Parliaments in Western Europe: Victim of, or Obstacle to, Presidentialisation?

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Abstract:

Presidentialization can be defined as ‘a gradual shift from collective to individual control over the formulation of governmental programmes and from collective to individual accountability’ (Poguntke/Webb, Workshop Proposal, p.1). In the parliamentary democracies of Western Europe, parliamentary chambers have traditionally been one of the most important mechanisms of collective executive accountability. The proposed paper is comparative in character and aims to assess to what extent parliaments have fallen prey to a process of presidentialization. To what extent have they become ‘dignified’ (Bagehot) but largely ineffective bodies in their attempt to hold the executive accountable? Under what conditions have parliaments been able to resist the tendency towards presidentialization? To what extent have the parliaments of Western Europe developed a suitable ‘armory’ to contain this trend. It will be argued that traditional studies of parliamentary oversight and the ‘decline of parliaments’ have often underestimated the power of parliaments as constraints on the executive by focusing too narrowly on specific forms of parliamentary monitoring. It will be demonstrated that parliaments (with considerable cross-national variations) have used – and continue to use – a broad range of formal and informal oversight mechanisms, which constrain the scope for presidentialization.

Introduction

Walter Bagehot (1888: 10), the eminent Victorian political analyst, deemed ‘the close union, the nearly complete fusion, of the executive and legislative powers’ as the ‘efficient secret of the English Constitution’. In the introduction to the second edition of The English Constitution (1888: lviii-lix), he characterises the main difference between the English and American systems of government, which have subsequently become models for parliamentary and presidential systems of governments, as follows:

The English Premier being appointed by the selection, and being removable at the pleasure, of the preponderant Legislative Assembly, is sure to be able to rely on that assembly. If he wants legislation to aid his policy he can obtain that legislation; he can carry out that policy. But the American President has no similar security. He is elected in one way, at one time, and Congress … is
elected in another way, at another time. The two have nothing to bind them
together, and in matter of fact, they continually disagree.'

With regard to the British parliamentary system of government, these
descriptions were canonised in generations of political-science textbooks at
least until the early 1960s. By the 1990s, this perspective found itself
increasingly challenged. Michael Foley (1993: 22) in his influential study, for
example, claims that prime-ministerial leadership in Britain, the mother of
parliaments, ‘has undergone changes since the late 1970s of such profundity
that they amount to a qualitative shift in the type of leadership that is now viable
in the British system of government.’ He diagnoses a new type of personal
leadership by the Prime Minister ‘that had previously been associated with the
American presidency’. Others disagree. Emphasising the division of labour and
mutual dependence between Prime Minister Blair and some of his senior
cabinet colleagues, *Times* columnist Peter Riddell (2000: 16), for instance, has
repeatedly challenged the notion of presidential government under Prime
Minister Blair: ‘The over-used term presidential about Tony Blair’s premiership
really applies only to presentation’ (Riddell 2000: 16).

This paper focuses on the relationship between parliament and
government in West European democracies. It examines whether there is
sufficient empirical evidence to support the ‘presidentialisation thesis’ as outlined
by Thomas Poguntke in his introductory paper as a research question. Is there
more to the thesis than the personal leadership ‘styles’ of particular prime
ministers? Are there discernible trends in the development of legislative-
executive relations that would justify the term ‘presidentialisation’ as a valid
description of gradual institutional change in Foley’s sense? In particular, is
there evidence of ‘an erosion of the unity of action of government and supporting parliamentary parties’ and a growing ‘independence’ of parliaments vis-à-vis governments as suggested in Poguntke’s (2000: 8) definition of ‘presidentialisation’?

My argument will be that the evidence does not support these propositions conclusively, at least not in their general form. I shall argue that – despite similar predictions of ‘presidentialisation’ in a number of West European democracies – the empirical literature on the subject does not find an unequivocal general trend towards ‘presidentialisation’. To be sure, there is considerable variation across political systems and over time. But on the whole, the ‘fusion’ of executive and legislative powers, the ‘efficient secret’ of parliamentary systems of government seems to have withstood the pressures generated by the causal factors outlined in Poguntke’s paper.

In the second section I shall briefly develop an analytical perspective derived from principal-agent theory. The analytical categories derived from this theoretical approach will be applied in the subsequent four sections. It will be attempted to operationalise a number of these categories and present some illustrative empirical evidence with a view to ‘test’ the presidentialisation hypothesis from the perspective of legislative-executive relations. The paper relies on the secondary analysis of published data. Despite the scarcity of valid comparative data (especially over time), some conclusions can be drawn from the data available in the final section.
Theoretical Perspective: Agency Problems in Executive-Legislative Relations

For the purposes of this paper, representative democracy will be conceived of as a chain of relations of delegation and accountability where voters elect (and delegate powers to) members of parliament (MPs), MPs delegate powers to governments, which formulate policies but delegate their implementation to specialised bureaucracies (Strøm 1995: 48). These processes of delegation and accountability can be considered as relations between principals and agents in the sense of much of the agency literature in the neo-institutional political science literature (cf. Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). The nature of these agency relationships varies between presidential and parliamentary systems of government (for simplified illustrations see Figures 1 and 2).

