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1

Introduction: the government survival debates

The liberal democratic world is composed for the most part of two very different regime types: the presidential and the parliamentary. Needless to say, comparisons between the two have long been a stock-in-trade of political analysts and propagandists. Typically, the presidential system – I take the United States as the prototype – is praised for its elaborate separation and balancing of powers, its constitutionally enshrined protection of individual rights and freedoms, and its governmental stability. There is a price to be paid for these advantages, however, and it is usually seen in the multifarious possibilities for stalemate or deadlock between formally separate institutions of government (Congress vs. president, Senate vs. House of Representatives, etc.). When these stalemates become serious, U.S. observers occasionally turn an admiring eye toward the parliamentary regime of Britain, where the fusion of executive and legislative powers under a disciplined, majoritarian party appears to open the door to rapid and coherent government action – even if the lack of checks on executive power is regretted.

While the “Westminster model” of parliamentary government is highly respected, a similar regard is seldom extended to the parliamentary system of government as a whole; the functioning of what is essentially the same regime type in Italy, for instance, more often elicits criticism or ridicule than praise. This bifurcation in perceptions of parliamentary government stems from the fact that its fundamental principles do not in themselves guarantee that decisive government action will be possible. For governments in parliamentary systems to act decisively – indeed, even to survive – they usually require the support of cohesive and disciplined parliamentary majorities.¹ In systems where such majorities cannot be assembled, the consequence may be not merely policy stalemate (presidentism’s dilemma), but also a feature that presidential systems expressly rule out – rapid changes of government. If parliamentary government can seem superior to presidential government at times, it can also seem far worse: not only ineffective but unstable to boot.

This Janus-faced nature of parliamentarism is more than a curiosity to political scientists; to a considerable extent, it provoked the rapid development of the comparative politics subfield in the 1950s and 1960s. Two “real world” concerns were uppermost in the minds of democratic theorists at the time: would democratic gov-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Government survival in parliamentary democracies*

ernment take root in the defeated powers of the Second World War – (West) Germany, Italy, and Japan – and could it be implanted in the numerous new states then emerging from the breakup of colonial empires? The prior experiences of the Axis powers with representative institutions were not auspicious. In Germany, a democratic regime created in the aftermath of the First World War had fallen victim to ideological polarization, party-system fragmentation, and governmental instability before finally succumbing to a Nazi movement bent on territorial expansion. Italy and Japan also had seen parliamentary institutions give way to expansionist authoritarian governments in the interwar period. Despite these experiences, all three countries had become parliamentary democracies in the wake of their military defeats. As for the new states, the predominant tendency was for them to adopt parliamentarism, in part because their erstwhile colonial rulers (usually Britain or France) were themselves parliamentary. The future of liberal democracy – then perceived to be in global conflict with international communism – thus appeared to be intimately tied to the parliamentary model of government, with all the risks that model entailed.

The theoretical lesson taken from the weakness or collapse of democratic regimes in the 1920s and 1930s was that democratic political institutions, at least in their parliamentary versions, do not in themselves guarantee a thriving democracy – something more is involved. Early pioneers of comparative politics, such as Almond and Verba (1963), found that extra ingredient in the concept of political culture. Democratic institutions, in their view, required democratic or “civic” attitudes and orientations – tolerance of dissent, bonds of solidarity across political divisions, emotional attachment to the regime – to sustain them. It became important, therefore, to examine cultures as well as institutions and to assess the “fit” between the two. This connection was seen not just by political scientists but also by policy makers. In Europe, both the determined effort in West Germany to inculcate democratic values through the school system and the establishment in France of a hybrid parliamentary-presidential regime in 1958 (the Fifth Republic) may be interpreted as efforts to improve the fit between political culture and democratic institutions.

