



Government Alternation in Western Europe

A Comparative Exploration

Marco Valbruzzi

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to
obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences
of the European University Institute

Florence, 19 May 2017

European University Institute
Department of Political and Social Sciences

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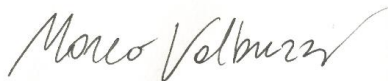
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Abstract

In the last thirty years, alternation in government has become a common practice in Western Europe. Unfortunately, democratic theories and theorists have hitherto mostly neglected or taken for granted this crucial phenomenon in many political systems. This thesis aims to fill this gap between theory and practice. In the first part, the dissertation puts forward a new and original conceptual toolkit for the analysis of government alternation across countries and through time. Three dimensions, or faces, of the concept of alternation (i.e. actuality, possibility and probability) are singled out, defined and thoroughly operationalised. This process of concept reconstruction makes it possible to paint a large historical fresco of the development of government alternation in Western Europe throughout the whole post-war period.

The second part of the thesis is devoted to the empirical analysis of the suggested determinants of alternation in government. All the factors that may have an impact on the occurrence of alternation in its manifold manifestations are scrutinised and correlated to the diverse ways in which West European party systems change their cabinets across space and time. Furthermore, the analysis carried out in this part of the thesis directly challenges much of the conventional wisdom that has accompanied the study of alternation since its uncertain inception. More precisely, the results of the bivariate analyses show that the occurrence of alternation is not strictly correlated with the fragmentation of the party systems or the proportionality of the electoral systems. Other factors, such as the existence (and the strength) of anti-system parties, the role of pivotal actors, voters' availability to change their electoral behaviour or the cabinet size, contribute to the explanation of the emergence and the persistence of a pattern of alternation in government.

In the last part of the thesis, I carried out a comparative time-series cross-section analysis of the determinants of government alternation in seventeen West European countries. Partially, this set of multivariate analyses confirms some of the evidence collected in the previous section. However, and in addition to that, the large-N statistical analysis demonstrates that different explanatory factors account for the variation in the three dimensions of alternation suggested above. Moreover, the same argument holds true for the explanation of the development of government alternation, in particular its accelerated rise since the 1980s.

Finally, in the concluding chapter I analyse, firstly, the foreseeable evolution of government alternation in Western Europe, especially in relation to the impact of the current economic crisis on the functioning of West European democracies. Secondly, the chapter closes with the suggestion of a new typology of party systems based on the existence of a bipolar pattern of inter-party competition and the possibility of a wholesale replacement of the governing parties.

To Cinzia

Acknowledgments

Any scientific endeavour is not the result of a personal effort but the product of a collective journey. This is not a ritual statement, nor should it be interpreted as the customary blame-avoidance strategy. As the traditional disclaimer goes, the responsibility for all the remaining errors is entirely my own and I am honoured to share the possible merits of the thesis (if any) with those scholars, colleagues and friends who have offered their generous help and assistance.

I started reflecting on the idea of this thesis many years ago, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Bologna. It was at that time that I met Gianfranco Pasquino, my first *maestro* of political science who has accompanied (and constantly, even harshly, spurred) me throughout this never-ending academic journey. My gratitude to him is enormous and I have the unpleasant feeling that I will be permanently indebted to him for his support and for what he has (and continues) to teach me. His vocation and passion for the discipline is, undoubtedly, the most important lesson I have learned.

After Bologna I moved to Florence (*rectius*: Fiesole), to the EUI, and my experience here started with a loss. Peter Mair – whom I was lucky to have been selected by as PhD researcher – died prematurely in August 2011, and while his unexpected death meant that I missed out on the opportunity of attending his seminars and benefiting from his mentorship, his reflections, insights and studies (as the reader will quickly realise) were a constant point of reference, even a benchmark, for my research. Unfortunately, he will not be able to read these lines, but I would like to thank Peter for having accepted me into his academic crew at the EUI.

This Institute in Fiesole is not only an academic institution. It is, so to speak, a state of mind and one of best fulfilments of that idea of Europe that we, as Europeans, should defend. My time at the EUI also gave me the opportunity of meeting, for the second time in my life, Stefano Bartolini. I initially met him at the University of Bologna, when he taught a seminar on the Analysis of Political Institutions. I remember that course as brilliant, demanding, and definitely thought-provoking. It was at that time that I had the opportunity to get to know and appreciate Stefano – as both professor and scholar. Yet I did not imagine that I would be so fortunate as to get a second chance of coming into contact with him. He agreed to accept me as one of his supervisees at the EUI and, more than a formal supervisor, he became my second *maestro* of political science. He taught me the importance of being methodologically rigorous and, at the same time, intellectually creative. If I have been able to put into practice his insights, combining *politological* imagination and methodological awareness, I must share this result with him. I expect all of Stefano's supervisees would admit that his supervision is no 'dinner party' – there is always something that could be done better, stated more clearly, made simpler. And he is always, somewhat frustratingly, right. Yet I know that without his tough, no-nonsense supervision I would have got lost along the way, wasting my own time and energy. For this and for many other reasons, I am incredibly grateful to Stefano Bartolini.

As known, the EUI somewhat resembles a busy seaport. People, scholars, students, and researchers constantly come and go. Among this flux of people, I had the good fortune of crossing paths with other professors and scholars, who offered me their time and, most importantly, shared their ideas. It is here that I met Hanspeter Kriesi, who taught me how to effectively combine political theory with empirical analysis. It is also here that I first encountered Ferdinand Müller-Rommel, who also gave me the important opportunity of attending the *ECPR Summer School on Political Parties and Representative Democracy* held in Luneburg in 2014. I would like to warmly thank both of them for having agreed to serve on my jury and for the time they have spent reading and commenting on my papers and manuscripts.

My fortuitous meetings at the EUI do not stop here. When I arrived in Fiesole, I came across a brilliant Marie Curie Fellow, Duncan McDonnell, with whom I had something in common: a strong interest in comparative politics. That point of contact inspired many passionate discussions on the future of representative democracy, the transformation of political parties, the (dismal) state of the discipline and, not really *dulcis in fundo*, the bizarreness of the Italian political system. The echo of those discussions can be found among the lines of this manuscript and I would like to thank Duncan for having shared with me his time, his knowledge and, more than once, also his home. To the list of important encounters at the EUI I must add those with Luciano Bardi, Daniele Caramani, Wolfgang Müller, Takis Pappas, Thomas Poguntke and Philippe Schmitter. At different times but with the same kindness and generosity, they helped me better specify my research interest and the overall framework of the thesis. I am indebted to all of them.

For different and not exclusively academic reasons, many pages of this dissertation have been written in different cities. Obviously, Bologna, Florence and Rome are at the top of list. Yet I had the opportunity of working on this research in other places. As a Visiting Scholar, I started my bibliographical and empirical research at the University of California (campus San Diego), where I met Arend Lijphart, Gerald Mackie, Matthew Shugart, Samuel Popkin and Kaare Strøm. I am thankful to all of them for what their encouragement when I was at the very beginning of my journey.

My journey continued to Corsica, Greece (namely, the marvellous island of Naxos), and Washington, followed by a quick stop in Luneburg – where Richard Katz and Hans Keman very generously provided me with their feedback on a draft version of the thesis – after which I eventually arrived ‘down under’ in Sydney, where I was Visiting Scholar at the University of Sydney and researcher for *The Electoral Integrity Project*. During my ‘Australian’ period, I had the opportunity of discussing many aspects of my research with Pippa Norris, Richard Frank, Ferran Martinez i Coma, Holly Ann Garnett, Norbert Kersting, Allesandro Nai, Aiko Wagner and Margarita Zavadskaya. To all of them I would like to send my very special thanks. For their stimulating and literally magisterial suggestions, I am also extremely grateful to Giovanni Sartori and Joseph LaPalombara. Their comments on the overall structure of the thesis, as well as on its theoretical underpinnings, provided me with important guidelines that I have tried to follow throughout the manuscript. Finally, I would also like express my gratitude to Adele Ines Battistini, Maureen Lechleitner, Martina Selmi, Gabriella Unger and Helen Aitchison for their help and assistance.

In a more personal dimension, I would like to thank my family for their unconditional support, love and understanding. Without them, I would not be who I am. With them, I have become a better person. In addition, I must confess my endless gratitude to my sweet nieces, Lucia and Giulia. Thank you, my little best friends, for make me feel younger every day, despite the tyranny of age.

Lastly, my very special thanks go to the woman of my life. She supported me when I needed encouragement, tolerated my stubborn eccentricity, and forgave me for my absence and my distance. If I ever have come to understand what love means, I owe it to her. Thus, it is not by chance that my thesis is dedicated to her.

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Chapter 1

The story of a silence. Alternation without a theory

1.1. In the beginning was the silence

This is a story of a silence. A strange silence, indeed. Our libraries are full of books that contain or elaborate complex theories of democracy. Our classes and syllabi include sophisticated discussions about the nature and the structure of representative democratic regimes. Our papers and researches, often presented in official meetings of some scientific association, adopt innumerable definitions of modern democracy. Everybody, in brief, seems to know what democracy is and what democracy is not. Furthermore, many of those conceptualizations and descriptions of the democratic regimes presuppose, implicitly or not, some form of removal of the rulers, of those who have, and are in, power. In a representative democracy, citizens are free if they can get rid of their elected governors. We can give very different labels to this specific process (just to mention a few: turnover, rotation, alternation, replacement, substitution, swing etc.), but the crucial point is that contemporary democratic theorists have been hitherto silent on that subject.

Now, the question is: Why? To answer this fundamental question we need to explore, first of all, the main theories of democracy elaborated in the last two centuries or so. The next section of this chapter will be devoted precisely to accomplish this task and, more specifically, its main focus will be the analysis of the relationship that different «models of democracy» have with the process of substitution of the rulers. Yet the story of that strange silence is not over here. Not only scholars are speechless when they are called to investigate, both theoretically and empirically, the link between democracy and turnover in power. They remain also mute when they try to establish a linkage between the process of democratization and the process of alternation. Not so many years ago, just to take one relevant example, Samuel P. Huntington (1991) claimed that a country, in order to be included in the set of the purely democratic nations, must meet a «two-turnover test»: briefly put, a democracy can be viewed as consolidated when it is able to bear the cost of a double alternation among the political authorities. If, so to speak, the initial winners accept to become the subsequent losers. My take is that, whereas the study of the process of democratization has immensely grown, the process of alternation in power has been immensely neglected. The focus on democratization has cast a long and enduring shadow on the concept of alternation, which has suddenly become the dark side of the story – under-investigated and rarely analysed. Hence, once again the question is: Why? The tentative answer will be at the centre of the fifth section of this chapter.

Additionally, there is a recurring catchword that appears almost in every book dedicated, at least in the title, to the concept and the working of democracy. That magic word is “accountability”. It means, to put it very crudely, that rulers must be accountable to the citizens for what they have done, not done or poorly done while in office (Pasquino 2007). Accordingly, voters have the possibility to sanction/reward bad or good governors. The connection between democracy and accountability is self-evident and, in fact, along this line Schmitter and Karl (1991) define the former by making explicit reference to the latter: «modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives». Thus, if, on the one hand, the relation between democracy and accountability is considered as

straightforward and indisputable, on the other hand, the relation between accountability and alternation is much more indefinite. But how can citizens control their elected politicians or punish their rulers if they cannot vote them out of office? Or, put it differently, how can accountability be obtained without alternation in office or at least without its possibility? Answering these questions will be the task that I shall carry out in the third section and, in relation to the model of direct democracy, in the fourth section.

Finally, scholars of party systems, especially those interested in their different performances, usually distinguish between two distinct kinds of party system. On the one hand, one finds those democratic regimes where alternation is permitted and concretely experienced. In this case, the name assigned to this category is *alternational party systems*. On the other hand, there are the so-called *pivotal party systems*, in which a party or a group of parties make the occurrence of alternation in power simply impossible. It is worth stressing here that the *fundamentum divisionis*, namely, the criterion of classification, between alternational and pivotal party systems is the possibility of alternation in government. Unfortunately, most scholars have taken that classification for granted, even when it looked more and more problematic, if not useless. Nowadays, most of the countries, especially among advanced industrial democracies, have experienced at least one alternation in government and, consequently, have been included in the class of the alternational party systems. As a consequence, we are dealing with a classification that does not properly classify, or that poorly classify. Thus, the problem of this misclassification is the criterion used for classifying different party systems, that is, the possibility of alternation, and not the classification *per se*. Regrettably, political scientists have paid attention, and are still paying attention, only to the existing classifications, avoiding completely any discussion concerning the way we (mis)classify party systems. I do not intend to avoid this crucial matter, and I will deal with it in the sixth section.

To sum up, the existing theories of democracy have, consciously or not, hitherto ignored the subject of how power changes hand. We do not know what it is, we do not when it occurs, we do not why it happens and, *acer in fundo*, we do not know which are its foreseeable consequences for a democratic regime. The veil of ignorance has reached and wrapped this important political process. Unveil all the theoretical features of alternation in power will be the main endeavour of the first chapter of this journey among the subtleties of alternation.

1.2. Many democratic models, no role for alternation

“Throwing the rascals out” is one of the most (ab)used expression in the scientific literature concerning the role of governments and the behaviour of the voters in a democratic polity. Even though we do not know clearly who the rascals are, the point I want to underscore is the action or, better yet, the process of “throwing out” those agents whose behaviour has been deemed somehow unfit to rule a political system. In the theoretical framework set up by William Riker, ‘the function of voting is to control officials, *and no more*’ (Riker 1982: 9). More accurately, the replacement of officials is, in the liberal view, the only available instrument in the hand of the citizens-voters to protect their liberty. In Riker’s terms, ‘the essence of the liberal interpretation of voting is the notion that voting permits the rejection of candidates or officials who have offended so many voters that they cannot win an election.’ In this sense, therefore, “throwing the rascals out” is, at least from a purely liberal standpoint, at the core of any democratic (and representative) theory.

However, as David Held (1996) has correctly pointed out, there exist different types or models of (liberal) democracy. In particular, Held identifies (among others) two different democratic models: on the one hand, there is the “competitive elitism” and, on the other hand, we find the protective democracy. What is the role (if any) of alternation in these two models? Or why should we give a role to alternation in government? Let us proceed with order, starting from the former model.

First and foremost, it is worth reminding that government alternation – as a specific procedure for “kicking the rascals out” – is not usually “considered as a central feature of any modern democratic theory. For instance, just to name a few preeminent political theorists, neither Robert A. Dahl (1956) nor Giovanni Sartori (1987) take into account the process of alternation in their respective theories of democracy. Sartori (1982: 197) simply argues that the fact that alternation may appear to many as desirable ‘does not make it, *per se*, a front-line variable.’ Hence, within a democratic theory and for the survival of democratic regimes alternation is by no means a fundamental, or constitutive, defining element. At best, it is a second-class variable that may be used to explain, as an intervening factor, the quality, or the performance, of democratic political systems (Pasquino 2011a).

More in general, after having scrutinized twelve democratic theories, Berg (1965: 150) has concluded that there are ‘only few and brief references to alternation in power, and most of those references are implicit rather than explicit.’ For instance, Hans Kelsen, in admitting certain defects of his favourite electoral system (proportional representation), argues that in a democratic regime the minority must be able, sooner or later, to become the majority. In Kelsen (1929: 77)’s terms, ‘[o]nce political parties have achieved a certain permanence among those possessing civil rights, so that significant shifts in the power relations among political groups are no longer to be expected in the foreseeable future; and once a two-party system – which in turn is favored by the parliamentary principle of the majority – has directly and indirectly been formed; then proportional representation threatens to lead to a certain rigidity of the political system.’ In all these circumstances, in which the political group controlling a majority of seats permanently stay in power, there ‘is a want of the possibility of a salutary change in governance [*Wechsel in der Regierung*], of a kind of back-and-forth system, in which the two dominant groups alternate in running, and, hence, in carrying the responsibility for, the state (Kelsen 1929: 77).

Kelsen reserves only these brief references to the concept of alternation within the broader context of his democratic theory. Nevertheless, albeit implicitly, it is possible to acquire at least three fundamental takeaways. First, alternation in power seems to require a sort of preliminary agreement among the main political actors on the fundamental principles (i.e., civic and political rights) of the regime. In a way, this is linked to the fact that ‘competition rests on non-competitive precondition which set the social capsule within which political competition can take place and without which it would easily convert into another’ (Bartolini 1999: 437). In other words, alternation, as a variant of political competition, must be “encapsulated” in order to preserve it from its dangerous consequences. However, few scholars have been questioning whether political competition, as a method of processing conflicts, is a self-institutionalizing mechanism that does not require any preliminary consensus or collusion (Berg 1965; Przeworski 2015). In any case, alternation as a way of processing conflict needs a more or less widespread acceptance of the rules of the game, that is, the recognition that democracy may turn into a losing game.

Second, Kelsen seems to accept uncritically the equation according to which the most hardened enemy of alternation is the proportional representation. This is an aspect that it will be specifically investigated in the next chapters, but suffice it to say here that this equation does not seem to apply in the majority of West European cases where the process of alternation coexists with a proportional electoral system. Hence, such a voting method does not preclude the prospect for that ‘salutary change in government,’ commonly known as alternation.

Third, Kelsen makes reference to the *potentiality* rather than the *actuality* of alternation. As I will show in Chapter 2, there exists a remarkable difference between the two dimensions of this single concept. Yet this difference remains under-studied in the field of both political science and democratic theory. Indeed, Kelsen appears to maintain that, in the long run, the absence of alternation may strengthen the bitter antagonism between a permanent majority and a likewise permanent opposition, but this useful insight has turned out to be a fall into the void that no scholar has hitherto attempted to perform.

In short, alternation is not a defining component of a democratic political regime, which is, instead, characterized by the existence of free and fair elections (political rights) and civil rights. There is no room for any form of alternation, or rotation, in office within this proceduralist/minimalist framework. Nevertheless, other scholars and thinkers – that we can still consider as members of the proceduralist school of democratic thought – such as Riker, Przeworski, Schattschneider, Linz etc., argue that alternation is, or ought to be treated as, a crucial element of a democratic regime.

Let me illustrate better this aspect. First, for Juan Linz (1998: 19) ‘democracy is government *pro tempore*’ and, more importantly, this is ‘one of the defining elements of political democracy.’ Moreover, as Linz himself acknowledges, the idea of government *pro tempore* ‘seems however so obvious that in some of the writings on democracy the temporal character of democratic rule is not explicitly stated.’ As a consequence, government alternation is taken for granted and lives in the shadow of this undeclared, but implicitly supposed, temporal condition. Hence, if and when rotation in office is conceived as a way for constraining politician’s behaviour, one should begin to consider it a (more) central element of representative democracy. The second example that I want to discuss is related to the writings of Schattschneider. Democracy is – for Schattschneider – ‘a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives’ (1960, 141). There are two relevant points in this quotation that one needs to take into account. First of all, the role of *competition* between leaders/organizations/parties is *a sine qua non* for a democratic regime. In line with the progenitor of the so-called minimalist, or proceduralist, theory of democracy, namely, the Austrian economist Josep Alois Schumpeter, Schattschneider conceives the ‘competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ as the main engine of the democratic process. More precisely, democracy flourishes from the electoral competition between different and distinct actors. On this point, it is worth reminding that one of the dimension in the concept of “competition” is, for Bartolini (1999; 2000), the *vulnerability* of the office holders. The incumbents’ safety of tenure (that is, political vulnerability) as a dimension of the concept of competition should be considered at the core of a broader democratic theory, at least in a Schumpeterian (competitive elitist) perspective. It goes without saying that a government is electorally vulnerable if it can be peacefully ousted from office by the voters. Thus, again, alternation in government should not be (too) easily ejected from our theoretical discussions on the defining features of the democratic regimes.

The second relevant element that the quotation of Schattschneider brings to the fore is the role and the importance of the political *alternatives*. Succinctly, democracy entails also the possibility to choose between different (in terms of policies and ideologies) actors. With no alternative at stake, the possibility of democratic competition is inexistent. Although, as we shall see in the next chapter, “alternation” and “alternatives” are different concepts, they are, at the same time, deeply intertwined and, at the end, members of the same semantic field. In a way, we can say that there is alternation if, and only if, there are alternatives from which voters can select their preferred ruling representatives. To put it differently, when the “rascals” in government are thrown out from office, there will be, sooner or later, another *alternative* would-be team of rulers ready and eager to exert the executive power.

Lastly, the scholar who most vigorously has tried to include alternation in power among the defining elements of democracy is Adam Przeworski. Unfortunately, he started from the wrong assumption that ‘everyone agrees that the occurrence of alternation is the litmus test of democracy’ (Przeworski 2015: 105). In the light of the above discussion, a simple fact-checking would prove the unsustainability of this statement. Indeed, the vast majority of democratic theorists simply neglect alternation in power or, in the best scenario, they treat it as a needlessly ornamented add-on of representative democracy. As Sartori (1982: 198) put it, if alternation ‘was the essence of representative democracy, we should give up any hope.’ Perhaps, some scholars would be tempted to admit that the *potentiality* (rather than the occurrence) of alternation may be used as a ultimate test of democracy, but even in this specific circumstance Przeworski would find himself in a small company. In this sense, he can be considered as a heretic in the group of the proceduralist democratic

theorists since very few among them would endorse his belief that ‘alternations are a *sine qua non* of democracy (Przeworski 2015: 104). In addition, Przeworski goes as far as to argue that alternation in power is the mechanism that allows self-rule in societies with heterogeneous preferences. In other words, by distributing influence over time among all the citizens equally, alternation is not only a self-institutionalizing mechanism, but also a method maximizing autonomy and political freedom. However, this maximization can occur only ‘through a “perfect” alternation in power, i.e. through a temporally equal distribution of the periods during which any individual or group controls political decision-making’ (Berg 1965: 152). A perfection in “control periods” that, for one reason or another, it is impossible to meet in practice and, accordingly, cannot guarantee that different people actually rule in turn.

Therefore, what is the essence of democracy, at least in the Schumpeterian “competitive elitism” model re-elaborated by Held? The answer is straightforward: the essence of democracy is ‘the ability of citizens to replace one government by another and, hence, to protect themselves from the risk of political decision-makers transforming themselves into an immovable force’ (Held 1996: 179). As a consequence, (actual or, better, potential) alternation in power, conceived as the most clear-cut procedure to replace one government by another *alternative* government, is or should be located at the hearth of any liberal-democratic theory. Indeed, it is not just a case that Schumpeter (1942) himself argues, in one of the least quoted passages of his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, that ‘in making it the primary function of the electorate to produce a government (directly or through an intermediate body) I intended to include in this phrase also the function of evicting it.’ And, as Schumpeter aptly specifies, ‘the one means simply the acceptance of a leader or group of leaders, the other means the withdrawal of this acceptance’ (1942: 272). That said, what is alternation if not the *withdrawal of acceptance* to a specific leader or team of leaders? Once again, the answer is that governmental alternation is the essence of that *withdrawal* and, accordingly, it is surprising that scholars and theorists have not paid so far enough attention to this specific and relevant process.

To recapitulate, many philosophers and thinkers maintain that alternation must not be considered as a defining element of a democratic regime. In short, democracy lives and survives even without any specified pattern of alternation in office. Nevertheless, other proceduralist or “elitis” scholars (Schumpeter *in primis*) have emphasized the importance of a government *pro tempore* for the survival and consolidation of a democratic polity. It is precisely at this critical juncture that the “competitive elitism” meets its historical predecessor, the “protective democracy” model.¹ In fact, if the government is not only *legibus solutus* (that is, illiberal or above the law), but also – so to speak – *temporibus solutus* (above any temporal constraint), then democracy may turn itself into a form of despotic regime. As Lord Acton wrote in a famous letter to Bishop Mendell Creighton in 1887, ‘power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Hence, in my view, absolute power is a power without checks and balances, and one of the most effective way to curb a despotic exercise of power and protect the liberty of the citizens is to set up regular and regulated temporal constraints.

It goes almost without saying that this is the solution promoted and endorsed by the ideal founders of the “protective democracy,” starting from Montesquieu, Locke, Stuart Mill, Madison and so on and so forth. Incidentally, with particular reference to the work of the so-called Founding Fathers (*The Federalist Papers*), it is worth reminding two relevant aspects strictly related to the concept of alternation in power. The first aspect is linked to the nature of the mankind: ‘If men were angels, no government would be

¹ In this case, the emphasis is on the concept of “limited government”, namely, on that set of arrangements that *check* and *balance* the executive power. To some extent, it is possible to argue that the emphasis that scholars and practitioners alike have put on the formal instruments to restrain political power have largely restricted the study of alternation into a small grey area. I would like to thank Hanspeter Kriesi for bringing this aspect to my attention.

necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions' (*The Federalist Papers*, no. 51). Here, the main argument is that, because of their human nature, men are not charitable souls (angels) and, accordingly, the power they have once in government should, and ought to, be severely limited. One of the many and existing ways to limit the power of those who govern is to make that power temporally limited. If a party or a coalition of parties remain in power *ad indefinitum*, namely, without any connection to the evaluation of the electorate, then the control on government is highly undermined. Interestingly enough, that is a point finely illustrated by Carl J. Friedrich (1937) with reference to the English constitution. According to Friedrich, 'alternation of government between two or three parties' is a 'very effective' instrument to restrain and control the power of the political authorities. Put it another way, in England the 'consequent relative absolutism has been endurable because of a constitutional safeguard which no one clearly envisaged until after Montesquieu's time: the regular alternation of two large parties in controlling this broad power' (Friedrich 1937:149).

As these simple quotations indicate, sometimes alternation makes its appearance in the work of very few democratic theorists, but they usually remain segregated behind the front line, without obtaining the necessary relevance. If, as Friedrich (1937: 293) maintained, 'it is justifiable to describe any type of authoritarian regime as essentially a one-party government... [because] the control which comes from alternation with the other party is lacking.', then it even more striking the amount of silence that has wrapped the concept of alternation until nowadays.

The second element which is present in *The Federalist Papers* and directly linked to the phenomenon of alternation in government is the idea that a good and safe democracy should be constructed in such a way that 'ambition must be made to counteract ambition.' In a nutshell, this is the Madison's recipe to neutralize the obnoxious 'mischiefs of factions.' More specifically, the ambition of one faction (for instance, the incumbent government) must be pitted against the ambition of another faction (the would-be rulers). It is this particular form of competition between concurrent ambitions that prevent the advent of what Madison called (and feared) the 'tyranny of the majority,' which can only be forestalled by specific constitutional arrangements, that is, 'a system of political representation and a large electoral body' (Held 1996: 92). Briefly put, pluralism of groups, interests and parties was the magic democratic formula envisaged by the supporters of the Madisonian, or polyarchal, democracy (Dahl 1956, Truman 1951).

For sure, there exist many different arrangements to set up a representative democratic regime, and the process of alternation in power is only one among them. Nevertheless, even though alternation is not *per se* a synonym, or a consequence, of ambition, the two concepts are intertwined in practice. Indeed, when the possibility of alternation in power is inexistent, the ambition of those out of power is repeatedly and automatically frustrated. As we shall see in Chapter 2, there are many forms of turnover in government, but the most explicit and adamant is that commonly known as alternation. When all parties in government act under the sword of Damocles, that is, of the electorate which can reward or punish them, then their ambition can be democratically restricted and regulated. On the contrary, if the electorate has no real power to hire or fire the government, the ambition of the incumbent rulers has no temporal limit; they can govern *ad libitum et indefinitum*, regardless of the will of the citizens.

In this sense, the role of governmental alternation becomes crucial also within the perspective of the liberal or protective democracy, in particular because it sets in motion the circuit of accountability for those who govern (Pasquino 2011b). To be more precise, as Held correctly argues in relation to the advent of liberal democracy, 'since those who govern will naturally act in the same way as the governed, government must, if

its systematic abuse is to be avoided, be directly accountable to an electorate called upon frequently to decide whether their objectives have been met' (Held 1996: 95). Therefore, it is time now to analyse the relation between democratic accountability and alternation.

1.3. Alternation and electoral accountability

First of all, it is worth saying that the term "accountability" refers to 'the duty of an agent to account for his action to his principal, who in turn can punish him if he fails to perform according to expectation' (Lewin 2007: 3). Hence, in this sense, punishment (or, correspondingly, reward) is one of the main features of the so-called "vertical" accountability. To this feature, Schedler (1999) adds two more elements: information and justification. Without clear and robust information on the behaviour of the rulers, accountability is, if not impossible, potentially deleterious. Instead, justification concerns the set of reasons provided by incumbent party leaders for their actions. Therefore, electoral reward and punishment is the (by-)product of these two preliminary phases because, as well as one cannot have accountability without some form of evaluation, at the same time information and justification are prior to any form of punishment or compensation.

So far, on the concept of accountability. But where and how does it relate with the concept of alternation? In order to answer this question, is it useful to make a step back and conceive electoral accountability as 'a three-phase process and a feedback' (Pasquino 2009: 14). More precisely, 'political actors looking for election will first try to *take into account* the preferences of the voters. If elected, they will then *keep into account* what they have heard and learned during the electoral campaign. Returning to the voters, they will *give an account* of their behaviour and their performance. Even those representatives who do not run again will retain some electoral accountability, because none of them would want to ruin the electoral chances of his or her party and successor' (*ibidem*).² In this very stylized electoral-representative process, alternation in government, either actual or potential, takes the field in last phase, namely, when rulers are called upon to give an account of what they have done, not done or poorly done while in office. In the light of this, alternation in office should be conceived as an instrument of democratic accountability. Yet with an additional caveat. As Schmitter (2005: 19) persuasively argues, 'the exchanges of information, justification, and judgment that make up the ordinary cycle of accountability are less obtrusive than the "big bang" of "throwing the rascals out" ... [...] Thus it would be wrong to think that only an electoral turnover, the loss of a confidence vote in parliament, a presidential impeachment, or a premier's resignation demonstrate that political accountability is working. In all likelihood, the most accountable rulers are those who never face the immediate threat of such measures. These leaders make it a practice to take citizens' expectations on board, to explain the citizens what the leaders are doing and why, and, therefore, have nothing to fear from accountability.' This apparently contradictory relationship between the "big bang" of alternation and accountability can be explained by the fact that 'political accountability is not only negative', meaning that, 'citizens in a democracy – or their representatives – do not normally desire to "throw the rascals out" ... [...] Most frequently, the exchange of information, justification and judgment is unobtrusive and citizens reward (or, at least, tolerate) rather than punish their rulers' (Schmitter 2003: 6).

Along this line of reasoning, accountability and alternation might appear in sharp contradiction because more alternation in power may imply the existence of less accountable – or, perhaps more correctly, less *responsive* – leaders. That looks like a good and tricky puzzle. Indeed, there is no doubt that frequent alternations in government are the results of "bad" rulers who are rightly punished for their commissions and/or omissions while in office. In other words, if the big bang process of "throwing the rascals out" is

² Hence, the representational cycle consists of three phases: receptivity, responsiveness, accountability.

frequent, it only means that the rascals are several and equally widespread; on the contrary, it does not mean that alternation does not work as an instrument of electoral accountability.³

The solution to the puzzle relies in the *expectations* of those who govern. As Schmitter (2003: 6) has specified, the most responsive rulers are those who 'have so internalized the expectations of those they are ruling that they have nothing to fear from accountability'. In this idyllic world, alternation ("the big bang of throwing the rascals out") is invisible, but not inexistent. In other words, it lies behind the expectations of the rulers and of the ruled. As the market is, in Adam Smith's famous expression, "the invisible hand" which connects the demand with the supply, it not so hazardous to maintain that in politics the possibility of alternation is the invisible hand which matches the expectations of the rulers with those of the ruled. Accordingly, accountability and alternation are not at odds, but, in the sense just specified, are self-reinforcing institution: accountability works if alternation in government is possible and alternation in government is credible if accountability works.

That said, if one considers governmental alternation as the supreme form of electoral punishment for the rulers, it is quite easy to see the linkage between rotation in office and accountability. Even more clearly, as Przeworski, Stokes and Manin (1999: 10) have convincingly argued, 'governments are "accountable" if citizens can discern representative from unrepresentative governments and can sanction them appropriately, retaining in office those incumbents who perform well and ousting from office those who do not'. The link between alternation and "accountable" governments is straightforward: the possibility to sanction unrepresentative politicians, ousting them from office, is what makes the entire cycle of delegation from citizens to their representatives democratic. If citizens have to "fire", either retrospectively or prospectively, bad governments, the most effective instrument to do this is electoral alternation. And this is a further reason why we should pay more attention to this particular type of change of/in government.

1.4. Alternation, self-government and direct democracy

To better highlight both the conceptual and empirical linkage between alternation and accountability, it may be useful to investigate this relationship across time, in particular by analysing how different models of democracy have coped with the problem of (de)selecting political authorities over time. Thus far, I have exclusively considered representative democracy but there is at least one alternative conception of democracy, with its roots in ancient Greece of the Fifth and Fourth centuries b.c., that is worthwhile discussing. In this regard, the first aspect that is important to stress is that there is not a single model of direct democracy. Indeed, there is 'a range of "classic" models' (Held 1996: 185) where one can find *inter alia* that model which we are used to know as direct, or participatory, democracy. This democratic ideal-type is, in a nutshell, 'a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved' (Held 2013: 280). The keyword here is "directly" because it implies that the citizenry as a whole, gathered in the Assembly, forms the main sovereign body of the city-state (Manin 1997).

Furthermore, as Aristotle acknowledged, classical Athenian democracy requires specific institutional features, that is: 'a) Elections to office by all from among all; b) Rule of all over each and of each by turns over all; c) Offices filled by lot, either all or at any rate those not calling for experience or skill; d) No tenure of office dependent on the possession of a property qualification, or only on the lowest possible; e) the same man not to hold the same office twice, or only rarely, or only few apart from those connected to warfare;

³ It must be also stressed that political accountability, especially in its rationalistic and optimistic interpretation, must not be confused with political responsibility. A responsible party, who takes into account all the constraints to its action and capacity, might be voted out of office. There is not necessarily a trade-off between the two concepts, but an increasing tension between them can help explain the puzzle for which perfectly responsive and accountable rulers are ejected from office.

f) Short terms for all offices or for as many as possible...’ (Aristotle, *The Politics*: 362-363). This list of features suggests that the citizenry must be not only directly involved in public affairs, but also that offices must be elected for a short period of time and by lot. More precisely, what is interesting from the perspective of alternation in government is the idea that power must be exerted by turns. On this point, Aristotle is even more explicit: ‘one aspect of liberty is being ruled and ruling by turn... [...] So this is the second defining principle of democracy, and from it has come the ideal of not being ruled, not by anybody if possible, or at least only in turn.’ From this standpoint, rotation in office as the main bulwark of the liberty of the citizen in direct democracy is the functional equivalent of alternation in office for representative democracy.

Up to this point, so to speak, the analogies. But where alternation and rotation in office plainly diverge is at the junction with electoral accountability. Adam Przeworski has taken this point very seriously in distinguishing the selection of politicians either by lot or by voting. In Przeworski (1999)’s terms, ‘when the authorization to rule is determined by a lottery [as it happened in Athens], citizens have no electoral sanction, prospective or retrospective, and the incumbents have no electoral incentives to behave well while in office. Since electing governments by a lottery makes their chances of survival independent of their conduct, there are no reason to expect that governments act in a representative fashion because they want to earn re-election: any link between election and representation is severed’ (Przeworski 1999: 45). Therefore, in direct democracy rotation of the rulers is a device for the avoidance of violence because, although the losers would be better off in the short run rebelling rather than accepting the outcome of the current round, if they have a sufficient chance to win and a sufficiently large payoff in the future rounds, they are better off continuing to comply with the verdict of the coin toss rather than fighting for power. Briefly put, ‘regulating conflict by a coin toss is a self-enforcing equilibrium. Bloodshed is avoided by the mere fact that, à la Aristotle, the political forces expect to take turns’ (Przeworski 1999: 46).

Yet if bloodshed is avoided, representativeness and responsiveness of the rulers (while in office) is not guaranteed by the mere rotation in power (by lot). More specifically, the difference between rotation and alternation in office is the same existing between the expressions “tossing up” and “tossing out”. To toss up a coin simply means that all participants in a given contest have an equal chance to be punished or rewarded, to be winners or losers. There is no linkage to the past performances of the participants: punishment and reward are assigned by lot. On the opposite, to toss out implies a selection, if not of the fittest, at least on the basis of past records in office or of the promised programs. In other words, rotation is a cyclical phenomenon that does not assign any incentive and send any signal to those who govern. For this reason, rotation in office is *uninformative* – rulers do not have to take into account the preferences of the citizens; they do not have to keep into account the will of the electorate and, finally, they do not have to give an account of their missions, commissions, and omissions. In sum, the cycle of electoral accountability does not work within the direct democracy model.

Let us recapitulate. Although the most famous theories of representative democracy do not entail any theory, or simple speculation, of alternation in power, what we have seen up to now is that some form of rotation in office is present, albeit implicitly, in the writings of different scholars interested in the functioning of representative democracy. This is tantamount to saying that alternation and democratic representation are not antithetical and they can live together as a sort of bedfellows. By contrast, the relationship between direct democracy and rotation is much more complex and definitely less straightforward. To begin with, when all the people participate in the process of decision-making, as direct democracy presupposes, it is impossible to select an alternative “people” capable of producing an alternation in power. If direct democracy entails the participation of all the citizens, then government alternation becomes pointless, or simply unattainable. What one can expect is a cyclical rotation in office of the rulers. Yet, as we have seen above, rotation is similar to alternation in regards to the avoidance of violence, but they diverge in relation to the effects on the electoral accountability of the rulers.

Despite these differences, both concepts address the problem of, or the quest for, self-government in ancient and modern societies. In Ancient Greece, the idea(l) of self-government found its realization through 'a combination of selection by lot with short terms and restrictions on re-eligibility' (Przeworski 2009: 79). That is what we usually mean by the concept of rotation in power. Besides, as Rousseau maintained, rotation or, more precisely, election by lot is not specific to direct democracy and, accordingly, sortition may be integrated in representative democratic arrangements (Manin 1997). Nonetheless, the problem of size, which separates direct from representative democracy, 'would render rotation meaningless' (Przeworski 2009: 79). It is precisely at this point that alternation takes the stage, becoming the mechanism through which modern democracies attain an updated version of the ancient self-rule.

1.5. Democratization, transition and alternation

As we have quickly seen above, Huntington (1991) used the concept of alternation as an indicator of the level of democratic consolidation shown by a country that is undergoing a process of transition from an authoritarian to an allegedly democratic regime. The two-turnover test that a country must pass to be finally included in the club of consolidated democracies is fairly clear. Step 1: When incumbents lose elections, they hand power over to the opposition; and, step 2, when the new government will lose elections they accept the result and peacefully resign. The process in itself is clear. However, two aspects are not clear at all. First, is alternation a synonym of *transition* or *consolidation*? On this specific point, Huntington is, to say the least, elusive; he does not specify the relationship between the concepts and, in addition, he does not make clear where a transition begins and an alternation ends. Accordingly, Przeworski (2015: 104) is right in arguing that 'alternations need not coincide with transitions to democracy; indeed, they rarely do coincide. While alternations are a sine qua non of democracy, transitions to democracy need not entails alternations: Most transitions occurred when authoritarian rulers were overthrown by force.' All this means that alternation as a specific type of government turnover, and transition as a process leading to a different type of democratic regime must be kept separate.

Nevertheless, this separation has been difficult to achieve in practice because of all that burgeoning literature on that specific phenomenon defined as 'democratization by alternation' (Wahman 2013) or, more broadly, 'democratization by elections' (Lindberg 2009). As Wahman hastens to point out, 'if alternation is not, by definition, democratization, then it should instead be used as a potential independent variable to explain an increased level of democracy.' This is not the place to assess whether that hypothesis is viable or not.⁴ Yet this is the place to notice that, once again, alternation in government is used to explain something else, as a potential explanatory variable, with no prior discussion about its meaning or definition. To some extent, the concept of alternation glitters with the reflected light, namely, the light coming from, on a case-by-case basis, democracy, democratization, consolidation or alternation. Like a dwarf among giants, alternation ended up choked.

The second aspect that is not clear about the relationship between alternation and consolidation is the meaning assigned to the former concept. In this case, Huntington is absolutely vague. Alternation and turnover are treated as mere synonyms and one remains with no clue on how and where to draw the boundary between a simple change in government and a concrete alternation in power. In addition, as argued by Arend Lijphart (2012: 6), '[t]he frequent use of the "turnover" test in order to determine whether a democracy has become stable and consolidated betrays... [...] the majoritarian assumption.' Namely, the assumption that a democratic regime is really at work when it entails a bipolar structure of inter-party competition in which two blocs or parties regularly alternate in government. As a result, in taking seriously

⁴ A preliminary and quite convincing test for this hypothesis has been recently carried out by Przeworski (2015).

the underlying assumption of the two-turnover test there is the risk of ending up in an empirical conundrum according to which of the twenty countries with the longest democratic history analysed by Lijphart, 'all of which are undoubtedly stable and consolidated democratic systems, no fewer than three – Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland – fail even the one-turnover test during the more than sixty years from the late 1940s to 2010, that is, they experienced many cabinet changes but never a complete turnover, and six – the same three countries plus Belgium, Finland, and Germany – fail the two-turnover test' (Lijphart 2012: 7).

In short, being conceptually imprecise may lead, intentionally or not, to very bizarre results. The most curious of which is that, starting from the implicit equation between alternation and democracy, it is ultimately possible to rule out those party systems characterized by a long and indisputable history of democracy from the set of consolidated democratic countries. When the concept of alternation is mistreated and, at the same time, promoted to a *sine qua non* position within a theory of democracy, or democratization, paradoxically results are behind the corner. The most dangerous of which is to mismatch, on the one hand, hybrid regimes as instances of fully-fledged democracies and, on the other hand, real-existing democracies as deceptive regimes in transition towards perennially unspecified goals.

Putting aside all these subtle intricacies, it is useful to analyse the relationship between alternation and democratization in a longitudinal perspective, avoiding any simplistic and universal equation. Following this stream of research, Przeworski has very recently arrived to the conclusion that a democracy is a habit that can be acquired through time and, in particular, through a process of alternation that requires the acceptance of the results by the opposition parties and the respect of the minority rights by the government. Within this analytical perspective, the first experience of alternation in government assumes a critical relevance. In fact, the first case of 'election in which the incumbent rulers subject themselves to the verdict of the people, lose, and peacefully leave office has a powerful effect on shaping the beliefs' that also the opposition can prevail at some time in the future (Przeworski 2015: 121). The habit of changing governments is difficult to acquire, but once the engine of alternation is started, the democratic process becomes a sort of self-institutionalizing mechanism which is hard to dismantle. In any case, it is worth pointing out again that alternation as such is not simply a proxy for the evaluation of democratic transition. In some circumstances, though not always and not everywhere, a wholesale turnover is just the (fundamental) kick-off of a game that it is still waiting to be played and whose result is constantly open till the final whistle.

To summarize, alternation and democratization (or consolidation, transition etc.) have experienced in the last decades a rise in popularity among scholars or pundits. However, the focus has been more on the latter than the former. Too often, alternation in government has been seen and treated as a bump in the road leading to a democratic goal. Accordingly, we have plenty of books and articles dealing with the process, the drivers or the consequences of a regime transition; yet we are left with only few unsystematic words on turnover in government. Rivers of ink is keep flowing from experts' pen in 'transitology' or 'consolidology' (Schmitter 2017), and alternation remains, as usual, shrouded in silence.

1.6. Alternation as a (mis)classification criterion

By the late 1950s classifying party systems has been a constant endeavour for many political scientists. Maurice Duverger (1954) opened the Pandora box and afterwards a group of leading scholars followed, critically, his path, although in different directions and with different inspirations. In fact, according to Bartolini (1998: 36), party system literature has been dominated by three main approaches: 'a genetic, a morphological and a spatial competition approach, epitomized by the influential works of Stein Rokkan (1970), Giovanni Sartori (1976) and Anthony Downs (1957) respectively'. Although with different emphases and degrees, all these approaches have come to a term, sooner or later, with the concept of alternation. For instance, Rokkan distinguished between two main types of party system, based on the evidence that 'in some

countries elections have had the character of an effective choice among alternative team of governors, in other they have simply served to express segmental loyalties and to ensure the right of each segment to *some* representation, even if only a single portfolio, in a coalition cabinet' (Rokkan 1970: 93).

The Norwegian scholar investigated in-depth the constellation of factors leading to those outcomes and, subsequently, other political scientists have built their classificatory schema on the basis of that seminal Rokkan's insight. For instance, Lijphart identifies two "patterns" of democracy starting from the assumption that some countries encourage expressive voting (consensus democracies), whereas other democratic regimes provide incentives for a more instrumental voting (majoritarian democracies). A similar approach, perhaps conceptually more rigorous, has been pursued by Bingham Powell (2000), in distinguishing between *proportional* and *majoritarian* view of democracy. Arguably, it is not far-fetched to trace back the roots of these classifications to the original distinction, put forward by Duverger (1982), between a form of party system that he called '*médiatisée*', that is, constantly mediated by the brokerage activities of the political parties and their party leaders, and a form of *unmediated* democracy in which the chain of delegation between voters and rulers is clear, direct and straightforward. Nevertheless, in spite of the many potential "hooks" offered by the genetic approach to the study of party systems, alternation in government has abundantly remained behind the scenes, never taking the centre stage.

Similarly, the spatial competition approach, inaugurated by the seminal book-length dissertation of Anthony Downs (1957), has very rarely paid attention to the swing of the pendulum between government and opposition. As correctly noticed by Merrill and Grofman (1999: 130), '[a]lthough considerable work has been addressed to explaining the lack of convergence in party strategies [according to the classic Downsian model], the search for an internal mechanism – without resort to institutional structures – that drives alternation in office has been largely ignored.' Much of the work in this context has been devoted to the analysis of the failures of the extremely parsimonious Downsian model in predicting party convergence even in two-party systems or to the endless quest for equilibrium strategies in multi-party systems. Only by largely relaxing the assumptions behind the Downsian model of two-party competition, few scholars have arrived to the conclusion that 'party control will alternate over a series of elections and that different parameter assumptions imply different patterns of alternations' (Merrill and Grofman 1999: 130). A conclusion that looks more like a new beginning.

Finally, the morphological approach to the classification of party systems is linked to the works of Duverger and, especially, Sartori. This approach 'concentrates primarily on the implication for democratic performance and stability of different party system formats of the number of units and the relative distribution of forces' (Bartolini 1998: 36). The French scholar was the first taking the field and suggesting a classification of party systems based on the simple numerical criterion (i.e. one-party, two-party, and multi-party systems). This analytical framework was then amended by Giovanni Sartori, whose sophisticated classification, combining numerical and ideological criteria, is commonly considered 'as the most important to be developed to date' (Mair 2005: xvi; see also Pasquino 2005 and Ware 1996). Other tentative typologies, more or less elaborated, have come to the fore in the last thirty years or so (Mair 1997; Golosov 2014; Nwokora and Pelizzo 2014), but in most cases they appear more like a re-adjustment than a rejection of the Sartorian schema. Nonetheless, the aspect that is worth underlining is that all these attempts, old or new, have used, oftentimes implicitly, the concept of alternation as a criterion of classification. Duverger maintained that 'alternation of power occurs chiefly in two-party systems', but he did not spend a few words about the meaning, or the boundaries, of the concept. He just made the whole story even more complicated by making a distinction between, on the one hand, alternation as a type of government change and, on the other, as a type of party development. The latter implying a 'pendulum movement, each party moving from opposition to office and from office to opposition.' It is evident from this brief quotation that the border line

between the two notions of alternation is unclear and we do not know when the former ends and the latter begins, namely, when alternation as type of change in office turns into a form of party development.

In any case, the Duvergerian approach was quickly criticized and deeply re-arranged by Sartori, who suggested the introduction of a second criterion of classification, alongside the somehow misleading, or imperfect, numerical criterion. I will discuss at length Sartori's typology in the course of this dissertation and there is no need to dwell upon it now. Suffice it to say that he made explicitly and repeatedly reference to alternation of power for classifying party systems but, more often than not, the specification of the concept remained vague and nebulous. Even when he resorts to the concept of alternation in power as a criterion for distinguishing predominant from other types of competitive party systems, the definition runs at a very abstract and indefinite level. Specifically, he simply claims that the predominant party system is 'the variant of twopartism in which no alternation occurs (de facto) for a considerable length of time. [...and] – even though no alternation in office actually occurs – alternation is not ruled out' (Sartori 1976: 177). It is worth noting, first, that in this passage Sartori introduces an ad hoc criterion (length of time with no alternation in power) with no further specification or description. By and large, predominant party systems appears as a deviant case or, better, an instance of *imperfect twopartism* in which wholesale turnovers in government do not occur in practice. Second, Sartori touched upon the distinction between alternation as a potentiality and alternation as an actuality, which seems to be at the core of the separation between two-party systems and predominant systems. Nonetheless, he did not examine in depth the consequences resulting from the distinction between potential and actual alternations, and, accordingly, the predominant systems remain not only an ad hoc category (Mair 1996), but it paved the way to inevitable criticisms and attempts to make it more internally consistent.

One of these attempts has been recently elaborated by Nwokora and Pelizzo (2014), who tried to reconsider the overall Sartorian framework by putting alternation at the centre of the new classificatory framework. Although they argue that 'the degree of power alternation is a key distinguishing feature of one-party, two-party and multiparty types' (Nwokora and Pelizzo 2014: 833), the concept of alternation, which is central in their new typology, is quickly discussed and treated, as usual, as a vehicle for studying something else. Consequently, the syndrome of alternation as an independent variable hits once again this concept, which appears to be bound to live in the shadow of the other phenomena that it strives to enlighten.

Within the same morphological approach, it is also possible to identify a new classification of party system. More specifically, Kaare Strøm in 2003 points out the existence of two (very broad) types of party systems. 'In *alternational* systems, two blocs of parties (internally cemented, perhaps, by effective agreements) compete for the voters' favour and alternate in power much in the way that individual parties do in classic two-party systems. In *pivotal* systems, on the other hand, there is a single party, or occasionally a bloc of smaller parties, that forms of the core of the governing coalition, often because it controls the median legislator on the dominant policy dimension' (Strøm 2003: 76). In this case, it is more than evident that the concept of alternation takes centre-stage. The occurrence of alternation allows the separation between party systems in which incumbents can be totally replaced by the opposition parties and systems in which an unmovable centrist party, or bloc of parties, cannot be removed from office.

Despite the simplicity of this classification, which has experienced some diffusion especially in the literature on the Nordic party systems, it presents at least two main drawbacks. On the one hand, it mixes up structural and behavioural, or dynamic, factors. The pivotal party systems imply the existence of a centrist bloc of parties (that is, a structural condition), whereas the alternational systems are based on an adversarial-style of inter-party competition that produces a regular swing of the pendulum between government and opposition. Accordingly, it would have been more correct to classify party systems on the basis of a single criterion, either structural or behavioural. To illustrate, pivotal party systems should be distinguished from *bipolar* party systems, namely, politics in which the structure of inter-party competition relies on the creation

of two internally cohesive blocs of parties. Arguably, the simple equation between *alternational* and *bipolar* systems may be misleading because the two concepts do not walk the same line. In other words, not all bipolar party systems are, by definition, alternational. A good case in point is the party system created in Germany at the turn of twenty-first century, when the formation of a bipolar structure of party competition went, and still goes, hand in hand with a coalescent behaviour of the main party elites.

On the other hand, Strøm's classification uses but does not specify the meaning of alternation it refers to. In other words, we do not know how many alternations account for the emergence of a fully-fledged alternational party system. Moreover, it does not make clear whether it relies on alternation as a potentiality or as a concrete observable event. Either way, the classification suggested by Strøm, however useful in grasping the dynamics of party systems, appears to lay on a conceptually shaky ground – a condition that seriously undermines its both descriptive and explanatory power.

However, here too, the conclusion is desolately clear. Many works in this field have repeatedly made us of the concept of alternation, oftentimes in a casual or non-systematic fashion. New typologies of party systems have been created, in some cases even explicitly aiming at grasping the dimension of the competition for government, but alternation has always remained the silent dark side of the whole story. A situation that, unfortunately, has brought about two negative consequences. First, the classificatory party systems factory has been growing without questioning its own fundamentals. Second, the study of alternation in power has been relegated to the status of second-class (or third) phenomena, which apparently does not deserve any serious thorough investigation. This dismal state of the affairs explains why the most effective classification of party systems to date is still that elaborated by Sartori exactly forty years ago.

1.7. Concluding remarks

All in all, the important point to bear in mind is that the theory of representative democracy is the only democratic theory suitable for the accommodation of the process (and the concept) of alternation in power. Without delegates, or representatives, who act on behalf of the principal/citizen, the possibility of alternation is nil or, more precisely, impossible. To put it another way, if we are looking for a theory of alternation, the only place where one might find it is the representative theory of democracy. Unfortunately, most of the leading theorists of modern democracy have not paid enough attention to this specific topic. As Przeworski (2009; 2010) has claimed some years ago, 'the silence of democratic theory, even in its most modern versions, about alternation in office is astonishing.' Neither Kelsen, (1929), nor Schumpeter (1942), Downs (1957), Dahl (1956), Bobbio (1987), Sartori (1987), nor Held (1996) spend a clear word about it.

To make a long story short, political science does not have a theory of the causes and consequences of alternation because the theory, and the theorists, of representative democracy has mostly ignored it until now. Time has come to fill, both theoretically and empirically, this lacuna. And the best starting point is the definition of the concept of government alternation.

Chapter 2

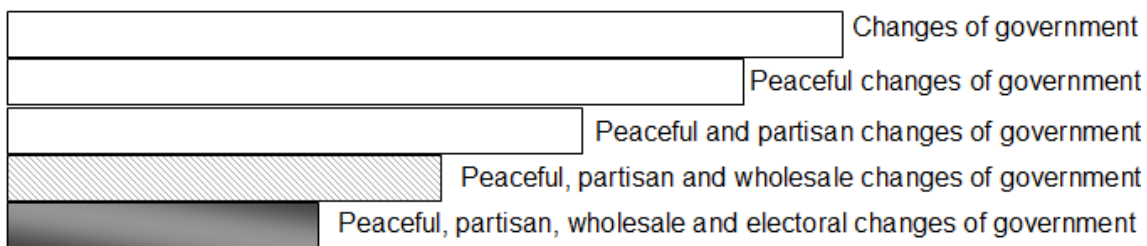
Government alternation: toward a definition

2.1. Is alternation a 'good' concept? Evaluation and re-formation

One of the reasons political scientists have not been well equipped to observe and analyse the dynamics of alternation – or rotation – in power is, first and foremost, that their conceptual glasses have been in many cases wrong and inappropriate. In Sartori's terms, they wore 'conceptual blinkers' that restricted how they have studied and conceptualised reality. From this perspective, my point is straightforward: thus far political science has not been able to see the transformations of alternation because its conceptual tools, or glasses, have been fundamentally unfit. And, in these cases, the best strategy to pursue is that of 'getting back to basics', namely, returning to concept formation and analysis.

