'This book is an outstanding study of coalition politics in India, a major development in the post-Congress phase that the recent rise of the BJP has not made redundant. Ruparelia not only offers a very detailed narrative, he also shows how coalition governments have paradoxically played a key role in the recent history of the "world's largest democracy" by restoring the rule of law after the Emergency, changing the social content of the regime under V.P. Singh or making overtures to estranged neighbours (including Pakistan and Bangladesh) during the Third Front of the 1990s. While we tend to put the emphasis on national parties at the expense of state parties, which are the main actors of coalition politics, these smaller entities — which have won as many seats in 2014 as in 2009 — cannot be ignored any more, as is evident from their representation in the Modi government.'

Christophe Jaffrelot, Research Director at CNRS and author of *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resistance*

'*Divided We Govern* finally lays to rest the notion that India was comprehensively mis-ruled in the last quarter of the twentieth century by weak and hopelessly divided Third Front coalitions. Sanjay Ruparelia's rich, rigorous and nuanced study reveals the achievements as well as the failures of the Janata, National Front and United Front governments. In so doing, Ruparelia contributes more generally to our understanding of the possibilities of coalition politics in a parliamentary democracy. This is a first-rate and important book.'

Stuart Corbridge, Professor of International Development and Provost, London School of Economics and Political Science

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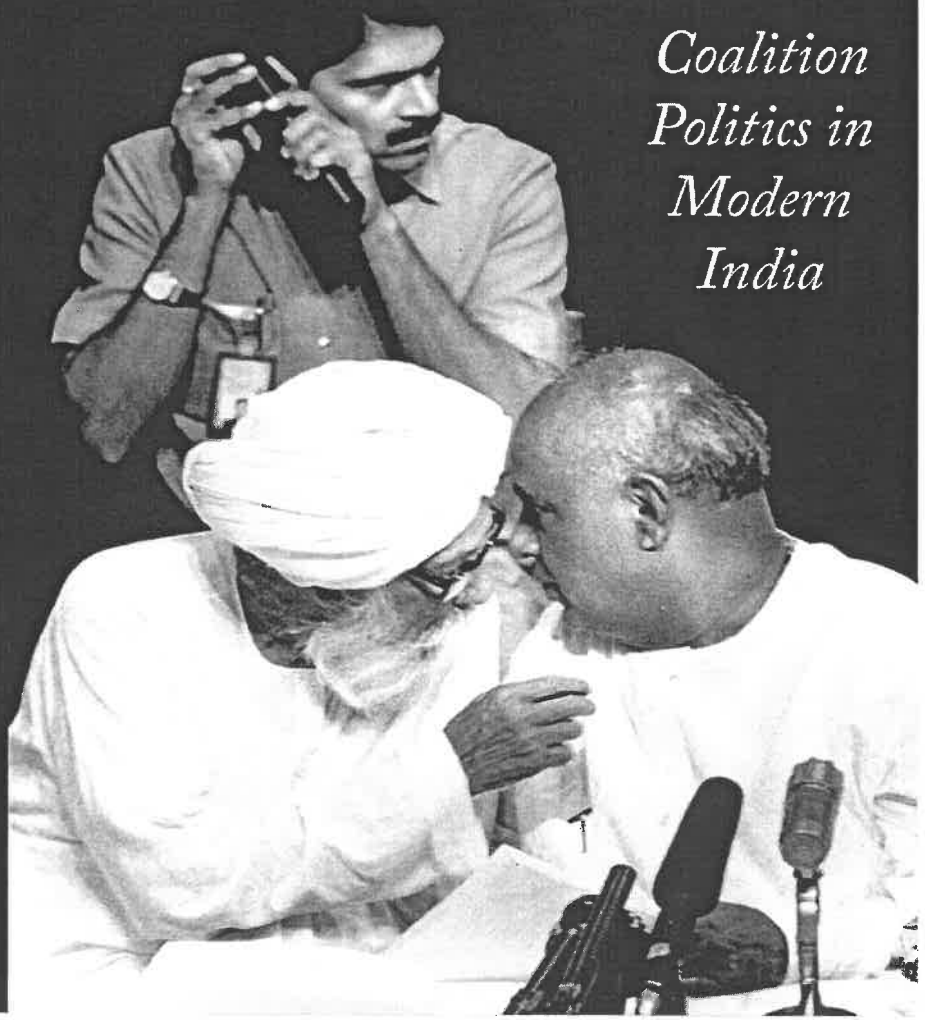

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"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but rather under circumstances found, given and transmitted."

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

"In decisive historical moments, political capacity (which includes organization, will, and ideologies) is necessary to enforce or to change a structural situation. Intellectual evaluation of a given situation and ideas about what is to be done are crucial in politics. The latter is immersed in the shady area between social interests and human creativity. At that level, gambles more than certainty line the paths through which social forces try to maintain or to change social structures. Briefly, in spite of structural 'determination', there is room for alternatives in history. Their actualization will depend not just on the basic contradictions between interests, but also on the perception of new ways of turning a historical corner through 'a passion for the possible.'"

Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto,
Dependency and Development in Latin America

"[The] very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of 'mistakes' is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable ... [But the] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a radically voluntaristic understanding of historical possibilities ... if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history ... 'Betrayal' is indeed a proper way of understanding social democratic strategies in a world free of objective constraints. But accusations of betrayal are not particularly illuminating in the real world."

Adam Przeworksi, *Capitalism and Social Democracy*

"What were the arguments used by those opposed to you being Prime Minister?

... Our argument was: this cannot last five years. If we are there, much more than the others we can make them accept some policies, put them before the country, whatever the limits are. You can't remove every obstacle, that is not possible: but we could do something for self-reliance, for the countryside, for panchayats, all that we can push through. Anti-poverty programmes: it is there but it does not reach the people. ... But it is a political blunder. It is a historical blunder ... We do not accept many of their policies, they do not accept many of ours. But the minimum programme was there, and we could have implemented it much better than others. Because we have the experience, nothing more, nothing personal."

Jyoti Basu, former chief minister of West Bengal

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, a series of national coalition governments, challenging the dominance of the Indian National Congress (Congress), have ruled the world's largest democracy. Significantly, the first three of these multiparty experiments espoused a social democratic vision, inspired in varying degrees by the politics of the broader Indian left.[1] The Janata Party (1977–1980), an amalgamation of four parties from northern India, was the first. Rallied by the eminent Gandhian socialist Jayaprakash Narayan, the Janata coalesced during the electrifying sixth general election to overturn the Emergency (1975–1977), a disastrous experiment in authoritarian rule instigated by Indira Gandhi. It pledged to restore parliamentary democracy and end mass poverty through constitutional reform, political decentralization and small-scale cooperative development in the countryside.

The second coalition government to rule the Union was the National Front (1989–1991), successor to the Janata Party, which came to power after the highly fractured verdict of the ninth general election.[2] The seven-party alliance formed a minority government, supported by two external formations, the communist Left Front and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Led by the Janata Dal (JD), the National Front advocated the interests of propertied middle castes and poorer subaltern classes, championing social justice. Yet the coalition also encompassed ascendant regionalist forces from non-Hindi speaking states, seeking greater political devolution and economic autonomy in Centre-state relations, as well as cultural recognition in the national imaginary. Indeed, its formation constituted a watershed, heralding the start of the "third electoral system" in India's federal

parliamentary democracy.[3] The increasing electoral participation of historically subordinate groups, rise of state-based parties and growing threat of militant Hindu nationalism signaled the beginning of a "post-Congress polity", in which neither the Congress nor any other party could muster a plurality of votes across the Union. Fractured electoral verdicts and hung parliaments became the norm. The National Front suggested that a "third force" might emerge vis-à-vis the Congress and the BJP to fulfill the rising aspirations of its most disadvantaged citizens.

Indeed, the inconclusive verdict of the eleventh general election produced a third center-left coalition government in New Delhi, a minority fifteen-party alliance christened the United Front (1996–1998). The primary aim of its left, secular and democratic forces was to prevent the BJP from seizing national power after militant Hindu nationalists destroyed the *Babri masjid* (mosque of Babur) in Ayodhya in 1992, unleashing the worst communal riots since Partition. The politics of *Hindutva* (Hindu cultural nationalism) threatened to tear the country apart. In many ways, the United Front was the culmination of the protracted attempt to forge a progressive Third Front in modern Indian democracy. Its socialist parties, whose predominantly lower-caste leaders had become chief ministers in the most populous states, undermined the presumption of upper-caste rule. The parliamentary communists, who had alleviated rural poverty and expanded local self-government in their regional bastions and advanced a more egalitarian vision of national economic development, comprised key members inside and outside the governing coalition. And its ascendant regional formations, which contested the idea of India championed by different national parties, had shifted the dynamics of power between New Delhi and its peripheries. In short, the United Front symbolized the possibility of a new politics, expanding the foundations of the most populous, diverse and poverty-ridden democracy in the world.

Yet each of these governing coalitions failed to last a full parliamentary term, let alone survive. The Janata Party, encompassing lower-caste socialists, agrarian capitalists and Hindu conservatives, succumbed to high-level intrigues and deeper partisan conflicts. Clashing leadership ambitions within the JD, and growing tensions between the rising political aspirations of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the Hindu right, tore the National Front apart too. Finally, the minority parliamentary status of the United Front left the coalition vulnerable to the

Congress, a rival to many of its constituent parties in the regions. All three experiments, according to critics, "ended in ignominy".[4]

The fall of the United Front allowed the BJP to capture national power at the head of the National Democratic Alliance (1998–1999 and 1999–2004), whose ranks eventually comprised over 20 parties. Its first spell in office, which saw the BJP weaponize India's nuclear capability, lasted just over a year. Yet the party adroitly exploited tensions amongst the remnants of the third force, while attracting new state-level allies that expanded its regional presence and social base, enabling the National Democratic Alliance to secure a rare parliamentary majority after the thirteenth general election in 1999. Its second tenure witnessed increasing violence against Christians and Muslims, efforts to undermine secular institutions and the transformation of India into a strategic nuclear power, throwing the ranks of the broader Indian left into disarray.

Despite the surprising defeat of the National Democratic Alliance in the fourteenth general election in 2004, the prospects of the third force worsened. The Congress put together the United Progressive Alliance (2004–2009 and 2009–2014), enabling the grand old party to recapture national power with the crucial outside support of the communist Left. Conflict over the Indo-US civil nuclear deal fractured their partnership in 2008. The Congress survived, strengthening its position following India's fifteenth general election in 2009, garnering credit for a range of progressive social legislation that its communist allies had pushed for and reflected many longstanding socialist commitments. The historic downfall of both Left Front administrations in Kerala and West Bengal in state assembly elections in 2011 constituted a moment of reckoning. But the sixteenth general election in 2014 inflicted a far more punishing defeat. Led by the combative Hindu nationalist chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, whose administration had failed to prevent an anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002, a resurgent BJP attacked the steep economic deceleration, high political corruption and paralysis of leadership that engulfed the second avatar of the United Progressive Alliance. Indeed, it vowed to restore rapid growth and national prestige by implementing a muscular version of neoliberalism, centralizing political authority and unleashing capitalist accumulation. Dividing the opposition, the BJP won a stunning electoral victory, becoming the first party to win a parliamentary majority since 1984. The politics of constructing a Third Front in modern Indian democracy lay in ruins.

What explains the rise of socialist, communist and regional parties since the late 1970s? Why have they faced repeated difficulties in constructing a stable Third Front in New Delhi? What explains the politics, policies and performance of its various incarnations, the Janata Party, National Front and United Front governments? To what extent have socialist, communist and regional parties reshaped the agendas, strategies and prospects of their principal national rivals, the Congress and the BJP? Finally, why did the idea of a third force persist in contemporary Indian democracy, despite its waning political fortunes since the late 1990s?

In general, scholars of modern Indian politics advance two perspectives to explain the chronic difficulties of a third force. The first contends that personal ambition, political expediency and struggles for power drive these inherently fragile coalitions.[5] Led by disgruntled former Congressmen, its customary parties come together to capture office for its own sake, with little to distinguish their policies. Hence their predominant image as "stopgap arrangements".[6] The second perspective emphasizes the multitude of personalities, interests and forces that divide its constituents. Conflicts involving caste, region and class, divergent political ideologies and competing electoral incentives in the states explain the volatility of third force politics.[7] Despite these differences, however, most observers agree: the struggle to build a Third Front in modern Indian democracy resembles the chronicle of a death foretold.[8]

These standard interpretations contain obvious truths. By focusing on moments of high political drama, however, they obscure as much as they reveal. This book seeks to break new ground in three realms. The first is to challenge prevailing empirical accounts of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front, each now consigned to the footnotes of history, reviewing old evidence and marshaling new facts to reevaluate their respective tenures in office. Existing scholarly accounts focus on how each coalition struggled to realize professed social democratic ideals, and rightly so. Despite committing more public resources to poverty alleviation, employment generation and egalitarian rural development, all three administrations witnessed progressively greater success in liberalizing industry, trade and investment, benefiting their more prosperous constituents.[9] Yet observers typically disregard how each of them established new institutions and reengaged contested regions to improve parliamentary democracy and

Centre-state relations.[10] Their respective efforts to forge better ties between India and its smaller neighbors in the subcontinent, while enhancing strategic flexibility in wider foreign relations, attract even less scholarly attention. And no attempt has been made, to date, to synthesize these broad trends into a synoptic historical account. Suffice to say, many of the policy initiatives and institutional reforms unveiled by the Janata Party, National Front and United Front were rushed, inconsistent, sometimes even contradictory, interventions that rarely developed into a clear overarching programme. Failures and disappointments, moreover, dogged each government. Nonetheless, their cumulative records outlined a distinctive political vision, challenging the view that none of them had any idea about how to run the country.[11] In particular, the politics of the third force gradually advanced a more faithful version of the asymmetric "federal nationalist" principle that has shaped the dynamics of the Indian "state-nation" since Independence.[12] The failure to consolidate its possibilities was a missed historical opportunity to forge a more progressive coalition representing the broader Indian left.

Second, analyzing the history of the third force afresh yields new theoretical insights. Recent scholarship on Indian coalition politics, which increasingly studies its dynamics through the prism of comparative theoretical inquiry, emphasizes competing party interests and formal institutional arrangements to explain the formation and demise of different multiparty experiments. Both factors matter. Yet such investigations overstate the stability of and polarity between competing political motivations. Many also neglect internal party debates over whether to share power, and with whom, to what extent and how, which frequently caused real schisms. Lastly, given these complexities, party leaders confronted difficult choices. To grasp the politics, achievements and shortcomings of different coalition governments in India, in other words, requires an innovative conceptual grammar able to illuminate the dynamic interplay between political institutions, social interests and human agency.

In general, the prospects of competing multiparty administrations in India owe much to the evolving logic of its democratic regime, in particular, the ramifications of contesting for power in an increasingly regionalized federal parliamentary democracy with first-past-the-post (FPTP) elections. The reorganization of states along distinct linguistic-cultural lines in the 1950s and 1960s encouraged many political for-

mations to mobilize electoral support in local idioms of caste, region and language.[13] Over time, plurality-rule elections fostered specific distinct party systems in the states, in which two parties or blocs competed for power in the vernacular, creating a federal party system with "multiple bipolarities" that generated parliamentary fragmentation in New Delhi by the late 1980s.[14] The rise of socialist, regional and communist parties was partly a long-term consequence of these complex path-dependent processes.

However, the same regime dynamics that encouraged the proliferation of state-based parties and national coalition governments after 1989 paradoxically tested their ability to survive. Dissimilar electoral incentives in the regions hindered durable alliances at the Centre. High electoral volatility, factional splits and the disproportional effects of FPTP generated mistrust amongst coalition allies.[15] Lastly, structural economic reforms deepened these centrifugal tendencies through the 1990s. In sum, despite its relative institutional stability, India's macrodemocratic regime generated tremendous political uncertainty after 1989. Party leaders confronted an intensely competitive federal party system, where marginal electoral swings, tight electoral races and multiparty blocs determined the balance of power.[16] Sustaining a diverse coalition government in such circumstances, especially an alliance of diverse state-based parties seeking to forge a Third Front, became exceedingly difficult.

