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# Dynamic Approaches to Studying Parliamentary Coalitions

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Democratic governments come in two pure forms—presidential and parliamentary systems. The main distinction lies in the relationship between the executive and the legislature; a separation of powers characterizes a presidential system, while in a parliamentary system, there is a fusion of the executive and the legislature. The majority of democracies in the world use some variation of a parliamentary system (Lijphart 1999, 118). In these nations, where multiple parties compete for power, the electorate determines the membership of the legislature, which in turn chooses the executive (composed of the prime minister and the cabinet). The legislature also typically maintains the power to dismantle the government via a vote of no confidence. The executive thus must garner the support of enough of the legislators so that the legislature does not vote (usually by a majority) to decompose the cabinet in favor of another government. In most cases, this requires a coalition between various parties that control, or at least are tolerated by, a majority of the legislators.

In many ways, research on coalition behavior in parliamentary democracies exemplifies progress: generating path-breaking theoretical models (e.g., Riker 1962; Baron and Ferejohn 1989), documenting near-perfect predictive relationships (e.g., Browne and Franklin 1973; Warwick and Druckman 2006), and melding theoretical and empirical work (e.g., Diermeier and Stevenson 2000; Martin and Stevenson 2001; Skjæveland, Serritzlew, and Blom-Hansen 2007). Yet, a well recognized but largely unresolved problem plagues the bulk of extant studies: they are static. The typical research study explores a single coalition process at one point in time, with limited attention to dynamics external to coalition politics. The alternative is to have dynamic studies that explore interactive processes (e.g., with feedback) over time.

Even the earliest scholars of coalition politics recognized the importance of developing dynamic studies (e.g., Leiserson 1970, 271; Bueno de Mesquita

1975; Browne and Dreijmanis 1982, 340; Laver 1986, 33-34; Laver and Hunt 1992, 74-75). Laver (1998, 22) explains, “The absence of these [dynamic] features from government-formation models is not because theorists regard them as unimportant. The reason is more prosaic—it is very difficult to incorporate them in a rigorous manner.”

Incorporating dynamic elements into coalition theory would represent substantial progress. Indeed, the presumed goal of the research is to understand which coalition forms, how long it lasts, and how it shapes governing decisions and policy. It seems fairly obvious that processes of coalition formation, governance, and duration relate to one another and also to other political and economic dynamics. Understanding how coalition politics works and isolating causal mechanisms then require a consideration of these dynamic relationships—something that is still lacking.

This symposium brings together three of the most promising research programs aimed at incorporating dynamic elements into coalition models. The articles, each of which constitutes one example from the authors’ larger research programs, include a study by Daniel Diermeier, Roderick Swaab, Victoria Medvec, and Mary Kern that explores the relationship between coalition formation and future bargaining expectations; an article by Lanny Martin and Georg Vanberg that looks at the methods governing parties use to communicate with voters who will later decide the fates of these parties; and an article by William Bernhard and David Leblang that investigates the endogenous relationship between cabinet stability and the economy. Each article not only offers critical insights into the particulars of coalition politics but also provides methodological guidance on how one can go about creating dynamic models of coalitions

**Author’s Note:** This symposium is dedicated to Ken Janda, whose contributions to the comparative study of political parties have been fundamental.

(e.g., the articles use experiments, content analyses, and instrumental variable models). The symposium concludes with commentaries from Michael Laver and Kaare Strøm.

In the remainder of this introduction, I present a conceptual scheme for thinking about coalition dynamics. I then discuss how the symposium contributions fit into the scheme. The symposium's goals are to stimulate a sustained movement toward more dynamic models and to re-energize coalition scholarship.

## Dynamic Studies of Coalition Politics

The lack of dynamic studies of coalition politics stems in part from a conceptual challenge. While many scholars cite the lack of dynamic models, few, if any, offer a framework for pursuing dynamic approaches. To fill this gap, I propose a scheme as a starting point for generating further discussion.

Dynamic approaches can be conceptualized along two dimensions: (1) which processes are linked, and (2) the content of these links. The conventional approach focuses on one point in time—the present—and a single coalition process—coalition formation, payoffs, or termination.<sup>1</sup> For an approach to be genuinely dynamic, there must be some incorporation of the past and/or the future. This could involve studying a single process over time, such as how prior formation attempts affect subsequent ones (e.g., Bäck and Dumont 2007). However, a more intriguing alternative involves *linking processes*. This can be achieved by connecting explicit coalition processes, such as formation and duration (e.g., Martin and Stevenson 1995), or incorporating processes external to coalition politics. External-process connections require exploring the relationship between coalition behavior and one of the following: elections, the state of the economy, party formation and change, international relations, or policy outputs. In short, a necessary condition for a dynamic approach entails studying linkages over time of a single coalition process (e.g., formation at multiple times), multiple coalition processes (formation, payoffs, and/or duration), and/or a coalition process or processes with other external actions.

