MC	–	–	Congress-led UPA

Notes: Dates of swearing-in include not only legal swearing in but also the start of a new government by Woldendorp *et al.* (1993, 1998) and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006) criteria, e.g. after the exit of a coalition partner. See notes to Table 1 for type of government acronyms. I follow the West European definition of Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006) and the Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive (www.pol.umu.se/ccpd), and the cross-national definition of Woldendorp *et al.* (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. I further count independents as separate members of a coalition. I exclude parties which have a minister only from the Upper House. Due to the above reasons I 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. I do not count the addition of individual MPs to the ruling party as a 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. I calculate the total duration (in days) of the government by both Woldendorp *et al.* (1993, 1998) and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006). In the former case, I define it as the date of swearing in to the date of swearing in of the next government, and by Muller and Strom's definition, by the date of swearing in to the date of resignation or notification of fresh elections, or the change (a) above which does not involve resignation of the prime minister or an election. In each case I include the first date and exclude the second date mentioned in calculating duration.

Source: Same as Table 5.

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

^bAIADMK ministers resigned from the Union Council of Ministers.

^cPMK quits NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^dTrinamool Congress quits NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^eRLD joins the NDA, Ajit Singh sworn in as the cabinet minister.

^fPMK rejoins the Union Council of Ministers, Maneka Gandhi (Ind) dropped from the Union Council of Ministers. She continues to support the government.

^gNC quits the Union Council of Ministers.

^hRLD quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers, and IFDP joins the Union Council of Ministers.

ⁱTrinamool Congress joins the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^jDMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^kMDMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^lPMK quits the NDA and the Union Council of Ministers.

^mPrime Minister Vajpayee demits office.

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

^oTRS leaves the Union Council of Ministers and the UPA.

for 52 of the 65 years since independence in 1947, winning majorities until 1989 (except in 1977) with pluralities of the vote of 40 per cent and above, against a fragmented opposition. Even since 1989 it has maintained a vote share plurality in all seven elections. The Congress is a secular party that subscribes to a linguistically and culturally pluralist notion of Indian nationhood.

There are four other major categories of parties (each not necessarily constituting a coalition). I classify them as Hindu nationalist (the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, and the Shiv Sena), the Communist parties (the CPI(M), the CPI), the agrarian/lower-caste populist (the Janata Party, the Janata Dal and its offshoots like the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Biju Janata Dal, Janata Dal (Secular), Janata Dal (United), etc.) and ethnic/ethno-regional parties based on particular regional linguistic groups (DMK, AIADMK, SAD, TDP, AGP) or lower-caste blocs (BSP) or tribes (JMM) (Table 5, Notes, for acronyms used hereon). Except for the Congress, BJP and CPI (M), these are regional parties with a single-state stronghold.¹¹

The first four general elections to the Lok Sabha (Lower House), in 1952, 1957, 1962, and 1967, coincided with elections to all the state assemblies. In the first three of these, the Congress party won two-thirds majorities in the Lok Sabha on the basis of only vote share pluralities of 44–48 per cent. 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 leading to either two-party, one party versus a coalition, or two-coalition systems, i.e. bipolar systems. This bipolar consolidation was the key feature and driving force of the fragmentation of the national party system.¹² But this bipolar consolidation has been one of *multiple bipolarities* (e.g. 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. Duverger's law states that the first-past-the-post or single-member simple plurality (SMSP) 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.¹³ While Duverger's law applies essentially at the constituency level, where strong local/state parties exist as in a federal polity like India's where the states are linguistic and cultural entities reflecting such social cleavages, and where the division of powers makes state-level power politically attractive enough to form single-state parties, Duvergerian dynamics can lead to two-party or bipolar state party systems due to the consolidation of the state-level opposition to the principal party in a principal rival, whether a national or regional party,

while simultaneously leading to a national multi-party system because the state-level two-party systems do not consist of the same two parties (Rae, 1971).¹⁴

The major trends of 1989–2009 are the relative decline of the Congress, the rise of the BJP, and the rise of regional parties. In 1989, the erosion of the Congress party's vote plurality to below 40 per cent led to a situation where this no longer converted to a seat majority. This process has resulted in an evolving party system in which no party has achieved a majority in the seven elections since 1989, necessitating minority and/or coalition governments. The national party system has become increasingly fragmented since 1989 while party systems at the state level have become bipartisan or bipolar, hence less fragmented, in more and more states. The fragmentation of the party system since 1989 is shown by the index of the effective number of parties (Table 7).