That said, these crosscutting pressures did not determine the fate of competing national coalitions. As historical institutionalists point out, electoral regimes, governmental systems and different state designs create incentives, opportunities and constraints that political actors have to appraise.[17] In some cases, institutions and rules may fail to specify how to act. In others, complex interaction effects produce multiple possible outcomes. Lastly, even stable political institutions can fail to mitigate uncertainty during moments of significant historical change. All three scenarios are germane for understanding the politics of the third force. India's parliamentary cabinet government supported executive power sharing. But forging political agreement and enforcing collegial responsibility in unwieldy minority administrations requires power-sharing formulas and conflict resolution mechanisms to accommodate rival interests. Party leaders had to devise a number of practices and techniques—from local pacts, friendly electoral contests and joint state-level campaigns to national electoral alliances, common

minimum programmes and high-level steering committees—to facilitate bargaining, negotiation and compromise. The superior cohesiveness of the United Front vis-à-vis the Janata Party and National Front, and the even greater durability of the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance in turn, underscored their importance.

Ultimately, the vicissitudes of India's coalition politics heightened political agency. In particular, it forced competing party leaders to exercise sound political judgment. They had to comprehend the possibilities and constraints of specific historical contexts, only partly shaped by their beliefs, desires and practices; to distinguish the foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of different political decisions, whatever their intentions; and to seize the possibilities of a given political moment. In general, to judge well in politics requires actors simultaneously to synthesize a vast array of information, yet grasp what differentiates a particular context, and to demonstrate a pragmatic outlook, strategic orientation and detached spirit, yet possess a passion for a cause.

The quality of judgment was especially salient in determining the trajectory of the third force and India's coalition politics more widely. The demise of single-party majority governments in New Delhi after 1989 represented a new era, when the ideas, identities and interests that had hitherto shaped modern Indian democracy became less stable, creating new opportunities. The organizational weakness of many Indian parties enhanced their leaders' political autonomy. Lastly, the number, diversity and fluidity of parties and factions that comprised successive coalition experiments, and the minority parliamentary status of many of the latter, undermined the possibility of strict rational calculation. In short, these circumstances tested the prudence, creativity and foresight of every party in equal measure, yet simultaneously made it difficult to judge well.

What prevented the leaders of the third force from exercising good political judgment, especially those on the broader Indian left, was their tendency to conceptualize power in fixed, indivisible and zero-sum terms. Its manifestation differed. On the one hand, the refusal of many leftists in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) to share formal executive power with non-communist parties betrayed a stridently moralistic yet strangely mechanical conception of power, whose majoritarian underpinnings frustrated its possibilities of expan-

sion. On the other, the readiness of many socialist leaders to join hands with myriad forces yet not share organizational power amongst themselves revealed a politics of resistance, insubordination and defiance necessary for genuine subaltern groups, but self-liquidating for its elites. Put differently, the moralistic intentions of the communists as well as the cynical instrumentality of the socialists undermined good political judgment at decisive moments.

The third aim of the book, vital for understanding the dynamics of national coalition politics in modern Indian democracy, is to provide a fine-grained analytic narrative of the rise and decline of the third force since the 1970s. In general, narratives elucidate the nexus between agency, structure and process in a single coherent account. They are exemplary for investigating temporal issues: the timing, sequence and contingency of events, the crystallization of particular historical conjunctures, the passage of an era.[18] Hence narratives provide an excellent technique for creating a "moving picture" of "politics in time".[19] Constructing a narrative proves very useful for demonstrating how multiparty governments actually function—something that existing scholarly accounts and the dominant theoretical models upon which they rely only partly explain. Moreover, analyzing the judgments of real political actors in proper historical context demands a prospective orientation: examining their incentives, opportunities and constraints, and assessing the foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of their decisions, by reconstructing the moment of action itself. If done well, such an approach can minimize the specter of inevitability that beguiles so many explanations in political science today.

Plan of the book

Writing a narrative involves several customary steps: identifying the main protagonists, tracing the chronology of events and plotting their actions from beginning to end.[20] Our intellectual preoccupations always influence how we depict social reality, however. In narrating events, we pose questions, make assumptions, and select concepts and methods to identify facts we deem significant amongst a range of alternatives, suggesting particular arguments versus others. Put differently, narratives do not merely illustrate arguments, but carry them.[21] This is self-evident with analytic narratives, whether rational choice histories of political action, meso-level studies of social mobilization or macro-

analytic comparative history, which present theoretical arguments to explain specific historical accounts.[22] Yet even abstract theoretical models encapsulate particular narratives from the real world: no ideal chronicle or ideal chronicler exists.[23] Hence the need for conceptual precision, theoretical leverage and empirical rigor, to allow readers to compare particular arguments vis-à-vis others, enhancing their persuasiveness and reliability.

Chapter 1 examines the dominant explanations of coalition politics in modern India vis-à-vis the comparative theoretical literature that increasingly shapes the contours of debate. Recent scholarship illuminates how myopic party leaders and the complex interaction effects of formal political institutions encourage unstable multiparty governments in India. Yet many existing studies discount the hard political choices party leaders frequently confront, and the incompleteness and indeterminacy of institutions, especially during moments of change. Moreover, coalition leaders must devise formulas, strategies and tactics of power sharing to facilitate consultation, negotiation and compromise. Lastly, they often have to make decisions under conditions of great political uncertainty. Such circumstances demand astute political judgment, a form of reasoning that militates against strict instrumental rationality as well as ultimate moral values. The chapter ends by identifying and assessing the sources of information and variety of methods—including private letters, political speeches and party manifestoes, media reports, electoral and survey data and government documents, and the rare confidential testimonies of key political actors—that furnish and orient the narrative.

Part I of the book deploys these arguments, and synthesizes previous scholarship and selective archival material, to explain the genesis of the third force. Chapter 2 traces its conceptual roots and political manifestations from the anti-colonial movement in the mid-1930s until the Emergency in the mid-1970s. It analyzes the failure of communists and socialists to unite vis-à-vis the Congress. Ideological conflicts over many issues—caste, class and religion, the nationalist movement and the postcolonial regime, and the prospects of socialism, capitalism and democracy—divided the two pillars of the broader Indian left. Yet internal party disputes over power sharing, including whether to align with the progressive wing of the Congress, caused splits within each camp too. The failure of various opposition forces to forge durable multiparty governments in the states in the late 1960s tarnished the

image of coalitions from the start. Yet their failure obscured the early regionalization of the federal party system. The centralization of power by the Congress, culminating in the Emergency, allowed opposition forces to coalesce.

Chapter 3 explains the formation, performance and demise of the Janata Party, the first non-Congress government to rule the Union. The myopic political ambitions of its leadership, and the rising power of propertied intermediate castes in the states, ruined its avowed neo-Gandhian ambitions to uplift the rural poor. Yet the Janata also enhanced parliamentary democracy through constitutional reforms and political innovations, reset Centre-state relations and pushed sub-continental relations in positive new directions. Clashing political ambitions and poor tactical choices in New Delhi triggered its downfall. Yet the collapse of the Janata Party also revealed strains between the socialist left and Hindu right, sowing the seeds of the third force.

Chapter 4 analyzes the rise of new state-based parties and the regions more generally during the 1980s. The Congress' return to power, and its massive electoral victory in 1984, suggested renewed dominance. Indeed, the party declared its ambition to modernize the state, castigating bureaucratic corruption and promoting economic liberalization. Yet the growth of various opposition forces, from a reintegrated communist Left and new regional parties in the middle to Hindu nationalists on the right, intensified electoral competition in the states. The failure of the Congress to grasp the nature of these developments, and its cynical tactical misjudgments, stoked growing communal polarization and deteriorating Centre-state relations. Perceptions of high political corruption, general economic mismanagement and mounting opposition unity sealed its demise.

Lastly, Chapter 5 explains the formation, performance and demise of the National Front, the second non-Congress government to rule the Union. Like its predecessor, rival aspirations over the prime ministership threatened the minority governing coalition from the start. Deeper political tensions over reservations for the OBCs ruptured its ranks towards the end. And its leadership failed, despite early signs of goodwill, to resolve growing militant insurgencies in Punjab and Kashmir. Nonetheless, the National Front advanced the politics of the third force in several ways. The coalition encompassed significant regional parties within its ranks and established stronger relations with the communist Left. It also crafted new political institutions to improve

Centre-state relations while extending a more conciliatory approach to subcontinental affairs. Ultimately, the politics of *Hindutva* precipitated its demise, crystallizing the idea of the third force.

Part II of the book analyzes in greater depth the maturation of third force politics, using extensive primary research to explain the rise, performance and demise of the United Front. Chapter 6 explores the prospects of the Third Front in the early 1990s by investigating the political manifestoes, social ideologies and election strategies of its various constituents and their principal national rivals. Power struggles within the Janata *parivar*, and differences with the communists, weakened the prospects of the broader Indian left. Economic liberalization tested wider cross-party solidarities. And strategic disagreements and tactical disputes in the states frustrated the possibility of building a coherent national alliance. Nonetheless, the regionalization of its federal party system rewarded parties that mobilized distinct social constituencies in key state-level arenas, making it hard for national parties to occupy the center of gravity. The menace of growing communal violence by militant Hindu nationalists sharpened the secular commitment of third force politics.

Chapter 7 explains the formation of the United Front, which came together to prevent the BJP from capturing national power, following the eleventh general election in 1996. The political orientation and social bases of the three principal fronts revealed distinct profiles: parties comprising the Third Front disproportionately represented the middle and lower ranks of every major cleavage in society. Yet the composition of the United Front, and the establishment and formulation of its Steering Committee and Common Minimum Programme, failed simply to reflect the parliamentary seat tallies or prior political preferences. The decision by the CPI and more regionalist parties to join government, and of the CPI(M) to reject the prime ministership amidst intense debate, exposed numerous competing interests, strategies and judgments.

Chapter 8 investigates the ways in which H.D. Deve Gowda sought to establish his prime ministerial authority, manage relations vis-à-vis external parliamentary supporters and address economic liberalization, Centre-state relations and foreign affairs. These early months uncovered the array of views on how to address inter-state water sharing, public sector retrenchment and the insurgency in Jammu & Kashmir. In general, the United Front displayed surprising energy in tackling

various challenges. Yet tight political relations between Deve Gowda and Narasimha Rao, the embattled leader of the Congress, failed to protect either of them from a confluence of pressures. Political manipulation, alongside the failure to devise agreed power-sharing formulas and decision-making practices, exacerbated latent conflicts.

Chapter 9 examines various events in Centre-state relations that tested the pro-regional credentials of the United Front amidst growing tensions within its ranks. The coalition exploited national power for partisan ends, imposing President's rule against rivals in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh and failing to ensure free assembly elections in Kashmir, weakening its claim to difference vis-à-vis the Congress and the BJP. Yet its regional inclinations also led to partial efforts to re-engage longstanding grievances in the Northeast. More imaginatively, the United Front resolved a seemingly intractable dispute with Bangladesh, extending asymmetric concessions which the media christened as the Gujral doctrine. In doing so, the coalition exhibited a more regionalized conception of the national interest

Chapter 10 analyzes growing political tensions over national economic policy in the run-up to the 1997–98 Union budget. By joining government, regional parties had acquired control of several key ministries that pushed further economic liberalization, belying the view that a left-of-center governing coalition would stymie the latter. Yet it also threw into question the strategy of the CPI(M), leading Jyoti Basu, its venerable chief minister of West Bengal, to characterize its decision not to join the government as an "historical blunder". Indeed, the United Front proceeded to unveil a "dream budget", according to proponents of liberalization, and to restart crucial high-level dialogue with Pakistan. Deteriorating political relations between the Congress and the United Front precipitated the downfall of the Deve Gowda ministry, however. The vanity, skullduggery and misjudgments of key political leaders caused an unnecessary political crisis, undermining the conditions necessary for further economic liberalization and sensitive bilateral negotiations to succeed.

The final part of the book, the third, explains the decline of the third force. Chapter 11 analyzes the selection of I.K. Gujral as the second prime minister of the United Front and the events that marked his tenure. The changed political circumstances lessened the prospects of accommodation between rival political interests in economic policy, hampered efforts to make clear progress in Indo-Pakistan relations and

frustrated progress in Centre-state affairs. Despite internal tensions, the United Front government fell because of ham-fisted machinations by the Congress. Yet the coalition unraveled during the twelfth general election, unable to resolve the divergent electoral incentives facing its parties across the regions, allowing the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance to capture national power in March 1998.

Chapter 12 explains the gradual dissolution of the third force from 1998 to 2012. Regional political calculations, mounting inter-state economic competition and widening social disparities pushed its erstwhile constituents further apart. Yet their declining coalition prospects also owed much to the strategic maneuvers, tactical acumen and political choices of their national rivals. The ability of the BJP to retain national power at the helm of the National Democratic Alliance for six years demonstrated considerable political skill. On the one hand, the party astutely shelved its most controversial proposals, attracting previous members of the third force. Sharing executive power, establishing new consultative institutions and espousing coalition *dharma*, the BJP expanded its regional presence and social base. On the other, the party mollified its militant Hindu allies by trying to shift the center of national political gravity to the right. The Congress party, unwilling to grasp the logic of the third electoral system for several years, suffered a long political winter. The survival of the National Democratic Alliance after the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat highlighted the paradoxical effects of the federal party system, encouraging ostensibly secular parties to weigh the potential electoral backlash in their respective states, belying their professed ideals.

The failure of the BJP to maintain its national alliance, combined with the belated strategic reorientation of the Congress, allowed the United Progressive Alliance to form a minority Union government with the crucial parliamentary support of the Left. Exploiting their position, the communists blocked economic liberalization in New Delhi, supported a range of progressive social legislation pushed by like-minded political allies in the Congress, demonstrating the relevance of concerns that had been raised originally by the third force. Yet it became impossible for the CPI(M) to oppose further reforms in New Delhi yet advance them in the states, stranding the party between government and opposition. In the end, divisions over the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, exposing substantive disagreements as well as crude political machinations, drove the socialists and the communists apart.

The book concludes by situating the politics, successes and failures of the broader Indian left in comparative historical perspective. The tenures of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front deserve critical reappraisal, I argue, as do the conventional terms of art employed by most comparative studies of coalition politics. Crafting stable national coalition governments in India, given the diverse regional forces and complex institutional compulsions that encourage their emergence yet undermine their survival, poses unparalleled challenges when compared to virtually every other consolidated democracy in the world. Equally, complex ideological differences and tougher material conditions made it harder to forge a broad progressive coalition along the lines of the famous "red-green" alliance of urban workers and rural smallholders that enabled social democracy in twentieth century Europe.[24] Indeed, the predicament of the broader Indian left since the 1970s recalls the fate of Eurocommunists, highlighting the constraints of capitalism and democracy. Yet the vicissitudes of Third Front governments in India belie the assumption that regional parties are inherently destabilizing forces, suggesting theoretical insights and practical lessons for other parliamentary democracies where processes of devolution and demands for federalism may fragment national electoral mandates in the future. Ultimately, a more imaginative grasp of the real possibilities at key historical junctures, including unprecedented opportunities to exercise national power, would have enabled reformist elements amongst the socialists and communists to advance the cause of a progressive third force in modern Indian democracy to a greater degree. The book concludes by reflecting on the prospects of social democratic politics in India in the years ahead.

1

THE PARADOXES OF INDIA'S COALITION POLITICS

Traditionally, scholars of coalition politics in the comparative tradition pose the following questions: What explains the formation of coalitions? What causes them to fall apart? A few ask: How do coalition governments perform in office? A substantial corpus of scholarship addresses these broadly framed questions in a comparative theoretical framework. Conspicuously, the explanations put forward are general, too.[1] Guided by the belief that explanations are nomothetic in principle, leading coalition theorists assert that fine-grained idiographic studies cannot establish valid causal inferences. Ascertaining the latter requires explaining—sometimes even predicting—specific coalition experiments through concepts, theories and methods that are applicable to and account for the largest number of cases. Consequently, most scholars of coalition politics tend to dismiss the value of particular case studies; regard them as useful first steps in the process of forming causal hypotheses and constructing general theories; or employ them only to test the latter.[2] The search for general political explanations, marked by conceptual parsimony, theoretical ambition and empirical range, remains an ideal.

