

Chapter 20: Parties in government and in coalitions

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Political parties frequently encounter public derision for their perceived ineffectiveness at governing. Yet, parties continue to organise and control government bodies in representative democracies. Moreover, political theorists have not outlined convincing alternatives to representative government that supplant parties' influence. Indeed, all-too-common beliefs that parties fail to fulfil their policy promises may not hold up to detailed scrutiny. For instance, recent criticisms have drawn attention to intra-party disunity as a constraint on their effectiveness while overlooking the extent to which their own decision-making processes can influence their policy positions. In this chapter, we evaluate parties' roles in government through consideration of current research on government and coalition behaviour. We propose that parties have substantial impact on policy-making, but also that the challenges of reaching collective action and institutional limits on governance constrain their influence.

Significant research from the European and American continents has led to a wealth of literature on government formation, participation, and termination. While the American approach has relied heavily on formal models of coalition formation, initially inspired by studies of the US Congress (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988), the European approach has been inspired primarily by empirical experience and in depth case analysis of European legislatures (Laver and Hunt 1992). This divergence in approaches from formal theoretical and in depth case studies is also present in literature investigating the effects of parties on the policy-making process. American approaches rely heavily on models of collective action problems, wars of attrition, and veto actors (Tsebelis 2002; Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006) whereas European scholars have tended to explore the influence of history or party ideology (Laver and Shepsle 1996; Bäck and Lindvall 2015). For example, formal/theoretic

approaches predict that multiparty coalitions are less suited for reducing public debt than single party governments due to collective action problems (Tsebelis 2002, Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006). This prediction relies on a number of assumptions, such as the absence of prehistory in the coalition formation process and availability of multiple, alternative coalitions. Scholars following the empirical/historical approach, have highlighted, instead, the significance of parties' historical joint ability to resolve commitment problems in the coalition formation process. Specifically, Back and Lindvall (2015) argue that coalitions with a history of collaborations are at least as good as single party governments in resolving commitment problems and implementing fiscal adjustments.

This geographic divide lessened in the 21st century, however, as European scholars placed greater interest in formal approaches to studying government behaviour (Bergman, Ecker and Müller 2013) and formal modellers sought to test and link model assumptions to historical conditions emphasised by European scholars (Martin and Stevenson 2010). Despite these differences, much of the research studying democratic governance and policy-making has converged on the central question: *does it matter which parties are in government for policy change?*

More specifically, debates have emerged around a number of important questions (Laver and Shepsle 1996; Tsebelis 2002; Klüver and Bäck 2019): Whom do parties represent once in government? Voters or party members? How constrained are parties by electoral promises? How do parties make policy in coalition cabinets? How do coalition agreements and portfolio allocation affect government policy? Do parties' internal dynamics and policy divisions affect policy priorities in government? We approach these questions by linking the formal/theoretical and empirical/historical perspectives. We consider parties as consisting of strategic and forward-thinking actors as traditional formal models contend (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988), but also as complex organisations operating in highly competitive, and often

uncertain, multiparty systems as the more empirically focused tradition shows. Their ability and incentives to propose and negotiate policies is an outcome of multiple factors and processes that we review.

Here, we emphasise longer-term strategic decisions parties and members of parliament (MPs) consider by first addressing rules and conditions that provide parties and particularly party leaders with influence over decision-making in parliament. We start from a theory on the sources of party influence in parliament and critically evaluate the assumptions made in literatures about the role of parties in American and European legislatures. We then engage with studies on the role of parties in coalition governments and assumptions made by competing schools of thought. We bring these perspectives together in a final section linking this discussion on the role of parties as complex organisations in governments and policy-making. We conclude by highlighting the potential for studies of intra-party politics and cabinet decision-making to better explain policy-making and government behaviour.

