

*Fourth Edition*

# REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT IN MODERN EUROPE

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## BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A GOVERNMENT

Almost all European countries, including most of the newly democratized countries of Eastern Europe, operate under a constitutional system of "parliamentary government" (see Chapter 2). Governments are not chosen directly by the people. Rather, the people vote to choose a parliament, and this elected parliament has the power both to choose a government and to dismiss it from office. The system of parliamentary government means that, whatever the fine constitutional theory, the raw political reality is that parliamentary elections are much more about choosing governments than they are about choosing a set of people to legislate, to pass laws. Bagehot's memorable description of the British system of government, which applies more generally to parliamentary government, is that "[t]he legislature chosen, in name, to make laws, in fact finds its principal business in making and in keeping an executive" (Bagehot, p. 48). The real prize that is won or lost at parliamentary elections, for most politicians at least, is a place in the government.

Very few European political parties ever win an overall majority of parliamentary seats, because in practice it is very unusual for a political party to win a majority of all votes cast in any country. As we explained in Chapter 11, the proportional representation (PR) electoral systems used in almost all European countries create legislatures that reflect this pattern of electoral preference. Almost all parliaments in which a single party has a majority of seats are actually creations of nonproportional electoral systems, such as those used in Britain or France, that award majorities of seats to parties that win less than 50 percent of the votes. Thus, governments formed by a single majority party are rare exceptions on the European scene, found in only a small number of countries. It is much more common for the result of an election to be that no single party has won a parliamentary majority. This means that no unambiguous choice of government has been indicated by those voting in the election. When no single party wins a parliamentary majority, a *coalition* of different parties is needed to provide parliamentary support for any government—even if this government is made up of politicians from only a single party. And it is a matter of simple arithmetic that there are always several different ways to put together a majority coalition when there is no single majority party; there are thus several different possible governments. The voters have not definitively "chosen" a government, and in most European countries, the precise membership of the government is decided, sometime after the parliamentary election is over, on the basis of bargaining between senior politicians.

Actually, even single-party majority governments are more accurately seen as being supported by parliamentary coalitions formed on the basis of bargaining between senior

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politicians—except in this case the bargaining takes place *within* rather than *between* parties. These intraparty coalitions may be kept together not as a result of any great affinity between those involved but by little more than the mutual fear of electoral disaster. The best-known example of a single-party “coalition” of factions has been outside Europe, in Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The LDP is split into well-defined factions but has governed Japan as a single-party administration for much of the post-war era. Japanese politics during this period has been as much about shifting coalitions within the LDP as about competition between different parties. Within Europe, the Italian Christian Democratic Party (DCI) was also divided into clearly defined factions before it broke up in the early 1990s after a series of corruption scandals. Each DCI faction within the government was typically rewarded with a very precise share of the cabinet portfolios, almost as if it had been a distinct party in its own right (Merston, “Party”). Both of the main British parties, Labour and the Conservatives, have formed single-party governments marked by deep internal divisions. As in Japan, the factions have stayed together within the same party largely because of the way in which the electoral system would penalize them if they split. Because the first-past-the-post electoral system used in Britain typically punishes smaller parties and splinter groups so viciously, explicit party splits can be very damaging; the fate of those who broke away from the British Labour Party to form the Social Democratic Party is a notorious example. One interpretation of the real political impact of the British electoral system, therefore, is that it forces big parties to stay together in one piece, however hair-raising the intraparty politics might be.

In a very real sense, therefore, the notion of any government as a coalition of diverse interests is fundamental to all political systems. In Britain (and in the United States), such coalitions of interests are found for the most part inside political parties as a result of the distorting effects of the plurality electoral system. In most continental European countries, election results are translated more or less proportionally into parliamentary seat distributions, and so bargaining to form a government takes place both within and between political parties. Election results mean that most European governments are *executive* coalitions, in which more than one party is represented at the cabinet table. Most European single-party cabinets, furthermore, are not made up of parties that control parliamentary majorities on their own. These “single-party” cabinets must thus rely for their continued existence on parliamentary support coalitions comprising more than one party; thus a group of parties supports the government in parliament, even if only one party controls seats in the cabinet.

The system of parliamentary government fundamentally implies that even after a government has been installed by parliament, this is by no means the end of the story. The ability of the government to keep hold of the reins of power crucially depends on the continuing support of parliament—implying a continuing process of bargaining and negotiation between senior politicians to deal with the shocks and surprises that any political system is always throwing up. The deals made to put the government together in the first place can just as easily fall apart, bringing the government tumbling down. At a certain point in time, a wide range of political factors combine to encourage politicians to create a particular government. If these factors change in unforeseen ways, then the same politicians face different incentives and may choose to destroy the same government they earlier created. A key implication of parliamentary government is thus that the

government can be brought down at any moment, at least when parliament is in session, by the defection of key elements of its parliamentary support coalition. In reality, as we shall see, things are very much less chaotic than this description might imply. Members of parliament have an incentive to bring down any government only when a majority of them can agree on some precise alternative they all would prefer to the incumbent regime—which is very often much easier said than done.

In the rest of this chapter, therefore, when we explore the making and breaking of governments in modern Europe, we for the most part are considering the politics of executive and legislative coalitions. We examine factors affecting the formation of European cabinets and the allocation of cabinet portfolios among parties, before moving on to explore why some European governments last as long as is constitutionally possible while others form, collapse, and re-form at a very much faster pace.

## → GOVERNMENT FORMATION

The typical European election does not in any final sense settle the matter of who gets into government, although elections are often more decisive, even in a coalition system, than many people realize. Thus, if members of the incumbent government are reasonably happy with one another, if the election results are not too unfavorable for them, and especially if the government parties between them control a legislative majority, then the incumbent government may well decide to continue in office. No serious consideration may be given to a change of administration. The situation after the 2002 election in Ireland was a case in point. When the election was held, the incumbent government—formed in 1997—was a coalition comprising the large center-right Fianna Fáil Party and a small party, the Progressive Democrats (PDs), widely seen as having a more right-wing economic program. This government did not in itself command a majority of the Irish parliament, the Dáil, but was kept in power by a small group of independent deputies in exchange for having the ear of government in relation to the problems of their local constituencies. The Fianna Fáil-PD coalition had presided over the “Celtic Tiger” boom that resulted in sustained growth of the Irish economy, and the two government parties fought the 2002 Dáil election on the basis that they would continue in government together if they were able to do so. When the votes were counted, they had increased their combined share of seats, now commanding a parliamentary majority between them. Although some members of Fianna Fáil, now close to a parliamentary majority in its own right, might have flirted with the idea of going it alone as a one-party “minority” government, the outcome of the government formation process, to nobody’s surprise, was that the incumbent Fianna Fáil-PD coalition government continued in office. In this particular case, Irish voters can be seen to have “chosen” their coalition government at the parliamentary election. They had a clear opportunity to punish the incumbent coalition, and they chose not to do so.

Election results may also lead to predictable changes of coalition government. The Italian general election of 2001, for example, was fought between two rival electoral coalitions. The need to form coalitions of parties that fight elections as a cartel was brought about by a change in Italian electoral law, which, as we said in Chapter 11, set out to reduce the number of parties in Italy by introducing a system of single-seat first-past-the-post elections for 75 percent of seats in the Italian legislature. The 2001 elections

were fought out between a cartel, or electoral coalition, of parties on the center-right, and an opposing cartel of parties on the center-left. The center-left coalition of parties had won the previous election, in 1996, and had gone on to form the government. They thus fought the 2001 election as the incumbent coalition with an agreed candidate for prime minister, on the basis that they would continue in government if able to do so. The center-right cartel of parties fought the 2001 election as an alternative government, also led by an agreed candidate for prime minister in Silvio Berlusconi—leader of the largest of the coalition's component parties, Forza Italia. In this case, therefore, Italian voters had a clear choice between two possible government coalitions when they went to the polls and chose Berlusconi's center-right government. Italian voters had spoken and had played a big part in changing their government even in a political system with a large number of parties.

Thus, no one should get bewitched by an image of the political future of most European countries being settled not by voters but by the wheeling and dealing of party leaders in smoke-filled rooms. Even in countries where coalition governments are part of the political landscape, election results in practice may be politically decisive and voters may have a direct say in government formation. They may confirm an incumbent coalition in office, as in Ireland in 2002, or they may make it possible for a prearranged coalition in opposition to take over the reins of power, as in Italy in 2001. Notwithstanding this, and going to the constitutional heart of the matter in European parliamentary democracies, the final say in government formation always lies with elected politicians, not voters. Whatever the election result, no government can form without an agreement between senior politicians. Once formed, any government can fall if this agreement collapses. The constitutional and political bedrock is that the government remains in office as long as, but no longer than, a majority of parliamentarians prefer it to any realistic alternative. This means that the way politicians feel about the precise composition of any government is an absolutely vital matter. Before we can tell a sensible story about how European politicians set out to bargain their way into government, and before we can discuss the factors that Europe's parliamentarians take into account when trying to decide which government to support, we must consider what it is that motivates these people.

### Office-Seeking Politicians?

Each European government comprises a cabinet led by a prime minister. The prime minister is typically, though not invariably, leader of one of the main political parties. Thus, in order to become a prime minister, it is almost always necessary to become a party leader first, a fact that adds much of the fire and brimstone to the business of leadership selection in major European political parties (see Chapter 10). After the prime ministership, cabinet ministries are the most powerful political offices in the land. A seat at the cabinet table represents the pinnacle of a politician's career. Cabinet ministers are typically, but not invariably, senior party legislators, though who is or is not "senior" in a political party is a far less clear-cut matter than who is the party leader. Indeed, a party leader can turn colleagues into senior politicians at the stroke of a pen by nominating them to the cabinet.

The fact that the positions of prime minister and cabinet minister are such glittering political prizes provides one distinctive perspective on the making and

breaking of governments in modern Europe. This perspective sees politicians as being mainly interested in the "intrinsic" rewards of office. To be a cabinet minister, after all, is to be a famous and powerful person. The desire for such fame and power—for the "smell of the leather" in the ministerial car—may be the most important motivation for many politicians even if few would ever admit this openly or perhaps even to themselves. In many ways, achieving high office is in itself the mark of "success" in any political career.

### Policy-Oriented Politicians?

Another important set of reasons for trying to get into government has to do with influencing public policy. If politicians want to make a difference to the way their country is run, one of the most effective ways they can do so is to get into the cabinet. This motivation, of course, is far more acceptable to the wider political world than naked political ambition and is one that politicians are much more inclined to promote in public. Very few politicians, whatever their real hopes and fears, look for votes on the grounds that what they want to do if elected is make lots of money, get their picture in the newspaper every day, ride around in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven limousine, and have a large staff to boss around. Most European politicians, like their U.S. counterparts, campaign on the basis of promises about all the good that they can do for their country if voters put them in a position of power. They usually claim that they want all of this power not for its own sake but rather in order to implement cherished and lofty policy objectives for the benefit of everyone.

The desire to consume the intrinsic rewards of office and the desire to have an impact on public policy, therefore, are different plausible motivations for the politicians involved in the making and breaking of governments. (For an extended discussion of this theme, see Müller and Strøm.) Different interpretations of government formation in modern Europe flow from these alternative assumptions about what drives politicians.

