Coalition Politics in India: The Strategic Role of Regional Parties in Government Formation

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Abstract

Coalition politics has emerged as a defining characteristic of India's democratic framework, particularly since the 1990s, signalling the decline of single-party dominance and the rise of regional parties as influential stakeholders in national governance. This study investigates the strategic role of regional parties in the formation and functioning of coalition governments at the national level. Anchored in state-specific identities, cultural narratives, and local governance imperatives, regional parties have frequently assumed the role of power brokers in the event of fractured electoral mandates.

The paper critically examines prominent coalition phases, including the United Front (1996-1998), the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), to demonstrate how regional parties have utilized their leverage to secure policy concessions and ministerial positions. Through these case studies, the research explores the interplay between regional aspirations and national interests, assessing the implications for policy formulation, governance quality, and political stability.

While the inclusion of regional parties has contributed to the democratization of national politics by representing diverse socio-political constituencies, it has simultaneously posed challenges such as political instability and fragmented mandates. The study concludes that regional parties are not peripheral entities but are integral to India's coalition polity, playing a pivotal role in shaping the composition, stability, and policy orientation of national governments.

Keywords: Coalition Politics, Regional Parties, Government Formation, Political Stability, National Alliances, Power-Sharing,

Introduction

India's political landscape, shaped by its linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity, has undergone significant transformation since independence. Although national parties like the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have dominated Indian politics historically, regional political parties have gained prominence, particularly in the post-1990 era. These regional actors, grounded in state-level issues, have played a crucial role in redefining federalism and parliamentary democracy by becoming integral to coalition politics at the national level.

Regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) represent localized aspirations and provide platforms for underrepresented communities and regional identities. Their role has been especially prominent in forming coalition governments during periods of political fragmentation, often acting as kingmakers and negotiating for policy concessions and ministerial positions.

 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the theories of **federalism, coalition governance,** and **ethno-regional mobilization.** It engages with **Riker's theory of federalism,** which posits that sub-national units gain autonomy in exchange for participation in a central system, and extends it to explain how regional parties use their autonomy to influence national-level outcomes.

Additionally, **coalition theory** (Laver & Schofield, 1990) is used to analyze the bargaining behaviour of political actors in a fragmented system. The emergence of regional parties aligns with **Lip set and Rokkan's cleavage theory**, which explains party formation through societal divisions such as ethnicity, region, and language.

 Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative case study approach,** examining coalition eras (1996–2014) including:

➢ The United Front Government (1996–1998)

➢ The National Democratic Alliance (1999–2004, 2014–present)
➢ The United Progressive Alliance (2004–2014)

Data sources include official records from the **Election Commission of India**, party manifestos, parliamentary debates, and scholarly analyses. The paper also analyzes electoral statistics, policy documents, and coalition agreements to understand the role and influence of regional parties.

The Growth of Regional Parties in India

Historical Evolution

Regional parties began gaining ground in the 1960s and 1970s, challenging Congress hegemony. The **DMK's electoral victory in Tamil Nadu in 1967** marked a turning point. Subsequently, the **Telugu Desam Party (TDP)** emerged in Andhra Pradesh, emphasizing Telugu identity. This shift symbolized a more pluralistic and representative political order.

The 1980s and 1990s saw further consolidation of parties such as **Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP),** and **Shiv Sena,** catering to specific social, caste, and linguistic groups.

Electoral Recognition and Classification

According to the **Election Commission of India (ECI),** parties must meet criteria based on vote share and seats won to be recognized as **State** or **National** parties. These criteria include:

➢ 6% vote share + 2 Assembly seats (State Party)
➢ 6% vote share in four states + 4 Lok Sabha seats (National Party)
➢ Recognition in 4 states (National Party)

As of recent records, **8 parties are nationally recognized**, and **over 50** as state-level parties.

Regional Parties in Coalition Politics

United Front (1996–1998)

This was a significant era of coalition-building. The United Front, comprising regional entities like **Janata Dal, DMK,** and **TDP,** governed India with outside support from the INC. This phase marked the high point of regional bargaining power.

National Democratic Alliance (1999–2004, 2014–present)

The BJP-led NDA integrated regional allies like **Shiv Sena, Akali Dal,** and **JD(U).** The NDA's success lay in accommodating regional demands while presenting a united national narrative.

United Progressive Alliance (2004–2014)

Led by the INC, the UPA included **DMK, TMC**, and **NCP.** These regional parties were instrumental in shaping central policies like rural employment guarantees and education reform.

