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Reaching across the aisle: Explaining government–opposition voting in parliament

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Abstract

The divide between government and opposition is clearly visible in the way members of parliament vote, but the variation in government–opposition voting has been left relatively unexplored. This is particularly the case for contextual variation in the extent to which parliamentary voting behaviour follows the government–opposition divide. This article attempts to explain levels of government–opposition voting by looking at three factors: first, the majority status of cabinets (differentiating between majority and minority cabinets), cabinet ideology (differentiating between more centrist and more extremist cabinets) and norms about cabinet formation (differentiating between wholesale and partial alternation in government). The study includes variation at the level of the country, the government and the vote. The article examines voting in the Netherlands (with a history of partial alternation) and Sweden (with a history of wholesale alternation). We find strong support for the effect of cabinet majority status, cabinet ideology and norms about cabinet formation on government–opposition voting.

Keywords

government/opposition, ideological polarization, parliamentary politics, policy goals

Introduction

In parliaments, political parties interact every day creating majorities for legislation. We know that the distinction between opposition and government parties is crucial in explaining voting behaviour under parliamentary government (Cox and McCubbins, 2011; Hansen, 2006; Hix and Noury, 2016; Morgenstern, 2004; Tuttnauer, 2014). Yet, as Andeweg (2014) observes, there is a lack of comparative analysis of parliamentary voting behaviour from the perspective of government and opposition as well as a lack of theoretical work explaining under what circumstances this distinction matters more or less.¹

This article seeks to advance the comparative analysis of parliamentary voting behaviour and our theoretical understanding of government–opposition dynamics in parliaments. Central to our analysis is the idea that the nature of the party system affects the relationship between

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government and opposition. We draw on the field of party politics and in particular the work of Peter Mair (1997) and propose that the distinction between wholesale and partial alternation in government may affect the extent to which government and opposition parties vote differently. In some countries, only two governments are deemed possible: in these countries, there is either a cabinet supported by left-wing parties or a cabinet supported by right-wing parties, and these two alternate in office. In other countries, more governments are deemed possible. After the elections, some parties stay in government, some rotate into government and others rotate out: in those countries, all parties of the centre-left and centre-right are potential government partners for each other. This means that in countries with partial alternation, parties have an interest in maintaining cordial relations with the opposition, because some of these may be future government partners, whilst in countries with wholesale alternation such considerations do not play a role.

This pattern can affect the division between government and opposition directly, but there is also the possibility of an indirect, mediation relationship. Countries with wholesale alternation tend to see more ideologically extreme cabinets because the left and right alternate and never govern together (Strøm and Bergman, 2011). If the ideological division between left and right and the division between government and opposition coincide, there is little reason for government and opposition to bridge the divide between them, because there is little policy agreement between parties of the opposition and of the government.

We test these explanations whilst at the same time also examining the effect of the majority status of the cabinet. During multiparty majority cabinets, the parliamentary parties of the government may act as one bloc in order to maintain the stability of their cabinet (Holzhacker, 2002; Laver, 2006; Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000). During minority cabinets, the government parties continually broker *ad hoc* deals with other parliamentary parties in order to ensure a majority for their proposals and even the continuation of their government (Strøm, 1990). Finally, we examine the effect of the extent to which government parties are divided on an issue on the division between government and opposition (Martin and Vanberg, 2008).

The reason that the impact of these factors on government–opposition voting remains relatively unexplored is related to a division in parliamentary voting studies. On the one hand, scholars use advanced formal models that see legislators play intricate games and use advanced methods, such as NOMINATE, which allow them to model member of parliament (MP) behaviour in complex spatial models (Poole and Rosenthal, 1985). On the other hand, empirically, the field is almost completely focused on single-country case studies (Amat and Falcó-Gimeno, 2014; Andeweg, 2004; Boston and Bullock, 2010; Christiansen and Pedersen, 2012; Field, 2009; Otjes and

Louwse, 2014). Most of the comparative research in the field is descriptive and qualitative, incorporating contextual and institutional factors (Bale and Bergman, 2006a, 2006b; Christiansen and Damgaard, 2008; Holzhacker, 2002). The number of studies that analyse voting data using both these advanced quantitative methods and the theoretical complexity of the advanced case studies is limited (Coman, 2015; Cox and McCubbins, 2011; Hansen, 2006; Hix and Noury, 2016; Morgenstern, 2004; Tuttnauer, 2014).² We know of no study that analyses inter-systemic differences in institutions and intra-systemic differences between individual parliamentary divisions at the same time. Yet comparative work that examines both these differences is crucial for understanding what drives government–opposition voting.

This study explores these patterns by examining parliamentary voting behaviour in two countries: the Netherlands and Sweden. As this is one of the first truly comparative quantitative analyses of government–opposition patterns in parliamentary voting behaviour, we wanted to select cases that represent clear-cut cases of government alternation. They differ in the extent to which government composition changes after elections: Sweden has a history of wholesale alternation and the Netherlands has a history of partial alternation. They share a number of similarities. The Netherlands and Sweden both have a parliamentary system of government, a multiparty system, a history of democratic governance and procedures where any proposal made by any party is voted upon (and cannot be blocked by committee majorities or committee chairs). We analyse more than a decade's worth of voting behaviour in both the Netherlands and Sweden.

Theory

Our aim is to explore why government and opposition vote similarly in some votes and differently in others. We thus conceptualize government–opposition voting on the level of the individual parliamentary division (Otjes and Louwse, 2014; Van Aelst and Louwse, 2014). In a vote, what is the association between parties' support for the government and their voting decisions? If all government parties support a proposal whilst the whole opposition votes against, this represents the largest degree of government–opposition voting, whilst when both government and opposition are split down the middle, government–opposition voting in that particular vote is low.

There is one complication that relates to the presence of the so-called 'support' parties during periods of minority government. These parties do not supply ministers, but have a policy agreement with the minority government to offer support on a range of policy issues. Therefore, we can differentiate between three kinds of parties: government parties, support parties and opposition parties. A *government* party supplies ministers; a *support* party does not

supply ministers but has signed a support agreement; together government and support parties are called *coalition* parties. We will refer to *opposition* parties as parties either outside of the government or the coalition, depending on the context.