### Office-Seeking Politicians and "Minimal Winning" Governments

Perhaps the best-known approach to the analysis of government formation in modern Europe is based on the assumption that politicians are driven above all else by the desire to enjoy the rewards of office for their own sake. This approach leads to predictions that the governments that form will be just enough to take the prize and no bigger—that "minimal winning" cabinets are the most likely to be the European norm. Minimal winning cabinets carry no passengers; they include only parties whose seats are essential to maintain the government's parliamentary majority.

The logic of this argument is straightforward. If being in government is valued in and of itself, then the set of cabinet positions is like a fixed set of trophies to be shared out by the winners of the government formation game. Any cabinet party whose votes are not essential to the government's parliamentary majority will be enjoying some of these scarce trophies without contributing any of the political resources needed both to capture them and to hold on to them. Office-seeking politicians are likely to

exclude such "passenger" parties from the cabinet. This logic implies that government coalitions should comprise as few parties as possible, consistent with the need to win confidence votes in the legislature (Riker). The result is a minimal winning government. If a government does indeed include parties whose seats are not needed for its legislative majority, then it is called an "oversized" or "surplus majority" government. Both names, of course, suggest the rather curious—and, as you will see, unwarranted—implication that some governments can in some sense have "too much" support. Nonetheless, if a cabinet includes a party whose votes are not essential to keeping the government in office, then we do have to ask what else this party might be contributing. In this way, the notion of the minimal winning cabinet provides a useful basis from which to start thinking about the making and breaking of European governments. (For reviews of "office-driven" models of government formation, see Laver, "Models"; Laver and Schofield.) In a careful and widely cited empirical review by Martin and Stevenson (p. 41) of the formation of various types of government in parliamentary democracies, furthermore, one of the headline conclusions is that "[i]t is immediately clear ... that minimal winning theory is a significant improvement on the intuitive idea that majority cabinets are more likely to form than cabinets that control only a minority of legislative seats." In short, there is a systematic real-world tendency for the governments that form to contain sufficient parties to allow them to control a legislative party but no more than this. This effect remains even after controlling for policy differences between the partners in government (see below), and does indeed suggest that politicians have office payoffs on their minds when they bargain over government formation.

The "office-seeking" assumption about the motivations of politicians also provides the basis for a number of "power indexes," which measure the extent to which parties can exploit their bargaining positions in the legislature. Two well-known power indexes are the Shapley-Shubik and Banzhaf indexes, named after their inventors. Such power indexes have been the subject of intense and ongoing intellectual controversy based on arguments about whether they reflect the ways in which real people vote (Gelman, Katz, and Bafumi) or whether they should take account of the substantive preferences of the actors concerned (Garrett and Tsebelis, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Napel and Widgren). Nonetheless, the intuition behind them all is that they help highlight ways in which the distribution of bargaining power can sometimes differ quite starkly from the distribution of seats in the legislature. One classic example occurs when there are two large parties, each falling somewhat short of a parliamentary majority, with the "balance of power" held by a much smaller party. Imagine a legislature in which two parties win about 45 percent of the seats and a smaller party wins about 10 percent. In this situation, and if politicians are concerned above all else to get into office, the political facts of life are that neither of the two large parties can take power on its own but any two parties can take power as a coalition. All three parties have equal bargaining power despite their unequal size, giving the smaller party a level of power quite disproportionate to its size. This is actually quite similar to a situation that often arose in reunification Germany. The small Free Democrat Party held the balance of power and was able to be a maker and breaker of German governments despite its small size and indeed was in most postwar German coalition cabinets, often with the most coveted cabinet portfolios.

## Policy-Oriented Politicians and Ideologically Compact Governments

If the politicians who make and break governments want to leave their mark on public policy rather than merely to consume the fruits of office, then a different interpretation of government formation is called for. Public policy, after all, applies to everybody. It applies to people who are in government and those who are not, to voters and nonvoters alike. Above all, public policy cannot in any sense be "used up" at a faster rate if there are more parties in the government. Thus, abolishing the death sentence for convicted murderers is a policy that applies to all, whether they are in the government or outside it, murderers or not. If more people join the government, the policy is in no sense "diluted"; it is no better and no worse than it was before. Those who want no more than to see the death penalty abolished will be delighted when it goes, whether they are in or out of office at the time.

If politicians are driven by nothing but the desire to affect public policy when they set out to bargain their way into government, then the logic of the minimal winning cabinet is eroded. If some other politician shares your policies, then there is no reason in the world, if all you are concerned with is policy, to keep this person out of office. In its pure form, this approach suggests that the only criterion that will be used in government formation is the ideological closeness of the cabinet partners. The cabinets that take office should contain parties whose policies are as compatible as possible. They will thus be ideologically "compact" in the sense that cabinet parties will tend to be closer together, rather than farther apart, in their ideological positions. In the extreme, if parties are concerned only with policy, then this focus should lead to cabinets that are so compact that they comprise only a single party—even a very small one—with a very central policy position. If the other parties do not care at all about getting into office, then they may regard the policies of this very central government as being better than those of any other government that is likely to form. They may thus allow the central party to take power on its own and implement its policy program. As we will see, this logic underpins the formation of the so-called minority governments that have been quite common in postwar Europe.

Obviously, however, it is rather extreme to assume either that politicians are concerned only with feathering their own nests or that they are concerned, whatever personal sacrifice is required, only with the good of the country. The truth is most probably somewhere in between, and some accounts of the politics of government formation in modern Europe are based on the assumption that politicians are concerned both with getting into office for its own sake and with having an impact on public policy. This leads to predictions that "minimal winning" governments will tend to form, because office motivations are important, but that these governments will be ideologically compact, because policy is also important. This leads in turn to the prediction that "minimal connected winning" cabinets will form; these are cabinets comprising parties that are adjacent to each other in policy terms, and that cannot lose a party off either "end" without losing their majority. Figures 12.1, 12.2, and 12.3, later in this chapter, give examples of these.

Many authors have constructed "policy-driven" models of government formation in modern Europe. The models differ in a number of important respects, although most

assume that there is more to policy-driven government formation than a single left-right dimension of public policy. For example, other policy dimensions that might have a bearing on government formation in particular countries include foreign policy, environmental policy, and the "liberal-conservative" dimension of social and moral policy on matters such as abortion or capital punishment. Some of these authors have constructed models that concentrate more or less exclusively on the policy positions of the political parties and their relative strengths in the electorate or legislature (Schofield, "Coalition"; Schofield, "Equilibrium"; Grofman). Others have focused more on institutional features of the government formation process. These features include the order in which parties are chosen to be *formateurs* (Baron); for a discussion of the role of *formateurs* see Chapter 2). The vote of confidence procedure, also discussed in Chapter 2, is seen as being very important in a widely cited book by John Huber, as is the need to allocate control of particular policy areas to particular cabinet ministers (Laver and Shepsle, *Making*). Michael Thies has drawn attention to the need to balance the allocation of cabinet portfolios with the allocation of junior ministers. Carruba and Volden have focused on the need for coalition partners to put together "logrolls," whereby one partner makes concessions in policy areas that are lower on its list of priorities, in exchange for concessions from a coalition partner on policy areas much closer to its heart (Carruba and Volden; Volden and Carruba). A common feature of most of such models is that they highlight a tendency for the governments that form to adopt positions relatively close to the center of whatever policy dimensions are important. And a strong empirical result found by Martin and Stevenson is that policy divisions between the members of all types of potential government do indeed reduce the probability that such divided governments will form. The net result from all of this is that the government formation process in a coalition system is likely to produce government policies that are less extreme than the policies of many parties winning seats in the legislature. In this important sense, the politics of coalition appear to have a moderating effect on public policy outputs.

### Minority Governments

So far, we have been implicitly assuming that the cabinets that take office in modern European countries are made up of parties that between them control a majority of seats in parliament. This need by no means be the case, however. At first glance, the idea of a minority government—one whose members do not control a majority of seats in parliament—might seem at best a paradox and at worst downright undemocratic. When there is a minority government, after all, there must be a majority opposition in parliament. In the typical European country with a PR electoral system, furthermore, the majority opposition will have been supported in the most recent election by a majority of voters. This opposition controls enough seats in parliament to throw the government out on its ear but, for some reason, chooses not to do so. When there is a minority government, furthermore, a cabinet has taken office with no parliamentary guarantee that it can stay there for any length of time, because it can be defeated at any moment at the pleasure of the opposition. Yet Kaare Strøm has argued convincingly that minority government should be seen as a normal and "democratic" outcome of the process of party competition in modern Europe, rather than as a sign of its failure (Strøm).

The main reason why minority governments are such a common outcome of party competition in modern Europe has to do with the role of party policy. After all, if politicians are motivated solely by the desire to get into power, then it is hard to see why they would languish in opposition when they have the legislative muscle to force their way into government and take control of the spoils of office. If politicians are concerned about policy, however, then there may well be circumstances in which policy objectives are better served from a place on the opposition benches than from a seat at the cabinet table. Parties may choose to stay in opposition, the better to fulfill their policy objectives. Strøm therefore looked at the influence over policy that can be wielded by the opposition, concentrating mainly on formal influence exercised through the legislative committee system (Strøm). The influence of the opposition arises because it is actually rather rare for bottom-line decisions on important policy matters to be slugged out on the floor of the legislature. Many more political wars are waged in committees. As we saw in Chapter 3, different European countries differ considerably, furthermore, in the effectiveness of their committee systems and the policy influence that committees give the opposition. The more powerful the committee system and the greater the influence of the opposition, so the story goes, the lower is the incentive for opposition parties to get into the government, because they can be almost as effective outside it. And the lower the incentive to get into government, obviously, the greater is the likelihood of minority governments. Strøm tested this argument by looking at the size, scope, specialization, and power of the committee system in a number of European democracies. He found that the Norwegian committee system is the one that gives the opposition the most influence over policy. This is followed, according to Strøm, by the committee systems of Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Sweden, and France. Strøm suggested that the committee systems that give the opposition least influence over policy are in Britain and Ireland, followed by the Netherlands. The general pattern is clear; the relatively high frequency of minority government in Scandinavia and Italy is consistent in these terms with the relatively high formal policy influence of the opposition, exercised through the committee system.

Laver and Hunt collected data that shed more light on the relationship between minority government and the political role of the opposition. A group of experts in the politics of each country was asked to rate that country in terms of the potential impact of the opposition on government policy. The scores are shown in Table 12.1, and the pattern is striking. The five countries scoring highest on opposition impact are the Scandinavian countries and Italy; the precise group with the highest frequency of minority governments. Although we can never be quite sure which is the chicken and which the egg, the accumulation of evidence lends strong support to the argument that, if the opposition parties have a greater chance of having an impact on government policy, opposition will be more attractive than would otherwise be the case and the frequency of minority governments will increase.