Party government, legislative power and policy impact

The party government model refers to the idea that governments represent voters along partisan lines, following competitive elections where voters choose among alternative policy packages. Once in government, voters expect parties, in contrast to an unelected expert cabinet, to deliver on policy promises or be voted out in future elections (Strøm 2000). The individual's position within the party, therefore, marks the primary route to the party's parliamentary leadership and executive positions. An alternative perspective would consider a technocratic government run by prominent experts (Alexiadou 2020; Bertou and Caramani 2020). Instead, a party government perspective expects the majority party's representatives to systematically fill the executive and implement policies in line with the party's (rather than individual MP's) policy goals.

In a party government, the party leader plays an instrumental role directing the party's policy activities while also acting as the representative selected by the party's own internal decision-making process. These roles become more influential for the largest party, which generally selects the leader to serve as prime minister.

Debates over party influence on policy-making lead to differing conclusions dependent on authors' conceptualisation of parties and their goals. Although often implicit, scholars conceive of parties in the legislative arena as a team of parliamentarians or MPs using a common party label with commonly accepted policy goals. Applied in the parliamentary context, this perspective often implies that parties enjoy a high degree of policy agreement with members of the same party generally supporting policies put forward by their leadership. This perspective generally assumes that party leaders provide strong incentives and make use of parliamentary rules for encouraging disciplined behaviour.

As the increase in backbench rebellions in the UK post-2010 exemplifies (Burke et al. 2020), party leader strength is incomplete even in parliaments with historically cohesive or disciplined parties. Conversely, scholars of historically weak parties in the US emphasise party leaders' influence in a context where parties hold fewer institutional procedures that encourage party discipline (Huber 1996; Dion 1997; Kirkland and Slapin 2017; Burke, Kirkland and Slapin 2020). As the party government perspective illustrates, a theory of policy-making that emphasises parties' role should consider the parliamentary roots of party leaders' power.

Distinct from a perspective in which MPs use partisan labels solely for electoral purposes, MPs face a trade-off for supporting the party's leadership. Party government approaches conceptualise this trade-off through collective action and delegation models (Müller and Meyer 2010; Sieberer 2011). This perspective centrally assumes that MPs from the same party often hold differing policy goals. Even if distinct policy goals are only

instrumental for electoral purposes (Carey and Shugart 1995), MPs compromise on their specific policy- or office-goals to support the leadership in parliament. Ultimately, individual MPs go along with the leader's goals because they broadly see policy benefits they would not gain if they did not support the government's preferred policies . MP support for this collective action comes at the expense of losing individual influence over the details of the exact policy chosen.

Scholars from a rational choice perspective, question why parliaments can make decisions at all (Shepsle 1989). The party government perspective offers a solution to these concerns. It contends that party influence in parliament derives from an iterative process of delegation of power from MPs to a strong executive. For example, Cox (2005) models the formation of strong parties and Westminster system in the UK. He argues that MPs representing diverse regional constituencies delegated powers to party leaders to draw policy in their desired direction. From Cox's perspective, reforms to the UK electoral and parliamentary system resulted in a strong executive with substantial leeway to shape policy. Thus, party and cabinet leadership selection play central roles in examining parties' parliamentary influence. Indeed, the vote of confidence creates the potential for losing control of government, exemplifying one of the stronger tools at the legislature's disposal (Huber 1996; Döring 2003; Sieberer 2011).

The parliamentary context in many European countries contrasts with presidential systems as the latter provide relatively weak powers for legislative leaders (e.g. those in the US Congress). Scholars have sought to explain parties' persistence and apparent impact in these contexts and substantial Congressional research provides the theoretical foundations for the party government framework. As the vote of confidence provides substantial powers to leaders in parliamentary contexts, absence of this procedure and other legislative incentives in presidential systems limits leaders' ability to create incentives for legislators to vote for

contentious policies. Yet, parties' influence persists even in contexts such as Congress where appointments to key committees and majority party agenda-setting procedures encourage legislators to support leaders' policies on issues they disagree (Cox and McCubbins 2007). However, as electoral incentives to deviate from the leader's goals become stronger, such as under single-member-districts with open primaries in the United States, elected representatives feel less obligation to support the leadership and deviate on legislative votes more often.

