The Logic of Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Golder, Sona Nadenichek.
The Logic of Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation.
The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Prior to the 2002 German legislative election, the Social Democrats and the Greens reached a pre-electoral agreement announcing that they intended to form a government together if they received sufficient votes at the polls and encouraged voters to support their coalition. In the French legislative elections a few months earlier, the major parties on both the left and right were largely successful in forming pre-electoral coalitions of their own. Doing so typically meant fielding single candidates from the left or right in each electoral district. Yet in the French presidential elections that same year, the absence of pre-electoral agreements on the left and on the right allowed an extreme-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, into the final round of the presidential elections, an event the world press described as “a political earthquake.” Meanwhile, in the Dutch legislative elections, all of the political parties ran independent electoral campaigns, and there was a great deal of uncertainty as to the likely identity of the future coalition government up to and immediately following the legislative elections. These empirical observations raise the question as to why pre-electoral coalitions formed in Germany but not in the Netherlands, and why they formed in some French elections but not others. More generally, why do some parties coordinate their electoral strategies as part of a pre-electoral coalition, whereas others choose to compete independently at election time?

In most democracies, single parties are unable to command a majority of support in the legislature. Thus, political parties who wish to exercise executive power are typically forced to enter some form of coalition. In effect, they can either form an electoral coalition with another party (or parties) prior to an election, or they can compete independently at election time and form a government coalition afterwards. For the purposes of this study, ‘electoral’ or ‘pre-electoral’ coalitions are defined fairly broadly to include cases where party leaders announce to the electorate that they plan to form a government together if successful at the polls or if they agree to run under a single name with joint lists or nomination agreements.¹
The common link between these situations is that parties or party leaders in a pre-electoral coalition never compete in elections as truly independent entities. The fact that coalition government is the norm rather than the exception across the world has encouraged a vast literature to develop in political science. The overwhelming majority of this theoretical and empirical literature focuses purely on government coalitions; electoral coalitions are virtually ignored. This book seeks to redress this imbalance in our knowledge of coalitions by focusing on pre-electoral coalitions; specifically, it aims to explain electoral coalition formation at the national level. Although parties may form pre-electoral coalitions for several reasons, the theoretical and empirical analyses conducted in this book focus primarily on electoral coalitions between parties whose goal is to enter government. By concentrating on national-level efforts to enter government, my analyses of pre-electoral coalition formation can be directly connected with the existing government coalition literature.

Understanding the formation of electoral coalitions is important because (i) they can have a considerable impact on election outcomes, government composition, and policies; (ii) they have important normative implications for the representative nature of government; and (iii) they are quite common. Consider the following simple example. Imagine a legislative election with single-member districts in which there are two blocs of parties, one on the left and one on the right. The right-wing bloc has more electoral support than the Left. Suppose the parties on the left form an electoral coalition and field a common candidate in each district, but the parties on the right compete independently. The Right would most likely lose in this situation. In this example, the possibility arises that a majority of voters could vote for a group of politicians who support similar policies and that these politicians might still lose the election by failing to coordinate sufficiently. The result is that the left-wing party is elected to implement policies that a majority of the voters do not want. In other words, the absence of a pre-electoral coalition on the right can have a significant impact on the election outcome, on the government that forms, and on the policies that are likely to be implemented. Inasmuch as one places a normative value on the basic principle that the candidate with the most support among the electorate should be elected and should implement policy, it matters whether political elites choose electoral strategies and coalitions that make them more or less likely to win elections.

Coalition strategies employed by political parties also have important normative implications for the representative nature of governments. Powell (2000) distinguishes between majoritarian and proportional representation visions of democratic government. In the majoritarian vision, a party with a majority or plurality of the vote wins the election and governs the country until the next election. In this situation, members of the electorate know that their votes directly influence
which party exerts executive power and implements policy. In the proportional representation vision, this is not necessarily the case, since coalition governments often form after the votes have been counted, beyond the scrutiny of the electorate. In effect, elections in proportional systems “serve primarily as devices for electing representative agents in postelection bargaining processes, rather than as devices for choosing a specific executive” (Huber 1996, 185). As a result, the lines of accountability are blurred, and it is unclear how well voter preferences are reflected in the government that is ultimately formed.