Tracing the source of parliamentarism’s divergent outcomes to society’s cultural foundations possesses a strong intuitive appeal; after all, how could one expect a democratic regime to function stably and effectively if its citizens are not guided in their political behavior by democratic values and orientations? Nevertheless, on closer examination, the connection between the political orientations of the average citizen and the functioning of parliamentary government became somewhat murky, given that (1) most citizens have relatively little involvement in politics and (2) the political elites who operate the system often do not share mass political orientations. There were, in addition, the very successes of West Germany in transforming cultural values (Conradt 1980) and of France in institutional engineering to get around them to be reckoned with; neither is particularly compatible with a strong interpretation of the constraining role of culture.

Political culturalists were not oblivious to the need to establish a more tangible linkage between mass political attitudes and elite institutional functioning. For the

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Paul V. Warwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the government survival debates*

3

most part, the interpretation they favored was that cultural traits such as political distrust, intolerance, and the lack of overarching bonds of solidarity undermine democratic functioning because they reflect a society divided along fundamental lines.² Given the opportunity, societies composed of hostile, distrusting subgroups typically tend to produce party systems mirroring these divisions, and where no subgroup is majoritarian, it may be very difficult to find sufficient interparty agreement on policy issues to generate stable coalition governments. In such circumstances, the result is likely to be governments that fall apart quickly because they cannot agree on what to do, or else occupy power only so long as they agree to do nothing.

This interpretation of parliamentarism's darker face, although very popular, has never gained universal acceptance. Its most persistent challenger is a perspective that views politics in the Italian and French parliamentary republics in a fundamentally opposed way. Where the standard interpretation sees ideological divisiveness as a fundamental characteristic of parliamentary life in these regimes, exponents of this latter view see collegiality; where the first view sees instability, they see stability, even excessive stability. The key for this school is the actual behavior of parliamentarians. Although ideological differences may appear to be highly developed and strongly articulated in these systems, various observers (Jouvenel 1914; Leites 1959; Lapalombara 1987) have noted that relations among parliamentarians of different parties are guided by elaborate rules of courtesy and respect; the advancement of careers, not the cultivation of principle, appears to be the true goal of political life. More significantly, beneath the apparent instability of governments lies a profound stability of ministers. Governments change frequently but they are made up largely of the same parties and the same individuals. The politeness of parliamentary life reflects this reality; cabinet ministers may disagree with their coalition partners, yet their conduct is tempered by an awareness that they will probably have to collaborate with them in future governments. Indeed, the very stability of ministers may provoke the largely epiphenomenal instability of governments: because party leaders know that their support will be needed to form future coalition governments, they may defect from the present one all the more easily. Governmental instability, in this view, is more often the result of the jockeying for position in the next government than it is a question of policy differences, and the fundamental weakness of these regimes is more likely to be not extreme instability, but extreme stability induced by the relative absence of turnover in governmental personnel.

These two interpretations seem diametrically opposed, but the gap may not be as unbridgeable as it appears. For one thing, it is possible to argue that the elaborate rules of courtesy and the pervasive careerism manifest in the parliamentary arenas of these regimes are consequences of the intense political divisions among parties and the resultant inability of any one party to achieve its political program – in other words, that policy gridlock induces a displacement of objectives.³ For another, since even supporters of the more “benign” perspective would be reluctant to describe these regimes as models of democratic governance, it may be suspected that the differences in interpretation have more to do with different usages of the

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Paul V. Warwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Government survival in parliamentary democracies*

term *stability* than with different evaluations of the systems themselves. Sartori (1976), in a classic study of party systems, provided a framework that clarifies these points.

The thrust of Sartori's approach is to divide competitive party systems into two basic types, each with its own "mechanics." The first type, which comprises two-party systems and moderate pluralist (three- to five-party) systems, is "bipolar" in its operation: two sides, composed of either single parties or coalitions of parties, compete with each other for political power. In this competition, each side moderates its political position in an attempt to win a majority of parliamentary seats in general elections; and the result, at least over the long term, will usually be an alternation in power between the two. This type corresponds, generally speaking, to the stable and effective variant of parliamentary government.