In the literature on the US Congress, scholars contrast a party government perspective where legislators compromise on their exact policy goals to support legislative leadership with other explanations that emphasise information asymmetries legislators gain through the formation of policy expertise and privileged roles such as committee assignments (Shepsle and Wiengast 1994). Disagreements over the source of party influence in Congress led to substantial work on measuring and evaluating legislative voting behaviour (Poole and Rosenthal 2011; Ainsley et al. 2020). These approaches are difficult to apply to comparative cases that experience more uniform observed legislative discipline (Hug 2010; Rosas et al. 2015; Willumsen and Öhberg 2016; Hix, Noury and Roland 2018). Yet, the broader debates over the source of party influence are instructive for parliamentary contexts.

Comparative studies find that a substantial source of party leaders' power derives from control of parliamentary rules (Döring 2003). Yet, rules are subject to change by the same majorities that elect the party's leadership (Sieberer 2011). Furthermore, most studies proposing institutional sources of leader influence rely on functionalist perspectives that explain rules' effects not by intended usage, but by immediate results (Gamm and Huber 2002). Party leaders apply the vote of confidence or set the legislative agenda to structure policy outcomes making parties' preferences appear unified (Döring 2003; Strøm 2000), but

ultimately, procedural powers are illusory if the leader's prior selection reflects internal compromise.

Scholars' reliance on functionalist approaches to understanding parties' policy influence suffers from a similar criticism. If policy compromises are reached prior to entering government (Kam 2009; Kölln and Polk 2017; Ceron 2019), party influence likely reflects intra-party processes and heterogeneous intra-party positions. The selection of party leader and executive within the party happens before entering parliament. Stated otherwise, leadership selection is not wholly endogenous to the parliamentary game, but a consideration of the future executive selection. Policy goals expressed through electoral platforms also reflect parties' internal compromises later put to test by those entering parliament (Ceron and Greene 2019). As we ultimately conclude, development of strong party governments in parliamentary contexts further highlights the need to understand decisions made prior- and external-to the legislative arena for understanding party influence.

In summary, theories of party government emphasise control of the legislative agenda and the executive as a solution to parties' internal collective action problems. The delegation of executive authority in parliament limits individual MP ambition and leads to policy that deviates from an MP's exact policy goals, but allows greater policy change and likelihood of executive influence than if they acted alone. A theory that accounts for parties' organisations and internal decision-making, therefore, raises questions as to how parliamentary structures resolve intra-party divisions at the heart of collective action problems. These structures potentially explain policy change and stability as much as negotiations between parties. Armed with party government theory, we review literature examining party policy influence in the following section.

Empirical determinants of political party policy influence

Though studies debate whether policies reflect the preferences of the median voter or vary by partisan ideology (Korpi and Palme 2003), most scholars who study multiparty governments agree that the partisan composition of governments matters for policy outcomes (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988). The mechanisms through which parties influence policy are less understood. Two competing paradigms take centre stage: coalition compromise (Martin and Vanberg 2014) and ministerial government models (Laver and Shepsle 1996).

According to the coalition compromise model, the proportion of seats parties control in parliament predict policy influence in multiparty governments – with a higher proportion of seats providing parties with greater policy-making influence in government (Korpi and Palme 2003). Empirically, scholars conceptualise policy influence as the weighted sum of voting power and their revealed policy preferences in ideologically coherent parties (Franzese 2002). The specific portfolios that parties control are of no consequence; only the total number of seats they control. Similarly, ‘Power resource theories’, also adopt this approach, predicting that the more ideologically left a cabinet is, the larger the welfare state. This approach predicts that parties have more policy influence in a single-party than coalition government. Non-cooperative game theory models complement this perspective by predicting the formation of centre-left or centre-right minimum winning coalitions in multiparty systems (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988).