To some extent, pre-electoral coalitions can alleviate this problem by helping voters to identify government alternatives and to register their support for one of them. In fact, party leaders in the Netherlands, Ireland, and Germany have made this type of argument publicly in order to explain their participation in electoral coalitions and in an attempt to appeal to voters (Saalfeld 2000; Mitchell 1999; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge 1994; De Jong & Pijnenburg 1986). Arguably, electoral coalitions increase democratic transparency and provide coalition governments with as much of a mandate as single parties in majoritarian systems. In fact, one might even say that pre-electoral coalitions provide an opportunity for combining the best elements of the majoritarian vision of democracy (increased accountability, transparency, government identifiability, strong mandates) with the best elements of the proportional representation vision of democracy (wide choice, more accurate reflection of voter preferences in the legislature). Given the important implications for the representative nature of government, one might want to know the conditions under which pre-electoral coalitions form.

Finally, electoral coalitions are not rare phenomena. There were 240 pre-electoral coalitions between 1946 and 2002 in the 23 advanced industrialized parliamentary democracies at the center of this book. Significantly, 70 (29.2%) of these 240 pre-electoral coalitions actually went on to form the government following the election. This number would be even higher if I also counted governments that contained electoral coalitions along with additional government partners. One hundred seventy-four (47.8%) of the 364 legislative elections between 1946 and 2002 had at least one pre-electoral coalition. Thus, about one-fifth (19.2%) of all the elections examined in this book produced a government that was based on a pre-electoral agreement. Again, this number would be even higher if I counted governments that comprised an electoral coalition along with other parties. A recent study of formal government coalition agreements in Western European parliamentary democracies concluded that when all coalition cabinets were considered, many had an “identifiable coalition agreement,” and more than one-third were written prior to the election (Strøm & Müller 2000). Naturally, this study did not pick up all instances of electoral coalitions—it obviously omits all electoral coalitions that did not make it into government. However, it does serve to reinforce
the point that coalition bargaining often occurs prior to elections in a wide range of countries and that a large proportion of government coalitions are based on pre-electoral agreements. The strong empirical link found between pre-electoral and government coalitions suggests that if we think that understanding government coalitions is important, which the vast literature on this subject suggests is the case, then it must logically follow that understanding pre-electoral coalitions is important, as well.

Despite these strong reasons for studying electoral coalitions, current research has almost nothing to say about them. Those quantitative analyses and formal models of coalition behavior that exist are typically used to predict which government coalition will form (Baron & Ferejohn 1989; Laver & Shepsle 1990; Austen-Smith & Banks 1990; Baron 1991; Strøm, Budge, & Laver 1994; Diermeier & Merlo 2004), who gets which portfolio (Warwick & Druckman 2001), how long the formation process takes (Diermeier & van Roozendaal 1998; Martin & Vanberg 2003), and how long the government coalition will last (King et al. 1990; Warwick 1994; Lupia & Strøm 1995; Merlo 1997; Warwick 1999; Diermeier & Stevenson 1999; Diermeier, Eraslan, & Merlo 2003). In other words, they focus almost entirely on government coalitions.3 There are simply no formal models of government coalitions that incorporate the possibility of electoral coalitions. Pre-electoral coalitions are almost entirely absent in the quantitative literature, as well.4 Only in the case study literature do references to pre-electoral coalitions crop up with any semblance of regularity. Even among those scholars who address electoral coalitions here, the primary interest is not in studying the pre-election stage of electoral competition as such; electoral coalitions are typically treated purely as an interesting aside (Strøm, Budge, & Laver 1994; Laver & Schofield 1998; Müller & Strøm 2000b; Strøm & Müller 2000). To this point, there has been no systematic, cross-national research focused on electoral coalitions.5

Given the prevalence of electoral coalitions and their potential normative and policy implications, I believe that this lack of focused research represents a serious omission in our knowledge of coalitions. In fact, this state of affairs has led G. Bingham Powell to claim in the conclusion to his highly influential book, Elections as Instruments of Democracy, that

One area that cries out for more serious theoretical and empirical work is the appearance of announced preelectoral coalitions between political parties. We know too little about the origins of such coalitions and about the great variety of forms (shared manifestos, withdrawal of coalition partners, recommendations to voters) that they can take. But in a number of countries such coalitions unmistakably play a critical role at both electoral and legislative levels. (Powell 2000, 247)
My book begins to answer Powell’s appeal by examining the conditions under which electoral coalitions form.