There have been 12 cases of coalition and/or minority governments in India since independence (Tables 4 and 5) by my alternative criteria or 26 cases by standard criteria (Table 6), including all since 1989.

All the coalitions since 1996 have been inter-state territorial coalitions, that is, between parties based in different states. The period since 1991 has also seen intra-state alliances based on ideology (BJP–Shiv Sena) and based on territorial compatibility of three kinds. The first are intra-state alliances in which the regional party allies with a national party with the former getting most of both Lok Sabha and assembly seats.¹⁵ Second, the reverse of this pattern, viz., an alliance between a minor state party and a national party in which

Table 7. Effective number of parties in lower house elections.

S. No.	Year	Effective number of parties (votes)	Effective number of parties (seats)
1	1952	4.53	1.80
2	1957	3.98	1.76
3	1962	4.40	1.85
4	1967	5.19	3.16
5	1971	4.63	2.12
6	1977	3.40	2.63
7	1980	4.25	2.28
8	1984	3.99	1.69
9	1989	4.80	4.35
10	1991	5.10	3.70
11	1996	7.11	5.83
12	1998	6.91	5.28
13	1999	6.74	5.87
14	2004	7.60	6.50
15	2009	7.98	5.01

Source: See *Journal of the Indian School of Political Economy*, XV/1-2 (January–June 2003), Statistical Supplement, Tables 1.1–1.13, 293–307. For 2004, the index was calculated by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi; for 2009 by the author.

the latter gets most of both Lok Sabha and assembly seats, the key being territorial compatibility in which the national party does not contest in its ally's intra-state strongholds.¹⁶ Third, intra-state alliances in which the regional party contests fewer Lok Sabha seats and more assembly seats and its national party ally vice versa (BJP–Shiv Sena). The clear emphasis of coalitions has been on *territorial compatibility even at the expense of ideological compatibility*, particularly the BJP's alliances of 1998, 1999, and 2004, and the Congress alliances of 2004 and 2009, but even the United Front (UF) coalition of 1996. Coalitions have been driven by the imperative to aggregate votes to win and not by ideological cleavages except for Congress–BJP and BJP–Left differences on secularism.¹⁷

Coalition theory and India: minority coalitions viable due to institutional features and locked-in supporters?

Of early theories of coalition formation, power maximisation or office-seeking theories predict minimal winning coalitions because in such coalitions each member's share of the payoff is maximised.¹⁸ Early 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, and within this limiting condition, the minimum number of parties needed for a majority.

Neither set of these early theories predicts minority governments (which include minority coalitions) or surplus coalitions (with redundant partners, not necessary for a majority). However, 21 per cent of governments in 20 Western democracies over 1945–95, and 36 per cent of governments in 17 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 and 2). Minority coalitions have been 36 per cent (Table 1) or 33 per cent (Table 2) of all minority governments in stable democracies.

Later theorising argues that minority governments are signs of the largest party's strength and/or ideological centrality (Van Roozendaal, 1992; Crombez, 1996) and policy acceptability (Laver & Schofield, 1990/1998: 68–69).¹⁹ Strom (1990: 42–44) argues that minority governments form when the opposition can influence policy 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 *et al.*, 1994) point to the most viable government given country-specific institutional constraints, particularly the presence or absence of investiture votes. SC (NMP)s are more likely when a vote of confidence is an investiture requirement, and minority governments when there are only votes of no-confidence.

Vital for understanding the dynamics 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. 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. Formal minority governments can be like majority coalitions 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’.