Viewed from this perspective, there exist notable examples of dynamic research.<sup>2</sup> For example, Strøm (1990a, 1990b) highlights the importance of electoral consequences in his theory of minority government; Austen-Smith and Banks (1988) incorporate electoral anticipation in their model of coalition participation; and Baron (1998) offers a repeated model of parliamentary

government that links formation, legislation, and termination. More generally, a sizable literature explores the relationship between coalition termination and the calling of parliamentary elections (e.g., Lupia and Strøm 1995; Diermeier and Stevenson 1999; Strøm and Swindle 2002; Smith 2004). The flip side of electoral anticipation concerns the occurrence of prior critical events that precipitate the termination of a coalition. Scholars have studied the impact of various types of such events, including public opinion change, policy shocks (in party positions or salient policy dimensions), and economic swings (e.g., Warwick 1994; Lupia and Strøm 1995; Laver and Shepsle 1998; Diermeier and Stevenson 2000). Other scholars have investigated how intraparty politics affect coalition formation (e.g., Laver and Shepsle 1990) and duration (Strøm 1994; Druckman 1996),<sup>3</sup> the potential impact of international politics on formation (e.g., Strøm, Budge, and Laver 1994, 321), and the relationship between coalition composition and policy making (Martin 2004). And there has been some recent work that considers the interaction between electoral campaigns and coalition formation (e.g., Golder 2006; Carroll and Cox 2007).

These works represent substantial progress toward dynamic models; yet, most are limited on a second desirable dimension of dynamic processes, which elaborates on the *content of the linkages*. For example, consider the aforementioned research on critical events causing cabinet termination. This work establishes a relationship between events, such as economic downturns or changes in public opinion, and cabinets' endings. It also shows that the likelihood of a cabinet's falling increases as an election nears (isolating the nature of the termination–election anticipating link). But the research is largely silent on the mediational processes at work. How exactly does a critical event translate into the decision to end a cabinet? When an economic crisis occurs, does the finance minister react by relaying the consequences to the prime minister, who then caucuses with the rest of the cabinet? Do public opinion upswings work through the media such that extensive media coverage of declining cabinet approval stimulates a reaction? Or is media coverage irrelevant? Diermeier and Stevenson (2000, 640) make the same point about the need to more carefully specify mediational processes between events and coalition processes: “Despite the added complexity of such an effort . . . ignoring the bargaining process that intercedes between events and outcomes . . . lead[s] to incorrect predictions about the distribution of cabinet failures.”

These processes will of course vary across times and countries, which leads to perhaps the more important issue of moderating factors. Under what conditions do shocks generate cabinet terminations? Do they depend on the nature of the government (e.g., left-leaning governments' being more sensitive to changes in unemployment; see Warwick 1994) or international conditions (relative economic conditions)? Similar questions apply to other types of linkages, such as how varying coalition compositions turn their policy positions into policy outcomes and what behavioral and institutional factors moderate this translation (see, e.g., Martin and Vanberg 2004).

A related challenge involves sorting out potential endogenous relationships (Diermeier 2006). There is little doubt that coalition actors are strategic in anticipating future consequences. As a result, the causal relationship between processes over time is often unclear. For example, Druckman and Thies (2002) suggest that in bicameral regimes, when a governing coalition lacks an upper chamber majority, its stability may be reduced because of interchamber conflicts. But the reality is that governments anticipate the life-shortening effects of bicameralism when forming in the first place, and they thus often form coalitions less likely to suffer from the bicameral dynamic (Diermeier, Eraslan, and Merlo 2008). In other words, there is an endogenous relationship—the type of coalition that forms affects duration, but expected duration affects the type of coalition that forms. The inherent dynamic endogeneity between coalition processes (e.g., formation and duration) and coalition politics and external processes (e.g., the economy and duration) makes identifying precise causal mechanisms challenging.

The difficulty of creating dynamic theories of coalition politics comes not only from conceptual issues but also from *methodological ones*. Quantitative studies of coalition politics typically use a conventional regression framework, with the identification of a dependent variable and fixed, *ex ante* independent variables (although see Warwick [1994] for incorporation of the effects of changing economic factors on duration). But identifying mediational processes and studying endogenous relationships requires the use of new data and methods. For example, isolating the connection between critical events and termination decisions entails identifying decisions by particular actors such as ministers and media outlets (for impressive novel data collections, see Müller and Strøm 2000; Strøm, Müller, and Bergman 2003). Additionally, identifying causal relationships in the presence of endogeneity means researchers must move to different research designs

and statistical models such as experiments, simultaneous equations, or structural equation modeling.

