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Veto Players and Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies[1]

George Tsebelis

This article presents a simple model with which one may examine the capacity of different parliamentary systems to produce policy change. In contrast to most theories in comparative politics which classify parliamentary systems by the number of parties in their party system (Duverger, Sartori, Lijphart), that is, the number of parties in parliament, this analysis comes to the conclusion that the important variable for policy change is, instead, the number of parties and the ideological composition of the government. I argue that, everything else being equal, the number of important laws passed in a country is inversely related to the number of parties in government, the ideological distances between them, and their internal cohesion. Other factors that may affect the number of important laws are the longevity of the government and the ideological distances between parties succeeding each other to government. Finally, I will argue that the number of parties in government is causally connected to the lack of executive dominance, to government instability, and to the bureaucratic features of the various countries studied.

The most frequent mode of distinguishing between different parliamentary systems is based on the number of parties in their party system, that is, the number of parties in their parliament. According to various authors of party systems literature, the number of parties in parliament affects a series of characteristics of a parliamentary democracy. For example, Lijphart (1984) makes the argument that a two-party system leads to (in fact, his argument is that it is correlated with) the dominance of government over parliament. Sartori (1976) has advanced the thesis that a large number of parties in parliament (over six) coexists with ideological extremism, anti-system parties and "polarised pluralism"; while a smaller number of parties (less than five) is correlated with more moderate politics, remi-

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niscent of a two-party system. Finally, a number of authors (Laver and Schofield 1990; Dodd 1976) have made the argument that the number of parties in parliament is inversely related to government survival in parliamentary democracies.

While executive dominance, the dynamics of political competition, and the longevity of governments are important characteristics of a political system, they are not necessarily the essential ones. For example, if a political system with executive dominance produces the same economic output (as measured, for example, by economic growth) as a system with parliamentary dominance, then it is not clear why executive dominance is important. Similar arguments can be made about the other variables as well. If longevity of a government is not correlated with government output, then longevity per se may not be an important characteristic after all.

The previous paragraph makes a point that is essential to any institutional analysis. Institutions are important, and the study of institutions is therefore essential, to the extent that they affect outcomes. Since policy output is the most fundamental characteristic of a political system, other features are important to the extent that they are relevant to this output. Consequently, one can analyse political systems more accurately when policy consequences are the point of departure. Along these lines, several empirical studies of political economy have correlated economic performance with the institutional characteristics of a system. Rogowski (1984) and Katzenstein (1982) make the point that proportional representation affects trade openness and economic growth. Lange and Garrett (1985) argue that corporatist systems with left-wing governments, and market systems with right-wing governments produce higher levels of growth than "mixed" systems i.e. corporatist systems with a right-wing government or market systems with a left-wing government. However, these analyses focus on highly aggregated variables (such as inflation, unemployment, growth), they do not identify the mechanism responsible for these empirical connections, if such connections exist at all.

This paper adopts a different approach to the analyses cited thus far. Unlike the political economy literature above, this paper identifies a policy variable that is less aggregated and relatively easy to trace; and it identifies the mechanism by which a political system's structural characteristics affect this variable. Unlike the party systems literature, this analysis connects policy outcomes with other features of a parliamentary system, such as party competition, government longevity, and government dominance. Finally, and again unlike the party systems literature, I argue that the most interesting variable for understanding parliamentary systems is not the number of parties in parliament, but the number of parties in government (as well as their ideological distances).

This chapter is organised into four sections. First, I present the logic behind the arguments that expect important characteristics of the system to be correlated with the number of parties in parliament. Second, I contrast this logic with a model that focuses on one policy variable - the ability of a political system to produce significant legislative changes - and explain why this ability depends on the number of parties in government and their ideological distances[2]. Third, I focus on the relationship between government and parliament in law production and argue that scholars, studying parliamentary systems for their policy output, should focus on governments, at least in addition to, if not instead of parliaments. Finally, I connect the policy variable with other characteristics of a political system such as executive dominance and government survival.

1. The Effects of the Number of Parties in Parliament

In the current state of knowledge in comparative politics, the party system of a country plays a crucial role in understanding the politics of the country. Beginning with Duverger (1951), the party system of a country has traditionally been connected with other significant features of the country, either as a cause or as an effect. According to Duverger, the party system was both the result of a country's electoral system, and the cause of a certain type of interaction between its government and parliament.

Duverger's argument was that a plurality electoral system will generate a two-party system for two reasons: First, there is a mechanical effect that gives large parties an advantage in every electoral system. This effect is far more pronounced in plurality than in proportional electoral systems. Second, there is a psychological effect which makes voters in plurality electoral systems loathe to "waste" their vote on small parties, consequently encouraging them to vote for one of the two major ones. Once a two-party system has been established, one of the two parties will enjoy a stable majority, giving it the ability to push its program through both the government (which is composed of members of this party) and the parliament (where the party has a majority).

Duverger also made the converse[3] argument, although not as forcefully as the direct one[4]: A proportional electoral system causes a multiparty system, because

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2 The model to compare across different political systems has been presented elsewhere (Tsebelis 1995).

3 Technically, he made the converse of the contrapositive conditional, which is logically equivalent. In logic a conditional proposition pq (read p implies q) is logically equivalent with its contrapositive qp (read not q implies not p). In addition, the converse proposition qp is logically equivalent with the converse of the contrapositive pq.

there are no incentives for different parties to merge. Once the party system includes many parties, none of them is assured a majority, coalitions become necessary for government formation, and the government is not assured of parliamentary support. Consequently, parliament becomes more important for both the passage of legislation and the survival of government than in a two-party system.

"Duverger's laws", which connected the electoral and the party system were widely debated and criticised on both methodological and logical grounds[5]. However, in the end they have been accepted as some of the most corroborated propositions in political science. In fact, subsequent theoretical and empirical research have both modified them only marginally, if at all[6].

With respect to the effects of the party system on coalition formation, Duverger's argument was straightforward: two-party systems give the majority to one party, and consequently produce stable governments who dominate the parliament; on the other hand, multiparty systems generate coalition governments which may lose votes in parliament (including confidence votes), and are consequently weak and unstable. From the previous discussion it should be clear that when Duverger discusses the number of parties in the party system, he is referring to the number of significant parties in a country's parliament. For example, the UK is the archetypal two-party system because the Liberals, despite their votes, do not control a significant number of seats in parliament. This is a common feature of all the analyses I will discuss: The number of parties in the party system is essentially defined as the number of parties in parliament[7].

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4   For a discussion of the relation between the direct and the converse argument, see Riker (1982) who calls the first Duverger's law, and the second Duverger's proposition.