This research objective presupposes the existence of a common underlying logic to the formation of pre-electoral coalitions. To some extent, this objective represents a new approach to analyzing these coalitions. As I mentioned earlier, the limited research that already exists on electoral coalitions is often country or election specific. One consequence of this fact is the emphasis placed on factors that are idiosyncratic to particular countries, elections, or party leaders. For example, the inability of the moderate right in France to form electoral coalitions in certain elections has frequently been explained in terms of the personal animosities or plain “stupidity” of party leaders (Bell 2000; Goldey 1999; Knapp 1999; Nay 1994). While the country-specific research is both important and highly informative, it does not offer us a general theory for explaining why electoral coalitions form in some circumstances but not in others. I seek to provide such a theory here.

As with government coalition formation, the emergence of pre-electoral coalitions is the result of a bargaining process among party leaders. For example, party leaders who wish to form a pre-electoral coalition must reach agreement over a joint electoral strategy and the distribution of office benefits that might accrue to them. This process may involve outlining a common coalition platform; deciding which party gets to run the more powerful ministerial posts; choosing which party’s candidates should step down in favor of candidates from their coalition partner(s) in particular districts; or determining which leader is to become prime minister. Clearly, any pre-electoral coalition bargaining process involves a thorny set of distributional and ideological issues. Ultimately, party leaders must weigh the incentives to form an electoral coalition against the incentives to run independently.

Before elaborating on these incentives, it is worth noting that the pre-electoral coalition formation process is not quite the same as the government coalition formation process. First, electoral advantages that come from competing together as a coalition, particularly in countries with disproportional electoral rules, will create incentives to form an electoral coalition that are no longer relevant in the post-election context. Put differently, forming a government coalition cannot influence the probability of electoral victory; electoral coalitions can. Second, the ideological compatibility constraint facing potential coalitions is likely to be stronger prior to the election than afterwards. This likelihood is because voters might be unwilling to vote for electoral coalitions comprising parties with incompatible policy preferences; after the election, parties have more leeway to enter into these types of government coalitions, because voters are no longer such an immediate constraint on politicians’ actions. My point here is only that it would be a mistake to immediately assume that the factors that have been found to be
important in the government coalition bargaining process will turn out to be the same factors that shape pre-electoral coalition formation.

The logic of electoral coalition formation that I present is based on the belief that party leaders care about winning office and policy (Müller & Strøm 1999). Party leaders must compare the utility that they expect to receive if they competed independently to the utility that they expect to receive if they competed as part of an electoral coalition. Consider first the case where party \( i \) decides to run independently. In this scenario, the party may be sufficiently successful at the polls that it gets to enter government. If the party wins more than 50% of the seats, it could form a government on its own. In this situation, the party would obtain all of the office benefits associated with being in power and could set policy at its own ideal point. Clearly, this would be the first choice for party \( i \). However, party \( i \) will recognize that it is relatively rare for a single party to control a majority of the seats in most parliamentary systems. If party \( i \) is to enter government, then it is much more likely to do so as part of a government coalition. In this case, party \( i \) would receive some utility from its share of the office benefits and would suffer some utility loss from having government policy set at the ideal point of the coalition rather than at its own ideal point. Naturally, the utility loss suffered by each coalition partner would be lower the more ideologically compatible the government coalition. Finally, party \( i \) will know that there is some probability that it will not get to enter government if it runs independently. If this situation arises, then it will receive no office benefits and will suffer the utility loss associated with having the government set policy at the government ideal point and not at party \( i \)'s ideal point. The lowest possible utility for party \( i \) from running independently would occur if it was in opposition and government policy was ideologically distant from its own ideal point.