The study of coalitions in modern Indian politics has developed over two broad phases. The first examined its emergence in the states in the 1960s and 1970s. A number of scholars analyzed these experiments in comparative theoretical perspective.[3] However, most offered particular

historical analyses.[4] In contrast, the second phase increasingly engaged the comparative tradition to explain the advent, character and ramifications of national multiparty governments since the late 1980s. Broadly speaking, three positions emerged. Some observers emphasized the significance of deep contextual peculiarities, particularly social cleavages such as caste, language and region.[5] Others applied classic theories of coalition politics, electoral regimes and party systems in the west, including models of rational choice, to explain the formation of successive minority governments since 1989.[6] In the middle, a number of commentators embedded the politics of coalition in India into comparative theoretical frames without losing sight of its historical particularities.[7]

This book pursues the last path. General political theories guide our investigation into a particular case. Yet the concepts, theories and methods employed in their service often fail to explain contextual features that bear on the problem under study.[8] Indeed, the claim that only general theories yield defensible explanations commonly leads to tendentious descriptions of specific empirical cases—which turns problems into artifacts of theory rather than independently observed puzzles.[9] Arguably, similar problems characterize much of the existing scholarly literature on coalition politics. Its leading theoretical models furnish relatively wooden accounts of the formation and demise of coalitions as discrete political events; formulate strict causal hypotheses from these accounts; and test the latter in large-N analyses on the ground that explanations must be general in scope. In doing so, these highly aggregated models obscure the complex political dynamics that govern many coalitions in the real world. Testing abstract theoretical models against particular cases may advance the state of knowledge within narrow sub-disciplinary parameters. But the costs, ranging from possibly distorted cases to inadequate causal understanding, can be high.

Ultimately, convincing explanations presume valid descriptions. Acquiring detailed knowledge of particular cases, which requires asking questions afresh, is therefore a necessary first step.

The main protagonists

Who are the main protagonists of India's coalition politics? Comparativists focus on competing party organizations, which dominate the struggle for power in modern representative democracies. Many characterize these parties as unitary political actors. Scholars

recognize that parties contain parliamentary and organizational wings, whose leadership, functions and prerogatives vary, not to mention political factions. Indeed, most concede that internal coalition dynamics consequently remain mysterious.[10] Yet few analyze them directly.[11] Some claim that studying the politics of leaders or factions would make wide-ranging analyses of many cases harder. Others point out that mutually binding incentives ensure parties' cohesion, especially in western Europe, which overwhelmingly constitutes their region of focus. In particular, backbench politicians obey the whip at crucial moments of decision to further their personal careers, which party membership normally enhances, while party leaders use the resources and rewards at their disposal to ensure their subordinates' allegiance.[12] The most important decision points, of course, concern the formation and demise of government. Most comparative studies focus on these moments, construing each as independent of prior events or future expectations, in order to test statistically which theories yield greatest leverage. Hence the conceptual assumptions, empirical record and methodological parameters of these inquiries reinforce each other.

To grasp the dynamics of India's coalition politics, in contrast, requires us to investigate the actions of senior party leaders: the high-ranking elected representatives and organizational functionaries of competing electoral formations. There are several reasons for doing so. First, characterizing the main protagonists as unitary party organizations is simply untenable. Many of India's "weakly institutionalized" parties split into rival political factions before, during and after the tenures of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front, "on the basis of feuds or deals of leaders".[13] In many cases they comprised local personal networks, which individual politicians formed and disbanded expediently. The ancient conception of parties, as factions engaged in plots of intrigue for their own personal benefit, depicts their character far more accurately.[14] Others had proper organizational structures. Yet their leaders, seeking to enhance their personal political power, undermined their integrity and functioning. Indeed, institutional changes and political developments encouraged these proclivities. The passage of the Anti-Defection Law in 1985, designed by the Congress to support party unity, ironically encouraged many factions across the spectrum to create their own parties as vehicles for power.[15] The resulting electoral fragmentation and advent of national coalition politics, which lowered the threshold for acquiring parliamentary influence, deepened these

incentives.[16] That said, it makes sense to designate the main actors of India's coalition politics as party leaders. Many of them performed expected tasks—recruiting electoral candidates, mobilizing social interests, structuring political issues, collecting funds, and forming and breaking governments.[17] Indeed, the fact that even satraps aspired to office by forming or joining parties and contesting elections highlights the significance of structured party competition.

Second, as comparativists acknowledge, viewing parties as unitary political actors obscures their internal power struggles. Intra-party deliberations and alternative organizational structures affect electoral contestation, government formation and the demise of coalitions.[18] Modern Indian politics displays a diversity of parties. These range from the communist parties and Hindu nationalist Jan Sangh/BJP, independent political organizations with relatively disciplined cadres, institutionalized decision-making procedures and strong links with ancillary social organizations, to the various splinter groups of the Congress (I) and Janata *parivar*, clientelistic networks that sometimes acquired independent status by registering themselves with appropriate state authorities. The majority of parties in India occupy the middle range, however, with the most effective combining elements of both. These organizational differences, as the narrative illustrates, had two ramifications. On the one hand, intra-party disunity heightened the autonomy of various party leaders at crucial political moments.[19] On the other, strong party organizations sometimes constrained their respective leaders' options, most obviously in the case of the communist Left.

Lastly, conceptualizing the main protagonists as party leaders is useful methodologically. It provides an ideal-type for appraising their actions: whether personal self-interest, partisan advantage or larger social purposes inspired their conduct.

Preferences, interests and goals

What motivates party leaders' decisions? Three general theories, which construe specific purposes as the clearly defined, mutually exclusive and exogenously determined goals of rational agents, dominate scholarly debate. Power-maximization theories argue that considerations of power *simpliciter* drive coalition politics: in particular, the desire to acquire the greatest share of cabinet posts in government.[20] Assuming

that such posts are "fixed prizes" and that parties are fully aware of the various bargains that others are considering,[21] such theories posit that "minimum winning coalitions" are likely to emerge according to the "size principle": parties will form any coalition able to secure a working parliamentary majority with the fewest possible number of partners (the "strategic principle") in order to maximize their relative share of cabinet power (the "disequilibrium principle").[22] Underlying power-maximization theories is a Schumpeterian conception of politics: parties seek power for its own sake.[23]

In contrast, policy-realization theories maintain that coalition formation cannot be explained solely by the will to dominate.[24] Rather, the contest for power involves substantive concerns, specific policy goals that reflect divergent political ideologies and represent distinct social interests, as pluralists and Marxists would contend. Typically, policy-realization theorists claim that economic policy differences matter the most; that party ideologies differ over how much states should intervene in markets to promote economic stability, growth and redistribution; and that social cleavages reflect the nature and degree of class-based stratification. They argue that parties seek to forge coalitions with other parties that share convergent, or at least indifferent, policy goals through incremental negotiation.[25] Hence policy-realization theorists claim that either "minimum connected winning coalitions" or minority governments are likely to emerge.

Lastly, vote-seeking theories contend that since parties contest the ballot in the first instance, the desire to maximize vote share dictates their coalition strategies. Underlying such theories is a Downsian conception of politics: "parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies".[26] Parties view elected office as the ultimate reward, a prerequisite for maximizing power or influencing policy, which "in turn implies that each party seeks to receive more votes than any other".[27] Indeed, the value of the latter increases in fractured electoral contexts since "the more votes a party wins, the more chance it has to enter a coalition, the more power it receives if it does enter one, and the more individuals in it hold office in the government coalition".[28]

Strikingly, virtually every observer of India's national coalition politics agrees that constant power struggles define its key dynamics. According to some, the absence of disciplined party organizations with clear ideological differences and relatively stable bases of electoral sup-

port generates chronic political instability and disappointing policy records.[29] Parties espouse "catchy slogans", others claim, merely to hide "crass opportunism".[30] Others recognize that personal ambition, principled differences and struggles for power frequently co-existed. Nevertheless, the last motivation often proved decisive, especially amongst India's embattled socialists.[31] The "surplus" multiparty governments forged by the communist Left Front in Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal since the 1970s, whose shared policy goals and ideological commitments enabled them usually to outlast single-party majority administrations, are exceptions that prove the rule.[32] Hence most would concur that "from 1977 onwards ... coalitions have been pulled down [at the Centre] only because they did not suit the personal interests of some contenders for power".[33] It is impossible to refute the significance of these ubiquitous power struggles.

Adopting the terms of standard comparative debates has several drawbacks for analyzing India's coalition politics, however. First, the notion of "power-maximization" requires greater conceptual elucidation. Numerous party leaders sought high office for purely private reasons: personal vanity, a political career or to exploit such posts for corrupt purposes. Yet the desire for office frequently served larger partisan interests: to apportion patronage to important clients and distribute governmental posts and administrative prebends to assorted party members. Indeed, many party leaders sought national office to protect turf in their home states, particularly after 1989. Lastly, several justified their pursuit of office on representational grounds, either by advancing the "pure identity claims" of particular communities or by joining forces with ideological opponents in order to block rival social groups.[34] In short, the struggle for power drives a great deal of India's coalition politics, especially within the third force. But such compulsions may serve a range of interests—personal, organizational, social—that warrant attention.

Second, emphasizing the primacy of power in India's coalition politics risks obscuring parties' substantive differences. Policy considerations, the interests of different social groups and ideological conflicts also influenced party leaders' choices, especially in office. In some instances, a personal "sense of vocation" inspired their decisions, particularly in the realm of economic policy and foreign affairs.[35] At other times, specific policy stances reflected partisan beliefs or the interests of particular social cleavages based on caste, class or regional lines.

Indeed, many Indian voters support particular party programmes out of concern for their socioeconomic well-being, rather than simplistic representational claims of caste, region or religion. Moreover, inferring social interests from pre-existing divisions ignores how political mobilization shapes the issues at stake in electoral competition.[36] Disagreements between the socialists and communists, the two axes of the broader Indian left, exemplify these issues. On the one hand, the socialists historically advocated small-scale rural production, a politics of recognition based on lower-caste identities, and non-alignment in foreign affairs. On the other, the communists traditionally championed rapid state-led industrialization, a politics of redistribution based on classes, and an anti-American foreign policy. Reducing their policy conflicts and ideological debates to the pure mobilizational tools of self-interested political entrepreneurs would be misguided. Finally, several party leaders occasionally took decisions that served a perceived national interest, even at their own expense. Differences over India's nuclear strategy, and terms of bilateral trade and resource sharing in the subcontinent, revealed such motivations at key historical moments. In short, power-based accounts fail to explain why different coalition governments in India have pursued distinct policy agendas with varying success.

That said, grasping substantive inter-party differences requires careful analysis. Policy-realization theories normally make two assumptions: policy goals correspond to specific party ideologies as well as particular social interests. Both are contestable. Ideological differences may not directly orient policy choices. On the one hand, the actual range of choice in an issue-area, such as economic policy, may be limited due to structural constraints in the domestic political economy or international economic order. This was clearly the case in India since the 1990s. On the other hand, a party may appeal to the values and identities of particular social groups, yet fail to advocate policies advancing their economic interests. The politics of dignity pursued by lower-caste parties and militant cultural agenda of Hindu nationalist parties, each of which sometimes made symbolic gains on behalf of their respective constituents yet ignored their wider material interests, illustrate these distinctions. Finally, it is difficult to infer political choices strictly from ideological dispositions because most actors take situational factors into account.[37]

Indeed, the constituents of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front advocated distinctive programmatic objectives, and their

respective tenures pushed economic policy, Centre-state relations and foreign affairs in new directions. Many of their respective initiatives were rushed, incomplete and sometimes even at odds, revealing tendencies rather than truly fully developed policies driven by a shared political ideology. Nonetheless, all three governments revealed the outlines of a different political disposition, which require acknowledging the concerns of the socialist, communist and regional parties that composed their ranks in varying degrees.

Third, pure coalition theories overstate the polarity between competing political motivations in actual coalition bargaining. In many cases, a party can only realize its policy preferences by securing enough votes to gain office and ensuring their implementation. Conversely, a party may only be able to capture office by pledging certain policies to the wider electorate that its base dislikes. Several comparativists embrace these realities. Party leaders may prefer to enter heterogeneous coalitions in order to maintain their distinctive profiles. Conversely, they may minimize policy compromises in order to maximize party unity, but largely to protect their own positions.[38] Indeed, particular situational constraints may alter prior political preferences. Yet the desire to construct parsimonious explanations, including the presumption that elections are unconnected political events, prevents many scholars from probing these more complex relations. More generally, however, parties may perceive substantive value in maximizing power, influencing policy and acquiring votes: these objectives are not logically exclusive. But conceptualizing them in such terms encourages the view that coalitions are homogeneous blocs that solely seek to maximize power, influence policy or obtain votes. Indeed, assuming that parties may possess a plurality of goals, other questions arise, such as which motive trumps at specific moments, why and its consequences. Likewise, assuming that coalitions often contain heterogeneous interests, similar questions emerge, such as which parties realize their aims, why and to what effect.

A few comparativists investigate these hard political choices by studying how the leaders of several governing coalitions dealt with critical trade-offs in moments of crisis.[39] Their analyses generate several insights, namely, the importance of formal institutional rules and parties' organizational characteristics in shaping outcomes. Yet most avoid cases that exhibit high "bargaining complexity", circumstances that allow situational factors to dominate but make generalization difficult:

[All else equal], the greater the number of negotiating parties, the higher the level of bargaining complexity. But the latter may also be a function of a lack of unity on the part of the organizations involved or the lack of familiarity among the leaders of the relevant parties ... Numerous, disunited, or unfamiliar parties are likely to [have] given rise to information uncertainties among the partners in bargaining ... The more limited their information, the less likely risk-averse party leaders are to gamble on new coalition partners or on moves whose electoral implications are hard to foresee. Thus, in situations of highly imperfect or incomplete information, we may see fewer policy concessions and fewer unorthodox alliances than we might otherwise expect.[40]

Few established democracies rival the bargaining complexity of India's coalition politics. Indeed, the sheer number, fluidity and diversity of parties that oscillate amongst its national coalition governments engender tremendous uncertainty. Contrary to expectation, however, unorthodox alliances are the norm. Moreover, party leaders had to make policy concessions to form many of India's governing coalitions too.

In short, a diversity of purposes animates national coalition politics in India, even though narrow political instincts wreaked havoc all too often. Rather than embracing a "Manichean dualism of soul and body, high-mindedness and the pork barrel,"[41] we need to grasp how a variety of substantive disputes and power struggles shaped the emergence, tenure and demise of India's coalition governments, and the project of building a progressive third force more broadly.

Institutions as rules and incentives, opportunities and constraints

What shapes the opportunities and constraints party leaders face, and the size, character and durability of multiparty governments? Pure coalition theories presume an unconstrained political world. Most scholars realize that intentions rarely determine outcomes, however. Hence they examine the impact of formal political institutions, which generate incentive structures, influence agents' expectations and shape the probability of outcomes.[42] Three particular institutions draw scrutiny.

First, many analyze the ramifications of different electoral rules on party strategies as well as on the size and degree of polarization within the party system. In general, comparativists argue that electoral rules based on proportional representation (PR), the norm in west European democracies, translate votes into seats in relatively predictable ways. Hence such regimes encourage parties to maximize vote shares. In contrast, single-member simple-plurality (SMSP) systems, in which the

candidate first-past-the-post (FPTP) wins, inflate and depress the conversion of votes into seats, creating incentives for parties to stick to their preferred policy positions.[43] Constitutional provisions regarding the installation and termination of governments, and legislative-executive relations in general, are the second institutional focus. In particular, comparativists investigate whether a formal investiture requirement exists, and if so, the specific role played by the head of state; the conditions for tabling parliamentary votes of confidence; and the significance of such votes for the continuation of parliament, government or both. Third, most scholars examine the type of government. Generally, presidential systems create few incentives for cooperation since they concentrate formal executive power into a single indivisible office; parliamentary cabinet systems allow governing coalitions to share executive power and set official policy agendas collectively to a greater degree; and consociational regimes, by dividing the spoils of office and providing constitutional vetoes over key policy issues, facilitate the greatest degree of elite cooperation.[44] Taken together, the preceding institutional arrangements determine the bargaining arena and establish incentive structures that influence parties' decisions.

Additionally, institutional considerations generate several hypotheses regarding why multiparty governments collapse.[45] The "coalition attributes model" tests the durability of "minimum winning coalitions" vis-à-vis "minimum connected winning coalitions" and minority governments. "Regime type approaches" focus on the number of parties in and size of the party system, its degree of polarization and the rules that govern policy formulation as well as the formation and demise of governments. The greater the number of parties in the legislature, and the higher the presence of extreme ideological parties, the greater the difficulty of forming durable coalitions. Strong investiture requirements exacerbate the latter. The "political bargaining environment" approach examines coalition attributes along with the degree of polarity in the party system. Coalitions with extreme ideological parties are more likely to collapse. Lastly, the "event-oriented" perspective investigates the susceptibility of coalitions to sudden critical incidents, precipitating their demise.

