



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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DEFECTION DENIED: HOW INDIA'S LAW CHANGED THE GAME OF POLITICS

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Abstract

The anti-defection law, enshrined in the Tenth Schedule of the Indian Constitution through the 52nd Amendment Act of 1985, represents a watershed moment in Indian parliamentary democracy. This legislation was enacted to address the pervasive menace of political defections that had plagued Indian politics since independence, particularly during the tumultuous period following the 1967 general elections. While the law has succeeded in curbing individual defections to a significant extent, it has simultaneously created new challenges for democratic governance, including restrictions on legislative independence, potential for partisan misuse, and emergence of orchestrated mass defections. This article critically examines the historical context, constitutional framework, judicial interpretations, contemporary challenges, and reform proposals concerning India's anti-defection law.

Keywords: Anti-defection law, Tenth Schedule, Political defections, Parliamentary democracy, Kihoto Hollohan judgment, Speaker's powers, Judicial review

I. Introduction

Political defection has been a persistent challenge to democratic governance worldwide. In India, this phenomenon reached alarming proportions during the 1960s and 1970s, threatening the very foundations of parliamentary democracy. The phrase "Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram" entered the political lexicon in 1967 when Haryana legislator Gaya Lal changed his party affiliation three times within fifteen days. This incident symbolized the rampant political opportunism that eventually led to the dissolution of the Haryana Legislative Assembly.

The scale of defections during this period was staggering. Between 1967 and 1970 alone, approximately 800 legislators crossed the floor, with nearly 155 receiving ministerial office as reward for their defection. According to the Committee on Defection, nearly 50 percent of the 4,000 legislators elected in the 1967 and 1971 general elections subsequently defected. This epidemic of floor-crossing resulted in frequent government instability, particularly at the state level.

The anti-defection law was Parliament's response to this crisis. Enacted in 1985 under Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's leadership, the Constitution (Fifty-second Amendment) Act introduced the Tenth Schedule, establishing for the first time a constitutional recognition of political parties and providing a legal framework for disqualifying legislators who defect.

Nearly four decades later, the law stands at a critical juncture. While it has reduced individual defections, recent developments in Maharashtra (2022), Madhya Pradesh (2020), Karnataka (2019), and other states demonstrate that the law has been circumvented through orchestrated mass defections. Furthermore, critics argue that the law has stifled legislative independence and meaningful debate.

II. Historical Context: The Defection Crisis (1967-1985)

A. The Era of Political Instability

The 1967 general elections marked a watershed in Indian politics. The Congress party, which had enjoyed virtual monopoly on power since independence, suffered significant losses, failing to secure majorities in several states. This created opportunities for opposition coalitions but also unleashed an unprecedented wave of defections.

Haryana emerged as the epitome of defection politics. During an eight-month legislative session, 31 Congress members defected. One legislator notoriously changed parties five times. Similar patterns emerged across states including Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar. The formation and dissolution of governments became a revolving door exercise.

Several factors contributed to this phenomenon:

- 1. Weak Party Organization:** Many parties lacked strong organizational structures and internal democracy.

2. **Coalition Imperatives:** Multi-party coalitions created situations where small groups of defectors could determine government survival.
3. **Lure of Office:** Concentration of power in ministerial positions created strong incentives for defection.
4. **Absence of Legal Sanctions:** No legal consequences existed for defecting legislators.
5. **Feudal Political Culture:** Politics was dominated by personal loyalties rather than ideological commitments.

B. Failed Legislative Attempts

The Chavan Committee Report (1968) documented an average of 438 political defections annually between the First and Fourth General Elections. Various state legislatures attempted their own measures, but these proved largely ineffective due to lack of constitutional backing.

C. The Political Context of 1985

The enactment of the anti-defection law occurred during a unique political moment. Rajiv Gandhi's landslide victory in the 1984 elections—securing 404 Lok Sabha seats—provided the political capital necessary for reform. Rising public disillusionment with defection politics created favorable conditions. Both Houses of Parliament passed the bill unanimously in January 1985, and it came into effect on 18th March 1985.