A second interpretation of the ability of minority governments to stay in power—one that may be more appropriate outside Scandinavia—is based on policy divisions within the opposition (see, for example, Laver and Shepsle, *Making*). On this account, a minority government can survive and can even be quite stable simply because the opposition parties cannot agree on a replacement. Thus, governments can be politically "viable" with far less than a parliamentary majority. Although control over a parliamentary majority guarantees victory, failure to control a majority does not inevitably spell

TABLE 12.1

## Impact of Opposition Parties on Government Policy

Country	Score
Italy	7.1
Norway	6.8
Denmark	6.5
Sweden	5.2
Finland	4.9
Iceland	4.8
Portugal	4.3
Austria	4.1
Ireland	4.1
Luxembourg	4.0
Netherlands	3.6
Germany	3.5
France	3.4
Malta	3.3
Belgium	2.6
Greece	2.2
Spain	2.0
Britain	2.0

Note: Mean scores on a scale ranging from 1 (low) to 9 (high).

Source: Laver and Hunt, app. B.

defeat. In particular, a party whose policies place it at the center of the political system may often find itself a member of every viable government. Laver and Shepsle call such a party a "very strong" party, its strength deriving from the fact that any government that excludes it is likely to be defeated on policy grounds in favor of a minority government comprising only the very strong party. In such a situation, a very strong party obviously can credibly demand to be allowed to govern alone, even in a minority position. Thus, if some party is sufficiently central that it can split its political opponents in this way, it can form a viable minority government, a conclusion for which Martin and Stevenson (p. 48) found systematic empirical support.

This logic may well underwrite a number of the minority governments formed in the past by the Christian Democrats in Italy and by the Social Democrats in Denmark. In each case, a substantial party with an ideological position toward the center of the ideological spectrum won less than a majority of seats but faced a divided opposition. Some of the opposing parties were to the left, some to the right. As a result of this ideological positioning of the parties, it was difficult to envisage a coalition of ideologically diverse opponents that could somehow combine to evict the center party in favor of an alternative they could all agree on. Because it was very difficult for this reason to evict the "strong" center party from office, this party was in a very powerful bargaining position and could have decided to go it alone. Even without a majority it could not be

beaten. Indeed, the ability of a particular party to go it alone as a minority government, in the face of a divided opposition, is one of the acid tests of real bargaining power in the making and breaking of governments.

An additional factor that might plausibly affect the formation of minority governments is the existence of a constitutional requirement that any new government must win a formal vote of investiture before it can take office (Strøm). Such investiture requirements force the incoming government to demonstrate majority legislative support quite explicitly, and thus they impose a sterner test on potential minority governments than can be found in countries where there is no need for the government to win a legislative vote before it forms, so that legislative majorities on individual matters to be decided can if necessary be put together on an ad hoc basis. And indeed we do find a systematic empirical pattern that, holding many other factors constant, minority governments are less likely when a formal investiture vote is required (Martin and Stevenson, p. 44).

It should be quite clear from the foregoing discussion that minority government is very much a part of the political scenery in modern Europe, for quite understandable reasons. Any model of European politics that cannot give a convincing account of minority government, therefore, is seriously deficient. We should also note that each of the more plausible interpretations of minority government depends on taking policy seriously. One possibility is that the opposition to a minority government is so divided over policy that it can provide no alternative. Another possibility is that the other parties accept a minority government because they expect to be able to fulfill policy objectives from a position on the opposition benches—by exploiting the committee system, for example. If voters are motivated by policy considerations, then a party may even prefer to stay on the opposition benches so that it can pick and choose the issues on which it makes a policy intervention. If the same party were in government, in contrast, it would be forced to make heavily constrained policy decisions on many issues that were not of its own choosing, in this way alienating at least some of its supporters. However we look at it, policy figures prominently in accounts of minority government. We might conclude, then, that in those countries where minority government is common, policy must be an important factor in political competition. Policy also figures prominently in accounts of "surplus majority" government, the matter to which we now turn.

### Surplus Majority Governments

Just as some cabinets may be able to survive with less than a parliamentary majority, others may include parties whose seats are not crucial to the government's majority in the legislature. There may be several reasons for the formation of such "surplus majority" or "oversized" governments.

Immediately after World War II, for example, governments of "national unity" were formed in many western European countries, with the intention of involving all sections of society in the job of postwar reconstruction. These were typically surplus majority coalitions comprising all, or nearly all, major parties. Examples can be found in Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. In most cases, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly in the circumstances, these arrangements tended to be short-lived. "Normal" party competition soon reestablished itself. Government formation quickly came to involve some parties going into power and consigning

others to the opposition. A similar pattern can be seen in the "founding" governments formed at the beginning of the transitions to democracy in eastern Europe, where there was a strong tendency not for grand coalitions of all parties but certainly for "oversized" coalitions involving more parties than needed to control a parliamentary majority. Although trends are difficult to establish over the short period since the beginning of the postcommunist transition in the early 1990s, there also seems to be a trend away from surplus majority governments as the new system of eastern European party competition becomes consolidated.

There are still occasional forlorn popular appeals, at times of major political or economic crisis, for governments of national unity. Although there may be public support for the idea that everyone should get together and pull the country out of trouble, politicians almost never respond to these appeals. Grand coalitions are rare in modern Europe, and government formation is typically as much about who is left out of office as about who gets in.

Another reason we may find surplus majority governments has to do with the constitution. Countries have different requirements for constitutional amendments but, as we saw in Chapter 4, one requirement used by some countries involves winning a "qualified" majority vote in the legislature, a majority of more than 50 percent of legislators—two-thirds or three-quarters, for example. In such circumstances, if constitutional reform is on the political agenda, a cabinet may need a legislative majority of more than 50 percent to implement its policies. Additional parties may then be included in the cabinet, whose seats are needed to achieve a 50 percent majority, so as to achieve this higher threshold. In Belgium, for example, divisions between language communities have resulted in constitutional provisions that laws affecting relations between the communities require the assent of a majority in each language group and two-thirds of legislators overall. This requirement in effect has meant that Belgian cabinets may sometimes need a two-thirds legislative majority in order to govern effectively. Such cabinets may superficially look "oversized," but they are in practice no larger than legally necessary in the circumstances.

There is another reason why a party whose votes are not essential for a government's parliamentary majority may still be a vital member of the cabinet. Laver and Shepsle (*Making*) argue that a party may be essential for a stable government because its presence is required to send out certain signals about some aspect of government policy. For example, the seats of a party with a tough policy of cutting public spending may not be needed for a cabinet's majority. If this party is nonetheless in the cabinet, then public perceptions of the government as a whole may be that it is tough on public spending. If the party is excluded, then public perceptions may be that the government is softer on public spending. The party thereby contributes to the perceived policy profile of the government, rather than to the government's parliamentary majority, and in this sense is not at all "surplus" to political requirements viewed broadly.

Finally, Luebbert argued that a very clear strategic benefit can arise from carrying "passengers" in cabinet coalitions, especially for a large government party. Once a government takes office, any party that is crucial to the government's majority can bring the entire executive tumbling down by withdrawing its support. Even very small parties have a potent threat with which to attempt to extract concessions from their cabinet colleagues, provided, that is, that their votes are critical to the government majority. In anticipation

of this, a large party may choose to surround itself with a protective screen of weaker passengers so that no single other party is critical to the cabinet's parliamentary majority. In this event, none of the weaker passengers can make serious demands once the government has formed, because every one of them is expendable (Luebbert, p. 79). To put it rather crudely, powerful parties might actually choose to carry passengers so that one or two can be tossed overboard without too much fuss if they start to get greedy.

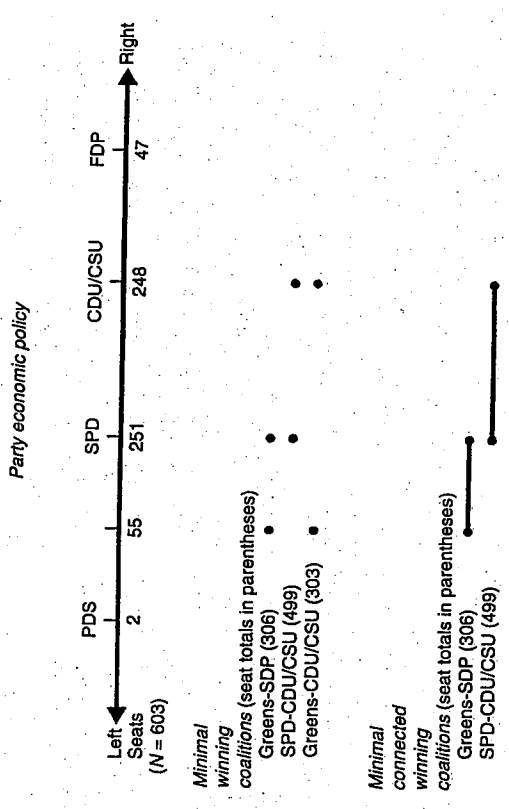
This argument was recently expressed in a more systematic way by Carruba and Volden and tested empirically by the same authors (Volden and Carruba). Carruba and Volden focus explicitly on the need of governments to get a diverse package of policy proposals through the legislature. In putting together a potential government, different parties will have to do "logrolling" deals with each other: Party A will concede to Party B on some issue that Party A opposes but cares rather little about, in exchange for a concession from Party B to Party A on a matter that Party B opposes but is close to Party A's heart. Each party benefits by getting its way on what it cares more about, in exchange for giving way on what it cares less about. Any policy agreement between prospective partners in government can be seen as a complex deal of this type. But in the real world such agreements are put into practice not in a single giant piece of "omnibus" legislation that deals with absolutely everything but in a particular sequence of legislative proposals. The danger for members of a coalition cabinet is that after members of some cabinet party have achieved the passage of the measures they are most concerned about, they will defect from the government rather than stay in office and honor their end of the deal—supporting policies they oppose but care less about than cabinet colleagues. Because policy proposals must inevitably be dealt with in sequence rather than all at once, any logroll that puts together a coalition cabinet is vulnerable to such defections by individuals who achieve their main objectives early in the sequence. One way to minimize the risk of this happening is to put together an oversized government. This reduces the incentive of any single member to defect because the government can remain in office, and can continue to implement its policy program, even after such a defection.

Overall, therefore, surplus majority governments are easier to understand than they might seem to be at first glance. This is just as well, because they are in practice quite common, particularly in the former communist states of eastern Europe. Drawing together the various possible explanations set out above, we can come to a conclusion quite similar to the one we came to for minority governments: Policy is important in government formation. Almost all of the theoretical ways in which we can make sense of surplus majority governments have to do, in some way or another, with the desire of potential members of the government to fulfill their policy objectives. This holds whether the objectives reflect what politicians deeply feel about policy in their hearts or instead indicate a more pragmatic desire to redeem policy pledges made to voters at the previous election.

## A Minimal Winning Cabinet in Germany

Later in this chapter we take a comprehensive look at the types of government that form right across modern Europe. The best way to get a feel for these types of government, however, is to consider some specific examples. We begin with a straightforward and instructive example of a minimal winning cabinet.





**FIGURE 12.1** Coalition Possibilities in Germany, 2002

The top part of Figure 12.1 provides some information about the situation in Germany after the general election of 2002. Five parties were represented in the parliament that was given the job of choosing a government. The policy positions of these parties are placed on a left-right dimension of economic policy, and the number of seats won by each party, out of a total of 603, is also given. (Policy positions are taken from a collection of expert surveys of party positions in a wide range of countries, reported by Benoit and Laver.) From left to right, the parties involved were the former East German Communists (PDS), the Greens, the Social Democrats (SPD), the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), and the Free Democrats (FDP). The incumbent government at the time of the election was a coalition between SPD and the Greens.