In short, the conceptual and methodological hurdles to creating dynamic theories of coalition behavior are significant. The payoff, however, could be substantial. As explained, there is little doubt that various processes involved in coalition governance are interrelated in intricate ways, both to each other and to other external events (e.g., economic change, party formation). Understanding how governments work in parliamentary democracies (e.g., causal connections) therefore requires study of the specifics of these dynamic relationships.

## Dynamic Coalition Symposium

The symposium articles represent the most important and promising research programs aimed at constructing dynamic approaches. Each contribution comes from larger research programs that the articles' authors have undertaken.

The first article, by Daniel Diermeier, Roderick Swaab, Victoria Medvec, and Mary Kern, is appropriately titled "The Micro-Dynamics of Coalition Formation." The authors introduce dynamics on two dimensions: they open the black box of coalition negotiations and they link formation bargaining to anticipated coalition stability. Many portrayals of coalition formation ignore the mediational processes that occur during the negotiations. One notable exception is Baron and Ferejohn (1989), who posit that negotiations proceed via sequential bargaining in which a proposer makes payoff offers that others accept or reject (compare with Morelli 1999). Diermeier and his colleagues offer an experimental study of formation processes and find two striking realities. First, formation tends to occur according to a proto-coalition process in which partners first agree to join together and then (afterward) discuss payoff proposals, rather than a sequential bargaining sequence in which a coalition forms only once parties accept a proposer's payoff proposal (see Baron and Diermeier 2001). This brings into question Baron and Ferejohn's portrayal of coalition formation. Second, future uncertainty (about what coalitions might form) substantially affects current formation, and in fact, can lead to inefficient coalitions. This point is entirely ignored in the Baron and Ferejohn model and accentuates the need to consider dynamic links (also, see Diermeier and Merlo 2000; Diermeier, Eraslan, and Merlo 2008).

The second article, “Coalition Government and Political Communication,” by Lanny Martin and Georg Vanberg, studies what happens after formation: the governance process. Extant work offers scant insight into processes of governance; what do coalition actors do once in office to ensure they maintain good standings with their supporters? Like Diermeier et al., Martin and Vanberg open up a black box by taking a different empirical approach. They content analyzed more than a thousand legislative speeches to study how coalition actors communicate in anticipation of future elections. They show that coalition parties engage in extensive discussions and debate on issues that tend to divide the coalition (i.e., issues on which the governing parties disagree). Parties do this to communicate to their supporters that they are not straying from the party’s true position and that any policy movement within the coalition reflects the demands of a cooperative relationship. That parties do this to an even greater extent as elections approach confirms that the dynamic shows how future expectations affect current governance activities. The article is entirely novel in its identification of mediational governing processes and linking these to future anticipation.

In the final article, “Cabinet Collapses and Currency Crashes,” William Bernhard and David Leblang explore the inherent endogeneity between cabinet terminations and economic changes. As mentioned, coalition scholars have documented how economic events can cause cabinet terminations (e.g., Warwick 1994). But how the economy functions in the first place depends, in part, on government actions. Bernhard and Leblang study this endogenous relationship using an instrumental-variables framework. They show that the likelihood of a speculative currency attack conditions cabinet stability, but this likelihood, in turn, depends significantly on the probability of a cabinet collapse. Their results accentuate just how critical it is to recognize the inherent (endogenous) dynamics in coalition governance—it is not safe to assume that processes are exogenous to one another. Bernhard and Leblang appropriately conclude by discussing what processes might mediate the economic and political interplay.

## Conclusion

Scholars who study parliamentary coalitions have long called for dynamic theories. In this brief introduction, I have offered a framework for conceptualizing

dynamic approaches. The articles that follow fit into this scheme and show that dynamics are possible to study. More importantly, the articles offer major contributions to the coalition literature, demonstrating just how much potential lies in taking dynamic approaches.

The question of how to proceed from here—beyond building on the symposium articles—is taken up in two commentaries that follow the articles. The commentaries, by two of the most influential and insightful theorists of the past quarter-century—Michael Laver and Kaare Strøm—provide blueprints for the next generation of work on coalition politics.

## Notes

1. Moreover, the conventional approach involves focusing on a set of fixed, ex ante parameters. For example, work on coalition formation studies the impact of institutional factors or other variables fixed after the most recent election (e.g., Martin and Stevenson 2001). Portfolio research limits attention, almost exclusively, to seat distributions set after elections (e.g., Warwick and Druckman 2006).

2. I identified approximately forty-one articles on parliamentary coalitions that have been published since 1962 in the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Political Research Quarterly*. Of these, about half dealt, at some level, with connections between parts of the coalition process.

3. This work, then, relaxes the widely noted unitary-actor assumption common in coalition theory. Laver (1998, 22) suggests that incorporating intraparty functioning is the key to developing dynamic models.

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