We can summarise this discussion and argue that minority governments can be considered to be solutions from the standpoints of both the party/parties in the minority government and those in the opposition, in situations characterised by one or more of the following two features: (1) the minority government enjoys a near-majority and/or the opposition is ideologically divided, allowing it to survive and perhaps even be legislatively effective by being able to count on the support or abstention of varying parties in different confidence/no-confidence and legislative votes; (2) opposition parties can get policy payoffs since the minority government is vulnerable to pressure and calculating that participation will harm their future electoral prospects (incumbents tend to suffer at the next election, see Mitchell & Nyblade, 2008: 209), opt to forego its short-term benefits while negotiating influence over policy as the price of support.²⁰ Under plurality-rule, unlike in European-style proportional representation (PR), a small vote swing can hugely increase or decimate a party, potentially either putting it in power or destroying its chances. This would tend to encourage minority government rather than majority coalitions because greater electoral volatility in seats also holds out the chance of an opposition party coming into power in the next election either on its own or in a coalition.

The Indian record since 1989 is that in only two (1999, 2009) of the seven elections did the ruling party or coalition get re-elected, and that a minority government was formed after each of these elections.²¹ Additionally, a pivotal supporter can extract policy concessions.²² Therefore, there is greater incentive for post- and even pre-electoral allies, with a longer time horizon to stay in the legislative coalition but out of the executive coalition, remain ‘untainted’, and present themselves as credible alternatives in the next election.²³

While the viability of minority governments, particularly after 1999, could have been enhanced by traditions of accommodative politics, and by learning

from experiences, reflected in coalition management devices like a common minimum programme and a steering committee, the Indian system also has three features that incentivise either minority government formation and/or large and ideologically indiscriminate coalitions. They are as follows.

First, even when at the president's discretion, a vote of confidence is held in the event of a hung parliament, government parties have *only to show that the majority does not oppose them, rather than demonstrate a majority*, which facilitates minority governments by abstention of part of the opposition.

Second, as regards large and ideologically indiscriminate coalitions, an implication of the plurality-rule system's seat-vote disproportionality is that it would tend to give strong incentives to politicians to form pre-electoral coalitions (Laver & Schofield, 1990/1998: 204–206; Clark & Golder, 2006: 693; Golder, 2006: 198). National parties, that is, significantly multi-state parties like Congress and BJP, have to form pre-electoral coalitions with several regional parties (an India-specific feature of the party system) ignoring lesser ideological differences and also tacitly 'ceding' territory, if they are to win enough seats to stand a fair chance of forming a government.²⁴ Both national and regional parties have strong incentives for such pre-electoral coalitions if they face a common opponent in parliamentary and/or state assembly elections. This has not been studied, to my knowledge, and makes the Indian case of very large coalition governments of 6–12 parties unique. Thus, Golder (2006: 195, fn. 10) admits that her data set of 237 pre-electoral coalitions in 292 elections in 20 democracies over 1946–98 includes *only two* cases (German and Australian) of coalitions between parties with different geographical bases of support. Hence, the pattern of regional fragmentation into several single-state parties and the incentive for pre-electoral coalitions would tend to result in large pre-electoral coalitions and hence large, multi-party governments.

Third, I argue that there exists an India-specific feature of a something like a 'lock-in' effect incentivising minority governments because in a fragmented party system with a variety of regional parties, the formateur can be reasonably sure that external supporters, whether pre- or post-electoral, will not vote *against* its government in votes of no-confidence if: (a) such parties face the principal national opposition party and likely alternative formateur as their main rival in their stronghold state, and/or (b) if the principal national opposition party has basic ideological differences with them, and/or (c) the principal national opposition party's numbers and those of the parties with which it can possibly coalesce, that is, those that are not ideologically opposed and who are not their rivals at the state level, are too small to form an alternative coalition.

From this, I derive the following conclusion for the following reasons. I extend Strom's (1990) formal minority government concept to argue that

the legislative coalition formed in such cases, whether pre- or post-electoral, can be considered an SC (NMP) in the Indian case if (1) no single external supporter is pivotal for a majority and (2) external supporting parties 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 jeopardizing a state-level pre-electoral alliance upon which their parliamentary and state assembly strength substantially depends* or (3) opening a window for an even less favoured party to form an alternative national coalition government; in the case of a major national party as supporter this would mean opening space for its major rival to form an alternative government. Such supporting parties can be considered to be *locked-in* to a great degree and hence a *minority coalition dependent on such supporters is actually like an SC (NMP)*. Such mutual electoral interdependencies are rooted in the electoral coordination 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 can make 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 is often crucial for the major coalition partner against a well-matched rival.²⁵

