

# Alliances and Lessons of Election 2009

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Analysing the peculiar nature of alliances in the April-May 2009 Lok Sabha elections, this study points out that a major change was wrought by the Congress opting to abandon its national alliance in favour of state-level agreements. The new delimitation gave the Congress an opportunity to redraw the lines and break out of the corner that it had been boxed into by its coalition partners. Further, unlike 2004, all parties hedged their bets, waiting for post-election negotiations, and both the major groupings announced no common programme. Another notable feature was the high proportion of seats in which a split in votes by a third candidate decided the winner. Added to the prominent role played by many state and regional parties, all this seems to indicate that coalition politics is here to stay.

The 15th general election in April-May 2009 saw a strange mix of old and new, short-term and long-term friends, allies and enemies bonding with or against each other, making it one of the most puzzling and complex elections in terms of alliances and coalitions. Since the start of the coalition era it has been taken for granted that the making and breaking of governments depends a great deal on the nature of electoral alliances constructed or retained. Election 2009 saw a partial rewriting of the rules of engagement put in place during the last few general elections. Just when we thought electoral coalitions, which had been the key to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) victories in 1998 and 1999 and the Congress win in 2004, had come to stay, they gave way to what appeared to be bizarre agreements and seat adjustments. So, why was the script on electoral alliances modified and what impact did it have on shaping the outcome?

The paper is based on two assumptions. The first is that political parties are learning entities. Parties operating over a period of time in an institutional environment in which there are no major changes develop particular routines to further their ends. Changes in the institutional environment and lessons from their learning experiences could however bring about adjustments in their informal routines and conventions. The second is derived from coalition studies; “any coalition is at best a second-best situation for every major political party”.<sup>1</sup> Every major party, according to this, will persistently endeavour to advance its position vis-à-vis other political parties, including its own coalition partners.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first part examines the nature of alliances in election 2009 and also attempts to answer why pre-electoral alliances were modified. The second part focuses on the performance of different alliances and tries to show how alliances/non-alliances had an impact on the final outcome.

## 1 Alliances and Agreements

The distinguishing characteristics of coalitions in Election 2009 (Table 1, p 53 and Table 2, p 55) may be summarised as follows. First, there was no national-level alliance, only state-specific ones. Both coalition makers, the BJP and the Congress, and even the left, preferred alliances only to bridge territorial gaps. Neither the BJP and the Congress, nor the left was willing to cede space in their respective areas of strength to their friends or allies. The Fourth Front was constituted on the basis of partners not encroaching on each other's space and was restricted to two states. Notwithstanding the same logic, in 2004, the coalition makers had been more accommodating, enabling a facade of fronts. In 2004, the Congress had gone out of its way to accommodate its partners and forge alliances.<sup>2</sup> Following this, it was expected that there would be national-level fronts competing in 2009.

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But first there was the Congress' change in stand. It declared as early as in January 2009 that there would be no national-level alliance and seat-sharing adjustments would be limited to the state level. Following this, the Congress had specific alliances with a host of state-based parties, with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra and Goa, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) in West Bengal, among others.

For the parties, seat adjustments in a particular region or state were not a barrier to their contesting against a partner or ally in another state or region. This, however, led to peculiar alliances. For instance, the NCP joined hands with the left and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa and justified its stand on the grounds that its alliance with the Congress was confined only to Maharashtra and Goa.<sup>3</sup> The left, which was attempting to build the Third Front, also had an "Orissa-specific" explanation for its position.

The BJP's adjustment with different parties was on comparable lines. Its alliance with the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) was restricted to Bihar and the latter managed to obtain only two seats in Uttar Pradesh after much bargaining. Similarly, arrangements with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Shiv Sena (SS), the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) (SAD-B) were limited to western Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Maharashtra, Haryana and Punjab respectively and did not spill over even to adjoining regions.

Second, unlike in 2004, when all attempts were made to get pre-electoral alliances right, in 2009, almost all parties hedged their bets, leaving room for post-electoral discussions. In 2009, both coalition makers shed baggage, primarily to the Third Front. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress went it alone after its 2004 allies, the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) and the left, joined the Third Front. The 2009 Democratic People's Alliance (DPA), a front within the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in Tamil Nadu, was leaner, having lost the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) and the Marumalarchi DMK (MDMK) to the rival All-India Anna DMK (AIADMK) alliance. In Jammu and Kashmir, the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC) replaced the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as an ally, and in West Bengal the Congress joined hands with the AITC. The Congress decided to contest alone in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh but did not strategically field candidates in some seats, clearly leaving the door ajar for communication with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP).