5   The methodological criticism is that they attribute the formation of the party system to institutions, while the causal order goes in the opposite direction -- the existing parties designed the electoral system. The logical criticism is that the wasted vote argument operates at the constituency and not at the national level, so, it tells how many parties should exist in a constituency; but different parties may exist in different constituencies. Consequently, on the basis of this argument we know nothing about the national number of parties. For these discussions see Leys (1963)

6   For theoretical research see Palfrey (1989) and for a literature review see Riker (1982). For empirical research see Lijphart (1994); Rae (1967); Taagapera and Shugart (1989).

7   For example, the formula that produces the "effective number" of parties takes as input the number of seats different parties have (see Lijphart 1984). The only author in the party system literature who could count a party in a party system even if it were not represented in parliament is Sartori, but the matter is of academic significance, because there are no such parties in the countries he studies.

Sartori (1976) elaborated on Duverger's model by, among other things, refining the typology. In particular, with respect to multiparty systems, he distinguished between moderate and polarised pluralism. The dynamics of party competition in moderate pluralism are similar to two-partism: Two coalitions compete for office and one of them wins; and both coalitions are close to the ideological centre. In contrast, polarised pluralism includes a party that occupies the centre, and is opposed by bilateral oppositions on its left and its right. These oppositions are ideologically extreme and/or include anti-system parties. According to Sartori, the dividing line between moderate and extreme pluralism is "around" five parties. From his discussion, it becomes clear that the cut-off point is an empirical regularity, not a theoretical argument. Be that as it may, Sartori follows the foundations set by Duverger, and expects the number of parties in a country's party system to affect the politics of that country.

Lijphart (1984) takes a different approach and defines two different types of democratic regimes (he includes the U.S. in his sample): majoritarian and consensus democracies. In majoritarian democracies decisions are made by a majority, while in consensus democracies an effort is made to include multiple parties and interests in the decision-making process. Lijphart proceeds with an empirical analysis of 22 democracies that essentially confirms Duverger's expectations: plurality electoral systems (a variable that Lijphart calls "electoral disproportionality"), two-party systems, and dominance of the executive over parliament are correlated[8].

Finally, a series of authors (Laver and Schofield 1990; Dodd 1976) working on coalition stability in parliamentary systems have found that executive stability is inversely correlated with the number of parties in a country's party system and with the ideological distances between them. The essence of their argument is, when a government crisis occurs, parties will make calculations about how to react based on the probability of them being included in the next government coalition. Consequently, parties that stand to lose from the next coalition will have conciliatory attitudes, while the ones that stand to gain will be more aggressive. However, the probability of participating in a government depends on the configuration of the parties in parliament. In a system with multiple parties there are more possible combinations that include a particular party, which will then be

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8   These are the variables of interest to us here; Lijphart (1984) finds minimum winning coalitions and one-dimensionality of the policy space also correlated with the above variables. He also examines other variables such as unicameralism, constitutional flexibility and centralisation, which, despite his theoretical expectations, he does not find correlated with the other variables. These empirical findings led him to modify his argument in subsequent publications (Lijphart 1989).

willing to change coalition partners (bring down the government) in order to improve its position.

All these findings and theories are consistent, and each adds to the other. The are also congruent with other bodies of work. For example, Almond and Verba's (1963) cultural analysis separates Anglo-Saxon Democracies from continental ones, a distinction which is empirically identical with two- versus multiparty systems. Powell (1982) found a correlation between two-party systems and executive stability, but a very weak relationship between party systems and levels of violence.

However, concerning the relationship between party systems and government dominance and stability, there are two questions that can be raised concerning the theories, even if the empirical findings corroborate expectations. First, are these clusters of characteristics theoretically related or, at least some of them, empirical correlations? For example, both cultural analysis and institutional approaches expect countries like the UK to have a stable government dominating parliament, or Italy to have an unstable government and a very important parliament. Does this empirical corroboration support the institutional or the cultural theory, or, indeed, some third theory? Second, assuming that governments are strong and stable in the UK and weak and unstable in Italy, why should voters or political scientists care about these characteristics? Do these characteristics have any impact on the decisions made by these countries' political systems? These two questions lead us to an alternative approach to parliamentary systems.

2. The Effects of the Number of Parties in Government

This approach focuses on the effects of decision-making logic in a political system on the policy output of this system. The knowledge of such effects is essential, because once a link between institutions and outcomes is established, then the selection of certain types of outcomes will become equivalent with the selection of certain types of institutions.

In Tsebelis (1995) I have argued that every political system includes a certain number of institutional or partisan actors whose agreement is necessary for a change of policy. I have called these actors "veto players". The approach permits comparisons across systems (presidential and parliamentary), across parliaments (unicameral and bicameral), and across party systems (two- and multiparty), as well as combinations of the above. In this section I will summarise the abstract

logic of the argument[9]. In the next section I will focus on the logic of law production in parliamentary systems. In the last section I will spell out the consequences for other characteristics of a parliamentary system, such as government stability, executive dominance, role of bureaucracies, and the judiciary.

Consider the parties forming a government coalition. Each one of them is a collective player whose agreement is necessary for a change in the status quo. Of course, it is possible that the parties delegate decision-making powers in some areas to one or another of them. Even more realistically, parties may delegate decision-making powers to a minister consistent with his area of oversight[10]. However, with respect to important decisions, it is safe to assume that at least the leadership of the government coalition parties (on behalf of the parliamentary groups) is in agreement. This agreement may require a vote in the parliamentary group of each coalition partner or, alternatively, the will of the majority of the party may be taken for granted. However, it is also safe to assume that there will be no significant agency problems inside a party: Either the leadership agrees with the majority of the parliamentary group, or it does not violate the will of this majority on important issues, or if it does, a crisis inside the party results in a change of leadership. For this reason, in what follows it will be assumed that important government decisions have the agreement of concurrent majorities within each coalition partner.

How difficult is it to get diverse parliamentary groups to agree on a change of policy? For a change of policy to occur, the proposed solution must be considered as an improvement over the status quo by these concurrent majorities. Or, as I will say from now on, a necessary condition for a change in the status quo is that the new policy is in the winset of the status quo of each coalition partner. Figure 3.1 gives a graphic representation of this argument in a two-dimensional space with three government partners (or as we will say from now on, veto players). Each party is assumed to have a single ideal policy combination (we will relax this assumption in a while) and to prefer between two options, the option that is closer to its ideal point. With these assumptions, if the status quo is located outside the triangle ABC formed by the ideal points of the three coalition part-

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9 This paper focuses on partisan veto players only. Institutional veto players include Presidents with veto power, as well as upper chambers that can veto legislation. For the complete analysis of the interaction of institutional and partisan veto players see Tsebelis (1995). However, the simplification introduced here does not alter the empirical analysis of existing parliamentary democracies except for two countries, Portugal before 1982 (the President had veto power), and Germany in the periods where the Bundesrat was controlled by the opposition. In both cases, there is an additional institutional veto player.

