



Changing Dimensions of Coalition Politics in Bihar: 1990–2020

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Abstract

This article analyses the progression of coalition politics in the Indian state of Bihar from 1990 to 2020. Over three decades, Bihar's political environment evolved from the supremacy of caste-based parties led by Lalu Prasad Yadav to a more dynamic period characterized by fluctuating coalitions, governance discourses, and the increasing influence of national political figures. This study assesses the intersection of theoretical frameworks and actual realities in Bihar via the lens of coalition theory, using Riker's minimal winning coalition logic (1962), Leiserson's bargaining proposition (1966), and De Swaan's minimal-range theory (1973). It underscores the ascendance of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in the 1990s, the pivotal JD(U)-BJP coalition of 2005, the Mahagathbandhan initiative of 2015, and the resurgence of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2020. The analysis delineates four evolving features of Bihar's coalition politics: caste aggregation influenced by governance narratives, leader-centric instability, nationalization of state politics, and the influence of minor parties. The results enhance discussions regarding democratic accountability, coalition stability, and governance results in fragmented federations.

Keywords: Bihar, Coalition Politics, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (United), Bharatiya Janata Party, Mahagathbandhan, Coalition Theory

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Introduction

The creation of coalitions has emerged as the hallmark of Indian democracy with the waning of Congress's supremacy in the late 1980s. In parliamentary systems, governments are established when parties consolidate enough support to obtain a majority in the legislature. In situations without a majority party, coalitions are essential. In contrast to Western democracies, where ideological and programmatic alignment typically influences coalition formation, in India, social divisions such as caste and religion, aspirations for leadership, and strategic concerns are more essential (Sridharan, 2014; Brass, 1994).

Bihar exemplifies coalition politics in India. Bihar, with a population exceeding 100 million, pronounced caste stratification, and a rich history of social movements, offers an ideal context for examining the evolution, persistence, or dissolution of coalitions. The state experienced the ascent of caste-based politics in the 1990s, the formation of governance-oriented coalitions in the 2000s, and unpredictable transformations in the 2010s. These modifications provide a significant perspective for evaluating coalition formation theories established in different contexts (Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004).

The development of coalitions in Bihar has reflected India's overall democratic progression. During the 1990s, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), led by Lalu Prasad Yadav, solidified the backing of backward castes and Muslims via the "M-Y" (Muslim-Yadav) coalition (Jaffrelot, 2003). In 2005, the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], led by Nitish Kumar, formed an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to obtain a mandate focused on governance and development, therefore dismantling the RJD's supremacy. In the 2010 Assembly Elections, the NDA Alliance achieved a decisive victory, obtaining 206 seats out of 243. The JDU secured 115 seats, the BJP obtained 91 seats, the RJD acquired 22 seats, while its allies, Congress and LJP, garnered 4 and 3 seats, respectively. In 2013, the JDU terminated its 17-year coalition with the BJP. In 2015, Nitish reestablished an alliance with RJD and Congress inside the Mahagathbandhan (Grand Alliance) to counter the BJP's increasing dominance, but reversed his position in 2017 by rejoining the NDA. In 2020, the NDA maintained its authority, although the BJP outperformed the JD(U), highlighting the increasing nationalization of state politics (Kumar, 2018). This paper has three primary aims. Initially, it delineates the historical progression of coalition politics in Bihar from 1990 to 2020. Secondly, it employs theories of coalition formation, such as minimal winning coalitions, bargaining costs, and limited range, to elucidate the emergence or dissolution of coalitions. Third, it consolidates the information to delineate four evolving aspects that transform coalition politics in Bihar. This analysis enhances both comparative coalition studies and the examination of Indian federal democracy (Ziegfeld, 2016; Palshikar & Kumar, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Coalition politics has historically been a fundamental topic in comparative politics, producing a multitude of theoretical frameworks. Although several were conceived in European contexts, they provide significant instruments for analyzing coalition dynamics in India, particularly in Bihar.

Riker's Size Principle and Minimal Winning Coalitions William Riker (1962) proposed the size principle, contending that reasonable, office-seeking individuals will establish minimal winning coalitions (MWCs), alliances sufficiently large to secure a legislative majority. Additional partners unnecessarily diminish influence and access to office, prompting parties to limit the number of coalition partners after a majority is attained. In Bihar, the JD(U)-BJP coalition of 2005 exemplifies the MWC principle: it consisted of two parties whose collective might was adequate to attain a majority without an overabundance of allies. Conversely, the 2015 Mahagathbandhan was extensive, embodying elements outside Riker's rationale, including anti-BJP emotions and caste-based calculations.

