

Which System Is Best For India: Parliamentary Democracy Or Presidential Form Of Government?

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

Group Discussion (GD) is now being extensively used as a selection/screening tool to assess a candidate's personality characteristics and judge his/her suitability for a job or admission to a prestigious institution. The process and modalities of conducting a Group Discussion are deliberately planned in such a fashion that candidates participating in the discussion themselves display several personality traits during the course of this interaction. Given the significance attached to the Group Discussion in the selection process, there is a definite need for the candidate to adequately prepare before participating in a competitive GD. A well-planned strategy of preparation would help the candidate put up a better performance. In this regard, firstly, the candidate should acquire the much-needed relevant general information by reading national newspapers, which could be supplemented by a magazine like *Competition Success Review* or collecting information through the Internet, etc. This is needed as quite a few topics given in GDs demand an essential knowledge base. Secondly, the candidate must pay attention to improving his/her communication skills, as merely collecting information on a wide variety of topics would not suffice for a winning performance. Thirdly, participating in mock group discussions would improve self-confidence in presenting thoughts logically and convincingly with the help of data. Fourthly, the candidate must mentally prepare himself to display leadership qualities. These pertain to displaying good mental abilities and behaviour while showing compassion for others by letting them participate. The candidates must also prepare to deal with tricky situations to reach a consensus tactfully. These are some of the crucial points for devising your well-planned strategy for preparation to participate in a competitive GD.

The above topic was given to a group of eleven candidates who were called to participate in a Group Discussion during the selection process of Probationary Officers (POs) in the State Bank of India. Three assessors were deputed to judge these candidates, who conducted a detailed briefing before the commencement of GD. The candidates



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were given 3-4 minutes to jot down their points before the start, and candidates were asked to conclude this GD within 25-30 minutes.

After that, the Group Discussion proceeded in the following manner:

Candidate No. 4: Friends, good morning. As we all know, the topic given to us impacts all of us and is also relevant to our country's future. Presently, our country has a Parliamentary democracy, but off and on, an option is discussed as to whether we should switch over to a Presidential form of government. Before we commence discussing this topic, let me clarify that this discussion is somewhat academic, as this shift will involve changing the basic structure of our Constitution, which is not feasible unless we bring about major amendments to our Constitution as it stands today. Presently, the United States of America, France, Argentina, etc., have a Presidential form of government, while the Parliamentary form of government is prevalent in India, the United Kingdom, etc. A Presidential form of government is a system where the head of the government is also the head of state and leads an executive branch that is separate from the legislative branch. In the Parliamentary system, the

political party winning the majority seats in Parliament makes the government and elects a person from among themselves to be the Prime Minister, who is the head of the government. Both systems have some similarities as well as differences. We are required to analyse these two systems in detail and then see which of these will suit India the best.

Candidate No. 1: We should highlight the salient features of both systems before comparing them and deciding which is more suitable for India. Am I right?

Candidate No. 8: Yes, I agree with you. Let me talk about the Parliamentary system first. In this system, the executive branch is led by the PM and his Council of Ministers, and they are all members of the legislative branch. In this system, there are two heads. One is the nominal head, which is the President, while the other is the real head, which is the PM. The President is the head of State, whereas the PM is the head of the Government. The President is just a ceremonial figure but has no powers in terms of the nation's foreign or domestic policy.

Candidate No. 11: I would like to add that in the Parliamentary system of government, the PM is free to choose his Ministers from among the Members of Parliament. Also, in this system, a harmonious relationship exists between the legislative and executive bodies, while the judiciary works independently and can rule the actions of the executive as being 'unconstitutional'. The legislative branch, i.e., the Parliament, has two Houses, namely Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. While Lok Sabha has mostly members elected from constituencies that are divided based on population, Rajya Sabha has members indirectly elected by the members of an Electoral College comprising the State and Union Territory legislatures.

Candidate No. 6: I feel Numbers 8 and 11 have described the Parliamentary form of government fairly adequately.

Candidate No. 10: I think we should now talk about significant features of the Presidential form of government.

Candidate No. 4: Yes, in the Presidential form of government, like in the USA, the legislative and executive branches are separate from each other. The Secretaries of the Departments are answerable to the President only, and there is only one head. The President can select

his Ministers from a much wider field, taking into account their expertise and experience. The President is the key actor in foreign and domestic policy, and also representative of constitutional authority.