III. Constitutional Framework: The Tenth Schedule

A. Key Provisions

The Tenth Schedule comprises eight paragraphs dealing with disqualification on grounds of defection:

Paragraph 2: Grounds for Disqualification

For members belonging to political parties:

- Voluntarily giving up membership of the party
- Voting or abstaining contrary to party direction without permission and without condonation within fifteen days

For independent members:

- Joining any political party after election

For nominated members:

- Joining any political party after six months from taking their seat

Paragraph 3: Split Exception (Deleted) Originally exempted splits involving one-third of members. Deleted by the 91st Amendment Act (2003) due to widespread abuse.

Paragraph 4: Merger Exception Members are not disqualified if their party merges with another, provided two-thirds of legislature party members agree. This provision has become the primary vehicle for circumventing the law.

Paragraph 5: Presiding Officers Speakers/Chairmen who give up party membership are exempt, recognizing the requirement of impartiality.

Paragraph 6: Decision-Making Authority Vests power to decide disqualification questions in the Speaker/Chairman. The decision is declared final, though this has been modified by judicial interpretation.

Paragraph 7: Bar on Judicial Review (Struck Down) Originally excluded judicial review completely. Declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in *Kihoto Hollohan* (1992).

B. The 91st Constitutional Amendment (2003)

This amendment made crucial changes:

- Deleted the split exception (Paragraph 3)
- Disqualified members barred from ministerial office until re-election
- Limited Council of Ministers to 15% of House membership
- Raised merger threshold from one-third to two-thirds

IV. Landmark Judicial Pronouncements

A. *Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu* (1992): The Foundational Judgment

This Constitution Bench judgment is the most important pronouncement on the anti-defection law. The petitioners challenged its constitutional validity, arguing it violated the basic structure by infringing freedom of speech, undermining parliamentary sovereignty, and excluding judicial review.

Key Holdings:

- 1. Constitutional Validity Upheld:** The anti-defection law does not violate the basic structure. It strengthens parliamentary democracy by curbing defections that threatened democratic governance.
- 2. Speaker's Role Validated:** The Speaker's decision-making power was upheld, noting that presiding officers are expected to act with constitutional propriety.

3. Paragraph 7 Struck Down: The complete exclusion of judicial review violated the basic structure. The Court held that decisions remain subject to limited judicial review on grounds of:

- Mala fides or perversity
- Violation of constitutional mandates
- Non-compliance with natural justice
- Jurisdictional errors

4. Limited Scope of Review: Courts should not become appellate forums for every disqualification decision but should check arbitrary exercise of power.

B. Ravi S. Naik v. Union of India (1994)

The Supreme Court expanded the interpretation of "voluntarily giving up membership," holding it is not synonymous with formal resignation. Membership can be deemed voluntarily relinquished based on conduct including:

- Making public statements against the party
- Participating in rival party activities
- Consistently voting against party positions
- Accepting ministerial office in another party's government
- Sustained anti-party activities

C. Rajendra Singh Rana v. Swami Prasad Maurya (2007)

The Court criticized the Uttar Pradesh Speaker for undue delay in deciding disqualification petitions and itself decided the question rather than remanding. This established that Speakers cannot indefinitely delay decisions for political convenience.

D. Nabam Rebia v. Deputy Speaker (2016)

This Constitution Bench held that it is "constitutionally impermissible" for a Speaker facing a no-confidence motion to decide disqualification petitions. This ruling significantly limited the Speaker's powers in specific circumstances and provided protection against partisan misuse.

E. Shrimanth Balasaheb Patil v. Karnataka Speaker (2020)

The Court addressed whether disqualified members could contest by-elections. While not prohibiting this, the decision weakened the deterrent effect of the anti-defection law, as defectors could quickly return with ministerial positions as rewards.

F. Padi Kaushik Reddy v. State of Telangana (2025)

The Court criticized the Telangana Speaker for inordinate delays, set a three-month deadline, and called upon Parliament to review the Speaker's role, advocating for an independent mechanism for timely and impartial adjudication.