According to Strøm (2000: 58-59), ‘the ideal-typical parliamentary democracy features a single chain of command, in which at each link a single principal delegates to one and only one agent (or several non-competing ones), and where each agent is accountable to one and only one principal. This singularity principle … sets parliamentarism apart from other constitutional designs (e.g., United States presidentialism).’ Presidential democracy, by contrast, is characterised by a number of competing agency relationships as can be seen in Figure 1.
According to this view there would be considerable similarities between parliamentary systems of government and semi-presidential systems of government as far as the main relations of delegation and accountability are
concerned, since in all West European democracies save Switzerland the head of government is accountable, through a confidence relationship, to the parliamentary majority (Strøm 1995: 52).

Originally, principal-agent models were primarily concerned with the problem of asymmetry of information among contracting parties in economics. Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991) have made the concept more applicable to the study of political representation by stressing the role of authority rather than contract. In their definition an agency relationship ‘is established when an agent is delegated ... the authority to take action on behalf of ... the principal’ (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991: 239-240). In the case of a conflict of interest between principals (here: MPs) and agents (here: members of the cabinet), agency losses may occur when the latter exploit their informational advantage to the principal’s detriment. The opportunities for cabinet ministers to do so are vast.

Kiewiet and McCubbins identify four principal classes of measures which principals can employ in their effort to contain agency losses: ‘(1) contract design, (2) screening and selection mechanisms, (3) monitoring and reporting requirements, and (4) institutional checks’ (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991: 27). The first two mechanisms apply before the agency relationship is established (ex ante mechanisms), the latter two are of particular relevance thereafter (ex post mechanisms or on-going oversight). The members’ ultimate power to dismiss a government for political reasons tends to strengthen the various forms of ex-post oversight mechanisms at a parliament’s disposal, but it remains an instrument of last resort.

Any realistic study of agency problems in executive-legislative relations in Western Europe must recognise at least two key elements of legislative
organisation, however. First, the delegation process from members of parliament to the prime minister and his or her cabinet is mediated and controlled by political parties. The parliamentary parties form governments and organise the screening and monitoring of executive agents. The nature of a nation’s party system and the individual parties’ internal organisation shape the opportunity structure of executive oversight in parliamentary democracies. The organisation of parliamentary parties is likely to create agency problems within the parliamentary parties themselves. Second, members of parliament have responded to the growing information asymmetry between themselves and governments by committee specialisation. In doing so they have, again, created new agency relationships (and problems) between committee members and non-members, between ordinary backbenchers and the parliamentary parties’ policy experts, who often act on behalf of their parliamentary parties both in parliamentary committees and on the floor of the chamber. These agency problems within parties are essential to an understanding of the dynamics of parliamentary politics and executive-legislative relations in West European democracies. If this differentiation is increasing without countervailing control and co-ordination mechanisms, the expectation of an erosion of fused or unified powers should at least be plausible.

If the observation of a significant structural (rather than purely personal) trend towards ‘presidentialisation’ is correct, we would expect the agency relationships in most West European democracies to increasingly approximate the presidential model with (a) a significant loosening of the ties between the head of government (or the cabinet as a collective body) and parliament on the one hand and (b) an increasingly complex network of competing agency
relationships between the head of government, parliament, individual ministers and executive agencies on the other (see Figures 1 and 2). These developments should be reflected in the four principal ways parliaments, as principals, hold governments, their agents, accountable. In the following sections, I shall concentrate on point (a).

**Contract Design**

In the real world of parliamentary politics, governments and parliaments do not conclude ‘contracts’ in a strict sense of the word. Yet according to Strøm (1995: 74) a ‘contract’ in a wider sense can refer to ‘the set of terms on which the cabinet is allowed to take office.’ He identifies three possible political equivalents to contract design in economics: (1) mechanisms establishing shared interests between principals and agents (‘incentive compatibility’); (2) the rules by which prime ministers and their cabinets come to office (‘investiture rules’ or ‘formation rules’); and (3) rules pertaining to who will be asked to form governments, and in what order (‘recognition rules’) (Strøm 1995: 74-76). (4) In addition, the formal coalition agreements used in most West European parliaments between coalition parties often take the form of contracts in a stricter sense. Contract design in this more comprehensive sense constrains incoming governments in their future activities thus reducing the risk of government opportunism vis-à-vis the parliamentary principal (‘moral hazard’). These processes establish the link between parliament and government in a way that is typical for parliamentary systems of government.
Incentive compatibility. In parliamentary democracies political parties typically ensure at least a certain degree of ‘incentive compatibility’ between principals (those members of parliament who have chosen to support the government) and agents (the government ministers from that party). The vast majority of government ministers in West European democracies owe their political careers and eventual promotion to ministerial office to their position in their respective parties. In parliament, cabinet ministers and backbenchers of the same party are ‘in the same boat’ in a continuous election campaign against other parties. In this competitive situation, cabinet members ‘know that their fate is tied up with that of the backbenchers who support them. If the voters reject their party, they all go down together. The stronger the requirements of partisanship on the part of cabinet members, the more effective this bond’ (Strøm 1995: 74; see also King 1976: 15). The higher the share of cabinet members who are members of the respective government party and the more competitive government-

