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Coalition Politics and Challenges to Indian Democracy

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Coalition Politics and Challenges to Indian Democracy

Single-party majorities were the exception in Indian national politics for 25 years. From 1989 to 2014, no one party crossed the halfway mark in the Lok Sabha. That era rewired how Indian democracy works. Exams test both the mechanics and the failures of coalition rule.

> **1989–2014** No single party won a Lok Sabha majority.
> **272** Seats needed for a majority in the Lok Sabha.
> **52nd** Amendment (1985) that added the Tenth Schedule.
> **91st** Amendment (2003) that tightened defection rules.

Coalition: Parties join to cross the majority mark.

CMP: Common Minimum Programme.

Coalition dharma: Informal norm of accommodating partners.

Hung Parliament: No party reaches a majority.

1 Chapter 1: What Coalition Government Means

Must Know

The basic idea

- A coalition government forms when no single party wins a majority on its own.
- Several parties then join to cross the halfway mark and govern together.

- “Hung Parliament” is the term for a Lok Sabha where no party reaches the majority mark of 272 seats.
- That is the trigger for coalition bargaining.

India’s coalition era

- From 1989 to 2014, no single party won a Lok Sabha majority.
- Governments in this period were coalitions or minority governments, such as Narasimha Rao’s Congress government of 1991–96.
- Single-party majorities returned in 2014.

The Common Minimum Programme

- A Common Minimum Programme (CMP) is a shared policy agenda that partners agree on before forming government.
- It lists only the policies all partners accept.
- It leaves out anything too divisive for any one partner.
- Ministers are expected to govern within it, not just by their own party’s manifesto.

“Coalition dharma”

- “Coalition dharma” is the informal norm that partners accommodate each other’s core interests.
- It is not a law. It is a political convention.
- It can break down when a smaller partner feels ignored or a larger one overreaches.
- Several coalition governments of the 1990s collapsed in under two years for this reason.

Remember: 1989–2014: no single-party majority. CMP = shared agenda. Coalition dharma = convention, not law.

Quick check 1. The 91st Amendment created India's Anti-Defection Law. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 Chapter 2: The Law and the First Coalition

Good to Know

The 52nd Amendment, 1985

- It added the Tenth Schedule: India's Anti-Defection Law.
- It disqualifies a legislator who voluntarily gives up party membership or votes against the party whip.
- It was meant to stop MPs and MLAs from switching sides for personal gain.

The loophole and the 91st Amendment, 2003

- The 1985 law let a legislator escape disqualification if one-third of a party's legislators defected together.
- This "split" exception was routinely abused.
- The 91st Amendment, 2003, removed it entirely.
- Now two-thirds of the party's legislators must agree to merge with another party.
- The same Amendment capped the Council of Ministers at 15% of the House's strength.
- That targeted the practice of using ministerial berths to buy loyalty.

V.P. Singh and the National Front, 1989

- V.P. Singh became Prime Minister in 1989, leading the National Front.

- It was a coalition supported from outside by both the BJP and the Left. That was an unusual left-right pincer.
- His government implemented the Mandal Commission's recommendations.
- These extended reservation to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central government jobs.

> **Quick check 2.** V.P. Singh's National Front government implemented the Mandal Commission's recommendations. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Chapter 3: Coalitions Mature and Reshape Federalism

Great to Know

NDA and UPA

- By the late 1990s, coalitions matured from short-lived governments into two durable blocs.
- These were the BJP-led NDA (from 1998) and the Congress-led UPA (from 2004).
- The NDA under Vajpayee (1998–2004) and the UPA under Manmohan Singh (2004–2014) governed full or near-full terms.
- This showed coalition government could be stable, not just chaotic.

The criticism: policy paralysis

- Big, contested decisions get delayed or watered down because every partner holds a kind of veto.

The counter

- Supporters say the slowness forces broader consensus.
- It also gives smaller regional voices real influence over national policy.

Federalism shifts

- Coalition politics gave regional parties a seat at the national table.
- A party strong in just one or two States could decide who governed in Delhi.
- Its State's demands, funds, project approvals and special status became national bargaining chips.
- Examiners expect you to weigh both sides: decisive but narrow, versus slow but broadly representative.

4 Previous Year Questions

Two standing favourites.

5 Chapter 4: Current Affairs

Great to Know

The Supreme Court tests the merger exception

- Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal challenged how the Tenth Schedule's merger exception is being used.
- The charge: legislators avoid disqualification by claiming a "merger" that changes an electoral verdict, without a genuine party-to-party merger.
- On 27 July 2026, a bench of Justices PS Narasimha and Alok Aradhe issued notice on the petition.
- It was consolidated with related cases tied to the 2022 Goa defection and the Shiv Sena split. (Source: LawBeat)
- The question is whether the two-thirds test alone is enough, or whether the original party must also formally merge.
- See Parliament: Composition, Elections and Sessions and The Representation of the People Acts and India's Election System for the wider setting.

> **Think it through: Why did the 1985 "one-third split" rule fail?**
>
> A third of a party could leave together and stay safe. That made switching sides easy. The 91st Amendment raised the bar and made it a merger.

Quick Q&A

- **Which amendment created anti-defection law?** 52nd (1985).
- **Which tightened it?** 91st (2003).
- **Majority mark in Lok Sabha?** 272.
- **Who led the 1989 National Front?** V.P. Singh.
- **Which blocs matured?** NDA and UPA.

Practice MCQs

1. What does coalition politics refer to?

A. Rule by unelected officials

B. Direct democracy without political parties

C. Governance by an alliance of multiple parties, none holding a majority alone

D. A single party ruling with an overwhelming majority

See answer ↓

2. What informal norm of accommodating partner parties' interests became central to coalition governance in India?

A. Judicial review

B. The anti-defection law

C. Coalition dharma

D. The Common Minimum Programme alone

See answer ↓

3. What negotiated document often underpins a coalition government's stability?

A. The Constitution's Ninth Schedule

B. The Anti-Defection Act

C. The Representation of the People Act

D. A Common Minimum Programme

See answer ↓

4. What criticism have coalition governments faced regarding governance speed?

A. Excessive speed in passing legislation

B. Complete inability to pass any laws

C. Policy paralysis, since consensus-building among partners can slow decisive action

D. Too much concentration of power in one party

See answer ↓

5. How has coalition politics reshaped Indian federalism in practice?

A. By abolishing state legislatures

B. By giving regional and state-level concerns a stronger voice in national policy-making

C. By centralizing all power in the national government

D. By eliminating all regional parties

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Coalition politics refers to governance by an alliance of multiple parties, none holding a majority on its own. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** Coalition dharma, an informal norm of accommodating partner parties' interests, became central to how coalition governments have historically functioned. ↑ Q2
3. **D.** A coalition's stability often depends on a Common Minimum Programme, a shared policy agenda negotiated among partner parties at the outset. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** Coalition governments have sometimes been criticized for policy paralysis, since consensus-building among partners can slow decisive action. ↑ Q4
5. **B.** Coalition politics has reshaped Indian federalism in practice, giving regional and state-level concerns a stronger voice in national policy-making. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2

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