The essential parliamentary arithmetic of government formation in Germany after the 2002 election, which determined the different ways to put together a parliamentary majority of 302 seats, is shown in the bottom part of Figure 12.1. First, the three minimal winning coalitions are listed. These are coalitions between Greens and SPD, between SPD and CDU/CSU, and between Greens and CDU/CSU. Obviously, any other party or parties could be added to each of these coalitions to create surplus majority coalitions. Minority governments would comprise less than the minimal winning coalitions; but minority governments still need to win votes of confidence, so they need the explicit or implicit support of a majority coalition in the legislature, even if the cabinet partners themselves do not constitute a majority. Thus one thing is very striking about German government formation in 2002: Neither PDS nor FDP was a member of any minimal winning parliamentary coalition. The 2002 German parliamentary arithmetic put the FDP, with 47 seats, in a very different bargaining position from that of the Greens, only slightly larger at 55 seats. Any two of the three largest parties, including the SPD, could form a

minimal winning coalition without the FDP, but not one of them could form a majority with it. Quite simply, neither PDS nor FDP was an essential party of any parliamentary majority. In the indelicate language of government formation studies, they were “dummy” parties—by implication, destined to watch government formation from the sidelines. A dummy party in a multiparty system is the equivalent of the losing party in a two-party system, with no clear-cut impact on the making and breaking of governments. In this particular case, we also see quite clearly how bargaining power in government formation can be quite disproportional. The Greens in 2002 were much more powerful than the only slightly smaller FDP—and indeed the Greens went on to play a prominent role in the ensuing German government.

If party policy is important in government formation, as it usually is, then we need to consider the policy differences within various potential governments. Looking at the bottom part of Figure 12.1 again, we see that there were two minimal connected winning coalition cabinets after the 2002 German election, comprising only parties that were adjacent to each other on the left-right spectrum. These were coalitions between the Greens and SPD, and between SPD and CDU/CSU. The minimal winning cabinet involving both Greens and CDU/CSU did not comprise ideologically adjacent parties—and such cabinets may be considered less likely to form than those comprising parties whose policy positions are closer together. We already noted that “grand” coalitions are rather rare in modern European politics, and the coalition between what are by far the two largest parties in Germany, although it formed in the past, could in many ways be considered a grand coalition. Most recent German elections, indeed, are to a large extent head-to-head contests between two potential chancellors who are leaders, respectively, of the SPD and CDU/CSU. This makes it somewhat unlikely, if the possibility can be avoided, that the two will agree to go into government together immediately after having locked horns during the election. This left the minimal connected winning coalition between SPD and Greens, which had the added advantage of being the incumbent government and was in fact the government that formed very soon after the election results were declared, headed by SPD leader Gerhard Schröder. More generally in recent times, most German governments have been minimal winning cabinets.

**Minority Cabinets in Norway**

Although any government does need to win majority votes in parliament if it is to be able to govern effectively, the parties in the cabinet do not themselves need to command a majority and may instead form a minority administration. This is what happened after the September 1997 general election in Norway. Some information on the Norwegian party system after this election is given in the top part of Figure 12.2. Once more, party positions on a left-right dimension are given, together with legislative seat totals. Ranging from left to right, the parties are the Socialist Left (SL), Labor, the Liberals (Lib), the Christian Peoples’ Party (CPP), the Center Party, the Conservatives (Con), and the Progress Party (Prog).

The traditional pattern of government formation in Norway over most of the post-*era* was an alternation in power between two “bloccs” of the center-right and the center-left. Center-right governments have comprised a coalition of medium-sized and small parties, based around the Conservatives. Center-left Norwegian governments have

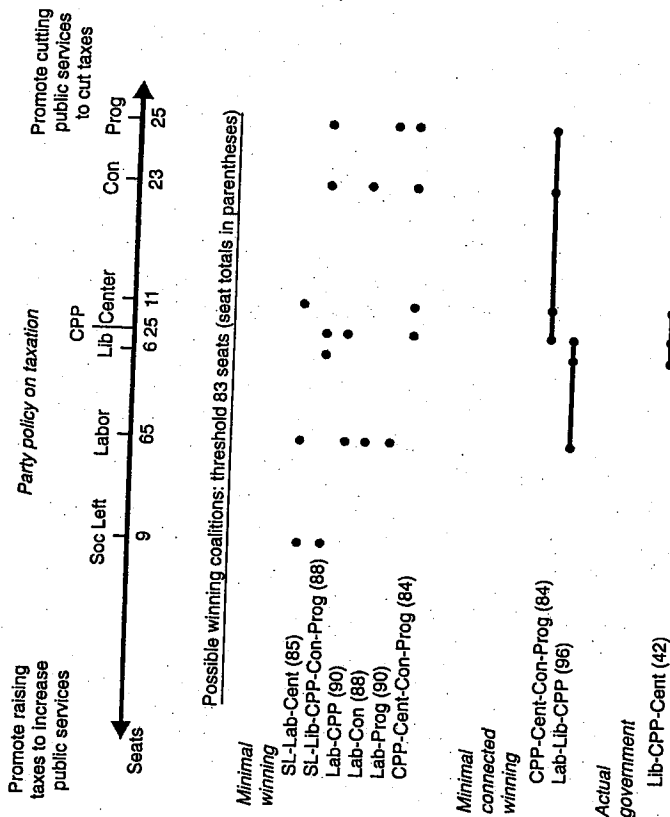


FIGURE 12.2 Coalition Possibilities in Norway, 1997

SOURCE: Policy positions taken from Laver and Hunt.

typically been single-party Labor administrations, often kept in office on the basis of "outside" support from other left-wing parties. The outgoing government in 1997 was a single-party minority administration controlled by the Labor Party. Although the Norwegian economy was in good shape, it quickly became clear that the incumbent Labor Party was not doing well in the opinion polls. While the right as a whole remained divided over the controversial issue of EU membership, an issue that had dominated Norwegian politics in the 1990s, the three parties of the center—the Liberals, the Christian Peoples' Party, and the Center Party—announced their intention to form a government if Labor was defeated.

As it turned out, all left-wing parties lost votes and seats in the election, dropping to their lowest combined level of support since 1936 (Narud). The Labor government was thus forced to resign. It was replaced by the small center coalition proposed during the election campaign, a coalition that fell far short of a parliamentary majority and excluded the traditional anchor of right-wing governments in Norway, the Conservative Party. Indeed, the administration that took over the government in October 1997 controlled only 42 of the 165 seats in the Norwegian legislature. Divisions within the right over the EU had thus broken the typical pattern of two-bloc politics in Norway. This minority government conformed very closely to the pattern of a small government at the

center of the party system that could continue in office because it divided the opposition. To defeat it, parties from both the right and the left of the minority government had to be able to agree on some alternative. In effect, both Labor and the Conservatives had to find something that they both liked better than the incumbent minority government—a rather unlikely possibility. Since Norway has fixed-term parliaments, furthermore, with no provision for early dissolution, the opposition parties lacked any incentive to bring down the government in the hope of cashing in on election gains. They really did need to agree on some alternative if they were to have an incentive to bring down the government. (For more on the formation of this government, see Narud.)

Led by Kjell Magne Bondevik of the Christian Peoples' Party, this government lasted three years, despite the fact that it controlled far less than a majority of parliamentary seats, before being forced to resign in March 2000 after losing a vote of confidence in the Norwegian parliament. It was replaced in March by another minority government, this time led by Jens Stoltenberg of the Labor Party, which stayed in office until the next scheduled elections in September 2001. These elections resulted in heavy losses for Labor and significant gains for the Conservatives, opening the way for Bondevik to form his second center-right minority administration, this time including the Conservatives, a government that was well placed to complete a full term until the scheduled parliamentary elections of 2005. One of the main reasons why it is so hard to find a majority cabinet is that right and left tend to be evenly balanced and in each of the last two elections the radical right-wing Progress Party won 25 of the 165 seats with policies that mean it is not considered a suitable partner in government by either the center-left or the center-right. This makes the parliamentary arithmetic very tight. With the Progress Party's 25 seats out of the equation and only 140 seats in play, either right or left still needs to find the 83 seats needed for a parliamentary majority—an effectively impossible task. The result is that a pattern of alternating left- and right-leaning minority cabinets has been established in Norway.\*

### Surplus Majority Cabinets in Italy

Just as cabinets can sometimes be stable while controlling less than a majority of legislative seats, they may sometimes include more members than are strictly needed in order to control the legislature. This may be the case because the government needs a qualified majority of more than 50 percent for certain vital votes, as in Belgium, or there may be less tangible political considerations. Italy, for example, has a long tradition of "surplus majority" coalitions, one of which formed in May 1994. A simplified version of the Italian party system at this time is described in the top part of Figure 12.3. Party positions on a general left-right scale are listed at the top of the figure. From left to right, the main parties were the Reformed Communists (RC), the Democratic Left (PDS), the Greens, the Democratic Alliance (AD), the Popular Party (PPI), Italian Renewal (RI), the Christian Democratic Center (CCD), the Democratic Union of the Center (UDC), the Northern League (LN), the National Alliance (AN), and Forza Italia (FI). A number of smaller parties have been omitted for the sake of clarity.

\*In addition to the 164 seats won by parties shown in Fig. 12.2, one of the 165 seats was won by a minor party.

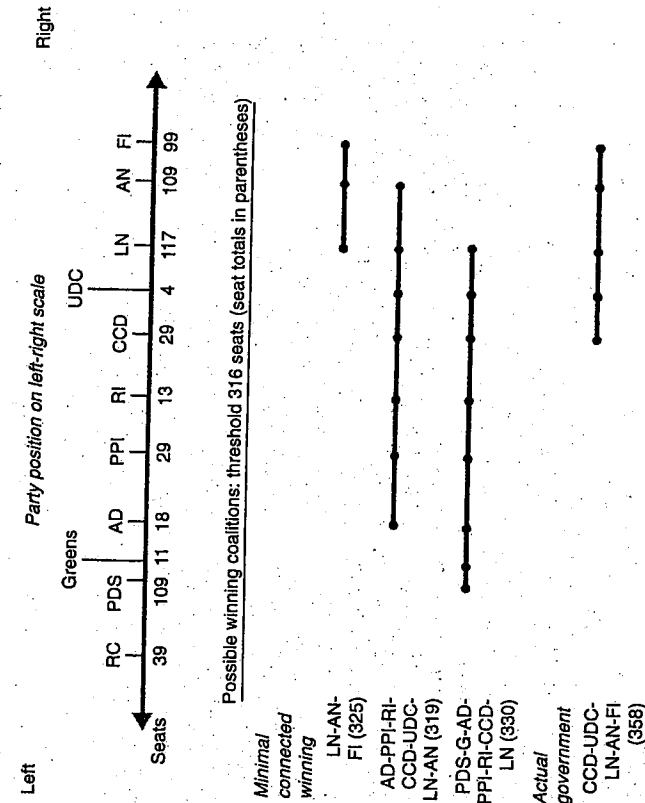


FIGURE 12.3 Coalition Possibilities in Italy, 1994  
SOURCE: De Vries et al., supplemented by Ignazi.