To sum up, in addition to the two general circumstances favouring minority governments there are three India-specific institutional and party-systemic features favouring minority governments, and specifically, minority coalitions, and large, ideologically indiscriminate ones at that. These five circumstances, in the above order, can be listed as:

- (1) Near-majority for the formateur party and/or divided opposition.
- (2) External supporters stay out of government out of long-term electoral calculation in exchange for policy payoffs.
- (3) No majority needs to be demonstrated by government parties in votes of confidence at investiture.
- (4) Plurality-rule incentives for pre-electoral coalitions in the context of the fragmentation of the party system into one with several regional parties lead to large, pre-electoral coalitions.
- (5) Minority coalitions can resemble SC(NMP)s due to the substantially 'locked-in' character of supporting parties in the legislative coalition due to state-level electoral interdependencies and national-level rivalries between major national parties.²⁶

Two key regularities in the data on Indian coalition and/or minority governments

India diverges in two important ways from the international pattern of (i) the distribution of types of non-single party majority governments and (ii) the number of parties in coalition and/or minority governments (for both, see Tables 1 and 2 compared to Table 6 by standard Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006) and Woldendorp *et al.* (1998) definitions and Tables 4 and 5 based on the Indian legal definition).²⁷

First, there are *no* minimal winning coalitions, and one surplus coalition (majority party) while the rest are minority governments, of which all but two were minority coalitions, by both standard and Indian definitions. Eleven out of 12 non-single party majority governments, by the Indian definition, or 92 *per cent are minority governments* (Tables 4 and 5). By standard definitions (Table 6), there were 26 non-single party majority governments, of which 23 were minority coalitions, two single-party minority governments and one a surplus coalition (majority party), or 96 per cent minority governments compared to 26 per cent 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 per cent by standard definitions, Table 6), and no country has had so large a percentage of minority coalitions in minority governments (92 per cent by standard criteria, Table 6). If we compare India with other SMSP electoral system countries, UK, pre-1994 New Zealand and Canada, the common pattern has been domination by single-party majority governments, but India diverges from 1989, all governments since then being minority governments. 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 Indian minority governments have been minority coalitions. Federal Germany and Belgium, which use mixed-member and PR electoral formulas, have been dominated by minimal winning coalitions.²⁸

Second, the period since 1996, has seen seven coalition governments formed (by Indian legal definition, Table 4), or 21 (by standard definitions, Table 6). The last six (or by standard definitions, 21) have been among the *world's largest coalitions*; 6–12 parties by both my alternative and standard definitions (Tables 4 and 6).²⁹ Why have such large coalitions been formed?

Explaining the two regularities

If one examines closely the minority situations (after elections or party splits) which have arisen in India in the light of the five circumstances (two general and three India-specific), listed earlier, that incentivise the formation of

minority governments, including on all but two occasions, minority coalitions (Tables 4–6), we find that in each case several of the five circumstances apply.

In cases of short-lived governments like those of 1979 and 1990–91, when the Janata Party and the Janata Dal, respectively, split, the smaller faction that emerged sought to form a minority government with Congress support. The latter, in both cases, had no interest in being discredited in electoral terms by becoming a coalition partner in an inherently unstable arrangement which would make it dependent on a fickle faction of recent opponents. It refused to support the Janata Party (Secular) faction which had to resign within three weeks, and kept the 54-MP SJP government going for a few months, buying time before withdrawing support at an appropriate moment and precipitating an election. In these two cases, splits in the ruling parties created short-lived minority governments.

In 1991, when the largest party, the Congress, managed only a plurality of 232 seats, 40 short of a majority, and faced an opposition divided sharply on secularism between the Hindu nationalist BJP (120 seats) and centre-left National Front and Left Front parties, it formed a single-party minority government since no majority needed to be demonstrated at investiture and maneuvering from issue to issue was viable. In the vote of confidence, the Congress won 241 votes with 111 against (BJP) and 112 abstentions (by the Left and National Front).³⁰ The latter could be considered weakly locked-in because toppling the Congress would give space to their current major ideological opponent, the BJP. Circumstances 1, 3 and 5 making a minority government viable were present.