Thus, *what is government alternation?* First of all, I want to stress that we are dealing with neither an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie 1956), nor with a multi-dimensional theoretical artefact (Goertz 2005), nor a 'thick concept' (Coppedge 1999). Much more simply, we are dealing with a 'theoretical term' or, to put it in a slightly different way, an 'empirical concept' – susceptible to direct observation – that 'can be located at, and moved along, very different points of a ladder of abstraction' (Sartori 1970: 1041). In such a case, we should have a 'ladder of generality' (Collier and Mahon 1993: 846) upon which we can locate and move the concept under examination. Figure 2.1 provides such a ladder.

Fig. 2.1. Ladder of generality: Government turnover and alternation



At the highest level of generality, where the extension of the concept reaches its maximum value, it is possible to claim that government alternation is a (type of) government change. For instance, it is at this very abstract level that we can locate the definition of alternation put forward by Norberto Bobbio (2006: 127). According to Bobbio, alternation in power is a 'rule of the game', that is, a method of substitution between different governments based on the 'formula "one or the other"'. Needless to add, this is a formula, or a rule, for a democratic game. Another definition, which operates at the same level of generality, is the one put forward by Palonen (2008: 137), who defines alternation not as a simple change of government, or a simple electoral victory, but as 'a decisive change' – that is, 'a potential turning point of the calendar, eventually the start of a new political era.'

By adding attributes to the concept and descending along the ladder, one reaches the category of 'peaceful change of government'. More specifically, this category encompasses all cases of change in government that occurred, as Karl Popper (1963: 350) put it, 'without bloodshed'. Incidentally, it is at this

level of generality that Quermonne (2003:13) defines *a contrario*, namely, in opposition to something, the concept of alternation. More precisely, he contends that ‘alternation in power is in contrast with Revolution’, and this means not only that alternation is different from the concept (and the practice) of revolution, but also that alternation is the *opposite* of revolution. However useful, this dichotomy (alternation/revolution) is, in a way, too country-specific and imbued of French history to be able to ‘travel’ over different cases and countries. Indeed, revolution is not the only violent way to kick the incumbent out of office and, just to give an example, the *coup d’état* is a much more frequent functional equivalent.

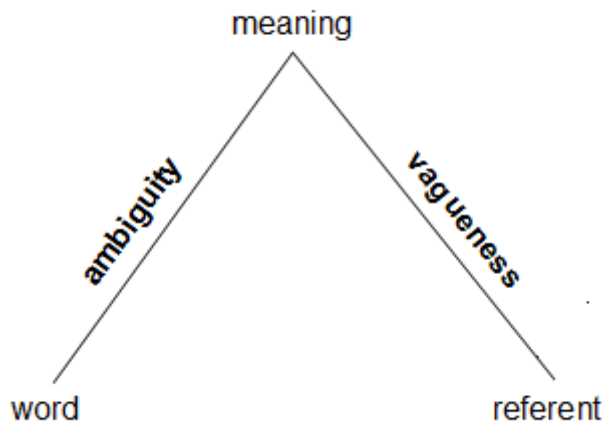
At the third level of the ladder of generality, there is the distinction between partisan and non-partisan changes of government. This is a crucial juncture because many studies and definitions of alternation in government assume different perspectives. For instance, Przeworski *et al.* (2000; see also Przeworski 2011) see a government alternation every time there is an electoral change in the partisan control over the chief executive (President, Prime minister and so on).

Still, we face here a ‘travelling problem’ of the concept at stake because that operational definition may be correct for presidential regimes or two-party systems in parliamentary democracies, but it is highly problematic for bipolar or multi-party systems, which are the rule in parliamentary democracies. A concrete example might be useful to better illustrate this point. From 1966 to 1969, a *Große Koalition* of Christian Democrats (CDU-CSU) and Social Democrats (SDP) governed West Germany. At that time, the Federal Chancellor was Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a member of the CDU. After the 1969 general election for the Bundestag, Willy Brandt, leader of the SDP, created a new two-party coalition government formed by Social Democrats and Liberals (FDP). Now, the question is: can we describe and record that government change as ‘alternation’? Obviously, the answer is: it depends; and, more accurately, it depends on the criteria that we use to define alternation. Adopting the criterion applied by Przeworski and his colleagues, that is, the change in the partisan control over the chief executive, West Germany in 1969 experienced an alternation in government¹. The relevant question thus becomes: is it true that the government led by Willy Brandt in 1969 set in motion a governmental alternation? Przeworski would say ‘yes’; other scholars with a different, perhaps more precise, conceptualisation would say ‘no’. Nonetheless, I think there exists an efficient way out to avoid this conceptual and empirical conundrum. The solution must consider: *a*) political parties as the *only* relevant actors in the process of making and breaking governments; and *b*) government as a collective actor composed of different groups or parties. Adopting this perspective, it would be easier – as I will show below – to identify the (real-existing) cases of government alternation.

The penultimate level of our ladder of generality is, in my opinion, the most important but at the same time the most troublesome. Furthermore, it is precisely at this level that the confusion about the concept of alternation abounds. More specifically, perusing the scarce and sparse literature on alternation in government, I have singled out two different sources of conceptual confusion: ambiguity and vagueness (Sartori 1975).

¹ Adopting a similar approach, Josè Cheibub (1998) comes up with four types of alternation based on a very elastic concept of incumbency: 1) alternation as a change in prime ministers; 2) alternation in the party of the prime ministers; 3) a ‘weak notion of alternation’ occurring any time there is a change (any change) in the partisan composition of the government; and finally 4) a ‘strong notion of alternation’ that entails a change of the plurality party in the government. Despite his noteworthy quest for more conceptual precision, Cheibub’s analysis ends up in a Hegelian ‘Night’ where any change of government can be classified as an episode of government alternation, weakly or strongly conceived.

Fig. 2.2. Defects: conceptual ambiguity and vagueness



Source: Sartori (1984: 26-27).

Let us begin with the first problem, i.e. ambiguity. By using the analytical framework for concept analysis elaborated by Sartori (1984), it is possible to see that ambiguity is a conceptual defect related to the meaning-to-word relation (see Fig. 2.2). In short, the problem here is a '*confusion of meanings*' because the same word might mean different things. To illustrate, let us take an example from the literature we are referring to. George Tsebelis, in his 2002 book *Veto Players*, defines alternation as 'the ideological distance between the previous and the current government' (2002: 193). In my view, ambiguity in this case hits its peak and the problem is, still following Sartori (1975: 7-8), 'the loss of etymological anchorage' that affects our discipline. The etymology of 'alternation' is fairly clear. The word derives from the Latin *alternatio*, where the root 'alter-' means *other* or *the other one*, and the suffix '-atio' indicates an action, a movement, a process. Therefore, *alternatio* is something that occurs *by turns*, namely, *one after the other*. By the same token, political alternation is *a process of substitution (by turns) between two groups or parties*. The 'ideological distance' does not enter into this declarative definition because it does not necessarily imply alternation in power. In other words, something that is ideologically distant may be what we call 'alternative'. Yet 'alternation' is different from 'alternative' because we may observe a wholesale rotation in office without any alternative (ideologically distant) parties. For sure, the reverse is true, too: alternative policies may be implemented, for instance, even by the same parties in government, in different periods of time, with no need for alternation. In a nutshell, alternation (between political parties) does not automatically imply alternative parties and/or policies.

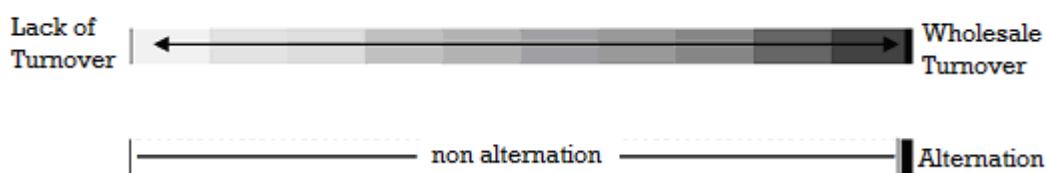
To sum up: alternation is a *process* and, specifically, a process of substitution between two distinct parts or groups. On the contrary, the concept of ideological distance (or 'alternative') makes reference to what enters in, or the content of, the process. In brief, one can alternate between a half-empty glass and a half-full glass but the water may remain the same.

The second source of conceptual confusion, that is vagueness, is linked to the referent-to-meaning relation. Here the task is to seize the object or referent in a productive and effective way. In particular, one needs to identify those characteristics of the referent that are necessary and sufficient to define the concept. At this stage there are three problems that any scholar sooner or later should resolve: a) boundary indefiniteness; b) membership indefiniteness; c) cut-off point indefiniteness.

Let us consider these problems one by one, starting from the latter. Unfortunately, in the scientific literature but also in the public debate at large many words such as alternation, rotation, turnover, change, shift, swing, etc., are used interchangeably, without any clear distinctions. In a sense, we find ourselves in a

situation of ‘collective ambiguity’ where many scholars use either the same word but with a different meaning in mind, or different words with the same meaning. The literature on alternation is such a case of collective confusion. To illustrate, take, for instance, another definition put forward by Quermonne (2003: 8): alternation is ‘*un changement de rôle entre des forces politiques situées dans l’opposition, qu’une élection a suffrage universel fait accéder au pouvoir, et d’autres forces politiques qui y renoncent provisoirement pour entrer dans l’opposition*’. This definition raises more doubts than certainties. First doubt: what is a *force politique*? Second doubt: what are the *rôles* for which we should expect an alternation? Third: what exactly is the relation between elections and rotation in office? In short, this is a definition that we should drop as soon as possible. Another, much more intricate, source of vagueness is the usage of ‘alternation’ and ‘turnover’ as synonyms. This is a serious problem because it conceals a deeper defect.

Fig. 2.3. Illustration of the concepts ‘government turnover’ and ‘alternation’

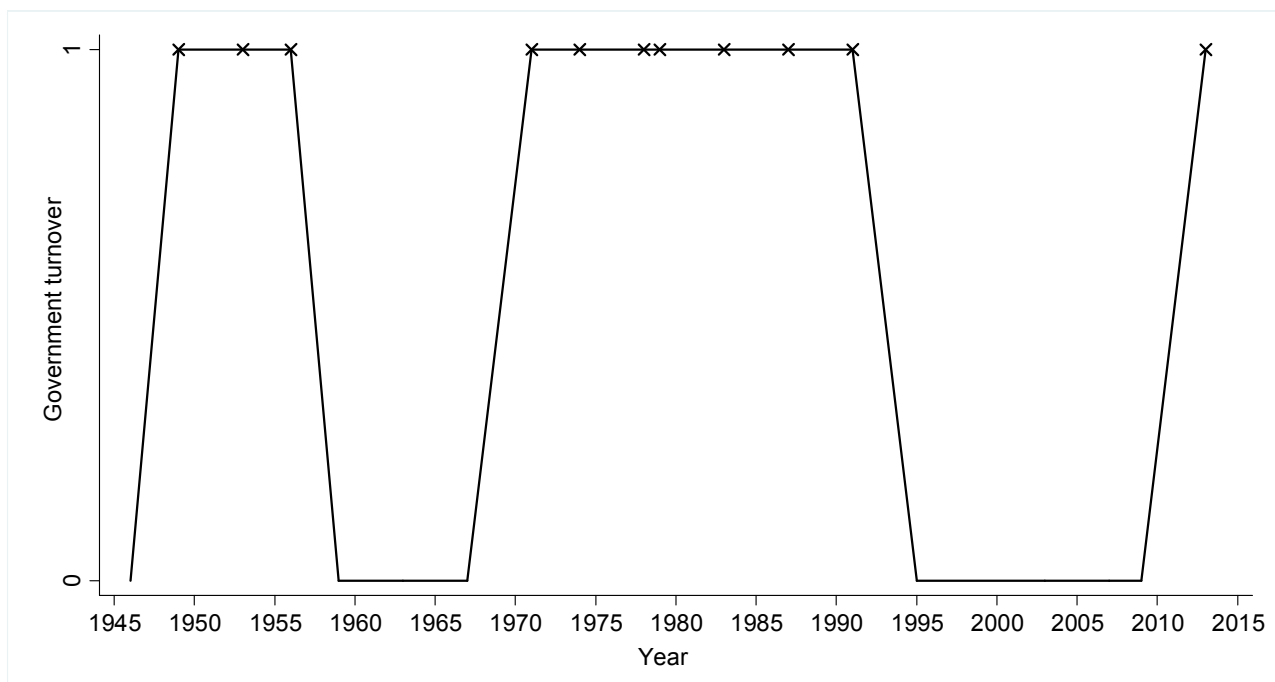


As Gerring (1999: 361) has correctly noticed, ‘concepts are routinely stretched to cover instances that lie quite a bit outside their normal range of use’. This kind of conceptual stretching, that is, ‘the distortion that occurs when a concept does not fit new cases’ (Collier and Mahon 1993: 845), is not absent in the literature concerning government alternation. Just to take the most interesting example, Figure 2.3 shows that turnover and alternation are different concepts that require different logical treatments. Indeed, ‘turnover’ is a *continuous* concept and, consequently, it must be treated as an interval between two extremes. At the opposite end, ‘alternation’ is a *dichotomous* concept and it *should be* studied with the binary ‘either-or’ mode of analysis. In order to corroborate my argument, we can observe the two opposite concepts of alternation and turnover, namely and respectively: non-turnover and non-alternation. As shown in Figure 2.3, the concept of non-alternation does not coincide or overlap with the former concept and, in fact, it covers many *degrees* or shades of turnover. Hence, the point to stress is that alternation is a binary concept: either there is or there is not alternation. *Tertium non datur*. Unfortunately, both Kaare Strøm and Peter Mair conceptualise government alternation as a continuous variable. For instance, Strøm (1990: 125; see also 1985) states: ‘alternation measures the degree of turnover in office from one government to the next’. In this case, the problem is that he mixes the *genus* (turnover) with a *species* (alternation), namely: it is not alternation that measures the degree of turnover but the other way around. Similarly, Mair (2007: 140; see also 2002; 2006) falls in the same conceptual trap when he tries to measure ‘the degree of alternation’ because alternation, by definition, is not a matter of degree. For the same reason, one cannot have ‘total, partial or mixed’ alternation in that a total alternation is a tautology (every alternation is total) and a partial alternation is a contradiction in terms.

The second problem that one has to face is related to the membership indefiniteness of the concept, that is, what we should include or exclude when we deal with government alternation. Partially, we have already discussed this point, but it is useful to look more directly at it. In particular, we have to be clear about the concept of (change in) government because this is the central unit of analysis in this thesis. Adopting the approach set up by Müller and Strøm (2000: 12), a change in government occurs when either there is a

change in the parties (or set of parties) holding cabinet posts or any general election². This is a crucial point because it sets the parties at the centre of the stage and, at the same time, it allows us to assess critically the way Przeworski *et al.* (2000) define and operationalise ‘partisan alternation’. Briefly put, the partisan control over the chief executive does not imply *sic et simpliciter*, at least in coalition cabinets, the whole control of the cabinet. Thus, if we are concerned with alternation at the governmental level, we should not exclude all the other parties forming the cabinet.³ Otherwise, we will keep on observing the same phenomenon with a different analytical lens or different phenomena with the same analytical lens. Arguably, that is exactly what happens if we analyse the pattern of government alternation in, for example, Iceland with a Przeworskian approach (see Figure 2.4) or with a more sophisticated and conceptually rigorous approach (see Figure 2.5).

Fig. 2.4. Patterns of alternation in Iceland, 1945-2015 (Przeworskian approach)



Note: Each data point indicates the episodes of alternation as defined by Przeworski *et al.* (2000), that is, a change in the party controlling the head of the executive. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

² As Laver and Shepsle (1996: 29-30) write, in parliamentary democracies ‘changes in government depend on changes in the cabinet generated by changes in the balance of forces in the legislature.’ As a result, ‘we assume in what follows that the government in the political process we model can be taken to be the cabinet, and that membership of the government is unambiguously defined in terms of membership of the cabinet... [...]. In other words, we make a clear distinction between a government as such and its legislative support coalition.’ This is the same approach that I will adopt in the rest of this research.

³ As argued by Laver and Shepsle (1996: 28-29), of ‘the many arms of government – the civil service, the judiciary, publicly owned corporations, and the various tiers of local administration, for example – it is the cabinet that symbolizes the apex of political responsibility. It is the cabinet that is expected to guide affairs of state by making and overseeing the implementation of policy on important issues. [...] And, perhaps most significantly of all, it is the cabinet whose survival is on the line at election times.’ With this specification in mind, in this dissertation the term *cabinet* is used interchangeably with the terms *executive* and *government*.

Fig. 2.5. Patterns of alternation in Iceland, 1945-2015 (second approach)



Note: The value '0' indicates 'absence of government turnover'; the maximum value identifies a wholesale turnover among the governing parties. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

Last but not least, one faces the problem of the indefiniteness of the cut-off point of the concept. That is: where does an alternation begin and end? First, it is worth noting that here the confusion under the sky of political science reaches its record high. Let me pick four examples out of hundreds. The first one is Lundell (2011: 154), whose starting point is, in my view, extremely alarming: 'Since electoral results are measured on a continuous scale, it is reasonable to treat alternation in a similar way'. Regrettably, I must confess that I do not see the rationale of this line of reasoning. Bluntly put, the age of a person can also be (and actually is) measured on a continuous scale, but this does not imply that one should treat life or death the same way, that is, like interval variables. Therefore, even though electoral results are measured on a continuous scale, we can conceptualize alternation as a dichotomous variable. And this is what I will do here and in the chapters to come.

The second example of concept misformation or, better yet, misdefinition is provided by Kaiser (2002; see also, Kaiser *et al.* 2000). Based on the partially wrong and completely untested assumption that government alternations 'are extremely rare and basically restricted to two-party systems or predominant-party systems', he jumps to the conclusion that 'we have to develop more sensitive measures for comparative purposes'. Fine, but how? Kaiser's *escamotage* hinges on the concept of dominant party in government, where 'dominance' means 'controlling more than 50% of all government-controlled seats in the legislature'. The reason why one should consider this particular threshold as a valid cut-off point for identifying alternation in power is completely unclear to me. What we know, as Kaiser himself acknowledges, is that 'alternation is difficult to quantify' but, what we should know further, is that – as Sartori put it long ago (1970: 1038) – 'concept formation stands prior to quantification'. That is, if one has bad concepts she will work with unreliable data. And difficulty in itself is not a valid justification for such an outcome.

Horowitz *et al.* (2009), in one of the rare empirical studies explicitly devoted to the concept of government alternation or turnover (they used both words interchangeably), offer the third example of a kind of conceptualisation that necessarily leads to some paradoxical results. For instance, to the question

‘when does an alternation in government occur?’, their answer is the following: ‘[o]ne rule would be to count turnover as occurring if these remaining or overlapping parties are in the minority within the coalition. A stricter rule would count an alternation only if the remaining parties are not necessary to form the new majority coalition. Various intermediate thresholds, in which the number of legislators remaining from the old government may not account for more than a certain share of the seats held by the new coalition government, are also possible’ (Horowitz *et al.* 2009: 111). The defects of this faltering definition are manifold. First, there is a continuous treatment of a dichotomous concept and, since I have already discussed in-depth this point, we can quickly move on. Second, Horowitz and his colleagues’ treatment of government alternation can be applied only and exclusively to coalition governments because they do not devote a single word to two-party systems and single-party governments. Accordingly, this is not a kind of definition capable of travelling across different cases and party systems. Third, although they propose different thresholds for counting alternation in power, we still do not know which is the ‘right’, or final, threshold. The solution put forward by Horowitz *et al.* (2009: 113-114) is neither clear nor resolving. In fact, one should observe an alternation when the ‘members of the old coalition government may not exceed one-fourth or one-third of the new coalition government’. Surprisingly, if we had to accept or simply adopt this approach for the analysis of the pattern of alternation in, let us say, Germany from 1949 to 2015, we should count six government alternations. For certain, this is not only a nonsense, but it is also in sharp contradiction to contemporary German history (Caciagli 2011).

Finally, Maeda and Nishikawa (2006) – my fourth example in the list of conceptual mistreatments – assign the right label to their ‘Government Change Index’ (GCI) but, in the end, they fall victim to the tempting trap of ‘degreism’: ‘With the use of GCI, we need to decide what value should be considered as an alternation of parties in power. The GCI can take any values between 0 and 100, and we have no theoretical standard in deciding what value should be considered as a meaningful value in representing an alternation of parties in power because this is a continuous variable. A simple solution to the problem is to take a half way between 0 and 100’ (Maeda and Nishikawa 2006: 361-362). In this case, the *punctum dolens* is that one does not need a ‘theoretical standard’ when deciding the threshold for counting an alternation; what we need is an (etymo)logical standard. And the logic of alternation tells us that the meaningful value in representing an alternation *is the maximum value of the index*. Which is to say that there is an alternation in power each and every time *all* parties that were in government in the previous cabinet are ousted from office. In doing so, that is, by using a binary logic in deciding what alternation is and what it is not, we solve, once for all, the problem concerning the cut-off point indefiniteness (on the same line, see Pasquino 2011).

At the end of this section, it should be fruitful and useful to ask ourselves, in line with the suggestions put forward by Gerring (1999), whether or not the concept of alternation that we have formed, or reformed, so far is a ‘good concept’ or not. The criteria for this kind of critical evaluation listed by John Gerring are eight (see Table 2.1).

Tab. 2.1. Criteria of conceptual goodness

1	Familiarity	How familiar is the concept (to a lay or academic audience)?
2	Resonance	Does the chosen term ring (resonate)?
3	Parsimony	How short is a) the term and b) its list of defining attributes (the intension)?
4	Coherence	How internally consistent is (logically related) are the instances and attributes?

5	Differentiation	How differentiated are the instances and the attributes (from other most-similar concepts)? How bounded, how operationalisable, is the concept?
6	Depth	How many accompanying properties are shared by the instances under definition?
7	Theoretical utility	How useful is the concept within a wider field of inferences?
8	Field utility	How useful is the concept within a field of related instances and attributes?

Source: Gerring (1999: 367).

How familiar is my concept of government alternation? As I have argued in the previous chapter, the concept of alternation in power was a concept known and acknowledged both by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The idea that executive power should be exercised by turns, through regular pattern of alternation in office, was familiar both in the past and nowadays. The term “alternation” was and – I maintain – still is the concept that best conveys the meaning associated to the term. In this sense, the concept under examination is the most effective and familiar way to express the idea of government *pro tempore* and by turns.

The second criterion suggested by Gerring concern the resonance of the term chosen for the concept. Does alternation ring? I guess it does, at least in comparison with the other most similar terms. Neighbouring concepts such as rotation, turnover, change of government, have a similar (albeit not the same) meaning, but their resonance is much less neat and clear than that of alternation.

As to the third criterion, parsimony, we have tried to make the concept of alternation as ‘thin’ as possible. If alternation is a wholesale substitution of the political parties in government and, put differently, it represents the maximum value of turnover, then also the parsimony of the concept reaches its peak. As we shall discuss in the next section, the defining attributes of the concept are two: a) its dynamic element (as a process of substitution); and b) its binary nature (either there is or there is not a wholesale rotation in office).

The fourth criterion (coherence) is, in Gerring (1999: 374)’s terms, ‘the most important’ for the evaluation of conceptual goodness. In particular, ‘the problem of coherence... involves attributes which are not mutually contradictory, but which bear no obvious relationship to one another.’ That is exactly the problem that I have tried to solve above. More specifically, following the *essentializing* approach suggested by Gerring (*ibidem*), I have tried to identify the core of the concept in order to maximise its degree of similarity, or internal coherence, among the items under examination. In doing so, I have set precise and neat boundaries between neighbouring concepts (*in primis*, government turnover), excluding those attributes that are either out of the intension or not consistently linked to the core of the concept.

The evaluation of the coherence of the concept leads us to the discussion of the fifth criterion. Differentiation is the ‘flip side’ of internal coherence and ‘derives from the clarity of its borders within a field of similar terms’ (Gerring 1999: 375-376). With reference to the concept of ‘alternation’, I have tried to differentiate it from the concept of ‘change of government’, on the one hand, and from the concept of turnover, on the other. In particular, I have argued, firstly, that alternation is a type of government change and, in the light of this, it is a mistake to conflate these two concepts into a single, all-encompassing category. Secondly, I have argued that ‘alternation’ and ‘turnover’ are not, and should not be treated as, synonyms because between these two concepts there exists a relationship of the type genus-species. More precisely, within the *genus* of ‘government turnover’ we can identify many different *species* of governmental change. Needless to add, alternation in government is just one *specie* (although a distinct one) of government turnover. In this sense, my conceptual differentiation has been driven by logical principles that avoid some of the contradictions presented by other conceptualisations of the analysed object.

Since ‘the ability of a concept is enhanced by its ability to “bundle” characteristics’ and, as a consequence, ‘the greater the number of properties shared by the phenomena in the extension, the greater the *depth* of a concept’ (Gerring 1999: 380), it is worth assessing the ‘richness’ of ‘government alternation’. This is not an easy task, in particular because its depth and fecundity rely on the theoretical framework in which the concept is included. Nonetheless, alternation *per se* seems to yield many different hypotheses, speculations and conjectures. This aspect implies not only the capability of the concept of being adopted within different approaches and models, but also its ability to travel in different contexts and polities. As a matter of fact, alternation, at least in the way I have conceptualised and treated it all in this chapter, can be effectively used, with no significant variations, both in (semi)presidential and parliamentary regimes. On the contrary, other concepts, such as rotation in office, government turnover or change in government, are so vague or internally inconsistent that they cannot travel across various democratic regimes without the loss of relevant information or the risk of conceptual stretching.

Finally, the last two criteria that we have to consider for the evaluation of conceptual goodness are strictly intertwined. Indeed, theoretical utility and field utility refer to the usage that one has in mind when forming a given concept. That said, as I have tried to show in the first section, one cannot elaborate any grounded theory about alternation unless one has a clear concept of government alternation. Hence, *rebus sic stantibus*, that is, with the current confusion around the concept, any kind of theoretical effort will be vain and fruitless. My ambition is to show that the way I have re-arranged the concept of alternation allows, on the one hand, an useful resettling of the semantic field in which the term is located and, on the other hand, the building of a theoretical framework for the study of the conditions for, and the consequences of, government alternation. Since this theoretical goal shall be the last step of a much broader research, what we need *hic et nunc* is a crystal-clear definition of ‘alternation’. Accordingly, the next section will be entirely devoted to this specific task.

2.2. Government alternation: definitions and dimensions

Thus far, I have sketched the *pars destruens* of my argumentation. Now, it is time to roll up my sleeves and move on to the *pars contruens* of the project. Even though I concur with Galileo that all definitions are arbitrary, I feel much more comfortable with the idea that some definitions are a great deal more arbitrary than others. Hence, my first task is to provide an unambiguous and not arbitrary definition of government alternation. As the foregoing discussion has tried to underscore, alternation is a *process* of substitution between two distinct components and this substitution has to be *total*, or wholesale. That specified, my minimal definition of alternation is the following:

a process of substitution (at time t+1) of all the political parties in government with other parties not in government at time t.

This definition is as minimal as possible because it encompasses the necessary and sufficient characteristics of alternation. To wit, it recognises its dynamic movement and it specifies its dichotomous nature. Incidentally, precisely because of its binary nature, it is not possible to have *more-or-less alternation* (in the singular) and, therefore, sentences like the following will inevitably appear misleading: in ‘terms of the level of alternation, the Netherlands is far from exceptional, and it fits more or less in the middle of a range stretching from 21.5% in the Swiss case to 100% in the cases of Malta and the UK’ (Mair 2008: 246). Alternation *per se* has no level. On the contrary, one can speak of *more-or-less alternations* (in the plural) when considering a given span of time. To illustrate further this point, it is possible to say that in the post-war period the United Kingdom has experienced seven alternations, whereas Germany and Finland have only

one. More precisely, the concept of government alternation can be treated in a continuous manner if, and only if, it concerns its occurrence in a particular time span. In sum, alternation in the plural refers to its *frequency* over time, either potential or not, and not to the concept in itself.

Taking all of this into account, I maintain now that alternation at the governmental level can be split into three different dimensions: a) actual alternation; b) possibility of alternation; c) probability of alternation. The first dimension is what we have discussed until now, that is the alternation between a government and the previous one. Put very crudely, single alternation is a one-shot game, from *time t* to *time t+1*, and thus the time horizon of this process is extremely short. Since I have discussed in-depth this dimension in the previous section, I can move on and consider the second dimension, namely, the possibility of alternation.

Strøm (2003: 76; see also Bergman *et al.* 2003: 181-83; Strøm and Bergman 2011: 20-21) claims that in 'terms of their competitive characteristics, multiparty systems may usefully be subdivided into alternational versus pivotal party systems. In *alternational* systems, two-bloc of parties (internally cemented, perhaps, by effective agreements) compete for the voters' favour and alternate in power much in the way that individual parties do in classical two-party systems. In *pivotal* systems, on the other hand, there is a single party, or occasionally a bloc of smaller parties, that forms of the core of the governing coalition, often because it controls the median legislator on the dominant policy dimension. This pivotal party may occasionally change coalition partners, but there is no wholesale alternation in power as a result of electoral contest.' At the bottom of this distinction, there is what I have dubbed 'possibility of alternation' (or, more figuratively, alternability). In other words, the *fundamentum divisionis* of the classification suggested by Strøm (2003) is the possibility that all ruling parties are rejected from office at the same time. As we know, this possibility is present in many different countries (the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Norway, France since 1958 and so on), but it is (or was) absent in many others (for example, in Italy from 1945 to 1993 and in France from 1946 to 1957).

This raises the question: how can we define and measure the possibility of alternation? At this point, the famous and much-debated definition put forward by Sartori is crucial (1976: 165): '*Alternation* should be loosely understood as implying the *expectation* rather than the actual occurrence of government turnover. Alternation only means, then, that the margin between the two major parties is close enough, or that there is sufficient credibility to the expectation that a party in opposition has a change to oust the governing party. In other words, the notion of alternation shades into the notion of competitiveness.' I have no quarrel with Sartori's definition about alternation being a *credible expectation* but I do not concur with his suggested operationalisation. More specifically, I do not think that the margin of victory is a valid proxy for the possibility of a wholesale turnover in office. In my view, alternation is possible only when the party system presents a bipolar structure. Accordingly, the existence of a multi-polar party system, that is, with more than two parties or blocs, entails the *impossibility* of alternation. In this sense, a cabinet is electorally *vulnerable* (Bartolini 1999; 2000a) when it operates within two-party/bloc party systems; in all other cases voters have no chance to remove *en bloc* the rulers. I will return to this aspect with more details in section 2.4.

The last dimension of government alternation to be tackled is its *probability*. In a nutshell, the probability of alternation is the child, or a by-product, of the possibility of alternation. Only where and when alternation is possible, can it be more or less likely. As a result, this makes the whole story much more complicated. Here the question is not whether alternation is a credible expectation or not; the question is: how credible is that expectation? Let us consider again the Italian case. In the so-called First Republic (1946-1993) there was no alternation in power and, as a consequence, the threat to the rulers of being ousted from the executive was nil, or literally incredible. Now, let us choose a different case: Germany. Since the end of the Second World War, alternation at the governmental level has occurred only once, in 1998. So, how credible is the expectation of alternation in Germany? In this case, we do not have a clear answer and the

best thing to do is to sound out the literature in search of such an answer. As a rule, whenever the answer is fuzzy and ambiguous, the adopted solutions are countless. From a preliminary survey of the literature, we can break down the measures of the probability of alternation into five broad categories (for a summary, see Table 2.2):

1) *Format and mechanics of party system.*

- One of the most frequent measures of the probability of alternation concerns the number of political parties in a given party system. To begin with, Kaiser *et al.* (2000: 319) argue that ‘the chance of alternation (understood as the exchange of the major governing party) decreases, the more relevant parties exist in a party system.’ However, the crux of the matter is that this association, albeit theoretically grounded, is in many cases (for instance: Norway, Denmark and also Italy since 1994) empirically untenable. Actually, Italy discovered alternation in power precisely when the breakdown of the previous party system brought about an explosion of party-system fragmentation. Furthermore, even when using the number of *effective* parties, as Zucchini (2010a) and Pellegata (2009) did, the overall argument does not change.
- A second measure which has been used to study the probability of alternation is the polarisation, or ideological distance, existing in a party system. For sure, this school of thought is directly linked to the theoretical framework elaborated by Giovanni Sartori. Indeed, the presence of a high level of ideological distance is a necessary condition for the type of party system that Sartori (1976: 118-21) named ‘polarized pluralism,’ in which the mechanics are ‘multipolar and cannot be explained, therefore, by a dualistic model.’ Given all this, Kaiser *et al.* (2000: 319) argue, basically, that the higher the level of polarisation, the lower the ‘chance’ of alternation. More precisely, the probability of a complete turnover ‘is maximal in a two-party system and becomes minimal in polarised pluralism with moderate pluralism as an intermediate type.’ Again, this is what the theory predicts (and in many cases the predictions are, or were, right), but in the last twenty years or so the (negative) association between alternation and polarisation has become increasingly questionable. In Italy, for instance, the advent of alternation has gone hand in hand with a rising ideological distance between the (alternating) parties in power. Another example in this list of outliers is Greece, where the slow development of a ‘polarized twopartism’ (Pappas 2012: 17) has been able to combine alternation with polarisation. To put it differently, what we are witnessing may be the birth of a strange and hybrid bird, that is *polarised* (and perhaps polarising) *alternation*; and this is something to which one should pay full attention when discussing the potential proxies for the probability of alternation.
- Finally, some scholars have also tried to operationalise indirectly the probability of alternation, namely, by taking into account the predominance of a party, or set of parties, during a given period of time. This is the solution adopted, on the one hand, by Zucchini (2010b: 758), who measures the degree of predominance as ‘the proportion of days spent by the government party that has been longer in office,’ and, on the other hand, by Rumi (2009), whose index of power concentration captures the probability that two cabinets, taken randomly in time, include the party that has been in office longer. As I have said above, this is an indirect measure of the probability of alternation because it considers the lack of alternation and not the real occurrence of alternation. Nevertheless, and despite this drawback, these measures may be especially useful for detecting and analysing those cases of ‘*alternating predominance*’ (Mair 2009: 288), in which a predominant position has transferred from one party to another.

2) Dimensions of electoral systems.

- In the scholarly literature there exists plenty of studies that associate the probability of alternation with some specific characteristics of the electoral system. For instance, both Kaiser *et al.* (2002) and Pellegata (2009) assume that alternation is strictly connected to the level of seat-vote disproportionality. In short, 'a highly disproportional electoral system allows alternation with smaller changes on the electoral level, and gives a smaller group of disappointed supporters of the acting government the chance to punish it. A perfectly proportional system, on the other hand, requires a genuine change in majority support to make alternation possible' (Kaiser *et al.* 2002: 317). Again, this is another case in which theory might clash with practice. Take, for instance, the case of Denmark. Arend Lijphart (2005: ix), one of the most coherent and hard-fighting advocates of PR-electoral systems, has imperatively claimed: 'I nominate the Danish system as the closest approximation to my "ideal" model.' At this point, it is worth recalling that the Danish electoral system is a list PR, with an average district magnitude of about eight seats, national compensatory seats with a low 2 per cent threshold, and a highly proportional allocation formula. In sum, the best and the purest of the proportional world. What is theoretically surprising is that since the end of the Second World War Denmark has experienced more government alternations (12) than the UK (7), which is, or is supposed to be, the homeland of alternation. In other words, the association between the probability of alternation and the degree of disproportionality of electoral systems, however measured, is not as strict as some scholars are eager to assume.

3) Inter-party competition.

- As discussed above, in Sartori's view the concept of alternation 'shades into the notion of competitiveness.' For this reason, the margin of victory between the major parties, or blocs, can be considered an indicator of the probability of complete turnover in office. Yet, as Strøm (1989: 278) correctly pointed out, inter-party competition 'is a bit like the proverbial elephant: easy to spot but hard to define.' This is even truer for the indefinite concept of competitiveness (Blais e Lago 2009, Cox and Munger 1989). The closeness of the election results is certainly a first way to tackle this topic, even though its connection with the concept of alternation remains unclear (and largely neglected). Nevertheless, it does not automatically follow that a close election brings about an alternation in power. In other words, it is very likely to observe a long series of very close elections that do not produce any alternation. For sure, this possibility calls into question the validity of the 'margin of victory' as an indicator of the probability of alternation. Similarly, also the use of pre-election polling as a proxy for that probability is equally debatable.
- Another indicator that has been used in the study of alternation is the inter-bloc volatility (Mair 2011: 82), which is a measure of electoral availability (Bartolini and Mair 1990, Bartolini 1999; 2000, Strøm 1989). Briefly, the higher the level of electoral availability along the incumbency (government-opposition) dimension, the higher the probability that the government will be removed from the executive branch. As for previous indicators, this hypothesis is theoretically grounded but, to my knowledge, it has not yet been tested empirically and, as a consequence, it may be discussed *cum grano salis*.
- Lastly, also the existence of pre-electoral agreements between two-blocs or parties can be conceived as a condition for the occurrence of alternation in power. However, we are still in the field of pure speculation where theory comes before empirical analysis. Therefore, before uncritically adopting this solution, much more research would be needed.

4) Cabinet type and size

- In relation to what I have discussed so far, it is possible to argue that the frequency of single-party or – in systems of moderate pluralism – minimum-winning cabinets is a facilitating condition for a high probability of government alternation. This holds true also for minority cabinets, especially in Nordic countries. More precisely, in ‘inclusionary and adversarial systems, minority governments are vehicles of alternations in office, whereas in captive government systems they may not be’ (Strøm 1990: 92; see also: Bergman and Strøm 2011). This is a crucial point because it brings us to consider the importance of institutions in shaping the conditions for the actual occurrence of alternation. In sum, the condition for a higher or lower probability of alternation must be identified in the interaction between institutional, electoral and behavioural factors. Taken individually these factors alone cannot be considered valid and reliable indicators of the probability of alternation; however when taken together, that is in mutual interaction, these indicators offer a more precise picture of government alternation.

5) Risk, rate and rhythm of alternation.

- Thus far I have considered measures and indicators of the probability of alternation which are, to a large extent, indirect and mostly theory-driven. Hence, it would be useful to integrate this set of indicators with more direct and, possibly, practice-driven measures. In doing so, one can pursue two different directions. The first direction concerns the risk of alternation at election-time. In other words, do elections produce alternation in government? And, in the affirmative case, to what extent? Given a specific period of time, this measure can be used retrospectively to analyse the degree of electoral uncertainty along the government-opposition dimension. However, as Laver and Shepsle put it (1996: 29), ‘governments in parliamentary democracies are created by legislators and may be destroyed by them’, and this means that *electoral* alternations are only a small part of the whole story. Since many governments are formed during the inter-electoral period, we should devise a more sensitive measure capable of dealing with this particular feature of parliamentary democracies.

Tab. 2.2. Dimensions and indicators of government alternation

<i>Alternation</i>	Index of Government Change
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of alternations • Degree of turnover in the partisan composition of the cabinet
<i>Possibility of alternation</i>	Bipolarism
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-party/bloc party system • Concentration of votes/seats in two poles
<i>Probability of alternation</i>	Format and mechanics of party system
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of relevant parties • Number of effective parties • Polarisation • Index of Predominance • Strength of two-partyism

Dimensions of electoral systems

- Disproportionality of the electoral formula
- District magnitude

Inter-party competition

- Closeness of the election results
- Margin in pre-election polling
- Inter-bloc volatility
- Frequency of pre-electoral coalitions

Cabinet type

- Frequency of single-party governments
- Frequency of minority governments

Risk and rate of alternation

- N. of electoral alternations / N. of elections
 - N. of alternations / N. of government changes
-

2.3. From concepts to numbers

The time has come now to outline the process of operationalisation of the concept of alternation. As we know, in the literature there are many suggested measures and indexes of government turnover but the most widespread and used are those elaborated by Kaare Strøm and Peter Mair. Operationally, Strøm (1990: 125) measures government change (under the alias: alternation) as the ‘degree of turnover in office from one government to the next’, that is, ‘the aggregate proportion of legislative seats held by parties changing status between government and opposition in the change of government in question.’ The larger the value of this index, the higher the degree of turnover from one government to the next. Although interested in the same subject, Mair (2008: 245) has followed a different path and proposed a new way to measure turnover at the governmental level. His suggested index is ‘simply the sum (in absolute values) of the gains of all “winning” parties (those that increased their share of ministers) and the losses of all “losing” parties (those that had their share of ministers reduced), divided by two (since the percentage “gains” obviously equals the percentage “losses”). Where a government composed by a single party *X* is replaced by a new government composed of a single party *Y*, the Index is 100%. Where a government in which party *A* contributes 40% of the ministers, party *B* 30%, and party *C* also 30% is replaced by a new coalition in which party *A* continues to hold 40%, party *B* rises to 40%, and a new party *D* wins 20%, the Index is 30%.’

The indicators elaborated by Strøm and Mair are strictly linked and correlated, even if they are using, and dealing with, data extrapolated by different levels of analysis: the former works at the parliamentary level, whereas the latter operates at the ministerial level. What is missing here is the medium level of analysis, to wit: the governmental level. The *Index of Government Volatility* (IGV) that I propose tries to fill this gap by borrowing the best of both methods. More specifically, IGV is the sum of the gains of all winning parties (those that increased their weight in the cabinet) and the losses of all ‘losing’ parties (those that had their weight in the cabinet reduced), divided by two. In a formula, we can express this index this way:

$$\text{Index of Government Volatility} = \sum_{i=1}^n \frac{|P_{i,t} - P_{i,t-1}|}{2}$$

where n is the number of governing parties and P_i is the 'weight' of a single party – measured by the share of cabinet seats – at time t and $t-1$. At this point, it might be useful to illustrate the operation of IGV by resorting to a concrete example.⁴ Table 2.3 shows a hypothetical parliament with a given distribution of seats for six parties (the grey areas indicate the governing parties).

Tab. 2.3. *Index of government volatility: An illustration*

Political parties						
$t-1$	A	B	C	D	E	F
Seat share	15	20	35	15	10	5
t						
Seat share	10	25	30	20	5	10
$t+1$						
Seat share	15	30	20	15	10	10

Legend: grey shaded area = governing parties; black-and-white dashed area = potential turnover.

From the example reported in Table 2.3, in the passage from the government at time t (CDE) to the next government (ABF, $t+1$), the value of IGV is equal to 100: all parties previously in government are not in office anymore. This is a crystal-clear case of government alternation. Furthermore, from the same example, it is possible to calculate both the amount of *potential turnover*, that is, the maximum level of rotation in office taking place for a given distribution of seats, and the extent of turnover actually exploited by the new, incoming government (*exploited, or used, turnover*). The difference between the potential and the exploited turnover is called 'wasted turnover'. In the case at hand, the value of potential turnover is given by the sum of the seat-share of the three parties (A, B, F) not included in the cabinet at time t : $15 + 30 + 10 = 55$. Since all the parties previously excluded from the executive office are included in the subsequent cabinet ($t+1$), the exploited turnover amounts to 55 per cent and, consequently, there is no waste of turnover, meaning that all potential turnovers in governmental office have been used by the parties.

From $t-1$ to t , that is from a government composed by BCD to a government made up of the other three parties (CDE), we face a different, more nuanced case and, in fact, the value of turnover is equal to 33.1. As to the level of potential turnover, the three parties excluded from the government at time $t-1$ (A, E, F) control 25 per cent of the seats after the election held at time t . As a consequence, the potential government turnover is 25, while the amount of exploited turnover is given by the seat-share (5 per cent) of the only new party (E) included in the cabinet at time t . Thus, in this process of government change the extent of wasted turnover is equal to 20.

In the light of the above, we are in a safe position to distinguish cases of wholesale turnover (alternation) from those of partial turnover and those characterised by an absolute lack of turnover at the

⁴ Appendix A includes all the details for the calculation of this index and the other indicators elaborated throughout this chapter.

governmental level. What we need now is to set up a cut-off point within the (too) large 'class' of partial turnover because it encompasses all those cases that have a value of IGV that goes from 1 to 99. Since we do not have any theoretical standard for deciding the 'right' position for the cut-off point, I have (arbitrarily) decided to set it at 35 (as a value in the Index of Governmental Volatility). In doing so, we can better differentiate, within the category of 'partial turnover', the cases of small changes, which I term 'micro-substitution', from the cases in which one or more large parties enter, or are forced out of, the cabinet (for these cases I prefer the label 'semi-rotation'). Referring back to our hypothetical legislature in Table 2.3, the first change of government occurs through a micro-substitution implying the formation of a cabinet with both incumbent and non-incumbent parties, while the second change (from t to $t+1$) assumes the shape of an alternation in government.

2.4. Possibility and probability of alternation

Thus far, the operationalisation of the concept has considered only one dimension, namely, the one I have defined as 'actual alternation'. However, as I have already pointed out, it is possible to identify two other dimensions: possibility and probability of alternation. As to the former, to the best of my knowledge the literature does not present any solution that operationalises it directly. In many cases, the possibility of alternation has been gauged indirectly, making no explicit reference to the actual occurrence of an alternation in government. Pre-electoral surveys, previous levels of electoral volatility, vote-margin in past elections or other similar ex-ante tentative operational definitions have been suggested and adopted, but none of these solutions was based explicitly on the concept of (actual) alternation. In order to fill this gap, I suggest that the 'alternability' of the party system (i.e., the possibility to change *simultaneously* all the governing parties) following the this practical guideline: if parties in government at time $t-1$ have an absolute majority (50% +1) of seats also at time t , then government alternation is arithmetically impossible.

In sum, given a specific distribution of seats in the legislature and the seat-share controlled by the parties formally supporting the outgoing government, it is possible to assess whether alternation is possible or not. Two caveats are in order here. First, the possibility of alternation is measured *ex post factum*, that is, taking into account the distribution of seats following a general election. This solution may be criticised because it does not grasp the concrete extent of uncertainty that comes along with a given electoral process. Yet, despite all the potential drawbacks, it has the merit to measure the possibility of alternation by making no reference to other more or less related concepts. The second caveat has to do with the majority principle implicitly included in my operational definition. Alternability as I have defined it here is based on a set of binding arithmetical constraints, the most important of which relies upon the rule that in all parliamentary systems the government must control, or be tolerated by, a legislative majority. In a way, my operational definition assumes the validity of the majority principle and sets the 'alternability threshold' at 50%+1 of seats. However, as many studies have convincingly pointed out, there exist many exceptions to the rule and such 'aberrations' – as Strøm called them (1989: 6) – are commonly known as minority cabinets, which do not meet the majority clause. In these circumstances, far from being rare or isolated, the possibility of alternation goes beyond the binding arithmetic constraints that I have indicated above. In other words, minority cabinets have the power to make possible the (arithmetically) impossible. That is, to track down the conditions for alternation even though these conditions are not explicitly present. Summing up, *prima facie* the operational definition of the possibility of alternation cannot take into account the existence of minority situations in parliament, but what it can do – as I will show below – is to highlight the distance between what is possible and what is real, pointing out the discrepancies between the possibility and the actuality of alternation in government.

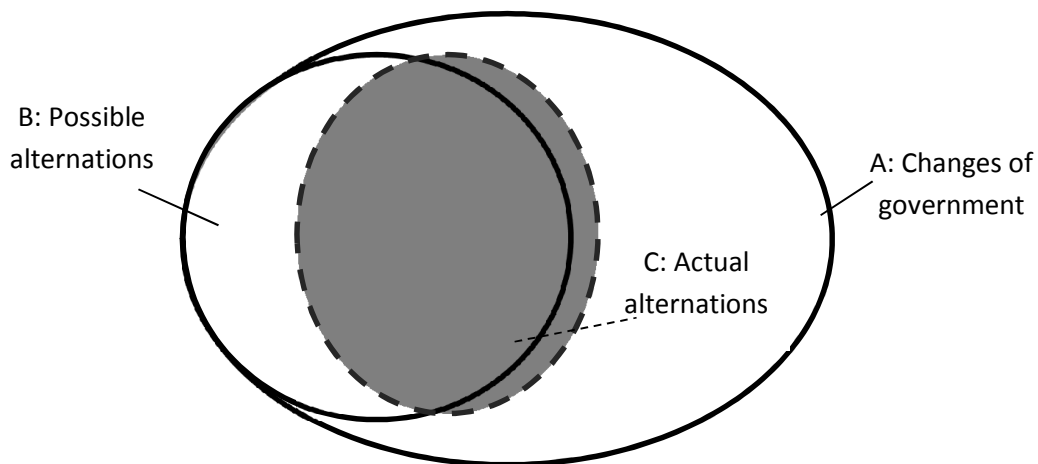
Having specified that, it is useful to better illustrate this aspect by referring back to the example reported in Table 2.3. The first change of government (from BCD at time $t-1$ to CDE at time t) shows that an alternation is not possible because the three parties that formed a cabinet at time $t-1$ control a legislative majority (75 per cent) at time t . Accordingly, given the binding legislative constraints that I have set out above, it is easy to conclude that at least one governing party must be included in the incoming cabinet – a combination of factor that rules out the possibility of a wholesale rotation in the executive power. On the contrary, the second change of government presented in Table 2.3 makes explicit the conditions under which an alternation in government is a concrete possibility. Indeed, the outgoing cabinet (BCD) lost the legislative majority at time $t+1$, controlling only 45 per cent of seats in the new legislature. In this circumstance, there exists a possibility for the opposition parties to coalesce and give birth to a majority cabinet. Once again, it must be stressed that there is an empirical gap between the possibility and the actuality of alternation because, especially in multi-party systems, the parties in the opposition must find an effective way to coordinate their behaviour.

However, as we know there exist many intervening factors (ideological distance, institutional constraints, path-dependent behaviours) that make more difficult that coordination game among the parties excluded from the government. This leads us to the introduction of a new concept, that is, ‘the exploitation of the possibility of alternation’. The idea behind this concept refers to the gap that can emerge between the arithmetical possibility of alternation produced by a given distribution of seats and the failure of the opposition parties to coordinate their behaviour. In some circumstances, the possibility of alternation can be exploited, but in other cases it can remain a mere hypothesis with no concrete implication. Different countries may be more or less ‘exploitative’ in terms of possibility of alternation and the analysis of these differences shall reveal which factors are crucial in fostering or hindering the emergence of a pattern of complete turnover in office. In brief, we should be able to distinguish the cases of *under-exploitation* of the possibility of alternation (i.e., when the parties are not able to seize the opportunity to kick the incumbents out of office) from those that I will call over-exploitation, that is, all those episodes in which, because of the formation of minority cabinets, a mathematically impossible alternation is made possible.

The relationship between possible and actual alternations – as defined above – is shown in Figure 2.6. Among all the conceivable types or modes of government change (set A), there is a strict subset (B) of cases that encompasses those circumstances in which alternation is, under binding arithmetical constraints, a concrete possibility. Finally, the set (C) including actual alternations in government intersects set B, but cannot be considered as a perfect subset of it. In other words, not all possibilities of alternation turn out to be actual alternations. Indeed, the white area in set B identifies cases of under-exploitation of the possibility of alternation, while the grey area intersecting B and C includes the exploited possibilities of alternation. In addition, the grey area outside the intersection is reserved for those circumstances that I have defined as over-exploitation of the possibility of alternation, due to the formation of minority governments that circumvent, or relax, the majority principle. Formally, we can express the relationships between the three sets in the following way:

- $B \subseteq A$ = possible alternations
- $C \subseteq A$ = actual alternations
- $C \cap B$ = exploited possibilities of alternation
- $C \cup B$ = exploited and not exploited possibilities of alternation
- $C - B$ = over-exploitation of the possibility of alternation.

Fig. 2.6. Relationship between potential and actual alternations



According to the specific relationships between possible and actual alternation, especially in the broader context including all changes of government, it is possible to introduce the third and last dimension of the concept of alternation, that is, its probability. As I have already pointed out, the probability of alternation is, in a certain way, a by-product of both the potential and actual alternations. More precisely, it can be devised as a relation, or a ratio, between what is possible and what is real. In this sense, the probability of alternation can be measured in three different ways, taking into consideration the ratio of the occurrence of actual alternations to, respectively: 1) the sum of potential alternations; 2) the sum of the government changes; 3) the sum of the governments formed in a given time-span. These three measures of the likelihood of a wholesale turnover in government are based, to some extent, on real-existing cases of alternation. That is a crucial difference vis-à-vis all other indexes, measures or solutions present in the literature. In fact, many scholars – as shown in the previous section – have preferred to study the ‘chance’ or the likelihood of a government alternation by recurring to other, more or less related, concepts or phenomena (i.e., the effective number of political parties, the disproportionality of the electoral system etc.). The solutions that I am going to propose measures the probability of alternation by taking exclusively into account the cases of wholesale turnover actually happened. For sure, this solution presents its own drawbacks. Perhaps, the most important of these is its backward-looking nature, in the sense that it reflects the past, but it does not prospect the future. Nevertheless, it moves from the assumption that there exist some regularities in the pattern of interactions between political parties in a given party system. Hence, under the shadow of the *ceteris paribus* clause, the analysis of the past admits and permits, to a degree, a prediction of the future, albeit not in a deterministic manner.

That said, it is possible to present the three measures of the probability of alternation. The first measure results from the ratio of actual alternations (set C) to the total sum of potential alternations (set B in Figure 2.6). Formally, it can be expressed as C / B . This measure, which I refer to as ‘rate of alternation’, reflects the extent to which potential alternations become real. In other words, the rate of alternation goes hand in hand with the potentiality and actuality of wholesale rotation in office.

The second measure is given by the ratio of actual alternations (C) to the total sum of government changes (A) observed in a specific span of time. More specifically, the operation C / A produces an index that I call the ‘probability of alternation’. In contrast to the first, this second measure reflects the extent to which a given type of government turnover occurs vis-à-vis other types of changes in government. According to the new terminology specified above, the ‘probability of alternation’ conveys the likelihood that a government change might occur through a wholesale turnover of the incumbent parties.

