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## When Do Allies Become Rivals?

*George Tsebelis*

Explaining the formation and persistence of political and social coalitions is one of the most important problems in the social sciences. Solving this problem will help us understand which groups of people will cooperate and which political parties will form coalitions. However, in order to explain the formation of coalitions, we cannot simply examine the interests of their members. As Mancur Olson points out, a community of interests is not a sufficient condition for the emergence of social coalitions.<sup>1</sup> Extrapolating the same argument to political coalitions, we see that the mere existence of mutual interests among coalition partners is not enough to explain the existence of the coalition. The coalition is a product of both cooperative and competitive tensions between the coalition partners. This means that the cohesion of a coalition is itself a variable to be explained.

Game theory has provided a theoretical framework by which to begin studying political coalitions.<sup>2</sup> However, the existing game theoretical literature, aside from being disputed on empirical grounds,<sup>3</sup> focuses exclusively on the cooperative behavior of partners in a coalition. Thus, this literature addresses which coalition will form and not which coalition, once formed, is likely to dissolve.

In a recent article published in *Comparative Politics*, Rochon and Pierce use the French Fifth Republic and, in particular, the two major partners of the Left—the Socialists and the Communists—to investigate *both* the cohesive and the competitive forces within coalitions.<sup>4</sup> The French Fifth Republic is the best empirical case for the study of the stability of coalitions. Under the French electoral system, parties have to stress both competition (in the first round) and cooperation (in the second round). In the first round of the run-off electoral system, strong criticism of the coalition partner may give a party the first place within the coalition and, therefore, the right to represent the coalition in the second round. In the second round, the cooperation of both partners is needed in order to win a parliamentary seat. But the French electoral system combines two unique institutional features, making it difficult for parties to pursue different strategies in the first and second rounds. First, the two electoral rounds are only a week apart and, therefore, there is no time to adopt two different strategies. Second, the strategies are electoral and, thus, visible as opposed to parliamentary.

Rochon and Pierce's article is important and thought-provoking precisely because it focuses on an aspect of coalitions that has been neglected by the literature—the centrifugal forces that develop and operate inside an electoral coalition. Therefore, although it deals with a particular country, the article has more important theoretical implications for our understanding of political coalitions.

Their analysis, however, comes to a surprising conclusion. "The Socialist-Communist alliance appears (at least based on our data on the Socialist candidates) to be ruled by jealousy

and even behavior that undermines the coalition in situations where it has a chance to succeed."<sup>5</sup> But if the coalition fails precisely when it is most needed, why would it survive at other times when presumably the incentives for cohesion are less strong? And why would the parties continue to cooperate over time?

This note will criticize some of Rochon and Pierce's arguments. It will then outline an alternative approach to the investigation of cohesion of French coalitions, which concludes that cohesion is usually higher precisely when it is most needed. Finally, this paper will attempt a synthesis of the two approaches.

### **Some Criticisms**

Rochon and Pierce present data from interviews with Socialist candidates for the National Assembly after the 1967 and 1978 elections. They divide these data into four groups: whether or not the Left wins, and whether or not the Socialist Party represents the Left. They find that the sympathy of Socialist candidates for the Communists is *significantly lower* when the Left *wins* a parliamentary seat.<sup>6</sup> They compare this result with the "utilitarian expectations about sympathy for the PCF," which, according to them, would predict that sympathy *would be higher* when the Left wins a seat. One of the explanations they offer for the discrepancy is that "party interests are defended in much the same way that individuals defend their own self-images when confronted with the unpleasant realization that a friend is outperforming them. . . . [they] try to undermine the success of the friend."<sup>7</sup>

In the remainder of this note, I will label Rochon and Pierce's conclusions:

*Result 1:* "Sympathy for the PCF will be related to the relative electoral position of the two parties in the candidate's district and to the strength of the Left compared to the Right."

*Result 2:* "The general rule for both sympathy and cooperative behavior between the two parties is that the coalition is most harmonious when it is least needed."<sup>8</sup>

My criticisms focus on Result 2. There are two things wrong with this result. First, expected utility calculations (which they call utilitarian expectations) would not give the outcomes that Rochon and Pierce expect. Second, Rochon and Pierce's Result 2 cannot be correct over a long time period like the one the two authors examine. Let us discuss each point separately.