The formation of the seven other minority governments, all 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 I (supported by the Left) and UPA II, can also be explained by the presence of several of the five general or India-specific circumstances favouring minority governments. In all the following cases, it should be noted, the lack of the need to demonstrate a government parties' majority in the vote of confidence, made minority governments a viable option, there being no need to form majority coalitions. We outline below how the circumstances making minority government viable, applied in these seven cases.

In the NF, 1989–90 (146 seats), the secular Janata Dal (143 seats) did not share power with the BJP (85 seats), which would have also made it impossible for it to get Left support (52 seats), despite pre-electoral alliances with both, but took support separately from both the BJP and the Left, all wanting to keep the Congress out of power, building on the pre-electoral coalition in which the necessity of pooling anti-Congress votes in the Hindi-belt states, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Orissa overcame ideological differences with the BJP and

the Left. The BJP derived a policy payoff in not facing any obstacles to its anti-Muslim mobilisation campaign until it precipitated matters with a major Hindu nationalist mobilisation in late 1990.³¹ Thus, the government was the result of a pre-electoral coalition, long-term calculations by supporting parties and policy payoffs to at least the BJP. Circumstances 2, 3, 4, and 5 making minority coalitions viable were present.

The UF I and UF II governments were, likewise, separately supported by both the Congress and the Left to keep the BJP out of power.³² The UF had only 136 seats and the legislative coalition consisted of the Congress (141 seats) and the Left (40 seats), making the Congress pivotal. Taking the Congress in as a partner would not have been possible because of the need for Left support and vice-versa, due to the Congress-Left rivalry in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, as well as due to the fact that the Congress was the principal rival of some UF state party partners like the TDP, TMC, DMK, and AGP. The government was the result of divisions in the non-government party space and long-term calculations by supporting parties to remain outside the government as well as the fact that the Congress and the Left could not possibly support a BJP-led alternative. The Congress, despite its pivotal position, and the Left were, therefore, weakly locked in until fresh elections were felt to be feasible. Circumstances 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 making large minority coalitions viable were present.

In the BJP-led coalition of 1998–99, some parties (Shiv Sena, SMT, BJD, AIADMK) were pre-electoral allies, and the key post-electoral supporter, TDP, opted to support the BJP primarily because its state-level rival was the Congress.³³ The BJP-led executive coalition had only 243 seats while the legislative coalition had another 39 seats, making the 12-seat TDP pivotal. The latter opted for supporting the BJP from outside in 1998 and again in 1999 despite becoming a pre-electoral ally in the NDA, 1999–2004, to both weaken the Congress and not lose its minority Muslim voters by being in government with the Hindu nationalists, and won policy payoffs for its support with generous allocations for its state. The government was a result of a pre-electoral coalition and long-term calculation by the external supporters to remain outside in return for policy payoffs as well as the ‘locked-in’ character of the TDP’s external support, despite the latter’s pivotal position, due to its principal opponent in its state being the Congress. Circumstances 2, 3, 4, and 5 making large minority coalitions viable were present.

The two BJP-led coalitions’ ability to attract considerable post-electoral support as well as the relatively large number of pre-electoral allies opting for external support (Table 5) was due to policy payoffs combined with not wanting to be ‘tainted’ by partnering the BJP in government as well as wanting to weaken their principal state-level rival, the Congress. In the NDA government, the fact that the Congress’ numbers rendered it implausible as

the nucleus of any alternative coalition, left the BJP as the only viable formateur, and hence contributed to 'lock-in', and none of the supporters was pivotal.

The NDA government was in effect an SC(NMP) rather than what it technically was, a minority coalition, its executive coalition being 265 seats. This was because of the BJP's surplus majority *legislative* coalition (303 seats), with its pre-electoral allies who opted to be external supporters, the TDP, INLD, SDF, HVC, ABLTC, and MADMK, who were formally part of the NDA coalition and accepted its manifesto, the National Agenda for Governance. That none of the parties were pivotal, combined with the fact that the TDP (29 seats) and INLD (5 seats) at least, in their 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, meant that *they were 'locked-in' 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 'locked-in' to the BJP by mutual electoral interdependence. So the argument of lock-in applies to the *executive* coalition too and therefore large coalitions can be stable! Circumstances 2, 3, 4, and 5 making large minority coalitions viable were present.