Candidate No. 8: Further, in the Presidential form of government, the three organs of the government work independently of each other. The political party and the government work harmoniously. The President is free to choose his Ministers from outside the members of the legislature. The legislative branch, like in the USA, is called the United States Congress, and it has two Houses—the House of Representatives and the Senate. Members of the House of Representatives represent Congressional Districts, divided among States according to their population, but States elect two Senators each irrespective of population.

Candidate No. 11: In the Indian context, this question of whether we should switch over to a Presidential system and discard the Parliamentary form of government keeps resurfacing. In the 1970s and again in mid-1984, with Indira Gandhi-led Congress party holding a comfortable majority in the Lok Sabha and consolidating its position in the Rajya Sabha, some Ministers tried initiating a national debate on this issue just before the general elections. It was argued that the Presidential form of government could cleanse the nation of political and economic corruption. However, this was promptly opposed by the Opposition, who called it an attempt to bring dictatorship in the country.

Candidate No. 1: No, even later, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led NDA Government had set up a National Commission in 2000 to review the workings of the Constitution, as some Ministers thought that a Presidential form of government was more suited for India. However, after criticism, including from the then President of India, the Commission did not broach the subject directly, and the proposal was eventually dropped.

Candidate No. 6: Well, we are aware that in the present times, there have been some indirect hints that our Constitution needs many major amendments. It was asserted that though our Constitution was drafted by Indians after our independence, it remained a legacy of the British period and needed an overhaul to meet the demands of a new India.

Candidate No. 4: Yes, during the last general elections period, while campaigning, a renewed indirect push was given to adopt a Presidential form of government. In fact, during the last few years or so, it was suggested that requisite Constitutional amendments were needed to implement 'one nation one election', and hints were also thrown to suggest that India should adopt a Presidential form of government. Presently, a commission headed by an ex-President of India is working to suggest how 'one nation one

election' could be implemented, and not whether this change was at all necessary.

Candidate No. 10: Yes, you are right. As can be seen now, present Indian politics revolves around personalities rather than the policies and programmes of a political party in a Parliamentary system. This is an indirect hint towards a Presidential form of government only.

Candidate No. 2: I quite agree with Numbers 11 and 4.

Candidate No. 8: I would like to add that quite a few people think that Parliamentary democracies are more stable and decisive mainly because powers are distributed, and the chances of an executive-legislative clash are minimised, if not made impossible. But, this is also a fact that many people in India now also feel that presently all is not well with Indian democracy. In this regard, it is said that the fault of India's ailing democracy lies not in the democratic system but in politicians who have corrupted the institutions, which are considered the pillars of democracy.

Candidate No. 3: Yes, I agree with Number 8.

Candidate No. 11: I would say that those who believe that the Presidential form of government is better for India also feel it is a necessity due to the frequency of elections now held in India and the related administrative and financial burden it puts on the country. There are several other issues also against the Parliamentary system. The Cabinet may not have adequately qualified or talented persons as the choice is confined to those who are elected members. Often, the PM cannot appoint a Cabinet of his choice as he has to cater to the wishes of the political leaders of coalition parties.

Candidate No. 4: Let me add that though the Anti-Defection Act was passed in 1985, it has completely failed to check the problem of defections. Now, political parties topple governments by getting MLAs to defect from a political party to join another party by offering them coveted posts in the government. So, democracy is all a game of numbers without any ethics or morality. Another serious issue is concerning the making of laws. Most Bills are drafted by the executive, and there is hardly any Parliamentary debate before they are passed, as members are forced to vote for their party as per whips issued in his regard.

Candidate No. 1: I feel now all governments are mostly indulging in politics rather than making policies for the welfare of our people or making long-term plans. Their primary aim is to remain in power somehow.

Candidate No. 6: I think Numbers 11 and 4 have adequately highlighted what ails Indian democracy at present.