The BJP's "bridging alliance" strategy, which proved successful when it was in government, appeared to have become unattractive to potential partners. It could not stitch up any viable alliance in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu with its erstwhile allies, the TDP and the AIADMK, preferring the Third Front. Despite supporting the demand for smaller states and Telangana specifically, it

was unable to attract the TRS into an electoral alliance. Finally, in Orissa, its old ally, the BJD, decided to quit the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) at the last moment. But it gained the AGP, the RLD and the INLD in Assam, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, respectively.

The left parties had serious differences among themselves and their allies, both in Kerala and West Bengal. In Kerala, besides the problem of factionalism in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), there were issues with its allies. The Janata Dal (Secular) (JD-S), an established ally, was forced out when the front refused to give it the seat it had been long contesting. In addition, the CPI and the CPI(M) had disagreements over seat allocation and the decision to informally ally with the A N Madani-led People's Democratic Party (PDP). The Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) refused to acknowledge the Third Front and was critical of the CPI(M)'s attempts to create a front without a commitment to its programme by its partners.<sup>4</sup> In West Bengal, since the Nandigram and Singrur standoffs, the CPI, the Forward Bloc and the RSP were critical of the decision-making process in the front.<sup>5</sup>

The Third Front, which the left was promoting, failed to take any concrete shape. The CPI(M) looked forward to the post-election scenario throughout its campaign.<sup>6</sup> It was also not clear who the partners in the alliance were. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), for instance, claimed to support the front but refused to have an electoral alliance. The AIADMK had an electoral alliance

**Table 1: Pre-electoral Seat Sharing and Contentious Constituencies**

State	Pre-electoral Seat Sharing	Alliance	Contentious Constituencies		
			Congress Alliance	BJP Alliance	Left Alliance
Maharashtra	26:22	INC:NCP	Washim, Sangli, Yavatmal, Raigad, Parbhani, Shirdi, Hathkanagale, and Mumbai North-West	Jalgoan, Kalyan, Washim, Yavatmal and South Mumbai	
	26:22	BJP:SS			
Haryana	5:5	BJP:INLD		Guurgoan, Sonapat	
Kerala	17:2:1	INC:MUL:KCM			Kozhikode, Ponnani, Kollam, Mavelikara
	14:4:1	CPI(M):CPI:KEC			
Assam	7:6	BJP:AGP		Guwahati	
Andhra Pradesh	31:9:2:2	TDP:TRS:CPI (M):CPI <sup>1</sup>			
Tamil Nadu and Puducherry	21:16:2:1	DMK:INC:VCK:MUL			
	23:7:4:3:3	ADK:PMK:MDMK: CPI(M):CPI			
Goa	1:1	INC:NCP			
Jammu and Kashmir	3:3	INC:JKN <sup>2</sup>	Ladakh		
Punjab		BJP:SAD (B)			
West Bengal	14:28	INC:AITC			
	32:3:3:4	CPI(M):CPI:FB:RSP			
Orissa	18:1:1:1	BJD:CPI(M):CPI:NCP			
Bihar	25:15	JD(U):BJP		Kishanganj, Madhubhani	
	28:12	RJD:LJP			
Uttar Pradesh	71:7:2	BJP:RLD:JD(U)			
Jharkhand	12:2	BJP:JD(U)			
	9:8	INC-JMM <sup>3</sup>			

The numbers in column two in some cases is more than the total constituencies in a particular state. This anomaly could be a result of various reasons, (a) some partners may compete in more than the seats they were allotted by agreement, (b) agreement between partners to have "friendly contests" in some constituencies.

1: The TRS did not adhere to the agreement, forcing the Telugu Desam Party to put up extra candidates.  
 2: Under the agreement, the INC was allocated Ladakh. However, a JKN member contested as an independent candidate. This candidate won and rejoined the JKN after the election.  
 3: The JMM and INC reached an understanding but internal differences within the JMM led to it contesting some of the seats that had been allocated to the Congress.  
 Source: Collected from various media reports.

but did not take a definite stand. The JD(S) was in the front in Karnataka but out of it neighbouring Kerala. The BJD had seat adjustments not only with known Third Front partners but also with the NCP, which was part of the UPA. It also refused to join the Third Front formally. The other partners also often spoke in different voices indicating that they too were playing the waiting game. Table 1 shows the seat-sharing agreements in different states and also lists the contentious constituencies by state and front.