The UPA I, 2004–09, took the external support of the Left to form a government as both agreed on secularism and wanted to keep the BJP out but a Congress-Left coalition was considered unstable by both due to both state-level rivalry in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, and differences on economic liberalisation.³⁴ The Left's support of the Congress was due to its greater aversion to the BJP partly through its learning experience of the period since 1989, including the 1996–98 UF experience, as it became more amenable to tactical coalitions to keep out its least favoured party. The Left's policy payoff was that it was able to check economic liberalisation and influence foreign policy, as reflected in the Common Minimum Programme and in the first four years of the government, despite alternative sources of support offered initially by the SP and BSP which the Congress did not take up until its split with the Left in UPA I's final year, due to its reluctance to cede turf to these parties in the largest state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) with its 80 seats.³⁵ The UPA I, though a formal minority coalition (executive coalition 215 seats, legislative coalition 327 seats including Left, 59, SP, 36, and BSP, 19), thus also resembled an SC(NMP) because its legislative coalition included the Left, SP and BSP, none being pivotal and none of which could afford to support the BJP on either ideological grounds or for fear of alienating the significant Muslim vote (18–25 per cent) in their stronghold states (UP for SP, BSP, West Bengal and Kerala for the Left) and hence could be considered 'locked-in' barring exceptional circumstances of conflict with the Congress, not

foreseeable at the outset.³⁶ Circumstances 2, 3, 4, and 5 making large minority coalitions viable were present.

The UPA II was like the NDA in reverse since the BJP's numbers (116) made it implausible as the nucleus of an alternative coalition. The executive coalition was 257 seats and the legislative coalition of supporting parties added another 61 seats including SP, 23 and BSP, 21, none being pivotal. Their ideological antipathy and state-level rivalry with the BJP and the lack of an alternative to a Congress-led coalition, led former electoral opponents like the SP, BSP, RJD, and JD(S) offering support to the Congress that was substantially of a 'locked-in' character for reasons of being constrained from offering support to the BJP for reasons of the latter being a political opponent at the state level, and fear of loss of Muslim votes, besides standing for secularism in principle, thus making it more like an SC(NMP) than a minority coalition, with supporting parties having little alternative and none being pivotal.³⁷ Circumstances 1, 3, 4, and 5 making minority coalitions viable were present.

Since 1996, the fragmentation of the party system, analysed earlier, resulted in both major national parties, Congress and BJP, getting 206 or less seats (majority mark, 273) in all elections since 1996, and under 150 seats in 2004, with the rest of parliament dominated by regional parties which did not exceed 46 seats (the leading party of the UF governments, 1996–98, the Janata Dal), or 36 seats (the SP in 2004), being typically under 20 seats, necessitating large, multi-party coalitions which still needed external support. Given the relative strengths of parties in the elections from 1996 to 2009, the minority coalitions needed 6–12 parties even to get within hailing distance of a majority and hence a semblance of stability.

The formation of each such minority coalition can be explained, as above, by the factors listed earlier that conduce to multi-party minority coalitions in which the formateur and many post- and even pre-electoral allies prefer such an arrangement. The SC(NMP) character of the legislative coalition of the NDA, UPA I, and UPA II was due to the *mutual electoral interdependence* of the formateur party and the leading supporting parties of this legislative coalition due to state-level electoral arithmetic. This gave the BJP in the NDA coalition and the Congress in UPA I, and in UPA II, the confidence that most of their external supporters were substantially 'locked-in' in that they had little option to withdraw support, and even if they did, could at worst abstain but not join the coalition led by the other major party. The Left's least preferred party, nationally, on which it had differences on both secularism and economic policy, was the BJP. The SP, RJD and even the BSP could not ally with the BJP because of their dependence on Muslim votes in UP and Bihar, and position on secularism, and in 2009 the same applied to the TDP and Trinamul Congress. Hence, the Congress can possibly have pre-electoral alliances with them or at least be sure of these parties as external supporters or

abstainers in a vote of confidence. Likewise, the TDP, INLD, AGP, Shiv Sena, BJD, and SAD face the Congress as their principal state-level opponent and hence cannot ally with it but can possibly be pre-electoral allies of, or be depended on by, the BJP as external supporters or abstainers. For those parties that might opt to be external supporters of a Congress-led or BJP-led coalition, as the case may be, it pays to extract policy payoffs for their states while remaining external supporters, particularly if the formateur does not want to include them or if there is no alternative coalition possible.