In our analyses we will look at two variables: government–opposition voting and coalition–opposition voting. *Government–opposition voting* captures the extent to which the government parties on the one side vote differently from the support and opposition parties on the other side. *Coalition–opposition voting* captures the difference between the coalition parties (government and support parties) and opposition parties. The difference between these two concepts is thus whether we treat the support parties as part of the governing coalition or as part of the opposition. As our expectations are in the same direction for both our dependent variables, we will discuss them jointly, although, as we will see, the explanatory strength differs.

Wholesale and partial alternation

The difference between wholesale and partial alternation is an important difference between party systems. As Sartori (1976: 44) stated, ‘a party system is precisely the *system of interactions* resulting from inter-party competition’ (emphasis in original). What makes a set of parties a system is the way political parties interact when competing for government (Mair, 1997). One can have two systems with an identical number of parties, but if the structure of inter-party competition is different, the political outcomes, for instance, parliamentary behaviour, can be very different.

West European countries differ markedly in the patterns of cabinet formation (Ieraci, 2012; Mair, 1997: 211–212; Strøm and Bergman, 2011). In some countries, the patterns of cabinet formations are fixed: access to the government is restricted to a limited number of parties and a limited number of governing formulae are possible. In these countries, we tend to see wholesale alternation: after elections, either one of two governments is possible. These two then alternate in power. Cabinets of a bloc of left-wing parties and cabinets of a bloc of right-wing parties come and go and parties of the left and the right never govern together. Given the importance of political blocs in the multiparty versions of these systems, it is sometimes referred to as ‘bloc politics’ (Green-Pedersen, 2002). In other countries, the patterns of cabinet formation are open: almost all parties, including new parties, are potential governing parties. Here government formulae can be very innovative (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2014). An element of stability is maintained through partial alternation: after the elections, some parties stay in government, some rotate out and others rotate in. Parties will gladly go into government with a party that previously was on the other side of the government–opposition divide. Parties of the centre-left and the centre-right govern together. This means that the exact

composition of the governing government is less predictable after elections.

The idea that more adversarial patterns of cabinet formation may lead to more adversarial relations between coalition and opposition parties has been discussed often but it has never been tested thoroughly (Andeweg, 2014; Di Giorgi and Marangoni, 2015). In a polity with partial alternation self-restraint is beneficial for all parties no matter if they are in government or opposition. If, when in government, parties pursue very narrow policy compromises, excluding the opposition, they risk alienating potential future government partners. Alternatively, parties from the opposition do not want to distance themselves too much from the government since that would jeopardize their prospects to be part of future governments. Contrast this with the situation in a polity with wholesale alternation: there is no risk of alienating future government partners by excluding them from compromises. Parties govern with their allies and they have little to expect from the opposition, and parties in opposition can play their role as opposition in full.

Alternation hypothesis. The division between coalition/government and opposition is more pronounced in parliamentary voting in countries with wholesale cabinet alternation than in countries with partial alternation.

Ideological factors

Voting along government–opposition lines will be strongest when the ideological divide and the government–opposition divides coincide (Otjes and Louwerse, 2014). One example is when all parties on the right form a government and all parties on the left are in opposition, as has been the case, for example, in Austria (ÖVP and FPÖ) between 2000 and 2007. Contrast this with a situation of a broad government (e.g. the grand coalition of SPÖ/ÖVP that has ruled Austria since 2007). In the latter situation, the government parties have ideological incentives to work together with opposition parties to reach certain policy goals (or at least to signal to voters that they are trying). In the former situation, when ideology and government participation overlap to a large degree, there is little to gain for government parties by working together with the opposition as they disagree with it on policy. Opposition parties, at the same time, will tend to vote cohesively, because they are all from the same part of the political spectrum. The coincidence of the government–opposition divide and the left–right divide is thus likely to increase the degree of government–opposition voting. As such, we expect that during cabinets with more extreme policy positions, in terms of deviating from the median legislator’s position, government–opposition voting will be higher.

Cabinet ideology hypothesis. The division between coalition/government and opposition is more pronounced in parliamentary voting under extreme cabinets than under centrist cabinets.

We argue that the political colour of the government and the level of wholesale and partial alternation are closely related. Systems with wholesale alternation will tend to see either exclusively left- or right-wing government. Systems with partial alternation may see governments of the left and right, but will also see centre-left, centre-right and centrist government. This means that the relationship between cabinet ideology and wholesale and partial alternation may be characterized as a mediation relationship, that is, partial alternation leads to the possibility of centrist government. Centrist government itself diminishes the division between coalition and opposition. Moreover, the coalition parties will not want to antagonize the opposition parties because their expectation of the possibility of partial alternation. Wholesale alternation leads to either left-wing or right-wing governments. If the division between left and right and between coalition and opposition coincides, the government–opposition division may become stronger. But this also leads to the expectation that government and opposition will not govern together in the future.

Mediation hypothesis. The effect of wholesale and partial alternation on the division between coalition/government and the opposition is mediated through the cabinet’s level of ideological extremism.

Government majority status

The difference between coalition and opposition may also depend on the status of the cabinet in the legislature: there is a difference between minority and majority cabinets. Do the party or parties that supply ministers command a parliamentary majority (Herman and Pope, 1973)? In the traditional view of politics during a majority cabinet, the opposition and government parties will vote in opposing ways (Laver, 2006; Hix and Noury, 2016). Under multiparty majority cabinets, government parties work together on the policies agreed in the government agreement, a set of package deals, compromises and agreements not to deal with certain issues (Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000). A government party will not accept its government partner sponsoring or voting for bills that go against the government agreement (Holzhacker, 2002). On issues outside of the agreement, MPs from government parties will foster close relations with each other and coordinate compromises and package deals on new issues as they arise (Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000).