Third, given that there was no national-level alliance, the fronts did not put out any common political programme. This was in contrast to 2004 when the NDA had a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) and the Congress alliance, which went on to become the UPA, at least had an unwritten understanding on what its programme was. In 2009, parties in different fronts had their own election manifestos and commitments. Yet, despite this multiplicity of programmes, there was a great deal of convergence between the two principal coalition makers on major issues and ideas. Almost all parties addressed the same issues and hardly advocated anything different, with each only claiming to do the same thing better. Only the left chose to put forward an alternative economic and foreign policy, but as part of the Third Front, it too did not have a common programme.

Finally, this was an election which saw the consolidation and rejuvenation of political parties, at least for the time being. Electoral alliances, compromises and bargains over the last decade had pushed issues like strengthening the party organisation and the need to consolidate and expand support bases to the background. Over the years, parties gave more importance to constructing and managing alliances than caring for the health of their organisations. Coalitions may have enabled parties to capture or share power and brought them short-term success, but their long-term possibilities were inherently limited. With parties refusing certain pre-electoral alliances, the 2009 elections gave them an opportunity to test their real strength, power and base.

### **Ambiguity, Retreat and Post-Electoral Calculations**

Why was there so much ambiguity regarding pre-electoral coalitions and why did the Congress retreat from a national-level alliance despite having successfully managed a coalition for a full term? Why did post-electoral calculations acquire so much importance? The questions that election 2009 raised can only be answered in the context of past experiences in coalition governance and the incentives that an institutional environment offers.

All electoral laws, among other things, basically stipulate the conversion of votes into seats or elective offices.<sup>7</sup> India uses the first-past-the-post system or technically the single member simple plurality (SMSP) system of electoral rules for elections to the Lok Sabha. Under SMSP rules, to win a seat, parties or candidates have to only win a plurality (one vote more than the nearest competitor) and not a majority of the votes or even a minimum quota in a constituency. The party with the majority of seats usually gets to form the government. The disproportional features of the SMSP system give parties an incentive to pool votes.<sup>8</sup> Alliances are always the product of a learning experience; they come after candidates and parties have internalised the working of the formal rules and are almost always based on past experiences.

The experience of coalition governance over the last decade has shown that it is coalition partners rather than coalition makers who call the shots when it comes to government formation and portfolio allocation. Though followed, this is done more out of compulsion than choice and it is unlikely that it is seen as a fair practice by coalition makers. While coalition makers would like to challenge this, their coalition partners would prefer to maintain their advantage. Given that past experiences are carriers of lessons, coalition experiments should not be treated as episodic events but as interconnected parts of a continuing story.

Election 2004 was in a way the culmination of an era of electoral adjustments that began in 1989. Since 1989, seat adjustments became part of the standard operating procedure of Lok Sabha elections. By this time, the party system had undergone a major makeover. Not only had the number of players increased, but the nature of the players had also been transformed. Its defining characteristic was the emergence of influential single-state or regional parties. These parties concentrated their energies on a single state or a particular region rather than spreading themselves across the country but began to play a major role at the centre. Though the Congress continued to be a polity-wide party, it lost its dominance and was reduced to one among several players.

Subsequent elections, in 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004 saw electoral adjustments of various kinds between different combinations of parties. What appeared as a standard operating procedure to enable vote aggregation was not a random process. Who entered the race and from where were based on strategic calculations of the possibility of winning. These calculations about who would win were based on past performance and experience. Sridharan in his study of the BJP's expansion after 1989 showed that it leveraged its emergence as a third party to form electoral alliances with existing major state parties in different parts of the country to increase its numbers.<sup>9</sup> What is crucial is the strategic use of expectation to form alliances. Alliances are therefore not haphazard arrangements, but tactical moves based on past experience.

For a long time the Congress was at the receiving end of most seat adjustments and electoral alliances. By the time it acquiesced to alliances on a large scale in 2004, there was very little left to be shared. Moreover, its performance had made it an unattractive partner, reducing its bargaining power. As it had ceased to be a serious contender in many key states, it was forced to accept whatever its partners or allies offered. This not only augmented the number of its allies but also increased their negotiating power after the election.