V. Contemporary Challenges and the Defection Paradox

A. The Merger Loophole: From Individual to Wholesale Defections

The merger exception has become the primary vehicle for orchestrated defections:

Recent Examples:

Maharashtra (2022): Eknath Shinde led a rebellion with 40 of 55 Shiv Sena MLAs, toppling the Uddhav Thackeray government. Despite clear orchestrated defection, the Speaker delayed disqualification petitions for over two years.

Madhya Pradesh (2020): Twenty-two Congress MLAs led by Jyotiraditya Scindia resigned and joined the BJP, collapsing the Kamal Nath government. The defectors were re-elected and several received ministerial positions.

Karnataka (2019): Seventeen MLAs from Congress-JD(S) defected to BJP, causing government collapse. Though disqualified by the Speaker, they won by-elections on BJP tickets and received ministerial appointments.

Goa (2022): Eight of eleven Congress MLAs defected to BJP after signing written loyalty pledges to Congress, claimed as a merger under the two-thirds threshold.

According to a 2020 Association for Democratic Reforms study, 405 MLAs defected between 2016 and 2020. Of these, 182 (44.9%) joined the BJP, while 170 (42%) were originally from Congress. Data shows 89% of disqualified defectors were re-elected in by-polls with a 70% re-election rate, indicating minimal electoral penalty.

Analysis: The law was enacted to prevent defections, but the merger exception has created perverse incentives. Political operators now target exactly two-thirds plus one member, using inducements and threats to achieve the threshold. Once achieved, the entire operation gains legal immunity.

B. Partisan Role of the Speaker

Vesting adjudicatory power in the Speaker creates inherent conflicts of interest:

- 1. Selective Application:** Speakers delay petitions against ruling coalition members while expediting those against opposition members.

- 2. Strategic Timing:** Decisions are manipulated to influence confidence votes and government formation.
- 3. Inconsistent Standards:** Different Speakers apply vastly different standards in determining defection.
- 4. Absence of Timeline:** The Tenth Schedule prescribes no time limit, allowing petitions to remain pending for years.

The Maharashtra case exemplifies this problem, with disqualification petitions pending for over two years despite clear prima facie evidence.

C. Death of Debate and Dissent

The law's impact on parliamentary democracy has been severe:

- 1. Suppression of Dissent:** Legislators cannot express dissent without risking disqualification.
- 2. Concentration of Power:** Party leadership exercises enormous control through the threat of whips.
- 3. Diminished Role of Individual Members:** MPs and MLAs cannot vote according to constituents' interests if these conflict with party positions.
- 4. Reduced Quality of Debate:** Legislators have less incentive to engage substantively, knowing they must ultimately vote along party lines.
- 5. Prevalence of Whips:** The law applies to all votes, not just those determining government stability, even on matters of conscience or local interest.

Political analyst Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues the law has created a "democracy of parties and numbers" rather than a "democracy of debate and discussion."

D. Legal Ambiguities

Several provisions suffer from ambiguity:

- 1. "Voluntarily Giving Up Membership":** Despite judicial interpretation, determining when conduct amounts to voluntary relinquishment remains subjective.
- 2. Party Whips:** The law does not clearly define valid party whips, who has authority to issue them, or required communication standards.
- 3. Merger vs. Split:** Distinguishing legitimate mergers from engineered defections requires subjective judgment.
- 4. Independent Members:** The provision that independents are disqualified if they join any party creates asymmetry, preventing participation in policy alliances.

E. Enforcement Challenges

Practical challenges include:

- 1. Political Pressure:** Speakers face immense pressure from ruling parties and coalition partners.
- 2. Money and Inducements:** Allegations persist of substantial monetary inducements and ministerial promises to defectors.
- 3. Central Agencies:** Recurring allegations that ED and CBI are used to pressure opposition legislators, with cases withdrawn after defection.
- 4. Inadequate Penalties:** Disqualification loses its sting when members can contest by-elections immediately.
- 5. Electoral Rewards:** Empirical data shows defectors often win subsequent elections, particularly when joining powerful parties.