On the other side of the aisle, ‘[t]he duty of an Opposition [is] very simple . . . to oppose everything, and propose nothing’ (Stanley cited in Jay, 2010). Opposition MPs have an incentive to vote against any government proposal (Hix

and Noury, 2016), as, if the government is defeated in a parliamentary vote, this may lead to the end of the cabinet. Conversely, MPs from government parties have an incentive to vote in favour of government proposals, because in a snap election they risk losing their parliamentary seat and their power as part of the government. Even when their hopes of defeating the government are small, opposition parties may gain from building a voting record against the government, which will help to present themselves as a genuine alternative at the next elections.

This image of parliamentary politics is refuted by actual voting patterns in parliaments not only in Westminster systems where this idea of government and opposition arose from but also in other case studies (Andeweg, 2013; Di Giorgi and Marangoni, 2015; Van Mechelen and Rose, 1986): parties of the opposition and of the government often vote together. Little is known about why government and opposition would choose to cooperate instead of competing.

Minority cabinets can be subdivided into supported and unsupported minority cabinets. In an unsupported minority cabinet, the cabinet has to build an ad hoc majority for every vote (Strøm, 1984, 1990). During unsupported minority cabinets, the government party or parties continuously need to find a majority for their legislative proposals: a cabinet must attempt to build a majority for every vote on an ad hoc basis. Such a cabinet must negotiate continually with non-government parties to stay in office and implement its policy agenda (Hix and Noury, 2016; Strøm, 1984, 1990). Essentially, all parties and MPs are potential partners for ad hoc agreements.

During a supported minority cabinet, government parties form an agreement with one or more parties in the legislature to assure their support for the government in crucial votes. In order to qualify as a supported minority cabinet, the support agreement must be made public prior to the formation of the cabinet, involve parties that together command a parliamentary majority, and concern comprehensive long-term cabinet policies as well as the survival of the cabinet (Bale and Bergman, 2006b: 424; Strøm, 1984, 1990). The political science literature on supported minority cabinets is mixed about the likelihood of cooperation across the government–opposition divide during supported minority cabinets: Strøm (1984: 223; 1997: 56) considers such supported minority cabinets ‘majority cabinets in disguise’, because in daily practice, they function much like multiparty majority cabinets as they can count on a reliable majority in parliament.

During supported minority cabinets, however, the unity of the coalition is weaker when dealing with policy issues not covered by the government agreement. On these issues, the cabinet must find an ad hoc majority for its policies: for instance, in New Zealand, the Netherlands and Denmark, the government and support parties have in the past agreed to disagree on foreign policy (Bale and Bergman, 2006b;

Boston and Bullock, 2010; Christiansen and Pedersen, 2012; Otjes and Louwse, 2014). On such issues, the government parties have to search for ad hoc majorities like an unsupported minority government, whilst on issues on which the support and government parties have an agreement, they cooperate as though they are a majority cabinet.

Cabinet-type hypothesis. During minority cabinets, the division between coalition/government and opposition is less pronounced in parliamentary voting than during majority cabinets.

Issue divisiveness

A final factor that may play a role is the divisiveness of issues: the degree to which government and opposition parties are ideologically divided on the issues that are under consideration. This builds upon the work of Martin and Vanberg (2008) who have looked at the ways in which government parties keep tabs on each other. They demonstrate that when government parties are divided on an issue, bills take longer to be passed. Similarly, government parties might choose to cooperate with opposition parties on parliamentary proposals concerning those issues on which they do not see eye to eye with their government partners. Whilst this may undermine government stability, this kind of cooperation between opposition and government parties may allow for more stable policy outcomes in the long run, as the opposition parties that supported the government on a given issue will, if they become governing parties themselves, prevent the new government from changing the status quo.

Issue divisiveness hypothesis. The division between coalition/government and opposition is less pronounced if governments are divided compared to when they are not divided.

Case selection

To test our hypotheses, we need to analyse countries that have different patterns of cabinet formation, variance in terms of ideology, as well as both minority and majority cabinets. To maximize comparability, we look at West European countries with parliamentary forms of government and multiparty systems that have been democratic since the end of the Second World War.³ Given that our argument deals with the effects of multiple repetitions of the government-formation ‘game’, a substantial history of democratic rule is necessary, in order to allow stable patterns of government formation to be established.

Table 1 gives an overview of the occurrence of majority governments and wholesale alternation. We want to look at countries that have experienced both majority and minority cabinets: this excludes Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, Austria, Finland, Ireland and Denmark, which have seen only one kind of cabinet. Italy and Belgium are also

Table 1. Cabinet composition in 12 West European democracies between 2002 and 2012.

Country	Share of majority governments (%) ^a	Share of wholesale alternation (%) ^b
Germany	100	0
Luxembourg	100	0
Finland	100	0
Austria	100	0
Ireland	100	50
Iceland	100	0
Italy	92	100
Belgium	83	0
Netherlands	75	0
Norway	67	100
Sweden	29	100
Denmark	0	100

Source: ParlGov database (Döring and Manow, 2012).

^aPercentage of time majority cabinets ruled between 2002 and 2012.

^bPercentage of government alternations were wholesale between 2002 and 2012.

excluded since the only minority governments in these countries were caretaker cabinets. This leaves the Netherlands as a country that has only seen partial alternation. In terms of wholesale alternation, both Sweden and Norway fit the bill. Given the greater role of the European Union in the domestic politics of the Netherlands and Sweden than in Norway, we determined that Sweden would be a more comparable case.

Since 1977, the core of Dutch cabinets has always been formed by two of the three major parties: the Christian Democratic Appeal (*Christen Democratisch Appèl*),⁴ the centre-right Liberal Party (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*) and the social democratic Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*). During cabinet formations one of these parties stays in government and often one of the other parties enters the government, whilst the third one leaves. As can be seen in Table 2, these parties are often joined by other parties in order to create a multiparty majority cabinet.

A substantial number of cabinets have been minority cabinets, but with the exception of the first Cabinet-Rutte that governed between 2010 and 2012 (Otjes and Louwse, 2014), these have been formed after a cabinet crisis. Parliamentary multiparty majority governments are associated with ‘monism’: the osmosis of the government parties in parliament and the cabinet (Andeweg, 1992: 161, 2004: 575–576, 2006: 232). The prime minister, the deputy prime minister(s) and the leaders of government parties meet regularly to set lines of cabinet policy (Timmermans and Andeweg, 2000: 383).