The 2009 election inaugurated another era. It was the first general election after the new delimitation. The delimitation exercise redrew the rules of the game, removed some of the established precedents and introduced an element of uncertainty. The remapping of boundaries created new spaces in the pre-electoral dialogue. Unlike in 2004 when things were taken for granted, past performance could not be leveraged in negotiations. It was therefore natural that parties drove hard bargains not only for seats but also the advantage of location. Some agreements between parties were reached after several rounds of discussions at different levels, often spread over a month.<sup>10</sup> Close friends and long-standing allies were abandoned, and often even after an accord, disputes continued.

For the Congress, delimitation was an opportunity to write a new chapter. Unlike the BJP's relationship with its NDA partners, many of the constituents of the UPA are competitors for the same political space as the Congress. So despite running a coalition for five years, it spurned a national-level alliance as it would have had to yield space in its own areas of strength to accommodate allies. In addition, being tied to some form of national alliance based on pre-delimitation performance would have worked to its disadvantage in the long run. Delimitation gave it an opportunity to attempt to break out of the corner that it had been boxed into.

The Congress decision to go it alone in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh was therefore partly a gamble in which it hedged short-term gains with a long-term expansion plan.<sup>11</sup> Enhancing its presence in these states could enable it to play a more assertive role. It was crucial to make a mark in 2009 given that subsequent negotiations would always be based on past performance. The offers by the RJD-LJP combine in Bihar and the SP in Uttar Pradesh were not enough to interest the Congress; their strategies were calculated to tie it down. As it was being offered next to nothing in these two states, going it alone became a viable option, especially because the choices for the SP and the RJD-LJP were limited. For this set of parties, the alternatives available, the NDA and the Third Front, were non-options.

The more important lesson was from the experience of coalition governments themselves. There have been coalition governments at the centre continually for more than a decade, and they have imparted valuable lessons to both coalition makers and coalition partners. The Congress decision to ignore some demands for pre-electoral alliances made sound post-electoral sense. In pre-electoral coalitions, the likelihood of having more than the necessary parties required for a majority is high.<sup>12</sup> It follows that office and policy options will also have to be shared with a larger number of parties. The BJP's experience with its NDA partners was the best example, where even two-seat and single-seat parties had to not only be accommodated in the government but also given crucial portfolios and departments. Moreover, the dependence on many partners with small numbers only increased the potential for blackmail.

Post-electoral alliances can overcome some of these limitations as there is the advantage of knowing in advance the exact number required for forming a government. The coalition maker can then target specific parties and make bargains that enable it to maximise its influence. The Congress decision to keep post-electoral coalition calculations open was therefore based not only on its own experience in the UPA but also that of the BJP in the NDA.

For potential coalition partners, both posturing and performance were critical given the future implications of past performance. Yielding too much space could reduce their importance. Potential partners are comparatively better placed in a post-electoral scenario. Given the predominantly "bi-nodal" nature of the party system at the national level, many of these parties have the liberty of moving between the two nodes.<sup>13</sup> The Third

Front option adds to their menu of choices. The conflicting noises made by potential partners were aimed at opening up space for post-electoral bargaining. Therefore while electoral alliances may still be the preferred strategy under the SMS system, our study of the 2009 alliance strategy reveals that the changes in practices must be understood in terms of other learning experiences.

## 2 Performance: Alliances and Parties

The final result was probably unexpected. The Congress emerged as the dominant coalition maker by winning handsomely in all states it had alliances and did not do too badly where it did not have any partners. In Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Jammu and Kashmir and Kerala its alliances succeeded. In Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, its decision not to have any alliance paid off. Finally, by not entering into an agreement in Bihar, it did not do any worse than it would have if it had accepted the little that the RJD-LJP combine had offered.

The NDA was swept away and the coalition maker, the BJP, is back in its pre-1998 days. In 2009, excluding the JD(U) in Bihar, none of its partners performed credibly, be it the SAD in Punjab, the SS in Maharashtra, the INLD in Haryana or the AGP in Assam. The coalition maker itself slipped up terribly. Barring Gujarat and Karnataka, the BJP did not come up with the numbers in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Its poor show may even threaten its coalition-maker status.

