

Coalitions within the Indian Context : Conceptual Implication

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Politics of coalition have generated intense research giving rise to plethora of conceptual postulations. Various attempts made so far have been categorized into three different approaches through which the empirical validity of coalition experiments has been put into theoretical framework. Each approach has a range of theories and each theory within an approach shares certain key postulations with other such theories, however, each is distinct in its intricacies. None of the theory or approach is sufficient to explain the Indian complexity. Therefore, there is a need to derive a skeletal understanding and try to empirically validate the Indian experience collectively through them.

According to Barbara Hinckley¹ there are three major approaches to the coalition study viz. The social psychological approach, game theoretic approach and the empirical political approach.

The Social Psychological Approach

This approach has its genesis from sociology and social psychology. It is both theoretical as well as empirical. It is theoretical because it seeks to identify and explain recurring patterns of coalition behaviour, but it is also empirical because it concentrates on how coalition players actually behave in the real world under different conditions. The theory develops with and depends for its support on evidence from concrete events. William Gamson has reviewed the theories of the social psychological approach.² Firstly, *the minimum resources theory* implies that the relative resources of the actors determine the coalition formation. They seek to maximize their share of payoff at least proportionally to their initial resources. This is called the parity norm and parity here means a commensurate gain according to the resources. This theory further predicts that a coalition are formed in which all the resources are minimal, but sufficient to win. This may broadly be termed as *minimum winning coalition theory*.

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Another important theory is the *minimum power theory*, which is an adaptation of game theory. It emphasizes the relative power of the players rather than their initial distribution of resources. Players 'pivotal' power is the proportion of times. Their resources can change a losing coalition into a winning one. Players expect a share of pay off proportional to their pivotal power rather than their initial resources. However, experimental test of this theory has shown discrepancies in it and has given rise to *anti-competitive theory*. This theory believes that attitudes about competition and bargaining, personality differences and other factors may lead the players to form coalitions larger than minimum size. It holds that coalitions will be formed along the lines of least resistance, i.e. between those partners for whom exists the most obvious and unambiguous solution to the problem of dividing the relative share of the pay off.³

Finally, there is a *random choice theory*, which, is a reflection of conditions which are not conducive to rational calculation and analysis and thus, coalition formation by this theory is the best as an essential random choice process.

Game Theoretical Approach

Pioneered by J. Von Neumann and O. Morgenstern, this mathematical game theoretical approach was popularized by William Riker. This approach is not concerned with explaining actual coalition behaviour, but with elaborating the formal logical relationships in a given situation. This theory originated from the presumption that problems in politics can be dealt as if they were games like chess, bridge or poker in which players adopt rational strategies to maximize their returns. They have resources, goals and defined sets of rules of the game and they calculate the best way to achieve their goals and move accordingly after considering all factors including the counter moves of the other players. This analogy is extended to coalition politics and political parties are treated as players of the game of politics.⁴ Important concepts of game theory are:

- *Notion of dominance*: It implies that one outcome dominates another when there are groups of people who can make the first outcome occur and when each individual in this group prefers the first outcome to the second.
- *Notion of equilibrium strategy*: This is the selected strategy of a player, which is not influenced by the new knowledge of the strategies of other players.

- *Notion of value:* This notion suggests that the worth of the reward that a factor receives for participation in a coalition is proportional to the value added by that actor to the coalition. The value or power of an actor is proportional to how he can turn a losing coalition into a winning one by joining it.

The most important contribution of the game theory to the study of coalition politics is *size Theory or Size principle*. Riker says: "In *n*-person, zero sum games, where side payments are permitted, where players are rational and where they have perfect information, only minimum winning coalitions occur.⁵ Here, *n*-person means that number of persons participating in a game should be more than two. *Zero sum* condition implies that loss and gains of the participating players are equal. *Rationality conditions* mean that all players are rational beings and will therefore try to maximize their gains and minimize losses. Condition of *perfect information* implies the knowledge regarding the move, counter move, pay offs, and bargaining alternatives of the players. The game theory, however, relies heavily on mathematical tools and is somewhat difficult to follow.

Empirical Political Approach

This approach seeks to explain a political phenomenon, whether an event, a process, or a relationship.⁶ This approach seeks to explain how coalition players actually behave in a real world situation and observes the actual situation instead of creating an artificial one for the purpose of experiment.

In coalitions Cabinet formation is an area, which is considerably explored by the empirical political theorists. Problems of forming and maintaining coalition governments arise from multi-party systems when no single party emerges with majority seats in legislatures. Sven Groenings has given many hypotheses in this regard. He has advanced *specification of variables* which form the basis of coalitions. These are:

- *Situational variable:* These are concerned with opportunities like strength and position of parties
- *Compatibility variables:* These relate to partners like their ideology, social base or leadership
- *Motivational variables:* These refer to propensities like desire for self identity preservation
- *Interaction variables:* These deal with methods like bargaining strategies

He also advances a model of coalition maintenance, which has five sets of variables. These are *apparatus variables* refer to leadership and decision making etc ; *motivational and communications variables* are concerned with rewards and losses, etc. *situational variables* encompass elections and other pressures, etc; *compatibility variables* are policy goals, reliability or resources of parties etc. and *strategic variables* are related to strategies, size, position on ideological spectrum, etc.

Lawrence C. Dodd⁷ has refined the size theory of Riker and applied it to party politics with special emphasis on the durability of the governments. He has further developed Minimum *Winning Coalition* theory by adding two bargaining conditions. (1) If there is a generalized *priory willingness* of parties to bargain and; (2) When there is a high degree of *information certainty*. A generalized *priory willingness to bargain* refers to the readiness of all the parties to enter into coalition and *information certainty* means perfect information on the prior *moves* like offers, bargains and counteroffers etc and complete information as to the *weight i.e.*, the voting strength of the party in the legislature. He defines the minimum winning coalition as a coalition of parties that has a reliable majority and yet contains no party in the coalition that is unnecessary to majority status.