The Scandinavian countries combine minority governments with wholesale alternation in government: Sweden is a clear example of this as can be seen in Table 3. Most governments since the Second World War have been

Table 2. Dutch cabinets included.

Cabinet	In office	Status	Composition
Balkenende II	2003–2006	Majority	CDA, VVD and D66
Balkenende III	2006–2007	Minority	CDA and VVD
Balkenende IV	2007–2010	Majority	CDA, PvdA and CU
Rutte I	2010–2012	Minority	VVD and CDA
Rutte II	2012–2014	Minority	VVD and PvdA

CDA: Christian Democratic Appeal/Christen Democratisch Appèl; VVD: Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie; PvdA: Partij van de Arbeid; CU: ChristenUnie.

Table 3. Swedish cabinets included.

Cabinet	In office	Status	Composition
Persson III	2002–2006	Minority	SAP
Reinfeldt I	2006–2010	Majority	Moderaterna, FP, C, KD
Reinfeldt II	2010–2014	Minority	Moderaterna, FP, C, KD

FP: Folkpartiet liberalerna; KD: Kristdemokraterna; SAP: Social Democratic Party/Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti.

minority governments, most notably through single-party minority governments by Sweden's Social Democratic Party (*Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti*). Between 2002 and 2006, the Social Democrats have entered into formal support agreements with the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*) and the Green Party (*Miljöpartiet de Gröna*). The alternative to social democratic government was a centre-right bourgeois government. In 2004, the four centre-right parties, the Liberals (*Folkpartiet liberalerna*/FP), the Centre Party, the Moderates (*Moderata samlingspartiet*) and the Christian Democrats (*Kristdemokraterna*) formed Alliance for Sweden (*Allians för Sverige*): they presented a common manifesto and expressed the ambition to form a majority government after the 2006 elections (Aylott and Bolin, 2007) and succeeded in this. The Alliance for Sweden increased their vote support in the 2010 election, but lost their majority in the parliament due to the entrance of the anti-immigrant party the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*). The Alliance for Sweden parties formed a minority cabinet and struck ad hoc agreements with different parties.

Methods

Our analysis aims to explain the degree to which parliamentary votes display a contrast between government or coalition parties on the one side and opposition parties on the other side. Recall the distinction between the government parties, the parties that supply cabinet ministers and coalition parties that also include support parties in the case of a supported minority government. Therefore, we use two different dependent variables: *coalition–opposition voting* and *government–opposition voting*. In the former, we contrast government and support parties with the opposition

parties; in the latter, we contrast government parties with the opposition including support parties.⁵ We will discuss the operationalization of coalition–opposition voting in detail below; the operationalization of government–opposition voting follows a similar logic.

We measure these dependent variables on the level of individual parliamentary divisions (Van Aelst and Louwerse, 2014).⁶ Intuitively, the highest level of coalition–opposition voting is achieved when all coalition parties support a proposal that is rejected by all opposition parties. When there is no relationship between parties' voting behaviour and whether they belong to the coalition or opposition, coalition–opposition voting is at its lowest.⁷ For each vote we calculate the level of association between the vote choice ('yea'/'nay') and coalition/opposition membership. We use the χ^2 -based measure φ_{co} (phi), which can be calculated directly as follows:

$$\varphi_{co} = \left| \frac{C_y O_n - C_n O_y}{\sqrt{YNOC}} \right|, \quad (1)$$

where, C_y and C_n stand for the number of seats held by coalition parties voting yes and no, O_y and O_n for the number of seats held by opposition parties voting yes (no) and Y , N , O and C being respectively the total number of yea votes, nay votes, opposition party seats and coalition party seats in that vote. When the option of abstention was used in the Swedish case, the formula is slightly more complicated, but the underlying logic is the same.⁸ Coalition–opposition voting runs from 0 to 1, with higher levels indicating a stronger divide between voting behaviour of coalition and opposition parties. Most votes will be taken along party lines and in the Dutch case also recorded by party. Therefore, our data do not so much reflect intra-party conflict, but rather conflict between parties.

The parliamentary voting data for the Netherlands was obtained from the Dutch Parliamentary Voting data set (Louwerse et al., 2014). Almost all parliamentary votes in the Netherlands are by means of a show of hands; roll call votes are very rare. Votes by show of hands are counted per party. When MPs deviate from their party line they announce this to the Speaker beforehand, but this is very rare. The Dutch parliament votes on motions (non-binding expressions of opinion of parliament), bills (legislation) and amendments (changes to legislation). The large majority of bills is proposed by the government; MPs rarely use their right to introduce legislation. Motions and amendments are submitted by one or more individual MPs. Committee majorities and chairs do not have the ability to prevent particular proposals from going the plenary; in essence, any proposal a party puts forth is voted upon. For each bill, parliament votes on the amendments first and then on the bill in its entirety (as amended).

The Swedish parliamentary voting data were collected by the authors from the Swedish Riksdag (Willumsen and Öhberg, 2013). During the legislative process in Sweden,

all parliamentary decisions are first dealt with in one of the parliament's committees.⁹ The committee formulates the majority proposal. Opposing proposals can be added as counter proposals. The counterproposal that has the highest support after an elimination voting procedure is put against the majority proposal. When the government presents a bill to parliament, the MPs vote on the articles within the bill.¹⁰ This means that in Sweden, like in the Netherlands, the parliamentary majority cannot control which issues are brought to a vote on the floor.

We analyse parliamentary voting in the Netherlands between 2003¹¹ and 2014 and in Sweden between 2002 and 2014. We only study votes on legislation and amendments and, in particular, exclude the Dutch votes on (non-binding) motions. Moreover, we exclude unanimous votes and votes taken when the cabinet had resigned or a caretaker government was in office.