Comparative investigations yield two major findings. The first is that policy-realization theories best explain why coalition governments form: "minimum winning coalitions" account for only 30 per cent of the total between 1945 and 1999.[46] In some cases, parties construct

"surplus" multiparty governments to insure themselves against potential blackmail. In others, policy affinities matter, leading to "minimum connected winning coalitions". Finally, against theoretical expectation, minority governments are the norm in Scandinavia: the relatively high informational certainty and low political risks characterizing these polities encourage parties to extract policy concessions without joining governments, enabling the latter to endure. In short, for many parties coalition pay-offs depend on the cost of office vis-à-vis their respective votes shares and policy credibility, and whether they believe particular governments will last.[47] In particular, the distribution of strength amongst parties in parliament and the difficulty of the political bargaining environment determine the probability of different arrangements emerging:

> Minority governments are most likely to form when bargaining power is concentrated in the hands of a single party, when the costs of forming free-floating coalitions are low, and when the value that parties place on being in government is not too great. Minimum winning coalitions are most likely to form when the value parties place on being in government is high relative to being in opposition, when uncertainty is low and parties are able to credibly commit to each other, when political decisions are made by simple majority rule, and when bargaining power is neither greatly concentrated nor greatly dispersed. Surplus coalitions are most likely when bargaining is greatly dispersed amongst the various parties in parliament, when political decisions require more than a simple majority in the lower chamber of parliament, and when government membership is neither extremely costly nor extremely valuable.[48]

Thus formal theoretical models predict correctly only 40 per cent of the time.[49] The second major finding is that random exogenous shocks, especially in governing coalitions that include extreme ideological parties and last beyond their first year, are likely to instigate their demise.[50] In sum, substantive policy concerns and contextual political factors matter. The significance of uncertainty and contingency at both ends of the coalition game, although rarely emphasized, is quite striking.

Where does India, an asymmetric federal parliamentary democracy with a FPTP electoral regime, stand in light of these comparative findings? The classic expectation regarding FPTP is Duverger's law: its propensity to produce two-party systems and yield single-party majority governments.[51] Winner-take-all elections generate strong incentives for voters to elect a candidate likely to win and, in turn, centripetal pressures for parties to appeal to the median voter by adopting a moderate electoral platform. If no single party can easily capture a plurality of

votes, however, FPTP creates incentives to form electoral coalitions that cross the threshold of votes necessary for government formation.[52] Similarly, Westminster-style governments produce a collegial executive whose tenure depends on gaining and retaining the confidence of parliament, which facilitates power-sharing. This is particularly the case in fragmented legislatures where no single party, even the largest, can easily dictate to its coalition partners. Since prime ministers must retain the confidence of parliament, they often have to concede de facto control over ministries to their allies, which retain the capacity to break the government.[53]

Yet India has never fulfilled these theoretical expectations neatly. New Delhi witnessed a succession of single-party majority governments from 1952 to 1989. The Congress party ran most of them, however, in stark contrast to the two-party systems that FPTP normally engender. Indeed, the average number of parties in the Lok Sabha between 1952 and 1984 and between 1989 and 2004 was 18.6 and 31.6, respectively. To put it in perspective, the second most fragmented parliament in the world over a comparable period was Italy, with an average of 10.5 parties.[54] And plurality-rule elections in India, in contrast to western Europe, have created strong incentives for parties to abandon their professed policy preferences for the sake of political survival.

Furthermore, since 1989 India has witnessed a series of national coalition governments, the largest in the world in terms of the number and diversity of parties they contain. The vast majority are minority governing coalitions, however, rare in Westminster-style democracies. Indeed, 87.5 per cent of the Union cabinet governments formed between 1989 and 2004 lacked a parliamentary majority, with a mean of 5.8 parties in each of them. Their size, character and instability make India an extreme outlier amongst even west European polities with PR systems.[55]

Lastly, national coalition governments in India are far more diverse vis-à-vis other federal parliamentary democracies.[56] On the one hand, the majority of national multiparty governments in Canada, Germany, Australia and Belgium are minimum winning coalitions. On the other, out of 237 pre-electoral coalitions that came together in twenty federal democracies between 1946 and 1998, only two had parties with different regional bases. Yet unwieldy minority coalition governments, comprising numerous state-based parties, have been the norm in India since 1989. Between 1991 and 1999, the number of state-based parties in

the Lok Sabha increased from 19 to 35, while their relative vote share jumped from 26 to 46 per cent.[57] In short, India's party leaders face the most difficult political bargaining environment of any modern representative democracy.

Given these anomalies, how useful are standard institutional analytics for explaining the vicissitudes of India's national coalition politics? Specifically, why have national multiparty governments become the norm since 1989, despite the persistence of its macro-democratic regime? Given their ubiquitous power struggles, which should encourage "minimum winning coalitions", what explains the fact that virtually every Union government in the post-1989 era lacked a parliamentary majority? And why did national elections in India continue to produce fractured verdicts, despite the instability of particular coalition experiments, until the surprising parliamentary majority won by the BJP in 2014?

We can resolve these puzzles by synthesizing the deft insights of the leading scholars of India's coalition politics. The demise of single-party majority governments at the Centre since 1989 owes much to the complex interaction effects of plurality-rule elections in a progressively regionalized federal parliamentary democracy. These dynamics shape their performance in office too. Its roots lie in the 1950s and 1960s, when New Delhi acceded to growing popular demands to reorganize the federal system into distinct linguistic-cultural zones. Vernacular public spheres developed in many states, leading new parties to employ local idioms of caste, region and language to mobilize historically subordinate classes vis-à-vis the Congress.[58] The vernacularization of federalism in India gradually encouraged the emergence, under FPTP, of distinct political systems in the states in which two parties or blocs competed for power in the 1960s and 1970s. These were slow burning processes. Yet their ramifications became clearer in the late 1980s. The inability of any single party to maintain a dominant presence in every state created a system of "multiple bipolarities" across the Union and parliamentary fragmentation in New Delhi.[59] Complex state-level rivalries, combined with a system of government that divided executive authority in the Council of Ministers and required opposition parties to demonstrate a parliamentary majority in order to defeat sitting administrations, locked in pre-electoral allies and enabled successive minority coalition governments to form.[60] The rise of lower-caste, regional and communist parties in the 1990s vis-à-vis the more elitist,

centralizing and nationalist tendencies of the Congress and BJP, and the crystallization of the idea of the third force in modern Indian politics, was partly a long-term function of these complex processes. Put differently, India's federal parliamentary democracy encouraged the development of "centric-regional" and "polity-wide" parties, incentivizing them to craft diverse governing coalitions in New Delhi.[61]

However, the same macro-institutional design that encouraged particular coalition governments to emerge after 1989 paradoxically tested their ability to survive. First, the emergence of specific party systems in the regions impeded stable alliances over time. From the beginning, India's federal system contained local social cleavages, making it hard for opposition parties to create horizontal political alliances across state boundaries. The Congress party, leveraging the symbolic leadership and organizational resources it had accrued through the national movement, found it easier.[62] The reorganization of states gradually cracked Congress dominance, however, notwithstanding a series of national wave elections in the 1970s and 1980s. The de-synchronization of state and national-level elections in 1971 deepened the regionalization of many parties' electoral horizons and social bases. The tendency for the latter to fragment into increasingly narrow segments in the 1980s, as parties began to court particular lower-caste, regional and communal identities, made it harder to build durable national fronts. Finally, the deepening of liberal economic reforms in the early 1990s compelled state-level governments of every persuasion to court scarce private investment domestically and abroad, creating fissures within many parties and widening inter-state disparities too. In short, the federal underpinnings of India's coalition politics make national political bargains the product of nested state-level negotiations. Rational political decisions in the regions, where parties may offer outside support to avoid becoming "tainted" by national government decisions, frequently encourage ideologically heterogeneous and politically unstable alliances in New Delhi.[63]

Second, a FPTP system may paradoxically generate instability in multiparty governments, despite creating powerful incentives to pool votes prior to elections.[64] Small vote swings in a fragmented electoral field can lead to massive seat changes in parliament, generating potential mistrust within particular coalition governments. Therefore parties have incentives constantly to jockey for advantage. In aggregate terms, the degree of electoral disproportionality in India diminished through the 1990s as

the number of parties increased.[65] Yet specific parties still often suffered from massive negative swings between elections. Notwithstanding 1984, the lead party of every Union government between 1977 and 1996 lost between 15 and 50 per cent of its vote share in the next poll.[66] Party leaders had good reason, given the persistently high electoral volatility India witnessed after 1989, to feel insecure.

Third, parliamentary cabinet systems are strategically complex. The timing of elections is endogenous—within a customary five-year limit—since the legislature makes and breaks governments. The prime minister commands greater discretion over such matters in single-party majority governments. Power diffuses in multiparty executives, however, to other leaders. And in minority coalition governments, which predominate in India post-1989, every member of the Opposition with an effective parliamentary veto enjoys such influence. The fact that only two minority coalition governments in New Delhi lasted a full parliamentary term to date—both avatars of the United Progressive Alliance—underscores these vulnerabilities.

A paradox emerges. The tripartite logic of India's macro-democratic regime, despite its relative institutional stability, generated political uncertainty after 1989. Party leaders confronted an intensely competitive federal party system where politicians, seeing the outcome simultaneously as close and open, "configure[d] around alternative parties or party blocs"; where small electoral shifts significantly enhanced their bargaining power; and where the stakes were high.[67] Sustaining a diverse multiparty government in such circumstances, especially a minority governing coalition of diverse state-based parties seeking to create a Third Front, became exceedingly difficult.

Formulas, strategies and tactics of power-sharing

Indeed, these macro-level uncertainties had micro-level dimensions too. The somewhat mechanistic conception of institutions that dominates comparative investigations creates several problems. First, it elides the distinction between rules and incentives. Formal decision rules sometimes produce specific outcomes independently of political agents' decisions. But we cannot assume that political actors will fully respond to the incentives generated by such formulae. India's FPTP regime has constantly encouraged opposition parties to form anti-Congress alliances since independence, producing similar inducements for the

Congress party after 1989. Contrary to what historical institutionalists expect, however, the "strategies induced by [FPTP in India] ... [failed to] ossify over time into worldviews, which ... ultimately shape[d] even the self-images and basic preferences of the actors involved".[68] Both sides struggled to recognize these incentives and overcome other obstacles over these years.

Second, drawing causal inferences from particular institutional matrices presumes that political agents know, accept and follow patterns of interaction that such arrangements encourage.[69] Rather than "enacting scripts", however, political actors may seek to acquire power or challenge the boundaries of authority by "play[ing] the rules as if they were instruments".[70] Parliamentary cabinet government enjoins collegial responsibility. Yet whether individual ministers respect the latter, and whether parliaments criticize government policy, oversee bureaucratic performance and hold the executive accountable as expected, are empirical questions. Alas, ministers in India's coalition governments regularly disputed formal cabinet decisions or bent, circumvented and subordinated them. Similarly, parliamentarians often showed indifference "to executive abuse ..., ignore[d] poor drafting of legislation and provide[d] minimal scrutiny of the budget".[71]

Lastly, even when formal institutions establish accepted routines, many cannot fully determine outcomes. In some instances, the rules are partial or ambiguous, unable to stipulate what an actor should do.[72] In others, the rules may only partly determine the range of options available to them. These indeterminacies may arise because an institution has multiple purposes, boundaries and functions that generate "intercurrence",[73] when complex interaction effects of an institutional matrix create multiple equilibria, or due to major social transformations beyond the formal political arena. The growing political significance of the President of India, who had a largely ceremonial role in the formation and termination of governments and passage of various executive orders prior to 1989, is a dramatic illustration of such developments.

In short, unless we embrace a deep structuralism that negates human decision-making or believe that institutions "come with instruction sheets",[74] political agency matters. Explaining India's coalition politics demands a reflexive form of institutional analysis, simultaneously recognizing how the macro-democratic regime shaped historic possibilities, without forgetting that party leaders had to evaluate the often conflicting incentives, opportunities and constraints it generated.[75]

Indeed, even when party leaders shared convergent goals, their perceptions of how to realize them often diverged. What formulas, strategies and tactics did they employ to realize their diverse aims and wider collective interests?

Few parties rivaled the strategic framework of the communist Left in terms of theoretical articulation.[76] Historically, its leading political formations embraced two classical Leninist strategies. The "rightest" anti-imperialist line required a coalition of workers, peasants and the petty and national bourgeoisie against feudal institutions and monopoly capitalism. The "leftist" anti-capitalist approach entailed the first three strata in battle against bourgeois nationalism. Over time Indian communist forces entertained a possible third strategy, supporting the progressive bourgeoisie along the lines of "people's democracy" in eastern Europe or "new democracy" in the People's Republic of China. Strategy concerned winning the war among classes. Hence choosing a strategic line required settling larger questions: the historical stage of capitalist development in India, the roles of different social classes in particular stages and consequently the aim of the proletariat vis-à-vis other strata. Whether the communists allied with non-communist parties through a united-front-from-above, or infiltrated the latter through a united-front-from-below, was a matter of tactics for its political organizations. Crucially, the movement cast these choices in formulaic terms, articulated well by Mao Tse-Tung: "The task of the science of strategy is to study those *laws* for directing a war that govern a war situation as a whole. The task of ... the science of tactics is to study those *laws* for directing a war that govern a particular situation".[77]

Suffice to say, most parties failed to develop such an elaborate theoretical discourse. But questions of strategy and tactics consumed them nonetheless. Debates over whether to share power, with whom and to what extent, and how often led to real schisms. The main protagonists had to address these issues at two related junctures. First, party leaders had to coordinate their electoral strategies. Joint election manifestoes and common programmes allowed them to strike compromises amenable to their respective bases and steer government policy. Collective agreements imparted a measure of coherence to several multiparty alliances, highlighted their distinctive agenda and set red lines vis-à-vis more contested issues. The absence of such pacts and failure to adhere to explicitly stated parameters exacerbated latent conflicts, as comparativists find elsewhere.[78] Of course, such pacts could not

guarantee solidarity. Yet joint election manifestoes and common minimum programmes stabilized expectations. The lack of either contributed to the fractiousness of the Janata Party and National Front. Conversely, every subsequent coalition government had common minimum programmes, an innovation of the United Front. Their increasing sophistication under the NDA and UPA shaped government business, demonstrating political learning.[79]

Party leaders also employed various practical techniques at the polls: permitting minimal cooperation by avoiding direct contests or allowing "friendly contests" in particular constituencies; putting up a single candidate in order to pool votes and stumping together on the campaign trail to facilitate greater coordination; and demonstrating maximal solidarity by integrating their parties into a single formation. More imaginatively, rival party leaders sometimes allowed mutual criticism and avoided joint campaigning as long as they opposed a mutual opponent. Suffice to say, India's coalition politics witnessed these stratagems employed with varying degrees of success. Several opposition parties coalesced into the Janata Party, seizing national power in 1977. Yet electoral integration failed to tame the conflicting personal ambitions between their respective leaders or deep political differences amongst their rank-and-file. Similarly, the JD allowed the BJP and CPI(M) to oppose each other stridently in 1989 as long as both sides attacked the Congress (I), allowing the National Front to capture national office. But the arrangement failed to prevent the BJP from withdrawing its external parliamentary support one year later. Still, attempts to craft a common electoral front made a real difference at several critical junctures.

Second, India's party leaders had to devise power-sharing mechanisms in government, an issue most comparativists neglect.[80] How party leaders manage their differences in office matters immensely, however. Coalition leaders need to address several tasks upon seizing office: forge interpersonal relationships, respond to new policy issues and unanticipated political events and, not least, run the government.[81] Put more colorfully, the survival of diverse governing coalitions in India "has depended on the adroitness in planning a balancing act—keeping one party happy, tolerating the whims and tantrums of individual leaders, avoid a conflict with another, and reining in the various regional parties in the coalition pulling in different directions".[82]

In theory, the locus of these functions in a parliamentary cabinet government is the Council of Ministers. But forging political agreement

in large multiparty governments is difficult: the problems of enforcing collegial responsibility are multiplied when the loyalties of ministers are diverse. The sheer number of parties in India's national coalition governments intensifies the challenge. Moreover, at different junctures various parties supported a parliamentary coalition but refused to participate in government. With the exception of the Janata Party and second administration of the National Democratic Alliance, every governing coalition in New Delhi was a minority, forced to rely on outside support. Hence they had to concoct power-sharing formulas and conflict resolution mechanisms to facilitate collective decision-making, adjudicate competing demands and make binding claims.