Laver and Shepsle (1996) propose a radically different model, often referred to as the ‘portfolio model’. According to ministerial government theory, party size alone cannot predict the policy direction in multiparty governments. Instead, parties dictate policy in their ministries’ domains of responsibility, irrespective of coalition partner size and ideology. This is possible because parties have separable preferences across issues. If ministerial autonomy is high, parties set policy independently of coalition partners. Policy complexity, limited ability to monitor policies across government, and tacit rules of non-intervention further

contribute to ministers' ability to monopolise the policy agenda within ministerial portfolios. For example, a green party is likely to have more policy influence on environmental policy if they control the ministry in charge of this issue than if they are the largest party in government. Unlike the coalition compromise and power resource theories, a left party need not form a single-party government to maximise policy influence; it needs to control portfolios central to policy priorities such as employment and social welfare portfolios. Mixed evidence supports this argument. For example, Becher (2010) finds support for employment policies, but only absent multiple veto players, whereas Alexiadou and Hoepfner (2019) find that left parties disproportionately influence social welfare policies for their size when they control the social welfare portfolio, but only when they made an electoral pledge to do so.

This model has motivated substantial empirical research on how coalition partners distribute portfolios, both in the number of cabinet positions each party controls and policy benefits received (Warwick and Druckman 2006; Bäck, Debus and Dumont 2011). According to Warwick and Druckman (2006), portfolio allocation is fundamental to parliamentary governance because cabinet ministers act as gatekeepers, preventing proposals they oppose from cabinet consideration. Parties allocate portfolios on an issue-by-issue basis to build compromises through issue trades or logrolls (Bäck, Debus and Dumont 2011; Greene 2017). A sequential perspective to portfolio allocation leads to similar predictions indicating greatest influence for the largest parties (Ecker, Meyer and Müller 2015). Consequently, substantial empirical literature predicting policy outcomes relies on coalition compromise models (Goodhart 2013; Martin and Vanberg 2014) whereby cabinets make policy collectively with larger parties having the most policy influence.

A weakness of Laver and Shepsle's (1996) model is that it ignores policy disagreement between ministers. For example, how do governments resolve disputes when

one minister's proposal directly affects another's department? Veto player theory (Tsebelis 2002) purports that where two disagreeing parties must settle over policy, there will be no policy change. Therefore, the larger the number of coalition partners and larger their ideological distance, the lower the freedom of ministers and subsequently of parties to set policy to their ideal point.

The contradictory predictions between portfolio and veto player models have been the subject of research, which seeks to identify political and institutional conditions that resolve whether individual ministers or collective cabinet decisions decide policy. Empirical evidence suggests that systems with a higher number of institutional veto players reduce the impact of partisan portfolios (Becher 2010), as do legislatures that have the capacity to effectively police ministerial departments through committees (Martin and Vanberg 2014).

Formal agreements offer alternative mechanisms for coalition governments to mitigate policy disputes. Coalition agreements vary in length and detail. Independent of agreement length, specific policy resolutions generally bind cabinets (Moury 2013). Therefore, agreements often include contentious issues to mitigate future conflicts (Eichorst 2014). Klüver and Bäck (2019) provide the first cross-country and over-time empirical analysis of 224 coalition agreements. They find that coalition partners are more likely to extensively describe details of policy compromises on specific issues, in particular when the issue is salient to each partner and when the partners are divided over the issue. Social welfare and economic issues are the most likely to be mentioned. This implies that a social democratic welfare minister, for example, will have substantially less policy influence on social welfare and employment policies in the presence of a detailed coalition agreement than predicted by the ministerial government model. Consequently, they conclude that coalition agreements significantly reduce independent ministerial influence, but highlight the importance of policy negotiations between parties prior to taking office.

Coalition agreements are potentially powerful mechanisms for coalition governance. But, their proposed impact assumes that government formation and policy-making is a one-period game; governments fix policy goals at each coalition negotiation period and only re-negotiate at the next election. Since agreement determines policy outputs, portfolio allocations, party size and preferences should not independently matter for policy outcomes following a formalised agreement. However, as the authors state, parties negotiate coalition agreements in parallel with allocating portfolios. Questions remain over how parties negotiate and agree on the two and crucially, how parties resolve disputes left unaddressed by coalition agreements.