The independent variables were measured as follows. *Minority cabinet* is a dummy variable indicating whether the parties that have ministers in government command a less than a majority in (the lower house of) parliament. Cabinets that rely on supply agreements with opposition parties are thus counted as minority cabinets.

Coalition ideology extremism captures how far the mean policy position of the coalition parties is away from the mean (seat-weighted) policy position of all parties. We take the seat-weighted mean of coalition parties' left-right position in the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2015). Subsequently, we subtract the seat-weighted mean of all parties' left-right positions and take the absolute value. Similarly, we calculate *government ideology extremism* for the government parties, that is, excluding support parties.

In comparison to *coalition ideology extremism* variable, the *government issue divisiveness* and *coalition issue divisiveness* variables capture how divided the government and opposition parties are on the *topic* of the vote rather than the general policy differences that the former variable captures. We operationalize the division between government and opposition and coalition and opposition separately. Let us illustrate the measurement for government issue divisiveness: first, we calculated the (seat-weighted) position of all government parties per issue. Next, we calculated the (seat-weighted) absolute difference between each government party's position and the mean position. Thus, issue divisiveness is given by the following equation:

$$ID = \sum_{i=1}^n w_i \left| p_i - \sum_{i=1}^n w_i p_i \right|, \quad (2)$$

where p_i is the position of party i , w_i is its share of the total number of seats held by all coalition (opposition) parties and n is the total number of parties. The issue divisiveness measures were calculated for a number of issue dimensions in each term. We used the closest available of either the Benoit and Laver Expert Survey from 2003 or the

Table 4. Variables used in analysis.

Variable	Minimum	Mean	Maximum	N
Government–opposition voting	0.00	0.58	1.00	13,358
Coalition–opposition voting	0.00	0.61	1.00	13,358
Government policy extremism	0.12	1.31	2.83	13,358
Coalition policy extremism	0.12	1.43	2.83	13,358
Government issue divisiveness	0.00	0.73	2.54	13,358
Coalition issue divisiveness	0.00	0.82	2.54	13,358
Minority government	0.00	0.47	1.00	13,358
Country = Netherlands	0.00	0.44	1.00	13,358

Chapel Hill Expert Survey from either 2006 or 2010.¹² We manually matched these issue dimensions to each of the subject categories available from the parliamentary voting data.¹³ For the analyses of *coalition–opposition voting*, we similarly calculate a variable *coalition issue divisiveness*. The dummy variable *Country = Netherlands* intends to capture the difference between two traditions of partial or wholesale alternation (wholesale alternation is thus the reference category).

Table 4 gives some basic descriptive statistics of the variables that we employ. As can be seen, our dependent variable is limited between 0 and 1.¹⁴ We find, however, that all predicted values from a simple linear model fall within this range. Therefore, we stick to a linear model, which is easier to interpret. We take into account the multi-level structure in our data by adding a random intercept for the *Cabinet* during which a vote was taken.

As hypothesis 3 (H3) proposes a mediated relationship, we need to use mediation analysis in order to test this relationship. One cannot examine a mediation analysis in a normal regression analysis. Therefore, we use the R package Mediation (Tingley et al., 2014), a mediation analysis can be used to assess to what extent a relationship between an antecedent cause and an outcome variable is mediated through a third variable. In our case, the antecedent cause is the difference between wholesale and partial alternation, the mediating variable is policy extremism and the outcome variable is the level of coalition/government–opposition voting. In order to test whether the relationship between the antecedent cause and the outcome variable is mediated through a third variable, a mediation analysis combines two regression analyses. First, we use the antecedent cause to explain the mediating variable. Second, we use both the antecedent cause and the mediating variable to explain the outcome variable.

Additional control variables can also be included in both stages. The key variable for the assessment of the level of mediation is the average causal mediation effect (ACME).

This is the product of the coefficient for the relationship between the antecedent cause and the mediating variable in the first analysis and the coefficient for the relationship between the mediating and the outcome variable. This variable indicates whether there is a significant mediation through the mediating variable. For there to be a complete mediation two conditions must be met: first, the ACME must be significantly different from 0. Second, the direct effect (that is the coefficient for the antecedent cause in the second analysis) should not be significant. That is, there should no longer be a significant relationship between the outcome variable and the antecedent cause when including the mediating variable. If the direct effect is significant, but the causal mediation effect is also significant, there is only partial mediation: some of the effect of the antecedent cause goes through the mediation variable and some of the effect is direct. The mediation package that we use runs 1000 simulations to calculate the causal mediation and direct effect and assess their significance. Therefore, we report the *average* causal mediation and direct effect.

Results

We have divided our results section into two parts: one on government–opposition voting and one on coalition–opposition voting. Remember that in the former support parties are counted among the opposition, whilst in the latter support parties are treated as part of the governing coalition.

The drivers of government–opposition voting

The results of the models using government–opposition voting as the dependent variable are shown in Table 5 and Figure 1. Four of the five hypotheses are supported by the data.

First, we examine the complex relationship between partial government alternation and policy extremism, which is the subject of the first three hypotheses. We hypothesized that countries with partial government alternation see lower levels of government–opposition voting (H1), that cabinets with more centrist positions also see lower levels of government–opposition voting (H2) and that the former relationship is mediated through the latter; that is, countries with partial alternation tend to see lower levels of government–opposition voting because their cabinets are more centrist.

Both partial government alternation and policy extremism have significant effects on government–opposition voting. The coefficient for partial government alternation indicates that the country with a history of full government alternation (Sweden) has higher levels of government–opposition voting than the country with a history of partial government turnover (the Netherlands). The coefficient for policy extremism indicates that the further the ideology of the government is from the mean, the more divisive votes

Table 5. Multilevel mediation analysis regression models explaining government–opposition voting.