10 This is the assumption that Laver and Shepsle (1990) have made in a series of papers.

Figure 3.1: Conditions for a Change in the Status Quo
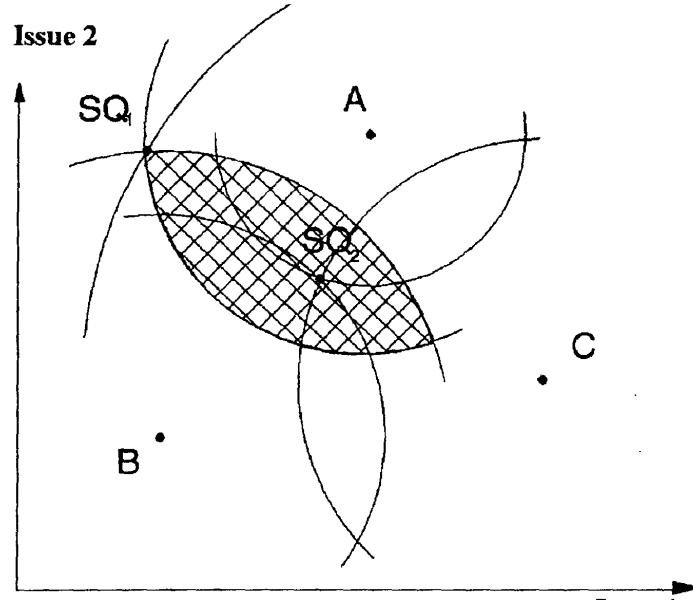
ners, there is the possibility of unanimous agreement for change. The shaded area is the unanimity set of SQ1, that is, the set of feasible outcomes. If, however, the status quo is located inside the triangle ABC, like SQ2, there is no possibility for change. Indeed, the three circles going through SQ2 (and around the points A, B, and C) do not intersect at any point other than SQ2. In terms of our initial question, the coalition ABC can change the status quo if it is located in the position SQ1 but not SQ2.

Tsebelis (1995) presents three propositions about the size of the winset of the status quo. Here I will state two of them and provide the intuition behind them.

Proposition 1:
As the number of players required to agree for a movement of the status quo increases, the winset of the status quo does not increase (i.e., policy stability does not decrease).

The argument behind proposition 1 is simple: the winset of the status quo of n+1 players is a subset of the winset of the status quo of n players. For this reason, adding one or more veto players will never increase the size of the winset of the status quo.

Proposition 2:

As the distance of players who are required to agree for a movement of the status quo increases along the same line, the winset of the status quo does not increase.

The next proposition relaxes the simplifying assumption that veto players are individuals (or if collective, that all members of the same collective player have the same ideal point) and permits collective veto players with differences of opinion between, as well as within veto players.
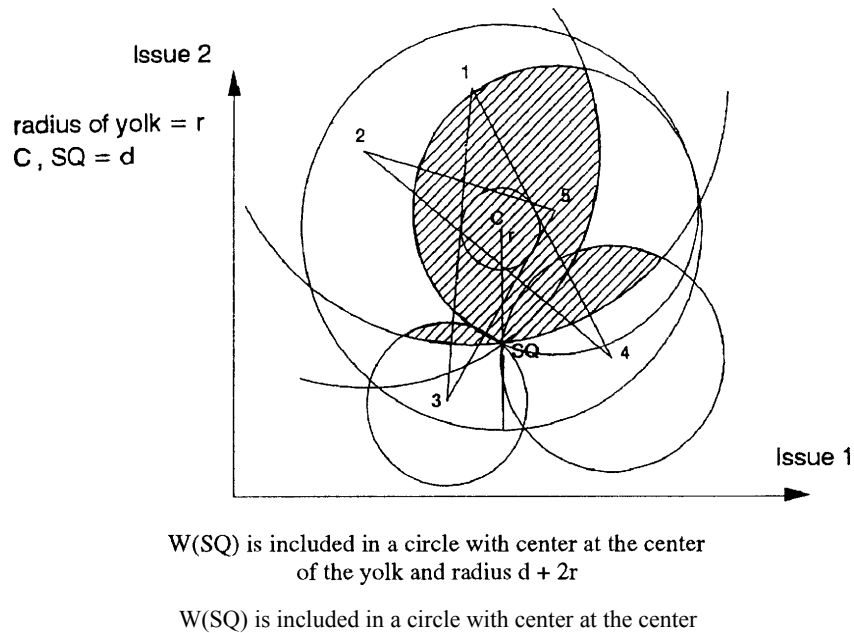
In this case, social choice theory has demonstrated that within every collective actor there is a centrally located sphere which is called the "yolk"[11]. The size r of the radius of the yolk is usually very small, and on the average it decreases with the number of individual voters with distinct positions (Koehler 1990). If one calls C the centre of the yolk of a collective actor and d the distance of the status quo (SQ) from C, the winset of SQ for this actor is included in a sphere of centre C and radius d+2r. This is an important social choice finding for our purposes here, because it allows us to replace the individual players in the previous figure with collective players.

Figure 3.2 provides a visual representation of the argument. Five individual players form a collective actor whose agreement by majority rule is required for a change in the status quo. The figure shows the yolk (centre C and radius r) of this collective actor, and the winset of the status quo. It is easy to verify that the winset of the status quo is included in the circle with centre equal to the centre of the yolk and radius d+2r, where d is the distance between the status quo and the centre C of the yolk.

Figure 3.2 can also help us understand why the relevant independent variable for policy making is the number of veto players in the government (as opposed to parliament). Here is how: Consider for the moment the textbook case where a coalition of parties controls both the government and forms a majority in parliament. We will consider the exhaustive list of alternatives in the next section. Suppose that parties 1, 2, and 3 form the government. If this is the case, the policy outcome will not be anywhere in the circle with centre C and radius d+2r, or even anywhere in the shaded area; the policy outcome will be inside the intersection of the circles around points 1, 2, and 3 (the lower left petal-like shaded area in Figure 3.2). Herein lies the reason why the number of parties in government is

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11 The yolk is defined as the smallest sphere that intersects all median hyperplanes. Hyperplanes are planes in more than two dimensions. A median hyperplane is a hyperplane that divides the individual voters into two groups so that a majority of voters are on the hyperplane or on one side of it, and a majority of voters are also on it or on the other side of it. For a more complete discussion, see Ferejohn, McKelvey and Packell (1984). For a non-technical discussion of the yolk and the calculation of winsets, see Miller, Grofman and Feld (1989).

Figure 3.2: Yolk and Winset of SQ of a Collective Decision Maker

W(SQ) is included in a circle with center at the center
of the yolk and radius d + 2r

W(SQ) is included in a circle with center at the center

the relevant variable concerning policy making: Government formation stabilises the majority that supports different policies by giving veto power over policy decisions to each party participating in government. Consequently, the size of the winset shrinks when the requirement be made that a policy be supported not by any parliamentary majority, but by the majority that supports the government itself.