The Italian political system in the period leading up to the 1994 election had been thrown into convulsions by a range of corruption scandals that had undermined the traditional parties (see Chapter 7). Many formerly strong parties had declined dramatically or disappeared altogether, while many new parties had formed. In an attempt to produce a more stable party system, the electoral system had been reformed to one in which 75 percent of all seats were allocated in single-seat constituencies on a first-past-the-post basis, while the remaining 25 percent of seats were allocated in regional constituencies using list-PR. The new system created very strong incentives for the formation of preelectoral coalitions of parties. This was the case because in order to avoid electoral disaster, "cartels" of parties needed to get together to decide which of them would fight which single-seat constituency. The PR element of the electoral system, however, which allocated seats to parties in a way that provided no incentive to form cartels, acted to preserve the identity of individual parties and held in check any pressure for wholesale mergers, resulting in a small number of large parties.

The result, for the 1994 election, was the formation of three "party cartels" to contest the single-seat constituencies. There was the "Freedom Pole" on the right, comprising the CCD and parties to the right in Figure 12.3. There was the centrist "Pact for Italy," comprising the PPI and RI, and there was the "Progressive Alliance," comprising

AD and parties to the left in Figure 12.3. The right-wing Freedom Pole, won the election with media mogul and political newcomer Silvio Berlusconi, founder of the new party Forza Italia, as its candidate for prime minister.

The list of possible minimal winning coalitions in this eleven-party system is immense; its calculation is left to any reader with a spare afternoon to while away. However, there were only three possible minimal connected winning coalitions. Two of these involved a large number of parties, and the third involved the three large parties of the right. A government based on the Freedom Pole did in fact take office after twelve days of hard bargaining, with Berlusconi at its head. The government was remarkable in a number of ways. None of the main parties had been in government before, and the National Alliance was a party that could trace its traditions back to Italy's wartime fascists. Forza Italia was a brand-new, media-driven, party, and the Northern League was strongly driven by regionalist concerns. These three parties between them controlled a legislative majority, but despite this, the two smaller parties that had been part of the electoral cartel were also brought into government and awarded cabinet seats. Neither of these parties was needed to keep the government in office in terms of legislative seats, but both nonetheless formed part of this "surplus majority" administration.

There is a long tradition of surplus majority governments in Italy (see Table 12.2), so there is no reason to suppose that this one was a product of the new electoral system, although it does give added impetus toward surplus governments by encouraging the formation of large electoral cartels. Traditionally, the level of party discipline has been low, and senior politicians may have felt the need for some additional legislative cushion, over and above a bare majority, before agreeing to form a government. As we shall see when discussing Table 12.5, surplus majority governments, despite having additional legislative support, tend on average to last less long than governments with bare majorities—perhaps because the political circumstances that encourage a prospective government to take on surplus partners may be more troubled and thus unstable than the norm.

As it happens, this particular surplus majority government did not last long. A number of serious divisions quickly opened up between the Northern League and Forza Italia, concerning among other things the issue of federalism (a fundamental matter for the Northern League) as well as the fight against corruption and antitrust legislation (the latter very sensitive given Berlusconi's dominant position in the Italian media). The government ceased to be viable after the withdrawal of the Northern League, a pivotal rather than a "surplus" member of the coalition whose votes were essential to its survival. Facing a motion of no confidence that he would surely have lost, Silvio Berlusconi resigned in late December 1994. (For more information on the rise and fall of this government, see Ignazi.)

The pattern of center-right surplus majority government in Italy was repeated in June 2001. The 2001 election was essentially contested by two cartels of parties, one from the center-left and one from the center-right, and resulted in significant losses for the incumbent "Olive Tree" (Ulivo) coalition of the center-left. Given these results, a new center-right government formed, once again under the prime ministership of Silvio Berlusconi. The cabinet included members from Berlusconi's party, Forza Italia, as well as the Northern League, the National Alliance, and the Christian Democrats. Both Forza Italia and the National Alliance were "pivotal" to this coalition cabinet; their withdrawal

would have taken away the government's majority. This was not true of either the Northem League or the Christian Democrats; one of these parties was needed for a parliamentary majority, but not both. Two factors are probably at work here. The first is the fact that these four right-wing parties contested the election as a cartel—presenting themselves as an alternative government. Given the Italian electoral system, there is a strong incentive to form putative government coalitions *before rather than after* the election has been held. In going into government together despite the fact the one or other of the two smaller parties was “surplus” to requirements, the parties were honoring a deal that had already been made. This may be because of a genuine sense of honor among Italian politicians, or it may be for fear of an electoral backlash if voters are not given what they were promised in the election. The second thing to note is that a canny politician such as Berlusconi might well have seen the strategic advantage of carrying a “passenger” party in his cabinet. Mindful of the fact that the withdrawal of the Northem League had brought down his last government, Berlusconi might have taken some satisfaction from the fact they could not bring down this one—and as a consequence were likely to be more modest in their ongoing demands on him. In this context it is striking that Berlusconi then went on to lead the longest-surviving government in postwar Italy.

### → TYPES OF GOVERNMENT IN MODERN EUROPE

Although the preceding case studies can give us a feel for the government formation process in modern Europe, they cannot give us a systematic picture of the types of government that form. This picture is provided in Table 12.2, which summarizes the types of government that have formed since World War II in a wide range of European countries.

The bottom line of the table indicates a wide diversity of government types. Only about 13 percent of governments are single-party majority administrations. This type of government is typical in Britain, Greece, and Malta—the first two of which in particular have electoral systems highly likely to produce single-party parliamentary majorities even when no single party wins a majority of the popular vote. This is the sense in which single-party majority governments in modern Europe tend to be artifacts of particular electoral systems. About one-third of the large number of governments categorized were minimal winning coalitions, and this type of government can be found in nearly every European country (with obvious exceptions such as Britain and Greece, for the reasons we just discussed). Taking these two government types together, we see that well under half of European administrations are “conventional” majority cabinets, in the sense that the government controls a parliamentary majority but includes no “surplus” members. Conversely, well over half of the governments analyzed either had too few parties to control a majority or had more parties than they needed to do so.

About 30 percent of postwar European cabinets were minority administrations. The body of the table shows that minority governments tend to be especially common in certain countries, in particular in Scandinavia and Italy. We already explored the reasons for this, which may have to do with the impact that opposition parties can have on

**TABLE 12.2**  
**Types of Government in Modern Europe, 1945–2003**

Country	Single-Party Majority	Minimal Winning Coalition	Surplus Majority Coalition	Single-Party Minority	Minority Coalition	Total
<i>Western Europe</i>						
Austria	4	17	1	1		23
Belgium	3	24	7	1	2	37
Denmark		4		14	13	31
Finland		6	23	4	7	40
France		7	41	4	5	57
Germany		17	5	1		23
Greece	8		1			9
Iceland		21	1	2		24
Ireland	7	8		4	3	22
Italy		2	31	11	9	53
Luxembourg		17	1			18
Malta	9					9
Netherlands		10	9			19
Norway	6	3		13	6	28
Portugal	2	4	1	4		11
Spain	4			4		8
Sweden	3	5		16	2	26
United Kingdom	20			1		21
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>459</b>
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>14.4</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>26.4</b>	<b>17.4</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Eastern Europe</i>						
Czech Republic		2		1	1	4
Estonia		6		2	1	9
Hungary		1	4			5
Latvia		4	3		4	11
Lithuania	2	1	3		1	7
Poland		5		2	2	9
Slovakia		4	1	1	1	7
Slovenia		2	3		2	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Percent</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>10.2</b>	<b>20.3</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Europe total</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>518</b>
<b>Europe percentage</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>32.8</b>	<b>26.1</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Western Europe: Woldendorp et al. “Party”; annual *Data Yearbooks of the European Journal of Political Research*; authors’ calculations. Eastern Europe: Müller-Hommel, Fattalschoss, and Harfst; “Party”; authors’ calculations.

government policy. Another pattern that emerges is that single-party minority governments are far more common than minority coalitions in western though not in eastern Europe. This finding gives some support to the view that many minority governments may be formed around particular "strong" parties, whose position in the party system means that even though they do not command a majority on their own, they do not need coalition partners in order to be able to form a government.

Table 12.2 also shows that surplus majority governments are very common in modern Europe, east and west, although such governments tend to be concentrated in a small number of countries, notably Finland, France, and Italy. Just under 30 percent of cabinets are oversized, containing more members than they need for a majority. Many of the French oversized governments occurred during the French Fourth Republic, when party discipline was notoriously poor and governments needed a wide margin of legislative safety to be able to govern. Low party discipline may also account for many of the earlier Italian oversized governments, although a more recent explanation could have to do with the incentive under Italy's new electoral system to form pre-electoral cartels of parties that then go into government together as a group.

Also apparent from Table 12.2 is the fact that the types of government formed in the eastern European EU accession states after their first open elections conform to broadly the same pattern as government types of their western European neighbors, although "conventional" single-party or minimal winning cabinets tend to be rarer in eastern (about 39 percent) than in western (about 46 percent) Europe. In general, there are notably fewer single-party governments, and more minority coalitions, in eastern Europe. One explanation for this difference may be that the new eastern European party systems are still in a state of flux—often having a large number of parties with many party splits, fusions, and reincarnations, as well as considerable movement of politicians between parties (Shabad and Slomczynski). Perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon can be seen in the aftermath of the 1991 election in Poland, in which twenty-nine different parties won seats in the 460-seat parliament, and the biggest single party won no more than 13 percent of the seats. Table 12.3 shows the distribution of seats between parties in the Polish parliament after this election, creating what amounted to an almost insoluble puzzle in the parliamentary arithmetic of how to put together a stable government majority. In the event, the government that formed was a minority coalition involving PC, PSL, PL, and ZChN—four medium-sized parties from the right of center—under the premiership of Jan Olszewski from the PC. This coalition survived about six months before being defeated in the legislature. Largely as a result of the government instability engendered by this type of election result, what was then the very open Polish electoral system was, as we reported in Chapter 11, reformed with the explicit intention of reducing the number of parties winning seats. Following this, as Table 12.2 indicates, Polish governments tended to be rather stable minimal winning coalitions. (For a series of country reports on government formation in eastern Europe, see Blondel and Müller-Rommel).

Overall, Table 12.2 sends a very clear message that although cabinets do need to be able to win the support of legislative majorities if they are to be able to govern in a parliamentary democracy, the government parties by themselves do not need to control a majority of seats. Both oversized and minority cabinets are clearly quite normal results of government formation in modern Europe.