Many relied on ad hoc devices: private bilateral meetings between key party officials. Others were regular yet informal: weekly political dinners at the prime minister's residence. Over time informal political institutions evolved, however, as often happens when pre-existing rules are inadequate.[83] The most important was the coordination committee, which acted as a safety valve as well as an integrative mechanism, providing a forum for parties to engage problems without the glare of media or parliament. At their best, it helped party leaders to "learn to play the game", recognizing "the right [of all constituents] to participate and ... be consulted in the decision-making process".[84] Crucially, coordination committees allowed outside supporters to engage with parties in government. Indeed, the United Front was the first to establish such a forum, with a higher-level steering committee too, in order to accommodate the CPI(M), which helped to construct the coalition and draft its common minimum programme but refused government participation. In several governments, disagreements over the status and functioning of the coordination committee vis-à-vis the Union cabinet hampered political consensus, deepened partisan divisions and blurred the locus of responsibility. Both the United Front and United Progressive Alliance encountered such difficulties vis-à-vis the CPI(M). Nevertheless, the fact every national coalition government in India after 1996 set up such a body testified to its relative utility and political necessity.

The necessity and difficulty of exercising political judgment

In sum, senior party leaders deeply influenced the rise, performance and fall of different coalition experiments, given their relative autonomy, the

range, diversity and fluidity of interests that they had to manage and the complex interaction effects generated by India's democratic regime. Yet several conjunctural factors heightened the scope for agency. The Janata Party, National Front and United Front represented major turning points in modern Indian politics. The Janata Party, the first non-Congress government to rule the country since independence, consolidated representative democracy. The National Front, whose tenure witnessed the acceleration of liberal economic reform, popular democratic mobilization of the lower castes and the march of Hindu nationalist forces, ended the era of single-party majorities in New Delhi. Indeed, it constituted a critical juncture, a "major watersheds in political life ... which establish[ed] certain directions of change and foreclose[d] others in a way that shape[d] politics for years to come".[85] The United Front, which crystallized the idea of a third force in modern Indian democracy, deepened the logic of national coalition politics. These "structurally induced unsettled times" expanded the possibilities for "consequential purposive action" and "visions of alternative futures".[86]

To analyze party leaders' choices, I employ the concept of political judgment, drawing on the classical realist tradition of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Weber and their contemporary successors.[87] According to realists, politics demands the exercise of judgment. It is a distinct species of practical reason, which tests the capacity of actors to comprehend the causal relations of the world, which are only partly shaped by their beliefs, desires and practices, with a view to action; to distinguish the foreseen, foreseeable and unforeseeable consequences of different political decisions, whatever their intentions; and to seize the possibilities of a given historical moment:

> There is no great mystery in the formidable set of qualities, personal and political, that good political judgment demands: a clear purpose and a practical view of what has to be done to realize it; an achievable idea of how to command the power and resources to succeed, including a sensitivity to the views and likely strength of those who might support one and those who might not; a sense of how and when to tell the truth, varnish it, lie or be silent; confidence, courage, patience and a good sense of timing; the capacity to imagine the next move but one and the choices that this can present; and what, all along, might go wrong.[88]

Evaluating political choices, given the presence of uncertainty and partialities of judgment, is not easy.[89] The fact that mistakes happen, from small gaffes to costly errors, makes this clear. Hence Machiavelli's claim that fortune governs half of our political life.[90]

That said, five intellectual traits encourage good political judgment. First, it requires political actors to focus on particulars as opposed to generalizations or universals, to possess deep contextual knowledge of the situation they face in order to maximize the chances of success. The relevant context may differ: local power relations, the structure of national politics, an historical epoch. Moreover, judgment always entails relating particulars to universals, which requires the "ability to determine which ... theories abstract from crucial aspects of the situation".[91]

Second, good political judgment is pragmatic. Skilful actors exhibit a grasp of "what will work": to see a political situation "in terms of what you or others can or will do to them, and what they can or will do to others or to you".[92] It requires actors to possess a sense of timing, "to [grasp] opportunities that will not present themselves again",[93] foreseeing not simply what will happen but what will seem good to powerful others that matter.[94]

Third, good political judgment demands a synthetic form of causal understanding, "a capacity for taking in the total pattern of a human situation, of the way in which things hang together".[95] Realists view politics as complex and probabilistic: complex since the forces shaping it may be heterogeneous, reciprocal or contingent over time;[96] probabilistic because what is possible in principle, in a world that might yet exist, may not be at specific moments. Indeed, grasping the precise causal relations that define particular historical contexts frequently involves facing the contradictions of the world squarely.[97]

Fourth, good political judgment involves strategic reasoning. Actors have to consider the intentions, capacities and actions of others with partial knowledge. They may face brute factual uncertainty about states of affairs; higher-order uncertainty about the necessity and cost of resolving such factual uncertainty; indecision over what to do because of asymmetric information or the existence of multiple plausible choices; and inadequate causal understanding of how the political world operates.[98] Thus, strictly speaking, to judge is not to calculate.

Finally, good political judgment requires actors to possess a degree of detachment. On the one hand, they must have a passion for a cause. A purely instrumental politician, devoid of any substantive ends, would be a man without a soul. On the other, they must demonstrate an ethic of responsibility for the consequences of their actions, regardless of their intentions. Hence the ability to "maintain a distance from things and events" is crucial.[99]

Employing a classical realist conception of political judgment requires some justification. Indeed, comparativists that seek to elucidate strategic interactions under conditions of uncertainty normally use rational choice theories, praising their parsimony, elegance and universality. Yet they also highlight their suitability:

> It would be difficult to find a bargaining situation in which the principal actors are more familiar with each other than they are in forming governments. The party leaders involved work almost daily, often for many years, in parliament; they know one another's constituency interests; they read one another's speeches; they are aware of one another's political commitments and divisions. It is surely the case that no one observes the behavior of politicians more closely than politicians.[100]

Several observers of India's coalition politics agree.[101] Yet a realist conception of political judgment offers three relative advantages.

First and foremost, party leaders frequently evaluated decisions in the language of judgment. The CPI(M) Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, famously declared in 1997 that his party's decision not to participate in the United Front government was a "historical blunder".[102] Indeed, the broader Indian left has debated whether its leading parties correctly read key historical moments since the anti-colonial movement, as the narrative shows. Yet commentators rarely analyze the exercise of judgment in depth or consider its significance, a characteristic lapse of the parliamentary left too. The decision to analyze the exercise of judgment takes its cue from the empirics of the case.

Second, rational choice theories encounter severe methodological limitations in complex settings. Strong models assume utility-maximizing actors that possess rationally formed beliefs, desires and fixed transitive preferences, as well as a complete understanding of the consequences of different courses of action, in a stable political environment.[103] Yet there are scenarios where an actor knows "the set of mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive outcomes, but find themselves neither able to attach any (cardinal) probabilities to them", nor can say how much more likely a particular (ordinal) result is likely to be.[104] Strict instrumental rationality is very difficult in complex social environments,[105] during rapid political change[106] or over extended time horizons where "[because] the odds of correctly predicting ... several moves by the other player requires us to multiply the probabilities of correctly predicting each move, problems can arise even when actors are very good at predicting specific moves".[107] Unsurprisingly, recent

attempts to explain the formation and collapse of coalitions using non-cooperative game theory restrict their models to three contesting parties.[108] In contrast, the number and turnover of players and diversity and fluidity of interests in successive multiparty governments in India, not to mention their frequent minority parliamentary status, makes it hard to model their behavior without indeterminate results.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, rational choice theories confront inherent difficulties in grasping political mistakes, let alone explaining their causes or ramifications. In principle, models of rationality accentuate the imperative of choice, not least the dilemma facing socialists in west European democracies in the twentieth century:

> [The] very probability of committing mistakes presupposes simultaneously a political project, some choice among strategies, and objective conditions that are independent with regard to a particular movement. If the strategy of a party is uniquely determined, then the notion of "mistakes" is meaningless: the party can only pursue the inevitable.... [the] notion of mistakes is also rendered meaningless within the context of a radically voluntaristic understanding of historical possibilities ... [but] if everything is always possible, then only motives explain the course of history... "Betrayal" is indeed a proper way of understanding social democratic strategies in a world free of objective constraints. But accusations of betrayal are not particularly illuminating in the real world.[109]

Yet rational choice explanations habitually insist that "what the agent did was the best or most effective way of pursuing her purposes. And this entails establishing the embedded normative assertion [of complete rationality]".[110] Two problems arise. As behavioral economists show, actors often make irrational choices, sometimes quite systematically.[111] Moreover, many rationalist accounts paradoxically claim that actors could not have chosen otherwise:

> Was the alternative possible? ... Socialists had no choice: they had to struggle for political power because any other movement for socialism would have been stamped out by force and they had to utilize the opportunities offered by participation to improve the immediate conditions of workers because otherwise they would not have gained support among them. They had to struggle for power and they were lucky enough to be able to do it under democratic conditions. Everything else was pretty much a consequence.[112]

The specter of inevitability robs the notion of choice of meaning; indeed, it disappears. So does a great deal else too—suspense, luck and change—animating political life.[113] All that remains to be explained are rational mistakes.

Models of bounded rationality assume incomplete information, less ordered preferences and limited computational abilities, leading social actors to "satisfice" their choices based on various heuristics.[114] Yet even sober accounts acknowledge that "unintended consequences and unforeseen contingencies are [often] beyond the scope of the enterprise",[115] and continue to ignore the role of "errors ... cumulative but relatively invisible effects ... and environmental reverberations" in larger outcomes.[116] Most fundamentally, rational choice theories overlook how politics sometimes requires actors to act inconsistently, depending on context. Analyzing their actual political judgments, including their capacity to distinguish the foreseen and foreseeable from the unforeseeable consequences of action, provides a richer conceptual paradigm for grasping these issues.[117]

Consequently, synthesizing the focus of rational choice theories with a more historical sensibility may yield greater insight. The former illuminates how political actors' preferences and strategic interactions under conditions of uncertainty shape expectations, decisions and outcomes. The latter suggests that preferences may be eclectic, fluid and endogenous; that actors often lack the power to control events due to lack of foresight or because institutions shape individual behavior and power relations in asymmetric, unanticipated ways; and that consequently their choices may well depend "... on the interpretation of a situation rather than ... purely instrumental calculation."[118]

Suffice to say, analyzing the political judgments of real actors confronts its own difficulties. First, appraisals of good political judgment are context-dependent, of what seemed reasonable in light of what was known or foreseeable at the moment of decision. Yet it is often difficult to establish the true intentions of any party leader. We cannot access mental states. Moreover, they may have failed to grasp adequately their own motivations due to limitations all human agents confront. Lastly, party leaders frequently dissimulate, either to protect their reputations and careers or due to the political sensitivity of the subject matter.

Second, good political judgment is neither necessary nor sufficient for success. In some instances, actors may correctly perceive political possibilities but lack the requisite power, skill or determination to realize their desires. In other instances, they may display poor judgment yet secure their aims, either because more powerful forces abetted their designs, deliberately or otherwise, or due to contingencies they neither

had foreseen nor could have. We can only resolve these questions through rigorous process tracing, evaluating plausible counterfactuals in light of general theoretical principles and specific historical knowledge, a task that causal narratives generally face.[119]

Lastly, since good political judgment demands contextual reasoning, wider theoretical inferences are harder to draw. For rational choice theorists, "[what] makes a tale compelling is that the causal mechanisms it identifies are plausible ... [which involves] demonstrating their generalizability to other contexts ...".[120] As a result, "rationalists are almost always willing to sacrifice nuance for generalizability, detail for logic, a forfeiture most other comparativists would decline".[121] The belief that universal causal relations govern the world justifies the claim that valid arguments must be general in scope. Conceptual parsimony and theoretical ambition produce maximum explanatory leverage.

Fortunately, narratives provide a very useful technique for addressing some of these problems. If done well, they supply "diverse forms of internal evidence" that mitigate selection bias.[122] A narrative offers a critical plausibility test to examine the presuppositions underlying competing theories, uncover new facts and develop critical redescriptions of previously studied phenomena.[123] Quantitatively-oriented methodologists agree that valid causal explanations require good descriptive inference.[124] But describing events accurately, whether they suggest larger patterns or not, is necessary too.

In addition, narratives facilitate process-tracing, linking causes, mechanisms and effects and generating insights into possible auxiliary outcomes.[125] Such processes take various forms: linear isolated mechanisms that generate constant effects; the concatenation of actors, decisions and structures that produce complex causal chains; path dependent processes in which early contingent events mold historical outcomes over the *longue durée*, to name a few. "The very act of producing an account [of the past] ... virtually requires an often counterfactual neatness and coherence ... with an air of inevitability being given to an act that may have been highly contingent."[126] Uncovering the complex causal chains that may have produced larger outcomes minimizes such illusions.

Sources and methods

Ultimately, a compelling narrative demands good detective work, resting on the quality of observations and inference.[127] Accordingly, this

book relies on a variety of methods and sources. Reportage and commentary provided by newspapers and periodicals, and information from politicians' writings, party manifestoes and public government documents, comprise its foundation. Statistical analyses of official electoral data as well as national election surveys by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, provide further insights into the competing parties' electoral fortunes, policy profiles and social bases. Finally, and most importantly, the narrative contains the rare confidential testimonies of senior party leaders, high-ranking state officials from the bureaucracy, judiciary and police, and seasoned political journalists, elicited through dozens of in-depth semi-structured interviews. These interviews help to elucidate the rise and fall of the third force in modern Indian democracy, specifically its politics in the 1990s, while shedding new light on other coalition experiments.

There are well-known advantages and shortcomings of employing such a methodology. Apart from the credibility of different press accounts, skeptics might allege that "first drafts of history" engender too much speculation and not enough knowledge.[128] "Newspapers are the second hands of history," insisted Schopenhauer, "they always tell the wrong time".[129] These caveats must be kept in mind. Yet waiting for the declassification of secret government documents inspires greater speculation, not less, with observers projecting their own predilections into debates over what really happened. Moreover, by using contemporaneous sources of information, we can try to uncover what motivated the chief protagonists as events transpired, not merely what appears significant to us now. To minimize the vagaries of memory and ambition, the narrative balances the insights gleaned from high-level interviews with many other sources of evidence, not least a lively, diverse and erudite media. Fortunately, considerable time has passed, allowing a more disinterested perspective, especially helpful when judging party leaders' judgments. In the end, writing such a narrative entails such risks and dealing with them as best possible.

Using off-the-record claims by key political informants has obvious disadvantages too, which perhaps explains why few comparativists do.[130] It is hard for others to replicate the analysis or verify its inferences exactly. The difficulty of fully recovering actors' motivations, given the possibilities of dissimulation and incomplete self-understanding, exacerbates the problem. Still, it deserves effort. Treating the intentions of real political actors as revealed preferences or conceptualizing their

motives simply via theory, as most rationalist accounts do, skirts these challenges while raising problems of its own.[131] By granting confidentiality to key protagonists, moreover, we arguably increase their likelihood of imparting genuine observations. Lastly, no Archimedean vantage exists. We simply have to assess "diverse, complex and sometimes conflicting" claims, judging their credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness according to the best practices of empirical verification.[132]

Ultimately, recognizing the role of judgment in politics carries a significant implication. It requires us to exercise good political judgment ourselves: to ask what it was possible for the actors we study, in the circumstances in which they found themselves, to reasonably do, analyzing the foreseeable consequences of different political decisions by reconstructing the context of action in time, not as spectators after the fact, as faithfully as we can.[133] If done well, our explanations should resist temptations of abstract moralizing and easy historical judgment as well as tales of necessity and flights of fancy, demonstrating the possibilities and constraints surrounding real political events as they actually happened.