The second type identified by Sartori characterizes party systems that are fragmented (usually more than five significant parties) and polarized ideologically. Its most essential structural feature is the existence of sizable "antisystem" parties at both extremes of the Left–Right political spectrum. Because antisystem parties are usually considered unacceptable as coalition partners, governing majorities must be formed from the remaining prosystem parties. The result is perpetual rule from the center. Coalitions composed of the center plus the moderate Right may alternate with coalitions of the center plus the moderate Left, but as long as the extremes of Right and Left are large, the center itself must remain in power. Even so, governmental instability is rife in these systems. Governments collapse easily because they necessarily include diverse coalition partners (given the ideological polarization of the entire system) and because many of these partners know they risk little in abandoning governments as their advantage dictates: their chances of returning to office are excellent.

In policy terms, the consequence of perpetual center rule is immobilism: the divisions within governing coalitions, the fact that they usually contain one or more parties committed to the status quo, and the lack of a viable alternative waiting in the wings all ensure that government action will be difficult to come by. Rather than focusing on policy, therefore, coalition partners or potential coalition partners turn their attention to things that can be achieved: career advancement, patronage allocation, logrolling on the less charged issues, and so forth. From this follows the distinction between the "visible" politics of ideological rhetoric and the "invisible" (and thus apparently more fundamental) politics of polite pragmatism that fascinates students of the parliamentary scene and disgusts partisans of its various ideological tendencies.

Sartori's analysis of polarized pluralism not only accommodates manifestations of both ideological and pragmatic political behavior; it also encompasses both stability and instability. Simply put, the instability resides in the high rate of government turnover, whereas the stability refers to the high probability that subsequent governments will resemble their predecessors in party composition and ministerial personnel. *Immobilism* is probably a better term for the latter characteristic because it references not only the continuity in personnel but the policy stalemate as

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Paul V. Warwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the government survival debates*

5

well. This stalemate is important in Sartori's analysis because it contributes to a migration of popular support toward the antisystem parties and thus to the overall instability of this type of parliamentary system – its instability in a larger sense.

From the observation that parliamentary systems seem to subdivide into stable, effective Westminster-style variants and chaotic, immobilist “Italian” types, we have moved to a consideration of cultural characteristics, the societal divisions they reflect, and the very different party-system types that result from both. In Sartori's framework, the Janus-faced nature of parliamentarism is traced to one key intervening factor, the bifurcation in the mechanics of competitive party systems. The absence of disciplined, majoritarian parties or coalitions identified earlier as a major impediment to effective government in some parliamentary systems is thereby accounted for as an intrinsic feature of their party systems.

The very Manicheism of the framework, so appealing from a theoretical standpoint because of its lack of ambiguity, involves a price, however: vulnerability at an empirical level. While it can be plausibly argued that the German Weimar Republic (1919–33) and the French Fourth Republic (1946–58), whose party systems displayed all the basic characteristics of polarized pluralism, were weak regimes that commanded little popular support and fell easily in crisis situations, the present Italian regime has defied predictions of an early demise. The destabilizing tendency of Italian voters to migrate to the political extremes, which Sartori demonstrated for the period before 1975, has largely waned since that time; even the present corruption crisis feeds calls for reform of the system rather than its dissolution. Like the French Third Republic (1875–1940), the Italian parliamentary regime has displayed a staying power, despite the periods of economic difficulty and political turmoil, that sustains the more benign interpretation of its government instability.

Another indication that the dichotomy between moderate and polarized pluralism may be too extreme can be found in comparative data on government durations. Table 1.1 presents, in ascending order, the mean durations of governments in sixteen West European parliamentary democracies for the postwar period up till 1989.⁴ Although the order of regimes clearly progresses from polarized pluralist systems (Fourth Republic France and Italy) to moderate pluralist systems, there is no sharp break in the series. Rather, the list of mean durations resembles a continuum with no obvious place to draw a distinction between stable and unstable systems. The real world does not seem as clear-cut as the theory would lead us to expect.