Figure 3: Parliamentary Recruitment of Cabinet Ministers in 13 West European Democracies ca. 1945-1984

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>1945-1984</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>62.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>61.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>68.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>80.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>94.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>95.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>96.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: De Winter (1991: 48)
opposition relations, the higher the degree of incentive compatibility and lower the risk of conflicts of interest between MPs and cabinet ministers. Where incentive compatibility is high (and the scope for conflicts of interest somewhat lower), principals may wish to rely less strongly on institutionalised oversight, constitutional constraints, direct ‘police-patrol oversight’ and specific dismissal arrangements, especially as common party membership allows MPs to ‘screen’ candidates for ministerial office as they move up the political ladder (see below). A continuously high degree of incentive compatibility (which is not typical of the divided government alluded to by Bagehot in the quote above) would be incompatible with the presidentialisation thesis.

It is difficult to find direct measures of incentive compatibility that could be applied to a large number of parliaments. De Winter (1991: 48) provides data on the share of cabinet ministers who were members of parliament before joining the cabinet for 13 West European countries (between the end of World War II and the end of 1984). Assuming that all, or virtually all, of the cabinet ministers with parliamentary backgrounds were members of a governing party, the share of cabinet ministers with an ‘apprenticeship’ in their respective parliamentary parties can be used as a proxy measure for the extent of incentive compatibility. Figure 3 illustrates that incentive compatibility – in our operationalisation – is highest in the Irish Republic, the United Kingdom and Italy and lowest in the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Unfortunately, we do not have similarly comprehensive data for the time after 1984. However, Cotta’s comparison of the periods ca. 1945-84 and 1964-1984 (1991: 181-2) do not suggest that
there is a general tendency towards a declining share of ministers recruited from, and – through various selection processes – chosen by, parliaments. Figure 4 presents the absolute differences between the share of cabinet ministers with parliamentary backgrounds in the period 1964-84 and the period ca. 1945-84. If there had been a general loosening of the link between parliaments and governments in terms of ministerial recruitment, most values should be negative. However, for seven out of the 14 parliaments the share of cabinet ministers with a parliamentary background increased in the latter two decades of the period covered by Cotta’s (1991) study generating positive values. In some cases (Luxembourg, Iceland, the Netherlands) these increases were substantial. In Ireland and Italy the share remains constant and in only four countries the share of cabinet ministers with a parliamentary background decreased in the latter two decades. In two cases (Norway and France), the decreases were small. Thus the comparative data available do not support the expectation that relations between parliament as principal and governments as agents have loosened in terms of incentive compatibility between 1945 and 1984 (and informal screening mechanisms, see below).
Investiture or formation rules. Investiture rules influence the extent to which prospective governments have to negotiate more or less explicit contracts with MPs from the government parties, before they are allowed to assume office. Bergman’s (1993: 56-58) distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ formation rules is particularly relevant in this context. In countries with ‘positive formation rules’ (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) a government must win a formal parliamentary investiture vote, before it can assume power. (The required majority may vary from an absolute majority like in Germany to a relative majority like in Belgium, Ireland or Italy.) In countries with ‘negative formation rules’ (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom) a government does not have to survive such a vote. Once appointed by the head of state, it remains in office as long as there is no vote of no confidence or censure passed against it. Thus ‘according to the negative rules, the onus is not on the government to prove that it is supported by
the parliament. Rather it is left to the parliament to prove that the government is not tolerated’ (Bergman 1993: 57).

Parliaments whose consent is required before a prospective government is allowed to take office seem to be in a strong position as governments need to win sufficient parliamentary support through advance negotiations with backbenchers and (parliamentary) party elites. Yet, there may be a trade-off between strong parliamentary ex-ante controls through positive formation rules and weaker ex-post oversight once the government has been formed. Positive investiture rules may make it a priori more difficult for parliamentary leaders to form a government, but as a result they may be less vulnerable to the danger of early dismissal once they are in office. Vice versa Bergman found ‘that a negatively formulated government formation rule facilitates minority governments’ (Bergman 1993: 61) whose existence may strengthen parliament’s (and the opposition’s) ability and incentives to subject the cabinet to effective on-going oversight as research on the Danish and Norwegian parliaments seems to indicate (Damgaard 1992: 47; Maor 1999; Strøm 1990: 235).

‘Recognition rules’ are another parliamentary constraint on cabinets which may force prospective governments to commit themselves to specific policies before they can assume office. Such rules specify ‘who will be asked to form governments, and in what order’ (Strøm 1995: 76). In his study of cabinet formation and dissolution processes in 17 West European countries, De Winter (1995) finds that heads of state (presidents or monarchs) are the formal nominators in all countries studied save Sweden, where the Speaker of Parliament is the formal nominator. There is considerable variation in the degree
of initiative the head of state enjoys and the extent to which he or she consults parliamentary and/or extra-parliamentary actors. In Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, the head of state is actively involved in the consultation process, in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway and the United Kingdom he or she is not involved at all, or only formally involved. In these cases the initiative rests, in practice, usually with parliamentary leaders. There is no evidence to suggest a general diminution of the role of parliaments over time, although there are, of course, cross-national differences.

