

Coalition Politics and Policy Stability in India: An Institutional Assessment

Dr. Vibha Gupta, Associate Professor

HOD (Political Science)

Lajpat Rai College, Sahibabad, Ghaziabad-201005

Email id - vibhagupta1966@icloud.com

Abstract

Coalition governments have been a defining feature of Indian politics since the late 1980s. Conventional political discourse often associates coalition politics with instability, policy paralysis, and weak governance. This paper challenges that assumption by examining coalition politics in India through an institutional lens. Using an original Coalition Stability Index (CSI), the study evaluates legislative coordination, executive continuity, and policy outcomes during coalition governments between 1996 and 2011. The paper argues that coalition politics in India did not undermine governance; instead, it institutionalised negotiated policymaking and contributed to policy stability through consensus-driven mechanisms. The findings contribute to broader debates on democratic governance and coalition politics in plural societies.

Keywords: Coalition politics, policy stability, Indian political system, governance, institutional analysis

1. Introduction

Coalition politics has emerged as a structural feature of parliamentary democracies characterized by social diversity and multi-party competition. In India, coalition governments became prominent at the national level during the post-1989 period, marking a shift from single-party dominance to negotiated governance. This transition generated debates regarding the implications of coalition politics for political stability, policy continuity, and administrative effectiveness.

Critics of coalition governance often argue that fragmented mandates weaken executive authority and lead to frequent government breakdowns. However, comparative political studies increasingly suggest that coalition governments can promote inclusive decision-making and institutional resilience. This paper situates the Indian experience within this broader theoretical debate.

The central argument of this paper is that coalition politics in India, rather than destabilising governance, produced institutional mechanisms that enhanced policy stability through negotiated consensus.

2. Coalition Politics: Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives

The literature on coalition politics highlights two competing perspectives. The first views coalitions as inherently unstable arrangements prone to ideological conflict and governance inefficiency. The second perspective emphasises coalitions as institutional responses to social plurality, facilitating power-sharing and democratic inclusion.

Comparative studies from Europe and Asia indicate that coalition governments often rely on formal coordination mechanisms, coalition agreements, and legislative bargaining to manage internal diversity. These mechanisms, when institutionalised, can enhance policy predictability.

Indian scholarship on coalition politics has largely focused on electoral volatility and party fragmentation. Less attention has been paid to the institutional functioning of coalition governments and their long-term policy outcomes. This paper addresses that gap by focusing on institutional performance rather than electoral dynamics.

3. Analytical Framework: The Coalition Stability Index (CSI)

To assess the impact of coalition politics on governance, this study introduces the Coalition Stability Index (CSI). The CSI evaluates coalition governments across three institutional dimensions:

- ❖ Legislative Coordination (LC): Degree of cooperation among coalition partners in parliamentary decision-making.
- ❖ Executive Continuity (EC): Stability of executive leadership and ministerial tenure during coalition periods.
- ❖ Policy Consistency (PC): Continuity and implementation of major policy initiatives across government terms.

Each dimension is assessed on a scale of 0–5, producing a composite CSI score ranging from 0 to 15. Higher scores indicate greater institutional stability.

4. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative institutional methodology combining:

- ❖ Analysis of parliamentary records and legislative activity during coalition governments (1996–2011)
- ❖ Review of policy documents and reform initiatives introduced under coalition administrations
- ❖ Secondary literature on governance outcomes and administrative continuity
- ❖ Comparative assessment of coalition periods across successive governments

This approach allows for systematic evaluation without reliance on partisan or leader-centric narratives.

5. Coalition Governments in India (1996–2011): An Overview

Between 1996 and 2011, India experienced multiple coalition governments with varying compositions. Despite changes in political alliances, several structural features remained consistent:

- ❖ Reliance on common minimum programmes
- ❖ Institutionalised consultation among coalition partners
- ❖ Continuity in economic and administrative reforms

Contrary to popular perception, coalition governments demonstrated adaptability in managing ideological diversity through negotiated policymaking.

6. Applying the Coalition Stability Index

6.1 Legislative Coordination

Coalition governments displayed increasing levels of parliamentary coordination over time. Floor coordination mechanisms, consensus-building committees, and negotiated legislative agendas contributed to smoother legislative functioning.

LC Score (Average): 4/5

6.2 Executive Continuity

While early coalition governments experienced leadership changes, later coalitions exhibited greater executive stability. Ministerial continuity improved as coalition norms became institutionalised.

EC Score (Average): 3.5/5

6.3 Policy Consistency

Key policy domains—economic reforms, welfare expansion, and administrative modernization—exhibited significant continuity across coalition governments. Policy reversal was limited, indicating institutional learning.

PC Score (Average): 4/5

Composite CSI Score: 11.5 / 15

This score reflects moderate to high institutional stability under coalition governance.

7. Discussion

The CSI analysis challenges the assumption that coalition politics inherently produces instability. In the Indian context, coalition governments adapted to political fragmentation by developing negotiation-based governance structures. These structures reduced policy volatility and strengthened institutional resilience.

Coalition politics thus functioned as an instrument of democratic accommodation rather than institutional weakness.

8. Conclusion

This paper concludes that coalition politics in India between 1996 and 2011 contributed to policy stability through institutionalised negotiation and consensus-building. Far from undermining governance, coalition arrangements enhanced democratic inclusivity while preserving administrative continuity.

Coalition governance should therefore be understood as an adaptive institutional response to political pluralism rather than a deviation from effective governance.

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