These observations do not in themselves invalidate Sartori's party-system framework, but they do suggest the need for further empirical study of the determinants of government survival across a diverse set of parliamentary systems. If the benign or pragmatic interpretation of government instability is to be effectively countered, convincing evidence would have to be produced that issues of ideology or policy undermine the ability of governments to survive in office and implement policies. Sartori's analysis follows, and systematizes, a long-standing hypothesis that identifies the ideological diversity within governments as crucial

6 *Government survival in parliamentary democracies*

Table 1.1. *Mean government duration in sixteen West European parliamentary systems (1945-89)*

| Country | Period | Mean duration in days |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| France (Fourth Republic) | 1945-58 | 141.6 |
| Italy | 1948-89 | 251.0 |
| Portugal | 1976-89 | 312.3 |
| Finland | 1947-89 | 319.1 |
| Belgium | 1946-89 | 450.4 |
| Denmark | 1945-89 | 578.5 |
| Netherlands | 1946-89 | 649.7 |
| West Germany | 1949-89 | 671.0 |
| Sweden | 1948-89 | 744.6 |
| Norway | 1945-89 | 753.7 |
| Iceland | 1947-89 | 779.2 |
| Austria | 1945-89 | 800.6 |
| United Kingdom | 1945-89 | 850.2 |
| Spain | 1979-89 | 925.8 |
| Ireland | 1948-89 | 935.0 |
| Luxembourg | 1945-89 | 1,106.6 |

Note: These data are based on the CDS definition of governments, discussed in Chapter 2. Alternative definitions produce only slight changes in the means.

in this regard, yet largely because this factor is inherently so difficult to measure, its empirical connection with government survival has only rarely been investigated.

Nor is this the only plausible linkage between ideology and government survival. Game-theoretic models, which have become common in recent years, posit an alternative means by which the ideological or policy positions of parties may affect the survival of governing coalitions. The basic premise of these models is that coalitions fall apart, not because their members cannot agree among themselves, but because the larger parliamentary environment affords at least one member party the possibility of entering an alternative coalition whose policy position will be more favorable to itself. In other words, it is not the difficulties within existing coalitions so much as it is the prospects of better deals elsewhere that lead parties to terminate coalitions. This is a very different hypothesis from the ideological diversity hypothesis, but it, too, has received little empirical investigation. Moreover, none of it has been conducted in direct confrontation with the ideological diversity hypothesis.

Other hypotheses could be mentioned at this point, but the ones introduced so far are sufficient to establish the conclusion that theoretical work on government survival has run ahead of empirical testing. A great deal of energy has been ex-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the government survival debates*

7

pended over the past twenty-five years to develop theories and models that can account for (or explain away) variations in government survival in and across parliamentary regimes, but relatively little has been established in a rigorous manner. The consequences of this situation are serious: it means, among other things, that we still cannot be sure whether to interpret governmental instability as epiphenomenal or fundamental to system performance. This study's primary objective is to redress this imbalance.

THE DEBATE OVER THE NATURE OF THE PHENOMENON

The preceding discussion raises some very basic questions about the sources of government survival in parliamentary regimes, but behind them lurks an even more basic one: is causality involved at all? The scholarly debate as characterized in the preceding section rests on the assumption that survival in office depends on one or more causal processes that, in principle, are identifiable through further empirical work. From this perspective, the fact that researchers continue to disagree over the role ideology or policy plays in government survival is attributable to nothing more than the difficulties of measuring accurately the ideological positions of parties. The unspoken premise is that government survival must be approached from a causal perspective, even if every suspected cause cannot readily be measured.