One way to create a more collaborative approach to future policy disputes between cabinet ministers is through the allocation of overlapping portfolios between coalition partners. Fernandes, Meinfelder and Moury (2016) show that a number of European countries, such as Germany and Denmark, commonly distribute ‘neighbouring’ portfolios, whose policy jurisdictions overlap, across coalition partners. This practice encourages collaboration between ministers from different parties in the policy-formation process. Both parties draft policies at an early stage, increasing policies’ likelihood of success. Oversight perspectives further highlight the importance of committees and junior ministers to collect information and monitor ministers from other coalition parties (Carroll and Cox 2000; Thies 2001; Greene and Jensen 2016). However, not all governments or countries divide portfolios strategically. Even if governments do, policy disputes still arise between ministers.

An understudied factor in coalition governance is the role of expected electoral loss. The fear of future electoral loss over policy compromise could influence parties’ willingness to compromise over policy disputes. Alexiadou and Hoepfner (2019) argue that the fear of future electoral cost due to policy compromise becomes a significant factor for predicting the outcome of policy disagreements in multiparty cabinets. A party is more likely to pull policy

away from its partners' or the cabinet's ideal policy if it faces high electoral costs for failing to do so. A party's electoral costs increase if it controls the related portfolio *and* it has made a strong policy pledge on a highly salient issue for core voters. These predictions rest on the assumptions that policy-making is a dynamic process (Baron, Diermeier and Fong 2012) influenced by parties' cost of governing expectations.

To conclude, the discipline produced a significant body of work that outlines the conditions for party policy influence in government, namely party size, electoral pledges, the distribution of portfolios, coalition agreements, and to some extent, expected electoral costs. The next section reviews the recent literature on voters' policy attribution in coalition governments and makes the case for incorporating more explicitly parties' future electoral costs in studies of coalition governments.

The impact of parties' electoral costs and incentives on policy-making

Studies from a party government perspective often assume that voters punish and reward those parties responsible for policies. However, institutional divisions of power in multiparty coalitions are thought to limit voters' ability to hold individual parties to account for unmet policy promises (Powell and Whitten 1993). Yet, recent work finds that informed voters and party core voters, alike, are attentive of parties' electoral promises and policy shifts (Thomson et al. 2017; Matthieß 2020).

Empirically, voters in multiparty systems attribute policy responsibility to the prime minister's party, and to the parties that hold agenda-setting power through the control of ministerial portfolios (Duch, Przepiorka and Stevenson 2015; Angelova, König and Proksch 2016). These results hold in both observational and experimental data where respondents attribute responsibility to policymakers holding the power to introduce a policy rather than to the largest decision-makers. Accordingly, when the economy underperforms, voters are more

likely to punish the party that controls the finance portfolio (Debus, Stegmaier and Tosun 2014). These findings suggest that not all portfolios are equally powerful as argued by Laver and Sheplse (1996). The ones that have more policy influence also carry greater electoral risks, which should have a direct impact on policy choices.

Policy performance is not the only metric voters use to judge coalition governments. Voters also punish parties for policy compromises (Fortunato 2019). Those who previously supported incumbents are particularly less likely to support parties they see as having compromised on policy while in government. In addition, voters likely discount policy accomplishments which they view as having weakened or failed to uphold promises. There is also evidence that smaller parties disproportionately suffer such misperceptions and pay a higher electoral cost for governing than larger coalition partners (Klüver and Spoon 2020). However, small parties can exhibit a degree of agency. Electoral chances improve when they control ministerial portfolios that are salient to their voters or a larger number of portfolios (Greene, Henceroth and Jensen 2021). This means that party size, portfolio allocation, and issue salience interact in more complex ways than coalition compromise and ministerial government models predict (see also Handbook chapter 21).

In summary, governing has costs. These costs vary significantly depending on how much parties can influence policies salient to their voters or at least appear that they do so. The existence of costs questions both short-term payoffs necessary to join coalitions and the future electoral price they are willing to pay to control government.