Candidate No. 8: Friends, now I want to talk about some benefits of switching to a Presidential form of government. I think what we are already seeing in India is the Indian Parliamentary system being

run in a Presidential style. The Presidential system would provide checks and balances by establishing an independent legislature, which is absent now as the government commands a huge majority in the House. A country of India's size and diversity needs a political arrangement that allows decisive actions by the government. A Presidential system would allow such decision-making, which can make India's development faster. Finally, in this system, the President will be accountable and responsible for his actions or inactions, and he cannot blame his coalition partners for the same.

Candidate No. 10: There is yet another point in favour of a Presidential form of government. The Presidential administration is more stable than the Parliamentary government. This is because the President's tenure is set and is not subject to Parliamentary majority approval. As a result, he/she does not have to be concerned about losing the government.

Candidate No. 11: Some people have apprehensions that in a Presidential system, the President may become autocratic. I think such apprehensions are not quite justified as we have seen that in 1975, an emergency was imposed even when India was a democratic nation. Therefore, dictatorship can be imposed irrespective of any form of government in a country. I also want to add that in a Presidential system, the President can build consensus on various issues and take policy decisions accordingly in a swift manner.

Candidate No. 1: I am sure there are some concerns about the functioning of the Presidential system as well. Can some friends talk about these concerns now?

Candidate No. 4: First of all, as pointed out earlier, adopting a Presidential form of government is not feasible without changing the basic structure of our Constitution. Secondly, in a diverse country like India, it would be difficult for the President to function without consulting all stakeholders and building a consensus. We can realise this by observing how in the present times the southern States have differences of opinion on several issues with some other States of India.

Candidate No. 8: No, not only this, in the Presidential system, a great deal of authority is concentrated in the hands of only one person, the President. Moreover, the President is not subject to the authority of the legislature. The President may misuse his authority by appointing his family members or friends/business partners to important positions and thus adversely impact the State's political functioning. This situation has the potential to pose serious problems for the country.

Candidate No. 11: It is obvious that if the Presidential system is established in India, the executive and legislative branches will be separated, and Ministers will not be appointed from the legislature like now. In this situation, if legislatures have a difference of opinion, it may pose frequent problems in decision-making.

Candidate No. 6: I think we have adequately discussed the repercussions of having a Presidential form of government, highlighting points both in favour of and against this form of government. We also need to talk about Parliamentary democracy and what is best for India, given India's size and diversity. Am I right?

Candidate No. 5: Yes, you are right.

Candidate No. 4: Friends, we know that the Parliamentary form of government is the dominant form of government in Europe, with 32 of its 50 sovereign States being Parliamentarians. It is also common across the Caribbean, being the form of government of 10 of its 13 island States. Most Oceanian countries are also Parliamentary democracies. However, in other countries of the world, Parliamentary systems are less common, but they are distributed across all continents. We also know that the Parliamentary system is considered more flexible, allowing changes in legislation and policy as long as there is a stable majority or coalition in the Parliament.

Candidate No. 8: Let me add that in the Parliamentary system, the government can be questioned by the Members of the Parliament in which decisions/policies can be scrutinised. But, to ensure this, the government must have a cooperative attitude towards those who are questioning their decisions. It has also been observed that Parliamentary democracies are usually associated with less corruption. In this system, a PM who has lost support in the middle of his term can be replaced by his peer with a more popular alternative without holding an election.

Candidate No. 10: I feel one big advantage of the Parliamentary system is its ability to allow and accommodate more diverse viewpoints. Legislators are free to vote unless the parties they belong to issue whips. In this eventuality, legislators are forced to vote as per party dictate, or else they face disqualification.

Candidate No. 11: I think, as per the topic given to us, we should talk about how democracy is currently functioning in India. Indian Government is loosely modelled on the British Westminster system but adapted to Indian conditions. As many as 543 members are elected to the Lok Sabha through general elections held every five years. State representatives are indirectly elected to the Rajya Sabha on a 6-year term. The system is complicated by India's caste system and a hierarchical social structure. Moreover, India is a deeply religious nation, with diverse religions represented in its population. The Constitution is secular in the sense that it prohibits the persecution of individuals for their religious beliefs.

Candidate No. 4: Yes, the fact remains that India is an extremely diverse country with many regional variations, religions and languages. Some external observers had expected India to break up due to this diversity, but such differences were

managed by redrawing state boundaries along linguistic lines. The greatest challenge that Indian democracy faces is that it has not been able to deliver a sustained development enjoyed by countries like China, and a large number of people are still suffering from extreme poverty. In recent years, though India has been doing quite well in economic terms, the gap between the rich and the poor has further increased manifold.