The second case is when party \( i \) decides to run as part of an electoral coalition. Note that in order to form a pre-electoral coalition, it is likely that party \( i \) will need to make some concessions in terms of policy and office to its potential coalition partners. For example, it is highly unlikely that party \( i \) would get to set the coalition policy exactly at its own ideal point and/or obtain all of the office benefits if the electoral coalition entered government. These concessions are essentially the exact same concessions that parties that run independently would have to make when forming a government coalition after the election. Arguably, these concessions may be more costly to make prior to an election than afterwards. This possibility is because any concessions that must be made to other parties in terms of ministerial posts or coalition policies after an election can more easily be presented to party members as a consequence of the votes cast by the electorate; if the concessions occur before an election, they can only be blamed on the party leadership. Given this idea, one might reasonably wonder why parties do not simply
wait until after the election to make these concessions. Indeed, in many elections, this is precisely what happens.

However, the key thing to note about pre-electoral coalitions is that they can affect the probability that a party gets to enter government. Recognizing this fact, party leaders will form a pre-electoral coalition if they think that doing so will increase their probability of entering government to such an extent that the expected utility from forming such a coalition is larger than the expected utility from running independently. There are several reasons why pre-electoral coalitions might be electorally advantageous. First, it may be the case that an electoral coalition would attract a higher number of votes or seats than the coalition parties would jointly win running independently. This situation might occur if voters are risk averse in regard to the policy positions of potential future governments; that is, they prefer being able to identify a government alternative to being faced with a lottery over possible government outcomes, even if the mean expected policy position in both cases is identical. The lottery over possible government outcomes is less desirable, because the variance in possible policy positions is greater (Enelow & Hinich 1981; Snyder & Ting 2002; Ashworth & Bueno de Mesquita 2006). By decreasing voter uncertainty over which government coalition might form and thus which policy would get implemented, the parties that form a pre-electoral coalition might attract more votes than would otherwise be the case.

Second, and probably more important, is the strong empirical evidence that disproportional electoral institutions provide an electoral bonus to large parties or coalitions through their mechanical effect on the translation of votes into seats (Duverger 1963 [1954]; Lijphart 1994; Cox 1997; Clark & Golder 2006). Since all electoral systems are disproportional to some extent, electoral coalitions may hold out significant advantages in terms of extra legislative seats. Although we do not yet have an entirely satisfactory model of how particular distributions of legislative seats get translated into government coalitions, it seems reasonable to think that these extra legislative seats will be positively correlated with an increased probability of being in government. If this is the case, then party leaders will have an incentive to form pre-electoral coalitions.

To sum up, I hope to generate a wider scholarly debate about the role played by electoral coalitions at election time. Pre-electoral coalitions are important. Not only are they commonplace, but they also have the ability to determine electoral and policy outcomes. They may even be preferable on normative grounds to government coalitions that are not based on an electoral agreement. As a result, they deserve more attention from researchers. In the chapters that follow, I develop a theoretical model of electoral coalition formation and expose the hypotheses that it generates to statistical and case study analyses. In an attempt to link these analyses with the existing coalition literature, I also begin to examine how the decision
to form an electoral coalition affects various characteristics of government coalitions. This research represents the first attempt to formally analyze those factors that systematically influence the emergence of pre-electoral coalitions across elections and countries. The empirical analysis also represents the first time that data on electoral coalitions across such a large number of countries have been collected and analyzed.

The book proceeds in the following way. In the next chapter, I discuss in more detail how I define and identify pre-electoral coalitions. In addition to stating my coding rules and addressing several ambiguous cases, I also describe some of the different forms that electoral coalitions take in various countries and briefly summarize the data used in the rest of the book. In chapter three, I examine two hypotheses that are implicitly made in the existing coalition literature regarding pre-electoral coalitions. The first states that pre-electoral coalitions should be more common in disproportional electoral systems (Disproportionality Hypothesis). The second hypothesis focuses on the electorate’s desire to be able to identify future governments (Signaling Hypothesis). I test these hypotheses using data on pre-electoral coalitions in 23 advanced industrialized parliamentary democracies between 1946 and 2002. The data support a modified version of the Disproportionality Hypothesis—disproportional electoral rules do encourage pre-electoral coalition formation, but only so long as the number of parties in the system is sufficiently large. There is no evidence for the Signaling Hypothesis.