**When Is Cooperative Behavior Needed?** Consider four constituencies with the following electoral percentages for Socialists, Communists, and the Right, respectively: Constituency A, S=35, C=14, R=51; Constituency B, S=37, C=14, R=49; Constituency C, S=47, C=14, R=39; and Constituency D, S=15, C=14, R=71. In constituencies A and D the Right wins a seat, while in B and C it loses. On the other hand, in constituencies A and B the race between the two coalitions is close, regardless of the winner, while in constituencies C and D the outcome is practically assured. The need for cooperation is higher in constituencies A and B, and not in constituencies B and C as Rochon and Pierce claim. This intuitively obvious result is congruent with expected utility theory, which claims that the probability of winning is correlated with the closeness of the race, and not with who the winner is. Therefore, it is mistaken to jump from data with an independent variable indicating who the winner is, to conclusions about an independent

variable that indicates when cooperation is needed. In order to arrive at such conclusions, the data must be divided differently. Instead of a two-by-two table based on who wins and who loses, a three-by-three table (win, lose, close race) or, even better, a continuum where proximity to the 50 percent threshold would be the independent variable is needed. Even when Rochon and Pierce use such a continuum, they correlate sympathies with strength of the Left, and not proximity to the 50 percent threshold as required by expected utility theory.<sup>9</sup> My point, of course, is not that the authors should create a three-by-three table, given the number of their observations, but rather that Result 2, mentioned above, does not follow from the article.

**The Argument Cannot Be Correct in the Long Term** Rochon and Pierce examine two elections, 1967 and 1978. From the data in these two cases, they draw the surprising conclusion that cooperation is most harmonious when it is least needed. There have been, however, lots of ups and downs in the Union of the Left during the French Fifth Republic. Moreover, in this ten year period of Leftist history, 1967 is a year characterized by a high level of cooperation (even though the Common Program of the Left had not been signed yet), while 1978 is a year of competition (despite the existence of the Common Program until the summer of 1977). Yet Rochon and Pierce do not indicate in their article that there might be a difference in the electoral results between these two years or between these and other elections. In fact, the two authors use a statistical test which indicates that they can pool their data. Their argument then is an equilibrium argument: The situation is presented as persisting without any reason for change. However, as we will see, the actors have very good reasons to try to change the situation.

Why would each partner (assuming symmetry) stick with a coalition which is defective precisely when it is needed? It is of course possible that a misperception led one of the partners to believe that the coalition was to their mutual (and therefore to his own) advantage. But this illusion should be dissipated after the first few times that he was cheated by his partner.

The reader will observe that, in order to make this point, I implicitly assume that actors are rational.<sup>10</sup> It can be argued, of course, that the actors are not rational, that they do not choose what is best for them. In fact, it seems to me that Rochon and Pierce use the psychological concept of "jealousy," even though they depreciate the term by using such expressions as "it appears to be" or "as if," in order to *explain* the choice of such suboptimal solutions. Other explanations along the same lines would include discrepancies between beliefs and reality and some psychological attachment to the line of unity of the Left. What remains to be explained, however, is why, since the coalition is defective precisely when it is needed and therefore suboptimal not only in the short but also in the long run, the leaders are not replaced by some other leading group with different perceptions and strategies?

Alternatively, perhaps, the coalition might be decided at the national level, but defections are observed at the local level. Still, this argument cannot carry us very far because the signal that the partner defects (if it is general) will be transmitted to the top and revisions of strategies will be required. So no matter what the initial reason for the coalition, it *cannot* persist over time if it is undermined when it is needed.

For all these reasons, I think that Result 2 of Rochon's and Pierce's article cannot be

correct as stated. It can easily be replaced, however, without betraying their positions, by the following proposition, which I will label:

*Result 2'*: The general rule for both sympathy and cooperative behavior between the two parties is that the coalition is most harmonious when it is about to lose a seat.

The reader can compare this formulation with Result 2 to see that the modification is verbally minimal but conceptually important. He can also verify from Table 5 in the original article that it is consistent with the evidence presented by Rochon and Pierce. In the next section, I will try to specify further Result 1 and investigate the validity of Results 2 and 2'.

### **Different Findings and Alternative Explanations**

The relationship between the two partners of a coalition in French politics can be considered a Prisoners' Dilemma Game. Each partner has two options: either to promote the program of the coalition (cooperate) or to promote his own partisan interests and program and attack his partner (defect). For each partner, the best possible outcome is to defect while his partner cooperates, while the worst possible outcome is to cooperate while his partner defects. Moreover, mutual cooperation is better than mutual defection; otherwise, coalitions would not be possible.