Most of the empirical work done on government survival since the 1960s conforms to this basic epistemological stance. It has repeatedly been shown that majority governments survive longer than minority ones (Blondel 1968; Sanders and Herman 1977) and that minimal winning governments – governments that need all of their member parties to command a parliamentary majority – are more long-lived than other governments (Laver 1974). Dodd (1976) demonstrated that duration increases as governments approach the minimal winning condition. If the incentive of holding onto power keeps coalitions together, it has also been shown – in fairly rudimentary ways – that ideological diversity may have the opposite effect. Axelrod (1970) combined the minimal winning condition with the stipulation that the coalition members be adjacent on a Left–Right continuum and found that these “minimal connected winning” coalitions lasted significantly longer. De Swaan (1973) reported some explanatory value in replacing the connectedness criterion with that of minimal range on the Left–Right continuum. I produced evidence indicating that the involvement of both socialist and nonsocialist parties or clerical and nonclerical parties in governing coalitions undermines their durability (Warwick 1979). That bargaining complexity is inimical to longevity is suggested by evidence that party-system fragmentation is associated with shorter durations (Taylor and Herman 1971; Sanders and Herman 1977). Finally, Robertson (1983a, 1983b, 1983c) reported evidence that economic conditions, especially unemployment levels, are statistically linked to government survival. This list of reported relationships is not exhaustive, but it does reflect the overall correspondence between empirical findings and commonsense causality.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Notwithstanding the common sense, the causal focus of this research came under fundamental attack in the 1980s from a group of scholars headed by E. C. Browne. Their starting point was the observation that “with one exception, none of these studies has been able to explain more than 20 to 30 percent of the variation in government or coalition duration. This is not a very impressive result for more than ten years of empirical work” (Browne, Frendreis, and Gleiber 1986:630). Against the orthodox view that further progress depends only on better measures of some of the independent variables, Browne et al. (1986:634) argued that “the existing methodology has, perhaps, reached an upper level of predictability.” Rather than develop a better methodology to advance the process of causal explanation, they suggested instead that the search for causes be abandoned.

The reason Browne and his associates did not advocate the search for a better methodology is very simple: they do not believe the methodology is the problem. In their view, the inability of independent variables such as those cited earlier to explain large amounts of variance in government duration relates to the fact that they all reference government or parliamentary attributes whose values are fixed or set at the time a government takes office; none takes account of the (subsequent) events that actually bring governments down. The kind of events they had in mind include political scandals, international crises, illnesses or deaths of prime ministers, and the like. The important feature of government-toppling events such as these is that they occur independently of any parliamentary or government characteristics and therefore cannot be explained by them. Indeed, since events such as these are essentially random with respect to the parliamentary arena, the occurrence of government terminations must be random as well. Thus, given the stochastic nature of the underlying process, the search for causes – no matter how sophisticated it becomes – is bound to come up short.

The “events” hypothesis marks a very important turning point in the study of government survival because it destroyed the complacency that surrounded previous research on the issue. The search for systematic relationships between government duration and various proposed independent variables assumes that systematic relationships must exist; if the underlying process is random, however, it would mean not only that the search is ultimately bound to fail, but also that there may be no way to account for the very different outcomes observed in different parliamentary systems. Taking the events hypothesis to its logical extreme implies that whether a given parliamentary system experiences short-lived or long-lived governments is purely a matter of chance.⁵ A central feature of democratic politics, in other words, would escape systematic explanation.

The events theorists probably never intended their hypothesis to be taken that far. The empirical analyses they performed revealed that only four of twelve countries tested had distributions of government durations consistent with the assumption of an underlying process of random collapses (Browne et al. 1986:643). Moreover, the four countries in question – Belgium, Finland, Italy, and Israel – are all among the more unstable countries in their sample.⁶ This pattern suggests that the parliamentary systems, whose governments lack the characteristics asso-

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Paul V. Warwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: the government survival debates*

9

ciated with durability are the ones most at risk to government-threatening events; conversely, governments with the requisite characteristics may be relatively immune from them. Browne, Frendreis, and Gleiber (1986:645–7) not only acknowledged this point; they presented evidence that the four countries conforming to the events hypothesis have significantly higher mean levels of certain traits previously shown to be associated with instability, including (1) the number of parties in government, (2) the spanning of my socialist–nonsocialist and clerical–secular cleavage lines, and (3) nonminimal winning status. In their words,

We are driven to the conclusion that the quality of cabinets we have called “inherent stability,” while weak as an explanatory factor conditioning duration in all countries, is variable across countries and sufficiently strong in some countries to introduce a systematic (as opposed to perfectly random) element into the timing of cabinet dissolutions.” (Browne et al. 1986:649)