VI. Comparative Analysis: Anti-Defection Laws Globally

A. United Kingdom

The UK has no statutory anti-defection law. MPs are free to change parties without losing seats. Strong party discipline, whip systems, and electoral accountability compensate for absence of legal restrictions. Notable defections like Winston Churchill's shifts demonstrate that while legally permissible, such moves carry political consequences.

B. United States

Similarly has no anti-defection law. Senators and Representatives can change affiliations, though rare at the federal level. The presidential system with separation of powers reduces the direct link between legislative majorities and government survival.

C. South Africa

South Africa's law, enacted in 2003, is stricter than India's. Members who defect lose seats automatically without requiring adjudication. This eliminates partisan decision-making but has been criticized for being excessively rigid and eliminating parliamentary dissent.

D. Bangladesh

Article 70 of Bangladesh's Constitution provides for disqualification but applies only to confidence votes, budget votes, and money bills. This limited application represents a middle ground, addressing government stability while preserving legislative debate on policy matters.

E. Lessons

The comparative survey suggests:

- Context matters—anti-defection laws reflect specific political circumstances
- All approaches involve trade-offs between stability and autonomy
- Limited application (Bangladesh model) offers a potential middle path
- Independent adjudication removes partisan decision-making but requires careful design

VII. Proposed Reforms and Way Forward

A. Law Commission Recommendations

The **170th Report (1999)** recommended vesting decision-making power in the Election Commission rather than the Speaker for impartial adjudication. It suggested disqualification should apply only to confidence motions and money bills, allowing conscience voting on other matters.

The **255th Report (2015)** reiterated concerns about partisan Speakers and recommended constitutional amendments creating an independent mechanism with time-bound disposal requirements.

B. Other Official Recommendations

Dinesh Goswami Committee (1990):

- Limited application to situations where government is in danger
- Automatic disqualification upon specific triggers
- Exploration of voter recall provisions

National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2002):

- Independent tribunal headed by retired Supreme Court judge
- Mandatory 90-day timeline
- Permanent bar on ministerial office for disqualified defectors

Election Commission:

- Consistently advocated for transferring power from Speakers to itself
- Proposed three-month maximum for deciding petitions

Supreme Court:

- Recent judgments call for parliamentary reconsideration of Speaker's role
- Advocacy for independent adjudicatory mechanism

C. Academic and Civil Society Proposals

1. Narrow the Scope:

- Apply disqualification only to confidence votes and money bills
- Permit abstention on matters of conscience
- Distinguish policy disagreement from support for rival governments

2. Strengthen Merger Provisions:

- Require internal party democracy ratification
- Mandate public disclosure of merger reasons
- Increase threshold beyond two-thirds or eliminate entirely

3. Independent Tribunal:

- Permanent constitutional body of retired judges and electoral experts
- Fixed timelines (30-90 days)
- Expedited judicial review

4. Enhanced Penalties:

- Bar disqualified members from elections for six years
- Return of benefits (constituency funds, security deposits)
- Financial penalties
- Consider mid-term elections for significant defections

5. Strengthen Internal Party Democracy:

- Mandate internal democratic processes
- Regulate candidate selection
- Create mechanisms for intra-party dissent
- Require public declaration of party positions

6. Voter Recall:

- Allow constituents to recall defecting legislators
- Require threshold of voter signatures (25-33%)
- Appropriate safeguards against misuse

D. Comprehensive Reform Agenda

Structural Reforms:

- Transfer adjudicatory power to independent body
- Narrow disqualification scope to confidence/money matters
- Eliminate or significantly strengthen merger exception
- Establish mandatory timelines

Substantive Reforms:

- Clarify ambiguous terms
- Define clear standards for party whips
- Create gradations of penalties
- Increase deterrent effect

Institutional Reforms:

- Strengthen Election Commission oversight of parties
- Mandate transparency in party finances
- Regulate use of inducements
- Create party accountability mechanisms

Cultural Reforms:

- Develop public discourse stigmatizing opportunistic defections
- Encourage media scrutiny
- Build voter awareness
- Foster stronger party organizations

VIII. Critical Analysis: Evaluating Success and Failure

A. Achievements

- 1. Reduction in Individual Defections:** The epidemic of single-member defections has been substantially controlled.
- 2. Government Stability:** Contributed to greater stability, particularly at state level.
- 3. Deterrent Effect:** The threat of disqualification has deterred many potential defectors.
- 4. Recognition of Political Parties:** Provided constitutional recognition, acknowledging their central role.
- 5. Norm Setting:** Established that representatives owe primary allegiance to their parties.