The Third Front, which was expected to play a deciding role after the election, did not hold together even until the results were declared. The TRS jumped ship before the last phase of polling and went over to the NDA but still claimed that it was with the front, and the JD(S) began parleys with the Congress before counting began. The left's poor show in West Bengal and Kerala

**Table 2: Alliances and Performance**

	United Progressive Alliance	National Democratic Alliance	Third Front Plus Friends	Fourth Front	Others		
Pre-electoral	INC	206 BJP	116 CPI(M)	16 SP	23 MIM	1	
	AITC	19 SS	11 CPI	4 RJD	4 Swabhimani Paksha	1	
	DMK	18 SAD	4 RSP	2	BVA	1	
	NCP	9 JD(U)	20 FB	2	SDF	1	
	JKN	3 RLD	5 JD(S)	3	JVM(P)	1	
	JMM	2 AGP	1 AIADMK	9	BSP	21	
	IUML	2 NPF	1 TRS	2	AUDF	01	
	KCM	1	MDMK	1	BPF	01	
	VCK	1	BJD	14	Independents	09	
			HJC(BL)	1			
	Post-electoral	From NDA					
		NPF	1				
		From Third Front					
JD(S)		3					
From Fourth Front							
SP		23					
RJD		4					
From Others							
MIM		1					
SDF		1					
BSP		21					
AUDF		1					
BPF		1					
JVM (P)	1						

Source: Collected from various media reports.

significantly reduced its leverage. For the Fourth Front, only the SP brought results. The poor run of the RJD coupled with the washout of the LJP in Bihar greatly weakened the alliance and with this the wish of the Fourth Front to act as a post-election pressure group.

**Third Candidate Impact**

Does the victory of the Congress-led UPA without depending on seat adjustments spell the end of electoral alliances? An uncomplicated reading of the electoral result may suggest that the Congress has been able to check its decline and curb the influence of single-state and/or regional parties. What adds credence to this was the absence of post-electoral bargaining by its coalition partners. However, a closer look at the result tells a different story.

In the SMSF system, the party/candidate obtaining a plurality of votes in a constituency wins. From studies on electoral systems, we know that there is an upper limit to the number of viable competitors in a constituency.<sup>14</sup> In the case of India, this simply means that the top two candidates in a constituency are likely to get the maximum number of votes. However, to appreciate the nature of victory at the constituency level, especially in the absence of full-fledged electoral alliances, it makes sense to examine the performance of the three most popular candidates. The lack of coordination between candidates and/or parties increases the probability of a split in votes producing a winner. The greater the proportion of constituencies with winners by split votes, the lesser the chances that electoral alliances will cease to be important. To examine the impact of a third candidate, we first calculate the margin of victory in a constituency. If the third candidate has obtained a higher number of votes than the margin of victory, then his or her votes were a deciding factor. Aggregating results at the state level, it is possible to identify “third” parties who made a difference.

Table 3 highlights the impact of third-candidate votes on the result in election 2009. The first column shows the number of seats in which a third candidate had an effect. The other columns indicate which party benefited from the split in votes. In 60% of the constituencies across the country, third candidate votes played a key role in deciding the winner. Only in four of the 28 states did the third candidate not impinge on the result. In Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, two states with a substantial representation in the Lok Sabha, the winners in a whopping 83% of constituencies were decided by the third-party vote share. In Maharashtra and

Tamil Nadu, more than 65% of the winners were helped by the third placed candidate’s vote share, while in Bihar and Karnataka, it was more than 57%. It is clear that in many of the larger states the third candidate occupied a significant space, and experience tells us that these parties could become attractive alliance partners in the future.

In Andhra Pradesh, the newly formed Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) did not win a seat but it was second in three constituencies and third in 35 seats. In 29 of the constituencies in which it came third, the PRP was instrumental in deciding the winner. The Congress was the main gainer from PRP votes. In Assam, the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) won one seat and came second in two. In all the six seats that it came third, the winner benefited from its vote share. In Maharashtra, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), a breakaway unit of the SS, played a critical role in tilting results to the benefit of the Congress alliance. The JD(S) played spoiler in Karnataka in 12 seats.