This concession may seem grudging, but it was achieved at great cost to the events theorists. Previously, the interpretation was that differences among countries in dissolution rates were due to “country-specific idiosyncratic attributes” (Browne, Gleiber, and Mashoba 1984:24); now they were willing to admit that systematic factors were involved. The difference is crucial because, while idiosyncratic differences among systems may not be amenable to comparative analysis, systematic factors in principle are. Moreover, it means that any valid explanation of government survival or dissolution must at least temper the impact of random outside events with a consideration of general governmental attributes the possession of which provides protection from their destabilizing potential. The events hypothesis raised a new consideration; it did not invalidate the old epistemology. Nevertheless, that new consideration turned out to have immense implications for future research.

THE UNIFICATION OF PERSPECTIVES

The epistemological debate as cast by the events theorists centered on the question: which is more important in determining how long governments stay in power – random outside events or the structural features of governments and/or parliaments that may provide protection from them? This focus found play in a dispute between the events theorists and myself over which types of government termination ought to be considered as valid for the purposes of analysis. My earlier empirical work on survival in parliamentary regimes had excluded any government “whose termination was unconnected with the idea of instability” (Warwick 1979:468). This exclusion principally concerned governments that took office sometime after the beginning of a parliamentary term and ended with the arrival of the next regularly scheduled elections; the rationale was that it is impossible to say how long these governments would have lasted if the requirement of new elections had not forced their end.⁷ Browne, Frendreis, and Gleiber (1984) objected that these exclusions were unwarranted and may have served to enhance the ex-

Cambridge University Press

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Paul V. Warwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

plained variance above the 20–30% range of other studies. Easton and I responded that Browne et al.'s inclusion of these cases had the contrary effect of introducing an unjustified degree of randomness into the data (Warwick and Easton 1992).⁸

The reasoning behind this counterclaim is as follows. Since the arrival of regular elections is unconnected with any government attributes, the distribution of durations brought on by regular elections is bound to appear random or uncaused. But elections whose timing is established in advance by statute cannot reasonably be considered to be random events that just crop up and topple governments. Not only is their occurrence not random, but even the events theorists do not treat them as “events” in the sense of their hypothesis: to have done so would have required considering a government that wins an election and stays in power as having survived the challenge imposed by the outside environment. Instead, the events theorists defined each election as marking the end of the government that encountered it, regardless of its outcome.⁹

Clearly, the punctuation of government durations by regularly scheduled elections posed a dilemma for both the causal and the stochastic approaches. If it was undesirable in principle to exclude any category of government termination from the analysis, it also seemed inappropriate to treat these situations as equivalent to terminations brought on by parliamentary defeat, coalition disintegration, and the like. What was required was some means of including them in the analysis, as Browne and his associates insisted, but of treating them as “special.” What was true of this skirmish was true of the larger debate as well. Although proponents of the two approaches bickered vehemently (Browne, Frendreis, and Gleiber 1988; Strom 1988), it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that future progress would require some means of combining the two perspectives. There was plenty of evidence that certain attributes provide “inherent stability” to governments, but by the same token, was it not also reasonable to suppose that unanticipated outside events must occasionally bring down governments, particularly those that lack the appropriate attributes? Rather than debate which perspective was the more fundamental, a more productive strategy would be to explore what could be achieved if both perspectives were allied in some fashion.¹⁰

The methodology to handle this challenge was, in fact, waiting in the wings. It goes by different names in different fields: in medicine it is survival analysis; in engineering, reliability analysis; in economics, duration analysis; in sociology, event history analysis. In all applications, it consists essentially of explaining the “hazard rate,” or the rate at which terminating events occur (people die, machines break down, episodes end, transitions from one state to another occur), as a function of a set of independent variables and an underlying termination rate. This underlying rate may be defined so as to capture systematic changes in the rate of termination over time or to mirror a process of random terminations, such as the events theorists postulated. In addition, terminations that are deemed to be artificial, such as those imposed on governments by the electoral timetable, can be adjusted statistically to correct for any bias they convey.