Yet, the main determinant of parliamentary influence on government formation is the extent to which election results give parliamentary actors choices and leverage. Where the voters (and/or the electoral system) endow one party with an overall majority and electoral competition is intense (as is usually the case in Greece or the United Kingdom), cabinet formation is a relatively straightforward process. The voters as the ultimate democratic principal decide almost directly which party will hold office in the next parliament. Virtually the same holds for coalition governments in reasonably symmetrical bipolar party systems. In such cases, the direct link between party leaders and voters may be so dominant that parliamentary recognition rules are of secondary importance. When elections do not produce single-party overall majorities in parliament and/or parties are not cohesive, however, ‘the process is determined less by electoral outcomes than by institutional constraints; and by the expectations, goals and resources of all participants in the process, including the different types of parliamentary actors as well as parliament as a whole’ (De Winter 1995: 117-119).
**Coalition Agreements.** In many countries where coalition government is the norm, there may be formal contracts between the parties forming a government. Such contracts are important political constraints on cabinets in what Andeweg and Nijzink (1995: 153) call the ‘intra-coalition mode’ of executive-legislative relations. Coalition agreements are contracts designed to constrain the incoming cabinet’s ability to deviate opportunistically and without electoral cost, from the preferences of those parliamentary parties supporting it. Although coalition partners hardly ever command formal sanctions against ‘breaches’ of coalition agreements, government ministers accused of violating an agreement can be forced to justify in public why they did not keep certain promises. In doing so, they may be forced to share information about their conduct with parliament and the electorate. To the extent that such agreements are made public, they offer parliamentarians and party members

**Table 1: The Use of Written Coalition Agreements in 13 West European Parliaments Per Decade, 1945-1996**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1940s</th>
<th>1950s</th>
<th>1960s</th>
<th>1970s</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalition cabinets</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition cabinets based on a coalition agreement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries represent coalition cabinets that have assumed office in the decade in question.

*Source:* Strøm and Müller (1999: 266)
on the government side as well as the opposition and the general public a benchmark against which they can measure a government’s performance.

Formal coalition agreements are common practice in many West European parliaments. They vary greatly in length and content. They may tie a cabinet’s policy choices to a compromise between the parties forming the coalitions. Coalition agreements are always incomplete ‘contracts’ as the actors cannot foresee all future changes in the political environment. Therefore, they may devise procedural rules stipulating how unanticipated problems are to be dealt with. Such procedural rules in coalition agreements often serve as a coalition’s ‘constitution’. They may include a mutual promise of the parties not to vote against each other in parliament (coalition discipline) and to pursue parliamentary initiatives only, if all coalition parties agree. They may stipulate fundamental decision rules for cabinet meetings, for example, that no party shall be outvoted on important issues. Coalition agreements often establish a coalition committee in order to co-ordinate decision making on issues of fundamental importance and determine the involvement of parliamentary party leaders in government decisions. Such coalition committees often include leaders and experts of the parliamentary parties. They often specify the portfolio allocation between the coalition parties and provide consultation and decision rules for ministerial reshuffles. In most countries the largest part of coalition agreements is devoted to policy issues. In Austria, and to some extent in Portugal and Denmark, a significant part of coalition agreements tends to be devoted to procedural rules, the distribution of portfolios and the distribution of responsibilities within the coalition (for
details see Müller and Strøm 1997). The data in Table 1 suggest that the percentage of coalitions in Western Europe using formal coalition agreements has increased decade by decade since the 1940s. Given the fact that these agreements tie together not only parties but also parliamentary parties and government leaders, there is no evidence for a loosening of the link constituting the efficient secret of parliamentary democracy.

**Screening**

In most European countries, parliaments rely heavily on informal ‘screening’ and selection mechanisms to contain the problem of ‘adverse selection’ of government ministers. As Strøm (1995: 76) puts it, such procedures ‘aim to eliminate potentially troublesome cabinet members before they ever get into office.’ In systems where cabinet ministers go through a prolonged parliamentary ‘apprenticeship’ or, alternatively, gradually rise within their parties, fellow party members and Members of Parliament have opportunities to gather information on prospective ministers and (as selectorate) exert influence on their political careers.