Leiserson's Bargaining Proposition and Minimal Coalition Numbers Michael Leiserson (1966) enhanced coalition logic through the bargaining proposition, highlighting that negotiation costs escalate with the number of coalition partners. Consequently, parties want minimal-number coalitions (MNCs) to reduce coordination challenges, limit veto points, and facilitate more effective government. The JD(U)-BJP coalition in Bihar from 2005 to 2013 demonstrated this approach. With merely two principal participants, negotiation expenses were minimal, and governance seemed comparatively more stable. In contrast, alliances with numerous partners, like the RJD-JD(U)-Congress coalition in 2015, saw elevated negotiation costs, resulting in instability and ultimate dissolution (Sridharan, 2014; Ruparelia, 2015).

De Swaan's Minimal-Range or Policy-Distance Theory Abram de Swaan (1973) contended that coalitions are more probable among parties with minor ideological or policy divergence, thereby diminishing internal strife. In European contexts, this frequently indicated closeness on left-right economic continua. In India, ideology pertains more to identity, secularism vs communalism, and governance strategies than to the economic left versus right spectrum (Brass, 1994). The JD(U)-BJP coalition in the 2000s exhibited a degree of coherence in policies about governance and development, but divergences on social matters. The JD(U)-RJD alliance of 2015 was strained due to policy and

leadership issues, illustrating the limitations of minimal-range coalitions in leader-centric political contexts.

Gamson's Law and Office-Seeking Conduct William Gamson (1961) posited that coalition parties typically allocate cabinet portfolios in proportion to their legislative contributions, a principle referred to as Gamson's Law. This allocation guarantees equity and validity in coalition negotiations. Kaare Strøm (1990) distinguished between office-seeking coalitions, motivated primarily by the pursuit of power, and policy-seeking coalitions, where participants strive to enact ideological agendas. The coalitions in Bihar frequently mirror motivations for acquiring office. The disintegration of the Mahagathbandhan in 2017 exemplifies this phenomenon: although presenting a cohesive electoral front, divergent aspirations on portfolios and allegations of corruption undermined the coalition. The sustainability of the partnership was influenced more by office distribution than by similar ideology.

Indian Adaptations: Identity, Federalism, and Governance Traditional coalition theories necessitate modification to suit India's federal and multiethnic democracy. Three alterations are particularly significant in Bihar:

1. **Identity Aggregation:** Caste and religion influence electoral coalitions, replacing ideological alignment. Lalu Prasad Yadav's "M-Y" coalition in the 1990s prioritized the consolidation of Yadav and Muslim votes over policy consistency (Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2002).
2. **Federal Linkages:** National parties such as the BJP provide organizational depth and centralized resources, influencing state-level negotiating power. The JD(U)'s variable partnerships with the BJP illustrate this federal aspect (Chhibber & Verma, 2014; Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004).
3. **Leader-Centric Politics:** Dominant leaders can supersede theoretical coalition dynamics. Nitish Kumar's transitions between alliances in 2013 and 2017 were motivated by personal considerations rather than ideas of minimal numbers or minimal ranges (Ziegfeld, 2016). Integrating classical theory with Indian adaptations enhances our understanding of Bihar's coalition politics from 1990 to 2020.

Historical Analysis (1990-2020)

The coalition politics of Bihar from 1990 to 2020 evolved in several eras, mirroring significant transformations in Indian politics. Each phase elucidates the interplay of coalition logic, identity politics, and leadership techniques in influencing electoral results and government.

1990s: The Mandal Era and RJD Dominance

The 1990s signified the consolidation of backward caste politics subsequent to the execution of the Mandal Commission's recommendations. Lalu Prasad Yadav, a prominent leader of the Yadav community, orchestrated a coalition of Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Muslims, and disadvantaged groups through the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). The "M-Y" coalition (Muslims-Yadavs) furnished the RJD with a robust social foundation, facilitating its dominance in Bihar politics for the whole decade (Yadav, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2003). This phase demonstrates how identity aggregation can replace ideological coherence. The stability of the coalition during this period depended on social ties rather than minimal winning or minimal-range assessments. Issues of governance, such as declining law and order, were eclipsed by Lalu's discourse on social justice and the empowerment of marginalized castes (Jaffrelot, 2003; Brass, 1994).

2000: Diminution of RJD Dominance By the late 1990s, discontent with RJD's administration started to undermine its supremacy. The February 2000 assembly elections resulted in a hung assembly, with the RJD becoming the largest party while failing to secure a majority. This signified the onset of coalition instability, with independents and minor parties assuming a crucial role as intermediaries. The electoral results indicated that the RJD's caste strategy was inadequate amidst increasing aspirations for governance and development (Sridharan, 2014; Ziegfeld, 2016).