Lastly, the third measure reflecting the chance of government alternation is calculated as the ratio of all actual alternations to the total sum of governments that have been formed in a country in a specific period. This operational definition, that I term 'frequency of alternation', must be conceived as a measure of the real occurrence of alternation in office with reference to the overall sum of cabinets that have been created in every country.⁵

These three measures of the uncertainty in the occurrence (or nonoccurrence) of alternation shed a light on different facets of the same phenomenon. Both the rate, the probability and the frequency of alternation tell us the degree to which wholesale turnovers in office have taken place in different party systems. In some cases, for instance in 'perfect' two-party systems, the difference between rate and probability of alternation may be minimal and meaningless. In other cases, especially in multi-party systems, these differences grow exponentially and, accordingly, as a rule of thumb, one can argue that the more fragmented the party system, the higher the number of differences between the ratio and the probability of alternation. For the sake of clarity, the next chapters will avoid dealing simultaneously with all these conceptual shades and, when not explicitly specified, my reference to the concept of probability of alternation will refer to the second measure (i.e. ratio of actual alternations to the total of government changes). The same caveat applies to what I have called 'frequency of alternation', but in this case, because of its meaning and specificity, its appearance along the course of the present dissertation will by no means be episodic.

2.5. By way of conclusion

Summing up, it is fair to say that government alternation is a complex phenomenon that requires a meticulous concept analysis. In this chapter, I have tried to build up a conceptual toolkit that scholars can use in order to study and analyse both the causes and the consequences of alternation in office. Moreover, as just pointed out, governmental alternation can be conceived of as a 3D concept, including at least three dimensions strictly connected to one another: actual alternations, possible alternations and likely alternations. Each dimension reflects a specific meaning and referent. Unfortunately, in the literature, especially in the past, these dimensions have been conflated or confused, both in theoretical and empirical research. Many scholars who have located alternation at the centre of their democratic theories more often than not have avoided specifying which dimension of alternation they were referring to. Similarly, in the empirical research of these scholars who have tried to analyse the effects of alternations for the functioning of the party system, there is no concern for the differences between the dimensions of the concept at stake. In short, the common assumption in the literature was that the differences within the concept of alternation make no difference. Nonetheless, as I have tried to argue in this chapter and as I hope will emerge with greater clarity in the rest of the thesis, the driving forces behind each dimension of alternation are, to a degree, different and ought to be treated as such.

In any case, the challenge of this chapter was not only to clarify and better define alternation in government. If that were the case, concept analysis, albeit necessary, would be a largely sterile or futile activity. My ultimate goal was to shed some light on an increasingly frequent phenomenon to which political science has hitherto not paid enough attention or simply ignored. As shown in Chapter 1, we do not have a clear theory explaining the conditions for, and the consequences of, the current trend towards more frequent alternations in power. What is more, in this chapter we have seen that the lenses through which we study the changes in government are to a large extent inappropriate. With misleading conceptual blinkers and no

⁵ A similar approach can be adopted for the calculation of the 'frequency of electoral alternation'; a measure that uses the total sum of elections held in a specific country as denominator (while the numerator remains unchanged).

theory at hand, we are just proceeding blindly in some indefinite direction. The following chapters shall try to show that a different path is possible.

Chapter 3

Alternation in practice

3.1. Alternation and birdwatching: a premise

Giovanni Sartori (1982: 198) once described government alternation among democratic political regimes as a *rara avis*, that is, a rare and unusual phenomenon. Many decades later, another scholar, Adam Przeworski (2010: 117), would claim that ‘partisan alternation in office is now the bread and butter of democracy’. According to the Polish-American scholar, alternation in power is not a minor attribute of democratic regimes but, much more importantly, is ‘what democracy is all about’. To put it bluntly, either democracy entails government turnover or it is something different, something else. Nevertheless, the aim of this chapter is not to ascertain whether Sartori or Przeworski is right – nor to evaluate the more or less fundamental relation between alternation and democracy. Much more pragmatically, in the unfolding of this chapter I shall try to paint a big, politico-historical fresco of alternation in Europe, from the end of the Second World War until today. There is no better way of evaluating the evolution of alternation across space and through time than by observing it in its natural environment, namely, among democratic polities. And as a bird-watcher trying to assess whether a specific *avis* is *rara* or *frequens*, in this chapter I will wear the uniform of the alternation-watcher, trying to evaluate the rhythm, the frequency and the trends of alternation in government in Western Europe.

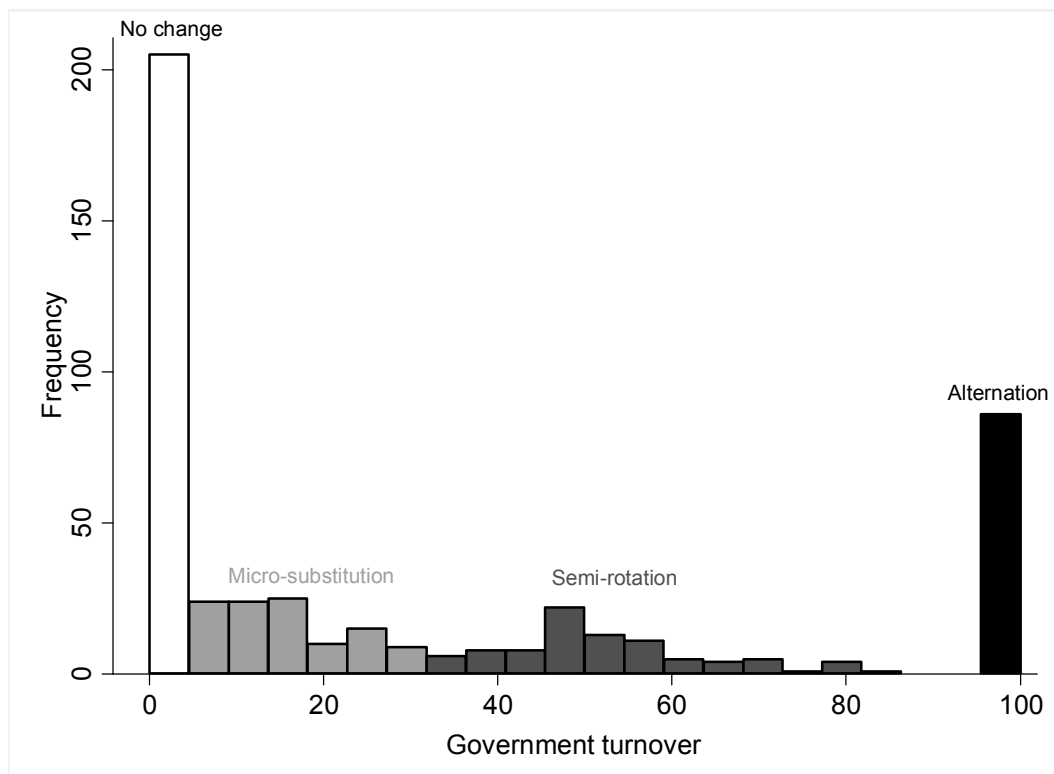
3.2. Actual alternation

Conceptualisation comes prior to quantification. Or, to put it another way, thinking precedes counting. If we do not know what we are counting, or classifying, our work will serve no purpose. This is why in the previous chapter I have carried out a thorough conceptual analysis of government alternation. But now that we know what we are talking about it is time to begin: how many alternations in office can we observe in Europe? How likely is alternation across democratic regimes? Has the possibility of alternation, during the last seventy years, increased (in frequency) or not?

As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, governmental alternation has a binary nature – it is all or nothing. Conversely, governmental turnover has a much more nuanced and multifaceted form. In the light of this, it is worth identifying different forms, or modes, of turnover. Briefly put, what we need is to set up a cut-off point within the (too) large class of ‘partial turnover’ since it encompasses all those cases that have a value of the Index of Governmental Volatility (IGV) that goes from 1 to 99. Since there is no theoretical standard for deciding the right location for the cut-off point, I have arbitrarily set it at 35. In doing so, I can better differentiate, within the category of ‘partial turnover’, the cases of small changes, which I term ‘micro-substitution’, from the cases in which one or more large parties enter in, or are forced out of, the cabinet. For these second circumstances, I use the label ‘semi-rotation’. Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of these

categories of government substitution in seventeen European countries¹ from the Second World War to 2015, namely: a) lack of change; b) micro-substitution; c) semi-rotation; d) alternation.

Fig. 3.1. Bar graph of the government turnover in Western Europe (1945-2015)



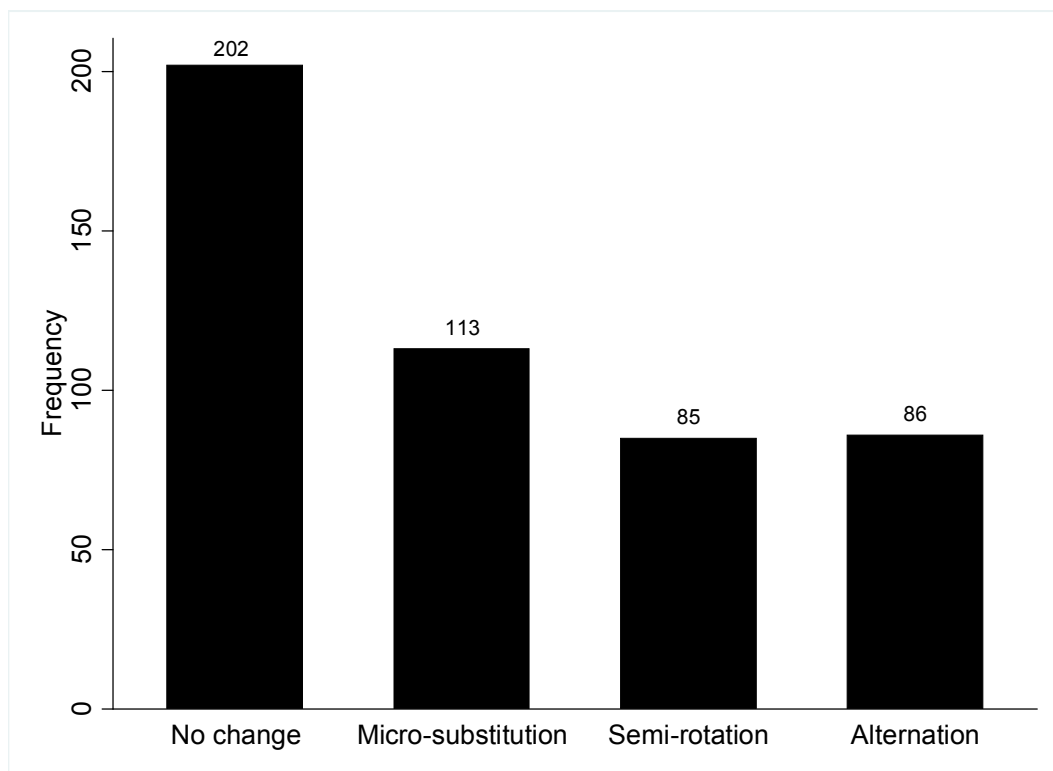
Overall, looking at Figure 3.1 we first notice that the cases of lack of governmental turnover are the most frequent in the dataset. In more than two hundred cases, the cabinet in power preserves its partisan composition. This figure is important because it reveals that in many circumstances, despite the format of the party system or the return of the elections, the incumbent parties are able to preserve their ruling position. Secondly, turning to cases of government change, we can observe that the three types of rotation in office are almost homogeneously distributed along the continuum that goes from 1 to 100 per cent of turnover in government. The only values that are not present in the dataset are those cases of ‘extra-large’ semi-rotation that record a value in the index of government turnover higher than 85 per cent. In this sense, our data exhibit a gap for those values ranging from 85 to 99 per cent, meaning that there is no episode in which a very minor party has acted as a pivot replacing its major coalition partner with another large party. These cases, in which a pivotal party seems to lose its positional power vis-à-vis other party actors, can explain both the gap in the dataset and, accordingly, the ‘empirical leap’ toward cases of government change with a higher turnover rate, where the replacement of the incumbent parties is wholesale.

As shown in Figure 3.2, which aggregates all the values in the index of government turnover into four mutually exclusive categories, one finds confirmation that the episodes of no change in government are the most common (202 cases). The second most common type of government change is micro-substitution with 113 cases, characterised by only marginal changes in the coalition’s composition. The least common category is identified by those cases of semi-rotation (85 cases) and, in the middle of the distribution, there are the

¹ In some circumstances, the total number of countries is 19 because I have split the cases of France (IV Republic: from 1946 to 1957; V Republic: 1958 to nowadays) and Italy (I Republic: from 1948 to 1993; II Republic: from 1994 up to now).

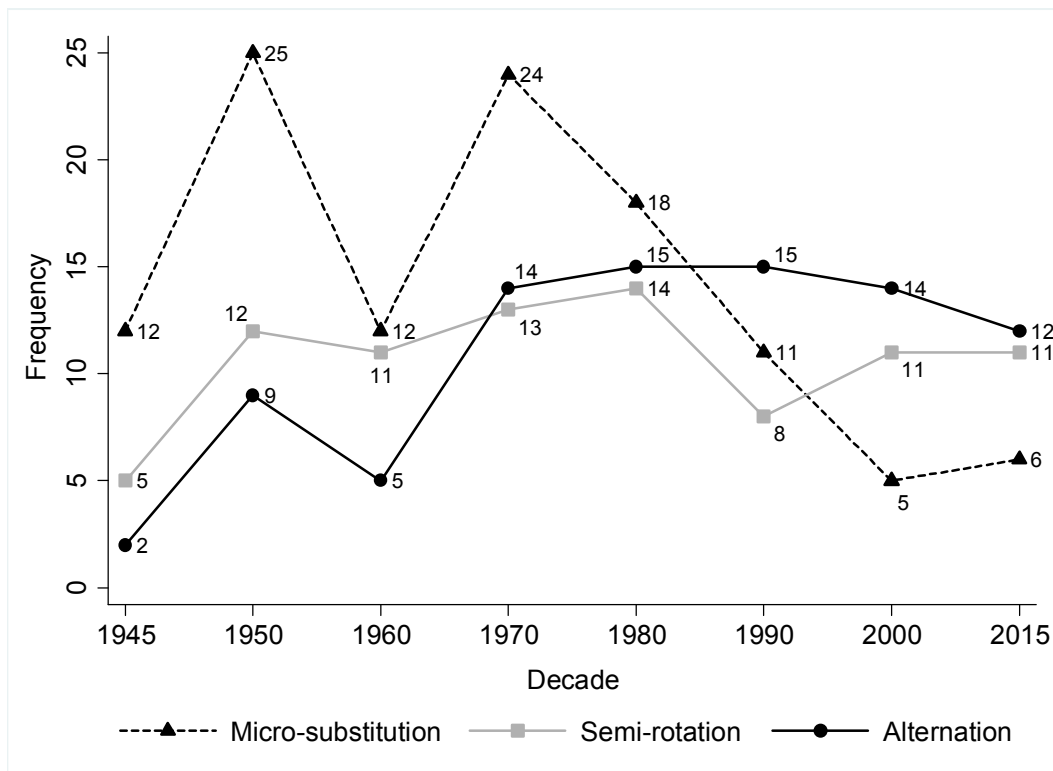
cases of alternation (86 cases). In the light of these figures, one can argue that, based on this distribution of frequencies, the phenomenon of government turnover in Europe is not as common and ‘large’ as we would have expected. Moreover, from this viewpoint alternation is, without doubt, an uncommon occurrence. Nevertheless, if and when European governments change, they tend to do so in a minimal, or minor, way, namely, through micro-substitutions of the incumbents.

Fig. 3.2. Types of government change in government in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (absolute values)



That said, if we change the perspective and observe the evolution of the different types of government change through time in the post-war period (see Figure 3.3), it is evident that alternation was, indeed, an extremely rare event in the decades immediately after the Second World War, but it has increased remarkably over time. In fact, starting from the 1990s it has become the most frequent way of changing government. In a nutshell, alternation was a *rara avis* until the end of the 1970s, when Giovanni Sartori made his observation, but in the last thirty years it has become the most common form of government change. Accordingly, Adam Przeworski’s claim that alternation has become the substance – i.e. ‘the bread and butter’ – of contemporary democratic regimes is now correct. Furthermore, this upward trend in the occurrence of alternation in government has remained stable also in the last years included in the dataset, in spite of the fact that, as an indirect consequence of the advent of the economic crisis commonly known as ‘Great Recession’ (Bermeo and Bartels 2014; Hall 2013; Hernández and Kriesi 2015; Pontusson and Raess 2012), micro-changes in the cabinet composition appear to be on the rise again, albeit marginally, in terms of their frequency.

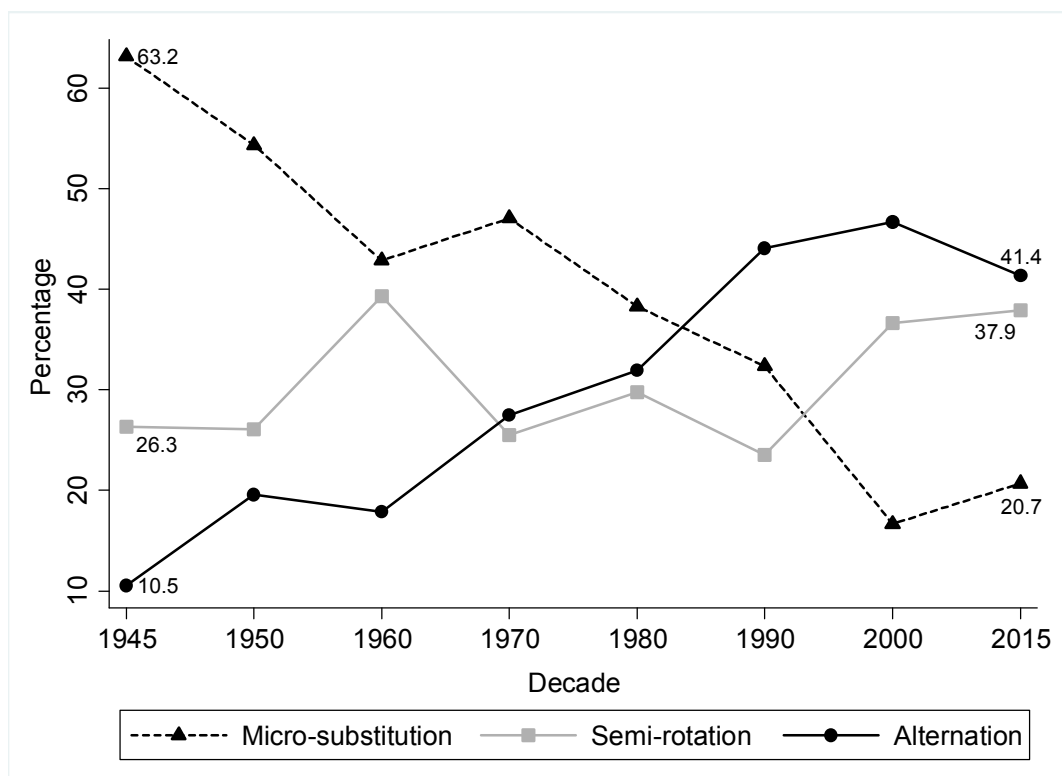
Fig. 3.3. Types of government change in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (absolute values, by decade)



Note: the values indicate the absolute frequency of each type of change in government aggregated by decade. The first (1945-1950) and the last (2010-2015) time-periods report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the frequency of observations for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for '1950', the range goes from 1950 to 1959).

The same description holds true when taking into account the proportion, or fraction, of the three types of government change over a period that goes from the end of the Second World War up to 2015. As Figure 3.4 reveals, until the 1950s barely two government replacements out of ten took place through a wholesale rotation in office, whereas in the same time-span more than one change out of two involved a micro-substitution in the partisan composition of the cabinet. However, it is striking to note that sixty years later this proportion has completely changed. Nowadays, roughly four government changes out of ten (41.4%) occur through an alternation in office and more than three out of ten (37.9%) take the form of a semi-rotation. Accordingly, since the 2000s only a minority of cases (20.7%) records that type of government change that was absolutely dominant in the early decades of the post-war period. Hence, in the last thirty years alternation has become the most common form of government change.

Fig. 3.4. *Types of government change in seventeen Western Europe, 1945-2015 (percentage values, by decade)*



Note: the values indicate the percentage frequency of each type of change in government aggregated by decade. The first (1945-1950) and the last (2010-2015) time-period report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the frequency of observations for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for '1950', the range goes from 1950 to 1959).

Yet the trend that I have just outlined is not, of course, country-specific and indeed it significantly changes from country to country. Looking at Table 3.1, it is more than evident that there are clear differences among the seventeen West European countries here analysed. For instance, in Spain, the United Kingdom, Greece and (partially) Norway governments rotate in the executive office almost exclusively through alternation. Besides, this description can also be applied to the so-called Second Italian Republic, which ran from 1994 to 2015, in which each and every election brought about a wholesale turnover in government. By contrast, in countries such as Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg alternations are rare or, in some cases, totally absent.

Tab. 3.1. *Patterns and types of government turnover in Western Europe (1945-2015)*

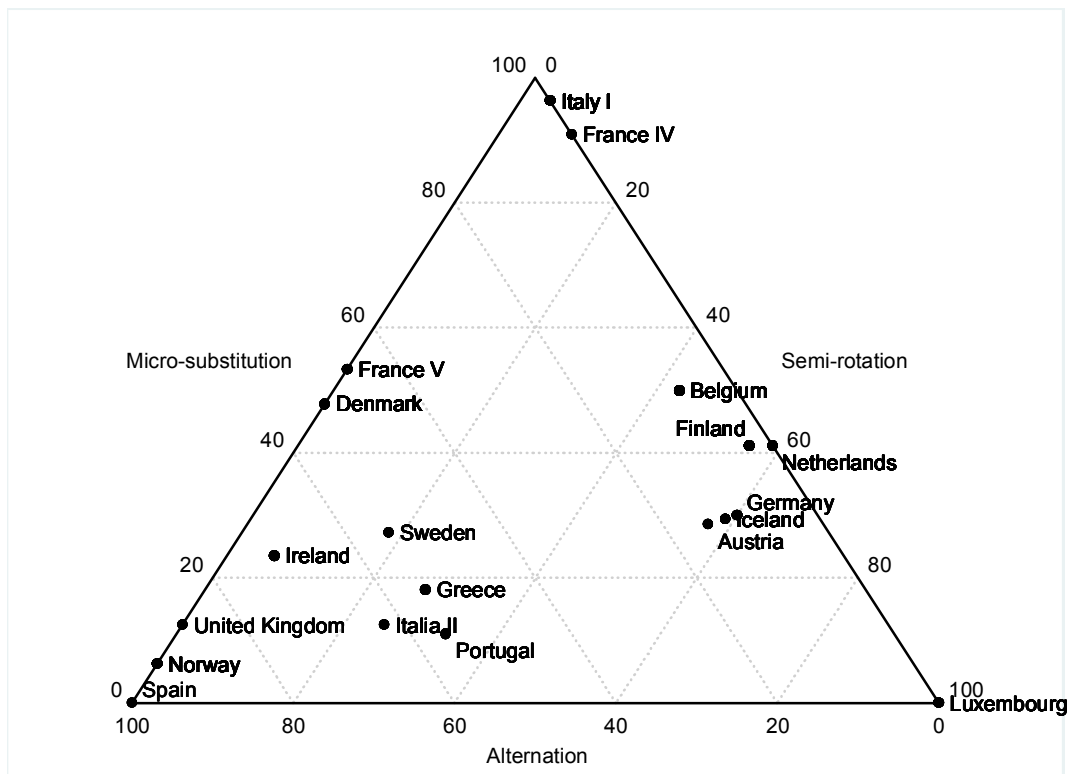
	<i>N. lack of turnover</i>	<i>N. (%) micro-substitutions</i>	<i>N. (%) semi-rotations</i>	<i>N. (%) alternations</i>	<i>N. of cabinets</i>
Austria	19	2 (28.6)	4 (57.1)	1 (14.3)	26
Belgium	9	14 (50.0)	12 (42.9)	2 (7.1)	37
Denmark	14	11 (47.8)	0	12 (52.2)	37
Finland	9	14 (41.2)	19 (55.9)	1 (2.9)	43
France	23	18 (69.2)	1 (3.9)	7 (26.9)	49
<i>France IV (1946-1958)</i>	12	10 (90.9)	1 (9.1)	0	23

<i>France V (1958-2015)</i>	11	8 (53.3)	0	7 (46.7)	26
Germany	14	3 (30.0)	6 (60.0)	1 (10.0)	24
Greece (1977-2015)	7	2 (18.2)	3 (27.3)	6 (54.5)	18
Iceland	9	5 (29.4)	10 (58.8)	2 (11.8)	26
Ireland	8	4 (23.5)	1 (5.9)	12 (70.6)	25
Italy	12	27 (77.1)	3 (8.6)	5 (14.3)	47
<i>Italy I (1945-1993)</i>	9	26 (96.3)	1 (3.7)	0	36
<i>Italy II (1994-2015)</i>	3	1 (12.5)	2 (25.0)	5 (62.5)	11
Luxemburg	8	0	11 (100)	0	19
Netherlands	5	7 (41.2)	10 (58.8)	0	22
Norway	14	1 (6.2)	0	15 (93.8)	30
Portugal (1976-2015)	8	1 (11.1)	3 (33.3)	5 (55.6)	17
Spain (1974-2015)	9	0	0	4 (100)	13
Sweden	18	3 (27.3)	2 (18.2)	6 (54.5)	29
United Kingdom	16	1 (12.5)	0	7 (87.5)	24
<i>Total</i>	<i>202</i>	<i>113 (39.8)</i>	<i>85 (29.9)</i>	<i>86 (30.3)</i>	<i>486</i>

As I have just pointed out, in some countries alternation in government is an uncommon – even absent – phenomenon: in Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France (during the Fourth Republic) and Italy until 1994. In these party systems, the existence of a centrist party or alliance, makes the likelihood of alternation virtually nil. More specifically, the presence of an extreme multi-party system, in which wholesale rotation in office is not a viable option, does not allow any alternation between distinct sets of political parties. By contrast, in countries characterised by a limited multi-party system or in two-party systems, government turnover can easily reach its maximum value. Spain and (until 2015) the United Kingdom are perfect instances of this trend: since the end of the Second World War all governments have been replaced only through processes – more or less regular – of alternation.

The figures are a bit more nuanced in countries where a limited multiparty system is at work. For instance, in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal, Ireland, and France (since 1958) governmental alternation has become the most frequent type of government change. Among these countries, the cases of Ireland and the Italian Second Republic are even more peculiar because here the episodes of alternation outnumber those in which the partisan composition of the cabinet remain unchanged. Put differently, these can be countries where the process of alternation in office becomes almost a synonym for government instability – that is, many and profound changes in the government composition that happen in a short period of time. Obviously, the opposite argument can be applied to those countries in which cases of micro-substitution (or semi-rotation) occurred very frequently in a short time span. Belgium, Finland, and Italy (1946-1993) can be included in this category as they are characterised by frequent government changes of small parties within the cabinet. Even in these cases, the specific pattern of substitution between distinct cabinets may be interpreted as proxies for political instability.

Fig. 3.5. Patterns of government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



Legend: triplot is used to portray a three-dimensional concept. A point in the above triangle denotes, for each country, the percentage frequency of the three types of government change. The value for each type of government change is measured from the opposite base. For instance, micro-substitution will be 0 anywhere at the base of the triangle but 100 per cent at the upper vertex of the triangle.

All in all, it is worth noting that alternation in office is a quite widespread feature of contemporary democratic regimes. Figure 3.5 displays the trichotomy of government changes in Western Europe in a single graph and also includes two particular cases: the Fourth French Republic and the ‘first’ Italian party system (1945-1993). The high percentage frequency of alternation characterises the cluster of countries located close to the left corner of the triangle, that is, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, Greece, Portugal, the UK and Italy since 1994. In these countries, governments are usually, though not always, changed by recurring to an all-or-nothing logic: the rulers out and the opposition in. It is striking to note the trajectory experienced by Italy before and after the party-system change occurred in the early 1990s. The First Italian Republic was located at the edge of the triangle, with a history of short-lived governments replaced mainly through micro-substitutions. By 1994, Italy had joined the group of countries characterised by frequent alternations, thus moving from the upper vertex of the triangle to the left angle. France shows a similar trend, albeit less neat, with its passage from a Fourth Republic, based on an unmovable coalition of centrist parties, to a Fifth Republic that saw alternation in 1981.

However, at least in the European context, only a few countries have not yet experienced a wholesale rotation in office: the Netherlands and Luxembourg, that is, two relatively small countries, characterised by deep social cleavages and a consensual political culture among the political elites. With reference to the Netherlands, all government changes have occurred through a combination of micro-substitutions and semi-rotations. On the contrary, Luxembourg – located at the right vertex of the triangular plot – experienced only one type of government change throughout the post-war period, namely, semi-rotation. There is only one

more country showing a similar pattern, with a coherent history of government changes, and it is located at the other extreme, in the left vertex of the triangle. In fact, all governments in Spain have been replaced through a process of crystal-clear alternation – a trend that might come to an end after the boom in party-system fragmentation recorded in the 2015 general election.

In any event, with the exceptions of Luxembourg and the Netherlands, all other fifteen countries included in the dataset have experienced at least once the process of government alternation. Despite the remarkable differences among these party systems, all the remaining fifteen cases can be included in the class of the so-called ‘alternational party systems’, that is, political regimes that, to a certain degree, rest upon the wholesale rotation of the parties as a method for changing government. Undoubtedly, a new, more fine-grained typology of party systems should be better able to differentiate the cases of frequent alternations (as in the UK, Spain, Norway, Denmark, Sweden) from those in which a complete turnover in the executive office is – however possible – a rare and absolutely unusual event (as in Finland and Germany). At the same time, the typology should differentiate the cases of physiological alternation from those circumstances in which government alternation becomes a pathological signal of a party system that works poorly or ineffectively.

The transformation in the pattern of government change in Western Europe can be readily visualised in Figure 3.6, which maps the diffusion of the three types of change in government in the thirty-five years since the end of the Second World War. Until 1980, only in four countries was alternation the most common form of changing government: in Denmark, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom. While, in four countries (Austria, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg) changes in government took place mostly through semi-rotation, and in the remaining six polities (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the Netherlands) changes in the partisan composition of the cabinet occurred through small or micro-replacements. These figures confirm that alternation in government was a rarity until the 1970s, a phenomenon almost exclusively reserved for a restricted club of countries. Additionally, it is important to stress that this map of Western Europe displays clusters of countries that cross the usual differences in type of party systems. To illustrate, among the countries characterised by a pattern of alternation in government one finds a classic two-party system (such as the UK), a couple of moderate multi-party systems (Ireland and Denmark) and, for the period under examination, a predominant party system (Norway). A similar logic can be applied to polities distinguished by micro-substitution – a set of countries that includes both polarised (Italy and France), moderate (Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands) and predominant party systems (Sweden). In this sense, types of government change cut across types of party system and there is no direct relationship between them. Without doubt, some party systems are more prone to specific types of change in government – i.e. alternation is unthinkable in polarised polities, just as micro-substitutions would be rare or episodic in two-partyism – but on the whole different types of party system may experience different methods for changing cabinets.

Fig. 3.6. Most frequent type of government change in seventeen West European countries, 1945-1980



The picture just analysed has changed completely in the last thirty-five years, that is, since 1980. As shown in Figure 3.7, alternation now characterises the vast majority of West European party systems – in nine countries out of seventeen. The restricted club of countries that resorted to alternation as the prevailing pattern of change has lowered, so to speak, its entry barriers. Today wholesale ejection of incumbent parties is the most frequent type of government change in nine countries out of seventeen, a trend that the entrance of the three ‘third wave’ countries in the late 1970s has made more evident. What is more, alternation has made its enduring entry in party systems that, in the previous phase, were characterised by polarised (Italy and France) or predominant party systems (Sweden). In these cases, the passage to a new prevailing pattern of government change went hand in hand with a party system change.

That said, two other aspects regarding the evolution of government alternation in Western Europe must be adequately underlined. Firstly, Denmark is the only country demonstrating a sort of step back from the general trend outlined above. Put differently, in the Danish party system alternation was more common in the first phase (1945-1980) than in the later period, in which cabinets have been replaced mainly through micro-substitutions. Largely affecting this U-turn was the explosion in party system fragmentation that followed the 1973 earthquake election, which made coalition-building more complex and governments more short-lived (Miller 1996, Fitzmaurice 1986). Secondly, both Germany and the Netherlands have joined the group of countries in which semi-rotation is the main type of government change, which means that, besides

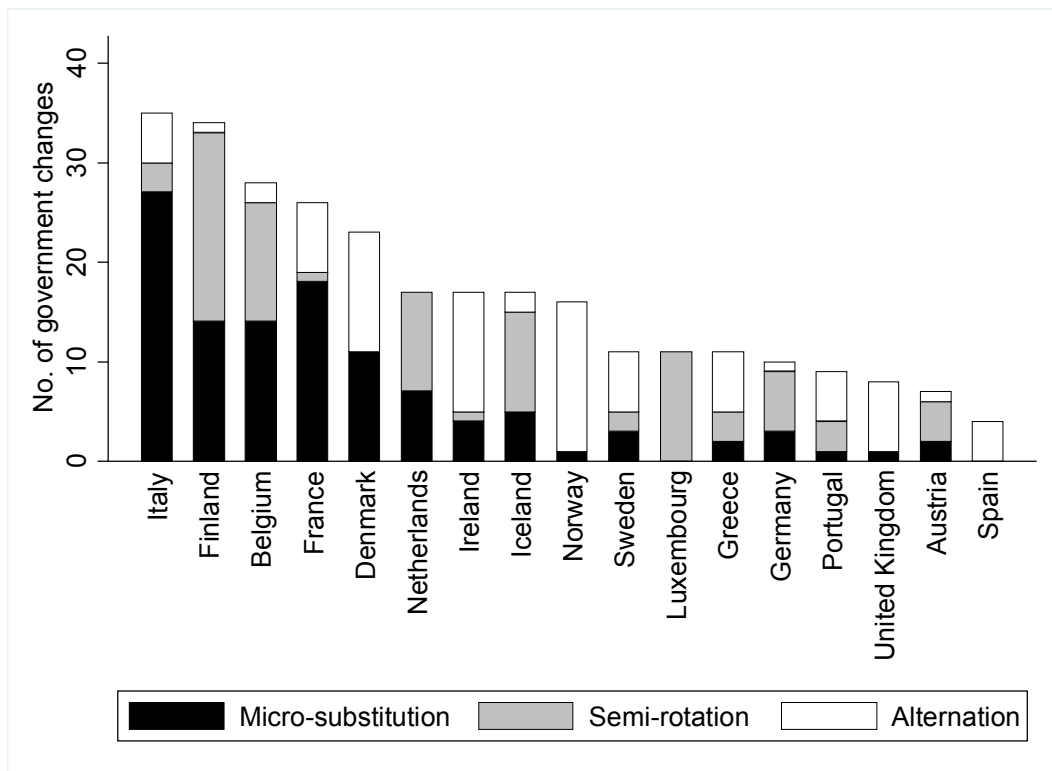
Denmark, the only country where governments rotate in office through micro-substitution is Belgium. By juxtaposing and comparing the maps reported in Figures 3.6 and 3.7, it is evident that patterns of government change in Western Europe have transformed profoundly over the past thirty years. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the continent may be labelled more as the land of alternation rather than the homeland of coalitional practices according to which minor parties are dropped from, or added to, the government.

Fig. 3.7. Most frequent type of government change in 17 West European countries, 1980-2015



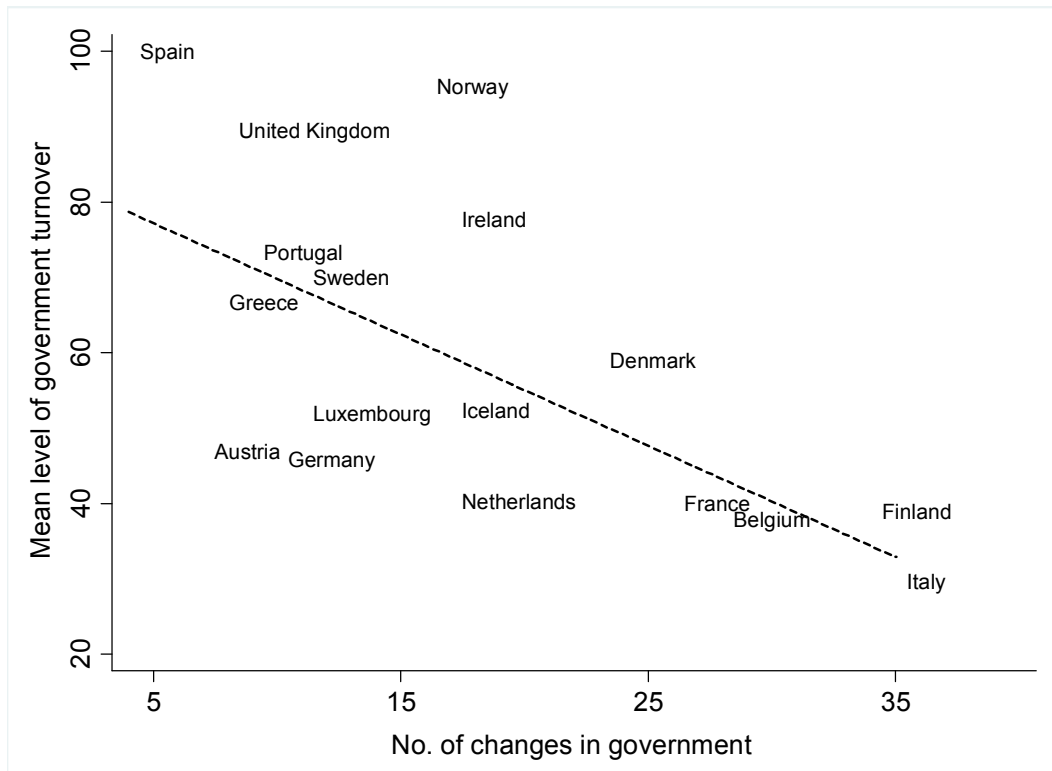
Turning to relationship between type of government change and frequency of change in government, it is evident that there is a somewhat inverse correspondence between, on the one hand, the frequency of change and, on the other hand, the amount of change involved at the governmental level. In other words, more changes of government appear to be correlated with less profound changes *within* the government. As shown in Figure 3.8, Italy and Finland are good cases in point because more than thirty government changes occurred through a simple reshuffle among the incumbent parties. By contrast, in cases such as Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Greece, Spain and the UK, few changes of government go hand in hand with complete replacements of the governing parties. In a nutshell, the higher the frequency of change, the lower the level (or amount) of change.

Fig. 3.8. Number of government changes by type of change (absolute values)



A similar pattern emerges by looking at Figure 3.9, which plots the average level of government turnover for each country against the number of governmental changes. The inverse relation between rhythm of change and amount of change finds a further confirmation. At the right extreme of the distribution, there are cases characterised by *very frequent but small* government changes (in particular, Italy, Finland and Belgium), while at the left extreme one can find the UK, Spain, Greece, Portugal, Norway and Sweden, that is, all cases distinguished by *very infrequent but large* government changes. In the middle of these two extremes, there are party systems that display, in many circumstances, occasional semi-rotations in the executive offices. Germany, Luxembourg or Austria, with their combination of Grand Coalitions and minimum winning cabinets, represent quite well this specific pattern of change in government. On the whole, the point that must be underlined is that the types of government change identified above appear to be related, to some extent, to the pace of making and breaking governments.

Fig. 3.9. Mean level of government turnover and number of changes in government in Western Europe, 1945-2015



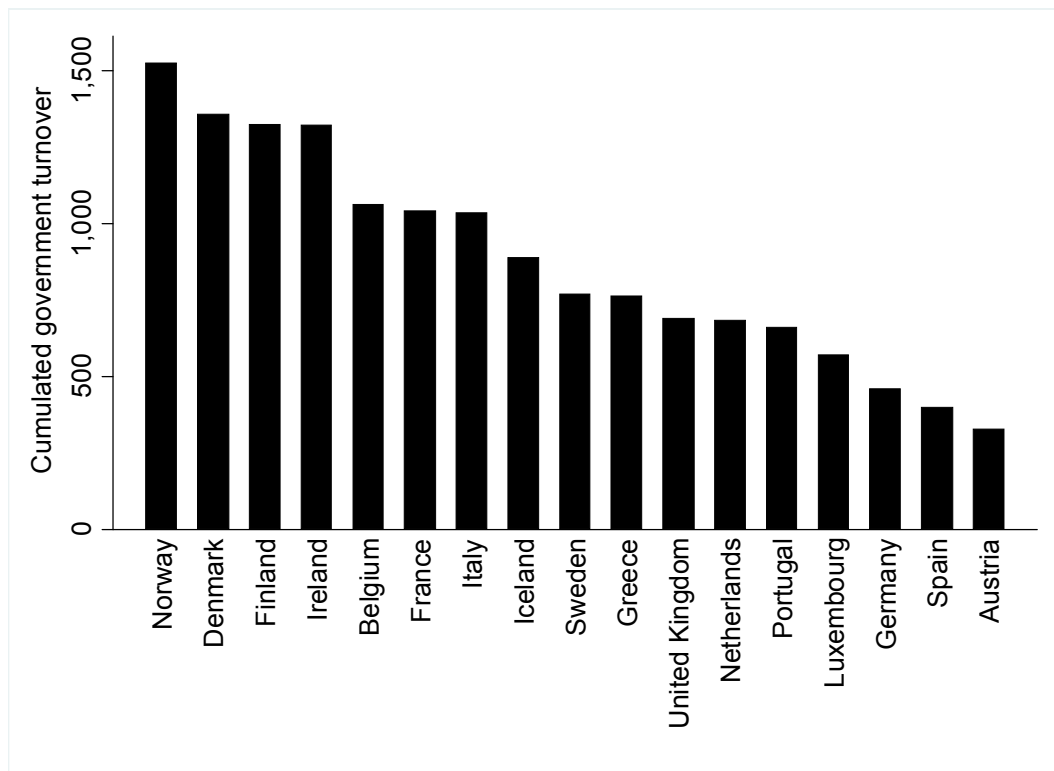
3.3. Cumulated turnover and type of change in government

Before moving on to the specific analysis of the development of alternation in Western Europe, it is useful to observe the overall or, better, the cumulated level of government turnover gathered in the post-war period by the seventeen countries under examination. This 'cumulative index', as Mair 2007: 144) labelled it, summarises the overall degree of government turnover in the West European party system during the post-war years by taking account of both the degree of turnover in the party composition of the cabinets and the frequency with which governments change. More precisely, this variable is measured as the sum of the degree of government turnover for each episode of change in government in the seventeen countries under examination. Figure 3.10 reports the cumulated level of government turnover for each country in the last seventy years and, to begin with, it is interesting to note that Norway is the party system that has so far collected the highest level of cumulated governmental turnover. In this case, and to a lesser extent in Denmark too, many alternations widespread over time account for the overall level of turnover in the executive office. By contrast, in the UK and Spain the more infrequent occurrence of alternations over time have led to a lower value in the cumulative index, respectively 690 and 400. At the lower end of the spectrum one can find Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, that is, polities where alternation in government is extremely rare. In a way, the cumulated level of government turnover can be the product of two specific, different patterns. It can be the result of frequent but small changes – as in the case of Belgium, Finland or Italy – or it can result from rare but sizeable reshuffles within the government.

To illustrate this point it will suffice to compare the cumulated level of turnover in Italy and the UK. In spite of the lack of alternation in office experienced by Italy until the early 1990s, the cumulative index in the UK is much lower than that collected in the Italian party system. Put differently, government turnover in Italy is spread, or stretched, all along the post-war period, whereas in the UK (large) episodes of turnover in

office concentrate in specific and distant points in time. Up to a point, this is the difference pointed out earlier, namely that – as a rule of thumb – small reshuffles in the party composition of the cabinet are more homogeneously distributed across time than large episodes of government successions.

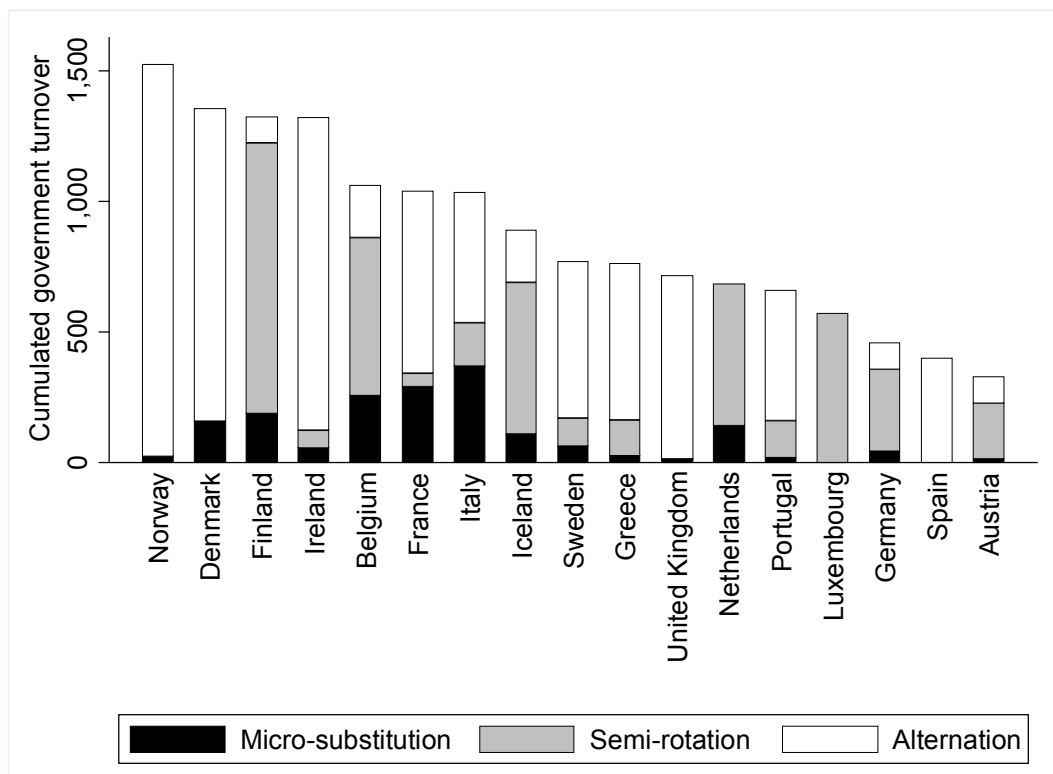
Fig. 3.10. Cumulated government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (absolute values)



Note: The cumulative index, or cumulated government turnover, is the sum of all degrees of turnover in the period 1945-2015 (for Greece, Portugal and Spain the computation begins in the mid-1970s).

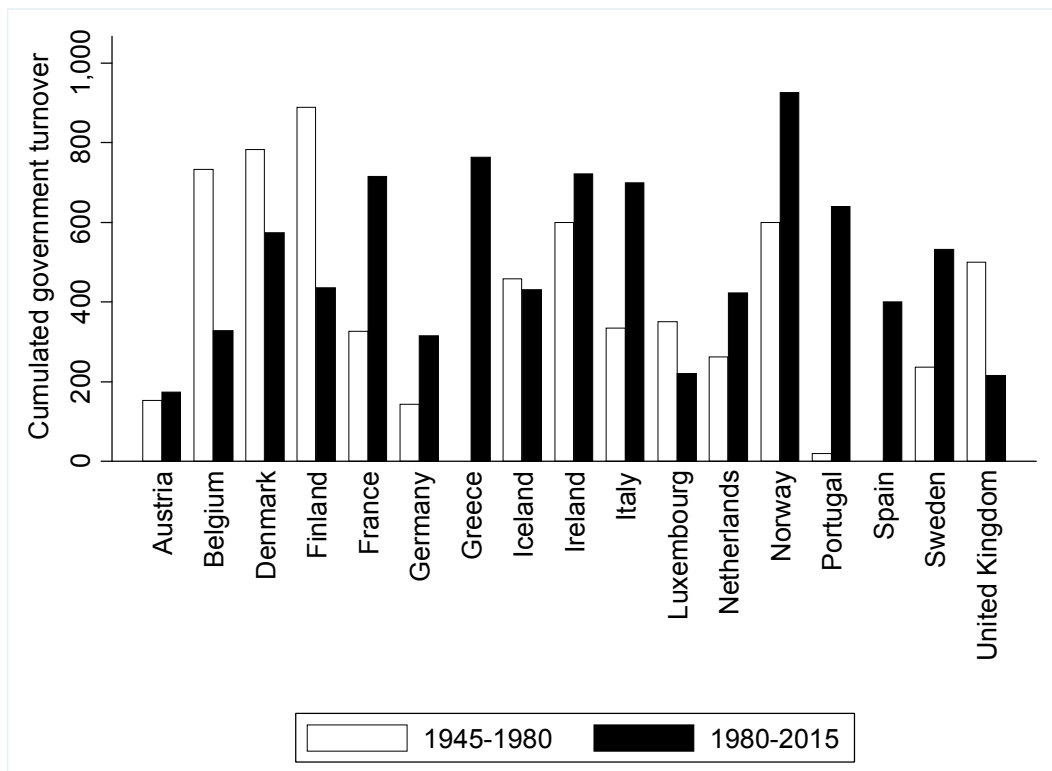
These patterns of government turnover neatly emerge by looking at Figure 3.11, which breaks down the cumulative level of rotation at the executive offices by type of government change. The figures shows clearly the overwhelming contribution of alternation to the cumulated government turnover. The share of turnover due to alternation is remarkably high – in most countries more than two thirds of the overall change. In other words, in spite of its rarity until at least the late 1980s, government alternation appears to be the main driver of government turnover in Western Europe. In five countries – Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands – the most important contribution to the cumulated level of change in government is carried by that type of change that I have defined as semi-rotation, while it is interesting to note that in no party system is the cumulated level of micro-substitution higher than the two other types of government change. Again, Italy is a fine illustration of this point: the pattern of alternation inaugurated in the last twenty years has produced as much government turnover as that experienced (mainly through micro-substitutions) in the half century after the end of the Second World War (1945-1993).

Fig. 3.11. Cumulated government turnover in Western Europe by type of government change, 1945-2015 (absolute values)



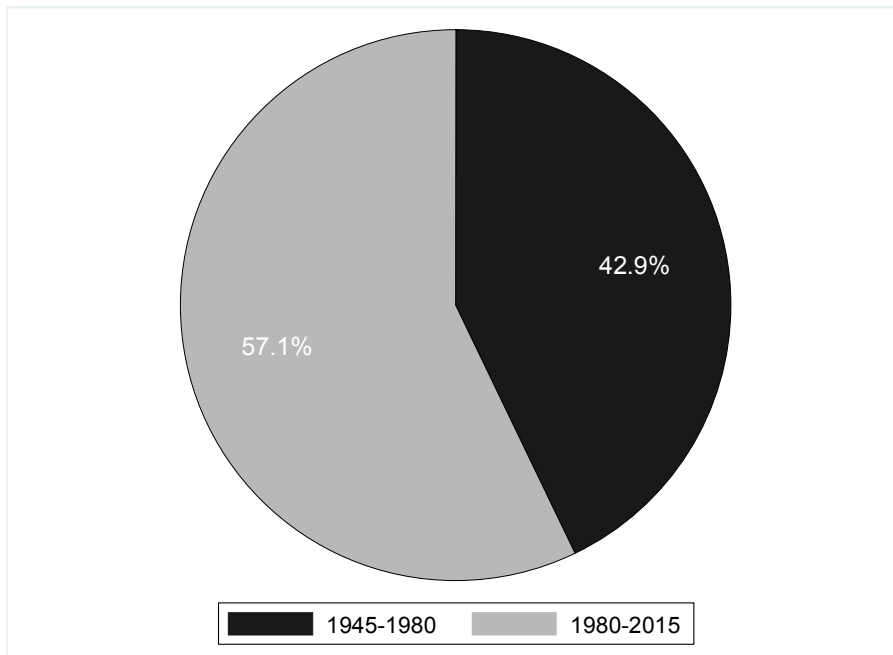
One more point on the development of the cumulated level of government turnover is worth a comment. Thus far, we have analysed the internal components of the cumulative index, with no temporal distinction. For proceeding in that direction, Figure 3.12 splits the cumulated government turnover for each country in two perfect temporal halves, from 1945 to 1980 and from 1980 to 2015. If we exclude the three countries that underwent the process of democratisation in the mid-1970s (i.e. Greece, Portugal, Spain), one can note that eight countries out of fourteen show a higher level of aggregate turnover after 1980 than in the previous thirty-five years. In many cases, this trend is linked to the increasing occurrence of alternation that I have underlined in previous chapters. More frequent alternations account for the growth in the cumulated government turnover. Incidentally, this development is particularly evident in countries that, after having experienced a predominant party system, have more recently joined the universe of bipolar, or limited, multi-party systems, characterised by a more open structure of inter-party competition. In a way, the weakening of the ‘predominant’ parties in Norway and Sweden had cleared the way for the occurrence of alternation in power.

Fig. 3.12. Cumulated government turnover before and after 1980 in Western Europe (absolute values)



That said, it must be also stressed that in six countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Luxembourg and the UK) the cumulated government turnover was higher before 1980 than in the last thirty-five years. This is a heterogeneous group of countries that includes both extreme and limited multi-party systems. There is the telling case of the UK that, according to some scholars, after the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime minister in 1979, has witnessed the emergence of an alternating predominant party system, that is, a sort of ‘two-partism in slow motion’ (Quinn 2013: 396; 2015) that makes alternation in government a sporadic event. Similarly, because of the duplication of its parties in the 1980s, the extreme party-system fragmentation in Belgium greatly reduced the possibility of (more) profound changes in government.