Some cross-national variations in the parliamentary and party-political backgrounds of cabinet ministers have been discussed in the section on ‘incentive compatibility’. Table 2 provides additional data on the average number of years West European cabinet ministers have served in the national
Table 2: Parliamentary and Party Backgrounds of Cabinet Ministers (end of World War II until end of 1984)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>MPs</th>
<th>Average Seniority</th>
<th>Junior MPs</th>
<th>Senior MPs</th>
<th>National Party Leaders</th>
<th>Outsiders</th>
<th>Insiders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>years</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUT</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEL</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GER</td>
<td>73.6</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEN</td>
<td>78.8</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>28.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIN</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>39.9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRA</td>
<td>68.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GB</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRE</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>60.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITA</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>8.01</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUX</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NET</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOR</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>40.2</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWE</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


parliament prior to their appointment (‘average seniority’). At one extreme, the average British cabinet minister looks back at a parliamentary career of more than 12 years before he or she gets appointed to the cabinet. At the other extreme, the average parliamentary ‘apprenticeships’ of Belgian, Dutch, French and German cabinet ministers last only between seven and eight years. In the latter group of countries a relatively large number of politicians without long parliamentary careers are appointed to the cabinet, giving members of the governing parties less opportunities to screen and ‘filter’ potential candidates for ministerial positions in day-to-day parliamentary
interactions. These data suggest significant cross-national variations. Unfortunately they do not allow us to discern trends over time.

**Monitoring and Reporting**

Monitoring and reporting are ongoing processes, which occur after a cabinet has been formed. ‘Armed with the ultimate sanction of the no confidence vote, and many subtler weapons, members of parliament can insist on active oversight’ (Strøm 1995: 77). There are two fundamental mechanisms for parliaments to monitor governments: First, governments usually have the statutory obligation to provide parliament and the general public with regular (e.g., annual) reports on certain aspects of their activities. The publication of budgets may be seen as one of the most important regular reports governments have to make to parliament in order to have new funds approved by the chamber. Second, most parliaments have a number of constitutional devices at their disposal enabling them to obtain information from the government or other bodies at their own initiative. These instruments are particularly important for parliaments to gain independent information and redress the information asymmetry at least to a certain extent.

Within this second set of instruments it is possible to distinguish two principal forms of parliamentary oversight, which McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) have termed ‘police-patrol’ and ‘fire-alarm’ oversight. Most monitoring activities discussed in the literature fit the description of ‘police-patrol oversight’ where parliaments, at their own initiative, examine samples of executive activity, with the aim of detecting and remedying any violations of legislative goals and,
by their surveillance, deterring such violations. Critiques of parliamentary oversight usually focus on the perceived inadequacy of such mechanisms. Yet, it is often overlooked that parliaments also employ ‘fire-alarm oversight’, which complements and reinforces ‘police-patrol oversight’. ‘Fire-alarm oversight’ entails the establishment of a system of rules, procedures, and informal practices enabling interested third parties (e.g., individual citizens, interest groups or other actors) to examine the implementation of policy, charge executive agencies with violating parliamentary goals and seek remedies from agencies, courts, and parliaments themselves. A parliament’s role in this often neglected form of oversight ‘consists in creating and perfecting this decentralized system and, occasionally, intervening in response to complaints’ (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984:166). The contribution of interested outside actors may reduce a parliament’s transaction (especially information) costs of monitoring significantly. The focus of this section will largely be on ‘police-patrol oversight’. A few examples of ‘fire-alarm oversight’ will be briefly reviewed in the penultimate section.

There are a number of ways governments may be required to report on their activities. Plenary debates in which government ministers have to justify their policies in the face of criticism by the opposition are one traditional device. Transmitted by the media, such debates are particularly important to inform the ultimate democratic principal, the voters, on the government’s record and political alternatives. Yet, debates on the floor of the chamber are not the most important monitoring device members of parliament employ. The choice of monitoring devices and the extent to which governments are prepared to share information depends to a large extent on whether a
member belongs to a government party or an opposition party. King (1976) has therefore suggested a distinction between different ‘modes’ of executive-legislative relations, which are essentially defined by the party membership of the relevant actors and their position in the party hierarchy. In the present context, two ‘modes’ are of particular relevance: the ‘intra-party mode’ focusing on the relationship between ministers and government backbenchers and the ‘opposition mode’ characterising the relationship between ministers and government backbenchers on the one side and members of the opposition on the other.

**Intra-party mode.** Despite a high degree of ‘incentive compatibility’ conflicts of interest between government backbenchers and ministers are not infrequent. The electoral incentives of cabinets and party leaders wishing to maintain a broad national electoral coalition may conflict with the policy preferences and interests of specific constituencies represented by MPs. The constraints under which governments operate may frustrate government backbenchers feeling that the party’s policy preferences are being betrayed. Unsuccessful cabinets or ministers may harm the electoral chances of the whole party and affect the government backbenchers’ re-election chances. Therefore, government backbenchers have incentives to monitor the behaviour of ‘their’ ministers despite the generally high degree of ‘incentive compatibility’ discussed above.

The monitoring carried out by the parliamentary majority party or parties can be very effective as the government depends on their votes and other forms of support. Empirical studies of decision making in parliamentary parties (cf. Norton 1993; Saalfeld 1998a; Schüttemeyer 1998) have shown
that this support is conditional and cannot be taken for granted by government ministers. Backbench influence is difficult to verify, because discussions between ministers and government backbenchers are often conducted ‘behind closed doors’, and governments frequently try to anticipate ab initio the extent to which a planned measure is acceptable to government backbenchers. Information about such processes is rarely shared with those members belonging to the parliamentary minority and the wider public. This lack of general publicity reduces the reluctance of ministers to provide information and listen to government backbenchers.