TABLE 12.3

## Parliamentary Parties in Poland, 1991

Party	Seats
Democratic Union (UD)	62
Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) (former Communists)	60
Catholic Electoral Action (ZChN)	49
Polish Peasant Party (PSL)	48
Confederation for an Independent Poland (KPN)	46
Center Alliance (PC)	44
Liberal-Democratic Congress (KLD)	37
Agrarian Alliance (PL)	28
Independent trade union "Solidarity" (S)	27
Polish Beer-Lovers' Party	16
German Minority (MN)	7
Christian Democracy (ChD)	5
Solidarity of Labor (SP)	4
Party of Christian Democrats (PChD)	4
Union of Real Politics/Republic's Rightists (UPR)	3
Social-Democratic Movement (RDS)	3
For Wielkopolska and Poland (W)	1
Others	1
Total	18
	460

## THE ALLOCATION OF CABINET PORTFOLIOS

The cabinet is the key organ of government in most European countries, acting both as a committee for making decisions in the name of the entire government and as a collection of individuals with responsibility for making and implementing policy in particular areas (see Chapter 2). It may come as something of a surprise to people who think of elections and parliaments as being at the heart of representative democracy to realize that most important policy decisions do not require the direct assent of the legislature. Rather, it is the legislative vote of confidence or no confidence in the executive that gives parliament technical control over the government in all matters: Legislators can instruct the government to act in a particular way, on pain of defeat in a confidence motion. In practice, however, the threat of such a dire sanction is a constraint on executive action only if the issue is one that a majority of legislators feel very strongly about, strongly enough that they actually would bring down the government. When legislators do not feel this strongly, then having at their disposal a threat to bring down the government gives them a sledgehammer with which to crack a nut. As a result, cabinet ministers in practice have considerable autonomy vis-à-vis most aspects of public policy that fall within the jurisdiction of their portfolios.

We said earlier in this chapter that the motivations of the politicians who bargain over coalition formation are the key to understanding the party composition of governments in most European states. Some may be most interested in changing public policy;

others may be most interested in consuming the spoils of office. Whatever their motivations may be, however, the politicians who do the bargaining are the very same people who actually get to consume the spoils of office if they are successful. If they manage to negotiate their party into government, then most of them will also get their feet under the cabinet table, enjoying considerable control over government policy as well as the lifestyles of important public figures. Therefore, notwithstanding the control over public policy that can be wielded by cabinet ministers and the evidence that policy is important in government formation, we should not be too quick to ignore the perks of office. To win a seat at the cabinet table is, after all, the pinnacle of a career in politics for most European politicians. The job brings public recognition, power, patronage, and many other pleasant trappings of success. We should not be surprised to find that many politicians dedicate their political lives single-mindedly to the pursuit of these coveted positions. Given the two basic drives that we might assume motivate politicians—the desire to consume the benefits of office and the desire to influence public policy—we can interpret the political value of getting into the cabinet in two basic ways. On the one hand, cabinet seats may be seen as political trophies to be distributed among members of the winning side. On the other hand, they may be seen as the vital levers of power with which to control the direction of government policy.

### Proportional Cabinet Payoffs in France

If cabinet portfolios are seen as political trophies, then we can easily observe how they are divided up in different European countries. The patterns that we see are quite striking. Cabinet portfolios tend to be distributed among government parties in strict proportion to the number of seats that each party contributes to the government's legislative majority. As an example, consider the coalition cabinet that formed in France in June 1997, details of which are given in Table 12.4. This cabinet was formed after an early election called by President Jacques Chirac in what some saw as an attempt to preempt the possibility of a left-wing victory if the parliament ran its full term. If this was the intention, it failed, however.

TABLE 12.4

#### Allocation of Cabinet Seats in France, June 1997

Party	Number of Parliamentary Seats <sup>a</sup>	Proportionate Contribution to		Share of Cabinet Portfolios (%)
		Cabinet's Legislative Majority (%)	Number of Cabinet Portfolios	
Communist Party	37	12	2	12
Socialist Party	246	79	12	71
Movement for Citizens	7	2	1	6
Left Radicals	13	4	1	6
Greens	8	3	1	6

<sup>a</sup> Winning threshold: 289 seats.

The incumbent right-wing government was defeated at the polls. The Socialist Party and leftist allies made strong gains but did not win quite enough seats to govern alone. Accordingly, when President Chirac asked Socialist leader Lionel Jospin to form a government, Jospin invited both the Communists and the Greens to join him.

As Table 12.4 shows, Jospin formed a surplus majority coalition; only one of the three smaller parties was strictly needed for the government to control a parliamentary majority. (For more information on the formation of this government, see Ysmall.) Nonetheless, what is striking about the figures in Table 12.4 is the close way in which the sharing of cabinet portfolios matched the proportion of seats that each party contributed toward the government's majority in the legislature. Clearly this situation did not arise by accident. When the government was being formed, it was taken more or less as a given that each party was due a certain number of cabinet portfolios by virtue of the number of seats that it had won in the election. This was despite the fact that some of the parties might well have been able to use their bargaining power to win more portfolios than their "fair" share.

Bringing any party into the cabinet involves giving it at least one cabinet portfolio; in this case, one cabinet portfolio was 6 percent of the total. Without seeing politicians in half and appointing a half politician from each of two parties to the same portfolio, this was the smallest payoff that could be given to any government member, despite the fact that each of the three smallest parties contributed only between 2 and 4 percent of the government's total legislative representation. The largest party underwrote this inevitable "overpayment" to the small parties, and the medium-sized Communist Party got a precisely proportional payoff.

This example is very typical of the pattern to be found elsewhere; Browne and Franklin demonstrated that a "proportionality norm" such as this is a very good predictor of the allocation of cabinet portfolios. This research also found a tendency for very small parties to be "overpaid" and for larger parties to underwrite this—almost certainly because of the "lumpy" nature of cabinet payoffs, which means that even the smallest cabinet party cannot be given less than one portfolio. Browne and Franklin's findings, which have been confirmed by a number of more recent studies, are based on empirical analyses that explain about 90 percent of the variation in the allocation of cabinet seats in the real world, and as such they have gone down in the annals of political science as some of the most dramatic nontrivial empirical relationships thus far encountered. The facts suggest strongly that European politicians treat the allocation of cabinet portfolios very seriously indeed. This is hardly surprising, because, as we have argued, a cabinet portfolio represents the ultimate ambition for most of them.

### Qualitative Portfolio Payoffs in Germany

Although the quantitative proportionality of portfolio payoffs is quite striking, these findings do not undermine the assumption that many European politicians participate in politics to have an impact on public policy—the interpretation that fits squarely with the facts on the frequency of minority and surplus majority governments. Being in command of a cabinet portfolio, after all, is the best means for a European politician to have an impact on public policy. This means that we must do much more than count portfolios when we analyze coalition outcomes. The allocation of particular portfolios to particular parties is a vitally important matter.



When all is said and done, these constitute the most credible signals about the effective policy positions of a government.

This approach also allows us to look inside parties at the role played by senior politicians in government formation. A particular government may be made possible by a particular cabinet appointment. The appointment of a hard-line defense minister or a liberal minister for justice, for example, may make all the difference to the political viability of a given administration. This phenomenon can even be found inside single-party majority governments with huge majorities, because the position of a single-party majority government depends crucially on its ability to hold together and maintain party discipline. In one sense, for example, the British Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher enjoyed some of the most secure government majorities in postwar Europe. Yet the unity of the Conservative Party during this era had to be maintained in the face of deep internal divisions, especially over policy toward the European Union. Euroskeptics were deeply suspicious of any move toward closer integration with Europe, and pro-European Conservatives were just as deeply committed to forging closer links. Feelings ran so deep that the party always had the potential to split on this issue, losing its huge majority. This meant that Conservative leaders making cabinet appointments to cabinet portfolios with an important role in European policy had to take care that these appointments did not aggravate the potential for party splits. Even single-party governments can sometimes usefully be seen as coalitions of factions, and this is why the allocation of cabinet portfolios between party factions is always a politically important matter.

Demonstrating the policy impact of individual ministers within the cabinet, and thus showing that the precise pattern of portfolio allocation between government ministers really does make a difference, is easier said than done. Nonetheless a recent study by Giannetti and Laver looked at the impact of ministers in one Italian cabinet on what happened in the departments under their jurisdiction. Giannetti and Laver estimated the left-right economic policy positions of individual ministers in the center-left Ulivo cabinet that held office in Italy between 1996 and 1998. They did this by conducting computerized analysis of the content of all parliamentary speeches made by each minister during 1996. When they plotted the policy positions of individual cabinet ministers against the change in the share of total government spending observed in the government departments under the ministers' jurisdiction between 1996 and 1998, they uncovered the pattern shown in Figure 12.5. Looking at the bottom right side of the plot, we can see that more right-wing ministers tended strongly to preside over departments for which the share of government spending declined, and (looking at the top left side of the plot) that more left-wing ministers tended to preside over departments whose share of total government spending increased. In this case, therefore, there is a strong association between the policy positions of individual cabinet ministers and at least one measure of the policy profile of their department, and the allocation of cabinet portfolios does seem to make a difference.

Overall, there can be no doubt that the cabinet is a vital institution in European parliamentary democracy. In theory it is permanently beholden to the legislature, which can evict it at any stage by a vote of no confidence in the executive. In practice, however, the considerable autonomy of cabinet ministers to set public policy in their respective areas of jurisdiction means that the cabinet is much more independent than formal

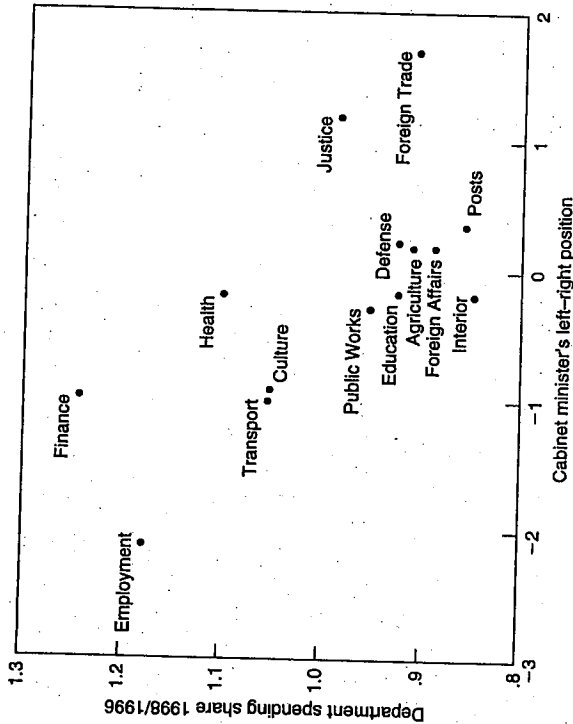


FIGURE 12.5 The Impact of Cabinet Ministers in Italy, 1996-1998

SOURCE: Giannetti and Laver.

constitutional theory might suggest. This means that the question of who gets into the cabinet, whether he or she is motivated by the desire to change the course of public policy or by nothing more elevated than the desire to be a big shot, should be seen as one of the fundamental political questions with which party competition in each European system is concerned. In the last analysis, voters choose between alternative sets of politicians; these politicians bargain over who gets what in the cabinet. The ideological complexion of the cabinet that they form represents the most important single way in which party politics in general and the voters in particular can be said to have an impact on what European governments actually set out to do.