2005: Pivotal JD(U)-BJP Coalition The assembly elections in October 2005 marked a pivotal point in Bihar's coalition politics. The JD(U)-BJP coalition attained a majority, resulting in Nitish Kumar's ascension to the position of Chief Minister. The alliance's success demonstrated both minimal winning coalition logic (Riker, 1962) and minimal-number logic (Leiserson, 1966). Nitish Kumar established himself as the emblem of sushasan (good government), highlighting infrastructure, education, and women's empowerment. The BJP offered organizational fortitude and national backing, whereas Nitish secured the allegiance of Kurmi and Koeri OBCs, Dalits, and women (Sridharan, 2014; Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004). The partnership signified the onset of a new epoch in which caste and governance discourses were amalgamated to achieve electoral triumph.

2010: Solidification of the JD(U)-BJP Alliance The JD(U)-BJP coalition was re-elected decisively in 2010, securing 206 out of 243 seats. This result highlighted the resilience of a two-party alliance with synergistic qualities. Governance improvements, including infrastructure development, power expansion, and higher school enrollment, bolstered the coalition's credibility (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). The coalition illustrated Leiserson's assertion on bargaining efficiency: a reduced number of partners enabled more effective coordination, permitting the alliance to advocate a cohesive governance agenda.

2013–2014: Division Regarding Modi and the Expenses of Nationalization In 2013, Nitish Kumar severed ties with the BJP due to its endorsement of Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate, citing concerns regarding his secular credentials. The JD(U) endeavored to operate independently in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections but was obliterated, securing merely two seats out of forty. This result emphasized the dangers of forsaking a robust national ally and underscored the increasing nationalization of state politics (Ziegfeld, 2016). The BJP's ascendance at the national level altered the dynamics of coalition negotiations in Bihar, diminishing the JD(U)'s influence.

2015: Mahagathbandhan (Grand Alliance)

In the 2015 state elections, Nitish Kumar formed the Mahagathbandhan with RJD and Congress to fight the increasing power of the BJP. The coalition amalgamated synergistic caste constituencies—Yadavs (RJD), Kurmis and Koeris (JD(U)), Muslims, Dalits, and upper-caste Congress adherents—into a potent electoral alliance. The coalition secured 178 seats, a definitive triumph (Kailash, 2016). From a theoretical standpoint, the Mahagathbandhan constituted an extensive coalition, defying Riker's principle of minimal winning coalitions. Their success depended on tactical cohesion and caste calculations, rather than efficiency or policy alignment. Nonetheless, the alliance exhibited structural fragility: conflicting leadership aspirations and elevated negotiation costs compromised its stability (Palshikar & Kumar, 2004).

2017: Disintegration of the Mahagathbandhan In July 2017, Nitish Kumar resigned from his position as Chief Minister, alleging corruption allegations against RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav. He rejoined the BJP-led NDA within hours and was subsequently sworn in again as Chief Minister. This leader-focused realignment underscored the vulnerability of large coalitions and the critical importance of individual political survival. This instance illustrates the limitations of both policy-distance and bargaining-cost theories from a coalition theory perspective. The Mahagathbandhan disintegrated despite a substantial election mandate due to leadership conflicts and ambitions for office.

2020: NDA Triumph and BJP's Ascendance

The 2020 assembly elections reinstated the NDA, albeit with modified dynamics: the BJP secured 74 seats, while the JD(U) obtained 43 seats, thus assuming the role of the junior partner in the alliance, while the LJP disrupted JD(U)'s position (NDTV, 2020; Time, 2020). The RJD, possessing 75 seats, emerged as the largest party yet was unable to establish a government. The 2020 results demonstrated the nationalization of Bihar politics, as the BJP's national momentum and organizational prowess

eclipsed Nitish Kumar's regional supremacy. The outcome also highlighted the changing intra-coalition negotiating dynamics, with JD(U) relegated to a subordinate partner role (Ziegfeld, 2016).

Transformations in Coalition Politics in Bihar

The historical development of coalition politics in Bihar from 1990 to 2020 can be distilled into four interconnected components. Each level illustrates the intersection of coalition theory with local social divisions, leadership tactics, and national political dynamics.

Governance Narratives Mediating Caste Aggregation

Caste has continued to be the fundamental axis of political politics in Bihar. In the 1990s, the RJD predominantly depended on the mobilization of backward castes and Muslim support to solidify its "M-Y" coalition (Yadav, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2003). Nonetheless, the resilience of caste-based coalitions has waned over time as governance has become increasingly significant.

