

16 Conclusion

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In the introduction, we described the methods that governments may use to control parliamentary agendas – methods that are at the core of each chapter of this book. The assortment of methods include time constraints, closed rules, restrictive rules, expansive rules (last-offer authority), sequencing rules, gate-keeping rules, voting order rules and rules assigning exclusive jurisdiction to governments.

To what extent are governments able to impose their will on parliament in legislative processes? Governments introduce most of the bills, and most of them are accepted by the parliament without substantial changes. There is however some variation. For example, government bills are hardly rejected at all in Germany, Greece, the United Kingdom and Norway, although changes on the floor occasionally occur (typically with the consent of government parties).¹ In countries as diverse as France, Hungary, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland, the parliamentary stage of government bills seem in general to be more turbulent. In Portugal, for instance, the success rate of government bills has been as low as 50 percent in the early 1980s and as high as 95 percent in the early 1990s. In the latter group of countries private member bills also tend to be more successful, although the success rate for opposition groups is marginal in most countries. Even though an exceptional 20–40 percent of private member bills pass in Portugal, these types of bills and amendments to government bills are used by the opposition as “advertisements” – as means to signal policy commitments to voters and party members (cf. Mayhew 1974, Heller 2001). Despite some variation, thus, government is the source of nearly all legislation.

In the introduction we made the point that there are three dimensions of agenda setting: institutional, partisan and positional. In the interaction between government and parliament these three dimensions can substitute each other. A government that has a majority in parliament can implement its policy positions because it will pass (through its majority) whatever it wants through parliament. A government that has institutional advantages will be able to make a take-it-or-leave-it offer to the parliament (or, something close to it) through the mechanisms described in detail in the chapters of this book. A government that does not have any of those features has only one chance of making its program respected, and this is the positional advantage (its location in the center of the policy space).

At the end of this volume we are able to summarize our findings by applying this scheme: we have seen that countries like the UK and France have both partisan and institutional advantages attributed to the government. Stable majorities prevail most of the time, and even if there is a minority government (France) it can rely on its institutional weapons to pass legislation through the parliament. Other countries with relatively strong executives are Hungary and Russia. The differences between these last two systems are considerable (e.g., the Duma lacks full control of government formation), but in both cases governments have relied on disciplined legislative majorities to impose their will.

In most countries analyzed in this book, however, governments do *not* have strong institutional means at their disposal to control the parliamentary agenda. Governments in countries like Denmark and Norway are weak institutionally. Both countries often have been governed by minority cabinets. In this situation, the government is dependent on being located in the center of the political landscape to get its program adopted. Median parties have been of paramount importance to the processes of government formation in Denmark, and the same seems to be true for Norway.

In countries where governments lack institutional agenda setting power it is quite common to find majority governments. Germany, the Netherlands and Japan are examples. In countries of this type, partisan advantages rather than institutional privileges make it possible for the government to implement its policy; a majority government is able to hold certain issues that it believes to be divisive – or a challenge to the cohesiveness of the coalition or the unity of coalition parties – off the parliamentary agenda.

Italian governments have had weak institutional agenda setting instruments, both in the First and Second Republic. This weakness was compensated for by centrist governments (in the First Republic, whether they were majority or minority governments). In the Second Republic, the weak agenda setting power was complemented by slim majorities *and* alternation (that is, non-centrist governments). As Zucchini demonstrates, they complemented this configuration (or rather, complemented for it) by increasing the *de facto* agenda setting powers of the government.

Table 16.1 is a summary that includes all countries in the volume. Although this gives a very simplified picture compared to the description in each chapter, the basic message is clear: in each country, at least one of the means of legislative agenda control – institutional, partisan or positional – is available to governments. This is because a government deprived of all three agenda setting means would not be able to govern and, therefore, no party or coalition would accept to be in such a position.

Table 16.1 Dimensions of agenda setting

<i>Country¹</i>	<i>Dimensions of agenda setting</i>		
	<i>Institutional² (strong institutional means?)</i>	<i>Partisan³ (majority governments?)</i>	<i>Positional⁴ (small ideological difference between governments?)</i>
Denmark	No	No	Yes
<i>France V</i>	Yes	Yes	No
Germany	No	Yes	No
Greece	Mixed	Yes	No
Hungary	Mixed	Yes	No
Italy I (1948–92)	No	Yes ⁵	Yes
Italy II (1992–)	Mixed	Yes	No
Japan	No	Yes	No
Netherlands	No	Yes	Yes
Norway	No	No	Yes
<i>Portugal</i>	No	Yes ⁵	Yes
<i>Russia</i>	Mixed	Yes	Yes
Spain	Yes	Yes ⁵	No
Switzerland	No	Yes	Yes
United Kingdom	Yes	Yes	No

Notes

- 1** Countries in bold are parliamentary and those in italics are semi-presidential (i.e. they have a popularly elected president in combination with a government that needs to be accepted by a majority in parliament, cf. e.g., Cheibub and Chernykh 2008). Switzerland does not have parliamentary governments.
- 2** Assessments are based on the country studies in this volume.
- 3** “Yes” indicates that the country in question has majority governments most of the time (in practice, at least three-fifths of the time after 1945 or the (re)introduction of democracy). A “no” means minority governments most of the time. Sources: Woldendorp *et al.* (1998), Rasch (2004), Gallagher *et al.* (2006) and country chapters.
- 4** The positional dimension is related to the ideological difference that typically can be observed between shifting governments. “No” means big ideological differences. Sources: Laver and Hunt (1992), Müller and Strom (2000), Tsebelis (2002), selected issues of the *European Journal of Political Science* data yearbook and country chapters.
- 5** There have been a significant number of minority governments, although majority cabinets have been in office most of the time.

Note

- 1 See also data in Bräuninger and Debus (2009) for Belgium, France, Germany and the UK.

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