### → THE STABILITY OF EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS

In some European countries governments tend to last significantly longer than they do in others. Toward the "stable" end of the stability spectrum in western Europe we find Luxembourg, Britain, Austria, and Ireland—all with governments that tend to last a full parliamentary term. We can be less confident about long-term trends in government stability within eastern Europe, since we have information only from the early 1990s, but thus far governments in the Czech Republic and Hungary have lasted as long on average as governments anywhere else in Europe (Müller-Rommel and Fetteschoss). Toward the "unstable" end of the spectrum in western Europe, with by far the shortest average



**TABLE 12.5**  
**Average Durations, in Days, of Different Government Types in Modern Europe**

Country	Single-Party Majority		Minimal Winning Coalition		Surplus Majority Coalition		Single-Party Minority		Minority Coalition		Mean Duration	
	Single-Party Majority	Minimal Winning Coalition	Surplus Majority Coalition	Minimal Winning Coalition	Surplus Majority Coalition	Single-Party Minority	Minority Coalition	Minority Coalition	Minority Coalition	Mean Duration	Mean Duration	
<i>Western Europe, 1945-98</i>												
Luxembourg		1,180	466									1,136
United Kingdom	1,038					227						995
Austria	1,424	763	1,420			548						933
Ireland	861	1,006				872		732				901
Netherlands		1,200	942									879
Denmark		876	1,202			224						830
Norway	965	960				777		235				757
Sweden	493	708				816		802				752
Germany		815	703			501						660
Finland		807				567		674				641
Belgium	464	644	316			134		35				511
Netherlands		507	548			494		140				404
France		363	323			585		303				334
Italy		347	360			285		351				331
Mean duration	953	814	462			601		410				
<i>Eastern Europe, 1990-2003</i>												
Hungary		1,280	1096			1,458						1,096
Czech Republic		679	794					545				870
Slovenia		533	1,446			242		280				604
Poland		507				423		271				593
Latvia		582				498		436				477
Lithuania	682		471					228				449
Estonia		232	503					249				447
Mean duration	682	636	862			655		299				340

Table excludes caretaker and nonpartisan cabinets.  
Sources: Woldendorp et al., "Party"; Müller-Rommel and Fattelschoss; *Data Yearbooks of the European Journal of Political Research*; authors' calculations.

cabinet durations, we find Italy, France, and Finland, although cabinets in each of these countries have been more stable in recent times, and the short average cabinet durations in Table 12.5 reflect patterns prevalent early in the postwar era. Latvia has the least durable governments of the eastern European countries with which we are concerned. To give a sense of the types of duration we are talking about, countries with more stable cabinets have governments that last, on average, about three years. Those with unstable cabinets have governments that tend to last about a year or even less.

The stability of governments is obviously an important matter for all who are interested in politics, and considerable intellectual energy has been devoted to exploring it. Before we move on to look at these patterns, we need to comment on one unexpectedly tricky matter: deciding when a government has actually come to an end. Unfortunately, different researchers have looked at this in different ways. To begin with the easy part, all researchers agree that one government ends and a new one takes office when the party membership of the cabinet changes. If an incumbent party leaves, or if new parties join, then there is effectively a new government. Some commentators take this as being the only definitive sign that a government has changed. Others regard a new government as having formed after every new election, even if exactly the same parties and the same prime minister resume control. They do this on the grounds that every new parliament represents a new political environment, typically with a host of new faces and a new legislative arithmetic, so that explaining what might appear to some people to be effectively the "same" government does present a new problem for political analysts.

A further important matter concerns the overall "turnover" of cabinet ministers from one government to the next. After all, if a government changes its prime minister and even its party composition, but most of the cabinet ministers remain the same, then it could be argued that it has not really changed very much. This argument is particularly important when we evaluate the apparent instability of governments in, for example, Italy. According to most definitions, postwar Italian governments have on average been very short-lived, but it is also the case that the turnover of Italian cabinet ministers from one government to the other is often very limited. Some considerable stability in the ranks of senior personnel underlies the apparent instability of Italian cabinets (Mershon, "Costs"; Mershon, "Party"). In a comprehensive comparative analysis, Huber and Martínez-Gallardo show that cabinet stability and cabinet turnover are indeed quite distinct from each other. They confirm the finding that Italy over the postwar period has tended to have short-lived cabinets but also to have relatively low turnover of cabinet ministers by international standards. Austria, Sweden, and Iceland are other countries in which cabinet ministers tend to stay in office for much longer than the average duration of cabinets—implying far less instability of cabinet personnel than might be inferred from simply looking at cabinet durations.

All of this shows that the question "How long did this government last?" is easier asked than answered. The classification of governments reported in Table 12.2 is based on data from Woldendorp et al. ("Party"), who have a "permissive" definition of the end of a government. They see a wide range of factors (elections, new party composition, new prime minister, resignation of incumbent prime minister even if she or he resumes office) as marking the end of a government's life. Obviously, this approach is likely to show cabinet durations as being shorter than if the sole indicator of the end of a government were a change in its party composition. Lijphart, however, has shown that different definitions do not make too much difference to the relative durations of different types of cabinet in different countries.

Most studies of the duration of European cabinets concentrate on two things. First, cabinets themselves may possess certain attributes that lead some to be more durable than others. It is widely believed, for example, that coalition governments are less stable than single-party governments, and that majority governments are more stable than minority governments. Second, there are features of the political environment in which a government

must survive. This, if party competition is fragmented between many parties, for example, or if there is a powerful antiregime party that refuses to take part in any government, then these features of the political system may lead to greater cabinet instability.

### Cabinet Attributes and Cabinet Stability

Several researchers have confirmed the expectation that single-party governments last longer than coalitions and the expectation that majority governments last longer than minority governments. These patterns can be seen by looking at the top part of Table 12.5. On average across the whole of western Europe, single-party majority governments last noticeably longer than minimal winning coalitions; they last about a year longer than single-party minority governments and more than twice as long as minority coalitions. Minimal winning governments, in turn, last much longer than minority or surplus majority governments. Overall, minority coalitions are notably the least stable type of government in western Europe.

There is only a very short history of parliamentary government in eastern Europe from which to draw conclusions about government stability. Nonetheless, the bottom part of Table 12.5 indicates some emerging trends and what look like some interesting differences from the pattern in western Europe. We can draw no conclusion at all about the longevity of single-party majority cabinets in eastern Europe because they hardly exist at all. What is quite striking, however, is that the most stable type of cabinet in eastern Europe is the surplus majority cabinet—comprising more parties than are needed to control a parliamentary majority. This sharp contrast with the situation in western Europe, where surplus majority cabinets are among the *least* durable, certainly suggests that in the more volatile party systems of eastern Europe during the transition era—with parties forming, splitting, fusing, and disappearing in between as well as during election campaigns—politicians have found that they may be able to bolster cabinet stability by including more parties than the bare minimum needed to control parliament at the time the government forms. This contrast also lends credibility to the interpretation of surplus majority cabinets as responses to uncertainty and flux in the political environment. Nevertheless, the pattern of government durations in eastern Europe resembles the western Europe pattern in one important respect: The least durable cabinet type is the minority coalition. As in western Europe, single-party minority cabinets are much more durable than minority coalitions. This similarity lends further support to the idea that single-party minority governments, as opposed to minority coalitions, tend to be based on parties that find themselves in a strong bargaining position in the legislature, albeit short of a full parliamentary majority.

Broad European averages are a crude measure of the durability of different types of government, however, and the body of Table 12.5 shows that the pattern is more complex than it seems at first glance. Some general patterns hold when we compare different types of government within individual countries, but others do not. For example, minority coalitions are almost invariably less stable than majority coalitions, regardless of country. In most countries, single-party minority governments are also less stable than single-party majority governments. Majority status does tend to extend government stability in all political systems. Comparing the stability of minimal winning coalitions with that of single-party majority governments is instructive, however. With the exception of Austria, there

is no evidence that minimal winning coalitions are less stable; indeed, in those countries that experience both types of government, minimal winning coalitions are likely to be just as stable as single-party majority governments. The reason Europe-wide averages make single-party majority governments look more stable is that this type of government tends to be found more often in countries where the stability of *all* types of government is higher. In other words, as long as the government has majority status, there is no strong evidence that coalitions per se are less stable than single-party governments.

Policy differences between members of a coalition cabinet can also have a big impact on government stability. This has been shown most clearly by Warwick, who measures the ideological diversity of coalition cabinets along three important policy dimensions: the traditional left-right dimension; a dimension contrasting proclerical and secular ideologies; and a dimension that captures the extent to which party policy is "anti-system." Warwick shows that increasing cabinet diversity on any one of these three dimensions reduces the life expectancy of the cabinet, presumably because of the greater possibility for policy disputes.

Not all sources of government instability come from within the cabinet, however. There are large differences between countries in government durability, in both eastern and western Europe, even when we take account of the different types of cabinet that form. Single-party minority governments are much more stable in Ireland, Sweden, and Norway, for example, than in Italy and Belgium. Surplus majority cabinets are much more stable in Hungary than in Latvia. Thus, the political system within which a government must survive, as well as the type of government itself, must have a major impact on government stability.

### System Attributes and Cabinet Duration

One of the patterns to emerge quite clearly from comparing government stability in different European countries is that countries in which governments are more short-lived tend to be those with relatively large numbers of relatively small parties generating a more complex and unstable parliamentary arithmetic. In Latvia, for example, where average government duration since independence from the former Soviet Union has been less than one year, the 1995 election to the 100-seat parliament generated the parliament described in Table 12.6. There were nine parties, none of which controlled more than 18 percent of the seats, generating a simply enormous range of coalition possibilities. No "obvious" government emerged from this election result. Furthermore, the Latvian parties were still merging and splitting, and individual legislators were also on occasion switching parties. Any change in the party system, however tiny, could change the legislative arithmetic and hence the parliamentary support base of the incumbent government. Clearly this does not seem to be a political environment conducive, under the rules of parliamentary government, to sustaining stable administrations. Perhaps not surprisingly, four different coalition cabinets, each comprising six or seven parties, formed and fell in Latvia during the three-year period between the elections of October 1995 and those of October 1998.

In Luxembourg, in contrast, almost no election result that can realistically be forecast is likely to change the power structure in the legislature. After any election, the parliamentary arithmetic almost inevitably reveals that any two of the three largest parties are needed to form a majority administration and that the large, centrist Christian Social

TABLE 12.6

## Parliamentary Parties in Latvia, 1995

Party*	Seats
DPS	18
LC	17
TKL	16
TB	14
LPP/LZS	8
LVP	8
LNNK	8
TSP	6
LSP	5
Total	100

\* DPS—Democratic Party—Saimnieks; LC—Latvia's Way; TKL—People's Movement; TB—Fatherland and Freedom; LPP—Latvia's First Party; LZS—Latvian Peasants Union; LVP—Latvian Unity Party; LNNK—Latvian National Independence Movement; TSP—People's Harmony Party; LSP—Latvian Socialist Party.

Party is going to be very difficult to keep out of office. Because the party system in Luxembourg is so stable, there are almost no shocks, surprises, or likely changes in the legislative arithmetic that could change the support base of an incumbent government that demonstrated the support of a parliamentary majority when it took office.