Figure 3.3 uses the argument presented in Figure 3.2 to replace the individual players with collective players. One can think of Figure 3.3 as the extension of Figure 3.1 for the case of collective rather than individual players. I call rA, rB, and rC the radii of the yolks of the collective players A, B, and C respectively. In this case, the winset of the status quo includes points that are at greater distance from the centres of the yolks of the collective players than the status quo itself. I have drawn the corresponding circles in Figure 3.3, and the set of points

Figure 3.3: Differences Between Individual and Collective Decision Makers for the Change of the Status Quo; Agreement of Three Players Required for a Decision
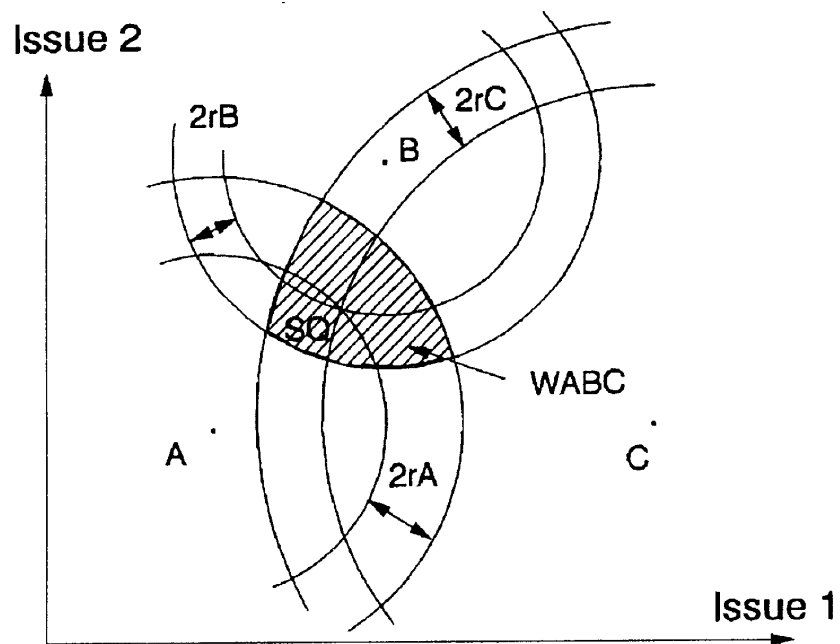
that can defeat the status quo is included inside WABC[12]. A comparison of Figures 1 and 3 indicates that when the individuals participating in a collective player do not have identical preferences, more solutions become possible. Indeed, there are more possible parliamentary majorities that will support some alternative to the status quo than when parties are monolithic in terms of preferences[13]. The next proposition follows straightforwardly.

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12 In fact, one can locate the winset of the status quo in a smaller area, but while such an increase in precision would greatly complicate the exposition it would not alter the results reported here. For such an example, see Tsebelis (1993).

13 Here I speak about monolithic preferences, not behaviour. I do not refer to party discipline which obviously facilitates agreement, since it forces even members of a party that disagree to vote for policies preferred by the majority.

Proposition 3:
As the size of the yolk of collective players required to agree for a movement of the status quo increases, so the area that includes the winset of the status quo increases.

These three propositions provide a theory of policy making (or alternatively of law production) in parliamentary democracies to which we now turn.

## 3. Law Production in Parliamentary Democracies

In the textbook example we used in the previous paragraph, government and parliamentary majority had identical composition, so there was no reason to distinguish between the two. However, this simple case does not represent the majority of empirical situations. The agreement of all coalition partners is, strictly speaking, neither necessary nor sufficient for policy change. Indeed, in parliamentary democracies, government proposals may be defeated by a parliamentary majority. This is particularly probable in the case of a minority government, which requires the support of other parties to have its policies approved. Also, if the government controls a comfortable parliamentary majority it may bypass some of its members and propose policies to which they disagree. In what follows, I argue that in its interaction with parliament, the government possesses important weapons because of its location in space (which I call positional advantages) and/or because of constitutional provisions attributing to the government agenda setting powers (which I call institutional advantages). These positional and institutional advantages guarantee that the government position will prevail in important matters.

I will first present the argument in its simplest form and then elaborate it in order to account for the rich institutional structure of existing parliamentary democracies. Consider two veto players, one called legislature (L) and the other executive (E). In most political systems of the world, a policy change requires the agreement of both the legislature and the executive to be enacted[14].

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14 Exception to this statement would be presidential regimes where the President does not have legislative veto.

Figure 3.4: Status Quo and Position of Legislature and Executive
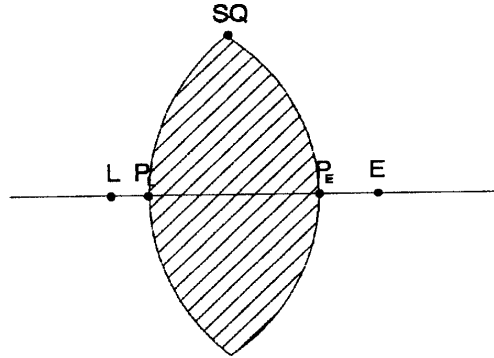
In Figure 3.4 consider the status quo, and the position of the legislature (L) and the executive (E). If they are both veto players, the feasible policy changes are represented by the shaded area. In determining which one will be selected, institutional provisions enter into play. In parliamentary democracies, the government controls the agenda and introduces legislation to the parliament. The parliament may be able to amend it (we will discuss this case in a while). In presidential systems, the parliament controls the agenda and presents the president with a package which he must accept or veto. This very simple game represents an important difference in policy making between presidential and parliamentary systems. In a presidential regime, the parliament will make a proposal PL which belongs to the feasible set and is closest to its own ideal point. Conversely, in a parliamentary system, the government will make a proposal PE which will be closest to its own ideal point. Figure 3.4 indicates that in this simple game it is better to be the agenda setter than to be the player who merely agrees or vetoes a proposal. For this reason, I submit that loss of agenda control is the reason for both the proliferation of arguments on the decline of parliaments in parliamentary democracies, and the lack of such discussions in presidential systems[15].

Some simple statistics will suggest that the general assessment that governments control the agenda in parliamentary democracies is correct. In more than 50 percent of all countries, governments introduce more than 90 percent of the bills. Moreover, the probability of success of these bills is very high: over 60 percent of bills pass with probability greater than .9, and over 85 percent of bills

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15 In the US there is an ongoing debate about executive dominance, but it has to do mainly with the expansion of the areas of the executive branch like executive agencies, the role of the presidency in foreign policy or defence, not directly with legislation which is the issue that concerns us here.

pass with probability greater than .8 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1986:Table 29)[16].