In Tamil Nadu, the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK) came third in 32 constituencies and its votes were critical in 20 of them. Similarly, a new sub-state party, the Kongu Nadu Munnetra Kazhagam (KNMK), which has a support base in the Coimbatore region, influenced the result in four constituencies. The DMK-led DPA was the major beneficiary of this splitting of votes. Both in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the incumbent government party/coalition won a greater number of seats than expected primarily because of third-candidate votes.

**Table 3: Election 2009 and Third Candidate Impact**

	Third-Candidate	INC	BJP	BSP	SP	JD(U)	ADK	DMK	CPI(M)	BJD	SHS	IND	TDP	NCP	Others
Andhra Pradesh	35	28											5		2
Arunachal Pradesh	1	1													
Assam	12	6	4												2
Bihar	23	2	6		11							2			2
Goa	2	1	1												
Gujarat	11	5	6												
Haryana	8	7													1
Himachal Pradesh	1	1													
Jammu and Kashmir	4	1										1			2
Karnataka	16	6	8												2
Kerala	8	4							4						1
Madhya Pradesh	11	2	8	1											
Maharashtra	32	13	7								6	1		4	1
Manipur	1	1													
Meghalaya	1														1
Orissa	14	6								7					1
Punjab	8	6	1												1
Rajasthan	8	4	3												
Tamil Nadu	27	7					9	8	1						2
Uttar Pradesh	67	16	8	20	19										4
Uttarakhand	5	5													
West Bengal	13	2							2						9
Jharkhand	13	1	7									2			3
D and NH	1		1												
Chhattisgarh	4	1	3												
Chandigarh	1	1													
A and N Islands	1		1												
	328	127	64	21	19	11	9	8	7	7	6	6	5	5	33

Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, Daman and Diu, NCT Delhi, Puducherry and Lakshadweep did not have any third-party vote defeats. Others include AITC, RLD, CPI, RJD, JKN, TRS, JD (S), AIFB, RSP, JMM, SAD (B), MDMK, JYM, IUML, AGP, BPF, BVP and HJC.

In Uttar Pradesh, only the NDA contested as an electoral alliance. Unlike other states, there was no identifiable “third” party and the major contestants shared the votes. The absence of an alliance between the RJD and the Congress helped the JD(U)-BJP combine in Bihar. Our analysis revealed that in 14 constituencies the combined vote share of the RJD/LJP and Congress was more than that of the winner. In 23 of the 40 constituencies, third-candidate votes were decisive, with the JD(U) deriving the maximum benefit from the split. An alliance of the Congress with the RJD-LJP combine may have added to the UPA’s numbers but might not have strengthened the Congress position vis-à-vis its allies.

The Congress returned with a historic high share of seats in the coalition era. Our study of different states indicates that its tally was the result of both alliances and non-alliances. A closer look at constituency results showed that a split in votes was responsible for more than 61% of its wins. The other coalition maker, the BJP, also benefited in 55% of the seats it won. Alliances are therefore here to stay as the strong showing by third candidates will only make them key players in future partnership calculations.

### Summing Up

Our focus here has been on the role of electoral alliances in election 2009. Unlike previous elections, electoral alliances in 2009 appeared imperfect from the beginning. Long-standing relationships between parties gave way and perfectly logical alliances did not take place. However, as in the past, alliances were guided more by strategic reasons of bridging spatial gaps than programmatic or ideological reasons. Election 2009 showed that electoral alliances are not simply an automatic response to system-level rules but are based on learning experiences.

Delimitation changed the rule environment of the electoral system, giving parties the opportunity to rework or reinforce existing seat adjustments. While the Congress attempted to rework its partnerships, potential coalition partners tried to maintain the status quo. The Congress decision not to have a national alliance, a common programme and leave space for post-electoral negotiations was an attempt not only to strengthen its own organisation but also to play a more assertive role as coalition maker. Its preference for post-electoral discussions was an attempt to give it more

control over the bargaining process for government formation. That the UPA-II has not come out with any common programme or made any effort to energise coordination mechanisms is illustrative of Congress efforts to assert its position.

Both the Congress and the BJP have been reluctant coalition makers and would prefer a single-party government. Interpreting the 2009 result as being closer to their preference would be reading it wrong. The combined share of the two polity-wide parties in terms of seats may have increased but there has been no significant increase in their vote share. The reduced dependence on single-state parties does not mean that the latter can be wished away. Election 2009 has actually reinforced the significance of regional and sub-regional players with new single-state parties carving a niche for themselves. The impact of “third” parties in Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra shows that future electoral strategies will have to take them into account.