Differences between countries in the complexity of their parliamentary arithmetic, in short, can have a major bearing on government stability. Countries with a record of short-lived cabinets (Italy, Belgium, Finland, and Latvia, for example) all tend to have fragmented party systems in which election results generate a rather large number of rather small parties (see Table 11.5). These systems yield a large number of coalition possibilities—as in the Latvian case—and a consequently high probability that small changes in the political environment are likely to destabilize an incumbent administration. Countries with a record of longer-lasting cabinets (Austria, Britain, Hungary, and Luxembourg, for example) all tend to have less fragmented party systems in which elections generate a much simpler parliamentary arithmetic. This outcome may occur because one party typically wins a majority, as in Britain. Or it may occur because there are only two or three large parties from which a majority coalition in parliament can be formed, as is typically the case in Austria and Luxembourg and after recent elections in Hungary. Extensive cross-national empirical analyses of factors affecting the stability of cabinets reinforce these conclusions (King et al.; Warwick; Diermeier and Stevenson, "Cabinet Survival"; Diermeier and Stevenson, "Cabinet Terminations"). They show that government duration is significantly affected by two factors that contribute directly to the complexity of the political environment within which the government must survive: the fragmentation and the ideological polarization of the party system. The more fragmented the party system is, and the greater the ideological polarization of the parties, the less conducive is the political environment to durable cabinets.

## Government Stability and Political Events

The "political science" account of the stability of European governments that we have just discussed stands in stark contrast to the way that political journalists and practicing politicians tend to think about this subject. Those who are deeply involved in the rough-and-tumble of day-to-day politics are likely to see the defeat or resignation of any government as the direct product of a particular sequence of events, not of some abstract configuration of the party system. When a government falls, political journalists typically regale their audiences with their versions of the sequence of events that led to its demise. And even a government that seemed solid as a rock can sometimes be "ambushed" by events that are largely beyond its control. Although we have seen strong general patterns in the stability of European governments, we must not forget that these patterns are no more than trends. In the case of any particular government, such trends may inform our views on how stable it is *likely to be*; but how stable it *actually turns out to be* depends to a large extent on the slings and arrow of outrageous fortune.

This caveat alerts us to an important and often neglected distinction between the duration and the durability of governments. The *duration* of any government is a simple observable quantity—the elapsed time between the birth of the government and its replacement by parliament with an alternative. Political scientists can collect large numbers of observations of government durations and infer trends from them. The *durability* of any government is an abstract and unobservable quality. It refers to how long a government is *likely to last* in a specified range of circumstances, or to how long a past government *might have lasted* if only things had been different. There is a big difference between the durability of any particular government and its actual duration. A government that seems on the face of it to be rather durable—perhaps a single-party cabinet with a huge parliamentary majority—can still collapse when people least expect it to. There might be a huge scandal involving the financial affairs of the prime minister, or some pivotal political figure may have a heart attack. Such events can destroy even a "durable" government like a bolt out of the blue—just days after it looked as though it would govern for several more years. (For a discussion of the distinction between the duration and durability of governments, and a more general review of government stability, see Laver, "Government".)

Every government must live its life in a world of "critical events"—of shocks, scandals, and other disasters that put its ability to survive to the test. Any one of these events may be a bullet with the government's name on it. By definition, all of these events are things that could not have been foreseen when the government formed. Indeed they are precisely the things that could not possibly have been foreseen and thus could not have been taken into account by the individuals who negotiated about the size and shape of the government. The durability of a government, in these terms, can be seen as its ability to withstand critical events. Rather like boxers, durable governments can take a lot of punches and come back fighting. Less durable governments, in contrast, tend not to survive the first really nasty surprise.

Critical events can take many, many forms. It is always easy to be wise after the event. It is much harder for political scientists to identify in advance the type of critical event that will bring down a given government. For example, an unexpected turnaround in opinion poll ratings may modify the expectations of politicians about the outcome of



The 1985 soccer riot at Heysel Stadium: this completely unexpected event brought down a Belgian government.  
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an upcoming election. Their changed expectations may provoke a reallocation of power within the incumbent government or may even destabilize a sensitive deal already made and bring the government down (Lupia and Strøm). More generally, a wide range of different types of political shock may put pressure on the government. As well as "public opinion shocks," there may be shocks to the political agenda, arising when unexpected and quite possibly unwelcome issues simply must be decided. Perhaps an oil tanker goes aground on the coast—forcing hard decisions on environmental policy. Perhaps a major company goes bankrupt—forcing unwelcome decisions on industrial policy. To such scenarios can be added unexpected ministerial departures, as a result of death, ill-health, or scandal. Laver and Shepsle ("Events") set out to classify different types of political shock and explore the types of effect that they might have on government stability.

When we set out to predict the durability of any particular government, therefore, we are talking only about the *probability* that it will last for a specified time. A fuller account of the life cycle of governments must take account not only of the key "stability-inducing" attributes of cabinet but also of the possibility that even an apparently stable government can be shot down out of a clear blue sky by an unexpected event. Using appropriate statistical assumptions to model the impact of random events makes it possible to combine both approaches into a single account of government duration in western Europe. Quite a number of political scientists have now done this, using a statistical technique known as "event history" modeling (King et al.; Warwick; Diermeier and Stevenson, "Cabinet Survival"; Diermeier and Stevenson, "Cabinet Terminations"; Diermeier and Merlo; for a review of these see Laver, "Government"). These systematic statistical analyses

have tended to confirm the more informal judgments we made above about trends in government duration. Longer-lasting governments tend to have majority status; they tend to arise in less fragmented party systems; they tend to arise when there is not a substantial antisytem opposition; they tend to arise when there is a formal parliamentary investiture requirement that tests the government strength before it takes office; and they tend to be less internally divided over policy. Thus we can use this work to write down the recipe for an unstable government: It would exist in a party system with a large number of small parties, including at least one antisytem party; it would be a minority coalition of ideologically diverse partners; and it would take office without having to pass an investiture requirement. Given a government with all of these attributes, we would not expect the cabinet to be able to survive many unwelcome political shocks.

The statistical techniques of event history analysis that were used in these studies also allow us, almost miraculously, to "remove" the effect of holding scheduled elections on the life span of governments. Although many governments never make it to the end of a full parliamentary term, many more durable governments might have been able to survive much longer had it not been for the constitutional need to hold a scheduled election. Thus King et al. found that scheduled elections have little effect on the duration of governments in high-turnover systems such as Finland and Italy. In contrast, if it were not for scheduled elections, governments in Britain would last even longer, on the average, than they do at present. In other words, for the more stable systems, turnover in governments is more a product of the constitutional requirement that elections be held at regular intervals, generating a new parliament, than it is of political forces at work within a particular parliament. In less stable systems, the high turnover of governments seems to arise because governments collapse, even without a constitutional limitation on their tenure, as a result of the forces at work in the very same parliaments that put them in office in the first place.

The same statistical techniques also allow us to estimate whether or not a government faces increasing risks of failure as it goes farther into its term of office. Intuitively, this seems plausible. As a new government takes office, it might seem strong and better able to withstand large shocks than it would be after it has been bombarded for a year or two by an endless stream of nasty shocks. The model of cabinet termination put forward by Lupia and Strøm, furthermore, predicted that the risk of termination—or "hazard rate" as it is usually referred to—should rise during the lifetime of a government. For them, this is reasonable because, with less time to go before the next constitutionally mandated election, the incentives for coalition partners to renegotiate their deal in the face of unanticipated political shocks will be less. Indeed, if some surprise event were to ambush a government shortly before an election was due to be held anyway, there might be no point in trying to renegotiate the deal. Diermeier and Stevenson ("Cabinet Survival") addressed this problem, distinguishing between cabinet terminations brought about by early dissolutions and those brought about by the fall of a government between elections. They found that the risk of a government being replaced *between elections* tended to be constant throughout its life—not to increase as we might have imagined. However, they also found that the risk of a government falling *as the result of an early election* did tend to rise significantly during a government's life.

This interesting finding returns our attention to the fact that many European prime ministers have strategic control over the calling of elections. What seems to be going on

is that the typical prime minister becomes increasingly likely to exercise his or her crucial power to cut and run for an election as the life of the government progresses. This preference is quite understandable, for letting the government run its full constitutional term would leave the prime minister without the option to pick an election time favorable to the government. Once the government is at least a couple of years into its term, any prime minister worth his or her salt will be keeping an eye on the opinion polls and trying to figure out the best time to call the next election. A good recent example can be found in the continued speculation about an early election in Britain from about 2003, despite the fact that the incumbent Labour government under Tony Blair had secured a new five-year term in 2001, having won 413 of the 659 seats in the House of Commons. Throughout the life of this government, there never seemed any question of it running its full term, despite having a crushing parliamentary majority. All of the talk was of the best time for Blair to cut and run for a third term—and of the need not to wait too late to do so. (For an excellent recent analysis of strategic election timing in Britain, see Smith.)

The destabilizing effect of anticipated elections is compounded by a crucial feature of *coalition* cabinets; as the next election appears on the horizon, junior coalition partners begin to calculate ways in which they might leave the cabinet and force an election on terms that will put them in the best light possible. Thus coalition partners may begin actually looking for “deal-breakers” that can form the basis of their next election campaign, with obviously destabilizing effects on the government. All in all, as soon as the next scheduled election pops up on the far horizon, the chances increase that some key player is going to cut and run, precipitating an early election. This possibility is why rather few national parliaments in modern Europe run to the very end of their legally mandated terms.

## → CONCLUSION

The making and breaking of European governments has been more extensively studied than many other aspects of the political process. Although there is always more work to be done, our conclusions on this important subject can nonetheless be rather firmer than those we have drawn on some of the other subjects we deal with in this book.

First and foremost, we reemphasize that the normal situation in modern Europe, given the system of parliamentary government used in nearly every country, is for no party to have a parliamentary majority. *Parliamentary* coalitions will always be needed in such cases if the government is to gain and retain office. But it is by no means always necessary that there be an *executive* coalition of parties. If a single-party “minority” cabinet can find favor with a majority of legislators, it can build and maintain a viable government. Such minority cabinets are very much part of the mainstream experience in Europe. Minimal winning coalitions, albeit common, do not account for the majority of governments that form, notwithstanding the preconceptions of many of the people who write about the government formation process.

Second, the details of the composition of the cabinet are a matter of vital political interest. The proportional allocation of cabinet portfolios among parties is a firmly established norm in most European systems. This does not mean, however, that the allocation takes place according to a sterile political formula. What it means is that the real political

action is concerned with which particular politician gets which particular portfolio; the end product of this process determines the fundamental character, and the likely policy outputs, of the government.

Third, certain types of political system in which coalition government is the norm do generate more unstable cabinets than others. In countries with stable *coalition* governments, furthermore, these are effectively as stable as one-party governments in Britain, where the stability of one-party majority governments is often put forward as the main advantage of maintaining a non-PR electoral system. Many of these stable coalition cabinets, indeed, have provided some of postwar Europe’s most successful governments.

Putting all of this together, we find that the making and breaking of governments in the parliamentary democracies of modern in Europe provides the vital link between legislative politics, on which citizens have at least some small impact when they vote for their members of parliament, and what the political executive actually does to run the country, over which voters have no direct control. The patterns we describe in this chapter show that the politics of representative government does not stop when an election result has been declared, but continue into the making and breaking of governments. The policy outputs of coalition cabinets are affected by politicians who do their deals while thinking about the possible results of the *next* election. The substantive effects of this can be seen in the way in which the policies of ideologically compact coalition cabinets tend to converge on the center ground—and in this way to please the maximum number of voters.

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