However, even if governments control the agenda, it may be that parliaments introduce significant constraints to their choices. Or, it might be that parliaments amend government proposals so that the final outcome bears little resemblance to the original bill. I argue that most of the time, neither of these scenarios is the case. Problems between government and parliament arise only when the government has a different political composition from a majority in parliament. By examining all possible cases of relationships between government and a parliamentary majority, I will demonstrate that such differences are either non-existent, or, if they do exist, the government is able to prevail because of positional or institutional weapons at its disposal.

The textbook relationship between government and parliament, where the government is supported by a minimum winning coalition, is only one of the possible configurations. The other two are oversized governments (i.e., governments that include more parties than necessary to form a majority) and minority governments (i.e., governments not supported by a majority). Let us examine each of these cases individually.

A. Minimum Winning Coalitions

This is the most frequent (if we include single party governments in two-party systems, which are by definition minimum winning coalitions) and the least interesting case for our discussion. The government coincides with the majority in parliament and, consequently, there is no disagreement between the two on important issues. As Figure 3.2 indicates, the minimum winning coalition represented in government restricts the winset of the status quo from the whole shaded area of the Figure, to the area that makes the coalition partners better off than the status quo. There is one exceptional case to consider: If the government parties are weak and include members with serious disagreements over a bill, the bill may be defeated in parliament. This, however, is only a marginal possibility because votes are public, and party leaders possess serious coercive mechanisms that pre-empt public dissent (Italy was the only exception to the rule until the government introduced open votes in 1988 and did away with the problem of franchi tiratori, that is, parliamentarians who voted to defeat and thus embarrass their own government). The most serious of these mechanisms is elimination

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16 What these numbers do not specify, however, is how many amendments were made to the bills or, how many times the government may have altered the bill in anticipation of amendments.

from the list. Even in cases where a secret ballot is required, party leaderships manage to structure the ballot in a way that enables them to monitor their MPs.

A good example of such structuring comes from Germany. In 1972, Chancellor Willy Brandt was about to lose the majority supporting his coalition because of defections from both his own party, the SPD, and his coalition partner, the FDP. On April the 27th he faced a constructive vote of no-confidence in the Bundestag[17]. According to parliamentary rules, a vote of confidence is a secret ballot, and the Chancellor was afraid he might lose his majority. For that reason, he instructed the members of his coalition to stay in their places and not participate in the vote, thus effectively controlling possible defectors. The vote failed by one vote (247 out of the 496 members of the Bundestag supported the leader of the opposition, Rainer Barzel).

In general, the coalition formation process gives an important advantage to governments. Either the leadership, or the most moderate party personalities are included in the government, so when they come to an agreement it is difficult for other members of parliament to challenge or undo it. An example of the latter is the following statement from the Norwegian Prime Minister Kare Willoch regarding his coalition government: "I wanted their leading personalities in the government. It was my demand that their party leaders should be in government because I did not want to strengthen the other centres which would be in parliament. That was my absolute condition for having three parties in government." (Maor 1992:108)

B. *Oversized Majority Governments*

Oversized majority governments are very common in Western Europe. Laver and Schofield (1990) calculate that four percent of the time (of the 218 governments they examine), a party which forms a majority alone will ask another party to join the government; and 21 percent of the time, while there is no majority party, the coalition formed contains one or more parties more than necessary.

In such cases, some of the coalition partners can be disregarded, and policies will still be passed by a majority in parliament. Such a situation occurs frequently in Italy, where five parties participated in the governments of the 1980s. The Christian Democrats and the Socialists together had a majority of seats, making the other three partners unnecessary from a numerical point of view. However, ignoring coalition partners, while possible from a numerical point of view, imposes political costs, because if the disagreement is serious the small partner can resign, and the government formation process must begin over again. Even if

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17 According to article 67 of the German Basic Law, the chancellor cannot be voted out of office unless a successor has been voted into office.

government formation costs can be avoided (by the formation of a government which includes all previous coalition partners without the disagreeing party) the argument is still valid, because the proposed reform will be introduced in parliament by a coalition that does not include the disagreeing party. Here is how Maor reports the position of a leader of the liberal party, member of the government coalition in Denmark: "We could stop everything we did not like. That is a problem with a coalition government between two parties of very different principles. If you cannot reach a compromise, then such a government has to stay away from legislation in such areas (Maor 1992:99-116)[18].

Simple arithmetic disregards the fact that there are political factors which necessitate oversized coalitions. Regardless of what these factors might be, for the coalition to remain intact, the will of the different partners must be respected. For this reason, each partner in the coalition is a veto player. Consequently, while the arithmetic of the legislative process may be different from the arithmetic of government, a departure from the status quo must usually be approved by the government before it is introduced to parliament, and, at that stage, the participants in a government coalition are veto players.

C. Minority Governments

These governments are even more frequent than oversized coalitions. Strøm (1990) has analysed minority governments and found that they are common in multiparty systems (around one third of the governments in his sample). Moreover, most of them (79 out of 125) are single-party governments which resemble single-party majority governments. Laver and Schofield have argued that there is a difference between a governmental and a legislative majority. While their point is technically correct, I will argue that, for two reasons, this difference has no empirical significance. First, minority governments possess positional advantages over parliament. Second, minority governments possess institutional advantages over their respective parliaments. I will discuss each one of these issues separately.

### a. Positional Advantages of Minority Governments

The party forming a minority government is usually located centrally in space. For this reason, it can lean slightly towards one or another possible partner in order to have its policies approved by parliament (Downs 1957; Laver and Schofield 1990; and Strøm 1990). In order to develop this point further, consider

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18 I do not know whether the government implied here is a minimum winning or an oversized coalition, but the logic applies to both.

*Figure 3.5:* Five-Party Parliament in a Two-Dimensional Space
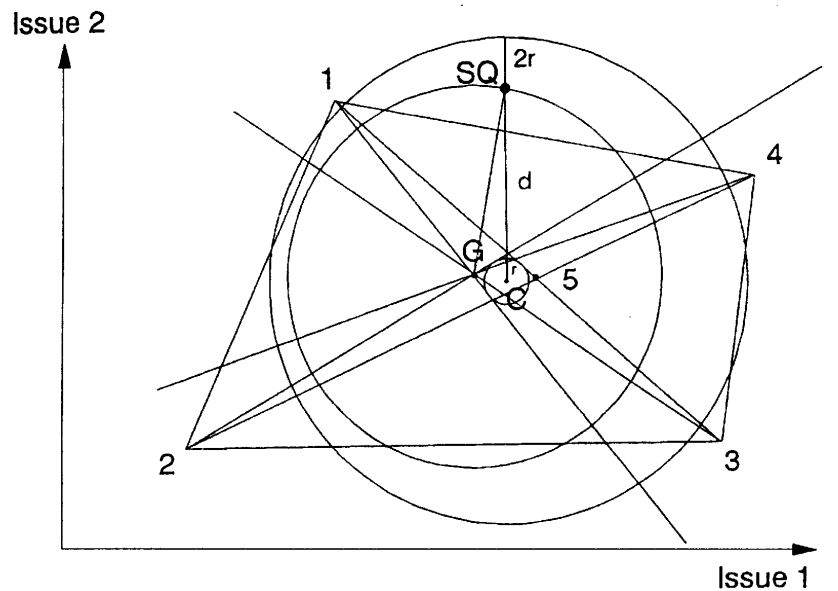
a five-party parliament in a two-dimensional space like the one in Figure 3.5. What follows is an illustration of the argument, not a formal proof.