Candidate No. 9: I agree with you. It is quite visible that rich businessmen and educated elites living in big towns in India lead a completely different life from India's poor citizens. A large number of people are unemployed to make things appear grimmer, and quite a few financially stressed farmers are committing suicide regularly.

Candidate No. 8: To my mind, another challenge that Indian democracy faces is the fact that many of our Parliamentarians have criminal records, and Indian politics has been plagued by corruption for a long time now. There are also allegations that institutions meant to safeguard democracy are not functioning independently, and there are inordinate delays in deciding cases in Indian courts. On the positive side, among other achievements, it is noteworthy that India has been able to widen its tax base and digital payments have become extremely popular.

Candidate No. 1: I think after all these inputs about the Parliamentary democracy and the Presidential form of government, we need to now suggest which system is best for India.

Candidate No. 11: Well, friends, In India, the Parliamentary system has been tried for more than 70 years now. Democracy in India has not performed so poorly that it deserves outright rejection. Looking at India's diversity and size, rather than adopting any other form of government, I think there is an urgent need to give Indian democracy more strength. In this regard, elections are considered a predominant aspect of any democracy. Therefore, certain electoral system reforms are needed to ensure that people's trust in our democracy continues and electoral democracy becomes free and fair.

Candidate No. 7: I agree with you. We must strengthen our democracy.

Candidate No. 6: Yes, in the past, quite a few electoral reforms have already taken place, but owing to corruption in our society and the criminalisation of politics, some more reforms are urgently needed. Lack of moral values, misuse of money, power, government resources/machinery, communalism, casteism, etc. are harming our democracy.

Candidate No. 11: First of all, these reforms must ensure that the independence of the Election Commission is ensured by selecting Election Commissioners through a neutral committee. Secondly, these reforms must limit the expenditure of political parties and fix India's election funding. We must

also hike funding for the Election Commission to make it more independent. There is also a need to ensure that candidates with criminal records are banned and that EVMs and VVPATs are made tamper-proof.

Candidate No. 10: Friends, the time allotted to us to conclude this discussion is now over. Can somebody come forward to conclude?

Candidate No. 8: If you all agree, can I conclude this discussion?

Candidate No. 7: Yes, Number 8, please go ahead.

Candidate No. 8: Friends, we had an absorbing discussion on this significant topic. In the beginning, we highlighted in detail the salient features of both Parliamentary democracy and the Presidential form of government. We covered the advantages and concerns of both these forms of government. This was followed by discussions on what ails the Indian democracy in the present times. We agreed that we should continue to practise Parliamentary democracy, but given several serious problems that have cropped up now, there is an urgent need to strengthen our Parliamentary democracy and undertake several electoral reforms to ensure that people's trust in the present system continues. In the end, we also briefly talked about some of the reforms that are needed.

Thanks, friends. Have a nice day.

Critical Analysis of Candidates' Performance

Good: 4, 8 and 11

These candidates made major contributions towards the discussion. As can be seen, these candidates highlighted vital aspects of this important topic and spoke 5-6 times. They possessed significant information on this subject and brought the discussion to its logical conclusion on an optimistic note. They also adopted a logical and pragmatic approach to the issues involved. Thus, they have shown their mature outlook. The discussion took place in an amicable atmosphere. Due to all these reasons, their performance has been graded as 'Good'.

Average: 1, 6 and 10

These candidates possessed some information on this topic and made a limited contribution towards this GD. Though their ideas were positive and assisted in prompting others into action, they did not take part in this group discussion in an effective manner. This was mainly owing to their lack of preparation and effort. One may presume that they had the potential to put up a better performance. For these reasons, their effort has been assessed as 'Average'.

Below Average: 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9

These candidates just butted in once or twice but did not make much of a contribution towards this GD. It appeared they adopted a casual approach and did not care to prepare and collect important information on this significant subject. Candidates need to remember that to participate in a competitive GD effectively, it is not feasible to speak on a topic without adequate preparation. Given these reasons, their effort can be assessed as 'Below Average'.

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