CONCLUSION

The politics of constructing a Third Front in modern Indian democracy, from its roots in the Janata Party (1977–80) and crystallization during the National Front (1989–91) to its maturation as the United Front (1996–98), has always been a struggle. Many observers blame the myopic personal ambitions of individual party leaders, bereft of any substantive agenda, simply desiring power for its own sake. Others emphasize the multiplicity of forces—distinct ideological traditions, competing policy goals and divergent social interests—underlying these inherently unwieldy coalitions. Yet most assessments, whatever their explanations, have been harsh. "The Janata had few real political designs, and it was incapable of implementing them. Survival was of the essence."[1] "What had begun as a bold experiment in party building, political realignment and national reconstruction along Gandhian lines ended in shambles."[2] Likewise, commentators lamented how the National Front spent "long days assuaging hurt feelings, imagined slights, political differences".[3] The coalition "had no machinery worth its name ... to build bridges ... dilute differences or even agree to disagree".[4] Finally, the United Front was a "patchwork creature of doubtful longevity", according to critics, encouraging an "almost palpable sense of a nation adrift with no cohesiveness or sense of purpose".[5] Indeed, even sympathetic observers claimed its predominantly lower-caste leadership took "an entirely instrumental view of the Union", lacked "a coherent view of Indian identity and operate[d] with more restricted horizons".[6] The rise and fall of the third force resembles the chronicle of a death foretold.[7]

Yet its obvious political failures, as some noted, concealed complex countercurrents. "[The] obvious weaknesses of the Janata system ...

tend to conceal the significance of new beginnings.... What the Janata Party ... accomplished during the brief span of two years was not self-evident when it assumed joint responsibility of democratic restoration and developmental reconstruction".[8] The National Front, tumultuous in office, attracted little praise. Yet some commentators found the United Front "refreshing", articulating the demands and sentiments of groups historically ignored by the Congress(I) and BJP, while others thought its constituents "managed to reconcile their differences with a fair degree of success ... a remarkable achievement [given the challenges] of growing economic liberalization and political federalization of the governance system".[9] Analyzing the trajectory of the Third Front in proper historical context requires a more nuanced perspective. And doing so helps to situate national coalition politics in India in comparative historical perspective, revealing its distinctive causal dynamics, which suggest wider conceptual, theoretical and methodological implications.

Indeed, the Janata Party, National Front and United Front differed in several important respects. First, each coalition encompassed a progressively wider constellation of parties, groups and interests. The Janata Party, led by the "squabbling gerontocratic triumvirate" of Morarji Desai, Charan Singh and Jagjivan Ram, coalesced to restore parliamentary democracy after Emergency rule.[10] It represented the merger of four distinct parties, all based in northern India, symbolizing the ascent of rich capitalist farmers in the Gangetic plains. The National Front suffered analogous tensions at the helm between V.P. Singh, Chandrasekhar and Devi Lal. Clashing personal ambitions and deeper partisan disputes spoiled the plot. Nonetheless, it was a seven-party coalition, incorporating ascendant regional formations from the east and south. Its minority parliamentary status left it vulnerable to the communist Left and Hindu right. Crosscutting tensions between the "*kisan* politics" of the erstwhile BLD and the "quota politics" of the socialists, and between the latter and *Hindutva*, precipitated its demise.[11] Finally, the United Front was a minority governing coalition encompassing fifteen parties, representing states across the country. Given the number and diversity of constituents in the alliance, which relied on the external parliamentary support of the CPI(M) and Congress(I), its leadership established a steering committee to manage inter-party relations. And the active government participation of the TDP, AGP and DMK, whose electoral fortunes had risen significantly

since the late 1980s, signified the arrival of non-Hindi-speaking regions in New Delhi. Hence the United Front represented the growing political ambitions of intermediate social forces and formerly regionalist parties in modern Indian democracy.

Second, the politics of the third force witnessed a gradual rapprochement with the communist Left as it grew increasingly antagonistic towards the Hindu right. The RSS and Jan Sangh played integral roles, respectively, in the JP Movement and Janata Party. Several eminent figures, most notably Atal Bihari Vajpayee, acquired executive power. But tensions over the membership of Jan Sangh parliamentarians in the RSS eventually led the Socialists to break away. In contrast, the National Front accepted parliamentary support from the Left Front as well as the BJP. But rising political tensions over *Hindutva*—committed to introducing a Uniform Civil Code, abrogating the special constitutional status of Jammu & Kashmir and building a Ram temple in Ayodhya—and the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report tore the coalition apart. The formation of the United Front, involving the crucial government participation of the CPI and outside support from the CPI(M), prevented the BJP from seizing national power. It represented the most secular avatar of the third force.

Finally, each of these multiparty experiments displayed greater unity. Competing prime ministerial aspirations in New Delhi and deeper partisan battles in the states plagued the Janata. The Congress(I) exploited its rivalries, temporarily propping up Charan Singh, before recapturing power. The party similarly exploited high-level intrigues during the National Front, briefly supporting Chandrasekhar, only to abandon him a few months later. Hence many commentators expected a similar fate to befall the United Front. Despite its manifold internal tensions, however, its government only fell after the Congress(I) withdrew outside support. The need to carry many state-based allies encouraged it to share power better than its predecessors.[12] Yet the willingness of the United Front to rebuff successive Congress(I) demands while in office surprised many observers.

In short, viewing the Janata Party, National Front and United Front as ill-fated experiments whose politics never change obscures as much as it reveals. The precise reasons for their respective achievements and shortcomings in economic policy, Centre-state relations and foreign affairs, lie embedded in the narrative that comprises the heart of this book. Nevertheless, several continuities, ruptures and trends become clearer in hindsight.

Ideologically, the Janata Party championed a neo-Gandhian outlook, vowing to eliminate mass poverty through political and economic decentralization in the countryside. Apart from introducing food-for-work schemes for the poorest and local development projects, however, it made little progress on these fronts. If anything, the government began to liberalize the economy, simplifying industrial licensing and corporate taxes, boosting economic growth, while greatly expanding agricultural subsidies that disproportionately benefited intermediate proprietary castes. The rise of the latter, facilitated by the Green Revolution, militated against a broader coalition of Dalits, small peasants and landless laborers. Similarly, the National Front promised greater employment, welfare and decentralization, exemplified by the Approach Paper to the Eighth Five Year Plan. Its maiden budget introduced employment guarantee schemes and earmarked greater funds for rural development. Escalating agricultural subsidies and further industrial deregulation proved more significant legacies, however, leaving critical shortfalls in health and education largely unaddressed. Accelerating fiscal and external deficits, precipitated by the Congress(I) and exacerbated by the first Iraq war, ignited a full-blown economic crisis. Finally, the United Front continued to liberalize industry, trade and investment regimes, while lowering tax rates and increasing public spending that rewarded the rising middle classes. The devolution of economic decision-making to the regions increased the chances that a minority governing coalition of state-based parties would advance the reforms. Economic liberalization by the Centre sowed divisions among the states, between Third Front constituents and within many of its parties too. But it was not a foregone conclusion. Advocates of liberalization had feared a Third Front government in New Delhi. The capture of key cabinet posts by liberal economic reformers from the regions, matched by the refusal of the CPI(M) to participate in government, made a difference. The United Front failed to embrace privatization, agricultural liberalization and labor reforms. Yet both the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance found it difficult to advance these second-stage reforms too. In short, the radical economic rhetoric and well-formulated social democratic plans of the Janata Party, National Front and United Front largely failed to materialize. The progressive campaign promises and government pronouncements of all three coalitions might simply have been empty rhetoric and cheap talk. Yet the relatively disappointing implementation of

pro-poor policies reflected, more importantly, the failure of leftists within each administration to capture, maintain and exercise sufficient power vis-à-vis coalition partners that held rival material interests and political views. And these shortcomings exposed deeper ideologies of power, elaborated further below, understood most broadly as a set of ideas regarding its nature, purposes and limits.

Efforts to strengthen parliamentary democracy and Centre-state relations fared better in varying degrees. The Janata Party repealed Emergency rule, restoring the autonomy of parliament, the judiciary and state legislative assemblies, constraining executive power. The coalition enhanced the institutional standing of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. And greater participation by the states in the NDC, and the first free and fair elections in Jammu & Kashmir, burnished its pro-federalist credentials. The Janata Party abused its historic mandate, alas, by dismissing nine state governments run by the Congress(I). Yet it largely improved the constitutional machinery and balance of powers governing India's federal parliamentary democracy. The record of the National Front was more contradictory. It established two important mechanisms, the Inter-State Council and Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal, to improve Centre-state relations. The coalition also sought to check executive power by introducing Prasar Bharati, which guaranteed greater freedom for the press. Yet its vow to resolve deadly conflicts in Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, despite early acts of goodwill towards opposition parties from both states that had participated in the regional conclaves of the 1980s, foundered against rising home-grown insurgencies. Cross-border support from Pakistan abetted the latter. But the National Front unleashed a severe military response, stoking greater violence in both regions, undermining Indian democracy for several years.

Centre-state relations improved during the United Front, which vowed to promote 'cooperative federalism'. The coalition pledged 'maximum autonomy' to Jammu & Kashmir and re-engaged the Northeast, directing central funds and scheduling high-level visits to both regions, heralding new beginnings. But it failed to ensure free assembly elections in Kashmir or reach out to secessionist forces, despite calls for both from within the JD, forfeiting an important political opportunity to the next administration. The United Front handled water-sharing disputes, between Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, with mixed success. The coalition brought together the relevant

parties, but political manipulation exacerbated longstanding tensions. Yet neither previous Congress(I) administrations nor subsequent multi-party governments resolved the issues at stake, underscoring their intractability. Indeed, it took fifteen years before the chief ministers from the relevant states met again to address the problem. Similarly, the United Front exploited mitigating circumstances to employ national power for partisan ends, imposing President's rule against BJP state governments on two occasions, despite its constituents' professed demands against such interventions. That said, the coalition sought to reverse the decline in central transfers to the states that characterized the post-liberalization era, while revitalizing languishing federal institutions. It held more sessions of the full ISC and its standing committee in eighteen months—albeit without granting either independent statutory authority—than the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance managed to do over six years.[13] In doing so, the United Front began to redress the asymmetries of power and resources that had historically damaged Centre-state relations.

Finally, all three governments pushed foreign policy in new directions, a realm where few observers expected much headway. The Janata Party pursued greater non-alignment vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union, while putting a moratorium on nuclear testing. The coalition re-engaged China as well as Pakistan, making high-level visits to both countries, ending a long and difficult hiatus. And it implemented a 'good neighbor policy', granting Bangladesh a greater share of the Ganga waters and acceding to longstanding Nepalese requests for separate trade and transit agreements, undoing some of the hardships unilaterally imposed by the Congress(I). The National Front promoted subcontinent relations further, ending the blockade against Nepal imposed by the Congress(I) in the late 1980s, and withdrawing the increasingly contentious IPKF from Sri Lanka, alleviating bilateral strains. Finally, many presumed the lower-caste, communist and regional parties that comprised the United Front would prove unable to develop a national perspective out of their ostensibly provincial horizons. Yet the coalition belied such fears. It withstood concerted international pressure to renounce India's nuclear option. More distinctively, the United Front promoted bilateral agreements vis-à-vis its smaller neighbors on the basis of non-reciprocity, exemplified by the Ganga Waters Treaty Accord, employing state-level leaders to achieve breakthroughs in a manner that has yet to be surpassed.[14] And

the coalition resumed bilateral dialogue with Pakistan. Some observers contended that an unwieldy minority government, facing the need to bolster economic growth and gain credit abroad, was bound to pursue such initiatives.[15] Yet the United Front went much further, covertly reducing foreign intelligence operations in Pakistan. It would prove to be a controversial decision. But it was hardly the sign of a weak Centre. Arguably, all these initiatives helped the National Democratic Alliance subsequently to pursue deeper bilateral negotiations. The presence, expertise and interest of I.K. Gujral proved critical. Yet it was not simply because every foreign minister enjoyed greater discretion in coalition governments.[16] The 'Gujral doctrine' represented the broader political orientation of the third force, tempering India's traditionally overbearing posture in the subcontinent, in contrast the Congress(I) and even the BJP. The divergent regional perspectives that tested its unity in New Delhi, paradoxically, inspired its conciliatory spirit and enhanced its capacity in foreign affairs. Indeed, given the tremendous odds facing the coalition, it was surprising that it accomplished anything at all. The United Front embodied a more progressive version of the "federal nationalist" principle and asymmetric dynamics that have unevenly shaped the Indian "state-nation".[17]

Despite their differences, achievements and shortcomings, however, the Janata Party, National Front and United Front failed to endure. No single overarching theoretical explanation, either the lust for power or irreconcilable social, ideological or policy differences, accounts for their common fate. The leadership of the Janata, given the immense popular goodwill and rare parliamentary majority enjoyed by the coalition, bears tremendous responsibility for its downfall. Indeed, the myopic political machinations that marred its tenure encouraged observers to explain the dynamics of subsequent anti-Congress experiments in New Delhi in roughly similar terms. In general, however, complex interaction effects, involving structure, agency and conjuncture, shaped distinct outcomes.

The vicissitudes of third force politics, and successive governing coalitions since 1989, owe much to the compound tripartite logic of FPTP elections in a progressively regionalized federal parliamentary democracy. From the beginning, India's federal system institutionalized distinct regional cleavages, making it hard for opposition parties to create horizontal alliances across state boundaries. The Congress party, successor to the nationalist movement, found it easier. The reorganiza-

tion of states into distinct linguistic-cultural zones in the 1950s and 1960s, however, encouraged opposition parties to mobilize electoral support in local idioms of caste, region and language.[18] Their rise undermined the old Congress system by 1967. The state-level coalition governments that emerged failed spectacularly. Shortsighted power struggles, substantive partisan differences and the difficulty of building cross-state alliances caused their demise. Yet the consolidation of power by Indira Gandhi in the 1970s, culminating in the Emergency (1975–77), could not prevent forces of regionalization gathering pace. Indeed, centralization generated powerlessness in New Delhi.[19] Plurality-rule elections fostered the emergence of distinct party systems in the states in which two parties or blocs competed for power in the vernacular. The gradual inability of the Congress(I) to maintain a dominant presence across the Union created a federal party system marked by "multiple bipolarities" to surface in the late 1980s, increasing parliamentary fragmentation in New Delhi.[20] Complex state-level rivalries, combined with a parliamentary system of cabinet government that divided executive authority and required a majority to remove sitting administrations, enabled successive minority coalition governments to form.[21] The rise of lower-caste, regional and communist parties, which decisively shaped the struggles over Mandal, *mandir* and market of the 1990s, was partly a long-term consequence of these complex processes. The struggles of the National Front crystallized the politics of the third force vis-à-vis the Congress(I) and BJP. The United Front represented its maturation as an idea.

However, the same regime dynamics that encouraged successive coalition governments to arise paradoxically tested their ability to survive. Distinct electoral incentives in the states, with parties contesting local issues against heterogeneous rivals in desynchronized polls over time, hindered durable alliances at the Centre. The disproportional effects of FPTP—where small vote swings led to massive seat changes—generated mistrust within particular coalition governments.[22] The regionalization of many parties' social bases, their tendency to fragment into increasingly narrow segments and relatively high levels of electoral volatility added further difficulties. And the introduction of structural economic reforms in the 1990s deepened these centrifugal tendencies. Inter-state competition over private capital generated rising economic disparities. Partisan differences over the pace and scope of reform began to widen. In sum, India's macro-democratic regime,

despite its relative institutional stability, generated very high political uncertainty after 1989. Party leaders confronted an intensely competitive federal party system, where marginal electoral swings, tight electoral races and multiparty blocs determined the balance of power.[23] Indeed, the minority parliamentary status of virtually every coalition government in New Delhi meant they always faced "election time", impeding the development of inter-elite trust that required longer "historical time".[24] Sustaining a diverse multiparty administration in such circumstances, especially an alliance of state-based parties seeking to forge a Third Front, became exceedingly hard.

Indeed, few established democracies pose comparable difficulties. First, despite its FPTP electoral system, which normally yields two-party systems and single-party majority governments, India has witnessed continued parliamentary fragmentation since 1989. Hung parliaments, minority governments and power-sharing executives arise in other plurality-rule regimes. Yet they rarely become the norm. Polities where governing coalitions regularly arise, such as in continental Europe, mostly contest elections under PR. Second, the disproportional effects of FPTP normally encourage parties to stick to their policy aims and to form durable majority alliances. Yet successive governing coalitions in India have seen parties adjust their professed preferences and shift political alliances with relative ease between elections in contrast to the west European scene. Factional disputes and weak party organizations, critics rightly emphasize, encourage these differences. Indeed, regardless of their stated views on social, economic and foreign policy, many party leaders enter 'unholy alliances'. Yet the latter also reveals the cross-cutting structural dynamics, generating an unparalleled degree of bargaining complexity, of the Indian party system after 1989.[25] Third, several European polities with a history of national coalition governments—Austria, Germany, Switzerland—are federal democracies as well. Yet their governing coalitions largely comprise national party organizations that span the polity. The frequency of minority coalition governments in Canada, which has a FPTP electoral system and strong regional proclivities like India, offers a more revealing comparison. With the exception of Quebec and the recently institutionalized self-governing indigenous territories of the north, none of its provinces are organized along distinct linguistic-cultural lines. Put differently, India exhibits greater affinities with diverse ethnofederal states in other parts of the world.[26] Yet few of them are consolidated

representative democracies. Indeed, many have collapsed as states. In short, the number and range of parties that have secured parliamentary representation and participated in government in India—with largely state-based parties receiving approximately 50 per cent of the national vote—constitutes a difference in order of magnitude that distinguishes its coalition politics decisively.