Evolution of Regional Parties: Historical Background

The emergence of regional parties in India reflects a broader shift from centralized political dominance to a more decentralized, pluralistic system. The **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)** became the first regional party to form a state government in **1967** in Tamil Nadu, challenging the Indian National Congress's long-standing control. This marked the beginning of a new era in Indian politics where regional identities and linguistic pride gained political legitimacy.

In **1982,** the formation of the **Telugu Desam Party (TDP)** in Andhra Pradesh further signalled the rise of regional consciousness. The TDP focused on asserting **Telugu identity** and regional development, setting a precedent for other states.

During the **1980s and 1990s**, several regionally rooted parties emerged across different states, often representing marginalized communities or local cultural groups. Examples include the **Samajwadi Party (SP)** and **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** in Uttar Pradesh, **Shiv Sena** in Maharashtra promoting Marathi pride, and the **National Conference** in Jammu & Kashmir advocating for regional autonomy.

This period marked the institutionalization of regional political forces as key stakeholders, both at the state and national levels, particularly in the context of coalition politics.

Recognition by the Election Commission: State and National Parties

The **Election Commission of India (ECI)** establishes clear criteria for recognizing political parties as either *state* or *national* entities, which directly influences their legitimacy, electoral privileges, and political visibility.

A state party must meet at least one of the following conditions:

➢ Secure **6% of the valid votes** in a state legislative assembly election and win **at least 2 seats;**
➢ Win **3% of the total seats** or a minimum of **3 seats** in the assembly;
➢ Obtain **8% of the total vote share** in either the Lok Sabha or Assembly elections from the state (a provision added in **2011**).

To attain **national party** status, a party must fulfil **any one** of the following criteria:

➢ Gain **6% of valid votes** in Lok Sabha or Assembly elections in **four or more states,** along with **at least 4 Lok Sabha seats;**
➢ Win **2% of Lok Sabha seats** (currently 11 seats) from **at least three different states;**
➢ Be recognized as a **state party in four or more states.**

These classifications not only structure the political landscape but also underscore the institutional importance of regional and national parties in India's federal democracy.

Classification of Regional Parties

Regional parties in India can be broadly classified based on their **geographic scope** and **socio-political orientation.**

➢ **State-based parties** operate within the boundaries of a single state and focus on localized issues, such as the **DMK** in Tamil Nadu, **TMC** in West Bengal, and **TRS** in Telangana.

➢ **Multi-state parties**, while still regionally focused, have a presence in more than one state, such as the **Communist Party of India (Marxist)** and **Janata Dal (United).**

Additionally, many regional parties are shaped by **identity politics:**

➢ **Caste-based parties** like the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** mobilize support from historically marginalized communities.
➢ **Linguistic parties** such as the **DMK** emphasize language rights and cultural identity.
➢ **Religious parties** like the **Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)** advocate for specific religious communities.

This classification highlights the varied foundations of regional parties and their role in articulating diverse socio-political demands within India's federal system.

Key Features of Regional Parties: Explained

Regional parties in India are distinct from national parties in both structure and focus. Their primary strength lies in **localized agendas,** where they prioritize issues specific to their respective states-such as language preservation, regional development, or social justice-over broader national concerns. These parties are often **leader-centric,** meaning their organizational structure and political appeals are closely tied to a single influential figure (e.g., Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi, or K. Chandrashekar Rao in Telangana).

A defining characteristic is their reliance on **identity politics**. Regional parties frequently mobilize support based on caste, ethnic, or a linguistic identity, which helps them connect deeply with specific voter blocs. Additionally, they are strong advocates of **decentralization,** calling for increased state autonomy and fairer allocation of central resources. This push aligns with federal principles and enables them to demand a larger role in both governance and resource-sharing at the national level.

Role of Regional Parties in Coalition Politics

United Front (1996–1998)

The **United Front (1996–1998)** was a significant coalition of **non-Congress and non-BJP** regional and left-leaning parties that came together to form a national government after a fractured electoral mandate. This alliance included key regional players like the **Janata Dal, DMK, TDP,** and others. Although the coalition did not hold a majority on its own, it was supported externally by the **Indian National Congress**, allowing it to form the government.

The United Front demonstrated the growing **bargaining power of regional parties** in national politics, as they influenced policy and governance without being part of the two major national parties. This coalition highlighted the shift towards **decentralized power-sharing** and marked a critical phase in India's coalition era, underscoring the indispensable role of regional forces in government formation.