Fig. 3.13. Percentage of cumulated government turnover produced before and after 1980 in Western Europe

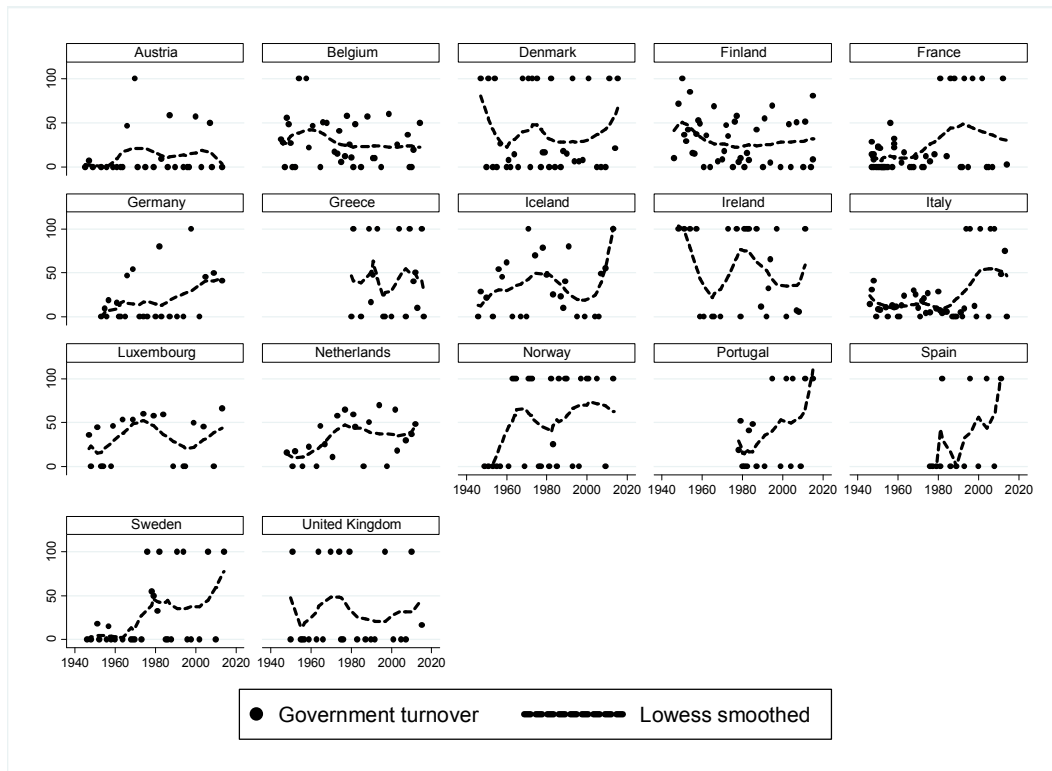


Furthermore, it is important to underline the impact that the three ‘third wave countries’ have had in terms of cumulated turnover. When Greece, Portugal and Spain became democracies in the mid-1970s, they quickly displayed an open structure of inter-party competition that in a short period of time produced a significant amount of turnover, in some cases higher or equal to that of other (older) democratic regimes. Hence, to some extent, the higher level of government turnover recorded in the last thirty-five years, as Figure 3.13 shows, is partially due to the entrance onto the scene of the three South European countries, which brought a wind of change in Western Europe, also in terms of rotation in power. More precisely, the cumulated government turnover recorded since 1980 makes up 57.1% of the overall amount of turnover, whereas the previous phase (from 1945 to 1980) accounts for ‘only’ 42.9%. As we investigate in more detail in section 3.5, the ‘extra’, or additional, government turnover observed in the last three decades is mostly a consequence of the growth in the occurrence of alternation.

3.4. Government turnover: national trends

Although alternations in government have increased over time in Western Europe, there exist specific national patterns that should be adequately recognised and highlighted. In many countries the mean level of government turnover has constantly increased since the end of the Second World War. The trend is upwards in all the cases analysed but five: Austria, Belgium, Greece, and Ireland. Here, the mean level of turnover in the partisan composition of the cabinet has decreased especially in the last twenty years. Other countries, instead, show a constant degree of government turnover over time: Finland and the United Kingdom have maintained a consistent pattern of turnover during the last sixty years. By contrast, the remaining cases clearly present an increasing level of government turnover from the 1950s up to now. In particular, Portugal, Spain, Norway and Italy have experienced the steadiest increase of government turnover since the last twenty or thirty years. All in all, in Western Europe one can observe an upward trend towards higher levels of government turnover. Even though few countries show the opposite tendency (less turnover), the overall picture signals an increasing occurrence of large government changes.

Fig. 3.14. National trends in government turnover in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)²



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. For more details, see note 2.

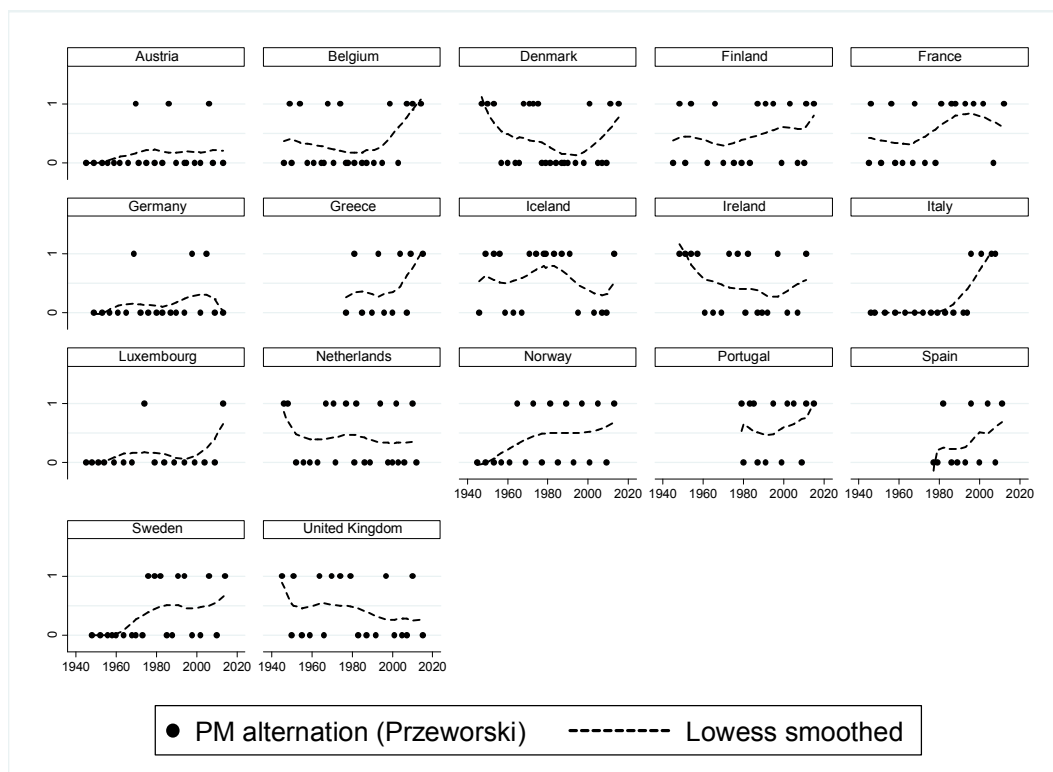
A slightly different picture emerges from the analysis of the alternation (*à la Przeworski*) for the party that controls the premiership (see Figure 3.15). In some cases, the trend highlighted in the analysis of government turnover is completely overturned. Take, for instance, the case of the Netherlands. If one considers only the mean level of government turnover, the Dutch trend is positive and shows a light increase towards a higher level of rotation in office. By contrast, taking into account the pattern of alternation for the party of the Prime minister, the tendency presented by the Netherlands is negative. Obviously, these results are not at odds. Indeed, in the last sixty years Dutch politics has experienced larger changes in the government composition but, at the same time, the premiership has been controlled, with only brief interruptions, by the Christian Democrats. A similar pattern, although in the opposite direction, can be observed in Belgium, where government turnover shows a negative trend while alternation – as measured by Przeworski and his colleagues – tends to go up, especially in recent decades.

By contrast, in other countries the two figures match each other perfectly. Italy is a good case in point. Both in figures 3.14 and 3.15, one observes an upward trend toward higher levels of government

² The lines displayed in figures 3.22 and 3.29 are generated using the nonparametric regression procedure LOWESS (for this purpose, see Cleveland 1994, Fox 2000). For each data point, this 'LOcally WEighted Scatterplot Smoother' calculates an estimated value that is based on the corresponding observed value, but also on the observed values of the neighbouring data points. In doing so, 'a weighting procedure is applied that assigns larger weights to closer data points, and lower weights to data points that are further away. By means of the so-called bandwidth researchers can determine how many neighbouring data points are to be used for these calculations' (Schmitt-Beck and Faas 2008: 34). As is standard, an interval that contained two-thirds of the data points is used (Stoll 2010: 469). All analyses presented in this chapter are based on a bandwidth of .7, meaning that for each data point the 70 per cent nearest neighbours were included in the calculation.

turnover *and* alternation for the party of the President of the Council. In fact, the bipolar competition, albeit fragmented, introduced in Italy after the sudden collapse of the ‘first party system’, has allowed the emergence of a pattern involving the complete substitution of the governing parties, including that of the Prime minister. A similar scenario has taken place in Spain and, to a lesser extent, Norway.

Fig. 3.15. National trends in government alternation in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. For more details, see note 2.

3.5. The absence of alternation

Thus far I have focused on the emergence or the occurrence of government alternation in Western Europe. I have purposely neglected the lack of alternation, which is a phenomenon that has played, and still plays, a crucial role in many theories of representative democracy or for the classification of party systems. For instance, Sartori deemed a prolonged period of time without alternation to be a good indicator for the existence of a predominant party system. In his own words, such a party system ‘can be thus defined as a kind of multi-party system in which alternation does not occur for long periods of time, even though a change in government is not ruled out’ (Sartori 1982, 70). Similarly, the classification of party systems suggested by Peter Mair (1997) is based – other factors aside – on the existence of a pattern of non-alternation (which seems to be a distinguishing mark of those party systems with an open structure of inter-party competition). More recently, both Pasquino (2011a) and Nwokora and Pelizzo (2014), in their attempt to adjust the Sartorian analytical framework, have focused on the lack of alternation as a sign, or a symptom, of party predominance. More precisely, according to Pasquino (2011a: 26) a predominant party system is characterised by the existence of a governing party that is able ‘to win four or no more than five elections,

or mandates, in a row.’ As already stated, also some democratic theorists, albeit very few indeed, have touched upon the effect that a phase of non-alternation may have on the stability of the democratic regime. Hans Kelsen, just to mention one of the most important theorists of the twentieth century, maintained that the absence of alternation in government could be pernicious in fostering the hostility between the perennial incumbent majority and the perpetual opposition.

At any event, the attention paid by all these scholars to the absence of alternation is, more or less explicitly, a tribute to the relevance of this phenomenon. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, non-alternation in power is a specific concept that sheds light on a specific, often neglected, aspect of politics. In order to analyse this phenomenon in more depth, Table 3.2 reports the number of both consecutive elections and years in which a government alternation has not taken place. As far as the electoral side of the story is concerned, it is evident that in some countries the pattern of non-alternation prevails over the pattern of alternation. More specifically, in the Netherlands, Finland and Luxembourg all elections (respectively, 21, 20 and 16) have confirmed, partially or completely, the incumbent parties. To a certain extent, if elections are – to quote Bingham Powell (2000) – an ‘instrument of democracy’, in these party systems elections become a blunt instrument. Here elections do not represent a threat for the incumbents but just an opinion poll in disguise that allows a more effective, or responsive, allocation of cabinet offices among the ruling parties. On the contrary, there are political contexts in which ‘the intentional inequality in outcomes that elections produce’ (Anderson et al. 2005: 7), that turns some voters and parties into winners and others into losers, fully accomplishes its function. In other words, there are party systems where election-day turns into a doomsday, by clearly separating the team of the winners from that of the losers. In such contexts, the occurrence of alternation, as well as its distribution over time, represents a crucial instrument of electoral accountability that rewards popular governments or discards those considered unpopular.

Tab. 3.2. Absence of alternation in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015

	Max No. of consecutive elections without alternation	Maximum No. years without alternation
Austria	14 (21)	43 (71)
Belgium	18 (22)	56 (70)
Denmark	4 (27)	14 (70)
Finland	20 (20)	68 (70)
France	5 (17)	23 (68)
Germany	13 (18)	49 (66)
Greece (1977-2015)	3 (16)	11 (38)
Iceland	13 (21)	42 (71)
Ireland	4 (20)	16 (71)
Italy	12 (18)	50 (70)
Luxembourg	16 (16)	70 (70)
Netherlands	21 (21)	70 (70)
Norway	5 (18)	18 (70)
Portugal (1976-2015)	7 (15)	19 (39)
Spain (1977-2015)	4 (11)	14 (41)
Sweden	9 (21)	31 (71)
United Kingdom	4 (19)	18 (70)

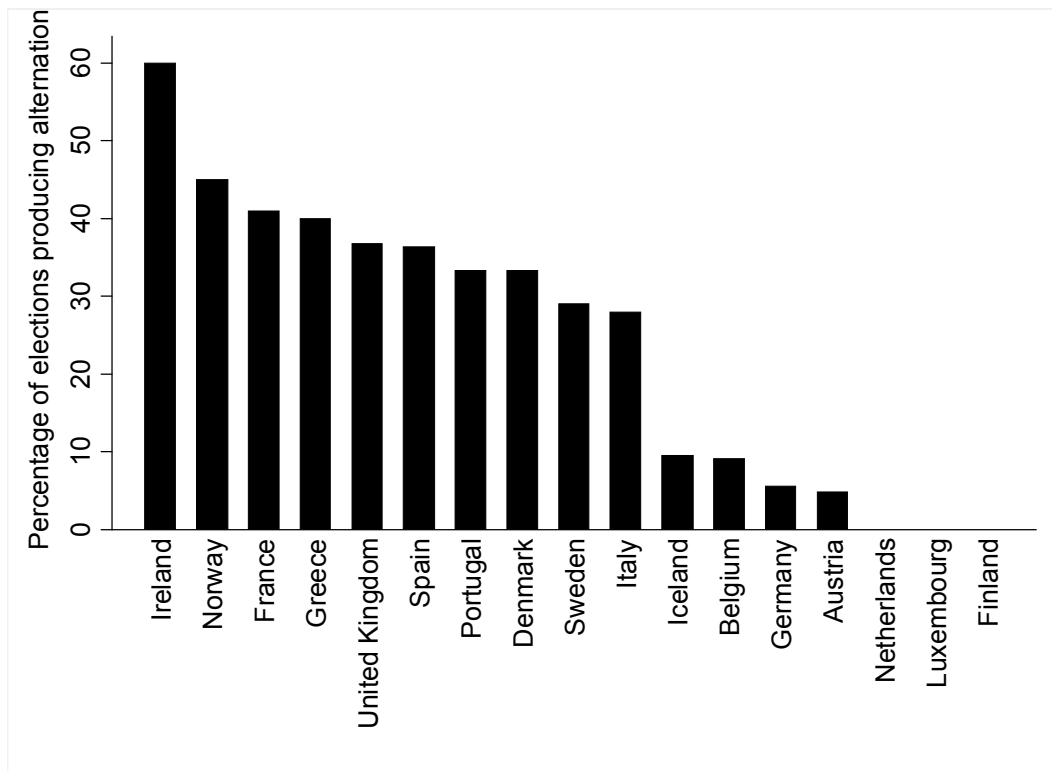
In the light of this, it is important to analyse how alternations are distributed, or dispersed, in a given time-span. As the figures reported in Table 3.2 show, Greece is the country with the lowest number of consecutive elections without alternation. To be more precise, Pasok governments were able to win three

elections in a row from 1993 until to 2004, when the Greek socialists finally handed over power to Kostas Karamanlis, leader of New Democracy (ND). In Denmark, Spain, Ireland and the UK four consecutive elections have confirmed in office the same ruling parties. Accordingly, all these countries do not meet the criteria set out by Pasquino and, albeit with more ambiguities, Sartori. Four consecutive elections or parliamentary mandates appears to be the upper limit for the definition of the predominant system, beyond which we run into different scenarios. On the one hand, there are cases that perfectly describe situations of party predominance. For instance, in both Norway and Sweden the Social-democratic parties were able to stay in power for a remarkable length of time, respectively 18 and 31 years (or, to put it another way, 5 and 9 elections). Without doubt, these party systems, at least until the 1980s, can be classified as predominant party systems. On the other hand, there are circumstances in which the ruling parties or some of them remained in power for longer periods but within the framework of the coalition government. That is the case of Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, namely, party systems in which, in different periods and with a variety of party combinations in their cabinets, more than ten consecutive elections have brought about no alternation in government. The Netherlands holds the record with 21 consecutive elections and 67 years of uninterrupted rule without alternation, while in second position we have Finland with 20 elections and 65 years with a total absence of alternation.

As I have specified in the previous chapter, non-alternation is not a mere synonym of non-turnover, in the sense that the latter are more comprehensive than the former. In other words, the cases characterised by lack of alternation may conceal different forms and degrees of turnover in office. And this is what has actually happened in all countries listed above in which coalition members come and go but some parties, usually those in a dominant or pivotal position, remain firmly in office.

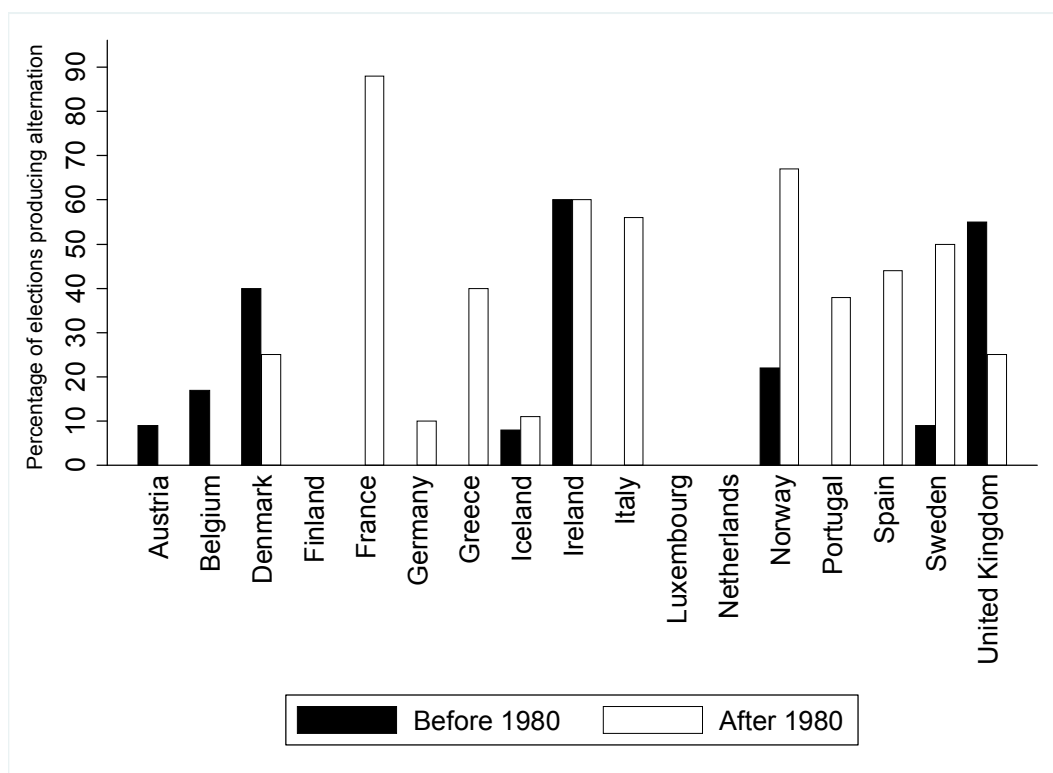
A different, though strictly related, perspective for analysing the absence of alternation in Western Europe is through the lens provided by the share (percentage) of elections that have produced a wholesale rotation in power. As shown in Figure 3.16, that share hits its peak in Ireland, where overall six elections in ten have brought about an alternation in government. In Norway nearly one-half of all elections have set the stage for the occurrence of a complete turnover, and in France, Greece, Spain and the UK four elections in ten have produced a total reshuffle in the cabinet party composition. Then, there is a group of countries (Portugal, Denmark and Sweden) in which one-third of all general elections have resulted in a government alternation. In Italy roughly three elections out of ten have brought about an alternation, whereas in Iceland, Belgium, Germany and Austria what can be defined as 'the risk' of being ousted from office at election-time is categorically low (less than 10% of cases). Finally, we have the three countries – Finland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands – where the voters have never produced a complete change in government.

Fig. 3.16. Percentage of elections that have produced alternation in government, 1945-2015



On the whole, the outcome of one quarter of all general elections (76 out of 321) held in Western Europe in the post-war period was the complete rejection of incumbent parties. However, this aggregate figure hides a great deal of variation across space and through time. In order to address this issue, Figure 3.17 reports the proportion of general elections resulting in alternation in two distinct periods of time, before and after 1980. As the figure shows, there is no clear pattern of change emerging from these data. In some countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, Norway and Sweden, elections have become a more 'risky' event for the ruling parties, in the sense that they run the risk of being ejected en bloc. It is worth noting that, to a degree, all these countries underwent a process of party-system change. France, with the passage from a polarised party system in the Fourth Republic to the so-called *quadrille bipolaire* distinguishing the moderate party system of the Fifth Republic, discovered the practice of alternation in the early 1980s. Italy, too, displays a similar trajectory, with the collapse of the polarised party system in the early 1990s and then the formation of a hybrid type of party system that, accommodating polarisation, fragmentation and bipolarisation in a common framework, cleared the way for the much-awaited alternation in government. As pointed out above, the weakening of the predominant parties in Norway and Sweden has slowly set the stage, since the 1980s, for a more open structure of inter-party competition and the possibility of a wholesale turnover in executive office. Lastly, though in a smoother way, also Germany experienced a transformation of its party system, with the emergence of a bipolar format of party competition in the mid-1990s and the occurrence of the one and only alternation in power.

Fig. 3.17. Percentage of elections that have produced alternation in government before and after 1980

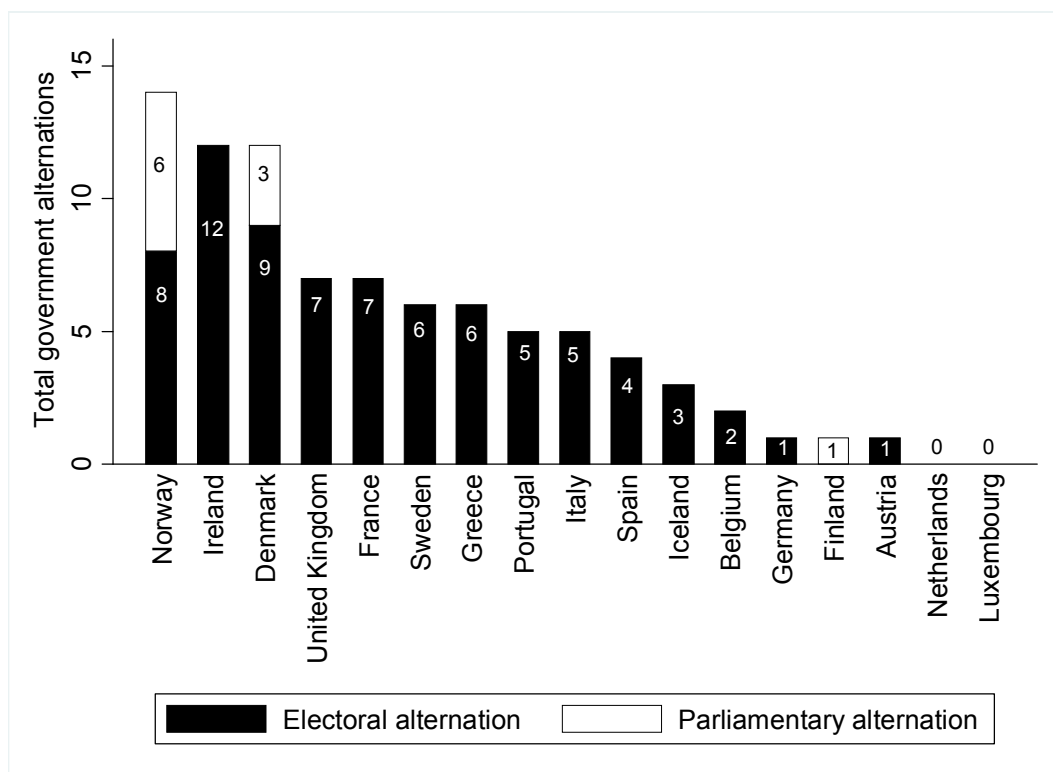


By contrast, other countries show a decline in the proportion of elections producing a complete reshuffle in the cabinet composition. In Austria, Belgium, Iceland and the UK the general elections were a more risky event for the incumbents as a whole before 1980 than afterwards. In this respect, the UK – the motherland of two-partisim – is an absolutely revealing case, showing a much lower share of election-cum-alternation after the 1970s than other party systems characterised by a higher level of party-system fragmentation. With some caveats, this holds true also in Spain – a peculiar case of a two-party system encircled by regional-based political parties. That is a point that we should bear in mind when we analyse (in the next chapter) the relationship between party-system fragmentation and the occurrence of alternation. Nowhere is it specified, or warranted, that two-party systems are more prone to (frequent) alternations in government. As I have said above, for Sartori alternation is the distinguishing mark of two-partism, which means that this specific type of rotation in power characterises the dynamics of a given party system. But this is not tantamount to saying that alternation in two-party systems would be by definition, if not by design, more frequent. Quite paradoxically, precisely the existence of only two relevant parties makes the occurrence of an alternation less likely because the ruling party has a fifty-fifty chance of being confirmed in power. As a consequence, alternation is, indeed, the distinguishing mark of two-partism but its distribution over time is, so to speak, in the hands of the voters rather than in those of the ‘system’.

In all parliamentary regimes, the making and breaking of governments takes place within the legislature. This means that also alternation in government can occur, in given circumstances, through the activities of the members of parliament (MPs). What we can define as ‘parliamentary alternation’, to emphasise the fact that this change of government has no direct link with the preferences of the electorate, appears to be absolutely infrequent in Western Europe. As shown in Figure 3.18, only in ten cases (that is, in 11.6% of all cases) is alternation exclusively a parliamentary phenomenon, decided and dictated by the MPs. Besides, it is interesting to note that the cases of parliamentary alternations have occurred only in three Nordic countries – Norway, Denmark and Finland (respectively, 6, 3 and 1) – where the formation of minority

governments is a common practice. In all other cases, which account for nearly 90% of all wholesale turnovers in office, alternation in government was the result of the preferences expressed by the voters *at election-time*.

Fig. 3.18. Electoral and parliamentary alternations in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (absolute values)



However, these figures, as well as those shown and analysed above, do not tell us whether alternation is a concrete possibility or how likely a complete government turnover is in a given party system. In Chapter 2 I have presented 'alternation' as a three-dimensional concept, with three faces each describing a specific aspect of this type of rotation in power. The next section will be devoted to the analysis of the possibility of alternation, its evolution through time and across space. Instead, in section 3.7 I will focus on the probability of alternation in government.

3.6. Possibility of alternation in Western Europe

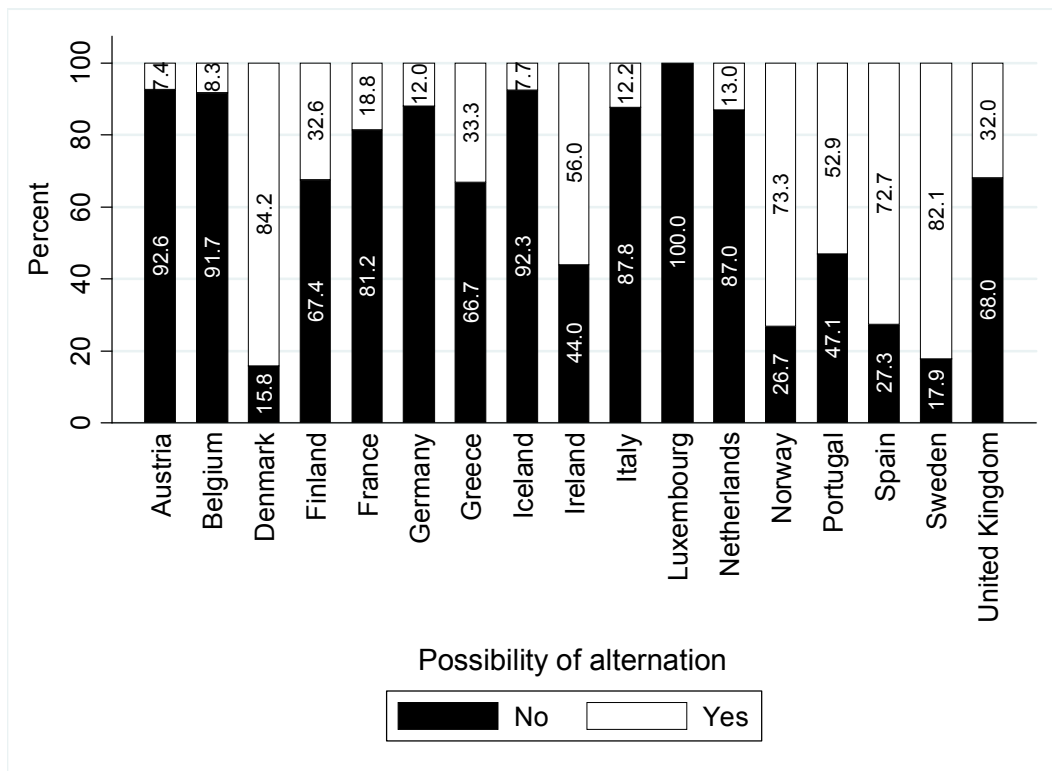
It is now time to consider the specific timing of government alternation across Europe. Since my analysis will be focused especially, but not exclusively, on this aspect, it would be useful to add some more details and elucidations. We know that the concept of 'alternation' can be analysed at three different levels but until now I have not taken into consideration its specific timing. As a matter of fact, we can analyse alternation both as a possibility and a probability. As far as the former is concerned, we know that, both theoretically (Sartori 1976) and empirically (Strøm *et al.* 2003), in some countries (Italy I, France IV, the Netherlands, Luxemburg) complete rotation in office is not, or has not been, a feasible option. Because of the high polarisation in the party system and the lack of any clear pattern of two-partism/bipolarism, government alternation in these countries is/was simply impossible or unthinkable.

As I have pointed out in Chapter 2, there is a significant difference between actual and potential alternation. It goes without saying that alternation can occur only when it is *possible*, but not all possibilities

are, or can be, actually exploited. For instance, there are cases in which governing parties decide to coalesce in order to exclude other parties from the cabinet. Or, in other circumstances, there are historic moments that require a consensual behaviour of the political elites rather than an adversarial confrontation between rival parties. The case of Germany is a classic example of such a situation. Both in 2005 and 2013 in Germany there was the possibility of a complete turnover in the partisan composition of the cabinet. Nonetheless, the ideological distance between left-wing parties (namely, SPD, Grüne and Linke) turns the arithmetical possibility of alternation into a *political* impossibility.

That said, since we aim at investigating the possibility of alternation as a specific characteristic of party systems, it is useful to begin with a description of this possibility among the seventeen countries included in this research. To begin with, as Figure 3.19 shows, there is only one country in which government alternation has never been a concrete possibility – Luxembourg. Until now, the (arithmetical) possibility of a wholesale governmental turnover has not been a viable option in the Luxembourgish party system throughout the post-war period. Besides, if we also include in the analysis the cases of the Fourth French Republic and the Italian party system until 1993, the figures reveal that in both systems alternation was not a viable or possible option. All in all, the data on the possibility of alternation in the seventeen West European countries indicate the existence of a set of polities in which the complete ejection of the incumbent parties is a remote opportunity. More precisely, in Austria, Belgium, Iceland, Germany and the Netherlands the likelihood of the incumbent being ejected en bloc is extremely low; in nearly 90% of all cases of government change alternation is not, from a purely arithmetical standpoint, a real possibility. At the other extreme, there are four countries where the possibility of alternation looms large. In particular, these are countries – Denmark, Norway, Spain and Sweden – where, to a different degree, the sheer existence of minority cabinets makes the life of the ruling parties (as a single actor) absolutely uncertain. In numbers, about eight changes in government out of ten occurred under the shadow of a potential alternation in power. In other political systems, these figures are more nuanced and the chance of a wholesale turnover in office is smaller. Interestingly enough, Greece and the United Kingdom – two prototypes of two-partism, at least up until very recently – show a low value in the possibility of alternation, respectively 33.3 and 32%. This means that in only one third of all government changes was the prospect of a government alternation real. Which brings us back to what I have specified in the previous section, with reference to the relationship between two-party systems and alternation. Despite the low level of party-system fragmentation that characterises these situations, alternation in the context of two-partism does not have an easy existence. Unexpectedly, two-party systems make at the same time alternation in power possible *and* difficult to realise.

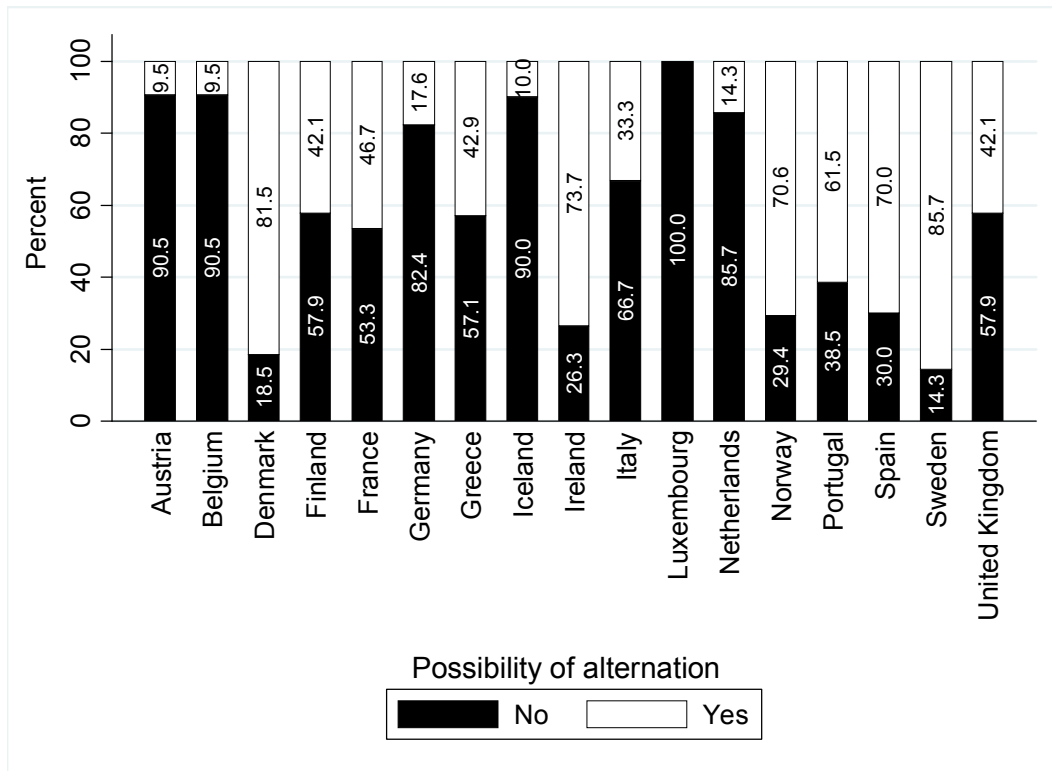
Fig. 3.19. Possibility of alternation in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



In the light of the above, it is not just a case that some scholars have tried to include the UK among the ‘predominant’ type of party system. More precisely, looking at the rhythm of alternation in the British party system, Peter Mair (2008: 215) concludes that ‘what had been a classic two-party system drifted toward what might better be seen as alternating predominant party system, with the Conservatives holding power through three further elections, usually massive majorities, and with Labour winning its own overwhelming majority in 1997, and repeating this victory in 2001 and 2005.’ In sum, according to Mair, the concept of ‘alternating predominance’ seems to offer a better description of situations where the predominance of one party (or coalition) is followed by the predominance of one of its rivals.

At this point, it is worth observing that the general trend outlined above remains stable also if one uses elections as a unit of analysis. As shown in Figure 3.20, in Austria, Belgium, Iceland and the Netherlands in nearly nine elections out of ten alternation is not possible, whereas the prospect of a complete ejection of the incumbent parties reaches its peak in Sweden (85.7%), Denmark (81.5%), Ireland (73.7%), Norway (70.6%) and Spain (70.0%). In the former group of countries elections actually work as an instrument of democracy, by permitting, or seriously threatening, the rejection of the rulers. Instead, in the latter group elections do not represent a credible threat for the incumbent, but they turn out to be a sensitive instrument that allows a better reallocation of cabinet offices among the ruling parties.

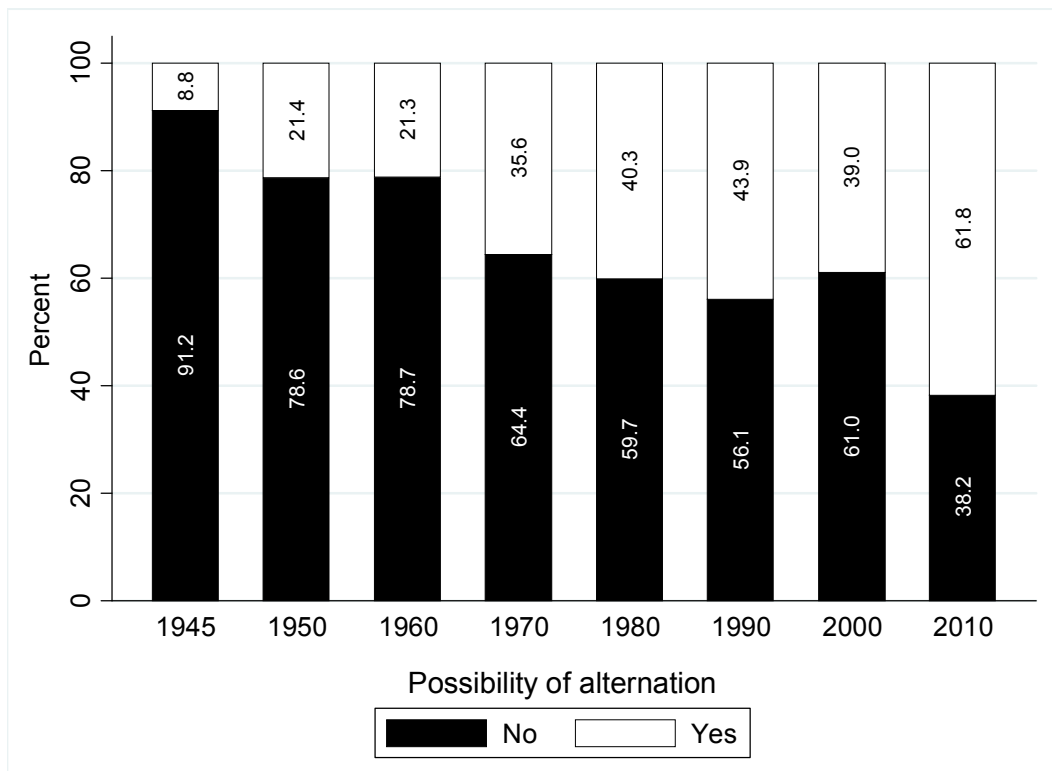
Fig. 3.20. Possibility of alternation at election-time in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



Up to now, I have focused on the “statics” of the possibility of alternation, disregarding its dynamic element or, better, its trend over time. In order to effectively address this issue, Figure 3.21 reports the percentage of circumstances in which alternation in government was a concrete mathematical possibility in the legislature. One aspect stands out clearly from the data. Cases of possible alternation have steadily increased over time throughout the post-war period. More specifically, until the 1960s on average only two government changes out of ten foreshadowed a possibility of alternation, while since the 1980s possible alternations account for about 40% of the cases. In practice, alternation is *more possible* nowadays than in the past, and that is especially true for the last five-year period included in the dataset. In fact, from 2010 to 2015 more than 60% of all government changes took place under the perspective of a possible alternation.

To a certain extent, these figures reveal that parliamentary democracies in Western Europe have progressively become a dangerous and hostile environment for the rulers. Their chance of being confirmed in office with the same combination of parties is much lower now than forty or fifty years ago. On the one hand, the effect of the economic downturns and, on the other, the weakening of the party structures as effective ways of controlling or channelling the preferences of the voters and, by turn, the volatility of the electorate have made more uncertain the fate of the rulers. Governing in hard times implies the constant risk of being rejected by the supreme *principal* – the voter. However, being essentially risk-avoiding actors, political parties have tried to adapt their organisations and strategies to this hostile environment, especially by engaging in the formation of blame-avoidance arrangements (e.g. Grand coalitions, technocratic cabinets etc.) or by adopting some sort of collusion strategy. Put differently, the higher the risk of alternation, the stronger the effort required for the rulers to avoid it.

Fig. 3.21. Possibility of alternation in Western Europe by decade, 1945-2015 (percentage values)

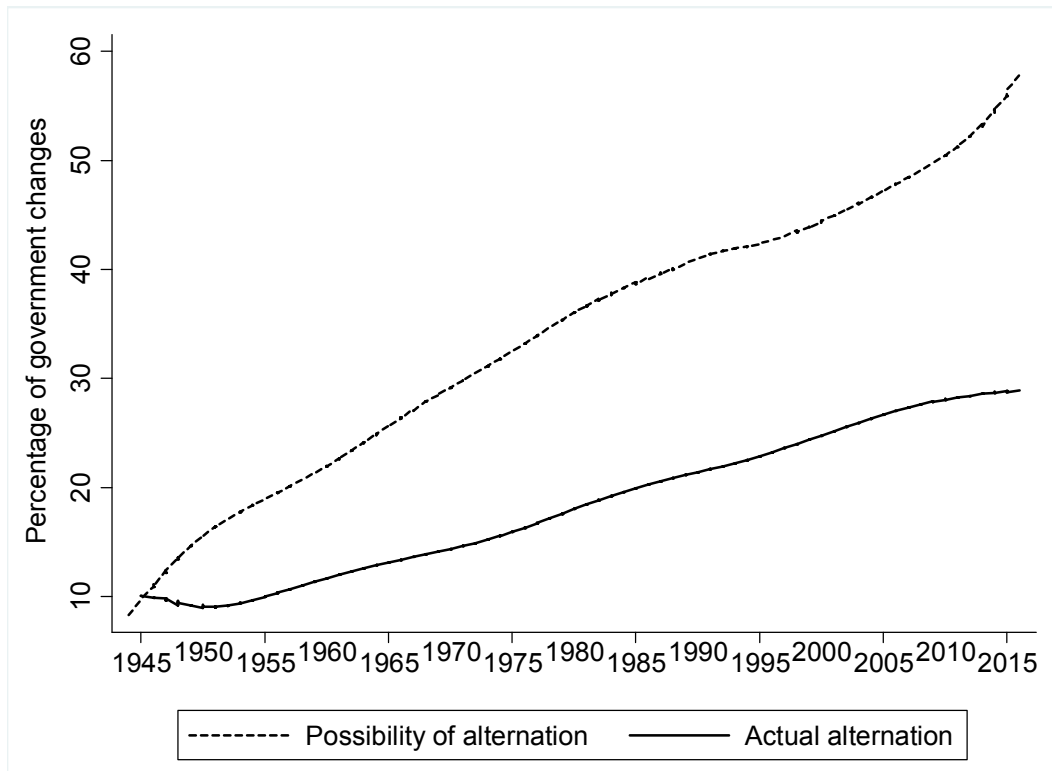


Note: the values indicate the percentage frequency of each type of change in government aggregated by decade. The first (1945-1950) and the last (2010-2015) time-periods report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the frequency of observations for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for '1950', the range goes from 1950 to 1959).

To make the overall trend clearer, consider the figures reported in Figure 3.22 that presents lowest smoothed data for both possible and actual alternations throughout the post-war period. It is evident that the trend is positive for both types of alternation but possible alternation appears to grow faster than actual alternation. In other words, in Western Europe in the last seventy years we observe a gap between the possibility and the actuality of alternation, as a consequence of the fact that the former is growing at a much faster rate than the latter. More possibilities of alternations lead to more alternations in office but the gap between them means that either the ruling parties have found a strategy to reduce that risk or other structural or behavioural factors impede the complete rejection of the incumbents.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the gap in frequency between actual and potential alternation has increased especially in the last years, with the advent of the economic crisis that has erupted in Europe since 2008. As a matter of fact, during the last decade many West European governments have tried to protect their position in power and their offices by enlarging their parliamentary base or resorting to technocratic arrangements. In either scenario, the risk of being voted out of office has been often neutralised by the formation of surplus governments, which make a wholesale turnover in power unfeasible and impracticable.

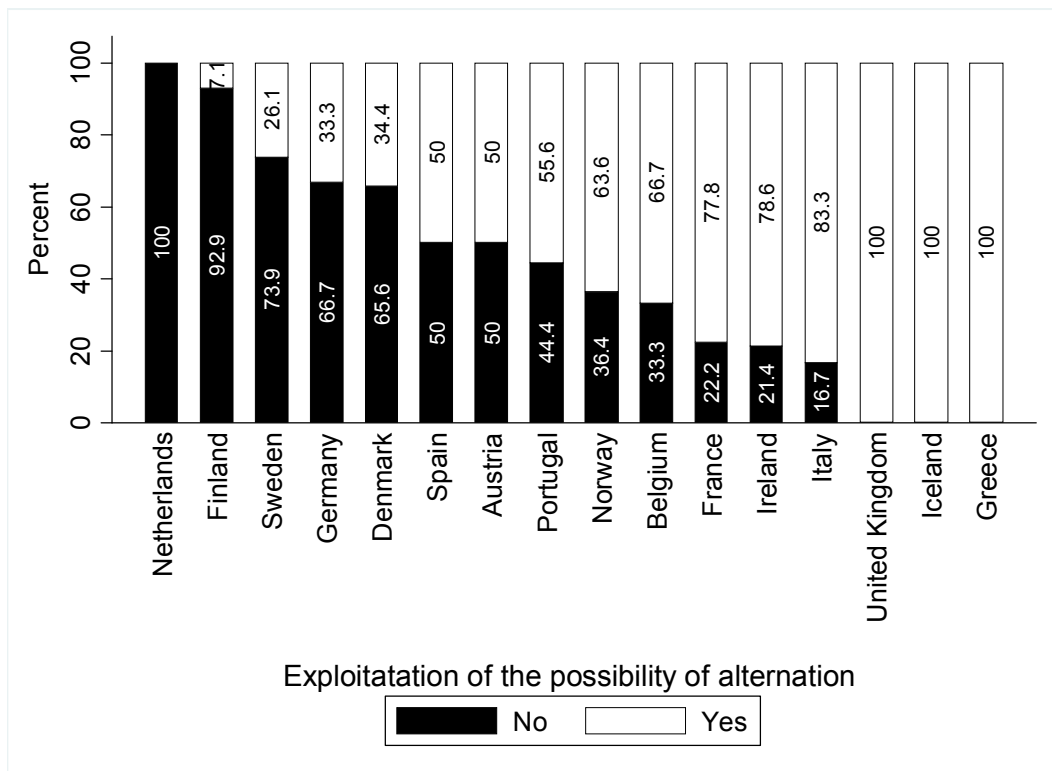
Fig. 3.22. Trends in the possibility and actuality of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. For more details, see note 2. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

This line of argumentation is strictly related to the concept of ‘exploitation’ of the possibility of alternation that I have presented in Chapter 2. To be more precise, not all possibilities are or can be, for a variety of reasons, actually exploited. Certain party systems may be more or less *exploitative* than others. As Figure 3.23 shows, the countries where all potential alternations have been transformed into actual alternations are Greece, Iceland and the United Kingdom. From this perspective, these three countries are the most exploitative in terms of the possibility of alternation since there is no possible alternation that has remained unexploited. Apart from the Icelandic case, Greece and the UK are two-party systems that, on the basis of these figures, seem to be highly exploitative of the opportunity to eject the rulers. A similar trend emerges from the analysis of France, Ireland and Italy, which have made use of about 80% of all possible alternations in power. At the other extreme, one can find the Netherlands and Finland where virtually all the circumstances in which a wholesale reshuffle in the partisan composition of the cabinet was a viable option have not been used. Finally, in the middle of the distribution there are countries, especially Spain, Austria, Denmark and Portugal, where about half of all potential alternations have resulted in a concrete and complete turnover in government.

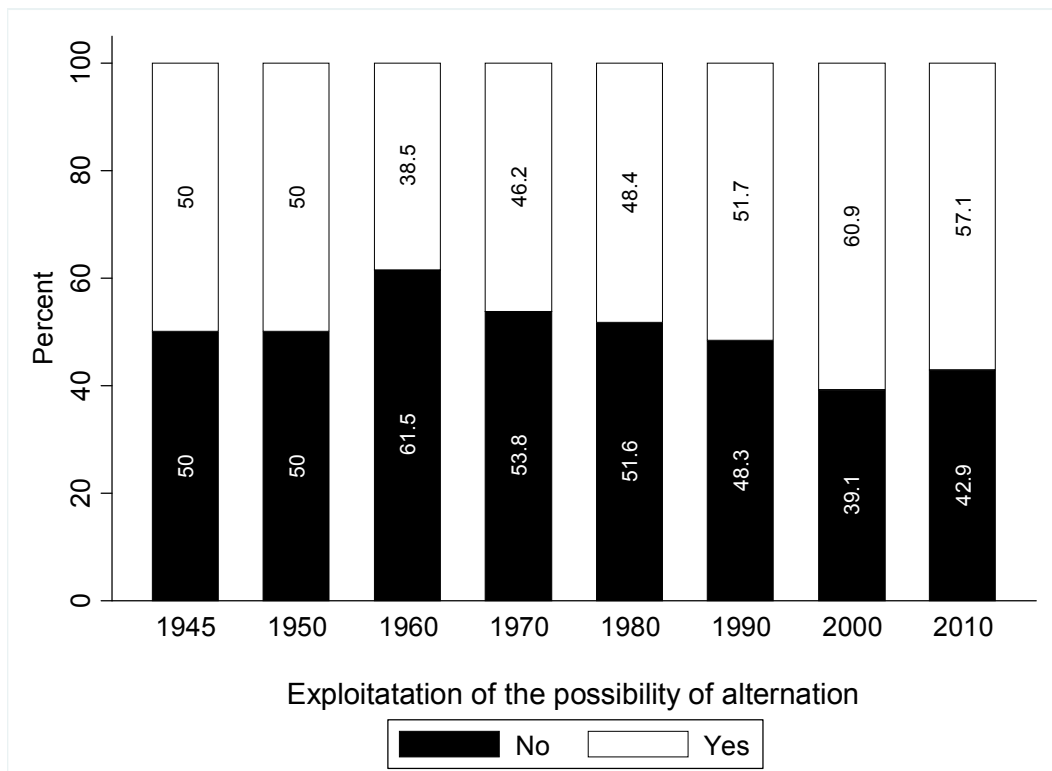
Fig. 3.23. Percentage of 'exploited' potential alternations in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015



Moreover, it must be also observed that the capacity of making use of the possibility of alternations by West European party systems has increased over time, in particular after the 1970s. Figure 3.24 reports the percentage of potential alternations that have been actually used among the countries under examination. In the 1960s only one third of the possibilities of a wholesale turnover has resulted in a complete ejection of all governing parties. By contrast, since the 1980s on average more than one possibility of alternation out of two has been actualized, hitting a record high in the 2000s, when 60.9% of potential alternations have become real wholesale turnovers in office.

All in all, it is important to underline that in the last twenty-five years the possibilities of alternations actually exploited outnumber those that remain unused. Hence, also in this perspective it is possible to argue that a twofold trend is under way. On the one hand, as noted above West European governments are increasingly under siege because their perspective of being re-elected is not as rosy as it was in the past. In brief, today voters are eager to punish the rulers, no matter who they are or what they do. On the other hand, party systems – as we shall see in the next chapter – are progressively assuming a bipolar configuration, which means that there exists always a sort of alternative-government-in-waiting ready to remove en bloc the incumbent cabinet. This constellation of factors has paved the way for the rise of both potential and actual alternations in Western Europe, despite the effort taken by the parties to avoid or resist it.

Fig. 3.24. Percentage of 'exploited' potential alternations in Western Europe by decade, 1945-2015



Note: the values indicate the percentage frequency of each type of change in government aggregated by decade. The first (1945-1950) and the last (2010-2015) time-periods report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the frequency of observations for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for '1950', the range goes from 1950 to 1959).

Before concluding this section, let me remind that the possibility of alternation, in the context of this dissertation, is conceptualised and measured through a policy-blind, purely arithmetically-driven approach. In short, alternation is a possible outcome whenever the incumbent parties have lost the control of their legislative majority. In the light of this, this measure does not consider the ideological proximity between parties, nor does it take into account the experience of past cooperation between governing parties or would-be rulers. Despite these restrictions or limitations, the data collected and discussed so far indicate that nowadays the opposition parties have more possibility to overthrow all incumbent parties than they did twenty or thirty years ago. As Figure 3.25 makes clear, the prospect for a wholesale turnover in office was extremely low in Western Europe until the late 1970s. No country experienced a high level of possible alternations, while in only four countries – Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the UK – did the possibility for all rulers to be ousted from office reach a medium level. On the contrary, in all other party systems the possibility of alternation was low, not to say nil. From this viewpoint, the democratic opportunity to 'throw the rascals out' was a privilege for some North European countries. In the Southern and central region of Western Europe the rulers rested peacefully in the knowledge that the electoral sword of Damocles hanging over their heads was broken or not perfectly effective.

Fig. 3.25. Possibility of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-1980



The landscape has changed completely in the last three decades. By 1980, three countries out of the classic Nordic quintet (Denmark, Sweden and Norway) show a high frequency of cases of possible alternations that – as we know – are in large part due to the formation of minority cabinets, namely, governments that relax or elude the majority principle. The mere existence of these cabinets make their day-to-day activities a precarious experience. Here the shadow of the future always has a threatening face. However, the possibility of alternation has ultimately landed along the coasts of Southern Europe, especially in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. Instead, that possibility (of seeing the rulers being voted out as a common actor) remains low at the core of Western Europe, that is, in those countries featuring a more consensual pattern of cooperation among the political elite. Lastly, the trajectory experienced by the United Kingdom cannot be ignored, from a medium to a low frequency of possible alternations. In such a case, the emergence of long government cycles, inaugurated by Margaret Thatcher and acquired by Tony Blair, has progressively removed the risk of an alternation in power, which remains possible to achieve but difficult to attain.

Fig. 3.26. Possibility of alternation in Western Europe, 1980-2015



The possibility of alternation has been the obscure object of desire for many scholars, especially those that have focused their activities on the elaboration of a theory of representative democracy. Because of its slippery nature, nobody has concretely tried to measure and analyse it over a long span of time. In this section I have tried to fill this gap by studying the transformation that occurred in Western Europe in terms of the possibility of alternation and the capacity of different party systems for making use of these opportunities. On this matter, the conclusion is clear – the room for alternation in power is much wider today than in the past. The extent to which this potentiality is concretely realised will be the argument at the centre of the next section.