The crosscutting pressures engendered by India's democratic regime failed to determine the fate of the third force vis-à-vis rival governing coalitions, however. Plurality-rule elections, parliamentary cabinet government and the regional dynamics of the federal party system created incentives, opportunities and constraints that party leaders had to appraise, especially when the rules presented multiple possible outcomes. Parliamentary cabinet government, compared to the winner-takes-all logic of most presidential systems, supported executive power sharing. The succession of different governing coalitions in New Delhi since 1989 makes this clear. But forging political agreement and enforcing collective discipline posed challenges, especially in unwieldy minority administrations, beholden to external parliamentary support. Moreover, the chief protagonists did not always play by the rules of the game. The weak organizational coherence and poor ideological moorings of many parties allowed individuals and factions to undermine collegial responsibility. Party leaders had to devise power-sharing formulas and conflict resolution mechanisms to accommodate contending interests. A number of practices and techniques—from local pacts, friendly electoral contests and joint state-level campaigns to national electoral alliances, common minimum programmes and high-level steering committees—facilitated bargaining, negotiation and compromise. The greater cohesiveness of the United Front vis-à-vis the Janata Party and National Front demonstrated their usefulness. The even greater durability of the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance, even if both enjoyed more propitious conditions, underscored their importance.

These empirical nuances offer several insights for the comparative study of coalition politics. First, they suggest that power-oriented explanations often elide important distinctions, namely what drives actors to seek high office. Personal vanity, partisan interest and the desire to represent distinct social groups comprise genuinely different motives. Grasping these distinctions requires greater conceptual discrimination. Conversely, a diversity of policy goals, social interests and

political ideologies shaped the Janata Party, National Front and United Front, not to mention the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance. Simply put, despite the ubiquity of manifold power struggles during their respective tenures, only a single minimum winning coalition emerged after 1989. Hence the premise that parties seek office, policy and votes, and view these goals as clearly defined, mutually exclusive and exogenously determined, overstates the polarity between them. Moreover, it evades the questions of strategy and tactics—what to prioritize, with whom and to what extent, and how—that bedevil actual coalition bargaining. Comprehending these debates through singular theoretical paradigms becomes very difficult.

Second, the proclivity of comparativists to study the formation and demise of coalitions at the expense of actual government decision-making, and to construe such moments as independent of prior events and future expectations, makes it hard to answer such questions. Indeed, the ontological presuppositions that underlie these methodological choices mask real dilemmas. Parsimonious theoretical models, which posit linear causal mechanisms to elucidate composite outcomes, maximize explanatory leverage. Yet they risk misconstruing significant facts and messy realities that bear on the outcome. Studying the formation, performance and demise of coalition experiments as interconnected processes, and analyzing the concatenation of actors, structures and contingencies that produce various outcomes, frequently reveal important configurative effects. Yet temporal contingencies and complex causal chains make theoretical generalization difficult. Clear trade-offs exist. The predominance of parsimonious theoretical models and relatively static large-N studies of coalition politics in comparative scholarship, however, provides a strong incentive to pursue analytical case studies that trace causal processes to a greater degree.

Finally, despite representing an extreme case, the study of national coalition politics in India offers potential comparative insights. Since the 1980s, the number of single-party majority governments in advanced industrialized democracies in western Europe and beyond has significantly declined, comprising less than a third of all governing formations.[27] The vast majority of these polities employ PR regimes. Nonetheless, the conditions that historically enabled two-party dominance in several Westminster-style democracies have waned too, encouraging greater parliamentary fragmentation over the last decade.[28] In Britain, the growing electoral popularity of the Liberal Democrats,

Scottish National Party, Greens and United Kingdom Independence Party has challenged the overwhelming post-WWII preeminence of Labor and the Conservatives, whose combined vote share has declined from approximately 97 percent in 1951 to roughly 65 percent in 2010. Many observers expect the 2015 general election to produce another hung parliament, with Labor and the Conservatives facing dissimilar challengers in different regions, increasing the likelihood that both parties will cobble together distinct regional majorities rather than a national mandate.[29] Similarly, despite their wildly oscillating fortunes, the rise of the Bloc Quebecois, Reform Party and Canadian Alliance, and New Democratic Party in Canada has significantly lowered the collective vote share of the Liberals and Progressive Conservatives since the late 1980s. The two dominant parties, the latter having integrated its regional conservative rivals, continue to alternate in power over long stretches. Moreover, both continue to seek parliamentary majorities, viewing coalition arrangements with extreme suspicion. Nonetheless, despite the recent parliamentary majority of the Conservatives, the succession of minority federal governments between 2004 and 2011 and growing electoral volatility reveal new political dynamics. The relative significance and underlying causes of these emergent trends—the devolution of political authority and economic resources, emergence of new social dynamics and regional forces, decline of trust in established institutional arrangements—attract much debate in each country.[30] Yet all these factors make it harder for traditionally dominant parties to enjoy a balanced national presence. The potential consequences stimulate growing attention too. Strikingly, many comparativists venture that regionalization correlates with poorer democratic governance, greater political instability and potentially the breakdown of national unity.[31] The structure and character of federal parliamentary democracy in India, given its distinctive linguistic-cultural states and tremendous socioeconomic diversity, makes it hard to infer simple generalizations. However, the composite record of the third force in domestic policy matters, and its relatively imaginative efforts in foreign affairs, belies the assumption that regional parties are inherently destabilizing forces. And the vicissitudes of Third Front governments suggest theoretical insights and practical lessons for other polities, especially Westminster-style parliamentary democracies, where processes of regionalization and demands for federalism may fragment national electoral mandates in the future.

Ultimately, strategies, tactics and choices matter in politics. The imperative of good political judgment challenged every party in India, including the Congress(I) and the BJP, the latter adjusting to the demands of power sharing during the third electoral system earlier than the former. Yet it tested the socialists and communists, the two principal axes of the broader Indian left that inspired the Third Front, to a greater degree.

Social democracy has always required a political coalition. The "red-green" alliance between workers and farmers that emerged in northern Europe in the mid-twentieth century remains the paradigmatic model.[32] On the surface, communists and socialists in India appeared to be natural political representatives of these two historical protagonists. Yet they faced less propitious conditions. First, the relative lateness and political compromises of state-led industrialization produced a very small class of organized sector workers against a massive reservoir of poor informal labor, whose magnitude in the countryside far exceeded the circumstances facing any society in twentieth-century Europe. Moreover, the politics of *Bharat* that sought to project rural society as a class unto itself vis-à-vis metropolitan elites since the late 1960s euphemized divergent class interests.[33] The rural propertied castes that benefited from *zamindari* abolition and the Green Revolution opposed programmes uplifting the rural poor. The strident opposition of Charan Singh and his successors to egalitarian social programmes in the countryside underscored these cleavages. Socialists in interwar Europe had to address conflicts between small farmers and agricultural labor as well. Land reform and higher agricultural wages threatened the material interests and social prestige of propertied classes everywhere. Yet their capacity to organize urban workers and rural producers into a social democratic bloc often presumed that non-socialist parties had already mobilized rural labor. Conversely, socialist parties' attempts to radicalize the latter alienated propertied classes, presaging the road to fascism.[34] Second, democracy preceded industrialization in India. The advent of universal adult franchise in a poor agrarian society, beset with destitution and inequality on a massive scale, was an unprecedented historical experiment. Yet it decoupled the mutually reinforcing struggles for political liberties and socioeconomic rights that had developed in most European social democracies.[35] Finally, the vexed relationship between class and caste and relative importance given to political representation versus material redistribution divided

socialists and communists in India, a predicament that had no significant correlate in European social democracy. In short, the struggle to forge a coalition uniting the broader Indian left confronted unique historical challenges from the start. Daunting material conditions demanded an innovative political vision.

The socialists emphasized the primacy of caste for understanding the disparities of power, status and wealth in Indian society. Since the 1960s, its leaders sought to justify, implement and extend a policy of reservations for backward castes in legislative assemblies, educational institutions and state bureaucracies, and to alter the discourse and landscape of the public sphere through symbolic acts that challenged upper-caste dominance. Rhetorically, they also advocated the right to health and education and, following Gandhi, self-sufficient small-scale development in the countryside. In contrast, the communist Left deployed a classic Marxist idiom of class struggle, championing labor mobilization, land reform and agricultural investment, and local self-government. In other words, the socialists pursued a politics of recognition based on lower-caste identities, while the communists promoted economic redistribution according to material class interests. The first addressed the degradations of caste, which violated the respect, dignity and self-worth of its most downtrodden citizens. The second tackled the structures of exploitation that shaped their relations of production. Together, these two traditions provided a critical foundation for progressive democratic politics.[36]

The socialists and communists struggled to find "an ideological chain of equivalence", however, capable of synthesizing their respective conceptual insights into a transcendent emancipatory politics.[37] Indeed, the achievements and shortcomings of each movement inversely mirrored the other. On the one hand, class-based cleavages—which divided the SSP and PSP in the 1950s, socialists and the BLD in the 1970s, and the SP and BSP in the 1990s—undermined solidarity in the Janata *parivar*. On the other, the upper-caste dominated echelons of the parliamentary communists reflected its deep resistance to caste-based empowerment, especially in West Bengal.[38] Similarly, the socialists neglected to tackle the structural relations binding land, capital and labor, or to expand the social capabilities of and economic opportunities for their most disadvantaged constituents. Yet the communists failed to recognize how social humiliation and inadequate political self-representation comprised distinct manifestations of social injustice,

irreducible to material class exploitation.[39] Ultimately, building a broad political coalition that integrated the strengths of both political movements proved difficult. Their respective struggles for ascendancy, beginning with attempts to unite the CSP and CPI during the anti-colonial movement, made it tough to bridge the divide. Their leaders, ideologies, strategies, policies and bases of support differed. Socialists and communists have remained distinct political forces ever since.

What has received less scholarly attention, however, is the notion of power that informed major sections of both political movements. In particular, their respective party leaders frequently embraced a fixed, indivisible and zero-sum concept of power. Crucially, its scope differed. On the one hand, the socialists instrumentally joined hands with many other forces, most controversially the Hindu right. Yet they struggle to share power amongst themselves, unleashing destabilizing cycles of domination, insubordination and defiance, which have proven self-liquidating for its elites. On the other, the Left Front successfully forged communist alliances over several decades in the regions. Yet the CPI(M), its leading party since the 1960s, refused to share power with non-communist parties in New Delhi, revealing a deeply moralistic, instrumental and majoritarian understanding of power. To put it in Gramscian terms, the socialists pursued too many self-destructive "wars of maneuver", allowing rivals to cannibalize its ranks, while the communists have mounted a steadfast "war of position", imprisoning them in particular bastions.[40]

As the most popular non-Congress force in the 1950s, the socialists led the call for opposition unity, sharing power with a variety of formations. Ram Manohar Lohia believed that collaboration would attenuate partisan differences. Yet non-Congressism, which manifested in the SVD coalitions in the late 1960s, the Janata Party a decade later and the National Front in the late 1980s, stretched too far. On the one hand, high-level disagreements over the Congress caused the socialists repeatedly to split. On the other, by allying with the BLD and Jan Sangh, genuine leftists in their ranks found themselves practically overwhelmed. Power sharing with Hindu conservatives and rich peasant proprietors failed to sway either group towards socialist ideology. Hence the conflicts that wracked the Janata Party and the National Front.

Still, the bewildering history of splits and mergers in the Janata *parivar* since the late 1970s requires further scrutiny. Some observers contend that caste-based politics, given the inherently local character of

particular *jati* groups, inevitably generates conflict. The classification and enumeration of castes by the state, which began during the colonial regime, further encourages specific leaders to direct sectional benefits to their own communities.[41] Amazingly, as early as the 1960s, Lohia foresaw the danger that Yadavs and Chamars, the "colossi" amongst OBCs and *dalits* in northern India, groups that later would dominate the JD and its successors and BSP in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, would corner the gains of power: "They do not change the social order ... but merely cause a shift in status and privileges ... sectional elevation ... disgusts all the other lower castes and enrages the high caste."[42] Others argue that federalism prevented the development of horizontal caste solidarities. The JD had distinct social bases in Bihar, Karnataka and Orissa by the mid 1990s: predominantly lower-caste in the first, rural propertied interests in the second, and a cross-section of social groups in the third. The subsequent formation of the RJD, JD(S) and BJD in each state reflects, to some extent, the regionalization of the party. Finally, electoral changes and political developments created additional pressures. The Anti-Defection Law and emergence of national coalition politics in the 1980s created powerful incentives for factions to maximize their political influence by breaking away.[43] All three factors carry weight. Yet each has its limits. Caste-based appeals have reshaped a social order defined by hierarchy, ordained status and ritually defined roles to one based on plurality, negotiated status and politically defined positions.[44] The Congress had distinct social bases and dissimilar electoral rivals in the regions too.[45] Finally, the predecessors of the Janata *parivar* suffered many splits long before the 1980s.

Ultimately, it was a failure of leadership. Many socialists attributed their reluctance to share power and recognize a single authority figure to a lack of experience, organization and time:

> Those who have experience with power ... money, privilege, status ... learn how to negotiate power. Intermediates lack sophistication ... just like a hungry man who wants to gulp his food at once.[46]

> [No] experiment of the Janata [lasts] long enough at the Centre to develop a hierarchy ... a leadership to distribute power among personalities and social forces. Visible power struggles compound the problem ... [and] generate their own logic and momentum.[47]

> There is no long association of struggle together ... just a short period of cohesion. So [the Janata forces] are like a flash flood [at the Centre] ... leaving no mark thereafter.[48]

Yet an enduring Gandhian skepticism towards parties shares blame too. As some acknowledged, the socialists' neglected the "intensive work" of party building: Jayaprakash Narayan "strayed into the Sarvodaya path, which he later admitted was a blind alley", compelling its forces to rely on "imported Congressmen".[49] The respective prime ministers of the Janata Party and National Front—Morarji Desai and V.P. Singh—as well as their principal nemeses—Charan Singh and Jagjivan Ram during the former and Devi Lal and Chandrasekhar during the latter—began their careers with Congress. H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral, who led the United Front, did as well. Narayan had hoped that a "new composite elite", untouched by the "evils of self-aggrandizement, dynastic succession, and family enrichment", would slowly emerge.[50] The socialist parties' ascent broadened Indian democracy by vernaculizing its politics and transforming the meaning of caste from *jati* to *samaj*.[51] Yet the politics of martial virtue and state patronage, which leveled traditional hierarchies between forward and backward castes, descended into a morally dubious *goonda raj* in the Gangetic plains. Worse, it showed how renegotiated caste identities could nonetheless allow hierarchical practices to persist.[52] The narrow strategic judgments of the socialists, reluctant to construct strong party organizations, stabilize power hierarchies amongst themselves and tackle material conflicts on the ground, prevented the emergence of a genuine *dalitbahujan* formation.

The greater stability and ideological consistency of the communist Left, which acquired leadership of the third force in the late 1990s, posed a striking historical contrast. Yet the choices of its two main formations, the political judgments that informed their strategic line and tactical maneuvers at key historical junctures, also generated intense debate. Indeed, the question of contesting the ballot, and whether and how to share power with other parties, has been an existential matter for parliamentary communists across the world in the twentieth century.

In western Europe, communist parties frequently entered diverse multiparty coalitions during national crises, allying with moderate parties in order to supplant the socialists as the leading progressive front, promising major gains for their constituents. Yet the perception of crisis often led their leadership to accept conservative policy measures pushed by their newfound coalition allies. Workers suffered disproportionately, causing substantial electoral losses, instigating relative decline.[53] The great social upheavals of the late 1960s, coinciding with

renewed labor militancy and growing communist party membership in Italy, France and Spain, crystallized new hopes. In 1977, the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI), Parti Communiste Français (PCF) and Partido Comunista de España (PCE) agreed to pursue a broader social coalition through democratic politics, while distancing themselves from the Soviet Union in varying degrees, inaugurating so-called Eurocommunism. The most famous experiment was the "historic compromise" of the PCI. Winning an unprecedented 34 per cent of the popular vote in the 1976 Italian general election, amidst a sense of mounting national crisis, the party supported the Christian Democrat-led ruling coalition. Its strategic rationale was twofold: to overcome the *conventio ad excludendum* (an unwritten pact to keep the PCI out of power) and to protect itself against elimination (even an electoral majority, as the overthrow of Allende in Chile in 1971 demonstrated, could not rule out a military coup or civil war against the communists). Power-sharing was inevitable.