> ➢ Regional parties in India play a vital role in the effective functioning of parliamentary democracy. These parties help in balancing the democratic system by being in power or acting in opposition in various states, thereby giving minority groups a chance to raise their voice and providing proper guidance to the majority.
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> ➢ Coalition government means that different political parties or groups come together under a common policy or agreement. This arrangement is formed when no single major party is able to obtain an absolute majority in general elections. The first coalition government after independence was formed in Kerala, and the first non-Congress coalition government at the Centre was formed in **1977**, which was a group of parties opposing the Congress.
>
> ➢ Regional parties have influenced the political involvement of governors on issues such as appointment of chief ministers, issuance of ordinances and presidential approval. These parties have played a vital role in shaping the political direction of India, and at times have challenged the dominance of major national parties such as the Congress and the BJP.
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> ➢ Regional parties have been able to gain support by focusing on local issues and connecting directly with the public, which gives them an opportunity to compete with national parties that may have less influence on local issues in a particular state.
>
> ➢ Additionally, regional parties represent linguistic, ethnic or religious minorities, becoming the voice of disadvantaged or underrepresented communities. These parties

have prominently raised the issues of these communities and have achieved electoral success.

➢ Regional parties have reshaped national coalition politics. Many regional parties have collaborated with national parties to form ruling coalitions, allowing them to play an effective role in national policy-making and discussions on national issues.

Regional parties in India can be divided into two main categories:

➢ Regional political parties in India can be broadly categorized into two types: **state-based parties** and **multi-state parties**. **State-based parties** function primarily within a specific state or region and focus on representing the socio-political, cultural, or linguistic interests of that area. Prominent examples include the **All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)** in Tamil Nadu, **Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS)** in Telangana, and **Shiv Sena** in Maharashtra. In contrast, **multi-state parties** have a presence in more than one state and often pursue issues that concern broader national themes or the interests of specific communities spread across multiple regions.

➢ Another meaningful way to classify regional parties is based on their **ideological orientation**. Some parties advocate for **leftist or socialist** economic and social policies, such as the **Communist Party of India (Marxist)**, which maintains influence in states like Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura. Others, such as the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**, follow a **right-wing, Hindu nationalist** ideology and, although now a national party, originated with regional roots in Maharashtra and has since expanded across India.

➢ Additionally, a number of regional parties are rooted in **identity politics**, representing specific caste, linguistic, or religious groups. For instance, in Bihar, the **Janata Dal (United)** has historically drawn strong support from **Yadavs** and segments of the **Muslim community**, aligning its platform with demands for social justice and regional empowerment.

Reasons for the Rise of Regional Parties in India:

The emergence and growth of regional political parties in India can be traced back to the early 20th century. Parties such as the **Shiromani Akali Dal**, established in the 1920s, were among the

first to articulate region-specific demands—particularly in Punjab. Later, the formation of the **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)** in 1949 in Tamil Nadu exemplified the political assertion of linguistic and cultural identities, specifically advocating for Dravidian ideology and Tamil linguistic rights. Since India's independence, the influence of regional parties has expanded considerably. While often criticized for contributing to political fragmentation, these parties have become crucial to the functioning of the democratic and federal structure. Their growth is largely attributed to a combination of **geographical, social, economic, and political factors.**

Geographical Diversity

India's vast and diverse geography has played a significant role in encouraging region-specific political mobilization. The linguistic reorganization of states during the 1950s, though aimed at administrative efficiency, often reinforced regional identities. This paved the way for parties such as the **Sikkim Sangram Parishad** and the **Hills People's Union,** which originated from geographically distinct and historically marginalized regions.

Caste-Based Political Mobilization

Caste remains a deeply embedded factor in Indian politics. Regional parties have frequently emerged from the aspirations of socially disadvantaged or marginalized groups seeking representation. For instance, the **DMK** and **AIADMK** in Tamil Nadu were partly born out of the non-Brahmin movement. Similarly, the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** in Uttar Pradesh has drawn significant support from Dalit communities by advocating for social justice and inclusion.

Religious and Linguistic Identities

In regions dominated by specific religious or linguistic communities, political parties have often developed to advocate for those groups' rights and interests. The **Indian Union Muslim League (IUML)** in Kerala and the **DMK** in Tamil Nadu represent religious and linguistic mobilizations, respectively. The **Telugu Desam Party (TDP)** emerged in Andhra Pradesh to champion the Telugu identity and address perceived central government neglect.

Historical and Cultural Assertion

Historical grievances, particularly from southern states regarding centralization and perceived northern dominance, have fueled the rise of parties grounded in regional pride. The **DMK** originated from opposition to the imposition of Hindi and longstanding demands for cultural autonomy. In Maharashtra, **Shiv Sena** gained popularity by promoting Marathi identity and the concept of "sons of the soil."