If the centrally located party (5) is in the intersection of the two diagonals of the quadrangle 1234, there is no majority in parliament without the support of party 5. Consequently, anything that party 5 wants, it can get through the support of the appropriate majority. Technically, party 5 occupies the core of the parliament[19]. However, such a situation is of limited empirical significance, since it has a low probability of occurrence. What happens if party 5 is not exactly in the intersection of the two diagonals but still centrally located? Consider the situation depicted by Figure 3.5 with five parties 1,2,3,4, and G (the government) where G is located somewhere inside the quadrangle. In this case, there are median lines through all four angles of the quadrangle that go through G. Consequently, the centre of the yolk[20] of the parliament will be located close to G, as in the Figure. Remember that the winset of the status quo of this parliament is located inside a circle (C, (d+2r)) with centre the centre of the yolk C, and radius d+2r (d is the distance of the status quo from C and 2r is the diameter of the yolk). If the seg-

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19 The core is the multidimensional equivalent of the median position in one dimension.

20 For the definition, see discussion of Proposition 3 above.

Figure 3.6: Splitting the Two-Dimensional Space into the Component Quadrants
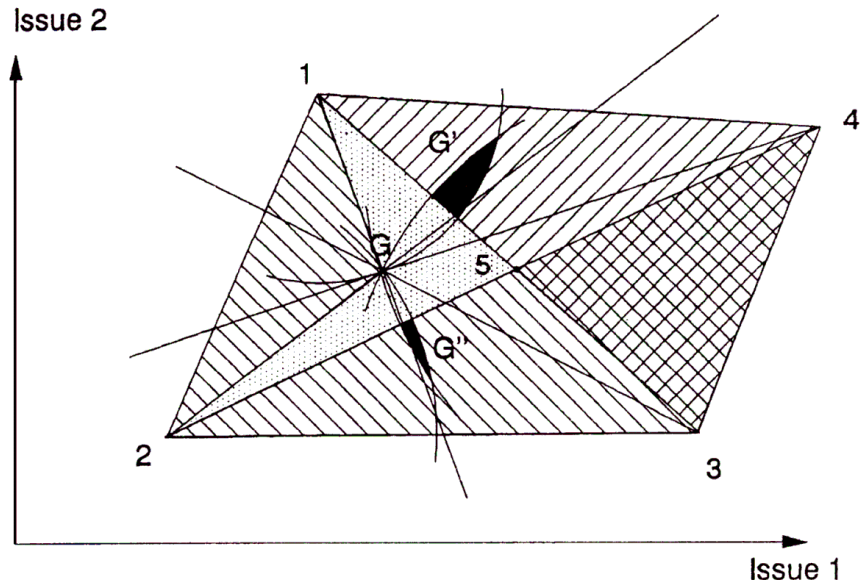
ment GC is smaller than the diameter of the yolk 2r, what the government prefers over the status quo will be included inside (C, (d+2r)). If the distance GC is greater than 2r there will be some points in space that G prefers over the status quo which the parliament does not approve. In any case, there is a big overlap between the will of the parliament and the will of the government. This does not imply, however, that parliamentary and government preferences exactly coincide. Let us examine different cases.

Figure 3.6 divides the two-dimensional space into different quadrants. Note that G will always be located inside a triangle with 5 as one of its vertexes. In Figure 3.6 this is triangle 125. Parties 1 and/or 2 will be the most frequent allies of the government for changes of the status quo. Here are the possible cases:

1. The status quo is outside the quadrangle 1234. In this case the government can always put together a majority which will prefer G over the status quo.
2. The status quo is inside the triangle 134. In this case the possible allies of G are party 2, and at least one of parties 1 or 3. This alliance will lead to the ideal point of the government except when the status quo is located in the shaded area originating at point G'. In this case, the government cannot

achieve its own ideal point, but it can change the status quo for a point closer to its own ideal point.

3. The status quo is inside the triangle 234. In this case the possible allies of G are party 1, and at least one of parties 2 or 4. This alliance will lead to the ideal point of the government except when the status quo is located in the shaded area originating at point G". In this case, the government cannot achieve its own ideal point, but it can change the status quo for a point closer to its own ideal point.

4. The status quo is inside the triangle 12G. In this case the government can use parties 3 and 4 as allies, and move the status quo to its own ideal point.

5. The status quo is located in the area 152G. This is the only case where the Government will find itself in the minority. There are two potential coalitions, 134 and 234, that can be formed against the government and move the status quo further away from G.

To recapitulate, if a minority government is centrally located in space, it can be part of most possible parliamentary majorities and, consequently, move the status quo inside its own winset. In fact, most of the time it might not have to compromise at all, and it can locate the final outcome on its own ideal point. In only one case can a bill that comes to the floor be opposed by the government and still be accepted, if the bill is located in area 152G. How likely is it for such a bill to come to the floor of parliament? This brings us to the second category of advantages of a minority government over parliament, the institutional ones. This category of advantages is not limited to minority governments. Every parliamentary government has at its disposal some constitutional, as well as procedural or political means to impose its will on important issues on parliament.

b. Institutional Advantages of Parliamentary Governments

Several constitutions provide ruling governments with a series of agenda setting powers, such as priority of government bills, possibility of closed or restricted rules, count of abstentions in favour of government bills, possibility of introducing amendments at any point of the debate (including before the final vote), and others. The most extreme in this regard is the constitution of the French Vth Republic. In this constitution the following restrictions of parliamentary powers apply: According to article 34, the parliament legislates by exception (only in the areas specified by this article, while in all other areas the government legislates without asking for parliamentary agreement); article 38 permits legislation by ordinance (upon agreement of parliament); according to article 40, there can be no increase in expenditures or reduction in taxation without the agreement of the government; article 44.3 gives the government the right to submit votes under closed rule (no amendments accepted); article 45 permits the government to declare that a bill is urgent, thus reducing the number of rounds that the two cham-

bers will shuttle the bill[21]; finally, the most powerful weapon of all, article 49.3 permits the government to transform the vote on any bill into a question of confidence (Huber 1992; Tsebelis 1990). The picture of an impotent parliament is completed if one considers that the government controls the legislative agenda, that the parliament is in session less than half of the year (special sessions are limited to 2 weeks and must have a specified agenda)[22], that the committee structure was designed to be ineffective (six large committees cross-cutting the jurisdictions of ministries), and that discussions are based on government projects rather than on committee reports. Finally, even censure motions are difficult because they require the request by 1/10 of MPs (the right is non-reusable during the same session), and an absolute majority of votes against the government (abstentions are counted in favour of the government).