B. Failures

- 1. Emergence of Wholesale Defections:** Successfully preventing individual defections created incentives for mass defections.
- 2. Manipulation of Merger Exception:** Two-thirds threshold has become the target for political operators.
- 3. Partisan Implementation:** Speaker-based decisions have led to widespread manipulation.

4. **Suppression of Legislative Independence:** Severely restricted independent judgment and constituency representation.
5. **Failure of Timely Justice:** Absence of timelines allows cases to drag for years.
6. **Inadequate Deterrence:** Penalties have not proven sufficiently deterrent.

C. The Fundamental Paradox

The law presents a fundamental tension between party discipline and individual conscience, collective responsibility and representative autonomy, stability and deliberation. Traditional parliamentary theory conceptualizes legislators as representatives exercising judgment for constituents (Burke's model). Modern reality necessitates collective action and party discipline for responsible government.

The anti-defection law attempts to resolve this tension by privileging party discipline over individual autonomy. However, it may have overcorrected, moving too far toward rigid party control. A reformed framework should prevent opportunistic defections while preserving space for conscientious dissent, policy debate, and constituency representation.

IX. Conclusion

The anti-defection law represents one of the most significant constitutional innovations in post-independence India. Enacted in response to a genuine crisis, it fundamentally altered Indian politics by imposing legal consequences on defecting legislators. Nearly four decades of experience provide rich grounds for evaluation.

The law's achievements are undeniable—individual defections have declined dramatically, governments enjoy greater stability, and parties have received constitutional recognition. However, limitations are equally significant. Wholesale defections disguised as mergers, partisan Speaker decisions, suppression of debate, and political manipulation demonstrate that the current framework is inadequate.

Recent episodes in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and other states reveal that the law has not prevented the evil it was designed to cure—it has merely transformed its manifestation. The emergence of orchestrated mass defections represents a failure to adapt the law to evolving political tactics.

Comprehensive reform is urgently needed. An independent adjudicatory mechanism, mandatory timelines, narrowing of disqualification scope to confidence votes and money bills, elimination or substantial reform of the merger exception, and strengthened penalties would address glaring deficiencies. Beyond legal reform, institutional development—including regulation of party functioning, campaign finance reform, and voter education—is essential.

The anti-defection law reflects a deeper question about parliamentary democracy in India. Are legislators primarily representatives of constituents or delegates of parties? Should they exercise independent judgment or function as disciplined party soldiers? The answer likely lies not in choosing one model over the other but in creating space for both—maintaining party discipline on matters affecting government survival while exercising independence on policy and constituency concerns.

As India matures as a democracy, its institutions must evolve to address contemporary challenges while remaining true to constitutional values. The anti-defection law, born of necessity in 1985, requires thoughtful reform to serve 21st-century democracy. The goal should not be to eliminate all defections or restore unlimited floor-crossing, but to create a framework preventing opportunistic defections while preserving meaningful legislative independence, robust debate, and genuine democratic accountability.

Recent Supreme Court judgments calling for parliamentary reconsideration present an opportunity for fundamental reform. Whether Parliament will seize this opportunity remains to be seen. What is certain is that without reform, the anti-defection law will continue to be more problem than solution, more loophole than safeguard.

Legal frameworks alone cannot ensure ethical political behavior. The anti-defection law can provide deterrence and consequences, but it cannot create a culture of principled politics. That requires leadership, institutional integrity, informed citizenship, and shared commitment to democratic values. Laws shape behavior, but ultimately, the quality of democracy depends on the character of those who practice it and the vigilance of those who participate in it.

India's experiment with the anti-defection law offers valuable lessons for parliamentary democracies worldwide. Its success in reforming this crucial constitutional framework will have implications beyond its borders, contributing to global understanding of how to balance

party discipline with democratic deliberation in modern representative government.

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