Independent variable	Government policy extremism	Government–opposition voting
Intercept	1.84 (0.01)***	0.52 (0.05)***
Minority	–	–0.11 (0.03)***
Country = Netherlands	–0.99 (0.01)***	–0.11 (0.04)***
Government policy extremism	–	0.11 (0.03)***
Government issue divisiveness	–	0.03 (0.02)***
ACME	–0.11 (0.03)***	
Average direct effect	–0.11 (0.04)***	
Total effect	–0.22 (0.03)***	
REML criterion	–304,930	1207
Variance: Cabinet (intercept)	0.00	0.00
Variance: Residual	0.00	0.06
Num. obs.	11,949	
Num. groups: Cabinet	7	

***p < 0.001.

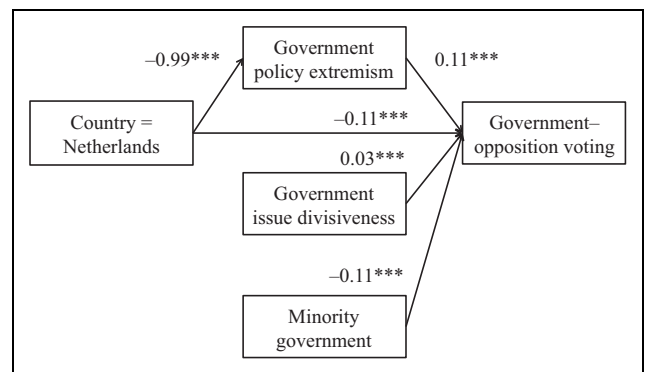


Figure 1. Mediation analysis for government–opposition voting visualized.

***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05.

are between the government and the opposition. The likelihood that opposition parties are ideologically similar to the government is lower during more extreme cabinets, leading to a lower possibility of compromise over policy between government and opposition. We also find that partial government alternation has a strong, significant and negative effect on government policy extremism: that is, in the country where partial alternation is the norm (the Netherlands), cabinets tend to be less extreme. Both the ACME and the average direct effect are significant. This means that there is a partial mediation relationship: the effect is mediated for 49%. There is a separate effect of having wholesale or partial alternation that cannot be entirely explained away by the partisan composition of the government. This means that the partial government alternation hypothesis (H1), the cabinet extremism (H2) and the mediation hypothesis (H3) are all supported.

This confirms our theory that when the identity of future government partners is unknown, governing parties have an incentive to exercise self-restraint in terms of exploiting their legislative majority for policy gains, whereas there is less reason for such restraint when there is no chance of having to govern in the future with a current opposition party. We can use the Swedish case as a conceivable example to illustrate the mechanisms at play: when the Swedish centre-right Alliance for Sweden formed a majority government from 2006 to 2010 (the period with the highest average level of government opposition found), it had every incentive to exploit this situation to the fullest through narrow policy compromises. First of all, it is likely that the government knew that they were unlikely to stay as a majority government for long – no centre-right government was re-elected with a majority in Sweden since the Second World War.¹⁵ Further, this government knew that there was no risk of establishing a precedent of majority government tyranny that could later be used against them; the Social Democrats were extremely unlikely to obtain a majority by themselves after the next election (the only time this happened since the Second World War was in the 1968 elections).

The cabinet type hypothesis (H4) proposes that minority governments result in lower levels of government–opposition voting. We find strong support for this hypothesis. Thus, as expected, parliamentary voting when a minority government is in power is less divided between opposition and government. It is worth noting that this is a partially mechanical effect; since governments in both these countries almost never lose votes, an (unsupported) minority government necessarily needs some opposition support to pass bills, leading to lower levels of government–opposition voting.

Finally, we find that as a government is more divided on an issue, government–opposition voting increases (H5). This effect is also significant, but in a different direction from our expectation: governments tend to operate in a more unified way on issues where they are divided. The most plausible explanation for this unexpected result is that when governments are divided internally, the government parties, knowing that they need to maintain unity to remain in power, close ranks towards the opposition and propose only the most narrow policy proposals that can be agreed upon, thus leading to higher levels of government–opposition voting.

Coalition–opposition voting in parliaments

Let us move from government–opposition voting and instead see what patterns emerge when we study coalition–opposition voting. Table 6 and Figure 2 show the mediation model using levels of coalition–opposition voting as the dependent variable. As support agreements blur the distinction between opposition and government, the

Table 6. Multilevel mediation analysis regression models explaining coalition–opposition voting.

Independent variable	Coalition policy extremism	Coalition–opposition voting
Intercept	1.83 (0.01)***	0.47 (0.06)***
Minority	–	–0.08 (0.04)*
Country = Netherlands	–0.88 (0.01)***	–0.04 (0.05)
Coalition policy extremism	–	0.13 (0.03)***
Coalition issue divisiveness	–	0.01 (0.01)
Average causal mediation effect	–0.11 (0.03)***	
Average direct effect	–0.04 (0.05)	
Total effect	–0.15 (0.04)***	
REML criterion	–292,505	2462
Variance: Cabinet (intercept)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.04)
Variance: Residual	0.00 (0.00)	0.07 (0.27)
Num. obs.	11,949	
Num. groups: Cabinet	7	

*** $p < 0.001$.

* $p < 0.05$.

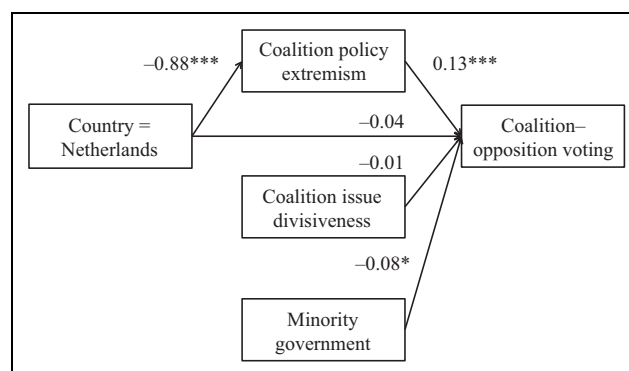


Figure 2. Mediation analysis for coalition–opposition voting visualized.

*** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$.

effects for coalition–opposition voting are different from the effects for government–opposition voting. Some patterns are stronger, others weaker. Again, we start with the complex mediation analysis: is the relationship between partial government alternation and coalition–opposition voting mediated through policy extremism? In the analysis explaining coalition–opposition voting, we find that the direct effect of partial government alternation is in the expected negative direction, but not significant. The coefficient for policy extremism is significant: the more extreme the ideological position of the coalition, the higher levels of coalition–opposition voting is found. Moreover, as above, more extreme coalitions are more likely in the country with wholesale government alternation. Because of these two significant relationships, the ACME is

significant. This means that there is full mediation; 72% of the effect is mediated. This corroborates H3. Whilst the alternation hypothesis (H1) holds, its effect is fully indirect, through policy extremism; there is no *direct* effect of alternation on coalition–opposition voting. H2 is thus supported by the data. All in all, the result of the mediation analysis is stronger for coalition–opposition voting than for government–opposition voting.

Support is also found for the cabinet type hypothesis (H4). The relationship is negative and significant, but it is weaker and less significant than the effect for government–opposition voting. This indicates that the minority cabinets we study tend to function more like majority governments in disguise, relying on a majority coalition in parliament more than one would expect from the previous analysis but that these supported minority governments still build ad hoc coalitions on some issues. We find no significant effects for coalition issue divisiveness (H5), whilst we do find a significant effect for government–issue divisiveness above. In both cases, our hypothesis is not supported. For coalition–opposition voting, it does not appear to be the case that coalition parties strike narrow policy proposals on issues on which they are divided.¹⁶

Robustness of the results

Our analyses of the effect of government alternation are based on only two countries: our partial government alternation dummy variable is equal to 1 for the Netherlands and 0 for Sweden. Therefore, we need to carefully consider whether other differences between these two countries might be responsible for the effect on government–opposition voting. Which other factors might explain lower levels of government–opposition voting in the Netherlands?

There is a set of characteristics on which Sweden and the Netherlands differ, but which we would argue should result in higher government–opposition voting in the Netherlands, rather than lower, as found above. First, Sweden has a history of minority cabinets, interrupted by majority cabinets, and the Netherlands has a history of majority cabinets, interrupted by minority cabinets. One might expect that this majority tradition leads to higher levels of coalition–opposition voting compared to Sweden with its history of ad hoc agreements, even when a majority cabinet took office in 2010. We observe, however, lower levels of coalition–opposition voting in the Netherlands. Second, Sweden has a stronger committee system compared to the Dutch system, with Swedish committees having the right to rewrite legislation (Ström, 1999). The stronger committee system in the Swedish parliament might cut across party allegiances to a larger degree than in the Dutch parliament. Again, we find that our result runs in the opposite direction. This is also true for cabinet duration, which is, on average, shorter in the Netherlands than Sweden (Lijphart, 2012: 120). We would expect that cabinets that can expect more

instability would have stronger incentives to stick together in parliamentary votes, which would result in *higher* rather than lower government–opposition voting. Therefore, if these variables would have any effect on government–opposition voting, we would strongly expect this to be in the *opposite* direction of what we find. Both countries are quite corporatist, but Sweden is the most corporatist countries among Western democracies (Siaroff, 1999): as decisions that are pre-cooked in tripartite agreements are less likely to be politically controversial, one would expect lower government–opposition voting in Sweden compared to the Netherlands. Calculating the levels of party system polarization using the positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, it is found that the Netherlands would have a slightly higher level of polarization (Bakker et al., 2015; Dalton, 2008): the Netherlands has an average value of 4.5 for the four parliaments between 2003 and 2014 and Sweden an average of 4.0 for the three parliaments between 2002 and 2014 (on a scale from 0 to 10). On basis of this one would, again, expect higher levels of government–opposition voting in the more polarized Dutch system, compared to the less polarized Swedish system.

There are two substantially important differences between Sweden and the Netherlands, which may explain the lower level of government–opposition voting. First of all, the Dutch constitution is more rigid than the Swedish one, requiring a two thirds majority in both houses of parliament for all constitutional changes. Therefore, if any constitutional proposal is to be successful, it would generally require cross-party support. This is, however, only true for constitutional proposals, which form a tiny fraction of the votes analysed. As constitutional changes are exceptional, there is no reason to expect that constitutional rigidity would result in lower coalition–opposition voting in general.

The second difference between the Netherlands and Sweden that might explain lower levels of coalition–opposition voting in the former is the partisan composition of cabinets. Sweden has a tradition of either left-wing or right-wing cabinets, whilst many Dutch cabinets are centrist, including parties from both the left and right. In fact, this explanation is very much a part of our theoretical argument: we expect that a tradition of wholesale alternation results in off-centre governments, which results in higher levels of government–opposition voting.

Our model presents government alternation as the main independent variable and policy extremism as a mediating variable. One might argue that the causal order is reversed: that more extreme governments are unlikely to be open to the possibility of partial alternation and therefore cultivate bloc politics. We have two responses to this argument. First, whilst our government alternation variable is a country-level dummy variable, our policy extremism variable does vary between the cabinets we study. Therefore, we would argue that policy extremism is a cabinet-level

variable, which partly depends on (historical patterns of) government alternation. It is problematic to assert that the policy extremism of particular governments will influence traditions of government alternation. Second, one might argue that the exact causal order is not key to our central argument. The main contrast is between bloc politics (Sweden) versus ‘centre coalitions’ (the Netherlands). As a result of the bloc politics, Swedish cabinets alternate and are off-centre, whilst Dutch ones only partially alternate and are centrist. These two things move together to create the different outcome between these countries.

Conclusion

Our comparative analysis of Sweden and the Netherlands shows that the degree to which the divide between government/coalition and opposition parties determines voting patterns is related to the government’s ideological composition and the status of the cabinet. Further, a key antecedent cause is a historical difference in patterns of cabinet formation.

The effect of coalition/government ideology is itself determined by historical traditions of cabinet formation. We compared Sweden, which features alternation in office between a ‘left’ and a ‘right’ bloc, and the Netherlands, where government formation effectively is a free-for-all. Not knowing the composition of future government, constellations contributed to a consensual style of politics, which even today leads to lower levels of government–opposition voting. The type of government alternation itself, however, also affected the policy extremism of coalitions and governments: Sweden has more extreme cabinets than the Netherlands. This extremism itself intensified the level of government/coalition and opposition voting. The more ideologically extreme a government/coalition is, the higher levels of government/coalition–opposition voting will be, as the policies favoured by the opposition are not amenable to compromise with the government parties. We found support for a mediation relationship in our analyses of both coalition–opposition and government–opposition voting. Wholesale alternation leads to more extreme cabinets, which lead to a starker divide in parliamentary voting between the coalition/government and the opposition.