Monitoring and influence in the intra-party mode can only be successful, however, if backbench members of the governing parties are not entirely dependent on voluntary information by the government. Parliamentary parties with a sufficiently large number of members have often responded to the information asymmetry by building up a specialised internal infrastructure based on departmentally-related working groups and/or certain socio-economic interests. Institutionalised division of labour allows members of parliament to specialise and gain expertise in certain policy areas and access relevant information more successfully. Yet, specialisation also creates hierarchies and agency problems within the parliamentary parties. The parliamentary parties’ caucuses often delegate powers to elected officers of the parliamentary party such as the chairpersons, deputy chairpersons, whips or the chairpersons of specialised working groups. In the major German parliamentary parties (Social Democrats and Christian Democrats), for example, most working groups shadow a government department and prepare virtually all major decisions of the caucus. The majority of chairs of specialised working groups
are experienced, respected and influential policy experts who have privileged access to ministerial information and are taken seriously by government departments. The chairpersons of governing parliamentary parties are usually members of key coalition committees and coalition talks in which the major policy decisions are taken. On the one hand this differentiated organisation institutionalises the influence of parliamentary (non-government) elites on cabinet decisions. On the other hand it contributes to the existence of several ‘classes’ of members (simple backbenchers, policy experts, lobbyists and ministers) with varying degrees of influence and the generation of agency problems within the parliamentary parties.

Opposition mode. One key dimension of executive-legislative relations is what King (1976: 17-18) calls the ‘opposition mode’ which is ‘characterized by, indeed defined by, conflict’ (King 1976: 18). Public clashes between government and opposition in parliament may not always be popular with the electorate. Yet, as Keith Krehbiel (1991: 84) shows in the context of Congressional committees in the United States, specialists from opposite sides of a policy spectrum are (as a result of their controversial debates) collectively more informative to the other members of the parliamentary chamber than specialists from only one side of the spectrum. Governments will have incentives to share information with all members of parliament, if this is necessary to defend their activities in controversial debates. Parliamentarians will have incentives to share information with the voters, if there is public competition between politically opposing forces. Although opposition members do not enjoy the direct sanctions available to government backbenchers (withdrawal of support), it is not necessarily powerless: ‘Even if the opposition knows that it is unlikely to be able to defeat
Table 3: Forms of Parliamentary Questioning in West European Parliaments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Written Question</th>
<th>Oral Question</th>
<th>Urgent Question</th>
<th>Topical Hour</th>
<th>Interpellation with censure motion</th>
<th>Interpellation without censure motion</th>
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government initiatives, it can force the executive to defend publicly what it has proposed. In doing so, the opposition fixes accountability for the government’s actions and puts itself in a position to assess a political cost for these actions at the next general election’ (Mezey 1998: 784). Despite an undeniable tendency towards ‘presidential statements’ to the media, parliamentary oppositions can still inflict political costs on governments, especially if and when they interact with the media.

Parliaments have a whole ‘arsenal’ of different tools to extract information from governments, to monitor their activities and to induce them to defend their decisions. In the reality of parliamentary systems of government, the incentives to use those tools are particularly strong for the opposition (cf. Maor 1999: Saalfeld 1998a). Table 3 shows a selection of different forms of parliamentary
questioning in the parliaments of Western Europe. According to Wiberg (1995: 185), the most typical forms of parliamentary questions include ‘some sort of oral questions presented at a fixed Question Time on a regular basis, written questions, which are not answered or debated at all in the chambers, and interpellations.’ In some cases interpellations may be no more than an attempt of the parliamentary principal to extract information from the government on an important issue. In other cases, they may ‘call into question the responsibility of the Government (or the Minister concerned) by tabling a motion on which the Assembly must take a decision, which then amounts to a motion of censure’ (Wiberg 1995:186). Most parliaments also use ‘urgent’ questions that enjoy preferential treatment in parliamentary timetable and ‘Topical Hours’ where Parliaments debate problems of particular current interest.

There are, however, significant differences in the extent to which opposition parties are constrained in the use of such tools and/or to which they have incentives to use them. First and foremost, the opportunities for opposition parties to press the government for information in the chamber are inversely related to the government’s control of the parliamentary agenda. Herbert Döring (1995) has provided the most comprehensive comparative assessment of agenda control in West European parliaments to date. He develops a seven-point ordinal scale ranging from 1 (‘the government alone determines the parliamentary agenda’) to 7 (‘the chamber itself determines the agenda’) and classifies 18 West European parliaments. Governments have relatively little or no unilateral control over the parliamentary agenda in Italy and the Netherlands. In Ireland and the United Kingdom the government controls the agenda unilaterally, although consensus is often sought with the major opposition party.
In France and Greece the government has a disproportionate majority in a parliamentary president's conference setting the agenda. Most West European

Table 4: Government’s Authority to Determine Parliament’s Plenary Agenda

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<th>VII</th>
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<tr>
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| More government control | less government control |

I. The Government alone determines the plenary agenda.
II. In a President's Conference the government commands a majority larger than its share of seats in the chamber.
III. Decision by majority rule at President's Conference where party groups are proportionally represented.
IV. Consensual agreement of party groups sought in President's Conference but right of the plenary majority to overturn the proposal.
V. President's decision after consultation of party groups cannot be challenged by the chamber.
VI. Fragmentation of agenda-setting centres if unanimous vote of party leaders cannot be reached.
VII. The Chamber itself determines the agenda.


parliaments do not belong to either of these extreme categories and share control of the parliamentary agenda with the government.