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 consequences of Indian political/electoral institutions such as the SMSP electoral system, federalism, multiple bipolarities in state party systems, several strong state parties, and the discretionary and plurality-rule vote of confidence.

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, expectations of instability, and state-level rivalries that incentivise alliances of regional parties with either the BJP or the Congress, and which give the two national parties the confidence that *some* regional parties, are substantially 'locked-in' by state-level electoral interdependencies and so will not support the other coalition, has made minority coalitions viable since 1996. These minority coalitions resemble SC(NMP)s due to this 'locked-in' character of supporting parties. This argument holds even if one views minority governments and minority coalitions by the literature's standard definitions as in Table 6, which breaks up the NDA and UPA I governments into multiple governments. All, however, remain minority coalitions and hence need to be explained, and the above explanation of the viability of minority coalitions holds. It also gives support to both Strom's (1990) argument that some (formal) minority governments can be like majority coalitions, and to neo-institutionalist arguments in the literature that explain minority governments due to their being the most viable given country-specific institutional constraints and incentives (Bergman, 1993; Strom *et al.*, 1994), due to their reflecting, variously, case-by-case, one or more of the following - the largest party's strength and/or ideological

centrality (Van Roozendaal, 1992; Crombez, 1996) and policy acceptability (Laver & Schofield, 1990/1998: 68–69; Strom, 1990: 42–44).

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Notes

1. The early scholarly work on coalition politics in India focused on the coalition governments in the States from 1967 to 1974. For pioneering theoretically informed work, see Bueno de Mesquita (1975) and Mitra (1978). For more recent, theoretically informed, work analysing the post-1989 period, see Wyatt (1999), Sridharan (1999, 2003, 2004b, 2005), Nikolenyi (2002, 2004), Adeney and Saez (2005) and Macmillan (2005). For detailed accounts sensitive to the federal dimension and to history, see Arora (2000, 2002), Singh (2004a) and particularly, Chakrabarty (2005), for a comprehensive bibliography on coalition politics in India.
2. I take into account the government formed after the 2009 elections for purposes of counting the number, types of, and number of parties in, governments.
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. I acknowledge use of the Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on 15 May 2008, and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006).
6. 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 above, and given the large coalitions of 6–12 parties in the post-1996 period, then we get a very large number of separate governments, e.g. 11 for the NDA government of 1999–2004 (Table 6), from what is legally one government with the same prime minister. This *obscures* the *strategic* behaviour of the prime minister and leading party in such coalitions.
7. In other words, one government by the alternative (Indian legal) definition could have two or more coalitions of parties by standard Woldendorp *et al.* (1998) and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006) definitions.
8. This is almost identical to Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006: 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 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 4) 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. 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!