All the above discussed approaches based on their strengths and weaknesses are individually insufficient to analyze empirical coalition realities. For instance, although the social psychological approach gives many theories, yet it fails to withstand the experimental test because it is primarily built on the basis of artificial settings. At the best it can be called as salient cue for decision making in a coalition situation, where the cue is some set of information about the players. Similarly, game theories try to quantify human preferences on the basis of parlour games; however, the suggested analogies have little scope for alliance politics of political parties. This is due to the very nature of alliance politics that is a dynamic process, quite out of reach for a rather static nature of almost all game theoretic ideas. Also, such perfect conditions like the rationality condition and the availability of complete information condition are difficult to achieve in a real life situation. Similarly, the empirical political studies have their limitations too. They have been applied mainly to the formation of coalition cabinets. They have generated a lot of data on the subject

but are not able to explain why two governments differ in their durability under similar situation.⁸

Power Maximization and Policy Based Theories

Power maximization theories predict minimum winning coalitions; while policy based theories predict minimum connected winning coalitions. The basic underlying idea is that in coalitions formed under compulsions of power, each party within the coalition would be indispensable to the formation/survival of coalition. This is because lesser the number of parties sharing the coalition, larger the payoffs guaranteed to each member. On the other hand, policy based coalitions celebrate the coming together of likeminded political parties - which lie adjacent on the ideological scale and are at least not incompatible on major issues. This reduces the number of coalition partners and hence, restricts the number of total coalition partners in the government.

The basic assumption of these two sets of theories that the rational choice of any actor should support minimum winning coalitions, however on the contrary empirical evidence around the world points to the extensive presence of coalitions that have not been minimum winning. While it is documented that around the globe, only 33 per cent of all non-single party majority coalition governments, and only 42 per cent of all coalition governments formed in twenty long-standing democracies in the period from 1945-95 have been minimally winning.⁹ Secondly, the simplistic assumptions made by these two theories fail to rationalize the extensive presence of minority governments including minority coalitions in hung parliament situations or also another extreme of this size factor, that is, surplus majority coalitions, which have coalition partners redundant for a majority number.

Thus, one of the most intriguing questions in theoretical analysis of coalition situation remains as to why do *hung parliament* situations across the globe, fail to produce *minimum winning* power theory or *minimum connected winning* policy theory coalitions. This is an anomaly which requires us to discuss the two set of theories in detail in order to derive a deeper understanding of the reasons behind such aberrations or to disqualify the non existence of (the limited set of) predicted patterns as aberrations.

Power Theory

The major theorists in this tradition are these of Riker, Gamson, and Dodd. According to Riker '*minimum winning coalitions*' may be

defined as a coalition in which each party is indispensable to the coalition's prospect of winning a simple majority of seats. In such coalitions, each member's share of the payoff is maximized. This is called the *size principle*. Size principle theories can have variants because there can be more than one minimum winning coalition in many distributions of seats. Therefore, one can have variants of *minimum winning coalitions* such as *minimum size coalitions* in which the number of legislators of the winning coalition is minimized to a number just enough to win a majority, or *minimum number of parties' coalition* in which the number of coalescing parties necessary to win a majority is minimized.¹⁰

An important corollary of size principle theories is that pivotal parties are especially strongly placed to extract rewards disproportionate to their size, particularly those that can threaten to leave and enable the formation of an alternative coalition in which they are also pivotal. Thus, in certain circumstances, very small parties which are pivotal to coalitions can extract disproportionate rewards and hold much larger partner and parties to ransom.

Varying from case to case extraneous criteria and considerations may be weighed to form minimum winning coalitions such as seeking parties that have similar agenda and programme perspectives. However, an implicit rule is that Cabinet formation cannot last indefinitely. Therefore, the longer the coalition bargaining process lasts, the more is the pressure for a Cabinet to be formed. In Riker's system, a *generalized a-priori willingness of parties'* to bargain pertains to selling of parliamentary systems where all parties are willing to consider entering a Cabinet coalition with any other party. Lawrence Dodd however upstages Riker and states that the type of coalition that forms the cabinet will depend on the bargaining conditions. According to him, if the parliamentary conditions were highly constrained in their willingness to bargain among themselves, there would be a tendency towards minority cabinets. Also, the availability of a set of parliamentary parties that are willing to bargain would be a factor crucial to the entire exercise. Thus, this willingness shall determine whether it will be a minimum winning coalition or an over sized coalition.

Riker adds the important factor of *information certainty uncertainty*, which determines the precise size of coalition. Simply put it means, the more the information uncertainty, the more will be the desire of parties to seek compensation and thus, the greater would be the number and size of extra parties in the coalition.¹¹ However, Dodd points out

that increase in information certainty can give rise to both oversized and undersized coalitions because in such situations where there is an information that undesirable parties can bargain and mutually find maneuverability and acceptance, calculations and negotiations would take more time and under constraints that exist in parliamentary bargaining, parties would be forced to settle for smaller coalitions than the best one possible, rather than enter coalitions that may be undesirable.

Riker-Dodd theory is generally applicable to multi-party parliaments because the important constituents of this theory - the bargaining conditions and cabinet coalition status can be perceived more clearly. It may also be applied to the parliaments which have dominant one party majority rule, in which case the single party formed cabinet can be considered as essentially a minimum winning cabinet. It has both a low level of bargaining constraints and high information certainty and is also more durable.

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