3.7. The probability of alternation

Once we have verified whether alternation is possible or not, the last stop in the journey within the concept of alternation in Western Europe is the analysis of its likelihood over time and across countries. Which is to say that we are leaving the coast of the possibility of alternation and entering the territory of probability. As I have pointed out in Chapter 2, the likelihood of alternation can be expressed or calculated in different forms and formulae. For the sake of clarity and simplicity, here I will rely on one single indicator ('probability of alternation') that is, the frequency of alternations as percentage of all governmental changes that occur in a given country in a specific span of time. Put another way, this index expresses the likelihood

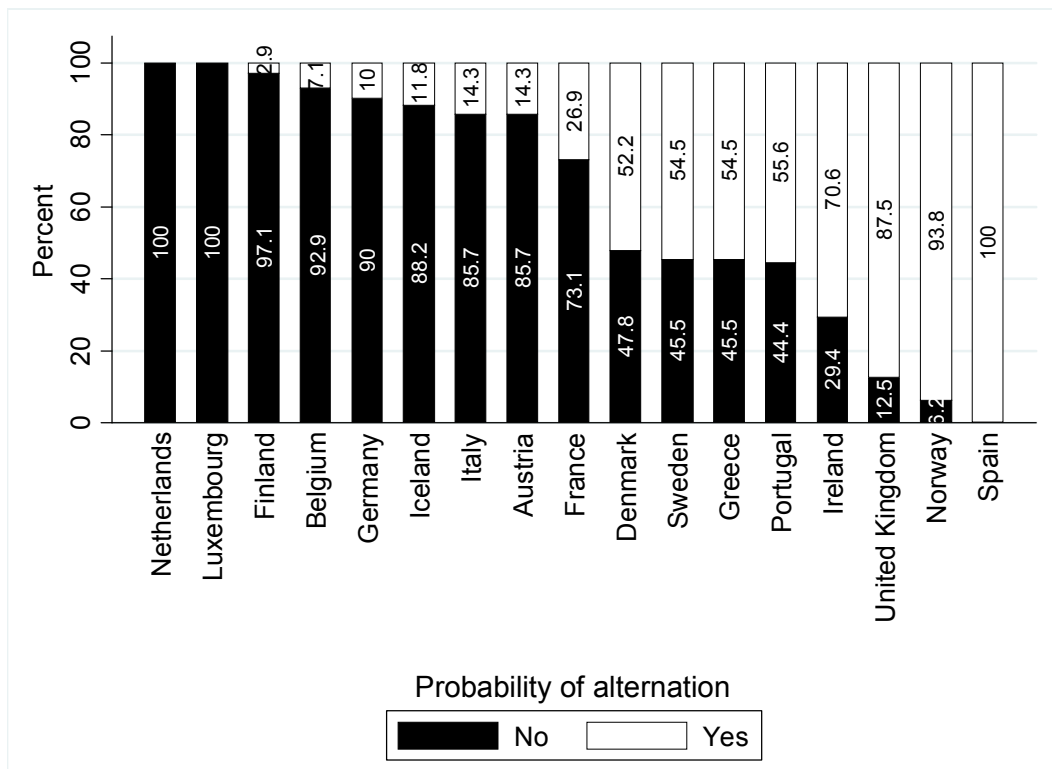
that a government change involves *all* incumbent parties. That is, the probability of an alternation vis-à-vis other forms of (partial) turnover.

Bearing these methodological specifications in mind, it is important to observe how likely an alternation is across the seventeen West European countries under examination. Figure 3.27 reports the probability of alternation expressed in percentage values. For one thing, it is evident that a wholesale reshuffle in the partisan composition is absolutely unlikely in Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Having yet to experience an alternation, the chance of observing it in the foreseeable future is very low. A similar argument can be applied to Finland, Belgium, Germany, Austria and Iceland, where the probability of alternation goes from 10 to 15%. Italy deserves an *ad hoc* treatment because alternation was unlikely until the early 1990s and then became almost a certainty in the subsequent phase. The same holds true in France, where the probability of alternation makes its entry in the party system only with the breakdown of the Fourth Republic.

On the other hand, one finds countries that reveal a high propensity to eject their rulers through an alternation in government. More precisely, a wholesale turnover is likely in nearly 90% of the cases in the United Kingdom, Norway and Spain. Which is to say that whenever a change in government takes place, it occurs by wiping out all incumbent parties. As said, this measure of the probability of alternation is insensitive to its relative frequency over time. The UK is a good case in point. Especially since the 1980s, the likelihood of a government change has decreased over time, but the probability that it occurs through an alternation has remained rather stable. That is, less changes but through the same format.

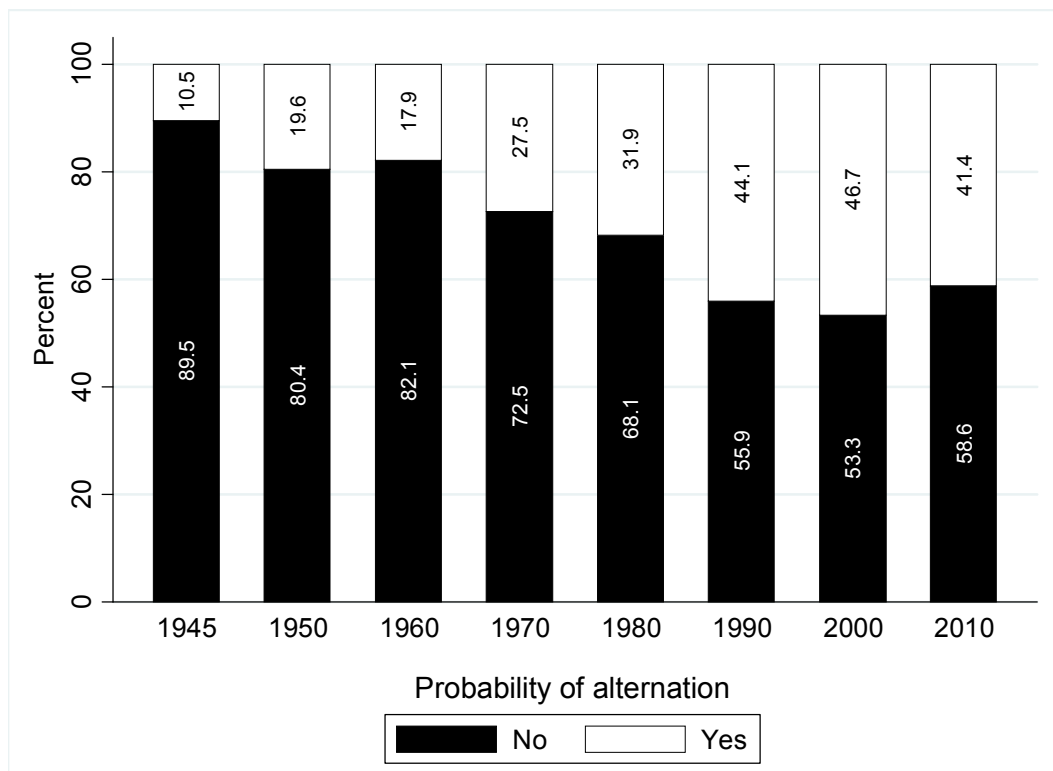
Finally, there is a set of countries, in particular Denmark, Sweden, Greece, Portugal and Ireland, showing a medium-to-high propensity toward alternation in government. Here, a wholesale turnover is likely to happen about 50% of the time, which means that one government change out of two takes the shape of alternation.

Fig. 3.27. Probability of alternation in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



Having said that, it is worth analysing the evolution of the probability of alternation through time. Figure 3.28 breaks down the likelihood of alternation by decade in the last seventy years. First of all, it is evident that the chance of alternation has steadily increased over time. Alternation was likely in two changes in government out of ten until the 1970s, and since then its probability has grown to 40% of cases. The 2000s hits the record high in terms of probability of alternation, in that in almost 50% of the cases the likelihood of a complete partisan reshuffle was concrete. Secondly, in spite of this overall trend, it is important to notice that by 2010 the probability of alternation shows the sign of a slight decline, from 46.7 to 41.4%. This five percentage-point difference within a five-year period appears to be the indirect product of the blame-avoidance strategies adopted by those parties that decided to bear the burden of governing in dire straits. To some extent, the strategies adopted by the governing parties have paid off, making the risk of being rejected from office less acute and certain. However, this counter-trend may change in the near future provided that the economic recession comes to a definite end.

Fig. 3.28. Probability of alternation in Western Europe by decade, 1945-2015 (percentage values)

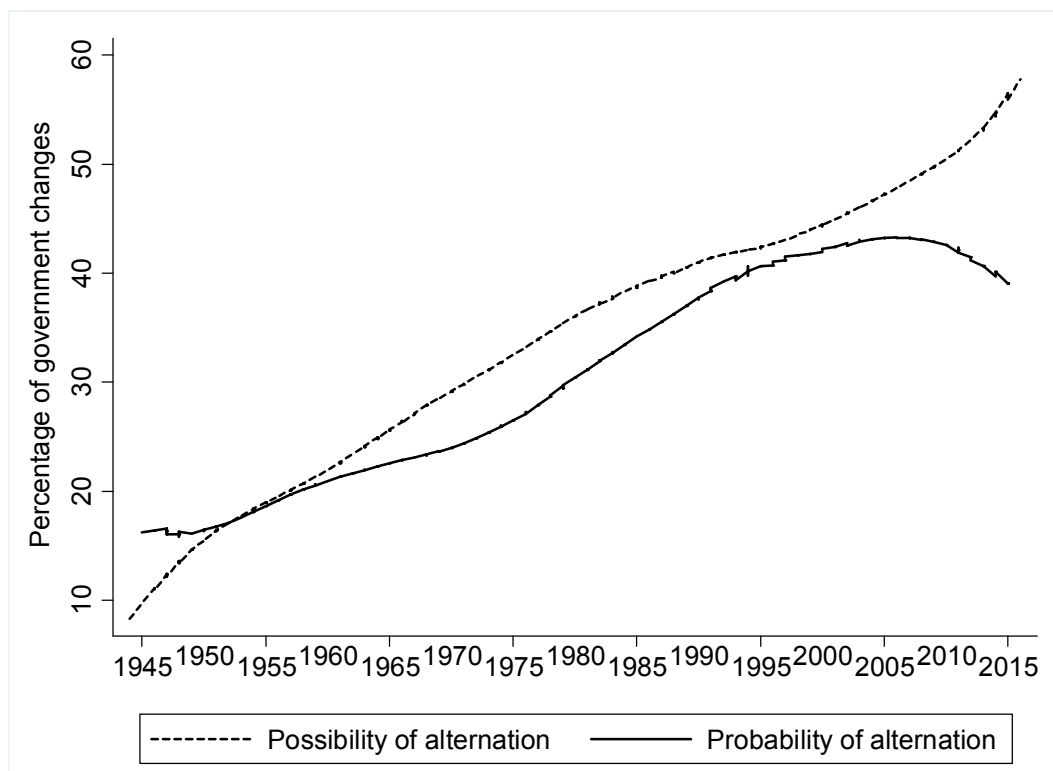


Note: the values indicate the percentage frequency of each type of change in government aggregated by decade. The first (1945-1950) and the last (2010-2015) time-periods report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the frequency of observations for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for '1950', the range goes from 1950 to 1959).

The recent trend in the probability of alternation can be further observed by plotting it against the trajectory of the possibility of alternation over time. As shown in Figure 3.29, both trends follow each other closely until the 2000s, but then the lines indicate a large bifurcation for the last period in the dataset. The distance, or difference, between possible and likely alternations hits its peak from 2010 to 2015, precisely when the political effects of the economic crisis turn out to be more acute and severe. In a way, that is a further confirmation of the success of the strategic behaviour of parties in the protection of their position once they get the executive power. We do not know whether these trends will continue in the next years,

with a larger amount of possibility of alternation remaining unexploited. Yet the methodological aspect that is worth stressing is that different concepts, or dimensions, of alternation in government can be singled out and emphasised only by drawing precise boundaries between them. Too often in the past these specific dimensions of alternation have been lumped together in a comprehensive, unbounded category, running the risk of being imprecise in theorisation, inaccurate in description and ineffective in explanation.

Fig. 3.29. Trends in the possibility and probability of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed line)³



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. For more details, see note 2. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

The bottom line in the analysis carried along this section is that, on the one hand, alternation in government has progressively become more likely in the post-war period. As the map in Figure 3.30 shows, until 1980 in the vast majority of West European countries the probability of alternation is low or nil. Only four party systems reported a medium-to-high likelihood of complete government turnover – Ireland, Norway, Denmark and the United Kingdom. In all other countries alternation was a political chimera – possible on paper but unattainable in practice. What is more, the probability of a wholesale partisan reshuffle within the cabinet was limited to a club of Northern countries, while in the Southern and Central areas the prospect for an alternation was virtually nil.

³ See note 2 for more details on Lowess smoothed data.

Fig. 3.30. Probability of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-1980



Only after 1980 did the probability of alternation begin to ‘colour’ the European landscape. In fact, as shown in Figure 3.31, in only five countries does that likelihood fail to pass the lowest threshold, set at 35%. More precisely, the probability of seeing the rulers ejected from office as a single body is unquestionably low in Austria, Belgium, Finland, and the Netherlands, where other types of government change, either micro-substitutions or semi-rotations, are more likely to take place. In the rest of Europe there is a fair chance that governments replace one another through clear-cut alternations in power. This description fits perfectly for the cases of Spain, France, Norway and Sweden, in which the likelihood of complete government turnover is highest, but it can also be extended to those party systems featuring a medium probability of the occurrence of alternation (Italy, Portugal, Greece, Ireland, Denmark and the UK). In any case, the lesson we can draw from the above maps is straightforward: for the power-holders the risk of being voted out from office has increased remarkably over time, especially since the 1980s. Nonetheless, there still exist party systems in which the prospect of government alternation remains a *rara avis* – whether a nightmare scenario to be avoided or, in other cases, a dream yet to be fulfilled.

Fig. 3.31. Probability of alternation in Western Europe, 1980-2015



3.8. Conclusion

At the end of this long exploration of the subtleties of government alternation, we can draw three major conclusions. First, conceptualisation matters. Different concepts point to different ‘slices’ of the world and determine the way we analyse and understand it. From this standpoint, the concept of government alternation or, *lato sensu*, turnover are good cases in point. As I have argued throughout this chapter, alternation is made of distinct dimensions that must be analysed separately. In doing so, we can realise that each dimension has its own story and trajectory that cannot be confused with, or diluted into, that of other, more or less similar, concepts. Although strictly interwoven, the complex relationship between actual, possible and likely alternations reveals that each of these ‘slices’ of the overall concept casts a significant light on a relevant phenomenon, with its own trends and peculiarities.

Second, however conceptualised or operationalised, alternation in Western Europe is considerably on the rise. Without doubt, there are still niches where alternation has not yet made its breakthrough but, these exceptions aside, the overall trend is rather clear and striking. The room for alternation has progressively increased over time, especially during the last three decades, and more parties have (re)arranged themselves or their strategies in order to grasp these rising opportunities. The general trends in both possible and actual alternations definitely point in that direction. At the same time, the main pattern

of government change across West European countries has gradually altered over time. Until the 1970s, micro-substitutions in the cabinet composition accounted for nearly half of all changes in government. Instead, in the subsequent period the most frequent type of government change is alternation, which implies an all-or-nothing logic in the formation of the new, incoming cabinet. This trend, which is robust and consistent over time, has come to a halt in the last five years included in the dataset (2010-2015), perhaps as a result of the strategies adopted by the governing parties to cope with the consequences of the Great Recession. On this specific aspect, the evidence gathered in this chapter is inconclusive. In other words, there is not a solid ground that allows us to establish whether the pause in the rise of alternation is temporary or not. To some extent, the future of alternation goes hand in hand with the future of the economic crisis in Europe (and beyond).

Third, the differences in the way governments rotate in office are not strictly linked with the types of party system. Put another way, the rise in the frequency of alternation has involved political systems featuring both two-party and multi-party systems. In some (extreme) cases, for instance in Italy or Greece, alternation can also be found in circumstances characterised by a high level of ideological polarisation, albeit more *verbal* than real (at least, in Italy). Which is to say that, in particular circumstances, alternation and polarisation must not be seen as strange bedfellows. At any event, the point to stress is that there is no one-to-one relationship between type of party system and type of change in government. Different government changes can be widespread among all party systems, with only minor exceptions. From this perspective, the distinction – perhaps too neat or not fully specified – between alternational and pivotal party systems (Strøm 2003: 76) conceals more variation than that it actually reveals. And even though the difference between these two party systems is based more on the potentiality of alternation rather than on its actual occurrence, this is an aspect that deserves further investigation. And, like the giant with feet of clay, a classification of party systems that rests upon shaky conceptual grounds is bound to crumble.

Chapter 4

Number of parties and party-system fragmentation

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will be devoted to the search for an explanation of the occurrence of different kinds of government turnover in West European party systems. In particular, it will analyse the relationship between the number of parties and the extent to which a cabinet is democratically replaced by a different group of rulers. In doing so, I should treat them, i.e. the *explanandum* and the *explanans*, separately. This is tantamount to saying that I cannot conflate the dependent variable with one of the presumed independent variables. Albeit unusual, this strange conflation can be found in the literature, especially in the works of those scholars who operationalise, for instance, the ‘probability of alternation’ in terms of the number of political parties that exist in a party system (see, for instance, Kaiser 2002; Pellegata 2016). Such operational definition is, in the context of this research, utterly misleading because we cannot take for granted what we are indeed trying to prove. The sheer equation between the number of parties and a certain degree of government turnover leads to a dead end that must be avoided.

The number of parties – in their different forms and operationalisations – is one of the most important variables to understand the nature of democratic regimes, their working and, in some cases, even to assess their stability and democratic quality. The ‘format’ of the party systems, as Giovanni Sartori (1976: 113) called it, namely ‘how many parties they contain’, is a crucial and widely used factor for analysing the stability of democratic regimes (Duverger 1954), the making and breaking of governments (Laver and Sheple 1996), the cabinet survival or durability in office (Warwick 1994), the amount of public spending (Persson and Tabellini 2005), the complexity of coalitional politics (Laver and Schofield 1990; Müller and Strøm 2000), the amount of electoral instability (Bartolini and Mair 1990) and so on. Since ‘the number of votes and seats that each party wins at elections is our best and safest data base’ (Sartori 1976: 106), it is easy to work out why the vast majority of political scientists have relied on it for their analyses, especially in the field of comparative politics.

Obviously, different scholars have adopted and adapted different definitions of the variable ‘number of parties’ for their research, but their final goal has been relatively similar. More precisely, they have established a more or less significant relationship between the extent to which political power is fragmented or concentrated in a given polity and a variety of political or economic dependent variables. Unfortunately, but absolutely revealing for the scope of this dissertation, to the best of my knowledge no scholar has so far moved his or her focus to the analysis of the relation between the number of parties and the way democratic governments change and rotate in power. The shelves of our libraries are crowded with books and scholarly journals that contain analyses on the determinants of government stability or survival, especially in relation to the frequency of cabinet turnovers. In fact, the main research question that prompted scholars’ curiosity and effort has been ‘*How many changes of government?*’. The present work, and the following chapters in particular, start with an original perspective and are driven by a different question. That is: ‘*Which kind of government change is more common, and why?*’. If we know why, when and how the number of parties is associated with the frequency of government turnover, we still do not have a clue about whether or not party fragmentation affects the way governments change or, in some cases, alternate in power.

That said, in this chapter I am not concerned with party-system fragmentation *per se* but, as the reader can easily imagine, with the impact of the ‘format’ of the party system on government turnover and alternation in power. Although I shall focus on the change in the number of parties across time and through

space, my analysis will be primarily devoted to assessing the pattern of association between party-system fragmentation and alternation across the whole universe of cases, as well as within the different countries and periods. The next step is to decide which and how political parties must be counted or discounted. Fortunately, I am not entering a *terra incognita*.

4.2. Counting parties that count

All parties are not created equal. They may differ in terms of size, ideology, internal organisation, locus of origin (e.g., inside or outside parliament), life span, relation between leadership and membership, spatial location in the party system and in many other respects (for an overview, see Duverger 1954; Scarrow 2015, Katz and Mair 1995, Panebianco 1988). For this reason, those interested in the number of parties must be able to recognise, and eventually weigh, the specific differences that exist between them. As to the hypothetical relationship between fragmentation and alternation of political power, the main question is: How large (small) must a party be in order to be counted (discounted)? To cut a very long story short, in the literature we can find two different solutions that have been suggested for dealing with such a problem. On the one hand, there is what I would call the *qualitative* approach, originally suggested by Giovanni Sartori in 1976. First of all, he suggests that scholars should take into consideration only those parties that, having won seats in the legislature, have been able to overcome the ‘threshold of representation’ (Rokkan 1970). This first criterion differentiates parliamentary parties from all those purely electoral groups which have competed in the electoral arena without obtaining any office or seat. However, the application of this criterion yields again a number of seat-winning parties of different size or parliamentary strength.

The second criterion suggested by Sartori deals explicitly with this second aspect. In fact, his ‘rules for counting’ serve to detect those parties that he defines as ‘relevant’ in a broader systemic perspective. This operation implies an analytical shift or leap from the parliamentary to the governmental level. More accurately, by considering the party as an instrument of government, a party can be judged as relevant if and when it has (had) governing or *coalition potential*, namely, if it has participated in governing coalitions and/or is considered ‘acceptable’ as a coalition partner. In order to be considered in the calculation of the number of parties, a relevant party, having passed the threshold of representation, has also overcome the threshold ‘of the executive power’ as Stein Rokkan (1970) terms it. Hence, a relevant party is a party that is (potentially) able to acquire executive power. A second subsidiary criterion of party relevance, similarly located at the governmental level, is based on the concept of ‘blackmail potential’, which refers to the power of intimidation of that kind of party whose sheer existence ‘affects the tactics of party competition and [...] alters the direction of the competition – by determining a switch from centripetal to centrifugal competition either leftward, rightward, or in both directions – of the governing-oriented parties’ (Sartori 1976: 108). To sum up, parties ought to be counted when they have either governing coalitional potential or blackmail potential. And since this *qualitative* solution operates, as we have seen, in the juncture between the parliamentary and governmental arena, it is particularly appropriate for analysing its impact on the process of government turnover.

Although still widely used, the solution suggested by Sartori has also prompted a vast array of critiques, not always theoretically or empirically well grounded. For instance, while considering Sartori’s criteria to be ‘very useful for distinguishing between parties that are significant in the political system and those that play only a minor role’, Arend Lijphart (2012: 64) argues that these criteria ‘do not work well for counting the number of parties in a party system’. The reason being that in his calculation Sartori does not take the relative size of the parties into account. Better, the criteria for party relevance are not based on a quantitative, numerical criterion but only on a much more ephemeral evaluation of their governing/opposition potential. Even though this critique, for the reasons I will explain below, is not very convincing, it has the merit of promoting a different, more quantitative-oriented solution for calculating the fragmentation of the party system. This *quantitative* approach has been incessantly explored and cultivated,

at least since the seminal work, in the late 1960s, of Jean Blondel (1968) whose suggested typology of party systems was based on the number of political parties and their relative size. From this perspective, the number of parties is a function of their electoral or parliamentary strength and accordingly the problem is not that we do not have 'rules for counting' but that we are not equipped with 'rules for weighting'. The absolute number of parties that enter the legislature or the number of parliamentary groups which poll above a certain, arbitrarily specified, threshold (2, 3 or 5 per cent) are, for sure, indicators of party system fragmentation, but they lose along the way relevant pieces of information. To remedy this defect, Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera (1979) have developed an index that combines in a single measure the number of parties with their relative size. Laakso and Taagepera's index, which incidentally is the one 'most commonly used by comparativists in political science' (Lijphart 2012: 66), is usually known as the 'effective number of political parties' and can be calculated either at the electoral ('Effective Number of Elective Parties') or the parliamentary level ('Effective Number of Legislative Parties'). As Golosov (2010: 174) has recently pointed out, '[b]y its algebraic construction, N_{LT} [i.e. Laakso and Taagepera's index] is a weighting mechanism: it weights each of the components by its own size, attributing larger weights to larger components, which allows for nearly discounting the smallest ones.'

In the light of this we might ask whether the 'effective number of political parties' reflects the degree of *fragmentation* in a party system or its sheer number of parties. In my opinion, concordant with that of Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (2008: 599), this index, as well as many other indices developed for correcting its alleged pitfalls (Dunleavy and Boucek 2003), 'cannot tell us everything about the shape of a party system'. Which is not to say they are useless, but simply that from their figures we cannot infer deep systemic properties or consequences in the pattern of interactions between the components of the party system. For this reason I do not agree with Lijphart when he claims that the rules suggested by Sartori for counting parties do not work well. They function if we aim at calculating the number of parties; they do not accomplish their task if we are interested in a more nuanced and sophisticated measure of party-system fragmentation. In summary, Sartori's rules of counting serve for counting parties, whereas Laakso and Taagepera's rules for weighting serve for assessing the extent to which the power within a party system is fragmented or dispersed. And since the two approaches answer different questions (*how many* parties vs *how much* the power is concentrated/divided), I will use both, with the specification that the former (i.e., number of relevant parties) measures the number of parties existing in a party system, while the latter indicates the specific fragmentation of the political system.

All that said, one final point deserves to be adequately stressed. I am not interested here in the number of political parties *per se* but, more precisely, in its systemic properties. That is, the focus on party fragmentation is justified by the fact that, in the words of Sartori himself, the *format* 'contains *mechanical predispositions*, that it goes to determine a set of functional properties of the party system first, and of the overall political system as a consequence'. In a way, the number of parties may affect the patterns of inter-party competition, including how cabinets change across time. Certainly, this is not a novelty at all. Indeed, Maurice Duverger was the first to establish a direct link, if not a proper causal mechanism, between the number of parties and different types of government change. 'Alternation', he wrote, 'exists primarily in dualist countries' (Duverger 1954: 299) and a few pages later he also added that alternation of power 'occurs chiefly in two-party systems'. First of all, let me point out that what Duverger means by 'alternation' is exactly what I mean, that is 'a pendulum movement, each party moving from opposition to office and from office to opposition'. In so doing, he cleverly avoids the so-called 'degreeism' trap (Sartori 1991) where alternation is not an indistinct but a specific kind of change in government. As such, alternation is produced and sustained by a 'dualism of parties'. Duverger (1954: 301) clarifies in passing that 'there is no absolute coincidence with the two-party system: alternation may be encountered in a system with electoral coalitions', but the hypothetical link between dualism, namely, a bipolar structure, and alternation remains firmly in place.

A decade later, with a book curiously written in vertical opposition to Duverger's *opus magnum*, Leon Epstein (1967) assumed, perfectly in line with the argument put forward by the French scholar, that 'multi-

partyism readily avoids alternation in office by opposing parties or groups' (Epstein 1967: 72). In this case, the relation is expressed in the negative form (i.e., a high number of parties brings about the absence of alternation), but the substance of the link does not change. Party-system fragmentation is treated as the main determinant of the way parties enter or exit the executive power. To be more precise, 'the absence of alternation may be claimed as a distinguished feature of multi-partyism' (Epstein 1967: 72). Accordingly, we may infer, by way of contrast, that the presence of alternation is the distinguishing feature of a two-party system.

Perhaps not by coincidence, this is the same line of argumentation that led Sartori, after another decade, to the conclusion that 'alternation in power is *the* distinguishing mark of the mechanics of two-partyism' (1976: 165). Yet in contrast with the opinions of both Duverger and Epstein, Sartori breaks the overall category of multi-party systems into two distinct types: limited and moderate pluralism, on the one hand, and fragmented and polarised, on the other. Moderate multi-party systems imply, despite their format, a mechanics that tends to imitate, albeit in a much more complex bargaining environment, the mechanics of a two-party system. In fact, in the case of moderate pluralism we would not observe alternative government 'but governing in coalition within the perspective of *alternative coalitions* (which does not necessarily mean actually alternating coalitions)' (Sartori 1976: 158). On the contrary, in cases of high and polarised party pluralism the mechanics of the system change completely: alternations in power are a feasible option and government changes will occur only through small and peripheral replacements.

Finally, there are scholars, like Siaroff (2000) and Taagepera (2008), who have tried to establish a more complex causal link between the number of parties and the balance of power between them, on one side of the function, and the occurrence of government alternation, on the other. But at this point it is worth quoting in full the point made by Taagepera (2007: 53): 'A quantitative measure of alternation remains to be worked out. It would represent a third dimension, orthogonal to *N* [number of parties] and *B* [balance of parties]'. This is to say, firstly, that the relationship between alternation and fragmentation is not as straightforward as one may initially assume and, secondly, that in order to study the impact of the number of parties on the degree of rotation in power we need, as a precondition, a quantitative definition of alternation. That is exactly what I have done in Chapter 1, working out a quantitative definition for each face of the concept of alternation. Based on this set of definitions, I then shall try to prove the existence of a link between the fragmentation of the party system and the occurrence of alternation in power.

4.3. From words to numbers

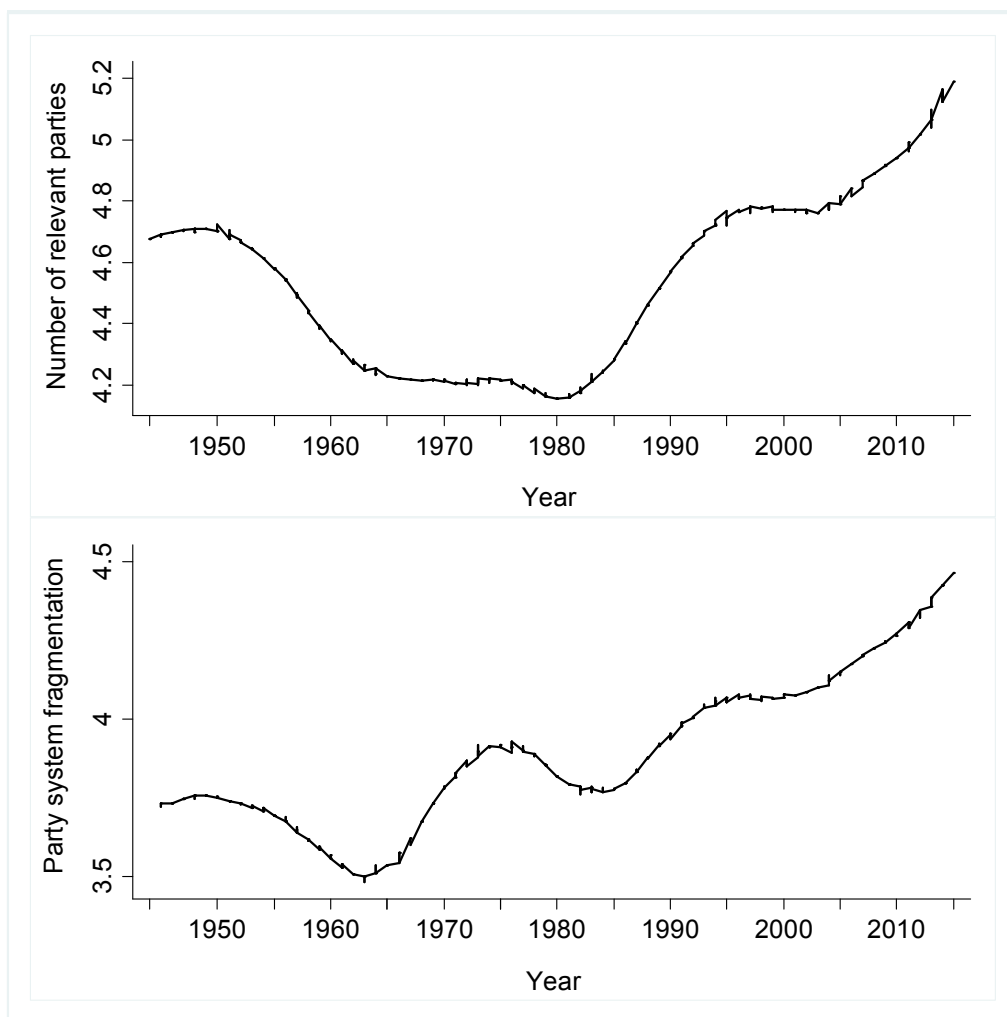
The number of relevant parties¹ and the degree of party-system fragmentation are not constants. They change across countries and through time. In the last seventy years (1945-2015), it is possible to observe a trend showing an increasing level of party fragmentation in West European countries. As can be seen in Figure 4.1, both the number of relevant parties and the number of effective legislative parties show some ups and downs until the 1980s and then a sharp rise thereafter. There are, of course, minor differences between the two measures of fragmentation in the legislature but, all in all, they display a straightforward trend. That is, in the last thirty years European party systems have become more fragmented in terms of the number of political parties.

The development in the number of relevant parties is less erratic than the one measuring party-system fragmentation but, again, the overall trend is clearly upwards. By comparing these figures with those shown in the previous chapter, where I have discussed the development of governmental alternation through time, at a first glance it is evident that these two variables – against the *communis opinio* in the literature – are neither strictly nor perfectly correlated. Indeed, this association seems *prima facie* positive, in the sense

¹ The number of relevant parties is calculated following the criteria originally suggested by Sartori, whereas the effective number of legislative parties is measured as the inverse of the sum of the square of all parties' seat shares (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).

that an increasing level of party fragmentation coexists with a higher frequency of alternation in power. From this viewpoint, all those scholars who interpreted alternation as a simple projection of the (limited) number of parties are contradicted by these recent trends. In fact, alternation seems to flourish where and when the number of parties is high, at least more than two. In brief, the hypothesis put forward by Duverger (alternation presupposes dualism) must be taken *cum grano salis*: a low level of party fragmentation can create the conditions for the occurrence of government alternation, but the frequency whereby this type of rotation in office takes place is not straightforwardly associated with the number of parties. Other intervening variables seem to play a role during the process of alternation.

Fig. 4.1. Number of relevant parties and party-system fragmentation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowest smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

On average, the number of relevant parties that get seats and governmental offices in the seventeen European countries here analysed is 4.5. At this point it is worth noting that the number of parties increases by almost one-unit during the last seventy years, from 4.7 in the 1940s to 5.5 in the 2010s (see Tab. 4.1). The same upward trend can be observed for the measure of party-system fragmentation, calculated in terms of both seats and votes. Even the number of absolute parties, which is the sheer total of all the parties that create a parliamentary group in the legislature, has significantly increased. Briefly put, West European party systems are more fragmented in the twenty-first century than they were in the thirty years after the end of WWII. And this fragmentation, somewhat surprisingly, has been accompanied by a steady rise of alternation in office.

Tab. 4.1. Number of parties and party-system fragmentation of West European countries by decade, 1945-2015 (mean values)

	No. of relevant parties	Effective number of legislative parties
1940s	4.7	3.6
1950s	4.6	3.8
1960s	4.1	3.4
1970s	4.3	3.9
1980s	4.2	3.7
1990s	4.9	4.1
2000s	4.6	4.0
2010s	5.5	4.4
<i>Mean</i>	4.5	3.8

Moving the focus of the analysis at the single country level, the overall impression of increasing fragmentation does not change. To begin with, in all but two countries (Italy and France) the number of relevant parties in the last decade is higher than the mean values for the entire period. One exception is Italy, where the breakdown of the party system in the early 1990s has given birth to a sort of destructured bipolarism characterised by extreme party fragmentation. As shown in Table 4.2, the highest value in the number of parties and party system fragmentation is recorded precisely in conjunction with the collapse of the party system. The second exception is France. With the passage from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic, and especially with the inauguration of a semi-presidential regime and the run-off majoritarian electoral system in 1958, France witnessed a sharp decline in the number of parties starting in the 1960s.

Tab. 4.2. Number of relevant parties in seventeen European countries by decade (mean values)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	<i>Mean</i>
Austria	2.5	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.5
Belgium	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	5.4	7.3	8.0	8.0	4.7
Denmark	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.7	5.0	6.6	6.0	7.0	5.2
Finland	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.6	6.5	6.2	7.0	7.0	6.4
France	6.0	5.9	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0
Germany	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	4.0	4.7	4.0	3.4
Greece	-	-	-	2.0	2.4	2.0	2.0	4.3	2.6
Iceland	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.3	4.0	3.9
Ireland	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.2	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.4
Italy	6.0	6.3	6.7	6.8	7.0	8.3	7.2	5.7	6.8
Luxembourg	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
Netherlands	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.5	5.0	7.0	5.0
Norway	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.8	4.3	5.6	6.0	7.0	5.1
Portugal	-	-	-	4.0	3.3	3.0	3.0	4.0	3.3
Spain	-	-	-	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0
Sweden	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	5.8	6.0	7.5	4.9
United Kingdom	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.0	2.0
<i>Mean</i>	4.7	4.6	4.1	4.3	4.2	4.9	4.6	5.5	4.5

Almost the same pattern of increasing party-system fragmentation can be observed in Table 4.3, which shows the trend for the effective number of legislative parties across countries. Again, these data clearly indicate that, in the last three decades, the formats of the West European party systems have become much more fragmented and complex. More specifically, in some countries, the increase of party system fragmentation is remarkably strong (e.g., Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) and in other countries more muted. Nevertheless, the direction of change, homogeneously

upwards, is straightforward and, despite this specific development, government alternation has not decreased as many theories would have predicted. But if predictions must be sustained by argument, it is time now to move on and analyse in-depth the association between the number of political parties and the many faces of alternation in power. Does party system fragmentation hinder or foster the occurrence of wholesale rotations in government?

Tab. 4.3. Effective number of legislative parties in seventeen European countries by decade (mean values)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Mean
Austria	2.5	2.3	2.2	2.2	2.4	3.4	3.7	5.0	2.8
Belgium	2.9	2.5	4.1	5.9	7.1	8.2	8.2	8.1	5.5
Denmark	6.0	3.8	3.8	5.1	5.3	4.5	5.0	5.7	4.7
Finland	4.5	4.7	5.0	5.5	5.2	5.1	5.0	5.7	5.1
France	4.3	5.6	3.3	4.1	3.1	3.1	2.3	2.8	4.2
Germany	2.9	2.7	2.9	3.4	3.6	3.8	4.0	3.5	3.3
Greece	-	-	-	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.4	3.3	2.5
Iceland	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.7	4.8	3.7	3.8	4.7	3.9
Ireland	3.5	2.9	2.6	2.4	2.7	3.3	3.1	3.4	3.0
Italy	2.9	3.3	3.5	3.5	3.8	5.7	5.1	3.4	4.0
Luxembourg	3.1	2.9	3.3	3.8	3.5	4.0	3.7	3.9	3.4
Netherlands	4.6	4.4	4.9	5.5	3.9	5.3	5.0	6.2	4.9
Norway	2.7	3.0	3.3	3.5	3.3	4.2	4.6	4.4	3.6
Portugal	-	-	-	3.4	2.9	2.5	2.7	2.9	2.8
Spain	-	-	-	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.4	2.6	2.7
Sweden	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.5	4.5	3.5
United Kingdom	2.1	2.0	2.0	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.4	2.6	2.2
<i>Mean</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>3.4</i>	<i>4.0</i>	<i>3.7</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>4.0</i>	<i>4.4</i>	<i>3.9</i>

4.4. Party-system fragmentation and alternation: a fresh look

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the previous discussion is that the strength of the association between the format of the party system and government alternation is not as clear as someone would have expected from the presentation of the scientific literature. Although party-system format contains dynamic or systemic predispositions, its direct association with specific patterns of government succession should be investigated in much more detail. As shown in the previous section, the steady rise of party fragmentation has not led to a decline in the frequency of alternation in power. By contrast, alternations have become more common, especially in countries characterised by multipartism. In this sense, the relationship between party-system format and government turnover must be questioned and analysed in a wider comparative framework.

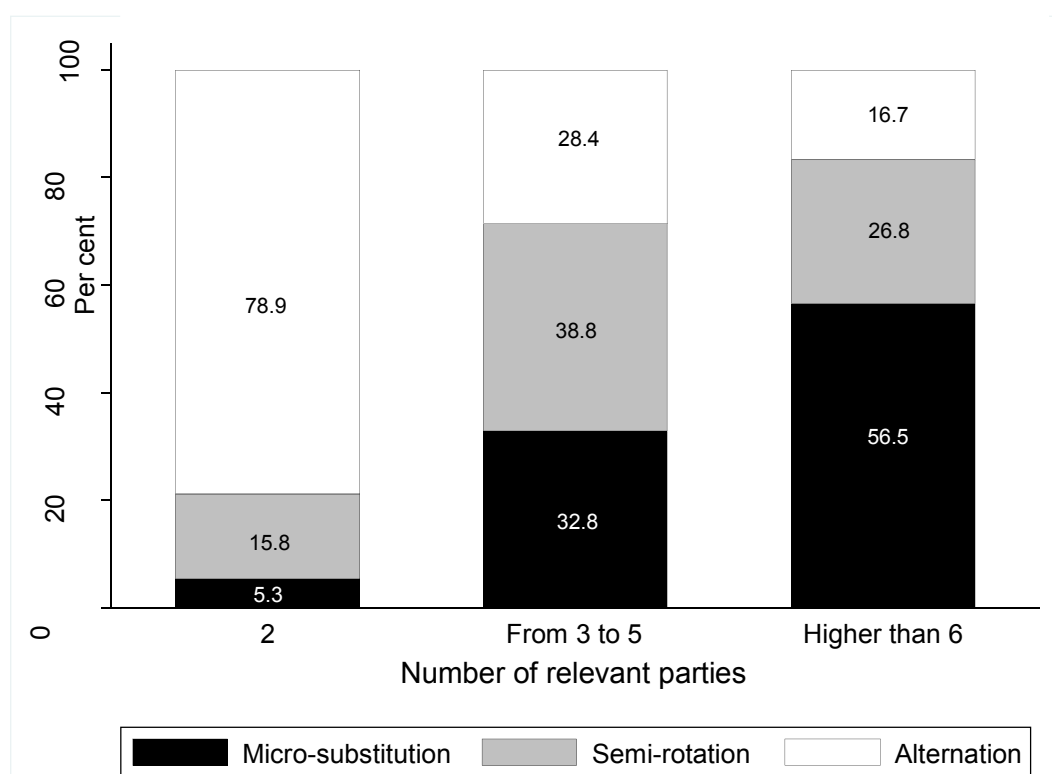
To begin with, it is worth noting that the degree of government turnover is higher in those countries where the number of relevant parties is between three and five. This is tantamount to saying that in limited or moderate multi-party systems the pace and depth of rotation in governmental office is greater than other circumstances. Although the potential government turnover is higher in case of extreme party systems (48.6%), its actual level of exploitation is lower than both two-party and moderate party systems. From this point of view, this argument is in line with what we have seen in the previous section: the association between alternation and fragmentation is much more enigmatic than we used to know or admit.

Tab. 4.4. Number of relevant parties and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015

Number of relevant parties	Government turnover	Mean level of government turnover
2 parties	27.3	86.4
From 3 to 5 parties	32.9	57.2
More than 6 parties	26.5	38.3

Nevertheless, by analysing the mean level of government turnover, which considers only those circumstances where a change of government actually takes place, the results are consistent with some of the hypotheses present in the literature. As Table 4.4 shows, the level at which government turnover occurs in a two-party system is 86.4%, very close to a wholesale rotation in office. Briefly put, two-partyism is characterised by a low degree of government turnover *and*, at the same time, a high level of government turnover. Namely, in two-party systems rotations in office are rare events but, when they occur, they imply a profound reshuffling among the governing parties. Conversely, in cases of extreme multi-party systems both the degree and the level of government turnover are low, respectively 26.5% and 38.3%. In these cases, changes *of* government (degree of turnover) are infrequent and changes *in* government (mean level of turnover) are limited. Finally, limited party systems are able to combine a high level of degree of turnover (32.9%) with a medium-to-high level of rotation in office (57.2%).

Fig 4.2. Types of government change by number of relevant parties in Western Europe, 1945-2015



That said, it can be useful to observe how different formats of party systems are related with the three types of government turnover that I have singled out in Chapter 2. Figure 4.2 clearly shows that in a two-party system alternation is the most frequent type of change in government. More precisely, in nearly eight cases out of ten, changes in government – when only two relevant parties compete – occur through a wholesale rotation in office. Semi-rotations account for 15.8 per cent of the cases and the remaining 5.3 per cent are reserved to minor, and extremely rarely, micro-substitutions in two-party systems. By contrast,

when the party system is extremely fragmented the most common way of changing government is by resorting to what I have defined as micro-substitution: small changes of minor allied parties, usually at the ‘periphery’ of the coalition cabinet. This circumstance accounts for almost 58% of all the government changes in an extreme multi-party system, whereas 26.4 per cent of substitutions occurred through semi-rotations and only 16 per cent were the product of alternation. Lastly, party systems with a limited number of relevant parties show a homogeneous distribution of the three types of government turnover: 32.5 per cent of micro-substitutions, 34.4 per cent of semi-rotations and 33.1 per cent. From this vantage point, one can argue that moderate party systems are the most versatile and eclectic in terms of government changes, showing the ability to resort to different governing formulae in different circumstances.

As to the association between the number of parties and alternation, the analysis carried out in Table 4.6 shows some very significant results. First of all, looking at the frequency of alternation the figures reveal that this specific type of government change is more likely in two-party systems. More precisely, more than two cabinets out of ten formed in times of two-partyism are the product of a wholesale rotation in office. When party fragmentation is limited, the frequency of alternation is 18.1% and the lowest value (10.7%) is recorded in those circumstances with more than six parties. In this sense, alternation shows an association, albeit feeble, with the format of the party system: the more fragmented the system, the more likely it is to observe an alternation.

Tab. 4.5. Frequency, probability and possibility of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015

N. of relevant parties	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
2 parties	23.8	68.2	31.7
From 3 to 5 parties	18.1	30.5	35.1
More than 6 parties	10.7	15.2	28.9

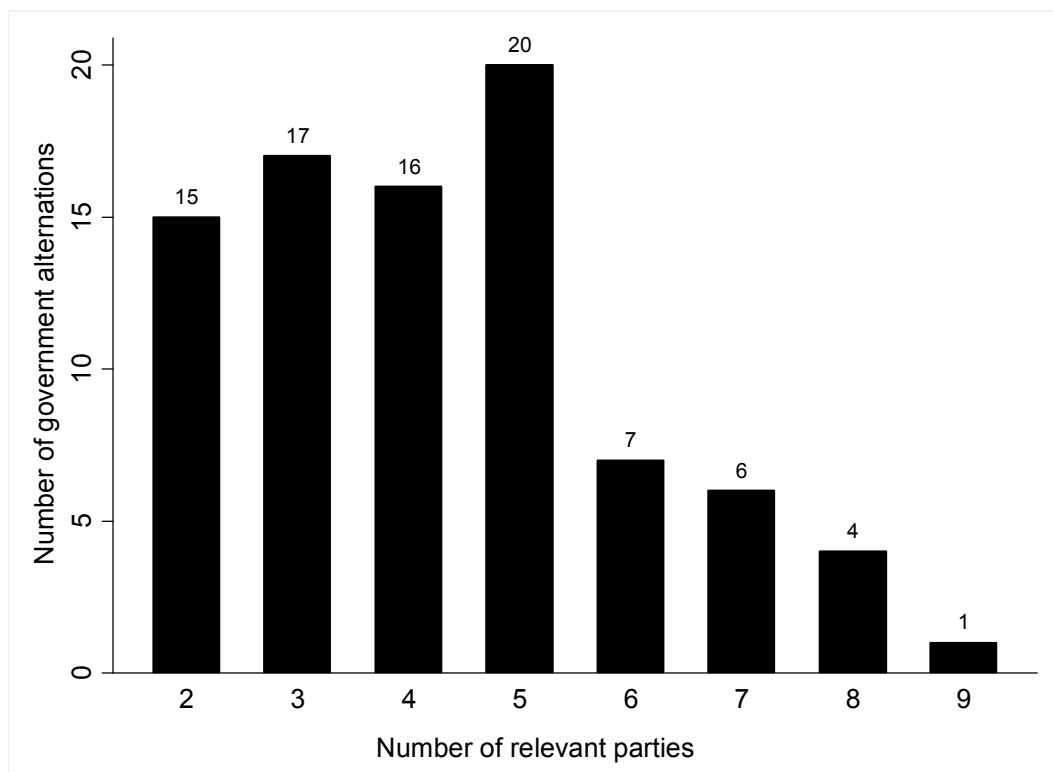
Looking at Table 4.5, which also reports the figures for the probability of alternation, it is worth pointing out that this probability is higher when the format of the system contains two relevant parties. At this point it must be recalled that the probability of alternation is based on the cases of effective, real-occurring changes *in* government. It measures, so to speak, the likelihood that, when there is a government change, it will occur through a wholesale substitution of the party/ies in office. In two-party systems, this probability is quite high: 68.8%, meaning that almost seven government successions out of ten take place via alternation. In cases of moderate multi-party systems the figure is half that of the probability for two-party systems and equal to 30.5%. Only one government change out of three occurs through a complete substitution of the party government personnel. Finally, when the party system is extremely fragmented, the probability of alternation shrinks to 15.2%, fifteen percentage points lower than moderate party systems and, more remarkably, fifty-three points lower than two-party systems. To sum up, the likelihood of a wholesale government turnover is negatively associated with the format of the party system: the higher the number of relevant parties, the lower the probability of a government alternation.

These figures assume a different light when analysed through the lens of the ‘possibility of alternation’. As I have specified in Chapter 2, the possibility of alternation indicates the *arithmetical* possibility that, given a specific distribution of seats in the legislature, the incoming cabinet will be made up of parties that were not in the previous, outgoing cabinet. As shown in Table 4.6, the possibility of alternation is greater in limited multi-party systems. In fact, in 35.1 per cent of the cases the seat-distribution in the legislature allowed a wholesale rotation in office. In cases of two-partyism, this figure is a bit lower (31.7 per cent), but still consistent with the figure concerning the probability of alternation. The main difference between two-party and limited multi-party systems is that the former are more ‘exploitative’, meaning that they are more prone to grasp the opportunity of an alternation. Despite the higher frequency of situations in which alternation was a real (mathematical) possibility, limited multi-party systems are, for obvious reasons, less inclined than two-party systems to seize the opportunity for a complete government

substitution. With regards to party systems with more than six relevant parties, the pattern of government change is rather clear: a low probability of alternation is related to their difficulty to exploit the few possibilities of alternation they meet along the way. Because of the complexity of a highly fragmented party system and sometimes due to the existence of parties with low or nil coalition potential (Bartolini 1998), government changes can occur only through marginal substitutions of minor political groups.

To summarise, we can say that elections operate as multipliers that amplify the oscillation of power between different cabinets. In two-party systems the pace of the pendulum is slow, but involves the cabinet in its entirety. In a limited multi-party system the rhythm of change is quite fast and implies the substitution of relevant actors within the cabinet. Finally, systems with more than six parties display frequent government changes involving only small and marginal parties within the government. This general pattern is shown in Figure 4.3, which charts the number of alternations associated with each given number of relevant parties. Needless to say, it takes at least two competitors to produce an alternation in power. Indeed, fifteen alternations out of 81 occurred in party systems with two relevant parties. This is the case, for instance, of the United Kingdom (with the parenthesis of a coalition cabinet between 2010 and 2015), Spain and Greece, at least until the advent of the Great Recession in 2008. Alternations in limited multi-party systems amount to 51, which is almost two-third of the whole universe of cases. These cases contain countries such as Norway, Sweden, Ireland and Denmark in different periods. The remaining seventeen alternations (20.5% of total) occurred in countries with more than six relevant parties, for instance in Belgium, the Netherlands and in Italy, especially after the breakdown of the ‘first party system’ (1947-1992) and the explosion of party-system fragmentation forced within all-encompassing alternative coalitions. Therefore, in conclusion, alternation is associated with the format of the system, but this relation is not as stringent as it could have appeared from a shallow interpretation of the literature. One can find instances of alternation even within unexpected countries that were not conducive to wholesale government turnover. These are cases that should be analysed much more in-depth, looking at specific national characteristics.

Fig. 4.3. Frequency of alternations by number of relevant parties in Western Europe, 1945-2015



4.5. National trends

We can now turn to the association between party-system fragmentation and alternation in government in individual countries. Thus far we have observed that across the universe of cabinets as a whole the relationship is, however present, neither linear nor strong. Nevertheless, this enigmatic association can conceal specific national variations and this variance can help us explain the somewhat peculiar development of the investigated relationship. To gain a better perspective on the matter, let us first recapitulate the general argument. The format of the party system, that can be studied relying on either the number of relevant parties or the effective number of legislative parties (what I call here ‘party-system fragmentation’), contains mechanical predispositions that may affect the way governments rotate or alternate in office. Hence, the argument goes that the existence of a fragmented party system curbs a process of substantial, not to say complete, turnover at the governmental level. The more fragmented the system, the more government turnover will occur through small changes among the governing parties. This pattern can be observed in Figure 4.4, which reports the frequency of the three types of government changes in relation to specific levels of party-system fragmentation. Alternation is most frequent (71.4%) when fragmentation is low and it gradually decreases when the party system becomes less fragmented. However, alternation does not disappear even when party system fragmentation reaches its peak. In these circumstances characterised by a medium level of party fragmentation, one-third of all government changes occur through a complete replacement of the old governing parties. In this sense, to resort to Duverger’s own words, dualism may not be a necessary condition explaining the presence of alternation in power. Other additional forces or factors should be taken into consideration for a better description of this phenomenon.