What is significant is that despite all the noise about not having alliances, the lesson that election 2009 throws up is that alliances actually made a difference to the final result. Our study shows that previous coalition experience and party interaction played a key role in shaping subsequent coalition negotiations, partnerships and even disagreements. The UPA gain in West Bengal was the result of the Congress agreeing to play junior partner to the TMC. In Maharashtra, the breakaway MNS hurt the BJP-SS to the benefit of the INC-NCP combine. The inability of the opposition alliance in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh to attract the DMK and the PRP respectively again assisted the Congress-led UPA. That there was no pooling of votes in Uttar Pradesh except in a small region again benefited the Congress. Notwithstanding the poor show by the Congress in Bihar, the result actually brought out the importance of alliances.

Finally, given the competitive multiparty system in place, a return to single-party governments is unlikely in the near future. Coalition politics is here to stay and election 2009 set fresh bargaining markers for future alliance making. However, it is difficult to discern what the nature of future coalitions will be. Will the bi-nodal coalitional system continue? If so, in what shape, given that the BJP is tripping as a coalition maker? Or will we see the emergence of a new system of multiple state-level coalitions with an emphasis on post-electoral bargaining?

### NOTES

- 1 E Sridharan (1999): “Principles, Power and Coalition Politics in India: Problems and Prospects in the Indian Context” in D D Khanna and Gert W Kueck (ed.), *Principles, Power and Politics* (Delhi: Macmillan), 279.
- 2 Congress president Sonia Gandhi made immense efforts to reach out to other political parties in 2004. Some of the well-known alliance building exercises included talks with CPI(M) leader Harikishen Singh Surjeet, and with M Karunanidhi after the DMK pulled out of the NDA. She met NCP president Sharad Pawar, drove down to LJP leader Ram Vilas Paswan’s house and wished BSP leader Mayawati on her birthday. See Purnima S Tripathi, “Joining Forces”, *Frontline*, 21 (3), 31 January-13 February 2004.
- 3 Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, “Wide Open Contest”, *Frontline*, 23(8), 11-24 April 2009.
- 4 *The Hindu*, 23 December 2008.
- 5 *The Financial Express*, 15 February 2007.
- 6 See Prakash Karat interview in the *Outlook*,

- 18 May 2009; “The Idea Exchange”, Sitaram Yechuri at the Express, *Indian Express*, 5 April 2009; Shekar Gupta’s interview with Sitaram Yechuri on NDTV 24X7’s, “Walk the Talk”, *The Indian Express*, 20 April 2009. In all these interviews, they stressed the “post-election” factor.
- 7 Gary Cox, “Electoral Rules and Electoral Coordination”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2, 145.
- 8 E Sridharan, 1999, 270-90.
- 9 E Sridharan, “Coalition Strategies and the BJP’s Expansion, 1989-2004”, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 43(2), July 2005, 194-221.
- 10 The SS-BJP agreement reportedly came after seven rounds over a period of one and a half months. <http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/shiv-sena-bjp-reach-seat-sharing-pact/351768/> (accessed 1 July 2009); the NCP-INC agreement came after four rounds of negotiations. Their discussions began in January before they finally reached an understanding sometime at the end of March 2009. *The Times of India*, 5 March 2009; the TDP

- negotiations with the TRS almost broke down and negotiations apparently went through the night till they reached an agreement.
- 11 On the going-it-alone strategy, senior party leader Ghulam Nabi Azad remarked, “We realised a bit late that walking with the help of crutches will only cripple the party”, *The Hindu*, 9 April 2009. The party’s decision to go it alone in the 2007 Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh was also based on the goal of increasing its seat/vote share in the long run.
- 12 E Sridharan, 1999, 280.
- 13 For a discussion on the “bi-nodal” nature of the Indian party system see Balveer Arora, “Federalisation of India’s Party System” in Ajay Mehra, D D Khanna and Gert W Kueck (ed.), *Political Parties and Party Systems* (2003) (New Delhi: Sage), 83-99.
- 14 In a constituency with the top M candidate being the winner, the number of viable competitors is M+1 number of candidates. Gary W Cox (1997), *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World’s Electoral Systems* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 99-122.