This is the general configuration of the situation. It would be extremely unrealistic, however, to limit each party to the choice of a pure strategy (defect or cooperate). Real life strategies are a mixture of these two extreme strategies, and the parties will be able to choose the most appropriate combination. It would be reasonable, for example, for each party to adopt a strategy of defection in the first round so that it would maximize its votes and a strategy of cooperation in the second round in order to avoid a victory of the opposing coalition. However, the proximity of the two rounds (seven days difference) makes the adoption of two different strategies impossible. Even if the candidates would call for cooperation and vote transfer in the second round, it is very unlikely that all their supporters would transfer their votes, especially if the first round had been very competitive.

In addition to this Prisoners' Dilemma Game at the national level, there is a competitive game occurring at the constituency level. The closer the race between the two coalitions, the more cohesive each coalition is expected to be, and the more successful the vote transfers because in these cases an additional seat is at stake. On the other hand, the closer the electoral strength of the two partners of a coalition, the more likely that the adoption of the defection strategy will pay, since the defector is likely to come in first in the first round and, therefore, will compete for the seat in the second round. This temptation is going to be higher when the coalition as a whole is more likely to win a seat.<sup>11</sup>

The parties at the local level are assumed, in this model, to be rational actors trying to maximize their expected utility and win a seat, while remaining inside the constraints defined at the national level. The Prisoners' Dilemma Game, which is played between the partners of a coalition, is nested inside a competitive game between coalitions. No additional assumptions are necessary. The predictions are, first, that the closer the race, the more cooperative the coalition partners will be, and, second, that the closer the two partners of a coalition are in the first round, the less cooperative they will be.

The model was tested with electoral data from 448 out of the 474 constituencies of

metropolitan France in the 1978 election.<sup>12</sup> The tests included not only the behavior of the Socialist party, but also the Communist party and the two parties of the Right. The results confirmed all the predictions and were all statistically significant.

However, in order to improve the fit of the model, especially with respect to the Communist party, a further modification was made that allows closer comparison of the two approaches. The data were divided into two categories based on which group of parties appeared to be the winning coalition in the first round (the total share of its components in the first round was over 50 percent of the vote). The same tests were made, and the outcomes were as follows:

*Outcome 1:* The closer the electoral scores of the two partners of a coalition, the more competitive they are with each other, and the worse the vote transfers between partners in the second round.

*Outcome 2:* If a coalition gets more votes than its opponent in the first round, then the closer the race, the more cooperative the partners, and the more effective the transfer of votes.

*Outcome 3:* If a coalition gets less votes than its opponent in the first round, then the closer the race between the coalition partners, the more competitive they will be, and the less effective the transfer of votes.

In each case, the results concerning the coalition which is ahead in the first round are much more accurate and precise than for the coalition which is behind. For example, the coefficients of multiple determination ( $R^2$ ) range from .58 to .74, while the coefficients of the independent variables have the correct sign and are significant almost always at the .01 level and most of the time much more.<sup>13</sup>

Let us now compare the results of the two models. If I understand Rochon and Pierce correctly, Result 2 is meant to be a further elaboration of Result 1. Result 1 notes that there is a relationship between cooperative behavior and electoral outcomes. Result 2 specifies the functional form of this relationship. Outcomes 1, 2, and 3, listed above are also further elaborations of Result 1, but are in contradiction with both Result 2 and Result 2'. We turn now to this point.

First, observe that there is no result relevant to Outcome 1. Second, Outcomes 2 and 3 are not directly comparable with Result 2'. Outcomes 2 and 3 are concerned with winning in the first round, while result 2' is concerned with winning a seat (that is, coming in first in the second round). However in only 12 percent of the constituencies does the winner of the first round not win the seat.<sup>14</sup> Because this difference is so small, we can ignore it and, therefore, compare Outcomes 2 and 3 with Results 2 and 2'.

In the first part of this note, I gave reasons why Result 2 does not follow from Rochon and Pierce's data and why it cannot be correct in the long run. I replace it with Result 2'. So the correct comparison is between Result 2' and Outcomes 2 and 3. For reasons of completeness, however, I will extend the comparisons to Result 2.

Consider a constituency in which the outcome in the first round is 29 percent for the socialists, 22 percent for the Communists and 49 percent for the parties of the Right. This is clearly a case where cooperation is most needed since the seat depends on a margin of one point. Therefore, according to Result 2, cooperation will be low. This is also a case in which the Left is about to win. Thus, according to Result 2', cooperation will also be low. According to Outcome 2, however, cooperation will be high. Thus, in this case, Outcome 2 contradicts both Results 2 and 2'.