Fig. 4.4. Types of government turnover by level of party-system fragmentation in Western Europe, 1945-2015

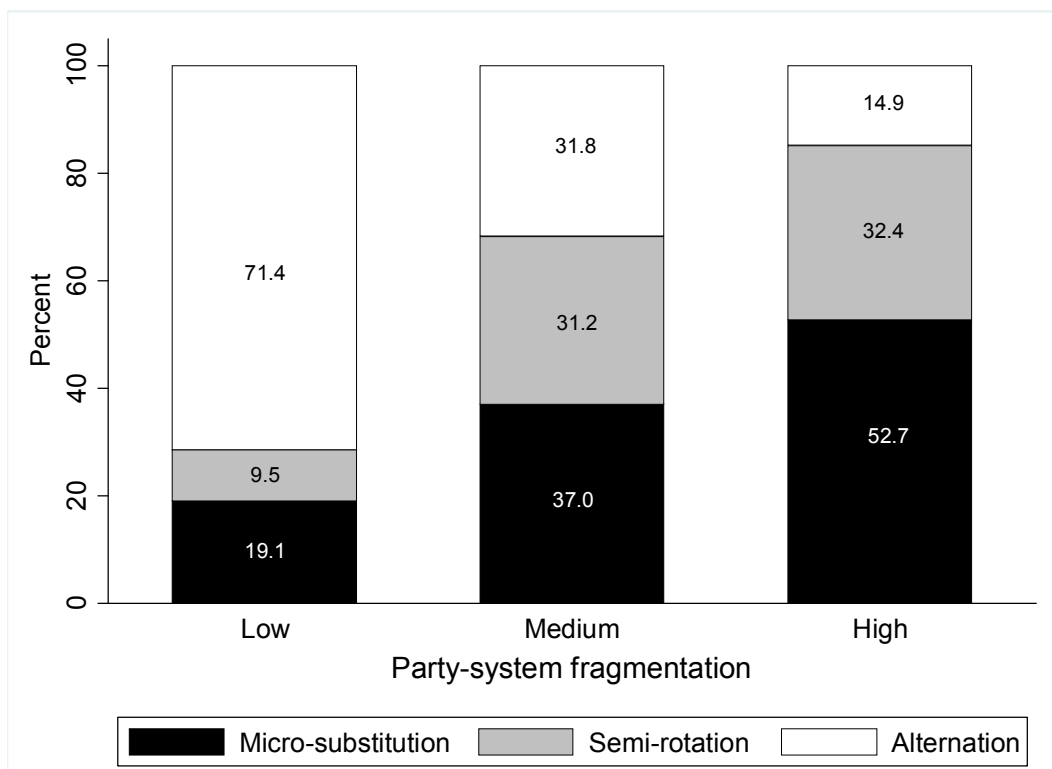
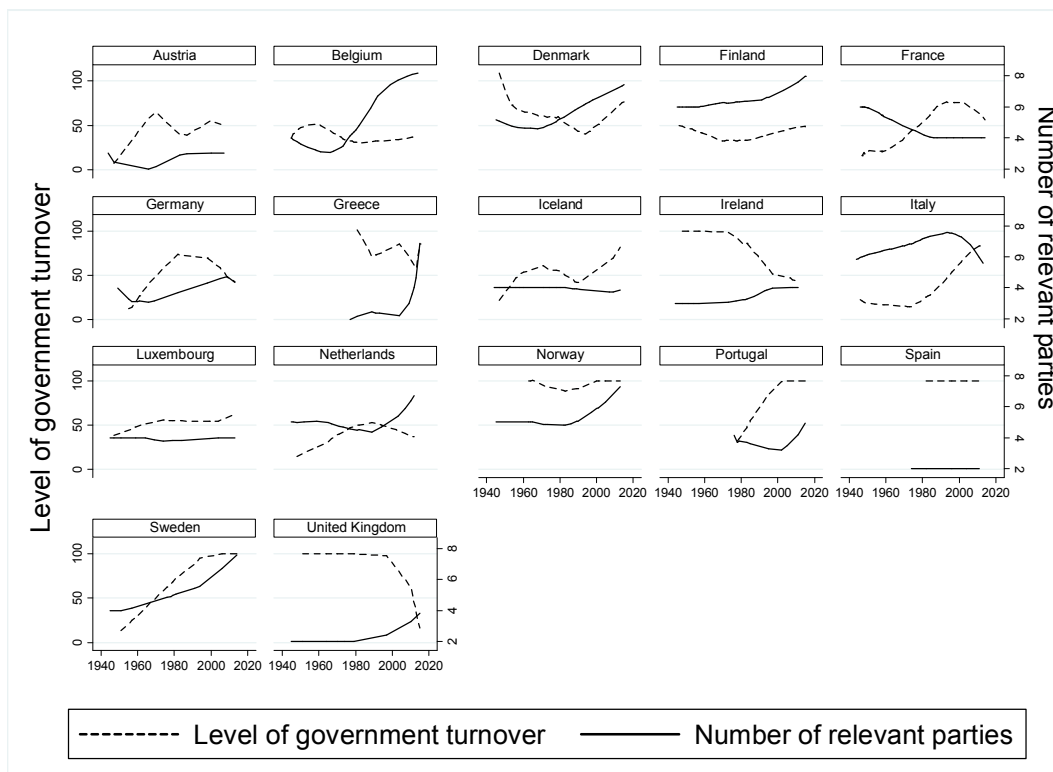


Figure 4.5 plots the index of government turnover and the number of relevant parties across countries and through time. Firstly, it is important to note that these two variables do not seem to follow a similar or overlapping development. In some cases, for instance in Sweden and Norway, both the number of parties and government turnover increase over time. The same trend can be observed in Italy where

government turnover starts rising in conjunction with the explosion, or implosion, of the old (and less fragmented) party system. Ireland is another interesting case in showing how the format of the system and the degree of rotation in power may be perfectly disjointed. Namely, the variations in terms of government turnover cannot be explained simply by counting the number of relevant parties. By contrast, in other cases the association between fragmentation and turnover looks more in line with the expectations. In Belgium, with the ‘duplication’ of the party system along territorial cleavages during the early 1970s, the degree of government turnover has significantly decreased. A similar trend, albeit in the opposite direction, is visible in France, where the collapse of the fourth republic brought about a new configuration of the party system and a new pattern of alternation in power (Aron 1982).

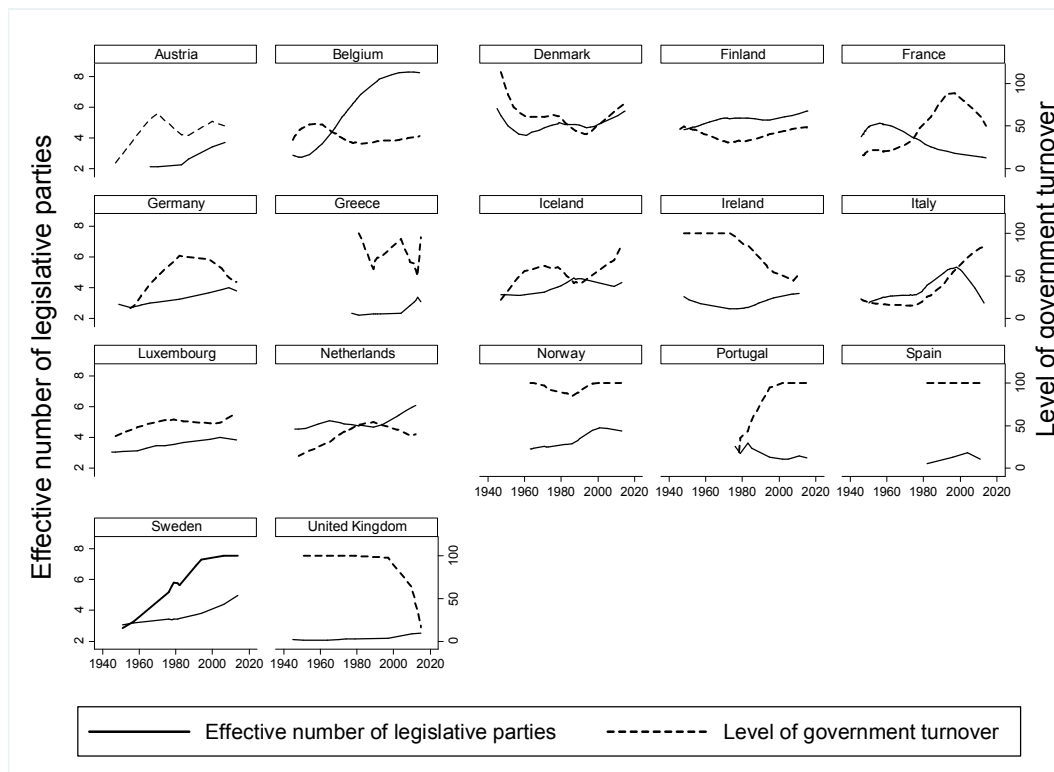
Fig. 4.5. Level of government turnover and number of relevant parties in seventeen European countries (lowess smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

The same nationally differentiated picture emerges from Figure 4.6, which plots the effective number of legislative parties and the level of government turnover against elapsed time. On the one hand, there are those countries, namely Austria and Finland, where the decline in government turnover went hand in hand with a slight growth in party system fragmentation. On the other, there are Germany and the Netherlands which have witnessed an increase both in terms of fragmentation and government turnover. Therefore, these figures confirm what we have observed in the above pages: patterns of rotation in office and party-system fragmentation show only a feeble, temporary and idiosyncratic association. Can this conclusion be applied also to the concept of government alternation?

Fig. 4.6. Level of government turnover and effective number of legislative parties in seventeen European countries, 1945-2015 (lowest smoothed lines)

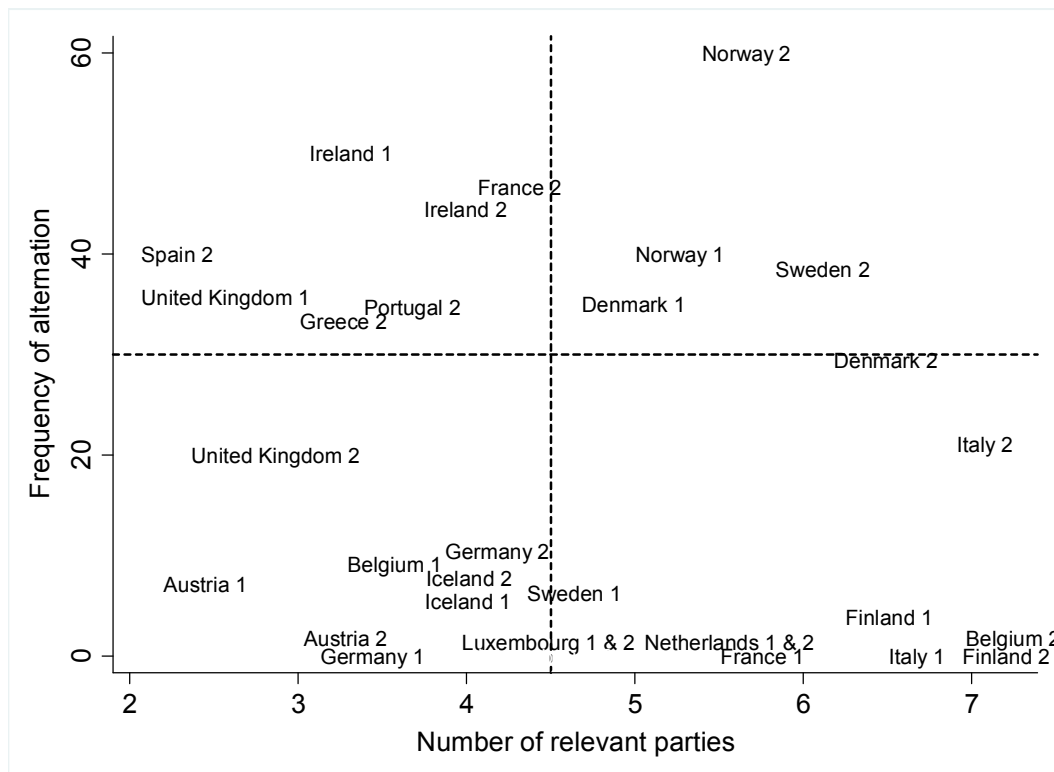


Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

A first tentative answer to this question emerges from Figure 4.7, which charts the number of relevant parties and the frequency of alternation in different countries in two specific points in time (before and after the 1980s). There is no clear trend or association emerging from the chart. Indeed, there are countries with fragmented party systems that have an experience of high frequency of alternation. This is, for instance, the case of Sweden, especially after the electoral decline of the predominant social-democratic party and the emergence of a more open and competitive electoral market. The same argument, with specific qualifications, can be applied to Norway after the 1980s and Denmark, whose not extremely fragmented party systems witnessed frequent alternations in power.

The case of Italy, in particular after the fall of the Berlin wall, deserves a specific mention, for no other reason that it was able to create a 'curious' combination between extreme party-system fragmentation and high frequency of alternation. Incidentally, it is no coincidence that Italian scholars have encountered many difficulties in classifying the party system that appeared in Italy following the 1994 general election making references to the classic typologies of party system. However, it would be a mistake to treat Italy as an isolated deviant case because the evolution of its party system is not so distant from the recent transformation occurring in other European nations. Even though the Italian party system should be better defined as 'destructured' rather than 'fragmented', other Western European countries – as we have seen above – are undergoing a process of increasing fragmentation that should be taken into account whenever we aim at providing a thorough explanation of governmental alternation. From this viewpoint, Italy may represent only the extreme point of a common trend in the transformation of West European party systems.

Fig. 4.7. Number of relevant parties and frequency of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-1980 and 1980-2015 (mean values, %)



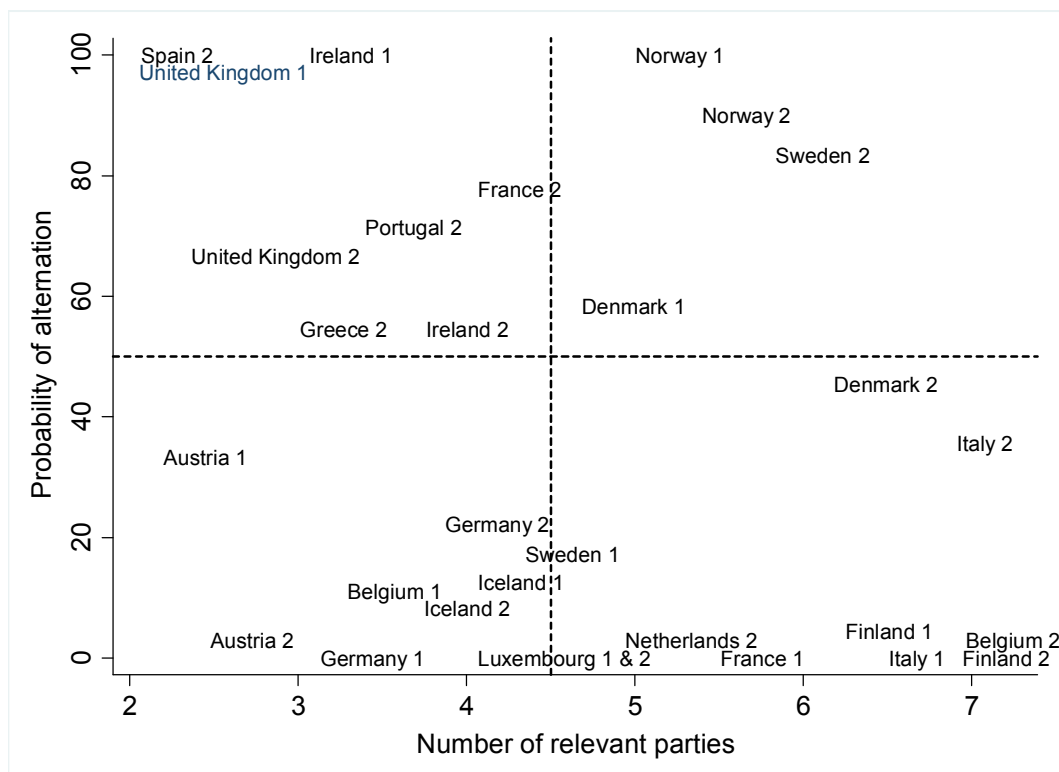
In the lower right quadrant of the figure we find classic cases of two-partyism and (very) limited multi-party systems characterised by frequent wholesale rotations in office. Spain and Greece, with their return to a democratic regime after the authoritarian rule, relied on a form of inter-party competition based on the existence of two-relevant parties frequently alternating over time. The United Kingdom shows instead a more peculiar development. Until the 1970s, alternation in power between the Labour and the Conservative Party was a recurring feature of the political landscape but, when Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 and then, eighteen years later, with the victory of Tony Blair’s New Labour, the party system has experienced far less alternations. So much so that some scholars have interpreted this development as a sign of party system change, that is, from a two-party system to a sort of new hybrid type defined as an ‘alternating predominant party system’ (Mair 2009, Quinn 2013; Nwokora and Pelizzo 2014).

In the lower left quadrant there are those countries with less than five relevant parties and without a long tradition of frequent government alternations. As we know from the discussion in Chapter 3, alternation never took place in Luxembourg, despite its low level of party fragmentation. In Germany, where alternation occurred only once, in 1998, a relatively limited multi-party system has not paved the way to a pattern of recurring replacements of governing parties. As we shall see in Chapter 6, the crucial position played by the Liberal Party had prevented the appearance of a clear-cut confrontation between the government and an ‘alternative government in waiting’. With some qualifications, the same argument holds true also for Austria. Despite the format of its party system, in some circumstances, especially until the 1960s, very close to a two-partyism, the coalescent behaviour of the elite of the two main parties has ruled out the possibility of a complete substitution of the governing party.

Finally, in the upper left quadrant we find those countries with more than five relevant parties and a very low, not to say nil, frequency of alternation. The Fourth French republic or Italy until 1992 are good cases in point. Their extreme and polarised multi-party systems made any significant turnover at the governmental level unlikely, and even impossible. Frequent replacements of small allied parties within the so-called ‘governing area’ or ‘pro-system field’ was the only feasible alternative. Notwithstanding all its peculiarities,

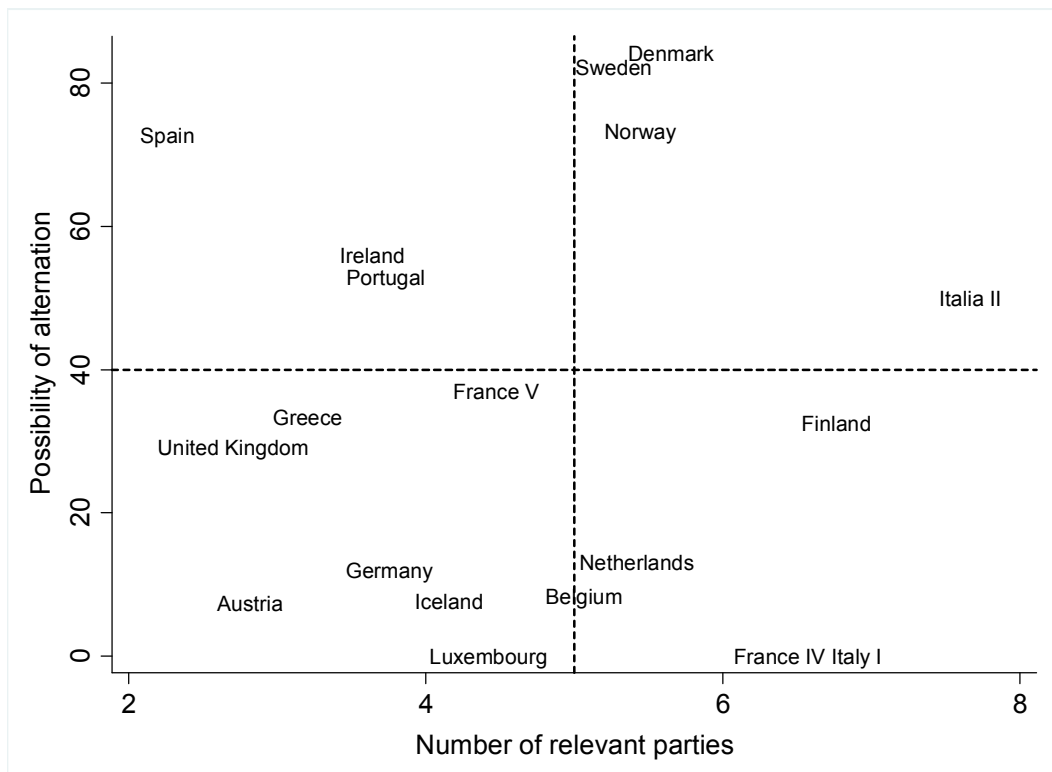
which are mainly related to its low degree of international autonomy vis-à-vis the USSR, Finland's multi-party system was able to control the effect of an extreme polarisation also through the formation of surplus coalition cabinets that prevented any 'risk' of alternation in power. Lastly, the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as the Austrian case already discussed, represent two almost prototypical examples of what Lijphart called in 1977 'consociational democracies', where a long tradition of elite accommodation created the conditions for the formation of grand coalitions between the major political parties (or social segments) and consequently inhibited the emergence of a clear government-versus-opposition pattern of confrontation.

Fig. 4.8. Number of relevant parties and probability of alternation in West European democracies, 1945-1980 and 1980-2015 (mean values, %)



If we now observe the probability of government alternation (see Figure 4.8), that is the likelihood that a government change occurs through alternation in office, the figures do not provide a different scenario. The format of the party system explains some variance in that probability, but there exists a number of cases where party-system fragmentation does not hinder, nor impede, a wholesale turnover in office. As a matter of fact, Denmark, Italy and Sweden after the 1980s have been able to combine fragmentation with alternation. These cases indicate that there is not a clear trade-off between the format of the system and the pattern of government change. In some circumstances that association maintains its validity, whereas in other countries other factors seem to play a decisive role. And if we now look at Figure 4.9, which plots the possibility of alternation against the number of relevant parties, it is possible to observe that even the credible expectation of a wholesale government turnover is not univocally associated with the number of relevant parties. For the sake of argument, I have split the cases of France (fourth and fifth republic) and Italy (before and after the electoral earthquake of the early 1990s). Notably, the Italian case shows that the prospect of a governmental alternation is not threatened by the existence of a highly fragmented party system. Indeed, as of 1994 party system fragmentation has increased in Italy, but this development does not bring about a reduction of the possibility of alternation. Quite the contrary, Italy 'discovers' alternation in power precisely in conjunction with the rise in the number of relevant parties.

Fig. 4.9. Number of relevant parties and possibility of alternation in West European democracies, 1945-1980 and 1980-2015 (mean values, %)



On the other hand, the French case reveals that under specific conditions a lower party system fragmentation can be conducive to a distinct pattern of government change, namely a complete substitution of the prior governing parties. Furthermore, Figure 4.9 also reveals that many differences may exist among cases of two-party or limited party systems. For instance, the comparison between two perfect cases of two-partyism (the United Kingdom and Greece) on the one side, and Spain and Sweden on the other, is absolutely telling. The possibility of alternation cannot only reach different levels among two-party systems but, as Sweden illustrates, limited multi-party systems may even show a greater possibility of alternation in power. Of course, there exist significant differences also within the category of moderate multipartism, with countries showing low values in the measure of the possibility of alternation (e.g., Germany, Luxembourg, Iceland) and other nations where that possibility is concrete (e.g., Sweden, Norway, Ireland).

Tab. 4.6. Correlation between number of relevant parties and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.022	-0.200	-0.235	-0.011
Belgium	-0.245	-0.196	-0.307	-0.247
Denmark	-0.054	0.035	-0.058	0.407**
Finland	-0.467*	-0.116	- ^a	-0.069
France	-0.295	-0.421***	-0.446*	-0.486***
Germany	0.697***	0.487**	0.474*	0.704***
Greece	0.278	0.204	0.206	0.237
Iceland	0.266	0.123	0.140	0.123
Ireland	-0.361	-0.387*	-0.420*	-0.007
Italy	0.182	0.229	0.316	0.068
Luxembourg	-0.225	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a

Netherlands	-0.118	- ^a	- ^a	0.021
Norway	0.350	0.256	0.350	0.018
Portugal	0.240	0.000	0.000	0.577***
Spain	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Sweden	0.436**	0.444**	0.432**	0.466
United Kingdom	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

In brief, the strength of the association between fragmentation and alternation cannot be established once and for all, but it should be evaluated for each country and for specific periods. For this reason, it is worth analysing statistically the strength of the relationship across our seventeen cases. As shown in Table 4.6, the correlation coefficients have different signs in different countries. For instance, there exists a positive relationship between fragmentation and government turnover in Austria, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom. By contrast, in the other seven cases the relationship shows a negative sign, which means that the more fragmentation of the system, the lower the level of government turnover. As to the frequency of alternation, the coefficients of correlation yield mixed results. In some countries, for example in Germany or Sweden, the correlation is positive, namely alternations are more frequent if and when the number of relevant parties increases. By contrast, in other polities, such as Austria, Belgium or Ireland, that association is concordant with the predictions extrapolated by the literature.

The same nuanced description can be applied to the coefficients of correlation concerning the probability and possibility of alternation. To illustrate, in Portugal or Sweden the chance of governmental alternation is positively associated with party system fragmentation (respectively, 0.577 and 0.466), while in other countries the relationship is negative. In general, there is not a single or unequivocal association at the country level between alternation and the format of the party system. National correlations provide a more nuanced and diversified description of the mechanism that links party-system format with the occurrence of alternation in power. Certainly, a final estimate of why this particular relationship assumes different signs across the bulk of the universe of cases will have to wait until we are able to compare the effect of the other institutional factor. Until then, it is possible to argue that, beyond national peculiarities, the association between the number of parties and the pattern of government turnover shows relevant cross-country and cross-time variations. With regard to the latter, it is interesting to note that after the 1980s the strength of the relationship decreases (see Table 4.7). More specifically, taking into consideration the level of government turnover, across all the cases, the correlation yields a negative sign and reaches a level of -0.294, which is equivalent to 9 per cent of the variance. However, in the first phase (1945-1980) the coefficient of correlation is stronger, reaching a level of .0385 and explaining 15 per cent of the variance.

Tab. 4.7. Correlation between number of relevant parties and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

Relevant parties	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
1945-1980	-0.385*** (143)	-0.163*** (250)	-0.346** (143)	-0.179** (148)
1980-2015	-0.266*** (136)	-0.041*** (231)	-0.195 (136)	-0.167* (133)
All cases	-0.294*** (279)	-0.078* (481)	-0.238*** (279)	-0.141** (281)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis.*

The same argument holds true also for the other measures of alternation in office. As to the frequency of alternation, the general association with the number of relevant parties is not particularly strong (-0.078), but it is nonetheless lower than the level reached before the 1980s (-0.163). Also the probability of alternation shows interesting results. In the first phase, the association with the party-system format is strong

and statistically significant (0.346), accounting for 12 per cent of the overall variance, while the coefficient for the second phase (1980-2015) is weak and not statistically significant. To sum up, the hypothesised relationship between party-system fragmentation and the way cabinets are replaced over time is not as straightforward and strong as many scholars have maintained in the last decades. Simply put, the number of parties matters, but not as much as we would have thought from perusing the literature on the topic.

Indeed, variations across countries and through space depict a far more complex association, which deserves a more fine-grained description of the phenomenon. If the negative relationship between fragmentation and alternation finds a confirmation, albeit weak, across the bulk of the universe of cases here investigated, all the differences encountered throughout this chapter should not be underestimated. National specificities, as well as the effect of other factors, must be taken into account for the explanation of variance in government turnover and alternation. Only through the combination or accumulation of these factors can one obtain a better explanation of the political phenomenon here analysed. A second factor, which is the structure of inter-party competition, will be analysed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Dualism: two-partyism and bipolarism

5.1. Introduction

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the number of parties matters. Not always, not everywhere and not to the same extent, though it affects the way democracies change and works. However, the format of the system is not the only determinant of the level (or kind) of government turnover. Other structural factors may exert an influence on the pattern of rotation in office. In addition, even though the party-system format entails dynamic predispositions, the mechanics of the system feeds back on its format. Or, to put it differently, the structure of inter-party competition may encapsulate and mitigate the effect of the fragmentation existing in the system. In many circumstances, indeed, the competition between political parties takes place around distinct blocks, or poles, which constrain and discipline the structure of opportunities available to the parties and, to some extent, the voters. In this sense, the explanation of the patterns of turnover in government should take into careful consideration the effect of these 'constraining' or 'blocking' factors.

It is no coincidence that both Duverger (1954) and Sartori (1976) recognise the existence of a link between the structure of party competition, on the one hand, and the phenomenon of alternation in power, on the other. Duverger admits that dualism, let alone two-partyism, allows wholesale rotations at the governmental level. Sartori himself, as discussed in Chapter 4, argues that limited and moderate multi-party systems, with some specific *caveats*, may function as two-party systems in disguise. That is, with the more or less recurring replacements of alternative coalitions. In sum, the format matters, but other overarching factors can matter as well, even to a greater extent. One of these factors that I shall analyse in this chapter concerns the existence of poles among political parties that, by constraining party-system fragmentation, allows a specific pattern of rotation in office. More specifically, the presence of a bipolar structure of electoral competition can modify the conditions fostering or hindering governmental alternation. Hence, in the course of this chapter I will assess the impact that a bipolar structure of competition has on the process of turnover in office. Does bipolarism affect the degree of government turnover and the frequency of alternation? And, in the affirmative case, to what extent? These and other questions will be addressed in the following pages.

5.2. From concepts to variables

In the political realm as in many other fields, there exist concepts that are easy to spot but difficult to grasp. Bipolarism, two-partyism, political poles or electoral blocks are only a few, though significant, examples. Very often we recognise, just by facing it, the existence of a bipolar structure of party competition, but the passage from the world of words to the world of numbers is not an easy task. The concepts of two-partyism or bipolarism encompass different configurations of factors that cannot easily translate into a single, perfect variable. The best or safest way to circumvent this problem is to resort to a host of variables or proxies that, on the whole, can offer the most plausible description of the phenomenon at hand.

The first variable that I will introduce in the analysis is the size of the two largest parties. In fact, one can assume that if the system is built around two large and electorally strong parties, the dynamics of competition will assume a bipolar structure. Obviously, for many different reasons, this is not always the case. To illustrate, let us take the case of Italy until the early 1990s. The two largest parties – the Christian

Democracy (DC) and the Communist Party (PCI) – did not experience a bipolar form of competition, based on a government-versus-opposition pattern, but they were the main pillars of a polarised multi-party system that ruled out any possibility of alternation in power. Although the Italian party system was originally described as one of ‘imperfect two-partyism’ (Galli 1966), because of that ‘construction fault’ derived by the existence of anti-system parties, the functioning of the system did not resemble that of ‘perfect’, that is, correctly defined, bipolarism. Despite all this, the sum of the two largest parties can however provide a hint of actual or potential two-partyism.

The second variable that can be used to study the structure of party competition follows directly on the heels of the previous specific variable but with the addition of a minor qualification. A bipolar structure of the party system might be based on the existence of two alternative coalitions that, before the election, present their alliance and platforms to the voters. Of course, two-partyism is a special case of bipolarism in the sense that the two coalitions are as a matter of fact formed only by one party each. Hence, in these circumstances the index of two-partyism is equivalent to that of bipolarism. Yet in other circumstances the two indices are not equivalent. For instance, in some Nordic countries, especially in Sweden and Norway, the competition occurs between a labour or social-democratic party and, on the other side, a set of parties gathered around what is usually called a ‘bourgeois coalition’. In all these instances, the indices of two-partyism and bipolarism yield different results and accordingly deserve separate treatments.

To recapitulate, so far I have put forward two operational definitions for the bipolar structure of the party system. On the one hand, we find the index of two-partyism, which is calculated as the sum of the seat-share of the two largest parties. On the other hand, there is the index of bipolarism, which measures the size of the two main poles when the pattern of competition is based on a bipolar logic. In other words, this index is not simply the combined seat-share of the two largest coalitions in the legislature. It is so only and to the extent to which the dynamics of the party system presupposes a dualistic, in-and-out logic. In many cases the sheer existence of two sufficiently large parties or coalitions is not *per se* a synonym of a bipolar mechanics in the competition between parties.¹ The case of Italy in the twentieth century – with two very large parties and the absence of a pattern of competition based on the government vs. opposition divide – is a good case in point.

Therefore, what we need is a measure which takes into account both of the following elements, namely, the size of the largest parties/coalitions and the existence of a pattern of party confrontation based on a clear bipolar logic. This latter element can be analysed by introducing an ad hoc specification, which implies the presence in the party system of a *pivotal actor* that, thanks to its *centrality* and *dominance vis-à-vis* other parties, plays a crucial role in making (and breaking) government. The appearance of such a pivotal party in the system brings about the disappearance of a bipolar pattern of inter-party competition. As pointed out by Keman (1994: 144), parties ‘identified as genuine pivot parties appear to have a central position within their party system, which is reflected in a high and continuing, degree of party control of government. This powerful position is almost always shaped within a coalition and is often structured by means of an oversized party government’. Accordingly, the existence of a pivotal party should be interpreted as the absence of bipolarity in the party system.

In the light of the above specifications, the second indicator (bipolarism) will measure the parliamentary strength of two major parties, or coalitions, *exclusively* in those circumstances in which the mode of inter-party competition follows a dualist (or bipolar) structure, that is, when the party system *does not include* a pivotal actor. Hence, this ‘index of bipolarism’ has a value of 0 when inter-party competition does not take place among two alternative sets of rulers, whereas it is measured as the sum of the two largest poles (either parties or coalitions) in those situations characterised by a dualist form of party confrontation.

¹ It should be specified that sometimes we can face ‘asymmetrical’ bipolarism, namely, situations in which a single party competes directly with a group of allied parties.

5.3. Types of dualism: trends and trajectories

The general hypothesis, originally formulated by the French scholar Maurice Duverger, states that political dualism is conducive to a specific pattern of government turnover. When electoral competition occurs between two rival teams of politicians chasing the executive power, the likelihood of a complete replacement of the governing parties increases substantially. Thus, dualism matters. Yet dualism in politics is a very slippery concept, which can assume different forms and formats. In order to deal effectively with this concept, I have devised two variables that, in different ways, try to detect the trajectory of dualism across Western European countries and through time:

- 1) two-partyism (combined seat-share of the top-2 parties);
- 2) index of bipolarism (combined seat-share of the top-2 parties or coalitions when there is no pivot party in the system)

With these tools at hand, we can proceed to analyse the trends of dualism in Europe. From the breakdown by decade in Table 5.1, the figures show no common trend: dualism has almost steadily decreased over time, while the rise in bipolarism peaks in the 2000s. More precisely, the trend in two-partyism is upward until the 1980s. For instance, in the 1980s the combined seat-share of the two largest parties amounts to 70.9 per cent. By contrast, in the last thirty years or so, the figures of two-partyism have fallen to their lowest values. In brief, dualism has experienced a downward trajectory that received a boost from the early 1990s. Especially in the last years, beginning in the 2010s, the mean values for two-partyism (62.1%) are much lower than those for the whole period (68.1%). From this perspective, the process of *dualisation* within the European party systems halted at about the dawn of the twenty-first century.

However, a different scenario emerges by looking at the figures of bipolarism. On the one hand, party systems in Western Europe have progressively adopted a bipolar structure, partially in response to the decline of the pivotal parties throughout Europe. To a certain extent, this process has set the stage for the growth of alternation in West European countries. On the other hand, this development has witnessed a slowdown in the last period, especially in the last twenty-years. At any event, the data presented thus far reveals the existence of a two-fold process, whereby the overall decline of two-partyism has been limited or substituted by a rising level of bipolarism. In other words, a bipolar structure of inter-party competition has gradually emerged from the electoral failure of the largest parties in each country.

Tab. 5.1. Trend in party dualism and bipolarism in Western Europe 1945-2015 (seat-share, mean values %)

	Two-partyism (%)	Bipolarism (%)
1940s	67.6	22.3
1950s	67.4	36.7
1960s	72.6	52.2
1970s	68.4	57.3
1980s	70.9	60.7
1990s	65.2	62.1
2000s	66.8	62.5
2010s	62.1	57.4
Average	68.1	52.2

Looking at the trends in party system dualism is interesting *per se*, because it points out a pattern of transformation of European party systems concordant with the one presented in the previous chapter: a rising number of increasingly smaller parties. In a way, the fragmentation in the format of the system spilled over and affected the underlying structure of competition. Yet, this development is even more relevant if compared to the trend experienced by the same group of countries in terms of government turnover and

alternation. As we know from the discussion of the argument in Chapter 3, in the last three decades or so the level of government turnover has increased and the same has happened for the frequency of alternation in power. Surprisingly, this development took place in conjunction with a rising party-system fragmentation and a decreasing two-partyism. So how can we explain these trends?

Before trying to address that question, it is worth analysing the trend in party dualism at the country level. With regard to two-partyism, in the vast majority of nations (see Table 5.2) the lowest values are recorded for the last twenty-five years (1990-2015). The exceptions being France, Germany, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. In many cases, these figures relate to the ‘founding’ elections (Germany and Ireland, in the 1940s, Spain and Portugal in the 1970s), when party systems were witnessing a process of ‘structuring’. Beyond these exceptions, in all other cases we can observe an erosion of the votes for the two largest parties. This trend is particularly evident, *inter alia*, in Austria where the size of the top-2 parties fell from 94.2 in the 1940s to 54.1 in the 2010s, and in the United Kingdom where the sum of the votes for the Labour and the Conservative parties diminishes over time by more than ten percentage points.

Tab.5.2. Combined set-share of the top-2 largest parties in West European countries, by decade (mean values, %)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	94.2	92.9	95.5	95.0	90.9	69.0	69.3	54.1	84.7
Belgium	78.7	85.6	69.6	62.7	49.5	34.4	31.5	36.3	59.7
Denmark	64.2	62.8	61.5	51.3	50.3	57.1	54.3	49.5	56.2
Finland	49.2	52.6	47.6	46.5	51.0	52.1	52.8	44.5	49.6
France	51.3	43.5	71.5	70.3	69.5	71.9	86.4	82.1	61.2
Germany	67.2	82.6	88.8	91.9	87.2	82.2	72.5	79.9	84.2
Greece	-	-	-	88.0	92.3	92.4	85.0	73.1	85.5
Iceland	63.5	70.8	66.7	65.0	54.5	65.6	64.7	60.3	63.9
Ireland	66.7	78.1	83.2	87.0	83.6	73.7	73.9	68.1	79.0
Italy	64.7	73.6	69.4	71.8	69.6	48.7	57.7	69.0	65.4
Luxembourg	71.2	78.5	73.2	61.9	67.8	61.1	64.2	60.0	69.2
Netherlands	60.0	62.7	58.9	53.7	65.5	51.3	50.4	46.7	57.3
Norway	69.7	70.5	68.2	66.1	74.3	57.6	52.3	60.9	66.2
Portugal	-	-	-	68.4	75.1	87.4	84.4	81.5	79.2
Spain	-	-	-	77.5	81.3	85.2	89.8	84.6	83.7
Sweden	73.5	71.2	68.0	67.7	67.2	63.4	61.1	59.6	67.1
United Kingdom	92.2	95.5	97.0	95.1	93.2	91.6	86.4	86.8	93.0
<i>Average</i>	<i>67.6</i>	<i>67.4</i>	<i>72.6</i>	<i>68.4</i>	<i>70.9</i>	<i>65.2</i>	<i>66.8</i>	<i>62.8</i>	<i>68.1</i>

Note: bold = negative peak.

Regarding bipolarism, the figures reveal a much more erratic scenario. Despite the overall trend indicating a rising level of bipolarism, in most countries the peak is recorded before the 1980s. For instance, in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom the heyday of bipolarism took place in the first three decades after WWII. By contrast, the countries showing an upward trend in bipolarism are – besides the exceptions of France, Italy and, partially, the Netherlands – the so-called ‘third wave’ democracies, namely, Greece, Portugal and Spain. To some extent, the general decline of bipolarism has been hidden by the entry in the dataset of these three countries, characterised by a Westminster-style of party competition.

Two more countries witness an upward trend in bipolarism: France and Italy. The former reaches its peak with the advent and the ensuing consolidation of the Fifth Republic, while the latter ‘discovers’ bipolarism in the early 1990s. This specific development is linked to the approval of two electoral laws (in 1993 and in 2005) which provided the incentives for the formation of two ‘all-encompassing coalitions’ (D’Alimonte 2005) including almost all the winning-seat parties. In this light, the Italian case shows that party-

system fragmentation, under specific conditions, can coexist with alternation in power. What is more, the case of Italy reveals that significant government turnover can indeed coincide with a party system that is in the middle of a 'destructuring' process.

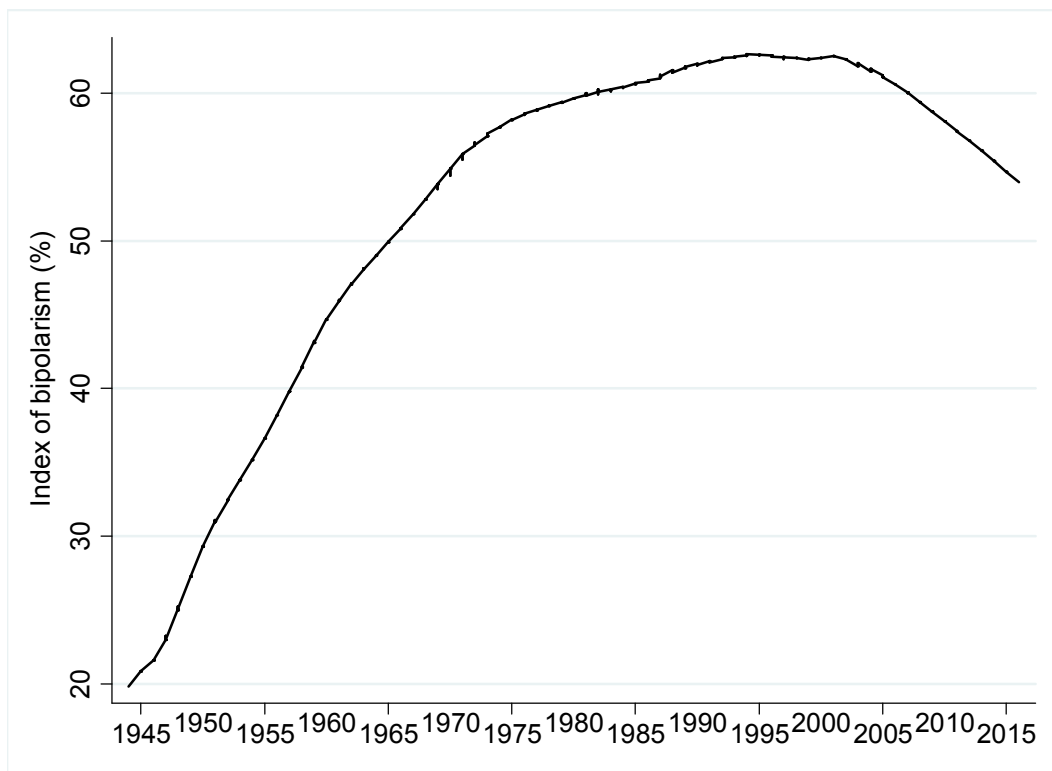
Tab. 5.3. Bipolarism in West European countries, by decade (mean values, %)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	0	0	0	95.0	90.9	69.0	49.0	54.1	45.3
Belgium	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	64.2	62.8	63.0	50.0	50.3	57.1	54.3	49.5	56.2
Finland	33.0	31.8	20.8	46.1	51.0	10.9	0	25.8	30.1
France	0	0	70.1	87.5	89.2	92.5	93.2	82.1	43.4
Germany	61.7	72.3	79.7	82.4	77.4	74.8	66.9	79.9	75.8
Greece	-	-	-	88.0	92.1	92.3	89.2	73.1	86.3
Iceland	63.5	69.4	70.0	65.0	53.2	64.6	64.0	0	61.0
Ireland	81.6	88.4	99.8	97.7	94.5	92.9	89.4	68.1	92.3
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	59.2	95.9	81.4	24.4
Luxembourg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Netherlands	0	0	0	38.2	15.3	0	0	46.7	11.7
Norway	78.8	97.7	99.5	96.8	94.7	83.0	76.2	60.9	90.2
Portugal	-	-	-	68.4	77.0	87.0	83.6	81.5	80.3
Spain	-	-	-	77.6	81.3	85.3	89.8	84.6	83.7
Sweden	96.5	97.4	97.9	94.8	91.8	87.1	87.4	90.2	93.3
United Kingdom	94.7	98.6	98.4	95.1	93.1	91.6	86.4	86.8	94.0
<i>Average</i>	22.3	36.7	52.2	57.3	60.7	62.1	62.5	57.4	52.2

Note: bold = peak.

All in all, the structure of inter-party competition in Western Europe seems to be less and less characterised by the presence of two major parties or alternative coalitions. More precisely, dualism exists and persists but its strength is decreasing. As Figure 5.1 indicates, this development accelerated remarkably during the mid-1990s and hit its negative peak in the last years of the twenty-first century. However, this general trend conceals many national variations and, in some cases, the change in party-system dualism is sizable. Therefore, a complete explanation of the relationship between political dualism and government turnover shall also take into consideration national developments.

Fig. 5.1. Trend in bipolarism in Western Europe, 1945-2105 (lowess smoothed line)²



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

5.4. Combining the pieces of the triptych: dualism, government turnover and alternation

A few decades ago, Sartori (1986: 44) noted that ‘Duverger’s “dualism” is an accordion-like notion’ that can contain different objects, even inconsistent among each other. However, due to how I have treated that notion here, the risk of internal inconsistency was avoided. Party dualism is simply a continuous measure that indicates the strength of the largest parties or coalitions in a given legislature. That said, and even though this nuanced notion of dualism does not contain any in-built mechanical predispositions, it is important to analyse the association between two-partyism or bipolarism and rotation in office.

Table 5.4 reports the measures of government turnover broken down by three distinct categories of two-partyism: low, medium and high level. With reference to the degree of government turnover, the highest value can be found in the ‘medium’ category, namely in those situations in which the sum of the seat-share of the two largest parties is between 50 and 75 per cent. The result changes by looking at the level of government turnover – that is, the actual level of rotation in office when a government change occurs. In this circumstance, the mean level of turnover is equal to 71.1 when the ‘strength’ of two-partyism goes from 75 to 100 per cent. This is equivalent to saying that, when the party system contains two large parties, rotation in office implies the substitution of a great portion of the old governing parties. This happens because in the vast majority of cases the two parties are mutually exclusive, in the sense that the entry of one party implies the exit of the other.

² For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

Tab. 5.4. Two-partyism and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral two-partyism (%)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (25-50%)	29.0	41.2
Medium (50-75%)	30.5	51.3
High (75-100%)	30.2	71.1

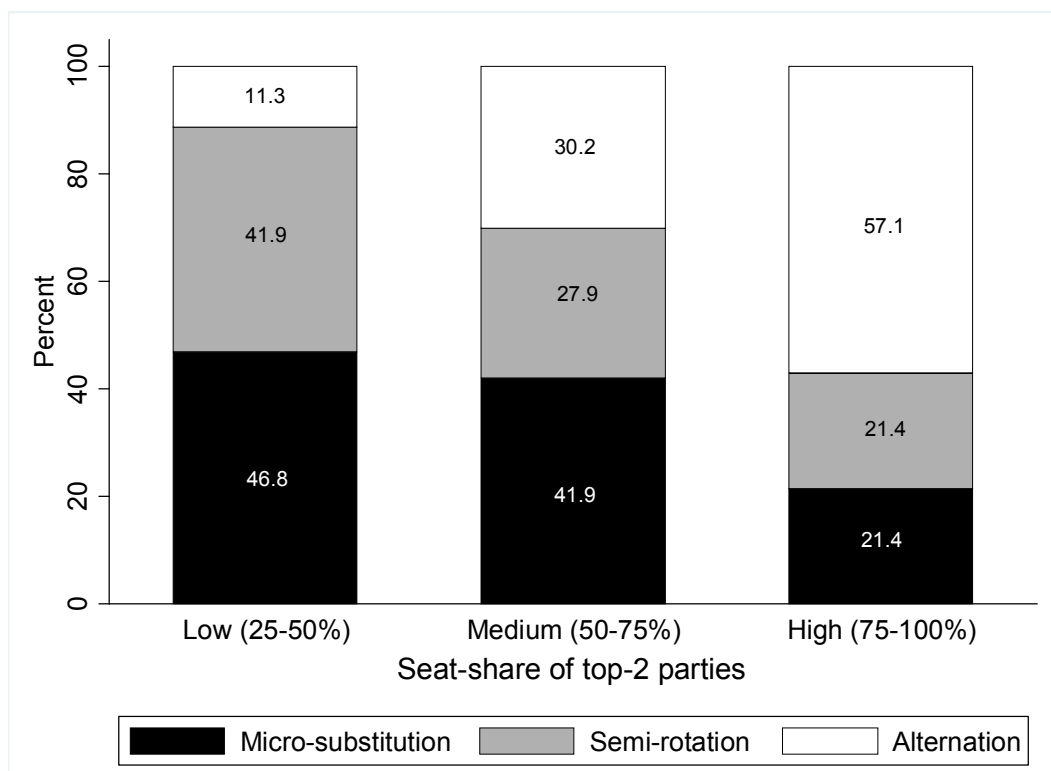
Looking at the measures of alternation in power in Table 5.5, it should be pointed out, first, that the frequency of wholesale partisan substations is higher when the functioning of the party system is based on the existence of two large parties. Indeed, in these situations more than two cabinets out of ten are the product of an alternation in office. What is striking, however, is that the possibility of alternation is not as high as we would have expected in cases of a high level of two-partyism. Only in 26 per cent of cases where the top-2 parties got more the 75 per cent of vote was alternation mathematically possible. From this perspective, the possibility of alternation is higher (37.4%) in the 'medium' category of two-partyism, when the sum of the two largest parties does not surpass 75 per cent of the seat. However, in terms of probability of alternation, that is the likelihood that a wholesale rotation in office took place whenever the cabinet changes its partisan composition, 'high' two-partyism shows the highest value. More precisely, more than one government change out of two (57.1 per cent) is likely to occur through a governmental alternation. In a way, party dualism, thanks to its innate exploitative nature, not only creates the conditions for, but also seems to enhance, the occurrence of alternation in power.

Tab. 5.5. Two-partyism and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral two-partyism (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (25-50%)	9.1	12.9	24.4
Medium (50-75%)	17.4	29.1	37.4
High (75-100%)	24.2	57.1	26.0

If we now break down the three types of government turnover (i.e., micro-substitution, semi-rotation, alternation) by level or strength of electoral two-partyism, it is clear that alternation in government is the most frequent type of government change when the party system is based on the presence of two very large parties (see Figure 5.2). Conversely, when the sum of seat-share of the two major parties is below 50 per cent, a government change usually implies the substitution of minor governing parties. Certainly, electorally 'strong' two-partyism does not rule out the possibility that a *new* cabinet will be made up of parties that were in the previous cabinet. But these circumstances are absolutely rare events (21.4%) which do not invalidate or undermine the general pattern highlighted above.

Fig. 5.2. Type of government change by level of two-partyism in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (% values)



As to the notion of bipolarism and its association with government turnover, the figures that emerge from Table 5.6 are much sharper than those concerning electoral two-partyism. The degree as well as the level of government turnover are strongly related to the existence of a bipolar structure of party competition. More specifically, the mean level of rotation in office in cases of ‘high’ bipolarism is twice that of ‘low’ bipolarism, respectively 76.9 and 36.4 percent. Our measures of alternation, included in Table 5.7, yield the same results. Indeed, frequency of alternation is almost nil (3.1%) when the strength of bipolarism is extremely low (less than 50% of seats held by the two main coalitions) and it gradually grows with the advance of a bipolar competition between parties. With reference to the probability of alternation, the figures show that more than one government change out of two (58%) occur through a complete replacement of the governing parties, while that likelihood significantly decreases (4.7%) when parliamentary bipolarism is, so to speak, only a façade.

Tab. 5.6. Bipolarism and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Bipolarism (%)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (<60%)	24.7	36.4
Medium (60-80%)	31.2	58.6
High (80-100%)	37.4	76.9

In summary, however conceived and measured, party dualism affects the way cabinets change and rotate in office. A dualistic or bipolar structure of party competition appears to be associated with sizable rotations in office and a high frequency of alternation in power. As a formula: the higher the level of party dualism (however defined), the higher the level of government turnover and the frequency or likelihood of alternation in government. What is more, bipolarism seems to be more conducive to relevant rotation in office than electoral two-partyism. However, two-partyism or bipolarism may have a different impact in different nations and, to some extent, in different periods. The next section will delve deeper into these questions.

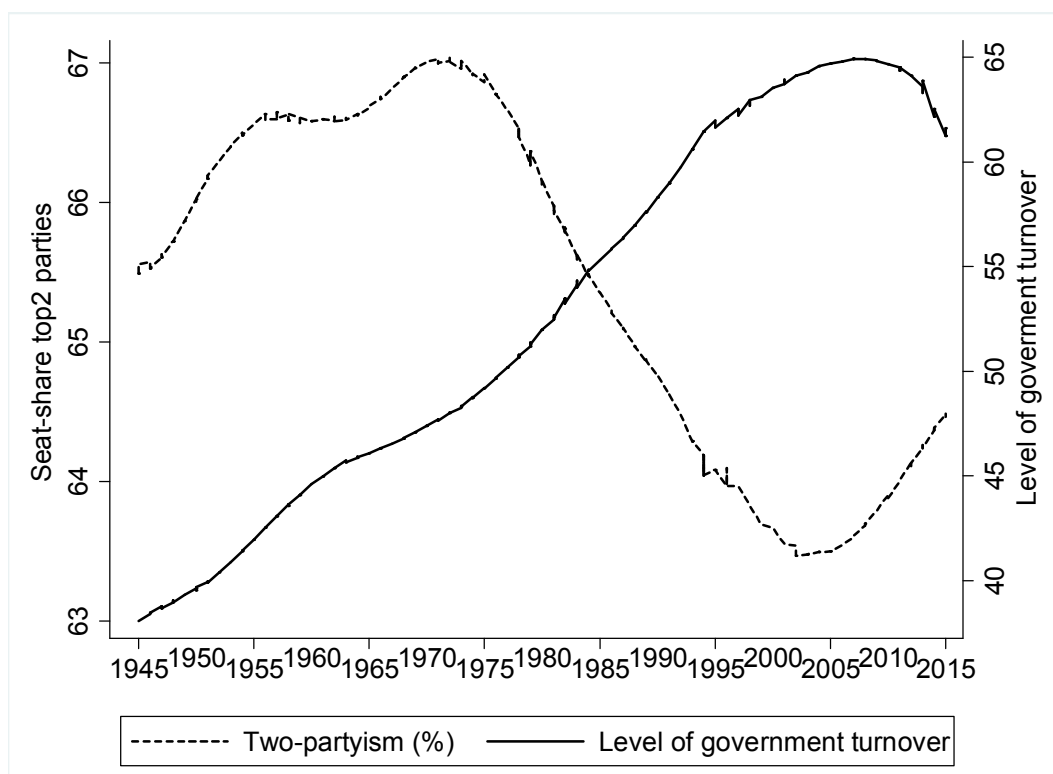
Tab. 5.7. Bipolarism and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Bipolarism (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (<60%)	5.3	7.8	20.0
Medium (60-80%)	15.6	29.3	34.6
High (80-100%)	33.3	68.5	49.2

5.5. National trends

Traditionally, in particular following the works of Duverger (1954) and Sartori (1976), political scientists have hypothesised a positive association between the existence of a dualistic structure of party competition and the level of government turnover. In fact, two large parties are used to alternate, more or less regularly, in power. However, if we look at this association over time, it is clear that the supposed relationship is not as straightforward as we would have imagined. As shown in Figure 5.2, the steady decrease in electoral two-partyism went hand in hand with an overall rise in the level of government turnover. In other words, in spite of the fact that the seat-share of the two largest parties has fallen, the extent of rotation occurring within the cabinet has grown. Only in the last decade have the two lines started moving together and downward.