9. I classify a government's status by what it began as (e.g. government that began as a minority government is classified as such even if it changed status to a majority government by merging defectors into the ruling party/ies, *so long as it does not add to the number of parties*, thereby remaining the same government even under standard international definitions. This is because it shows that a minority government can secure and extend its duration by change of status to majority status while remaining the same government by the Indian and international definitions. Some minority governments have survived by such means without any change in party composition (Congress 1991–96).
10. At the national level (Table 4) there is only one surplus coalition (majority party). The literature tends to use the terms 'surplus majority coalition' (Laver & Schofield, 1990/1998) and 'oversized coalitions' (Strom, 1990; Volden & Carrubba, 2004) synonymously to mean what I call surplus coalitions (following Woldendorp *et al.*, 1998). I define, for the discussion on India and for Tables 4–6, surplus coalitions (no majority party) 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 surplus coalitions (majority party) 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 1–3).
11. 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 recognisable 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.
12. For an account and explanation of the Duvergerian dynamic of bipolarisation at the district and state levels, see Chhibber and Murali (2006). For a view that Duverger's law does not apply at the district level, see Diwakar (2007); however, the latter's argument is consistent with state-level bipolar, if not two-party systems.
13. See Duverger (1963) for the full argument.
14. See Sridharan (1997, 2002) for a detailed version of this argument for India.
15. 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, RJD–Congress in 2004, and JD(U)–BJP in 2004.
16. Examples are the BJP–Lok Shakti in Karnataka in 1998 and 1999, the BJP–Samata in Bihar over 1996–99, the BJP–HVC in HP, and the Congress–JMM–smaller parties in 2004.
 17. For a detailed overview of state-level coalition politics in India, see Sridharan (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004a). 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).
 18. For seminal theorising 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 theorising 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 most recently Mitchell and Nyblade (2008). For more recent comprehensive analyses see Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006), Laver and Schofield (1990/1998), Budge and Keman (1990), Strom (1990), Laver and Shepsle (1996).
 19. See Muller *et al.* (2008: 19–25) for survey of the findings of research on the influence of structural, preference and institutional characteristics on the types of government formed.
 20. See Laver and Schofield (1990/1998: 66–81). Mitchell and Nyblade (2008: 232) support the above analysis of minority government formation in their recent and comprehensive survey of the determinants of government type.
 21. It is also important to note that the BJP-led coalition re-elected in 1999 was not the same coalition as in 1998, switching and adding important partners. The right-wing BJP and the Left both supported the left-of-centre National Front government of 1989 from outside, the BJP coming to power later in 1998 and 1989. The Congress supported the Chandra Shekhar government in 1990, and formed a government after the 1991 elections. The AIADMK supported the Congress from outside in 1991 and became a part of the BJP-led government in 1998.
 22. Two prominent examples are those of the TDP supporting the NDA government of 1999–2004 from outside and extracting considerable allocations for its Andhra Pradesh state, and the Left Front supporting the Congress-led UPA government from 2004–08 and extracting policy concessions on slowing down free market reforms.
 23. Macmillan (2005: 23–24) makes this point, in the Indian context, citing the NDA government, about parties wishing to remain ‘untainted’ by remaining outside the executive.
 24. For the incentives of India’s regional parties to coalesce with national parties, see Sridharan (2003: 135–52).
 25. For details of the patterns of coalitions and hence of mutual electoral interdependencies at the state level since 1989, see Sridharan (2005).
 26. Manor (1995: 58) has made the point that some chief ministers find it useful to govern with a minority to discipline their own parties; an analogous incentive could apply to national minority governments. Adeney and Saez (2005: 5–6) cite Tsebelis’ (2002) veto players argument that significant departures from the *status quo* are impossible when veto players are many and they have ideological differences, to argue that the stability of large coalitions like the NDA are not necessarily an aberration.

27. The figures in Tables 3–6 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.
28. The Swiss case of near-total domination of surplus coalitions is also exceptional but that is not really comparable because the cabinet is not responsible to the legislature.
29. The other largest cases being two of 10 parties (one of which lasted three years) and one of nine parties in Israel, one of seven parties in Italy and of up to six parties in Belgium). Data from Woldendorp *et al.* (1998), and for Israel from <http://www.knesset.gov.il/faction/eng/FactionGovernmenteng.asp> and from Parliamentary Democracy Data Archive, <http://www.pol.umu.se/ccpd/Database.htm> accessed on 28 May 2008, and Muller and Strom (2000/2003/2006).
30. In 1996, the BJP-led government formed a 12-day minority coalition but could not muster the support to face a confidence vote and resigned.
31. For an account of the NF government, see Chakrabarty (2005: 138–144) and in more detail, Jha (1993: 132–222).
32. For details, see Chakrabarty (2005: 144) and Singh (2004b).
33. For the BJP's coalition-building, see Sridharan (2005) for a state-wise account, and for events, see Arora (2000), Singh (2004b), Chakrabarty (2005: 168–201), and Muralidharan (1999).
34. For events, see Ramakrishnan (2004).
35. For the Common Minimum Programme, see Athreya (2004).
36. Such exceptional circumstances as the Congress–Left clash over the Indo–US nuclear deal were not foreseeable at government formation in 2004. Ending the BJP's hold on power was the top priority then for both Congress and Left.
37. It may be added that some regional parties like the BJD (Orissa) and INLD (Haryana) dropped the BJP as an ally before the 2009 election as they did not need it in their state or could not accommodate its demands and because it was not seen as a potential winner nationally.

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