While electoral institutions are clearly an important determinant of electoral coalition formation, I argue in the conclusion to chapter three that the implication in the coalition literature that pre-electoral coalitions are a simple function of electoral rules is probably too reductionist. I claim that a more nuanced understanding of pre-electoral coalition formation must take account of the distributional costs in terms of policy and office benefits that arise during coalition bargaining, as well as the potential electoral benefits. I develop a model of electoral coalition formation that takes account of these distributional costs in chapter four. The model is a bargaining game between two party leaders who must decide whether to form an electoral alliance or not. I derive several implications that relate the likelihood of pre-electoral coalition formation to various institutional and ideological features of the party system. Of the hypotheses that are generated, the most important are that electoral coalitions are more likely when the potential coalition partners share similar ideological preferences; when electoral institutions generate an electoral bonus for competing as a coalition; when the party’s expected share of office benefits from running alone decreases; when the likelihood of entering government after running alone decreases; and when there is an extreme opposition and the coalition is electorally beneficial.

In the following chapter, I use a detailed investigation of electoral coalitions in
Fifth Republic France and post-1987 South Korea to illustrate the causal process of pre-electoral coalition formation and the plausibility of my model’s assumptions and implications. The unusual nature of the French semi-presidential regime offers an opportunity to examine the impact of different electoral institutions, namely legislative and presidential elections, on pre-electoral strategies while holding other country characteristics constant. Moreover, the French case provides a dramatic example of the impact that pre-electoral coalitions (or their absence) can have on election outcomes. The South Korean case supports the notion that there truly is an underlying general logic of electoral coalition formation. Although France is a country in Western Europe with a well-established democratic pedigree and South Korea is a relatively new democracy in East Asia, similar factors play an influential role in pre-electoral coalition formation in both countries. For example, evidence from both South Korea and France indicate that distributional issues play a significant role in determining the ease with which electoral coalitions form. If these issues can be resolved, then even the most strident and long-held personal animosities among party leaders can be overcome. The South Korean case also provides evidence that my model of electoral coalition formation can be usefully applied to presidential democracies.

In chapter six, I conduct a cross-national statistical analysis of the hypotheses generated by my bargaining model using a data set containing information on potential coalition dyads in 292 legislative elections in 20 advanced industrialized parliamentary democracies between 1946 and 1998. The results provide strong support for all of my hypotheses. Pre-electoral coalitions are more likely to form when parties are ideologically compatible, when the expected coalition size is large (but not too large), and when the potential coalition partners are of similar size. They are also more likely to form if the party system is ideologically polarized and the electoral rules are disproportional.

In the seventh chapter, I begin to link my study of pre-electoral coalition formation more directly with the existing government coalition literature by examining several aspects of the relationship between electoral and government coalitions. I find that electoral coalitions significantly increase the likelihood that member parties enter government; in other words, they affect the identity of government coalitions. I also find that governments that are based on pre-electoral agreements are not only more ideologically compatible than those that are not, but that they also get to take office more quickly. While there are several reasons to think that electoral coalitions might also improve government stability, I find no evidence to support this idea. Overall, the evidence presented in this chapter indicates that the effect of pre-electoral coalitions does not end with the counting of votes and the allocation of legislative seats; electoral coalitions continue to affect important aspects of the government formation process even after elections are over.
In the conclusion, I summarize the theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions that my study makes to our understanding of electoral coalitions, and I address its normative implications. I also suggest that, although this book represents the first systematic, cross-national analysis to focus on pre-electoral coalitions, a fruitful area of future research would be to develop a more unified approach to government formation that simultaneously incorporates both pre-electoral and government coalitions.