Fig. 5.3. Two-partyism and level of government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed line)³



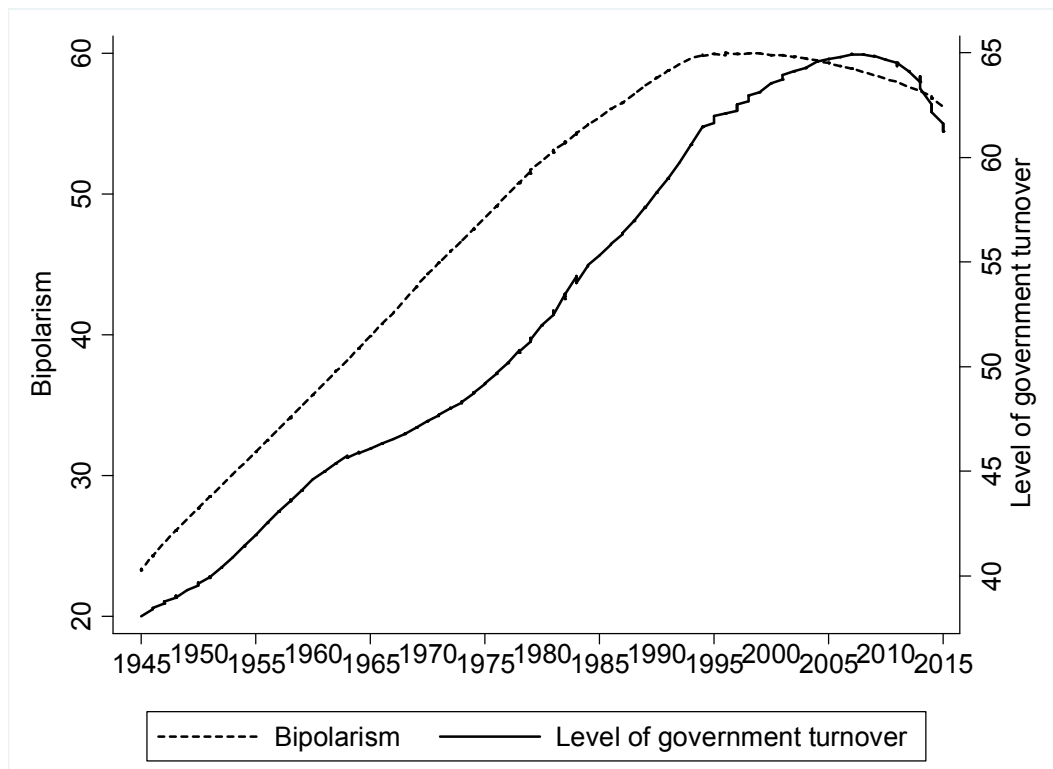
Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

As already pointed out, this development may however conceal national peculiarities that to some extent can explain this somewhat paradoxical trend. In addition, the decrease in electoral two-partyism may be balanced out by the existence of a coalition between two or more parties. For the sake of illustration,

³ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

Figure 5.4 depicts the development through time of bipolarism and level of government turnover. In contrast with the previous figure, since 1945 the evolution of bipolarism strictly follows the rise in the level of government turnover. As the strength of the bipolar structure of party competition grows, the level of government turnover has progressively increased over time. It is also interesting to note that the recent slowdown in bipolarism, especially since the mid-1990s, has brought about a parallel, though partial, decline in the level of governmental turnover.

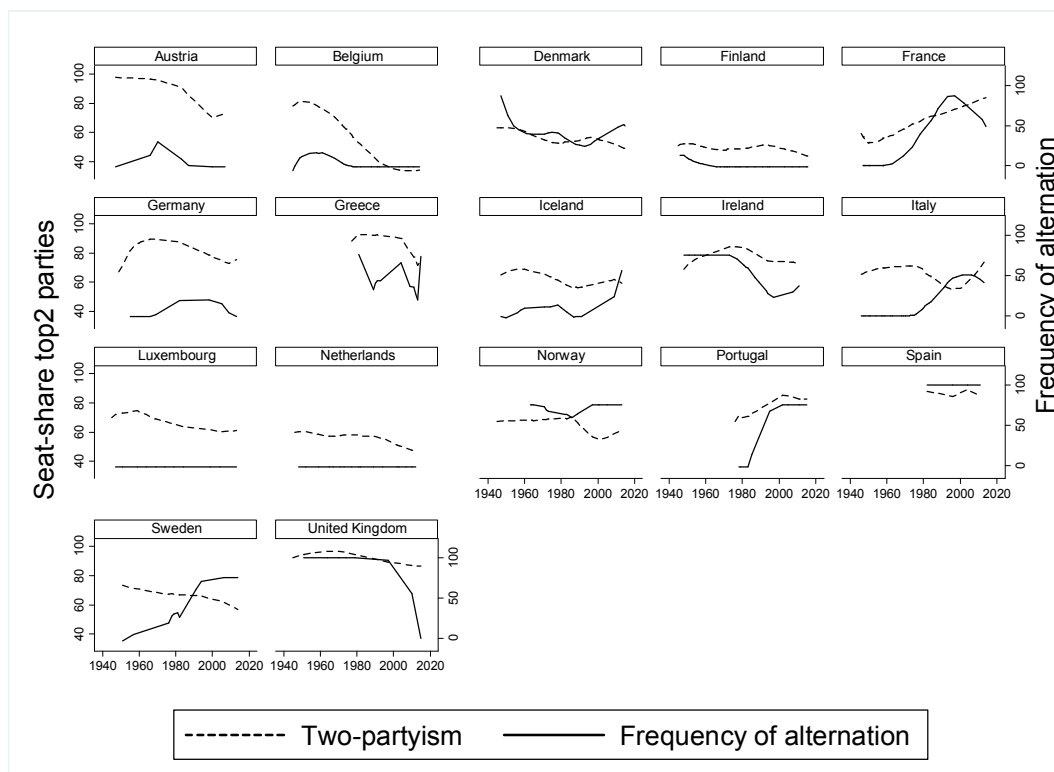
Fig. 5.4. Bipolarism and level of government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowest smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis

This general trend, however, tells only one part of a much more complex story. First of all, the story we are talking about is not a single story, but many stories or, better, it is a story made up of many stories. National trends and variations may lose their specificities if watered-down within analytical frameworks that do not allow or recognise cross-country developments. Furthermore, a relationship that seems straightforward at the general level, that is when we analyse the universe of cases without any differentiations, might lose its strength if observed from a different, case-by-case, perspective. Accordingly, in order to get a better explanation of the phenomenon at hand, it is worth analysing the evolution of government alternation and party dualism at the country level. What we have just said finds confirmation in Figure 5.5, which charts, for each country, the frequency of alternation and the combined seat-share of the two largest parties.

Fig. 5.5. Frequency of alternation and two-partyism in seventeen European countries, 1945-2015 (lowest smoothed lines)



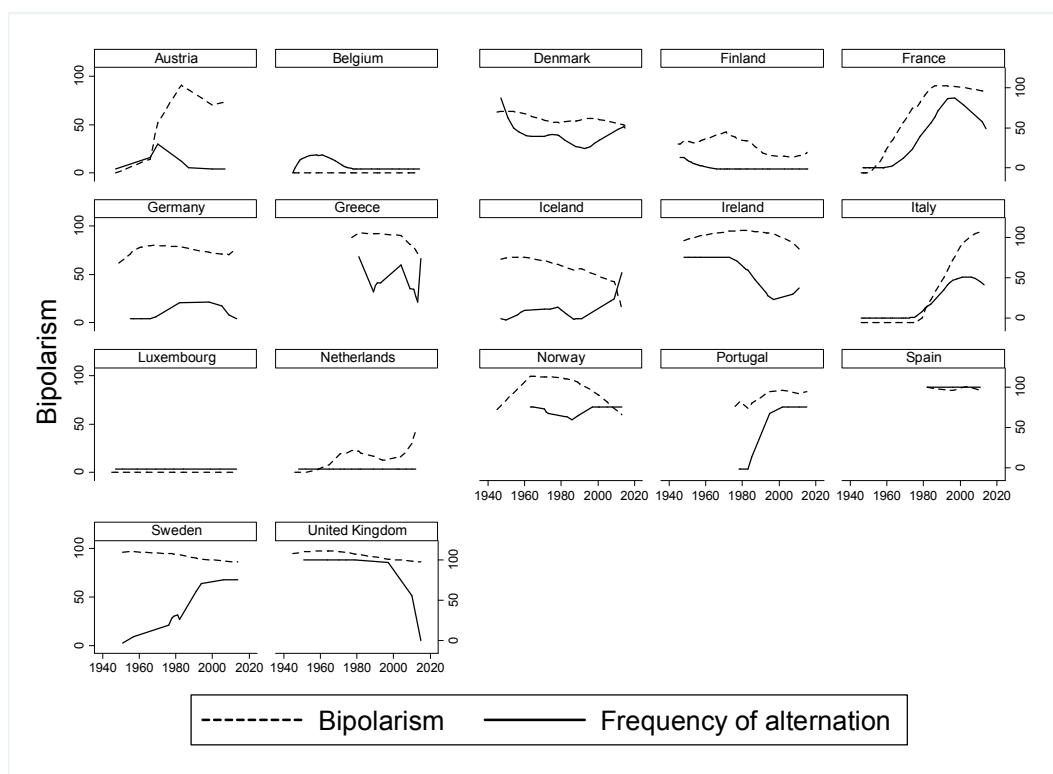
Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

Overall, we can observe a downward trend in terms of two-partyism in 13 countries, the only exceptions being Finland, France, Portugal and Spain, where the decline is either limited or utterly absent. Nevertheless, looking at the association between alternation and dualism (*qua* two-partyism) it is evident that in some nations their developments do not follow a similar trajectory. For instance, in Luxembourg and the Netherlands alternation is and remains absent, whereas the level of two-partyism shows ups (a few) and downs (many) over time. Italy is another interesting case because it reveals that alternation can easily be combined with a sharp decline in the size of two largest parties. For the sake of truth, in the Italian case alternation in government makes its entry in the system precisely when the size of the top-two parties starts declining. A similar, albeit not so evident, pattern of (non)association is visible in Sweden, where the decline of two-partyism goes hand in hand with a steady rise in the frequency of alternation. In other cases, for instance in Ireland and the United Kingdom, alternation and party dualism seem to follow disconnected trajectories, without any clear association. The same holds true for Germany, which experiences its first (and unique) alternation (in 1998) in a phase characterised by an electoral weakening of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) and the Social-democratic Party (SPD).

By contrast, there are cases in which a strengthening of the major parties has paved the way for the occurrence of a pattern of alternation at the governmental level. France, in particular since the 1960s, is a good case in point. Spain and Portugal, too, show that the frequency of wholesale rotation in office starts growing in conjunction with the growth of party dualism. Hence, the evidence collected so far at the country level does not lead to any stable and clear conclusion. Two-partyism can be conducive to government alternation in some polities and, conversely, can be utterly uninfluential in other situations. Which means that other factors, not yet investigated, may have played a role in the occurrence or non-occurrence of alternation in power.

Yet, if we move towards the analysis of party dualism *qua* bipolarism, the resulting picture may have less ambiguous contours (see Figure 5.6). In particular, we can observe that the decline of the two largest parties in some countries has been balanced out by the presence of electoral alliances which have preserved the dualistic logic of party competition. This development is crystal-clear in Italy, where the void left by the collapse of the Christian Democracy (DC) and the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in the early 1990s has been filled by the formation of two large, or ‘long’ (Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006), coalitions made up of many relevant, however small, parties. In this case, the practice of pre-electoral alliances has been a sort of functional equivalent for a strong or effective two-partyism. Besides all the differences, a similar trend occurred in Germany where alternation took place thanks to the creation of two pre-electoral coalitions, namely, the Red-Greens on the one hand and the Conservative *plus* the Liberal party on the other. In France, it was the formation of the so-called *quadrille bipolaire* that brought about a (new) pattern of *alternance au pouvoir*, and similar trends can also be detected, to a lesser extent, in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

Fig. 5.6. Frequency of alternation and bipolarism in seventeen European democracies, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

To sum up, the relationship between party dualism and alternation is not totally unambiguous and presents many grey areas. These uncertain ‘territories’ may, to some extent, be enlightened by a thorough examination of the many facets of party dualism, in particular by differentiating between two-partyism and bipolarism. In fact, in many countries we have observed that the latter have gradually replaced the effect of the former. As the late Peter Mair (2011: 78) argued, Western European party systems experienced ‘a process of systemic adaptation in which the multi-party offer becomes reorganized into a two-bloc competition. [...] In other words, the systems become Frenchified or Italianized, and so present their traditionally expressive voters with the opportunity to act instrumentally’. In this sense, the modal form of inter-party competition is now bipolar and this transformation has nullified, so to speak, the impact of the electoral erosion for the

major parties. Nevertheless, this process was not homogeneously distributed, either across countries or through time.

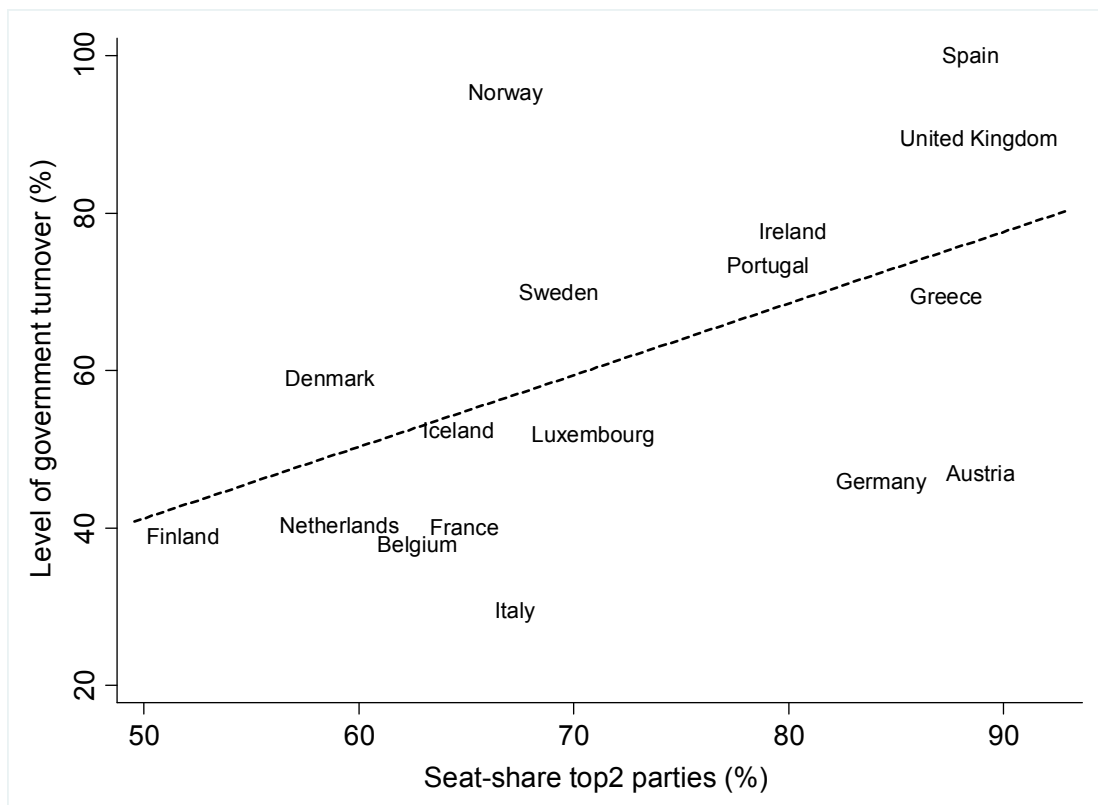
Therefore, party dualism is an important factor that cannot be ruled out if we aim at explaining the process of alternation in power. Its impact shows both cross-time and cross-space variations that must be taken into account for the analysis of the different patterns of rotation in office. That said, it is time now to move on and assess the strength of the association between party dualism, in its various formats, and government alternation.

5.6. Alternation and bipolarism: a comparative exploration

In light of the above discussion, it is possible to hypothesise a positive relationship between the strength of party dualism and the pattern of government turnover. In other words, the stronger the major parties or coalitions in the system, the higher the level of turnover and frequency of alternation in power. The analysis of this association can be carried out in multiple ways, even with the adoption of statistical techniques. Yet, before measuring the strength of that association, it would be useful to investigate graphically its direction.

Figure 5.7 plots the level of government turnover against the size of the two largest parties and the figures reveal a positive association, albeit quite weak. In some countries such as the United Kingdom and Spain, the combined seat-share of the two major parties, whose sum amounts to nearly 80 per cent, are associated with the highest values of government turnover. Nevertheless, there exist other nations (e.g., Austria and Germany) where an even higher level of two-partyism relates to a lower level of turnover. The comparison between Spain and the United Kingdom, on the one hand, and Austria and Germany, on the other, is illuminating because it reveals that it is not the strength of two-partyism *per se* that explains the occurrence of a sizeable reshuffling within the cabinet

Fig. 5.7. Two-partyism and level of government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

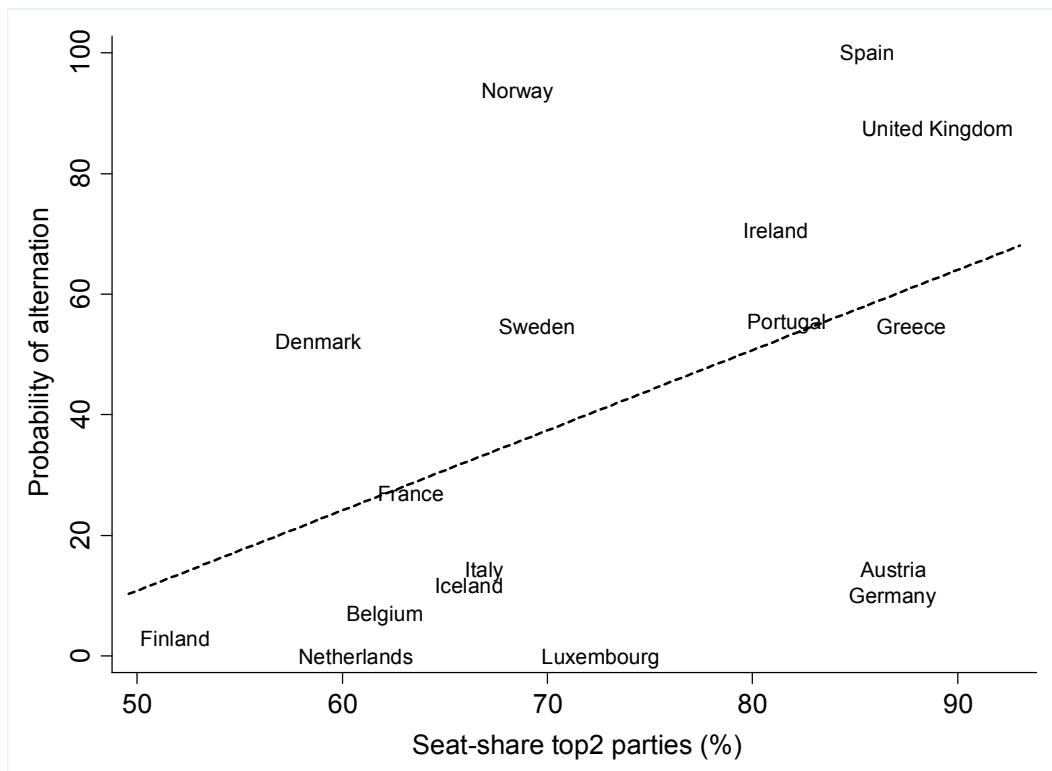


Moreover, as I have already specified, this measure of party dualism does not contain any mechanical predispositions. More precisely, saying 'two-partyism' is different than saying 'two-party system'. The latter implies a specific dynamics in terms of party competition, while the former is 'blind' from that perspective, having no theoretical implication for the cabinet configuration. This conceptual difference explains the empirical difference between the two pairs of our comparison. For instance, in Germany the high level of two-partyism is, in a way, neutralised by the existence of minor parties, especially the Liberal party. Instead, in the United Kingdom the presence of only two relevant parties (at least until the 2010s) paved the way for the occurrence of alternation.

From a different viewpoint, also the comparison between Italy and Norway is rather telling. Until the 1990s, the seat-share of the top-2 parties was rather similar in Italy and Norway. Yet despite this similarity, they show very different levels of government turnover. In the Italian case, rotation in office was limited, given the pivotal role played by the Christian Democracy and the impossibility of the Communists getting into a coalition government. On the contrary, in Norway the absence of a pivotal party located in the middle of the party system created the conditions, especially after the 1960s, for a centripetal style of competition and a pattern of alternation between two teams of would-be rulers.

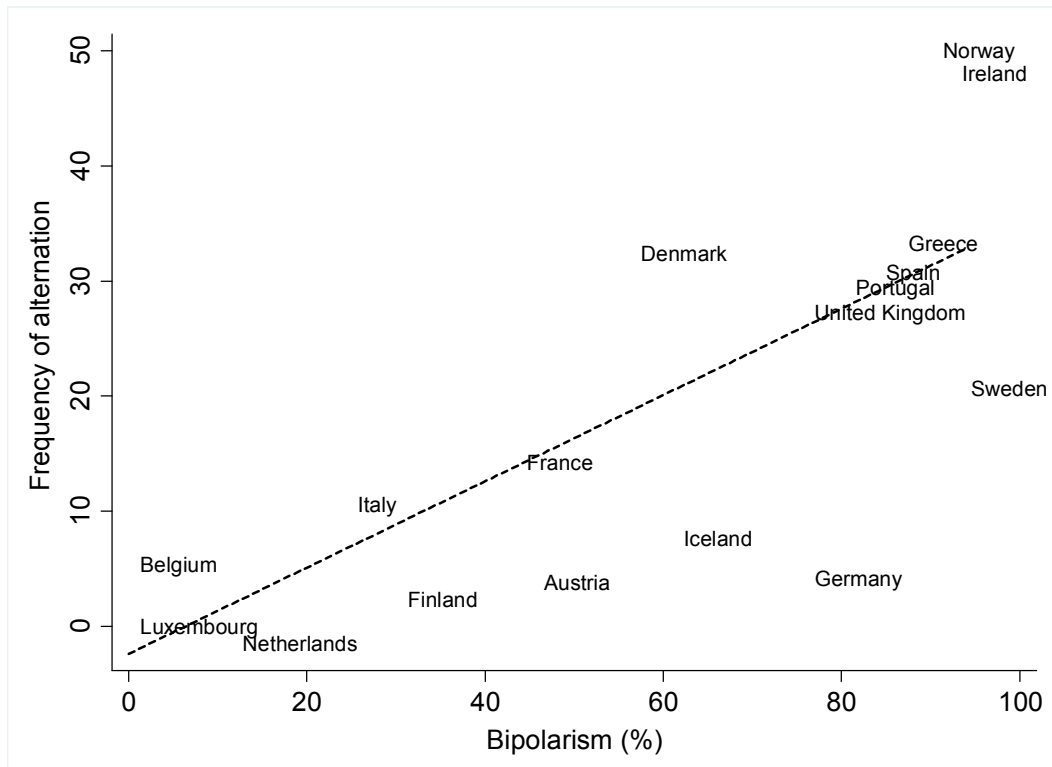
What I have just argued for Italy and Norway can be observed in Figure 5.8, which plots, for each country, the probability of alternation against the mean value of two-partyism. In this case, there is no clear trend emerging from the figure. In fact, the likelihood of an alternation in power may be high or low irrespective of the size of the two major parties. From this vantage point, the case of Luxembourg is absolutely revealing. The two largest Luxembourgian parties are, on average, electorally stronger than those in Sweden and Norway, but voters in Luxembourg never had the possibility to kick out of office a government in its entirety. A similar comparison can be applied to the cases of Denmark and the Netherlands: they have similar levels of party dualism but extremely different patterns of rotation in office. In sum, party dualism can be associated with both high and low levels of government turnover and frequency of alternation in power. The existence of two large parties may set the stage for the creation of a government-versus-opposition pattern of competition, but the appearance of alternation happens when other intervening factors enter the scene.

Fig. 5.8. Two-partyism and probability of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



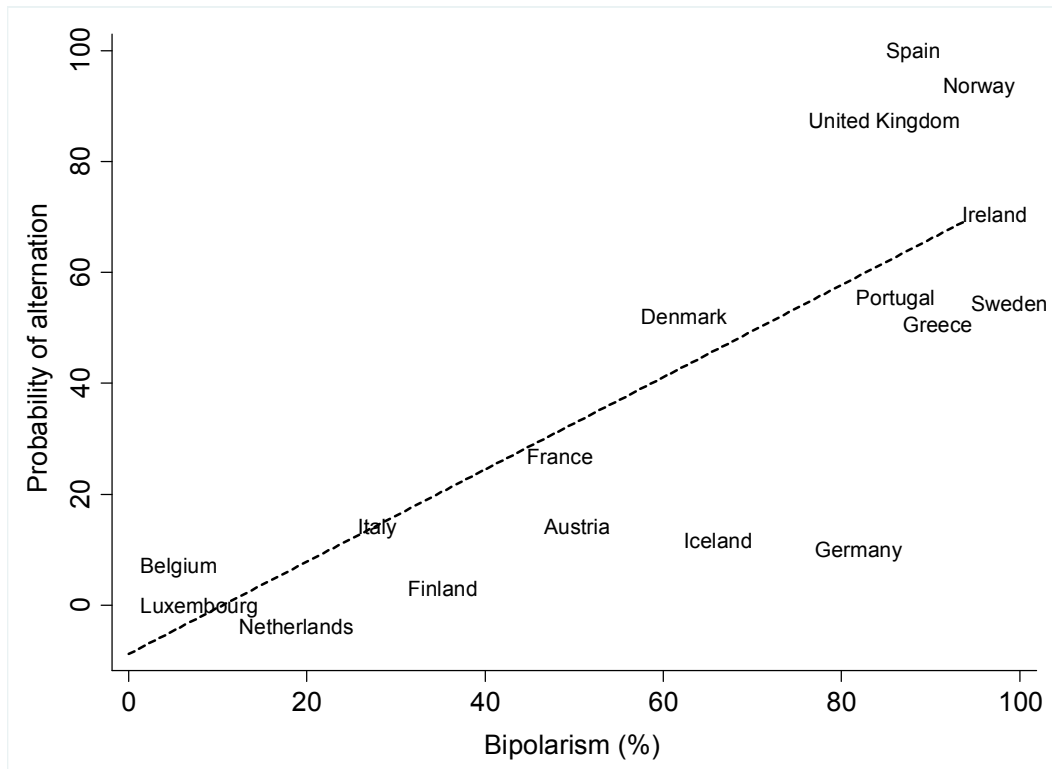
An alternative approach to assess the association between party dualism and patterns of government turnover is by analysing what we have properly defined here as bipolarism. It is worth recalling that Sartori himself argued that, in case of moderate multi-party systems, the mechanics of the system ‘tends to resemble and to imitate – albeit with a higher degree of complexity – the mechanics of twopartyism’ (Sartori 1976: 158-159). Therefore, the presence of alternative coalitions and the respective balance of power between them can be conducive to alternation in power. This argument is tested in Figure 5.9, which reports, for each country, the frequency of alternation and the mean value of bipolarism. The figures reveal a strong association between alternation and bipolarism: the countries with the highest seat-share for the two alternative coalitions are those showing a higher frequency of alternation in government. A cluster of countries (i.e., Ireland, Norway and Italy since 1994) shows that the highest frequency of alternation in power is linked to a very high level of bipolarism. On the opposite side, in countries with a limited bipolarism, such as the Fourth French republic, Finland, Belgium, Iceland and the Netherlands, alternation in power is a rare event. Nevertheless, these figures contain a relevant deviant case: Denmark. Despite its levels of bipolarism, since the end of WWII, the history of Denmark has been punctuated by very frequent government alternations. In this sense, it can be argued that a bipolar structure of party competition is not *per se* a sufficient condition for the occurrence of wholesale rotation in office.

Fig. 5.9. Frequency of alternation and bipolarism in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



If we now look at the probability of alternation, that is the likelihood that a government change took the form of an alternation in office, the figures reveal a pattern similar to the one just examined: the stronger the bipolar dynamics, the higher the probability of a complete substitution of the governing parties (see Figure 5.10). However, here at the top right corner one finds the United Kingdom, the classic example of what Lijphart (2012) and Powell (2000) called ‘majoritarian democracy’, namely a polity characterised by the concentration of political power in the hands of two relevant parties and a pattern of government change that follows the dividing line between the incumbent governors and the alternative government-in-waiting at the opposition side. Yet, high frequency of alternation in office is not reserved only to the majoritarian democracies. Following Powell’s (2000) two visions of democracy, among our seventeen countries only three nations can be considered as ‘predominantly majoritarian’: Greece, France (during the Fifth Republic) and the United Kingdom. Concordant with this description, these three polities combine a high concentration of power within two parties or poles and a high probability of alternation in power. Yet also other nations, which Powell does not include among the majoritarian democracies, report a high likelihood of wholesale government turnover: Ireland, Spain, Norway, Sweden, Portugal (and Italy after the 1993 electoral reform). All these political systems – included in the ‘mixed’ or ‘predominantly proportional’ categories by Powell (2000: 47) – have been capable of combining a pattern of rotation in office typical of the majoritarian democracies (alternation) with other institutional arrangements that characterise the proportional ones. For this reason, one can argue that alternation in power is a political phenomenon that cuts across the existing models or types of democracies. Furthermore, even though alternation has been traditionally linked to the ‘majoritarian vision’, its occurrence has not been exclusively limited to them. Proportional democracies, too, have experienced more or less prolonged phases of alternation in power.

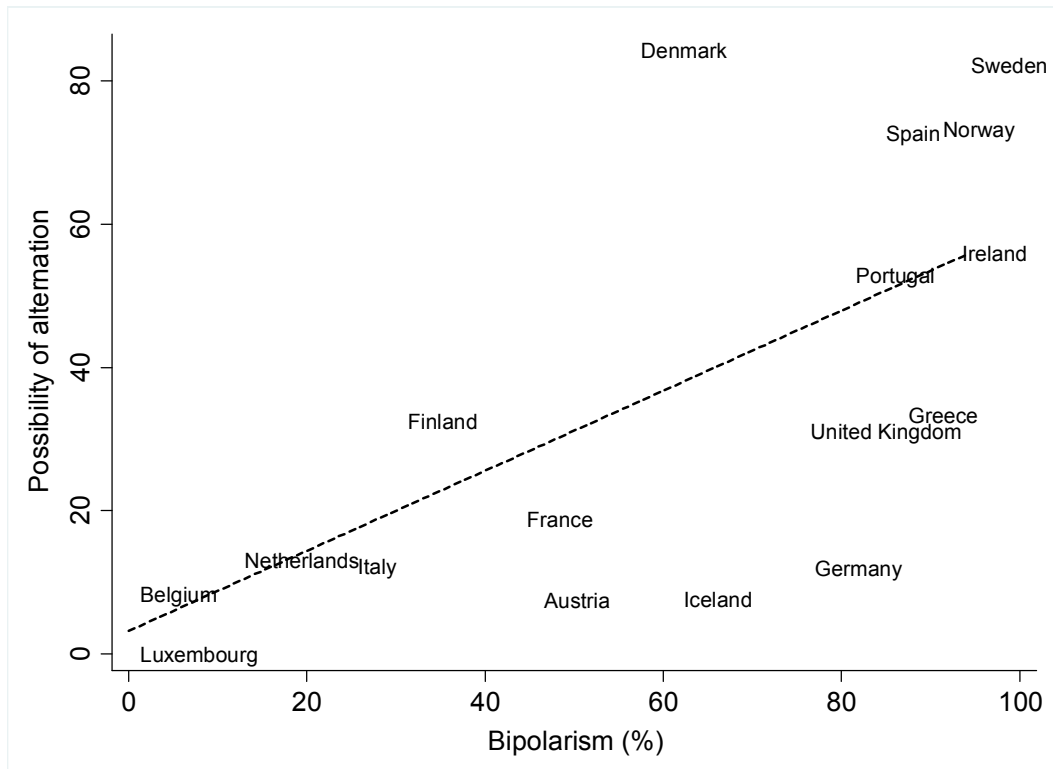
Fig. 5.10. Probability of alternation and bipolarism in Western Europe, 1945-201 (mean values, %)



It is clear from these data that the effect of party dualism on alternation is far from uniform. To the extent that two-partyism or bipolarism are adequate indicators of a dualistic nature of party competition, it appears that their association with a specific pattern of government turnover has a strong impact only in some countries. This conclusion is strengthened by the data reported in Figure 5.11, which plots the possibility of alternation against the mean value of bipolarism for each country. It is even more evident from these figures that alternation is not *the* distinguishing mark of majoritarian democracies. In fact, all the four countries with the highest level of possibility of alternation are not included in the ‘predominantly majoritarian’ category put forward by Powell. More precisely, in these nations, especially in the three Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden and Norway), the drivers behind the occurrence of alternation in power are not directly related to the existence of a bipolar pattern of party competition.

Briefly put, all majoritarian democracies imply alternation in office, but all the proportional democracies rule out its probability or possibility. This means, firstly, that these two categories or visions need further qualifications or, perhaps, in-depth revisions. Secondly, we cannot take for granted what we might call as ‘the iron law of party dualism’ – that is, that alternation exclusively implies a dualistic format of party competition. However, this deterministic approach has proved unfounded by the present study and a probabilistic approach appears more prone to encompass all the cross-country variations that emerged in this section. To what extent, and under which circumstances, alternation and party dualism are concretely associated shall be the research question at the centre of the next concluding section.

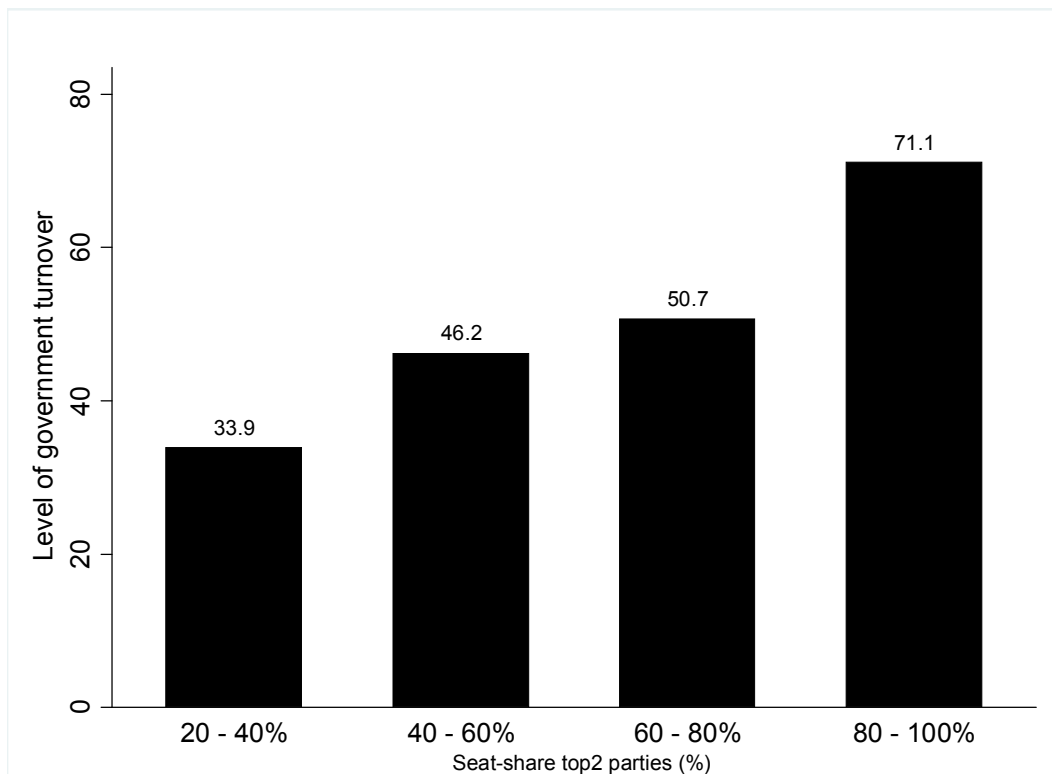
Fig. 5.11. Possibility of alternation and bipolarism in Western Europe, 1945-2015



5.7. Dualism and alternation: assessing the association

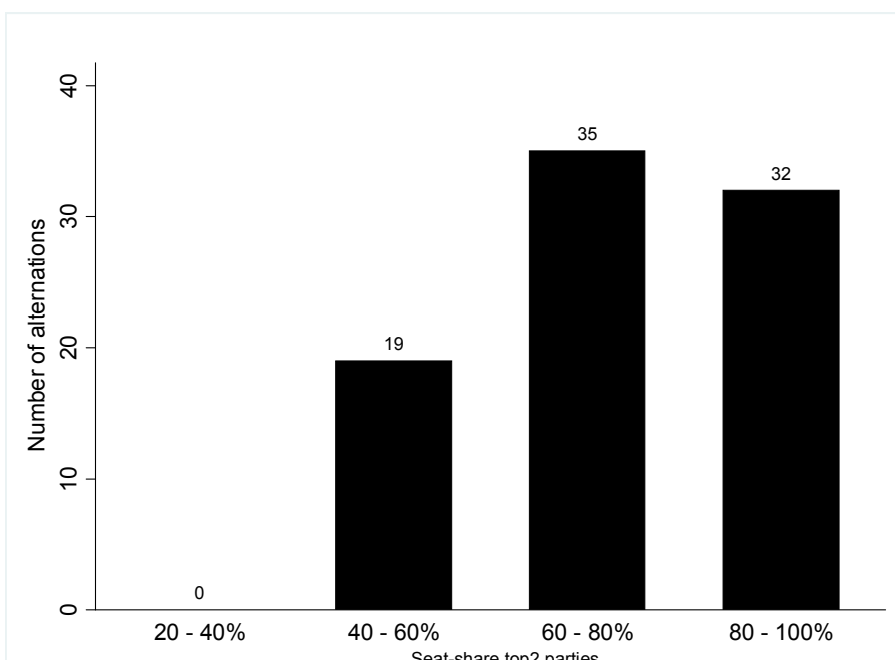
A first broad indication of the relationship between government turnover and party dualism can be seen in Figure 5.12, which reports the mean level of turnover for four categories of two-partyism. As it is clear from the figures, the level of government turnover increases gradually with the growth of the combined seat-share of the two major parties, reaching its peak (71.1 per cent) when the sum of the major parties is between 80 and 100 per cent. The lowest value (33.9 per cent) is found in those circumstances where the joint electoral strength of the two largest parties does not pass the 40 per cent threshold. In sum, the level of government turnover tends to increase with the size of the major parties.

Fig. 5.12. Level of government turnover by level of two-partyism in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



A similar trend can be observed in Figure 5.13, which relates the same four categories of two-partyism to the absolute frequency of alternation in government. More specifically, a higher number of alternations are associated with a higher level of two-partyism. In numbers, approximately 78 per cent of all alternations (67 out of 86) took place in legislatures where the sum of the two largest parties was higher than 80 per cent. By contrast, no alternation in government can be observed in the first category of two-partyism (from 20 to 40 per cent), meaning that in cases of high party fragmentation it proves to be difficult for the voters to oust the incumbent cabinet en bloc.

Fig. 5.13. Number of alternations by level of two-partyism in Western Europe, 1945-2015



As we know from the discussion in previous sections, two-partyism is far from being universally associated with a specific type of government change. Indeed, in many situations the impact of party dualism is safeguarded by the existence of alternative coalitions which act (at least during the electoral campaign) as single actors. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that the level of government turnover grows in concordance with the index of bipolarism (see Figure 5.14). More precisely, when the two alternative blocks get at least 80 per cent of the seats, the mean level of turnover in government is (77.2%) as twice as that (34.3) associated with the lowest category of bipolarism. At the aggregate level, a dualistic structure of party competition is associated with a more profound reshuffling in the cabinet composition. It is no coincidence that even the raw number of alternations in power (reported in Figure 5.15), reveals the same trend. To be more precise, more than three alternations out of four occurred when the index of bipolarism exceed the 80 per cent threshold. Arguably, these figures reveal that the association between bipolarism and wholesale government turnover is definitely robust.

Fig. 5.14. Level of government turnover by level of bipolarism in Western Europe 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

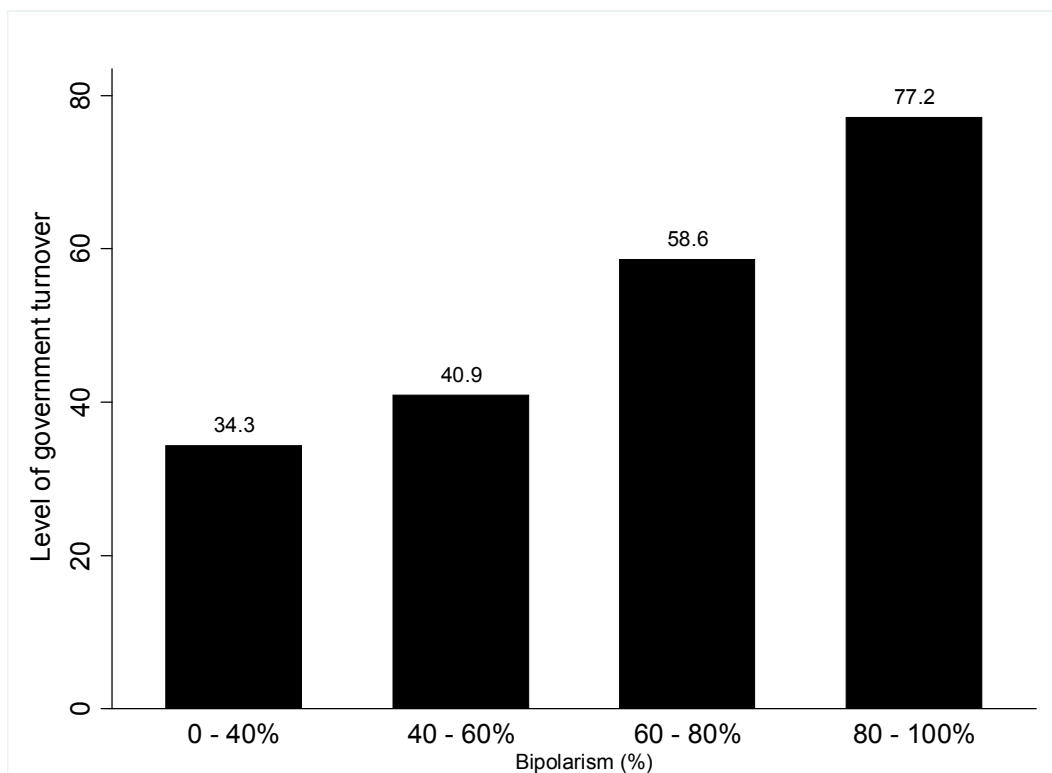
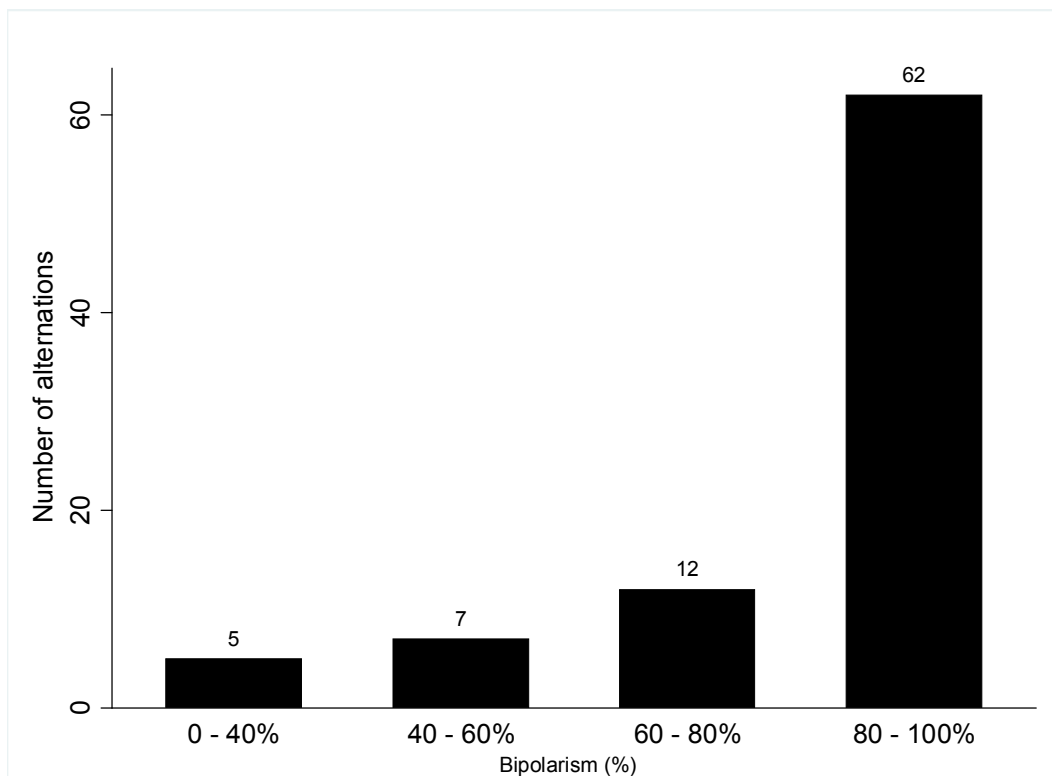


Fig. 5.15. Number of alternations by level of bipolarism in Western Europe, 1945-2015



As the foregoing implies, the contribution of party dualism, however defined and operationalised, for the explanation of government turnover is quite strong. Despite all its variations across time and through time, the impact of a dualistic structure of party competition appears a decisive factor for the occurrence of alternation in office. The strength of this relationship can be evaluated by correlating our measures of government turnover with the indicators of party dualism. As can be seen in Table 5.8, among the entire universe of cases, the overwhelming majority of the correlation coefficients are in the expected direction, with two-partyism or bipolarism and government turnover being positively associated. It is clear from these data that, as anticipated throughout this chapter, the impact of bipolarism is stronger than that of two-partyism. More precisely, the correlation coefficient between two-partyism and the level of government turnover is 0.240, while the association between level of turnover and bipolarism is 0.501.

The same proportion can be found for the frequency of alternation: the variance explained by two-partyism (less than 2 per cent) is lower than that of bipolarism (11.2 per cent). Moreover, the highest correlation coefficient is recorded for the association between the probability of alternation with bipolarism, whose percentage of explained variance is 31.5. These data reveal, therefore, a phenomenon that I have already pointed out in the above pages. Two-partyism is weakly related to government turnover or alternation, whereas the impact of bipolarism, which remains significant also in regards to the possibility of alternation, is strong.

Tab. 5.8. Correlation between indicators of party dualism and dimensions of government turnover

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Two-partyism	.240***	.132**	.307***	-.019
Bipolarism	.501***	.336***	.561***	.377***

The evidence accumulated so far indicates that party dualism, and in particular its bipolar variant, may offer a powerful explanation of the variance in level of government turnover or frequency of alternation

in power. However, as discussed in the first section, the level of dualism has changed remarkably over time, especially in the last twenty years. More precisely, since the mid-1990s the dualistic structure of party competition has become more common in West European democracies, but its strength, in terms of both votes and seats, has steadily decreased over time. Hence, in order to analyse the association between dualism and alternation across time I broke down the whole time span into eight categories, one for each decade. The result of this operation is reported in Table 5.9 and, for reasons of space, it takes into account only one indicator of party dualism, that is, bipolarism. As is evident from the data, the direction of the association is positive and constant across all the phases, and its strength increases over time until the first decade of the twenty-first century.

By contrast, in the last years included in our dataset the impact of bipolarism on the pattern of government turnover has significantly diminished. This development, we can speculate, is linked to the advent of the so-called Great Recession, namely, the economic crisis that hit European democracies in 2008. In many countries, for instance in Greece, Italy, Austria and Germany, the major parties have given birth to Grand Coalitions that are trying to deal with the political and economic effects of the crisis. As a consequence, this specific arrangement has constrained the mechanics of the party systems and neutralised the impact of a bipolar format of party competition on the pattern of government turnover. Basically, when the major parties, or coalitions, in the system decide to coalesce in order to share the burden of governing in hard times, the prospect of an alternation in power becomes automatically unthinkable.

Tab. 5.9. Correlation between bipolarism and dimensions of government turnover by decade

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
1940s	0.553** (19)	0.489*** (30)	0.774*** (19)	0.526*** (32)
1950s	0.305** (46)	0.147 (85)	0.296*** (46)	0.214* (84)
1960s	0.383** (28)	0.274** (60)	0.583*** (28)	0.237* (61)
1970s	0.625*** (49)	0.366*** (72)	0.613*** (49)	0.421*** (72)
1980s	0.501*** (47)	0.391*** (78)	0.557*** (47)	0.452*** (77)
1990s	0.563*** (34)	0.377*** (65)	0.654*** (34)	0.350*** (63)
2000s	0.571*** (30)	0.380*** (57)	0.672*** (30)	0.399*** (58)
2010s	0.102 (25)	0.230 (30)	0.263 (25)	0.209 (29)

But besides this exception, the overall trend must be adequately underlined. The impact of bipolarism on the level of government turnover or the likelihood of alternation became stronger through time. In other words, in spite of the fact that the largest coalitions have lost votes or seats over the last twenty years, the effect of a bipolar structure of party competition has become stronger. This may be due to the fact that other correlates of government alternation have progressively lost their reach or strength, thus setting the stage for the emergence of a new style of political competition.

In general, this analysis of variations across the universe of cases and through time suggests that party dualism plays a remarkable role in explaining different frequencies of alternation. Given the strength of this relationship, we might assume that this association will hold also at the individual-country level. Yet, as shown in Table 5.10, this conclusion would be quite hasty. In fact, there are many instances of a (unexpected) negative relationship between bipolarism and the dimensions of government turnover or alternation. For example, in Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, Norway and Sweden the association is negative, meaning that the strength of a bipolar form of party competition is not *per se* conducive to alternation in power. On the other side, other cases show the expected direction of association, in particular France, Italy and Portugal: the higher the index of bipolarism, the higher the level of turnover in office and the frequency or likelihood of alternation. This aspect emerges clearly from the Italian case, which records the strongest relationship between bipolarism and alternation. More accurately, in Italy the correlation coefficient between the index of bipolarism and the probability of alternation is 0.774, which suggests that a dualistic

structure of competition can account for some 60 per cent of the total variance in the likelihood of a wholesale rotation in office.

Tab. 5.10. Correlation between index of bipolarism and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.438 (7)	0.256 (26)	0.399 (7)	0.284 (26)
Belgium	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Denmark	-0.141 (22)	-0.121 (36)	-0.126 (22)	-0.339** (37)
Finland	-0.439*** (33)	-0.189 (42)	-0.234 (33)	-0.075 (42)
France	0.468** (26)	0.408*** (49)	0.586*** (26)	0.477*** (48)
Germany	0.070 (10)	-0.082 (24)	-0.055 (10)	-0.219 (25)
Greece	0.427 (11)	0.188 (17)	0.425 (11)	0.202 (17)
Iceland	-0.280 (17)	-0.593*** (25)	-0.574*** (17)	-0.593*** (25)
Ireland	-0.046 (17)	-0.251 (25)	-0.091 (17)	-0.141 (25)
Italy	0.845*** (35)	0.650*** (47)	0.774*** (35)	0.648*** (45)
Luxembourg	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	-0.381 (17)	- ^a	- ^a	-0.100
Norway	-0.168 (15)	-0.035 (30)	-0.168 (15)	-0.164 (30)
Portugal	0.809** (7)	0.279 (15)	0.804** (7)	-0.371 (15)
Spain	- ^a	0.379 (12)	- ^a	0.028 (11)
Sweden	-0.734** (11)	-0.384** (28)	-0.717** (11)	-0.503*** (28)
United Kingdom	0.525	0.050 (23)	0.525 (17)	0.050 (23)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

In conclusion and, in particular, in the light of this country-level analysis, it is worth stressing that alternation in power derives from a number of different factors, whose relative weight can (and do) change across time and space. Party dualism, as we have seen, represents only one factor among a set of other explanatory structural or behavioural variables. The comparative analysis of the impact of all these variables will have to wait until we are able to assess, with a multivariate statistical technique, the relative weight of each factor. Until then, we will proceed step-by-step or, better, factor-by-factor.

Chapter 6

Centre parties and pivotal actors

6.1. Introduction

As Thomas Poguntke (2010: xvii) puts it, ‘Democrats don’t like dominant parties. They block the essential mechanism of democratic accountability, namely alternation in government’. This is, in a nutshell, the main hypothesis that I shall test in the course of the chapter. In other words, I will investigate whether, and to what extent, the presence or absence of a powerful actor in the party system affects the process of coalition bargaining and the pattern of turnover in office. Of course, the concept of dominance can be defined in a very abstract way, as Duverger did in 1954: ‘A party is dominant when it is defined with an epoch: when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style, so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch... A dominant party is that which public opinion believes to be dominant’ (Duverger 1954: 308). However, this definition is, to say the least, tautological: a dominant party is a party recognised as such by other actors, voters or parties alike. It is clear that this definition is of little benefit to someone who is interested in analysing empirically the relationship between party dominance and the process of post-election government formation and substitution.

Luckily, there exist alternative ways to conceive and define a ‘dominant’ political actor, and we can detect at least three approaches (or three-and-a-half) in the burgeoning literature on this topic. First, there are scholars who operationalise the dominant party on the basis of the length of incumbency – that is, the duration in power, however measured (e.g., consecutive years in office or elections won), of a specific party. This *longitudinal* version of the concept has been quite widely utilised (Arian and Barnes 1974; Pempel 1990; Green 2010), albeit with the adoption of different and not always convincing longevity thresholds.

Second, there are those who exclusively consider the size of the dominant actors. In this case, as aptly pointed out by Boucek and Bogaards (2010: 5), one should ‘distinguish between electoral, parliamentary and executive dimensions of dominance’. In other words, party dominance cannot be conceived as a size-fit-all concept because its ‘content’ can change in relation to the different ‘parameters of party systems’ (Bardi and Mair 2008). This second *dimensional* version of the concept has been widely used, especially for the study of coalition formation and termination, though under different labels and indicators.

Between the two mentioned categories, we can identify those scholars who combine the two approaches, taking into account the length of incumbency *and* the size of the political parties. This ‘half’, or mixed, approach is the one followed by Sartori for the creation of the type of party system that he defines as ‘predominant’. Here a specification is in order. Sartori made clear the distinction between *dominant* party and *predominant*-party system. The former is – still at a very abstract level – ‘a party that outdistances all the others, this party is dominant in that it is significantly stronger than the others’ (Sartori 1976: 171). But stronger in relation to whom, what and in which arena? These questions, unfortunately, remain unaddressed by Sartori himself, who was more interested in stressing the difference between *dominance* and *predominance*. Dominance is a category that concerns the properties of parties in isolation, while predominance relates to parties in their interaction, namely their systemic properties. Following this distinction, Sartori (1976: 173) concludes that a predominant-party system is such to the extent ‘that the same party manages to win, over time, an *absolute majority of seats* (not necessarily of votes) in parliament’. He does not establish a specific length of incumbency, but he hastens to add that ‘three consecutive absolute majorities’ would be a reasonable threshold.