Yet, even if the government does not have the power to control the parliamentary agenda unilaterally, the opposition may have little incentive to pursue a competitive strategy, which provides one of the conditions for a parliament to share information efficiently with the electorate. If the opposition has a chance to exert quiet influence on government policy in parliamentary committees or extra-parliamentary bodies (neo-corporatist bodies, inter-ministerial committees of national and regional governments in federal states or other actors in the institutional ‘environment’ sketched in Figure 1), it may have
little incentive and credibility to engage in a constant parliamentary battle with the government (Saalfeld 1998a: 66-67). Conversely, Maor (1999) argues that in Norway, with a long tradition of minority governments and a divided opposition unable to challenge these governments, opposition MPs had both strong incentives and the opportunity to strengthen parliamentary oversight mechanisms. The key points are that parliaments can be and are used as platforms to mobilise voters both by governments and oppositions and (b) that parliamentary procedure provides legitimacy to government policy, but can also be used to delay government legislation thus reinforcing the dependence of the government on parliamentary assent.

Committees. In most parliaments, specialised committees are the single most important institutional means of monitoring and information acquisition. With a few exceptions (Ireland, the United Kingdom) most West European parliaments have permanent specialised legislative committees with varying degrees of specialisation. In most cases they are either subject-based or correspond with the main ministerial departments. In the United Kingdom, legislation is usually referred to ad hoc committees, whereas the monitoring of government activities is delegated to specialised and permanent scrutiny committees, which by and large do correspond with the main departments (Mattson and Strøm 1995).
Strong committees can help to reduce the imbalance in policy expertise between governments as agents and members of parliament as their principals. They ‘can provide legislators with the information that they need to participate effectively with the executive across a wide range of policy areas’ (Mezey 1998: 783). Yet, as Krehbiel’s (1991) study of the US Congress shows, committees may not always have strong incentives to share their expertise as a public good with the chamber as a whole. In the context of parliamentary systems of government, they may even become ‘accomplices’ of certain government ministries in their distributional conflicts with other ministries. For example, there are often tacit alliances between ministries of agriculture and agriculture
committees in parliament, or between finance ministries and the respective appropriations committee. If a significant trend towards presidentialisation existed and manifested itself in a weakening ‘of the formerly tight unity of action between government and parliamentary majority’ (Poguntke 2000: 14) such alliances might be expected frequently. At any rate, committees should have a high (and growing) degree of independence from control of their agenda by the floor majority and the government. While we do not have reliable data over time, there are some interesting cross-national differences, which are captured in Figure 5.

Parliaments vary considerably in the extent to which they delegate monitoring and law-making powers to committees. (Law making per se is not a monitoring activity, but parliamentary involvement in legislation at an early stage induces the government to share important information on policy with the parliament.) To describe the general leeway the chamber majorities (i.e., usually governments) grant committees in different West European parliaments, two dimensions of committee autonomy were taken from Döring’s (1995: 234, 236) study of government agenda setting powers. The first dimension measures to what extent the committee deliberations of bills are constrained by a preceding plenary decision. The second dimension accounts for a committee’s power to rewrite bills. The two dimensions can be expected to be related. Figure 3 shows that this expectation largely holds, although there is no one-to-one relationship. The countries are grouped according to the two dimensions: stage of committee intervention (X) and power to rewrite bills in committee (Y). The higher the value of the ordinal variables Y (1,2,3,4) and X (1,2,3), the more independence committees enjoy.
(see the table’s legend for coding criteria). Figure 5 illustrates that the government majorities in Ireland and the United Kingdom have kept a very tight grip on committee proceedings on both dimensions. In Spain, the plenary leaves the committees relatively little to decide in the legislative process by deciding about the principles of the bill before it reaches committee stage. At committee stage, the committee majority is relatively free to make (minor) amendments to government bills. In Denmark, France and the Netherlands, the amendment powers of committees are relatively circumscribed. The parliaments of Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden, by contrast, enjoy a relatively high degree of independence. The institutional rules of these parliaments would allow scope for growing independence of committee and government in line with the predictions for presidentialisation.