Conclusions and further research avenues

Scholars have developed diverse tools to evaluate the impact of parties as they participate in government. In doing so, scholars have drawn on the historically divergent formal/theoretical and empirical/historical approaches for studying their influence. In merging these

perspectives, studies increasingly connect the agency of individual actors to policy-making activities, while reflecting the institutional limits of governmental settings. The party government model provides a framework for connecting these approaches, but also struggles to account for the presence of increased intra-party disunity across advanced democracies. We also require better understanding of why and how rules and institutions for decision-making within parties and parliaments change in line with societal shifts and individual preferences. Examining the strengths and limitations of the party government model provides one framework to do so that connects these diverse areas of research.

The relevance of intra-party divisions presents a need for this research agenda to incorporate perspectives focused on parties' extra-parliamentary characteristics including party members' and leaders' agency and the strategies they employ to maximise their priorities. Although scholars have long hypothesised over the role of intra-party politics (Laver and Shepsle 1996), cross-national tests of these perspectives were limited by data availability. Consequently, studies struggled to evaluate the plausibility of key assumptions and made limited progress in developing mid-level theories capable of linking party government theories to extra-parliamentary organisational perspectives. Promising projects begin address these gaps through linking to data on: party rules (Poguntke et al. 2016), members' behaviour in settings such as party conferences (Ceron and Greene 2019; Schumacher et al. 2019; Kaltenecker, Heugl, and Müller 2021); and through the expansion of surveys to targeted groups (Kölln and Polk 2017; Webb, Poletti and Bale 2017). These projects enable researchers to test the external validity of hypotheses more directly. Diverse information on party member, leader and MP preferences in contexts outside of the legislative arena also hold substantial promise for better understanding parties' impact, and their decision-making processes on policy-making.

Likewise, extant literature poorly accounts for the impact of bureaucratic organisation of ministerial portfolios and policy-making powers on parties' strategies. Presumably, parties' will have greater policy influence when they control a portfolio exclusively than when they control a portfolio whose policy competences overlap with other ministerial portfolios. Since portfolio design and re-allocation of policies is common and results from a strategic process (Dewan and Hortala-Vallve 2011), research that incorporates complex institutional and partisan arrangements will improve explains of how portfolio allocation and portfolio design interact and shape policy outcomes.

Ministerial policy-making also involves constant negotiation of policy between senior and junior ministers (Thies 2001), ministers across different departments, and the interaction between senior civil servants and ministers. These areas remain mostly unexplored with some important, but rare contributions. Cabinet ministers themselves play a crucial role in policy-making as individuals who bring varying degrees of policy expertise, experience and divergent political and policy ambitions that in themselves likely reflect intra-party divisions over policy and career ambition. A ministerial portfolio is a major prize for politicians because of the prestige of the office and policy-making power. However, governing creates opportunities for intra-party tensions to arise. Although cabinet ministers formally jointly hold agenda-setting power, they differ in the degree to which they use it. Some ministers promote significant policy changes while others maintain the status quo (Alexiadou 2016).

Existing research on cabinet ministers focuses mostly on ministerial selection (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008) and less on the implications of this selection for policy-making. Recent studies suggest a tight connection between the type of minister selected and policy outcomes. Alexiadou (2016) puts forward a typology of ministers on the basis of their background and career objectives: those who prioritise political office (loyalists) are less likely to push forward policy reforms above and beyond the party agenda, whereas those

committed to a policy goal (ideologues) are less likely to compromise and more likely to succeed in pushing forward a policy reform.

More generally, policy reforms vary by the interaction of parties' ideological goals and political seniority of cabinet ministers (Alexiadou 2016). Additionally, ministers' career concerns can have concrete policy effects. For example, non-partisan experts, also known as technocrats, bear minimal career costs for adopting unpopular policies and are associated with cuts in government spending (Alexiadou 2020), and also with neoliberal economic reforms in many Latin American countries (Dargent 2015).

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