The French government is an exception in terms of the breadth, depth and variety of institutional weapons at its disposal. However, the German government possesses interesting institutional weapons as well, such as the possibility to ask for a question of confidence whenever it deems appropriate (article 68), or the possibility to declare legislative necessity and legislate with the agreement of the second chamber (the Bundesrat) for 6 months (article 81). Even the Italian government has the right to issue ordinances (Kreppel 1994). In addition, with respect to parliamentary legislation, it has the right to offer the last amendment on the floor. If one of its bills has been heavily amended, it can bring it back close to its initial position (Heller 1994).

Some of these measures can be found in this volume in the chapters by De Winter, Döring and Rasch. However, the most serious and frequent of all these agenda setting measures is the threat of government resignation, followed by dissolution of the parliament (Huber 1994). This measure exists in all parliamentary systems except Norway.

This analysis has serious consequences for law production. In order to understand policy changes in a country, we must focus on the party composition of that country's government. The existence of multiple and polarised parties in government prohibits significant changes to the status quo. This is because, with the exception of a dramatic change in public opinion, which would affect all parties the same way, at least one of the veto players (coalition partners) will disagree with any proposed change. Either the change will be aborted at the government

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21 For a discussion of the navette system in France see Tsebelis and Money (1995) and Money and Tsebelis (forthcoming). Their argument is that reducing the number of rounds increases the power of the National Assembly (which has positions closer to the government).

22 The Socialists, who had a heavy reform agenda, had to use seventeen such sessions in their first term (1981-86).

level, or, if some coalition partners decide to go ahead and the measure is significant, it will fail in parliament, or lastly, the coalition will collapse.

Conversely, single-party governments (whether majority or minority) have the possibility of introducing major changes in the status quo. I say possibility because they may not desire policy change. For example, the single-party government of Japan is not particularly renowned for dramatic policy changes. However, this is because it had remained in power for a long time, and, consequently, it liked the status quo that it had put in place. However, the same government, when confronted with the 1973 energy crisis, undertook swift and dramatic policy changes (Feigenbaum et al. 1993).

Consequently, (again, unless there is a dramatic shift of public opinion) the necessary condition for the absence of significant policy change is the existence of multiple and polarised veto players. Now we can go one step further and substitute the words "significant policy change" with "production of significant laws." This is because what we call significant laws affect a large number of people in important ways, that is, they mark a significant departure from the status quo.

Since multiparty governments are incapable of producing significant laws (unless there is a dramatic shift in public opinion), and while single-party governments are able to undertake such changes, one would expect to find over a long time period and in a wide set of countries more significant pieces of legislation in countries with fewer veto players. In other words, significant law production should be inversely affected by the number and the ideological distances of government partners. Table 3.1 presents a crude summary of the argument. In this table I have divided government parties into three categories (one, 2-3, and more than three), and the frequency of significant laws into high, medium, and low. Obviously, the theory presented in this section generates more refined expectations: the number of significant laws declines as a function of the number of parties in government and their ideological distances.

The same argument should apply to government-enacted legislation (decrees). Indeed, the more coalition partners and the greater the ideological distance among them, the more difficult it is to enact any kind of significant legislation. However, the theory presented here leads to the expectation that decrees are easier to agree upon than laws. This is because the participants in governments are ideologically closer to each other than are the supporters of the

Table 3.1: Number of Veto Players and Quantity of Significant Bills

Number of parties in government	Frequency of significant laws		
	high	*medium*	*low*
1	yes	yes	yes
2-3	no	yes	yes
> 3	no	no	yes

coalition in parliament, and, consequently, they can agree on more solutions (see Proposition 2) than can members of parliament[23]. Whether governments with multiple veto players will produce less decrees than governments with few or one veto player is a matter of empirical investigation. If the need for legislation is high, and parliament cannot agree, the government can legislate by decree as long as the differences between members of government are not very significant. If intergovernmental differences of opinion are significant, the government itself might be paralysed.

Along the same lines of argument, another prediction generated by the theory is that agreements made by party leaderships will be more stable than government decisions. The reason is simple: if party officials are different from government members, they are usually more extreme (either because they are faithful representatives of the average member of the parliamentary group, or because they are closer to rank and file members of the party than the parliamentary group). Consequently, (Proposition 2) they have less room for agreement. Under these circumstances, the set of possible agreements between party leaderships is a subset of the possible agreements of the parliamentary parties, which in turn is a subset of the possible agreements of government members. It follows that while an agreement of government members can be overturned in parliament, party leadership agreements are likely to be confirmed.

Finally, the above analysis can produce expectations concerning non-significant laws. Ceteris paribus, significant and non-significant laws should vary inversely, because of time constraints. The ceteris paribus clause assumes that a parliament has limited time and uses it to pass legislation (either significant or trivial). If there are other uses of time like questions to ministers, general debates etc., or if the time of meetings is itself variable, controls must be introduced for these factors.

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23 For an examination of government decrees in post-World War II Italy, see Kreppel (1994).

There are two other factors that I would expect to affect the production of significant laws. The first is the length of time that a given government stays in office. One would expect that governments take some time before they present significant laws in parliament. Consequently, short lived governments produce less significant legislative work. A second factor is the alternation of parties in government. A consequence of the argument presented in this section is that a government containing a new coalition partner would be expected to make more changes the greater the ideological distance between the parties that succeed each other in entering government.

In this section I concentrated on expectations about policy changes as a function of partners in a government coalition. Even if these expectations turn out to be correct, how can this analysis help us understand broader characteristics of parliamentary democracies, such as executive dominance, or executive survival? Also, are there any additional expectations to be formed concerning political systems on the basis of the veto players framework? This is the subject of the last section.

4. Law Production, Government Survival, Executive Dominance, and the Role of Bureaucracies

Consider a parliamentary system which exhibits policy stability (as defined in this paper). A government coalition that cannot agree on significant changes to the status quo will not be able to respond effectively to exogenous shocks to the political or economic system. For example, a sudden rise of inflation or unemployment, or an influx of immigrants will lead each one of the government partners to different analyses and different proposed solutions, so that no government response will be possible. If the shock is of sufficient magnitude, one would expect the government coalition to break down and be replaced by another government (possibly after an election). For example, economic recession prevailing at the beginning of the 1980s led to the breakdown of the coalition between Socialists and Communists in France in 1984. Mitterrand decided to apply austerity policies in order to stay inside the European Monetary System, while the Communists refused to "manage the crisis of capitalism." Similarly, the same strained economic conditions led to the collapse of the coalition between SPD and FDP in Germany in 1982, and to it being replaced by the more congruent coalition between FDP and CDU-CSU.