The success of the JD(U)-BJP combination in 2005 and 2010 illustrated how caste aggregation may be improved through legitimate governance assertions. Nitish Kumar's focus on infrastructure, women's empowerment, and law enforcement resonated across caste divisions, enabling the coalition to broaden its social support (Chhibber & Verma, 2014; Kumar, 2017). This transition demonstrates the evolution of identity-based coalitions into performance-oriented alliances, showcasing a hybrid model where caste dynamics are fundamental, while governance narratives dictate sustainability (Brass, 1994).

Instability and Leader-Centric Politics

The coalition politics of Bihar has been characterized by instability, with coalitions regularly changing. Nitish Kumar's political trajectory exemplifies this pattern: he formed an alliance with the BJP from 2005 to 2013, severed ties from 2013 to 2014, joined hands with the RJD and Congress in 2015, and rejoined the BJP in 2017. The frequent realignments underscore the prevalence of leader-centric decision-making over established coalition norms (Sridharan, 2014; Ziegfeld, 2016). The 2017 disintegration of the Mahagathbandhan exemplifies this assertion. Notwithstanding a strong mandate, the coalition fractured as a result of Nitish Kumar's choice to prioritize political survival over coalition obligations. This indicates that individual leadership incentives frequently take precedence over coalition dynamics, including policy alignment or negotiation efficacy.

Nationalization of State Governance

A significant aspect is the increasing nationalization of state politics. Since 2014, the ascendance of the BJP as a preeminent national entity has transformed the coalition dynamics in Bihar. The BJP's resources, national leadership, and ideological framework have diminished the negotiating ability of regional entities such as JD(U) (Chhibber & Verma, 2014). The 2020 assembly elections illustrate this trend: although Nitish Kumar maintained the Chief Minister position, the BJP ascended as the predominant partner within the NDA (NDTV, 2020; Time, 2020). This transition signifies the growing impact of national political trends on state elections, diminishing the independence of regional leaders (Ziegfeld, 2016).

The Role of Smaller Parties

Minor parties have exerted a disproportionate influence in Bihar's alliances, frequently acting as intermediaries or disruptors. Parties like the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), and Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) have influenced the equilibrium in hung assemblies. These actors elevate bargaining costs by proliferating veto points and necessitating that larger parties make excessive concessions (Sridharan, 2014). The 2020 elections underscored this dynamic: the LJP's choice to compete separately diminished JD(U), indirectly aiding the BJP (India Today, 2017). Minor parties function as crucial actors despite their restricted electoral support, hence compromising coalition stability (Ziegfeld, 2016).

Consequences and Comparative Examination

Governance and Policy Consistency

The membership of a coalition directly affects governance results and policy consistency. Small, coherent coalitions focused on governance can yield significant administrative enhancements. The JD(U)-BJP administration in Bihar from 2005 to 2010 exemplifies a cohesive alliance that emphasized effective governance—improving infrastructure, electricity, school enrollment initiatives, and targeted welfare—thereby cultivating an electorate inclined to reward achievement (Sridharan, 2014). During this phase, the coalition's minimal bargaining costs (two primary partners) and a concentrated administrative agenda facilitated bureaucratic momentum and programmatic continuity.

In contrast, large or tactical alliances frequently encounter difficulties in sustaining unified policy goals. The Mahagathbandhan (2015) achieved electoral success by consolidating social factions and presenting a unified opposition to the BJP; yet, its internal diversity led to conflicting agendas. Divergent preferences about appointments, anti-corruption standards, and patronage distribution generated friction that obstructed long-term planning and compromised governance continuity (Ruparelia, 2015; Kumar, 2017). Consequently, the composition of coalitions is significant: compact, policy-coherent alliances promote continuity, whereas extensive, diverse alliances are prone to drift and implementation discrepancies.

Democratic Accountability

The instability of coalitions presents significant obstacles to democratic accountability. In parliamentary systems, voters elect representatives with the expectation of a certain governing coalition or at least predictable coalitions. When chief executives alter their alliances mid-term without new election validation (as exemplified by Nitish Kumar's 2017 transition), the connection between voters and government may weaken. These reconfigurations generate normative issues: they diminish voters' capacity to hold governments accountable and complicate retrospective accountability (Palshikar & Kumar, 2004).