But it proved one-sided. Facing renewed hostility from the socialists, and unable to prevent severe austerity, organized labor blamed the PCI for imposing "sacrifices without compensation". A massive electoral backlash ensued in 1979, inaugurating a decade of declining party membership and electoral support, amidst labor demobilization.[54] The PCF took a more orthodox line. Conceptualizing social pluralism as a "bloc, a concentration of practically all major interests ... around [its] leadership," the party persisted in believing that "the problems of the country reside[d] uniquely in the fact that the Communists [were] not in power".[55] Yet it suffered falling membership and electoral popularity too.[56] Some observers highlighted the inherent limitations of liberal capitalist democracy to explain these historic failures.[57] Others blamed the communist parties' Stalinism, unable to grasp the character and potential of the social revolts of the late 1960s or to resolve the atomization and heterogeneity of late industrial society in the 1970s and 1980s, leading them to defend existing structures.[58] Hence its leaders continued to see multiparty alliances primarily as means to power rather than instruments of change.[59]

Analyzing the opportunities, strategies and fortunes of the CPI and CPI(M) against the record of Eurocommunism yields several insights. By definition, the "rightist" CPI has always proved more open to power-sharing with non-communist parties, causing the split in 1964. The political judgments of its leadership have been erratic. The party disas-

trously misread the politics of the mid-1970s, simply labeling the JP Movement fascist, only to support the tyranny of Emergency rule. Yet the CPI also demonstrated a capacity to learn, supporting reformists in the USSR and PRC in the 1980s, and participating in the United Front government in the 1990s. The party struggled to achieve its goals. Nonetheless, it was an historic attempt to steer the most coherent manifestation of the Third Front. If anything, the isolation of the CPI vis-à-vis other communist parties at both junctures refocuses attention towards the strategy, tactics and judgments of its larger partner.

The CPI(M) consistently refused to participate in every governing coalition in New Delhi.[60] Indeed, ever since the first socialist entreaties in the 1930s, leftists communist leaders have rarely joined coalitions they could not dominate. Forsaking national office, in order to maintain the political autonomy and "accumulated moral hegemony" of the party, has always been a price worth paying. Given the opportunism that frayed the Janata *parivar*, such remarkable self-restraint deserves admiration. Yet the judgments underlying its strategic vision grew more contestable over time. The CPI(M) declined to join the Janata Party in the late 1970s, given the participation of the RSS and Jan Sangh, displaying considerable prudence. The party acknowledged that it had missed an opportunity to radicalize the JP Movement beforehand, questioning its extant tactical line. Nonetheless, the prominence of the BLD in the Janata Party, in conjunction with the Jan Sangh in the states, would have overwhelmed the CPI(M) just as it had captured power in West Bengal. Similarly, despite protestations that it was a natural ally, the party had good reason to offer external parliamentary support to the National Front a decade later. V.P. Singh disallowed the BJP from entering government. Yet it was partly due to pressure by the Left. Moreover, the BJP shared power—if precariously—with the JD in various states. The growing militancy of *Hindutva*, symbolized by the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, required staunch opposition. In short, the CPI(M) tactical line evinced good political judgment.

But preventing its chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, from becoming prime minister of the United Front in the late 1990s made less sense. Sharing executive power in a large governing coalition necessarily involved ambiguities, constraints and risks. The CPI(M) would have lacked a majority of seats in the Council of Ministers. Indeed, the national electoral popularity of the party was a shadow of what the PCI enjoyed in Italy in the mid-1970s when the latter struck its 'his-

toric compromise'. Yet the PCI was never offered cabinet participation, let alone the prime ministership. Joining government, given that it would have enjoyed sizeable representation alongside the CPI, afforded opportunities. Prime ministers lack de facto control over ministries, especially in large coalition governments, yet the capacity of parties to make or break governments in parliamentary systems typically enhances the benefits of office.[61] Formal ministerial authority furnished the power to set the agenda, to draft, shape and push legislative proposals in cabinet, and to delay or veto them before parliament had a chance to deliberate if necessary.[62] Historically, many Left parties have sought to shape government agendas through outside pressure in order to maintain their ideological distinctiveness, especially in polities where elections are competitive and decisive. Yet such a strategy usually presumed considerable policy influence through parliamentary oversight and strong, decentralized and proportional legislative committees, features that India's parliamentary democracy lacked in the late 1990s.[63] Moreover, power is a function of complex strategic behavior in large multiparty coalitions: the greater the number of players, the more strategic action matters, diminishing the salience of simple legislative strength.[64] Being the single largest party, as the BJP and Congress(I) respectively discovered in the National Democratic Alliance and United Progressive Alliance, cannot determine every important outcome. And ministerial office does not ensure real clout. Deve Gowda and Gujral circumvented the CPI Home Minister Indrajit Gupta on key appointments under his remit, demonstrating the limits of formal executive power. Yet *de jure* authority, as the Fifth Pay Commission demonstrated, more often mattered. The longstanding complaints of discrimination by the Centre towards the CPI(M) during the Congress era, and acknowledgement that such practices lessened during other dispensations, suggested as much. A Basu prime ministership would have altered the balance of power in the Council of Ministers. The formation of the United Front constituted a political opening, creating new pathways, amplifying the significance of agency. It demanded the exercise of good political judgment, to foresee the likely consequences of particular actions at the moment of decision, even if these uncertainties made it harder to judge well.

Leading a diverse minority government, beholden to a historic rival, posed obvious risks. The Congress(I) would have likely toppled a Basu ministry prematurely too. Redirecting capitalist development from

New Delhi, in a federal parliamentary democracy undergoing economic liberalization, threw up enormous challenges as well. Critical junctures do not guarantee political change. Given these risks, the CPI(M)'s decision not to participate in government appeared supremely rational. Protecting its vote base and tenure in office in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura vis-à-vis the Congress(I), while seeking to exercise policy influence at the Centre, was a shrewd political stance. Indeed, the party deployed its parliamentary veto to slow the pace and scope of liberalization in New Delhi during the United Front as well as the United Progressive Alliance after 2004, helping to push new social entitlements during the latter to ameliorate the inequalities unleashed by uneven capitalist growth. The CPI(M) simply tried 'have its cake and eat it' too.

But ostensibly clever instrumental reasoning, allied with high-minded theoretical consistency, can impede good political judgment in intricate strategic environments. On the one hand, the party could not dictate policy agendas from outside. Sympathetic observers blamed the United Front for not making the Steering Committee its primary decision-making body. Granting every party a veto over fundamental issues would have avoided unnecessary policy conflicts and enabled more egalitarian measures to emerge.[65] By arrogating the right to lead without bearing formal political responsibility, however, the CPI(M) weakened its stand. Few believed the party would withdraw external parliamentary support during the United Front. On the other, the compulsion to liberalize pressured every state in the 1990s, causing increasing divergence between the policies of CPI(M)-led government in West Bengal vis-à-vis the stance of its Politburo in New Delhi. It became impossible to square the contradictions and fend off charges of hypocrisy. Put differently, the party's short-term instrumentality evoked the historic predicament of "rational choice Marxists" in interwar Europe, struggling to legislate socialism through parliamentary democracy. The need to win broad electoral support and political allies, and failure to answer the crises of capitalism, enabled Keynesian social democrats to win the day.[66] In the end, the CPI(M) played a two-level game, standing it between government and opposition. The party courageously walked out of the United Progressive Alliance over its opposition to the Indo-US civil nuclear deal. But the field of play by then had changed decisively against it.

According to some, rapid political change encourages actors to rely on existing templates, whereas changes that persist over longer dura-

tions tend to facilitate political learning.[67] Yet ideologies are powerful impediments. The steadfast refusal of the CPI(M) to reconsider its basic tactical line, in light of changing political circumstances, suggested an understanding of politics beholden to the "textbook solutions" offered by "high theory".[68]

Moreover, the Stalinism that pervaded a majority of the CPI(M) leadership, the belief that it was the only party that could rally all left, progressive and democratic forces, made it "incapable of learning the lessons of the past or of strategically orienting [its own cadre]. Ideological and programmatic mistakes were not directly confronted; errors were sidestepped, not overcome."[69] Yet the problem, arguably, lay even deeper. The theory of strategy-and-tactics that inspired the CPI(M), which privileged a traditional understanding of class relations and presumed that laws governed their dynamics, evaded the task of judgment, of making fine-grained assessments of specific historical contexts and moments of change, in order to grasp the possibilities and limits of autonomous political action in specific strategic situations.

Suffice to say, neither a Basu prime ministership during the United Front nor formal cabinet participation in the United Progressive Alliance would have engendered radical transformations. Notwithstanding its denunciation of capitalism and US imperialism, which prevented it from castigating similar developments in the PRC or from emulating the path taken by the Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil,[70] the CPI(M) became a social democratic party long ago.[71] Only a revolutionary political organization that promoted anti-capitalist structural reforms, practiced internal democracy with proportional representation for historically subordinate classes, and allied with socialist movements across the subcontinent could offer a more radical alternative.[72]

Yet the belief in a pristine socialist future, capable of avoiding the mistakes of the past, remains an article of faith for many too. "The future is certain," as the old Soviet joke has it, "it is only the past that is unpredictable".[73] Counterfactuals are hard to evaluate in a world of probability. Multiple causal forces interact, in a non-linear fashion, to shape historic outcomes.[74] Nonetheless, highlighting the scope for agency during periods of transition, particularly the importance of good political judgment, requires observers to exercise the latter as well: to analyze the foreseeable consequences of different political options by reconstructing, as carefully as possible, the historic contexts that gave them meaning. We do not have to rewrite Indian history

drastically to envision a plausible alternative to the present. The United Front constituted a rare political opening for the CPI(M) to consolidate a progressive alliance, however short-lived, and to introduce egalitarian measures that might have galvanized its ancillary front organizations, buttressed egalitarian movements and earned wider electoral support in new domains. Tactical maneuvers rarely "change the structure of the world", but they frequently allow political actors to "profit from its moment of fragility".[75] Renouncing the chance to lead a national coalition government, with all its inevitable flaws, was a missed historical opportunity. A more imaginative grasp of the real possibilities available at the time, a determination to identify political opportunities amidst structural constraints, would have enabled like-minded allies amongst the socialists and the communists to advance the cause of a third force to a greater degree.

The idea, despite its waning political fortunes since the late 1990s, nevertheless persisted. The advent of the sixteenth general election in 2014 revived the ambition. Most observers expected the demise of the United Progressive Alliance. High-level tussles over power and policy between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Congress(I) president, Sonia Gandhi, had paralyzed decision-making during its second term in office. High inflation, industrial stagnation and rapid economic deceleration ensued, amidst revelations of high-level corruption, overshadowing the rights-based welfare agenda the government had introduced. Public dissatisfaction mounted.

The spring of 2012 presaged a new political order. Intriguingly, it recalled the ferment that enabled the Janata Party to emerge in the late 1970s. On the one hand, an array of forces, including Gandhian social activists, urban middle classes and Hindu nationalist groups, channeled their discontent into the India Against Corruption movement, demanding the introduction of a Lok Pal to restore political integrity in public life. On the other, the CPI(M), criticizing the composition and ideology of the anti-corruption movement, called for a multiparty alliance of left and democratic forces at its 20th congress in Kozhikode, pledging to defend sovereignty and democracy, federalism and secularism, and people's livelihoods and rights. The party believed that bringing together rivals of the Congress(I) and BJP, which collectively had almost 300 parliamentary seats, could enable yet another "third alternative" to form the next Union government.[76]

The subsequent formation of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a neo-Gandhian formation that emerged from the anti-corruption movement

to win a plurality of seats in the 2013 Delhi assembly elections, altered the field of battle. Relations between the older communist vanguard and upstart socialist party remained prickly. In February 2014, the CPI(M) announced an eleven-party bloc in the Lok Sabha, comprising several longstanding protagonists of the third force, and obliquely invited the AAP to join. The latter dismissed its latest incarnation of the third force as "usual, predictable and boring", a "substitute" to the ruling establishment, not an "alternative".[77] It proved astute. Within days the AIADMK and BJD, wishing to maintain political flexibility, distanced themselves from the bloc. But the massive electoral wave for the BJP, with each survey forecasting greater numbers for the party, compelled its opponents to reconsider their stances. Indeed, some erstwhile members of the third force, notably the MGP in Goa, LJP in Bihar and TDP in Andhra Pradesh, whose leaders had previously castigated Modi for the anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002, joined the National Democratic Alliance.[78] Thus in the final phase of the campaign the Left, Congress(I) and the AAP declared their willingness to unite following the verdict.[79]

The BJP routed its rivals. The party expanded its presence in every major state of the Union, winning 31 per cent of the national vote and 282 seats in the Lok Sabha, becoming the first party to win a parliamentary majority since 1984. The electoral turnout, which saw 66 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot, was the highest since independence. Yet the consolidation of votes and seats amongst relatively fewer parties, and the increasing margins of victory at the constituency level, suggested a new electoral phase.[80] Several regional parties—especially the BJD in Orissa, AIADMK in Tamil Nadu and TC in West Bengal—swept their respective state arenas. But the need to share national power, the distinctive feature of the third electoral system, had been contained for the first time since 1989.

The politics of the broader Indian left, wherever its forces may lie, now confronts its greatest test. The Congress(I), retaining only 44 of 206 seats, faces existential crisis. The communist Left, reduced to twelve parliamentary seats, does as well. The stunning electoral sweep of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, at the expense of the SP, BSP and JD(U), underscores the limitations of their extant political strategies.[81] The terrible misjudgment of the AAP, relinquishing its electoral goodwill by prematurely resigning its minority administration in Delhi, inflicted unnecessary self-defeat. Each of these parties, to be sure,

retains electoral popularity. The disproportional effects of FPTP, in a divided oppositional field, over-rewarded the BJP. Moreover, despite its dominance of the Lok Sabha, the National Democratic Alliance lacks a majority of seats in the Rajya Sabha. It will have to earn wider cross-party support to pass legislation.[82] Nevertheless, the BJP earned a significant popular mandate, revealing widespread desire for leadership, stability and growth. The United Progressive Alliance, which neglected to foster the conditions for greater investment, employment and production alongside its pioneering welfare schemes, paid the price.

Yet opponents of the present BJP-led government may soon have reason to regroup. Its pro-business economic strategy of prioritizing capital accumulation and infrastructural development, if zealously pursued, risks enhancing social inequalities and human dispossession. The phenomenal amount of money spent by the party during the campaign, supplied by titans of finance and industry, underscores the nature of the new ruling alliance.[83] The presumption that modernization and growth will inevitably promote greater social opportunities begs obvious questions, given the severe market failures neoliberal economic policies have produced around the world in recent years. Moreover, critics rightly fear the BJP may weaken the checks and balances of India's democratic regime, fanning nationalistic sentiment while suppressing political dissent. Signs of intolerance and acts of intimidation during the campaign did not augur well. A new dispensation demanding political loyalty could further undermine institutional autonomy. Comparisons with the centralization of power under Indira Gandhi, and its calamitous effects, deserve considerable attention. Finally, the new prime minister made several efforts to articulate a new political discourse during the campaign, frequently expressing his ambition to transform economic development into a mass social movement. But evidence of massive communal polarization in northern India and the dearth of minorities in the BJP in parliament underscore the persistence of Hindu nationalist beliefs among many sections of the *sangh parivar*. Indeed, several high-level appointments in the new administration desire a more aggressive posture against civic organizations and neighboring states.[84] For the remnants of the contemporary Indian left to resurrect themselves amidst such adversity will require astute political leadership, committed to building durable party organizations and connecting with progressive social movements, to forge a new electoral coalition. Devising an imaginative strategic vision of how to promote

social equality without jeopardizing economic dynamism, and constructing transparent, representative and accountable political institutions without undermining their capacity to implement decisions, are equally difficult balancing acts. The ability of the broader Indian left to forge social democracy anew will shape the life-chances of multitudes in the world's largest democracy.