We can now combine the two steps of the argument. I have demonstrated that multiple veto players (government coalition partners) lead to policy stability (inability to change the status quo). I have also argued that policy stability will lead

to government instability. Consequently, multiple coalition partners will lead to the instability of the governments in which they participate. Preliminary evidence indicates that this is the case.

Warwick (1992) has found that the number of, and the ideological distances between government partners leads to government instability. In a more detailed, forthcoming study, he goes one step further: as I demonstrated in the first section while standard game-theoretic approaches of government survival expect characteristics of a parliament (number of parties in the party system, ideological distances of the parties in parliament) to affect the probability of survival, he introduces government characteristics in his model (number of parties and ideological distances of the parties in government). The result of the study is that when all variables are introduced, government characteristics are statistically significant, while parliamentary characteristics are not. This finding is a puzzle for standard game-theoretic models of coalitions, because, as we reviewed in the first section, according to these theories government survival depends on the chances of different parties to be included in a new government (that is, characteristics of the parliament). The model presented here accounts for Warwick's findings. If parties participate in government for policy reasons, then coalitions are going to break down and governments are going to be replaced whenever they cannot address an exogenous shock. This happens because the number of veto players is too large, or their ideological distances too great for them to present a common reaction.

The issue of executive dominance over the parliament remains. The analysis in section III above indicates that in any parliamentary system the government possesses significant political, positional, or institutional advantages over parliament. The government either controls parliamentary majorities, or (if it is a minority) it occupies a central position in the policy space, or controls a significant institutional arsenal (with the threat of resignation and new elections as the most frequent and significant weapon), or a combination of the above. Consequently, the real question is not whether the government can push its decisions through parliament. The answer to this question is affirmative, because in the executive parliamentary game, the government of parliamentary democracies controls the agenda (as Figure 3.2 indicates).

The real question concerning the interaction between parliament and government is whether the government knows what "it" wants. This question is directly related to how many veto players there are in the coalition, and the ideological distances between them. A single-party government can decide more quickly, and on many more issues than a multiparty government (in fact, because of its party manifesto and ideology, most of the time it has its decisions ready before the

problems arise); a multiparty government must try to find the appropriate compromises among the coalition partners.

The veto players framework can be used to generate predictions not only about law production, but also about other variables that are considered important in the comparative literature, such as executive dominance and stability. The same framework can be used to generate predictions about judicial and administrative importance and independence. If courts and bureaucracies are interested in seeing their decisions stand, and not being overruled by political actors, they will be more important and independent in systems with multiple incongruent and cohesive veto players.

With respect to the independence of bureaucracies, two seemingly contradictory arguments have been presented in the literature. Hammond and Knott (1993) use a two-dimensional model and argue that the size of the "core" (i.e. the set of points with empty winsets) increases with multiple principles of the bureaucracy, providing bureaucrats with the opportunity to select any point inside the core without fear of being overruled[24]. Their argument deals with the American political system (that is, a presidential democracy) and includes congressional committees, floors and the presidency. However, their approach is similar to the one adopted here[25].

Moe (1990), and Moe and Caldwell (1994) on the other hand, yet starting from similar premises, reach apparently opposite conclusions. They compare presidential and parliamentary regimes, using the UK and the US as archetypal systems, and argue that parliamentary regimes will have fewer bureaucratic rules and more independent bureaucracies than presidential regimes, which will have extremely detailed laws and procedures reducing the autonomy of bureaucrats.

In Tsebelis (1995) I have tried to synthesise these arguments in the following way. Single veto players do not need detailed descriptions of bureaucratic procedures written into laws. The party in power can decide how the bureaucracy is going to work, and for the bureaucracy, there is no difference whether it is written in the law or in a ministerial decision. In addition, crystallising procedures into laws for the next government makes no sense, because the new government can easily write new laws, or issue new ministerial instructions. So, single veto players will not need to restrict bureaucracies through legal procedures.

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24 This expectation is consistent with Lohmann's (1993) finding that in periods of divided government in Germany, the Bundesbank is more independent.

25 Notable differences between the Hammond and Knott model and my approach are that they are interested in the special case when the winset of the status quo is empty (while I am interested in the size of the winset), and they use two dimensions, (that can be generalised up to four; see George Tsebelis (1993) while my approach holds for any number of dimensions.

Multiple veto players on the other hand, will try to crystallise the balance of forces at the time they write a law in order to restrict bureaucracies as much as they can. How restrictive the procedures will be depends on the level of agreement among these veto players. For example, their disagreements may not only be political, but also institutional and procedural. In this case, if there is a law it, will be quite general, giving leeway to the bureaucrats. For this reason, the existence of multiple veto players does not guarantee detailed procedural descriptions written into the laws.

The argument I have just presented does not deal with just one kind of political system (presidential or parliamentary); in fact, the claim is that the veto players framework can help us compare across systems, and that it will reveal similarities between a parliamentary regime with multiple veto players, such as Italy, and a presidential regime like the US.

Restricting this argument to parliamentary systems (which is my focus here) the predictions are the following. On average, systems with multiple veto players are more likely to have cumbersome bureaucratic procedures than single veto player settings as Moe (1990) argues. On the other hand, cumbersome bureaucratic procedures should not be confounded by lack of independence. In fact, they might be a bureaucratic weapon against political interference in administrative tasks. In addition, bureaucracies are more likely to be independent when they have multiple principals (multiple veto players), than when they have a single principal. Focusing on the importance of the judiciary, my model generates the expectation that it will be important in both federal countries, as well as in countries where it adjudicates between veto players (presidential systems). Within parliamentary systems, the judiciary will be more important in countries with multiple veto players, like Germany or Italy, than in countries with single veto players, like the UK or Sweden. Similarly, supreme courts will be more important in federal than in unitary countries[26].

Further theoretical and empirical research is required to complete and validate this model. At the empirical level, while existing policy studies indicate that the number and incongruence of veto players leads to policy stability, the evidence is sparse and, for the most part, not quantifiable[27]. The sequel to this vol-

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26 One variable missing from this account which should be included in a comparative study of courts is who has standing in front of the court. For example, the condition for the increase of importance of the Constitutional Court in France was the introduction of the reform (at the time it was called "reformette" because of lack of understanding of its significance) that the Court could be asked to deliberate by 60 members of Parliament.

27 The most comprehensive comparison of policies across different political systems and countries is the volume edited by Weaver and Rockman (1993). They compare three

ume will perform more systematic empirical tests. The predictions of the model concerning government and regime instability find more quantitative support, but here too, the model itself has to be tested against all of the available data.

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or more countries at a time with respect to thirteen different policy areas, and come to conclusions confirming the expectations of this paper.

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