The observation of a strengthening of committee independence underestimates the extent to which parliamentary party groups and serve as an organisational ‘bracket’ between parliamentary parties, committees and government ministers of the respective party (see above and, e.g., Saalfeld 2000a). Depending on the nature of the organisation of a parliamentary party, governments may control committees via disciplined parliamentary parties and without recourse to formal parliamentary rules of procedure. In parliaments where the parliamentary parties maintain specialised working groups parallel to the parliamentary committee structure and overlapping memberships (for example, in Germany), by contrast, committee deliberations feed back directly into intra-party discussions and committees are less likely to become quasi-autonomous privileged groups with extreme preferences unrepresentative of the parliamentary parties and the floor majority. Yet
empirical studies of committees, for example in Germany (Johnson 1979), show that committees are more than merely an instrument of the parliamentary majority. Nevertheless, I am not aware of convincing evidence that the linkage between parliamentary majority parties and government ministers is weakening as a result of committee independence. At least the larger parliamentary parties have the means of achieving the bracket function mentioned above.

Ex-Post Control: Parliaments and Government Resignations

Unlike in presidential systems of government, the elected chambers in parliamentary systems of government have the power to dismiss a government for political reasons. A government that does not enjoy the confidence of the elected lower house of parliament has to resign. This constitutes the parliamentary principal’s ultimate sanction vis-à-vis the government. Resignation rules vary across countries. In countries where resignation rules make it relatively easy for parliament to dismiss a government, the latter has to be more careful in maintaining its parliamentary base. This may put members of the majority party in a relatively strong position vis-à-vis ‘their’ government and reinforce the general agency relationship between parliaments and governments. Conversely, however, a government may threaten its resignation in order to bring unruly backbenchers back into line.

In some countries constitutional conventions ensure that a government will step down after a defeat on a major bill, even if it is constitutionally not obliged to. In other countries the constitution or conventions stipulate that a
government must resign after a defeat on a vote that has expressly been declared to be a matter of confidence. In Germany, Spain and (since 1995) Belgium, the rules are even more restrictive: only a constructive vote of no confidence will bring a government down, that is, a government only has to resign if an absolute majority dismisses it by simultaneously electing an alternative government.

In analogy to Bergman’s (1993) distinction between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ formation rules, De Winter (1995: 137-138) suggests to distinguish between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ resignation rules. He speaks of ‘positive resignation rules’, if an absolute majority of all Members of Parliament is necessary to unseat a government, whereas he describes as ‘negative resignation rules’ systems where a vote of censure passed by a relative majority of the Members of Parliament suffices to unseat a government. The various rules are summarised in Table 5. The Table also underlines that the majority’s ultimate sanction is not an empty threat. In a number of countries, a substantial share of governments fell as a direct result of a loss of parliamentary support.
Prima facie it would be plausible to say that the lower the threshold for government resignation, the stronger a parliament’s position *vis-à-vis* the government will tend to be. However, this is convincing only up to a point. As the fate of the Weimar Republic illustrates, a parliament with strong powers of government dismissal may contribute to permanent government instability, parliamentary stalemate and paradoxically weaken the parliamentary delegation process as a whole in favour of stronger presidential intervention and/or polarised electoral competition.

Have there been changes over time? Arend Lijphart’s (1999) index of executive dominance, which is based on several measures of cabinet stability (i.e., the extent to which cabinets fail as a result of lacking parliamentary support) seems to be a useful proxy measure for government dependence on parliament and
the fusion of executive and legislative powers in parliamentary systems of government. It ranges from a minimum of 1.00 for the presidential system of the USA and the assembly-independent system of Switzerland to a maximum of 5.52 (France, United Kingdom). Figure 6 represents the absolute differences between the index for the periods 1971-96 and ca. 1945-96. If there has been a significant amount of ‘de-coupling’ between parliaments and governments (especially prime ministers) during the last two decades, the values for executive dominance should generally increase for most West European parliaments as prime ministers would have become more secure from a loss of parliamentary majority. However, Figure 6 suggests a (sometimes only minor) reduction of executive dominance in eight out of 17 parliaments, a finding which is not in line with the presidentialisation hypothesis. In five parliaments there was no change, including the new democracies of Greece, Portugal and Spain, which should be disregarded in this context. Only in four countries executive dominance vis-à-vis parliament (measured by using Lijphart’s operationalisation) increased (especially in Luxembourg and Germany). Again, there is little evidence for a decline in the ‘vulnerability’ of prime ministers and their governments to be overthrown in parliament.

Conclusion

The twentieth century has witnessed the spread of democratic parliamentary government throughout Western Europe. After a series of democratic regime breakdowns in the inter-war period, countries such as Germany, Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain have matured to fully-fledged and stable parliamentary democracies since 1945. Yet West European parliaments have faced new
challenges: With the growing scope of state activity and an increasing tendency of governments to delegate policy making to networks of experts outside the classical chain of democratic delegation and accountability, the information asymmetries between governments and parliaments have become more precarious. The scope for ‘hidden action’ and ‘moral hazard’ on the governments’ part has increased contributing to a long tradition of academic works about the ‘decline of parliaments’ in Western Europe. Nevertheless, the analysis of legislative-executive relations does not suggest a gradual development of parliamentary democracies towards a significantly more presidential model.

Neither does the evidence presented in this paper suggest that the confidence relationship between parliament and government, which is typical of parliamentary systems of government, had been broken, nor does it suggest that there has been a significant loosening of the delegation and accountability mechanisms between governments and parliaments.
References


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