We find higher levels of government–opposition voting in the Netherlands despite the fact that a number of structural features of the Dutch system would lead one to expect higher levels of government–opposition voting there than in Sweden: Sweden is more corporatist than the Netherlands, has a stronger committee system, has longer lasting cabinets and has lower levels of party polarization. Moreover, Sweden with its tradition of minority cabinets actually had higher levels of coalition–opposition voting than the Netherlands, which has a tradition of majority cabinets. The effects of both minority governments was similar in the

two countries: we found that minority cabinets witness a smaller division between those parties who formally pledged to support the government in voting and those parties that did not, due to the need to gain support from at least some opposition parties. This is most clear in Sweden, where both Government–Opposition and coalition–opposition voting increased when the Alliance for Sweden majority government took over from the Social Democratic minority cabinet in 2006; it declined again when Alliance for Sweden government lost its majority in the 2010 elections. Finally, we find that contrary to our expectations, the divisiveness of an issue within the government leads to higher levels of government–opposition voting as government parties can only agree to narrow compromises; this pattern was absent when studying coalition–opposition voting.

This is one of the first comparative analyses of government–opposition voting. We found support for four of our five hypotheses when analysing our two ‘ideal-type’ cases. This raises the question of the extent to which the phenomena we establish exists beyond these two cases. A number of reasons exist why we can expect similar, if weaker, patterns to emerge in other settings. A number of country cases are close to those studied here: In terms of wholesale alternation, Norway in particular, but also Denmark share most of the salient characteristics of Sweden. Similarly, in terms of partial alternation, a range of countries from Belgium via Austria to Iceland display most of the key characteristics of the Netherlands. One can expect similar patterns in these countries as uncovered in our analysis. Our results are less clear for countries with a more mixed history of cabinet formation, such as Ireland. Given the crucial role of government formation in the politics of parliamentary regimes, and the repeated game nature of parliamentary politics, we would expect that the patterns of government formation influence politics regardless of where it takes place.

That said, whilst our findings are relatively robust, our analysis focuses only on a limited number of cabinets in two countries. Future research may want to extend the number of countries examined with the systematic approach that was developed here to test hypotheses about the conditions under which coalition–opposition voting is stronger or weaker. Moreover, it could explore additional explanations of government–opposition voting, such as the type of proposal concerned and who proposed it.

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Notes

1. One aspect that has gained considerable attention is the difference between parliamentary and presidential systems (Hix and Noury, 2016) and voting patterns under different presidential systems (Morgenstern, 2004).
2. The study of party unity (as opposed to coalition unity, which is the subject of this study) also forms an exception (see Carey, 2007; Morgenstern, 2004; Sieberer, 2006).
3. We exclude semi-presidential systems from our case selection (France) and countries where single majority party governments are dominant (the UK). Further, as the Swiss government cannot be removed by the legislature, it is not parliamentary in nature (Cheibub, 2007) and is therefore excluded.
4. Before 1977, the core position of the Christian Democratic Appeal/*Christen-Democratisch Appèl* was held by the Catholic People's Party/Katholieke Volkspartij (KVP).
5. Of course, when there are no support parties, the two measures are identical.
6. Since our analyses concern proposals of importance, we have excluded unanimous votes on which all parliamentarians agree to a proposal. These 'hurrah' votes are in general related to uncontroversial and minor issues. In the Swedish case, these comprised 219 of 7686 recorded votes. The corresponding numbers in the Netherlands are 1800 unanimous votes of 7725 recorded votes.
7. For an analysis of universalistic voting, see Collie (1988).
8. We do this by calculating the χ^2 for the vote using a coalition–opposition by vote decision contingency table. From this we can calculate φ_{co} by dividing χ^2 by the square of the total number of votes cast.
9. A substantial portion of bills in Sweden are drafted by inquiry commissions rather than the government itself. However, these follow instructions set out by the government and hence should not be understood as independent from party politics (Petersson, 2016).
10. An exception to this is the budget. The parliament has to accept or reject the budget. However, the opposition cannot just simply reject the budget, but rather needs to offer a budget proposal that obtains more votes than the government's. Otherwise the government's budget stands. By tradition, members of parliament vote on their own party's proposal and if their proposal loses in the elimination process, they will abstain from voting in the subsequent voting. The final vote is between the majority proposal and the counter proposal with the highest support.
11. We exclude the 2002 Balkenende-I Cabinet, because it was in office for only 87 days, leaving only very few votes on bills and amendments.
12. Earlier Chapel Hill Expert Surveys (CHES) do not include parties' positions on specific issue dimensions.
13. For Sweden, a committee on piece of legislation was assigned to was used to determine the issue dimension. For the Netherlands, we used the topic classification as provided in the official documentation.
14. In five votes, a party split evenly in the Swedish Riksdag, preventing the calculation of the dependent variable (as no party position could be established). These cases were dropped.
15. In the 1973 election, the Social democratic government obtained exactly half of the seats in the Riksdag (175 of 350). Since a proposal needs a majority in favour to succeed, this situation was for all practical purposes identical to a minority government.
16. As a robustness check, we reran the models separately for Sweden and the Netherlands, to explore the extent to which our results for H2, H4 and H5 may be driven by a single country. In both Sweden and the Netherlands, levels of both government–opposition voting and coalition–opposition voting decline under minority government, lending additional support to H1. We also find the expected positive effect of cabinet ideology extremism in both the Netherlands and Sweden, in the Dutch case, the effect is significant (at the 0.01 level) in for both coalition and government extremism. In the Swedish case, the limited variation on this variable (two of the three cabinets have extremely similar values) means that the effect is not statistically significant.

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