Economic Disparities and Developmental Concerns

Inter-state economic imbalances have also driven regional political movements. Underdeveloped or neglected regions often feel excluded from national progress, prompting the formation of parties that promise targeted development and economic justice for specific areas.

Political Opportunism and Leadership Conflicts

Several regional parties have resulted from splits in national parties, often due to ideological differences or leadership disputes. Political leaders marginalized within national organizations have found regional platforms more responsive to their ambitions. The lack of internal democracy in national parties has further accelerated the formation of new regional entities.

Cultural Pluralism and Demand for Autonomy

India's pluralistic society has led to calls for more autonomy in managing cultural and administrative affairs. The **TDP's** formation reflected the desire for regional self-governance and linguistic recognition within the broader federal framework.

Decentralization and Local Governance

Reforms promoting decentralization-particularly the introduction of **Panchayati Raj institutions** in the 1990s-have strengthened local governance and expanded the influence of regional leaders. These institutional changes have allowed regional parties to consolidate grassroots support and increase their role in both state and national politics.

Corruption and Governance Failures

Inefficiency and corruption in national party leadership in certain states have created an opportunity for regional alternatives. These parties have often campaigned on platforms promising transparency, good governance, and responsiveness to local needs-attracting voters disillusioned with traditional national actors.

Measures to Manage the Expanding Influence of Regional Parties in India:

The expanding role of regional parties in India's federal democracy underscores both its pluralistic strengths and the challenges of maintaining political cohesion. While such parties have successfully articulated local and identity-based concerns, their increasing number has, at times, contributed to political fragmentation and governance instability. To maintain national unity while acknowledging regional diversity, several strategic measures can be considered.

1. Inclusive Reforms in National Political Frameworks

National political parties need to adopt more inclusive and flexible policy frameworks that accommodate the unique concerns of different states. Addressing regional grievances proactively can help reduce voter reliance on region-specific parties for political representation and advocacy.

2. Constitutional and Institutional Strengthening of Federalism

Revisions to the constitutional and political structure that promote equitable distribution of powers between the Centre and the states could help mitigate intergovernmental tensions. A more clearly defined federal arrangement may reduce the sense of exclusion often leveraged by regional parties to gain support.

3. **Balanced Regional Development**

Addressing inter-regional economic disparities is essential for discouraging the emergence of regional discontent. Uniform development policies that target backward and underdeveloped

regions can foster a sense of inclusion and reduce the appeal of regionally driven political movements.

4. Fostering National Integration and Cultural Cohesion

Programs that promote cultural integration, shared educational curricula, and national-level identity formation can help bridge regional divides. Coordinated efforts between the Centre and states to encourage cooperation and national solidarity can counteract the narrative of regional alienation.

5. Enhancing Democratic Functioning within National Parties

Strengthening internal democracy in national political parties-through decentralization, transparency, and local leadership empowerment-can make these parties more responsive to grassroots issues. This can help reclaim political ground from regional entities that capitalize on localized discontent.

6. Power Sharing and Regional Representation in Governance

Establishing mechanisms for effective political accommodation-such as including regional leaders in national decision-making bodies and ensuring equitable resource allocation-can integrate regional interests into the national framework without undermining unity. This approach fosters cooperative federalism and reduces antagonistic regionalism.

Conclusion

The development of coalition politics in India has significantly reshaped the framework of democratic governance, particularly following the decline of single-party dominance since the 1990s. Central to this transformation is the increasing influence of regional parties, which have emerged as crucial actors in national politics. Their active participation in coalition governments has allowed them to influence policy outcomes, secure ministerial positions, and bring regional issues to the forefront of national discourse. These parties, rooted in local identities and regional concerns, have played a vital role in enhancing federal balance by promoting decentralized decision-making. Coalitions such as the United Front, NDA, and UPA illustrate how regional

parties have evolved from peripheral entities to key power brokers. Their strategic support often determines government formation and stability at the Centre. While their rise has enriched India's democratic inclusiveness, it has also introduced complexities, including frequent policy compromises, unstable alliances, and fragmented mandates.

Nonetheless, regional parties have strengthened democratic representation by voicing diverse aspirations that national parties may overlook. As the Indian electorate becomes more regionally aware, coalition politics-with regional players at its core-is likely to persist. The future of stable governance will depend on collaborative efforts between national and regional entities to ensure inclusive development and democratic resilience.

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