Institutional measures, such as more stringent interpretations of anti-defection statutes, regulations governing formal coalition agreements, or mechanisms mandating confidence votes following significant coalition realignments, could enhance accountability. However, legal remedies alone cannot eradicate leader-driven opportunism; cultural and partisan norms, civil society involvement, and an attentive press are essential adjuncts for limiting opportunistic alterations (Brass, 1994).

Institutionalization and Coalition Design

Empirical evidence indicates that formalizing coalition operations via written agreements that delineate portfolios, dispute-resolution mechanisms, and monitoring protocols enhances sustainability. European legislative systems frequently incorporate such measures; their lack in the majority of Indian state coalitions leads to instability. Bihar's experience illustrates the advantages of formalizing coalition agreements: explicit regulations diminish uncertainty, decrease post-agreement negotiation expenses, and establish enforceable expectations among coalition partners (Lijphart, 1999).

However, institutionalization incurs significant political costs. Parties must relinquish flexibility and acquiesce to limitations on unilateral actions. In fragmented Indian states when survival is tenuous, political parties may use tactical informality to secure accords. The feasibility of institutionalization in Bihar is contingent upon electoral incentives: should voters increasingly penalize opportunistic realignments, political parties will possess greater motivation to engage in binding agreements (Ziegfeld, 2016).

Comparative Analysis: Bihar and Other Indian States

The trends of Bihar starkly contrast with those of states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Kerala is marked by a somewhat institutionalized alternation between the Left Democratic Front and the United Democratic Front, with coalition agreements that are stable, systematic, and enduring. The political landscape of Tamil Nadu is dominated by enduring Dravidian parties (DMK, AIADMK) characterized by robust organizational foundations and distinct intra-party discipline (Pai, 2002). Bihar, in contrast, amalgamates pronounced caste plurality with personalistic leadership and less institutional restrictions,

resulting in volatility.

Uttar Pradesh (UP) exhibits similarities with Bihar in terms of size, caste intricacies, and national party engagement; but, UP's electoral volatility and greater number of constituencies undermine any individual leader's ability to exert dominance in a comparable manner. Maharashtra offers a pertinent comparison, consistently generating intricate multi-party negotiations (e.g., Shiv Sena–BJP splits, Maha Vikas Aghadi initiatives) that illustrate how regional party unity and formalized inter-party dialogue influence outcomes distinctively compared to Bihar's leader-centric dynamics (Chhibber & Nooruddin, 2004).

Implications for Research and Policy

Bihar presents numerous interesting opportunities for researchers.

1. Micro-level examination of electoral transitions. Scholars can more accurately assess how governance effectiveness influences caste-based voting patterns by utilizing constituency-level turnout and vote-switching research, including panel surveys and booth-level data.
2. Institutional trials. Comparative case studies on the application of formal coalition pacts in India could elucidate their efficacy in enhancing durability.
3. Incentives for leaders and career trajectories. Ethnographic and elite-interview methodologies may elucidate how individual survival assessments influence coalition reconfiguration (Ziegfeld, 2016). Policymakers and party strategists must recognize that sustainable governance necessitates incentives that hold leaders accountable to coalition agreements (such as electoral reputational costs and inter-party disciplinary mechanisms) and institutional frameworks that diminish the benefits of opportunistic realignment.

Conclusion

From 1990 to 2020, Bihar's coalition politics experienced a significant evolution: transitioning from the rise of identity-driven mass mobilization (the Mandal-era RJD coalition) to the formation of governance-focused alliances (JD(U)-BJP), followed by strategic grand coalitions (Mahagathbandhan), and culminating in the increased nationalization of state politics with the BJP's rise to prominence. This trajectory demonstrates that classical coalition theories Riker's minimal winning coalitions (1962), Leiserson's bargaining proposition (1966), De Swaan's minimal-range logic (1973), and Gamson's office-seeking predictions (1961) retain analytical significance but necessitate contextual modifications for India's federal, caste-influenced democracy.

This paper identifies four evolving dimensions: (1) caste aggregation influenced by governance narratives, (2) alliance instability driven by leader incentives, (3) the nationalization of state politics, and (4) the significance of smaller parties—that offer a framework for comprehending Bihar's political dynamics. They illustrate that coalition persistence is not solely a mathematical result; it is contingent upon the interplay of social cleavages, leader strategies, institutional frameworks, and national circumstances.

Stabilizing coalitions and enhancing governance in Bihar necessitates a multifaceted approach: fostering written coalition agreements, reinforcing intra-party discipline, increasing the electoral costs of opportunistic realignments, and advancing civil society oversight. Bihar serves as a valuable case study for researchers examining the interplay of identity, governance, and federal dynamics in generating diverse coalition results.

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