Consider now a constituency with the following electoral results in the first round:

Socialists, 45 percent; Communists, 20 percent; and parties of the Right, 35 percent. In this case cooperation is not needed since there is a wide margin. Therefore, according to Result 2, behavior will be cooperative. Moreover, since the Left is about to win, Result 2' predicts that cooperation will be low. Outcome 2 leads to the same prediction. In this case, Outcome 2 agrees with Result 2' and contradicts Result 2.

Finally, consider a constituency in which the electoral results in the first round are as follows: Socialists, 29 percent; Communists, 20 percent; and parties of the Right, 51 percent. Here the Right is about to win and, therefore, cooperation is needed between the Socialists and Communists. Result 2 and Outcome 3 predict low levels of cooperation for the Left, while Result 2' predicts high levels of cooperation.

Thus, most of the time, Outcomes 2 and 3 are in contradiction with either Result 2 or Result 2' or with both.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

What is the conclusion of this exercise in theory comparison? Does cooperative behavior increase or decrease when the coalition is needed? Does it vary when a coalition wins or is about to win?

One line of argument would defend the position of incommensurability.<sup>15</sup> One can argue that the two theories discussed above speak about different phenomena. One model is concerned with sympathy and cooperative behavior; the other is concerned with cohesion as it is expressed in the electoral arena. One model speaks about feelings or attitudes which are latent entities; the other measures behavior which is manifest. One model is concerned with elites, the other with masses. To defend this line of argument, however, one would have to give reasons why attitudes are not congruent with behavior or why attitudes of elites are not consistent with those of the masses. This position is difficult, but not impossible, to defend. However, the lack of cumulative knowledge in the social sciences is due, to a great extent, to the failure to examine the relationship of different or contradictory findings from logically related studies such as these. We would have everything to gain by trying *any* alternative line of argument first.

A second line of argument would stress the fact that the predictions of the two theories differ. These diverging predictions could be used as a crucial experiment to compare the two theories. The supporting evidence would be compared, using the standard criteria of goodness of fit and statistical significance. Although such a comparison would clearly be in favor of the nested game approach, it would be misleading because the number of observations differ dramatically. If empirical accuracy cannot be the yardstick, then other criteria like generality, parsimony, and congruence with other theories could be used. The reader can refer to the two articles to make up his or her own mind on these issues.

There is a third line of argument. If the two theories are concerned with the same or with highly correlated concepts, we can try to combine them. The purpose of this exercise is to show that there is an alternative approach to crucial experiments in theory building. One can try to combine different local theories into a more general theory which fits both the data and other existing theories.

Let us assume that feelings of sympathy are translated into cooperative behavior and that

elite guidelines are followed by the supporters of a party. Since we are concerned with two different parties, it is reasonable to assume that their cooperation is not perfect and that there are mutual grievances, which in turn feed further noncooperative behavior. This is the everyday situation between the two parties. Imagine now that election day is approaching. It is reasonable to think that, because of the run-off electoral system, grievances will be put aside and each partner will try to be more cooperative, at the same time always keeping an eye on the other's behavior. When the election is over, the situation can return to normal. The two local organizations will continue to have more or less the same sympathetic feelings towards each other and more or less the same cooperative behavior with each other.

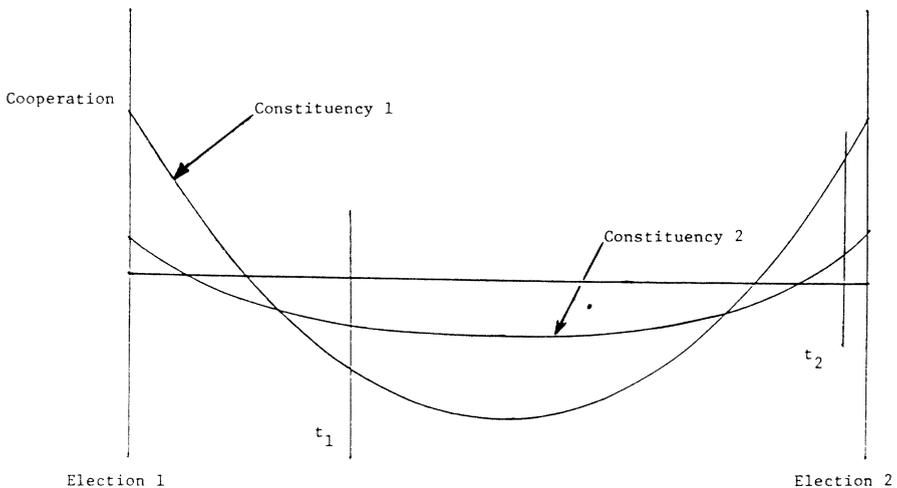
This is an argument of cycles in cooperative behavior. Cooperation peaks just before and during the election, and then it goes down again. It might seem reasonable, but is there any empirical evidence for such a cycle? I do not know of any empirical study on the issue, but there is evidence from a related phenomenon, government or presidential popularity.

It is self-evident that incumbents will try to maximize their popularity during the electoral period. Moreover, empirical studies have indicated that presidential or government popularity follows a similar cyclical pattern.<sup>16</sup>

Assume that such a cyclical pattern of popularity exists between one partner of the coalition and the supporters of a party, and consider then two different constituencies with the same level of cooperative behavior *on average*.<sup>17</sup> Figure 1 presents the level of cooperative behavior of two such constituencies. Constituency 1 manages to be more cooperative during the electoral period. Since the two constituencies have the same level of cooperation, the time paths of cooperation will intersect, and for most of the time between elections constituency 2 will be more cooperative. Figure 1 presents the two time paths.

Let us now consider the coalition's chances of winning the seat of each constituency. Other things being equal, the coalition is more likely to win the seat of constituency 1 than constituency 2. The reason is that, since the two partners are more cooperative just before

Figure 1



the election, the coalition is more cohesive and, therefore, transfers of votes are more effective.

This story is sufficient to explain the discrepancies between the two models. Rochon and Pierce measure cooperative behavior *after the election* at time period 1, while I measure cohesion *just before* the election at time period 2 (see Figure 1). This is the reason why our results seem contradictory.

The reader might object to the plausibility of the story. The explanation relies on two crucial assumptions: that there is a cycle, and that cooperative behavior is the same on the average. For the time being, this explanation is just a conjecture. However, it is a conjecture backed by both models and by other empirical research in related fields. It is necessary to test this conjecture empirically. Should it be falsified, one would have to choose one of the two remaining lines of argument presented in the beginning of this conclusion.

## NOTES

I would like to thank B. Salert and C. Boyer for many useful comments in successive drafts. I would also like to thank R. Bates, P. Camerra-Rowe, J. Ferejohn, and T. Rochon for their remarks.

1. Mancur Olson, Jr., *The Logic of Collective Action* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).
2. See William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Robert Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest* (Chicago: Markham, 1970); G. Luebbert, "Coalition Theory and Government Formation in Multiparty Democracies," *Comparative Politics*, 15 (1983), 235-49.
3. See Eric C. Browne, John P. Frendreis, and Dennis W. Gleiber, "The Process of Cabinet Dissolution: An Experimental Model of Duration and Stability in Western Democracies," *American Journal of Political Science*, 30 (August 1986), 628-650.
4. Thomas R. Rochon and Roy Pierce, "Coalitions as Rivalries: French Socialists and Communists, 1967-1978," *Comparative Politics*, 18 (July 1985), 437-451.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 447.
6. *Ibid.*, Table 5, p. 445. Sympathy is measured by a regular 100 degree thermometer.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 447-448.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 439.
9. *Ibid.*, fn.12.
10. In fact, the argument is a verbal statement of Nash equilibrium conditions.
11. For further details, see George Tsebelis, "Nested Games: The Cohesion of French Coalitions," *British Journal of Political Science* (October 1987).
12. The remaining constituencies were excluded because the election in the second round was not competitive or was a triangular competition.
13. Tsebelis, "Nested Games," Tables 8A and 8B.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
16. See C. Pissarides, "British Government Popularity and Economic Performance," *Economic Journal*, 90 (1980), 569-81; and Douglas Hibbs, "The Dynamics of Political Support for American Presidents among Occupational and Partisan Groups," *American Journal of Political Science*, 26 (1982), 312-32. The first article just assumes that government popularity follows a parabolic trend between elections and estimates his model with very good results, while the second tries to derive the same shape of curve from more elementary assumptions.
17. One could construct an index to measure cooperative behavior of the Socialist Party in each constituency at each point of time and calculate the over time average, or take the over time average cooperative behavior of Communists and Socialists in each constituency.