All in all, I concur with Sartori that we should not confuse the category of dominant party with that of predominance. Yet, these two categories cannot be readily separated if, and when, we are interested (as we are) in the systemic consequences of a dominant party over the process of government formation and turnover. In the context of the present study, we must admit that even a dominant party in (relative) isolation can affect the dynamics of the system. With this caveat, I agree with Dunleavy (2010: 23) when he argues that we 'urgently need an analytic definition that can identify parties as dominant independently from their tenure of office'. What is needed, in other words, is an operational definition of a dominant party that allows the evaluation of its effects on the functioning of the party system. Tangentially, this is the solution recently adopted, *inter alia* (Einy 1985; van Deemen 1989), by Laver and Benoit (2014: 4), whose classification of legislative party systems is based on a nonspatial notion of party dominance that describes those situations characterised by 'mutually exclusive losing *coalitions* made winning by adding the largest party'.

Finally, as a third category of scholars on party dominance, we can identify those adopting what I would define as a *spatial* approach. In contrast with the other two approaches (longitudinal and dimensional), this group of scholars emphasises the *location* of parties in the party system over given dimensions of competition. From this perspective, a dominant party derives its power from its spatial policy position in a system. A classic example of this approach is the work of Michael Laver and Kenneth Shepsle (1996: 62), who define a party as 'strong' if it 'is in a particularly powerful bargaining position... that allows it to dominate the making and breaking of governments'. Arguably, the existence of a 'strong party' depends also on complex interactions between other key variables (e.g., size of parties, distribution of power in the systems etc.) but, as Laver and Shepsle conclude (1996: 110), 'whatever its weight, and whatever the decisive structure, a party at the dimension-by-dimension median is nearly certain of being strong, and therefore of being in government'. In brief, dominance is a function of the specific position of a party in the system. This is the main tenet of the spatial tradition of studies on party dominance and, despite the numerous labels or variants we can find in the literature – 'strong party' (Laver and Shepsle 1996), 'core party' (Schofield 1993), 'median party' (Müller and Strøm 2000) 'central party' (van Roozendaal 1992; 1993), they all share the same policy-oriented approach.

In summation, party dominance is a multi-dimensional concept that can be, and has been, studied with different approaches: longitudinal, dimensional and spatial. Each approach, including their combinations, emphasises specific aspects of the concept mainly in relation to the research done by the scholars. Since in this study I am interested in the impact of party dominance on the process of government change and, in particular, the pattern of alternation in office, the longitudinal approach, which fits perfectly in the studies on party system typologies or party system change, appears inappropriate. As a consequence, I will rely on a combination of the two residual approaches for the explanation of the variation in government turnover. Yet, before proceeding in our analysis, we should devise viable and effective indicators of party dominance. This task shall be carried out in the next section.

6.2. Party dominance: concepts and indicators

Almost by definition, the existence of dominant parties affects the mechanics of party systems and the composition of the cabinet. However, different dominant parties may have more or less 'power' in relation to the different context in which they operate. In the words of Robert Dahl (1957: 204), 'power is a relation', which means that the strength of an actor change vis-à-vis the relative strength of other actors in the system. In this sense, a dominant party is not a party that is dominant everywhere, namely in any given legislature. As Kato and Laver (1998: 244) argue, 'what is important is not the "raw" distribution of seats between parties but the decisive structure, the set of winning coalitions generated by this seat distribution'. In brief, party dominance changes vis-à-vis other key systemic factors that can enhance or reduce the power of the dominant actor.

As the foregoing implies, party dominance is not a 'frozen' category and can change across space and through time. Moreover, it can change in relation to the fragmentation of the system and, even more so, to the concentration/dispersion of power in the opposition. Indeed, as Dahl made clear (1966: 333), 'the extent to which opposition is concentrated depends on the party system of a country'. In two-party systems, the degree of concentration of opposition is maximum, because one single party has in substance a monopoly of the opposition. The same argument, but with a higher degree of complexity, applies also to the moderate party systems, where the alternative coalition has, so to speak, an almost perfect oligopoly of the opposition. On the contrary, in extreme and polarised party systems, in which many opposition parties do not have any strong incentive to act as a single actor, the opposition is likely to be dispersed, and ineffective. All this is to say that party dominance is a relational concept with different nuances based on the concrete dynamics of the party system.

As to the indicators of party dominance, the easiest solution implies the calculation of the share of seats of the largest party. Albeit in a very impressionistic way, the seat-share of the largest party may contain many pieces of information. In fact, in many cases the largest party is included in the cabinet and can control the premiership. More precisely, since the end of the Second World War in West European democracies the prime minister was the expression of the party that held more seats in more than three cases out of four (78 per cent). Hence, as Van Roozendaal concluded (1993: 40), the 'dominant party is the most powerful party in the parliament as long as the policy positions of parties are not taken into account. Since its weight is higher than that of any other party in the parliament, it will get the mandate to form a cabinet first'.

A second, more sophisticated, indicator relies on the construction of a power index. Such an index, as noted by Jean-François Coulter and Patrick Dumont (2010: 48), can be 'constructed out of seat shares, a *decision rule* and *voters' (parties') behaviour* in a weighted voting system'. More accurately, 'a decisional rule specifies which coalition of parties are winning and the probability distribution over the possible coalitions typifies the parties' behaviour'. Therefore, an individual power index tells us the relative power of a party over the majority-building in parliament. According to Banzhaf (1965), who provided one of the most used power indices:

'[T]he appropriate measure of a legislator's power is simply the number of different situations in which he is able to determine the outcome. More explicitly, in a case in which there are n legislators, each acting independently and each capable of influencing the outcome only by means of his votes, the ratio of the power of legislator X to the power of legislator Y is the same as the ratio of the number of possible voting combinations of the entire legislature in which X can alter the outcome by changing his vote, so the number of combination in which Y can alter the outcome by changing his vote'.

In other words, the power of a legislator (or party) is proportional to the number of times he (or it) has had a decisive presence in winning coalitions. The calculation of the normalised Banzhaf index of a given party is 'the *relative* number of times party *i* is a *swing* (out of all parties' swings)' (Caulier and Dumont 2010:49).

This index, as well as the one suggested by Shapley and Shubik (1954), 'encapsulate the key strategic features of a given decisive structure. Their value is to quantify the generic decision-making power of actors in a particular system, regardless of their preferences' (Laver 1998: 9). Put differently, taking the notion of party dominance as a relational category, these indices make it possible to calculate the power of parties in terms of the relative proportion of potential coalitions in which each actor is necessarily present. For the sake of simplicity, and because it is more easily interpretable, in the course of this chapter I will utilise the Banzhaf index, that is, the bargaining power of the largest party, to assess the relative strength of the dominant party.

Up to now, I have focused on two indicators that tap into the notion of dominance in terms of the pattern of interactions that take place in parliament: seat-share of the largest party and the Banzhaf index. These two variables impound the notion of party dominance as a relational category. Yet, as we know from the previous discussion, there exists another approach to evaluate the extent of party dominance in a given

situation, namely the *spatial*, or positional, approach. Here, what counts for the evaluation of dominance is the relative position of parties in the system along specific policy or ideological dimensions. It is at this point that the concepts of centre, central, median and even pivotal party make their entry. But the preliminary problem here concerns the definition of the 'centre' in/of the party system. The starting point of our discussion cannot be, in this case, provided by Duverger (1954 who stated that 'the centre does not exist in politics'). On the contrary, as we have learned from the history of West European democracies, both centre parties and tendencies do exist in politics. Nevertheless, as aptly pointed out by Hans Daalder (1984: 92), 'European party systems are rarely viewed from a center perspective'. Indeed, a dualistic bias has characterised, at least until the 1980s, the analysis and interpretation of Western democracies. Only thanks to the works of Daalder (1984) and, later on, Van Roozendaal (1990; 1993), Ieraci (1992), Scully (1992), Keman (1994; 1997) and Hazan (1994; 1995; 1997), has the study of the 'centre' in politics been brought to the centre of the comparative politics literature.

Daalder was the first, among this group of scholars, to pin down the differences between a *locational* approach to the study of the centre, based on the presence of a particular party occupying the centre, or median, position in a given political space, and a *mechanics* approach, that sees certain parties holding the balance in a party system. More recently, Hazan distinguished between on the one hand a 'centre party', namely a party 'ideologically positioned in the center of a fixed, universal ideological left-right continuum', and 'middle party' on the other, that is 'a spatially located party between the two opposing poles of the party system' (Hazan 1996: 215). To a degree, these two categories overlap with the two approaches singled out by Daalder: the centre party emphasises its *location* in the party system, whereas the middle party refers to the specific mechanics of the system. In either case, the category of centre party identifies, implicitly or not, a given position of the actor in the party system.

In the literature, three main approaches have been suggested for the study of party location: a) content analysis of party manifestoes; b) expert surveys; c) opinion poll data.¹ Each approach contains strengths and weaknesses and none appears, for a variety of reasons, sufficiently satisfactory. Consequently, I prefer to rely on a raw categorisation of West European parties in three poles: Left, Centre, Right.² These categories allow me to identify those parties that, in Hazan's (1994) words, can be defined as middle parties in that they occupy the area in-between the other two poles. In doing so, we are assuming that in some circumstances middle parties may tip the balance in favour of one government combination rather than another. This assumption, originally put forward by Duverger (1954) and Sartori (1976), has been further elaborated by Daalder (1984: 106-107) who proposed a simple classification of party systems based on the potential impact of centre, or middle, parties. The first class includes a pure two-party system where 'the idea of a center party would not logically fit' (Daalder 1984: 106). In these situations, a relevant centre party does not exist; at the most we can observe the centre as a point of gravitation or a political tendency. A second class includes those party systems dubbed by some scholars 'two-and-a-half', namely systems with two major rivals parties, each of which needs the support of a third party (the 'half') to control a majority of seats in parliament. The archetype is Germany, where the FDP used its leverage to tip the balance of power to the left or right and affect the coalition-building (Abedi and Siaroff 2011).

In other countries, which we can consider as a third category, the typical situation entails the continuous rule by of one or more parties that have changed junior partners from time to time. This is the

¹ Another, additional approach is that based on the analysis of electoral campaigns but for a variety of methodological reasons it does not fit with both the scope and the design of my research.

² This allocation of the political parties to the three poles (Left, Centre, Right) has been carried out by recurring to different sources and, especially, thanks to the cases studies elaborated by several country-experts. More specifically, the Left pole has been created following and updating the list of left-wing parties prepared by Bartolini and Mair (1990), whereas the formation of the Centre and Right poles follows the evaluations of the case studies included in the books edited by Colomer (2008), Strøm et al. (2003) or specific datasets collected by Armingeon et al. (2014: *The Comparative Political Data Set*) and Swank (2013: *Comparative Political Parties Dataset*). The classification of parties is included in Appendix B.

typical situation that occurred in Italy until the early 1990s, the Netherlands and Finland. In these cases, as Daalder noted (1984: 107) the hold on the system by the centre party/ies ‘has been such as to make them of pivotal importance to system’. Finally, there is a residual class called ‘of changing coalitions’, where the interactions between parties are such that ‘neither alternation nor semiturnover is present sufficiently to constitute a regular pattern’ (Daalder 1984: 107). Adopting the terminology introduced in this dissertation, this residual category of countries (that includes, for instance, Belgium and Iceland) is characterised by the occurrence of micro-substitutions, namely, small changes of junior partners in a coalition government.

That said, one point should be firmly pinned down. The presence or absence of centre parties has an impact for the making and breaking of governments. We do not know, thus far, the extent to which a centre actor effects the mechanics of the system. Nevertheless, we can argue that the notion as well as the impact of centre parties are contingent on both the size and positioning of major parties in the system. Moreover, in the wake of a more recent strand of empirical studies (Keman 1994; 1997; 2011), much of the evidence collected on centre parties has shown that their presences ‘are typical for multiparty systems bringing about coalition governments’ (Keman 1994: 143). More precisely, being at the centre of the system becomes an asset for incumbency, in the sense that the parties located in the middle, that is between the left and the right poles, show a higher level of duration in office. This is mainly due to the fact that ‘the dominant parties are often also in the centre space of their party system’ (Keman 2011: 12).

To recapitulate, party dominance can be conceived and defined in very different ways. On the one hand, the *relational* approach emphasises the weight, or strength, of the actor vis-à-vis other systemic variables such as the fragmentation of the system, the decisive structure or the cohesion of the opposition. The seat-share of the largest party and the Banzhaf index are two crude indicators of this conception of party dominance. On the other hand, we find the *spatial* approach, whereby the power of the actor in a given legislature is derived from its specific location in the system or along a specific dimension. The idea of a central party as dominant actor can be included in this tradition of research. In these respects, a very useful combined, or mixed, approach has been proposed, among others, by Keman (1994; 1997), with his concept of ‘pivotal party’ (on the same line, see also Van Roozendaal 1990 and Hazan 1995). To be more accurate, the emergence and existence of a pivot ‘is considered to be dependent on the extent to which a party system contains central parties and which one of these is also dominant, that is: combine both qualities simultaneously’ (Keman 2011: 16). In brief, a party becomes a pivot if and when it is, *at the same time*, spatially located in the middle of the system and holds a plurality of seats in parliament. In this specific sense, the *pivotalness* of a party derives from the combination of its size and position in a given legislative assembly.

To sum up, the concept of party dominance can be studied under different perspectives and approaches. The longitudinal approach is mainly utilised for the (re)formation of party typologies (Sartori 1976; Mair 2002; Pempel 1990; Nwokara and Pelizzo 2014) or the elaboration of what Nyblade (2004) called a theory on ‘the dynamics of dominance’. However useful, this approach is not well equipped for the analysis of alternation in power simply because its adoption would create a tautological argumentation: predominant parties impede the occurrence of alternation and, consequently, alternation is impossible in predominant party systems.

Tab. 6.1. Descriptive statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Seat-share of the largest party	490	40.3	11.1	15.3	73.9
Banzhaf index	490	0.53	0.26	0.03	1
Number of centre parties	490	1.8	1.3	0	8
Seat-share of the centre parties	490	23.6	17.6	0	56.1
Seat-share of the pivot party	490	9.9	17.2	0	53.1

To avoid begging the question, I have decided to rely on the two alternative approaches (dimensional and locational, or spatial), which seem quite appropriate for the analysis of the processes of government formation, termination and substitution. Following these streams of research, I came up with an array of indicators that I will use to investigate the relationship between the concept of party dominance and the patterns of government turnover. For the sake of clarity, Table 6.1 provides the descriptive statistics for the four variables used in this chapter to detect some potential trends in party dominance.

6.3. Trends in party dominance

Is party dominance a common feature of contemporary democracies? To answer this question, we can first analyse the seats held by the largest political party. As Table 6.2 reveals, the largest party is ‘less large’ nowadays than it was forty years ago. More precisely, in the heydays of mass politics and mass-bureaucratic parties, the seat-share of the strongest group in parliament was 43.9 per cent. Forty years later, that figure declines to 36.4, losing more than seven percentage points. This not perfectly steady decline in the strength of the largest party began in the 1970s (38.2%), reaching its negative peak in the 2010s (36.4%). In a sense, if the existence of a strong party in the legislature can affect the outcome of coalition bargaining, one can argue that its impact has proportionally declined over time.

As the data show, a similar trend can be observed if one looks at the second measure of party dominance, namely the Banzhaf index of the strongest legislative party. Recall that the Banzhaf index assigns weights to parties as a function of the relative frequency that each, when considering the set of all possible winning coalitions, is a ‘swing’ or ‘critical’ actor. In this strict sense and despite its absolute policy-blindness, Caulier and Dumont (2010) use this power index as proxy for the ‘relevance’, in Sartorian terms, of political parties. Although I consider this equation misleading, for the very simple reason that the notion of ‘relevance’ is to some extent, albeit implicitly, policy-oriented, the Banzhaf index allows us to assess the bargaining power of the largest party. Moreover, this index power is not computed in isolation but takes into account the distribution of seats of the other political forces in the assembly. Accordingly, the Banzhaf index is a good indicator of the concentration of power in the hands of a single, potentially dominant, party. Looking at the data included in Table 6.2, the power index hits its peak in the 1960s and reaches its low twice, in the 1990s and in the 2010s. If observed in conjunction with those of the largest party, these figures reveal that, during the last thirty years or so, the dominant actor in parliament has lost some of its ‘dominance’, strength or ‘criticalness’. I am not in a position, here and now, to evaluate the impact of this decline in party dominance on the level of government turnover and I postpone this task for the next section. However, it is possible to foreshadow a circumstance in which a more balanced distribution of power among the parties leads to a more competitive arena and a more concrete possibility of alternation in power.

Tab. 6.2. Trends in party dominance and centrality in Western Europe, by decade (mean values)

	<i>Dominance</i>		<i>Centrality</i>	
	Largest party (% seat)	Banzhaf index (0-1)	No. of centre parties	Centre parties (% seat)
1940s	40.7	.52	1.8	32.2
1950s	38.5	.55	1.9	32.1
1960s	43.9	.56	1.6	25.0
1970s	38.2	.53	1.8	24.7
1980s	38.3	.51	1.6	20.3
1990s	38.3	.50	2.1	19.1
2000s	37.9	.53	1.8	15.7
2010s	36.4	.50	2.0	15.5
<i>Average</i>	<i>39.0</i>	<i>.52</i>	<i>1.8</i>	<i>23.6</i>

With regard to our measure of political ‘centrality’, we can observe some interesting developments. First, the number of centre parties has not diminished since the end of the Second World War. Quite the opposite, centre parties are more common now than in the 1950s or 1960s. In other words, today more parties than in the past are located in the middle between a left and a right pole. Second, in spite of their rise in absolute terms, centre parties are now ‘squeezed in the middle’ – that is, they control a smaller share of seats. Indeed, in the last twenty years centre parties have had half as much seats as they held in the 1950s. In a nutshell, centre parties are more common but less powerful: on average, only 15 per cent of seats are controlled by parties located in the middle of the system. This is a crucial development because, as we originally know from Sartori (1976: 119), the existence of a party or a group of parties that occupy ‘*the metrical centre of the system*’ has a strong impact on the process of government formation and coalition-building. However, as very aptly pointed out by Daalder (1984: 103), ‘Sartori gives relatively little attention to size factors, in that the proportionate size of a center party, of adjacent parties, and of more extreme parties including whenever relevant anti-system parties, may be more important for the actual functioning of party systems than the absolute number of relevant parties’.

In short, party-system format matters, but also the size of the parties, especially of those located in the middle of the system, counts for the explanation of the way democratic regimes work, develop or decay. That said, with these data at hand I can try to assess the strength of the association between the size of the centre pole and the process of alternation in power, filling the gap that still exists in the literature.

Tab. 6.3. Pivotal party in Western Europe, by decade (mean values, %)

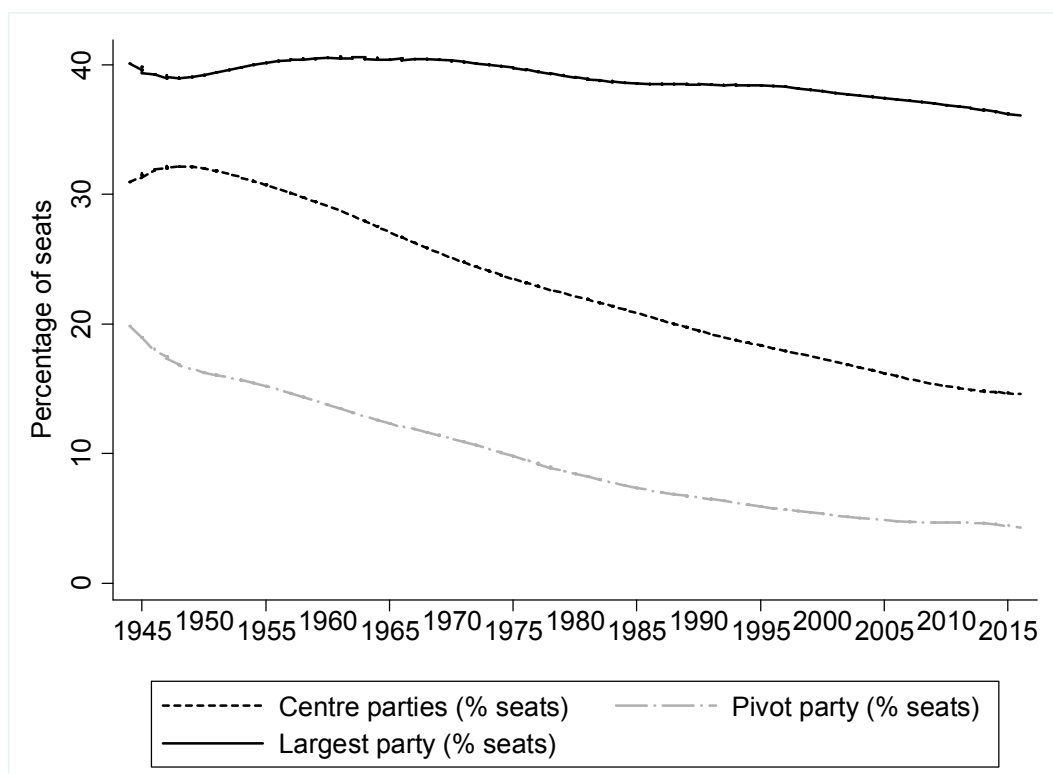
	Pivot party (% seat)	% of cabinets including a pivot party
1940s	43.3	34.2
1950s	42.9	29.1
1960s	39.1	36.1
1970s	38.2	21.3
1980s	35.2	23.1
1990s	28.6	16.7
2000s	28.5	20.3
2010s	26.0	3.3
<i>Average</i>	37.6	24.0

If we now turn to the concept of pivot actor, one major point should be immediately underlined. As shown in Table 6.3, the strength of the pivot party has remarkably decreased over time in terms of both votes and seats. This decline is perfectly concordant with the data above. Since a pivot party is the product of its ‘centrality’ and ‘dominance’, the decline of both these properties brought about, in turn, a decline in the ‘pivotalness’ of contemporary European party systems. More precisely, on average a pivot party held more than 40 per cent of seats during the twenty years after the end of the Second World War. Forty years later, the mean seat-share of the pivot parties is about 27 per cent, that is, fifteen percentage-points lower than that of the 1950s. These figures appear even more impressive if observed through the lens of the share of cabinets including a pivot party. Until the 1960s, one government out of three included a pivot actor. By contrast, in the last twenty years a pivot was present only in nearly one government out of ten.

In sum, the evidence collected so far reveals, in contrast to what Otto Kirchheimer (1957) noticed in the late 1960s, not a ‘waning of opposition’ but a waning of party dominance or, more specifically, of ‘centrism’. This development paired perfectly with that described in the previous chapter, that is, an increasing frequency of a dualistic, or bipolar, form of party competition. In this regard, it is worth noting that the decline in party dualism previously observed does not contradict the decline of centrism detected here. At least for two reasons. The first relates to the difference between the concept of party dualism as defined in this study and the two-bloc format of party competition. As seen in Chapter 5, these two aspects can coexist. That is, party systems are taking the form of a bipolar-style of competition, even though the two

poles are progressively losing votes and seats. The second reason why the waning of centrism does not contradict the emergence of a two-bloc form of inter-party competition relates to the birth since the 1980s of other types of political parties, such as the Greens (Müller-Rommel 1991 and 1998; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002), the anti-establishment parties (Abedi 2004) or the anti-party parties (e.g., the Five Stars Movement in Italy) (Mudde 1996), which cannot be easily included in, and often strongly reject, the left-right dimension of competition. Therefore, the erosion in the support for the so-called traditional, or mainstream, political parties (either of the left, centre or right pole) has been compensated by the emergence of new parties that, in some countries, cut orthogonally the classic and long-established dimension of competition existing in Western Europe (Kriesi et al. 2006; Kriesi 2010; Kitschelt 1994; Mair 2015).

Fig. 6.1. Party dominance in a longitudinal perspective, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed line)³



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

Briefly put, dominant parties are no longer as dominant as they were few decades ago. The largest party in parliament controls a smaller share of seats and, accordingly, its bargaining power has gradually declined. As to the centre parties, their power, too, has significantly declined and only on very few occasions are they able to function as pivot in the party system. Therefore, dominant actors in West European democracies are under stress. But before analysing the effect of this development on the process of government turnover, it is useful to observe the trends in party dominance at the individual or country level.

6.4. National trends

Dominant parties are losing their electoral strength and their reach on the party system. This trend, as outlined above, emerges clearly from Figure 6.1 which charts the different notions of party dominance through time. Evident from these figures is the steady decline of dominant actors in Western countries,

³ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

especially in terms of their ‘pivotalness’. However, before jumping too quickly to conclusions, an analysis of the dominant parties at the country level is needed. Let us start by observing, in Table 6.4, the seat-share of the largest party across the seventeen countries included in this study. The peaks tend to occur in the period that goes from the 1950s to the 1970s: in this time span, the largest party controlled, on average, 40 per cent of legislative seats.

In most countries the lowest level of party dominance is recorded in the last four decades, that is, starting in the 1980s. In other words, in thirteen countries out of seventeen the share of seats held by the largest party reaches its low in the last forty years. The only exceptions are Finland, France, Germany and Portugal, but in all these cases the low level of dominance seems to be linked to the original phase of party system formation. Once the party system reached a sufficiently high degree of political structuring, the trend for the strength of the largest party is downward. Hence, the overall decline recorded at the aggregate level seems to find confirmation also at the individual level.

Tab 6.4. Seat-share of the largest party in West European countries by decade (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	49.9	47.5	49.4	50.7	47.4	39.2	35.3	28.0	44.6
Belgium	46.3	49.3	36.4	28.2	23.5	18.3	16.0	19.7	31.5
Denmark	35.4	40.7	40.5	35.4	32.3	37.1	28.7	27.0	35.9
Finland	26.0	26.7	26.6	26.8	27.1	28.0	26.8	27.0	26.5
France	29.6	25.6	49.5	40.7	50.0	45.4	60.0	48.5	38.0
Germany	34.8	51.9	49.6	47.2	46.4	45.5	36.3	49.3	46.6
Greece	-	-	-	57.0	52.2	53.6	53.3	47.2	51.8
Iceland	38.5	39.0	38.3	37.2	20.4	40.7	26.6	30.2	31.7
Ireland	50.7	48.1	50.2	52.3	47.2	42.4	47.9	45.8	47.9
Italy	45.3	45.8	42.1	41.6	36.5	28.7	33.6	46.0	36.0
Luxembourg	47.1	44.2	38.4	35.6	37.9	33.9	41.5	38.3	40.5
Netherlands	32.0	32.0	30.7	30.0	33.1	27.3	28.3	24.0	30.1
Norway	53.7	51.7	48.0	44.5	42.0	40.0	33.3	32.5	43.5
Portugal	-	-	-	20.3	28.5	52.5	35.1	47.0	34.4
Spain	-	-	-	47.9	51.9	45.0	49.1	53.1	49.5
Sweden	49.3	47.3	50.4	44.7	45.9	41.1	39.3	32.3	44.3
United Kingdom	61.4	53.2	55.1	50.7	59.5	57.5	57.7	47.2	54.6
<i>Average</i>	<i>40.7</i>	<i>38.5</i>	<i>43.9</i>	<i>38.2</i>	<i>38.3</i>	<i>38.3</i>	<i>37.9</i>	<i>36.4</i>	<i>39.0</i>

Note: bold = negative peak.

What about the legislative strength of the centre parties? An answer to this question can be found in Table 6.5, which reports the seat-share of the centre parties by country and where the trend towards a weakening of these groups of parties emerges unequivocally. What I have defined as the waning of centrism seems to characterise the vast majority of European countries. More precisely, in thirteen countries the negative peak in the share of seats controlled by the party located in the middle of the system is recorded since the 1980s. The most striking outlier in this picture is the United Kingdom, where the steady growth of the Liberal Democrats (LD) countertrends that waning of centrism observed anywhere else. Incidentally, in saying ‘waning of centrism’ I do not mean the disappearance of the centre *tout court*, nor the enfeeblement of any centrist tendency in the system. Quite the contrary, the vanishing of the middle parties may indeed enhance a tendency towards a centripetal form of inter-party competition.

Tab 6.5. Seat-share of the centre parties in West European countries by decade (% values)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	37.4	47.5	49.4	44.4	43.6	34.0	33.9	25.1	40.5
Belgium	46.3	49.4	44.8	54.4	52.0	43.4	40.5	51.0	48.2
Denmark	10.1	13.9	10.4	16.8	14.0	9.5	8.0	13.6	12.5
Finland	36.3	37.4	36.5	27.2	24.8	30.0	31.0	27.3	31.6
France	49.8	47.5	18.8	9.6	16.5	27.2	4.6	3.5	31.3
Germany	15.9	10.4	10.4	8.0	9.2	8.4	10.9	0	9.6
Greece	-	-	-	5.3	1.1	0	0	0.6	0.8
Iceland	16.7	32.3	35.6	30.8	24.3	21.1	15.9	39.7	25.7
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Italy	30.2	48.5	45.0	44.2	42.3	23.8	13.0	7.3	34.7
Luxembourg	47.0	44.2	38.4	39.9	37.9	33.9	41.7	38.3	40.9
Netherlands	27.0	40.4	41.6	34.0	42.0	37.7	34.9	23.0	36.0
Norway	13.0	17.4	21.1	24.1	17.7	22.9	16.7	11.8	19.3
Portugal	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	-	-	-	1.5	6.5	5.9	4.3	6.6	4.5
Sweden	14.5	10.9	15.9	22.7	14.3	14.4	15.5	11.6	15.3
United Kingdom	1.9	1.1	1.4	1.8	3.5	4.5	9.0	5.0	3.2
Average	32.2	32.1	25.0	24.7	20.3	19.2	15.7	14.6	23.5

Note: bold = negative peak.

However, in the *spatial* approach to the study of party dominance, being at the centre of the system does not automatically transform a party into a dominant actor. It is the combination of size and centrality that creates a dominant actor. In the light of this, we can observe in Table 6.6 the share of seats acquired by the pivot party (if any). The first aspect to notice is that in many countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom), the pivot party does not exist today, and never existed in the past. Instead, in other countries the presence of a pivot party is intermitting or faltering. This is what happened, for instance, in the Netherlands in the early 1990s, when the Christian Democracy (CDA) experienced a considerable loss of electoral appeal and parliamentary strength. As a result, van Kersbergen noted (1999: 349), the CDA 'lost its long-established political dominance', moving away from a typical consensus democracy and, for the first time since 1917, coalition bargaining resulted in a cabinet which did not include the Christian democrats (Pennings and Keman 2008, Lijphart 1989, Irwin and van Holsteyn 1989).

Italy represents a second example of the vanishing of the pivot party. In fact, with the breakdown of the Berlin Wall and in the wake of a vast political investigation ('Clean Hands') against the corruption of the major governing parties, the role of the DC as the pivot of the party system immediately came to an end. Overall, other countries, such as Belgium and Finland, where a pivot party still exists and conditions the working of the system, indicate a downwards trend in terms of party dominance *qua* pivotalness.

Tab 6.6. Seat-share of the pivot party in West European countries by decade (% values)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	49.9	47.5	49.4	0	0	0	43.2	0	48.4
Belgium	46.3	49.3	37.6	34.5	28.2	19.3	16.7	20.0	34.5
Denmark	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Finland	28.0	26.0	25.7	0	0	27.5	26.8	25.0	26.3
France	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Germany	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Greece	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iceland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Italy	41.2	47.4	43.9	42.1	39.2	34.2	0	0	42.0
Luxembourg	47.0	46.6	38.4	35.6	37.9	33.9	41.7	38.3	41.1
Netherlands	32.0	31.6	31.5	0	34.7	0	28.4	0	31.6
Norway	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Portugal	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spain	-	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0
Sweden	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Average</i>	<i>43.3</i>	<i>42.9</i>	<i>39.1</i>	<i>38.2</i>	<i>35.2</i>	<i>28.8</i>	<i>28.5</i>	<i>25.6</i>	<i>37.5</i>

Note: the calculation of the averages includes only those cases in which a pivot party was present in the legislature.

6.5. Party dominance, government turnover and alternation

The association between party dominance and alternation has largely been studied from a purely theoretical point of view, without investigating and testing empirically the existence, as well as the strength, of this association. As we know, Sartori (1976: 163) made clear that a centre-based politics creates the conditions for a ‘peripheral turnover’ at the governmental level. In other words, the physical occupation of the centre by one (Italy) or more parties (France until 1958 or Weimar) implies that the middle area of the system is out of competition which, in turn, brings about a pattern of government substitution based exclusively on minor (peripheral) changes in the cabinet composition. In sum, the existence of a centre-located party may have great consequences for the way governments change, or do not change, over time. Similarly, the presence of a dominant party in the system may profoundly alter the mechanics of the system.

As discussed *supra* (6.1), the extent of party dominance is, to a degree, a function of the strength of the largest party and the dispersion of power in the system. What is more, the occurrence or non-occurrence of alternation, as Taagepera (2007: 50-53) has recently argued, relates to both aspects, party system fragmentation and presence of a dominant actor. In line with this argumentation, one can maintain that the concept of balance of power in the system is the opposite of the concept of party dominance. In such a case, a measure of *balance* may provide a first approximation, *e converso*, of the concept of *dominance*. Unfortunately, the scientific literature does not provide any hints on how the balance of power can be effectively operationalised, the only exceptions being Siaroff (2000) and Taagepera (2005; 2007). The former, however, devises operational measures of power concentration that depend mainly on qualitative estimates of balance. By contrast, Rein Taagepera provides a useful ‘index of balance’, taking into account party system fragmentation and the relative size of the largest party. More specifically, the index ‘takes the ratio of the logarithm of the minimal (N_{∞}) and maximal (N_0) estimates of the number of parties’ (Taagepera 2007: 50), where N_{∞} is simply the number of all seat-winning parties and N_0 is the inverse of the largest fractional share. Briefly put, the formula for calculating the index of balance proposed by Taagepera is the following:

$$\text{Index of balance } (B) = \log N_{\infty} / \log N_0.$$

The range of the index goes from nearly 0 to 1; 0 indicates a situation of utter imbalance in the distribution of power, whereas 1 is for those situations of perfect balance, meaning that all parties have equal shares. To further illustrate, among ‘the various constellations that all lead to N [effective number of legislative parties] = 3.00, 34-33-33 has a high balance of $B = 0.98$, while a low balance of $B = 0.18$ is reached with 57-1 plus 21 parties at 2 percent’ (Taagepera 2007: 50).

As Table 6.7 shows, there is a great degree of variation across our universe of countries in terms of balance of power in the party system. The countries showing the highest level of balance of power are Finland, Iceland and Austria, that is, multi-party polities with an equal distribution of parliamentary strength between parties. On the contrary, at the bottom of the table there are those countries, such as Spain, the United Kingdom and Italy, where the power in the system is highly unbalanced, in favour of one, but not

necessarily the same, dominant party. As it is evident from this list of polities, the existence of an unbalanced distribution of forces in the legislative assembly does not curb the occurrence of alternation in power. Quite the contrary, alternation is the most frequent (and unique) type of government change in the two-party systems of Spain and the United Kingdom. From this viewpoint, it should be clear that party dominance is not *per se* a constraint to the emergence of a pattern of government turnover based on the alternation between rival parties or coalitions. What is more, it is possible to hypothesise that periodical phases of dominance in the system, as the history of the United Kingdom reveals, are conducive to wholesale replacement of the governing parties over time.

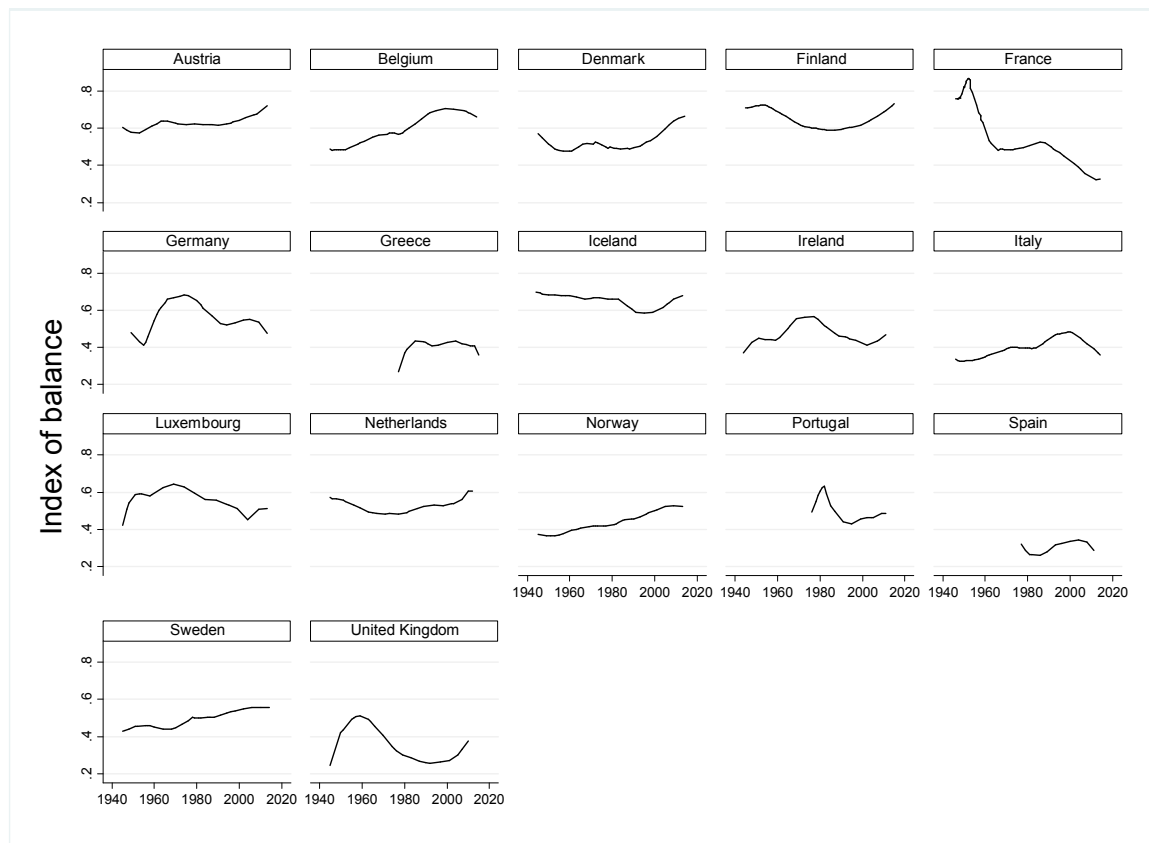
Tab. 6.7. Index of balance in Western Europe, 1945-2015

Country	Index of balance
Finland	0.65
Iceland	0.65
Austria	0.63
France	0.61
Belgium	0.58
Germany	0.57
Luxembourg	0.56
Netherlands	0.53
Denmark	0.52
Portugal	0.52
Sweden	0.49
Ireland	0.47
Norway	0.43
Greece	0.41
Italy	0.40
United Kingdom	0.37
Spain	0.30

At this point, it is worth recalling the difference between the category of dominant party and the concept of predominant party system as defined by Sartori. Whereas the latter excludes, by definition, the actuality of alternation in power (but not its possibility or credible expectation), the former appears, to a certain extent, a driving force in the occurrence of alternation in power. To illustrate, let us look at Figure 6.2, which plots the index of balance across countries and through time. In some cases, such as Sweden and Norway we observe a twofold trend: the gradual dismissal of a predominant party system and, starting in the mid-1970s, the advent of a more balanced political landscape. Hence, in these circumstances alternation of power emerges when the *predominant* party loses its grip on the system and the distribution of power becomes more equally distributed. On the contrary, by the 1960s France experienced a decline in the index of balance, meaning a development towards a more uneven distribution of parliamentary strength, and almost simultaneously an increase in the frequency of alternation.

These general trends empirically prove what Taagepera (2007: 53) argued from a theoretical perspective, namely that alternations ‘represent a third dimension, orthogonal to *N* [party system fragmentation] and *B* [balance of power]’. This is to say that one cannot infer, in a linear and straightforward way, any pattern of alternation in power simply recurring to the level of fragmentation in the system and the balance between parties. Other factors, indeed, may intervene along the chain of causation.

Fig. 6.2. Index of balance in Western democracies, by country (lowess smoothed line)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

As the foregoing implies, the association between government turnover and party dominance must not be taken for granted. The difference between a *predominant* and a *dominant* party is, indeed, a difference in kind that can reveal significant variations in terms of government change. I have tried to analyse these differences by creating three distinct categories for the largest party on the basis of its share of seats: low (15-35%), medium (35-55%) and high (55-75%). As the figures show, when the seat-share of the largest party passes the 55 per cent threshold, the mean level of government turnover hits its peak, 71 (see Table 6.8). On the contrary, when the strongest party in the parliament is not that strong, getting less than 35 per cent of seats, the level of turnover in government is nearly 30 percentage-points lower. At first glance, these data confirm what we have seen above, that is a sort of unexpected positive relationship between party dominance and governmental turnover. Put briefly, the larger the largest party, the higher the level of rotation in office. Recall, here, the difference between *degree* and *level* of government turnover. The former is a longitudinal measure of turnover that tells us how much rotation in the cabinet occurs over time. Accordingly, many and repeated micro-substitutions may yield the same result as few or rare alternations in power. The latter, instead, tells us the extent of rotation taking place when a party system experiences a government change. In this case, micro-substitution and alternation in power are completely different types of turnover in office.

Tab. 6.8. Largest party's seat-share and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Largest party	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (15-35%)	29.8	42.1
Medium (35-55%)	30.9	57.1
High (55-75%)	25.0	71.0

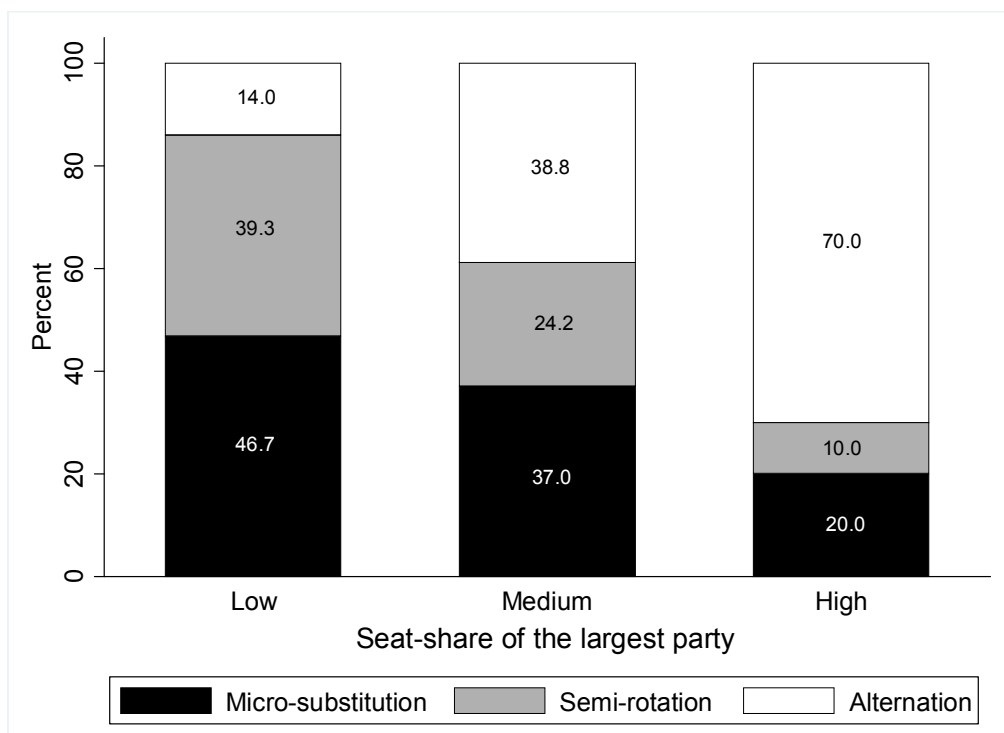
As to the occurrence of alternation in power, the figures reported in Table 6.9 are concordant with the argument previously sketched. Specifically, alternation is not at odds with the existence of a very strong political party. Indeed, the frequency of alternation is lower when the seat-share of the largest party goes from 15 and 35 per cent and it gradually grows in the other two categories. In terms of probability of alternation, the likelihood of a wholesale rotation in government is highest when the largest party controls more the 55 per cent of seats. In these circumstances, more than one government change out of two (58.3%) implies the complete replacement of the governing parties. Conversely, the likelihood of alternation drops to 13.3 when the major party does not hold more than 35 per cent of seats. In sum, here again the positive impact of party dominance for the occurrence of alternation in office finds a first tentative confirmation.

Tab. 6.9. Largest party's seat-share and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Largest party (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (15-35%)	9.5	13.3	26.5
Medium (35-55%)	20.7	38.3	37.3
High (55-75%)	20.6	58.3	20.0

A similar picture emerges by looking at the association between the strength of the largest party and the type of government change. In cases in which a political party controls more the 55 per cent of MPs, alternation is the most frequent type of cabinet turnover (see Figure 6.3). More precisely, in seven cases out of ten a change in government occurs through a wholesale replacement of the incumbent parties. By contrast, alternation is a rare event (14%) when the largest party gets less than 35 per cent of the seats and, accordingly, cabinets tend to be replaced through micro-substitution. It follows that, against the conventional wisdom, the presence of a dominant party in the legislature does not prevent the occurrence of alternation. More than a barrier to a wholesale partisan reshuffling in cabinet, a dominant actor appears to be a creator of government change.

Fig. 6.3. Type of government turnover by level of party-system fragmentation (% values)



Granted, the existence of a dominant party represents one side of the coin. The other side is represented by the location of a specific party within, and along, the party system. In Sartori's (1976: 157) words, 'What matters is neither the name nor the doctrine (whatever a centre doctrine may be) but the position'. If a party is located in the middle of the system, its role and bargaining power may be significantly enhanced. Accordingly, as Keman argued (2011: 16), 'if a party is in the centre space of the party system or is dominant, its chances to enter party government are high'. And this means, by implication, that being in the middle of the system is an asset in terms of incumbency. In brief, a centre party has a higher likelihood to stay (and remain) in power than other non-centre parties.

I test this hypothetical argument in Table 6.10, which breaks down the mean level and degree of government turnover by three distinct categories (or levels) of seat-share held by centre parties (low, high and medium). It is clear from the data that the existence of strong centre parties curbs or, in some cases, impedes a profound reshuffling in the party composition of the cabinet. More precisely, when the seat-share of the centre parties is high (i.e., more than 40 per cent), the mean level of government turnover is 29.3, meaning the substitution of junior partners in a cabinet coalition. Conversely, that is, in cases of a low seat-share of centre parties, the level of government turnover rises at 68.9. Therefore, to put it in a nutshell, the higher the share of seats controlled by the parties located in the middle of the system, the lower the level of rotation in office when a government change occurs.

Moreover, and in contrast with what we have seen above in relation to party dominance, the strength of the centre parties seems to affect also the degree of government turnover. That is, centre-located parties have a negative impact on the overall, longitudinal amount of rotation in office. In this sense I concur with Sartori (1976: 119) when he writes: 'the centre parties tend to be immobilistic, they remain an equilibrating force that performs a "mediating role" – and mediation, or brokerage, is not the same as immobilism'. It is precisely this brokerage function that enhances the leverage of the centre parties on the system. Tangentially, the centre-as-broker helps us explain the higher level of potential government turnover (52.2) recorded when the centre parties are not strong in the assembly. By contrast, the potential turnover drops to 39.9 when the seat-share of the middle parties passes the 40 per cent threshold. Hence, centrality is an asset for incumbency but, automatically, a liability for accountability, because the centre parties tend to stay in power in spite of their electoral (mis)fortune.

Tab. 6.10. Centre parties and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Centre parties (% seats)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (0-20)	34.9	68.9
Medium (20-40)	34.6	51.2
High (40-60)	18.0	29.3

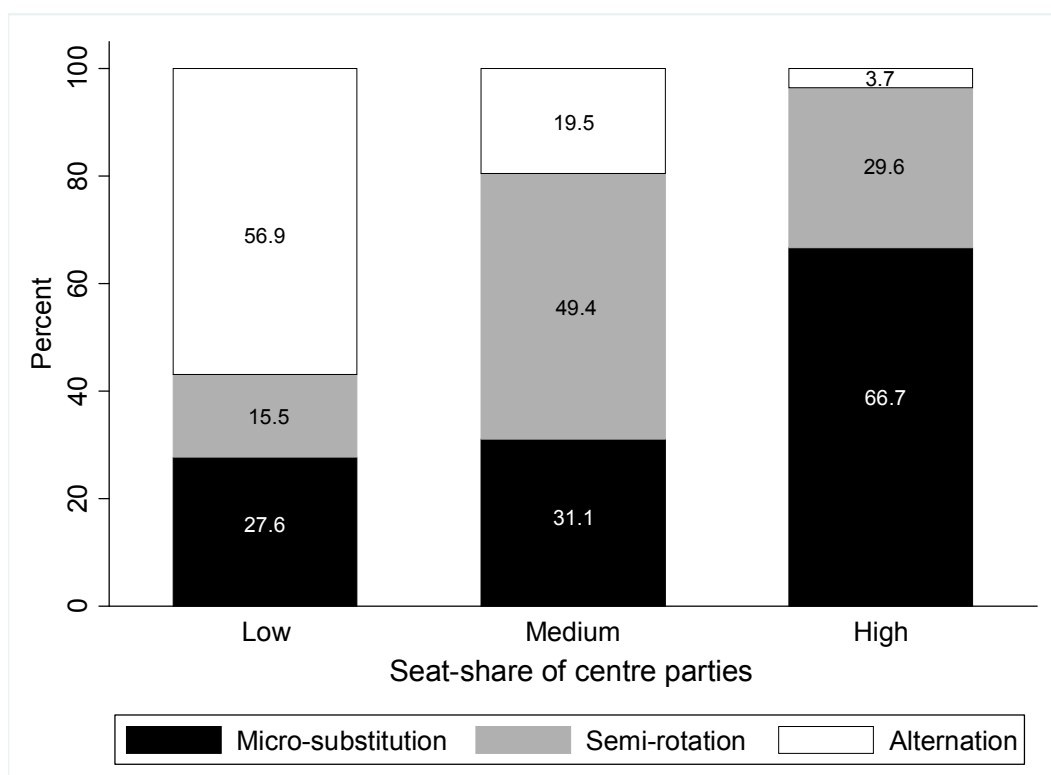
With regard to the alternation in power, the figures reported in Table 6.11 are even more straightforward, in terms of both actual frequency and probability. As to the former, the occurrence of alternation is nearly nil (2.3 per cent) when the seats held by the centre parties amount to 40 per cent or more. Instead, alternation is more common (28.7 per cent) when the middle parties are relatively weak. In terms of probability, one government change out of two is likely to occur through an alternation when the seat-share of the centre parties is lower than 20 per cent. Conversely, in the 'high' category of centrism, the likelihood of a government alternation falls to 3.7. In sum, a centre-based politics is largely conducive to a pattern of government substitution based peripheral turnover in the cabinet. This is even more so if we consider the measure of possibility of alternation. In almost 50 per cent of the cases in the dataset alternation is possible when the degree of centrism in the system is lower than 20. When the seat-share of the party in the middle grows, the possibility of alternation sharply declines (4.6 in the third category). By the same token, one can argue that a party system not based on the centre has a more exploitative nature in terms of alternation.

Tab. 6.11. Centre parties and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Centre parties (% seats)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-20)	28.7	56.6	49.6
Medium (20-40)	12.7	18.8	32.0
High (40-60)	2.3	3.7	4.6

It is evident from these data that the existence of a strong centre party, or pole, located in the middle of the system has an impact on the extent to which a government changes or not. Since, more often than not, a centre party is, so to speak, bound to stay in power, the process of government turnover typically involves only minor or fringe parties. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the most frequent type of government change occurring in case of 'high' centrism is the micro-substitution (66.7%: see Figure 6.4). Conversely, when the centre is not occupied, or it is weakly so, alternation is power is the typical pattern of government turnover (56.9%). Interestingly enough, when the seat-share of the centre parties is between 20 and 40 per cent, the most typical type of change in the cabinet is semi-rotation. Arguably, in these situations the centre party is able to tip the balance to one government combination rather than another and move the pendulum from a centre-left to a centre-right cabinet, or vice versa.

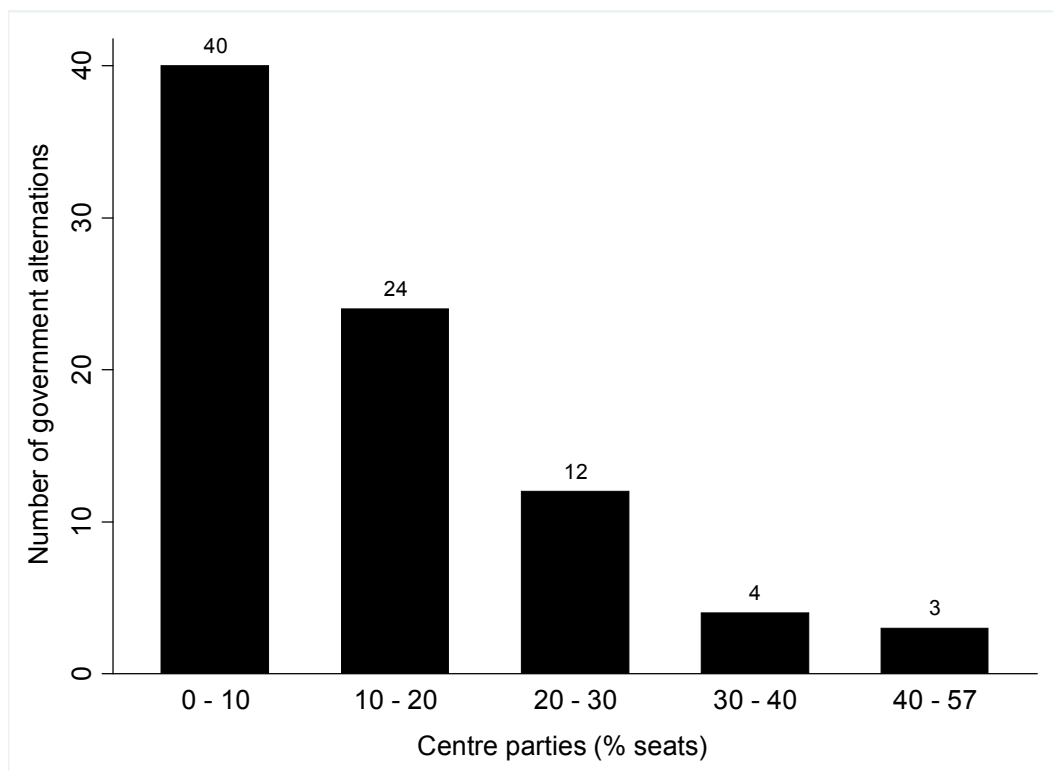
Fig. 6.4. Type of government turnover by seat-share controlled by centre parties (% values)



To sum up, a centre-based politics is a strong constraint against the occurrence of alternation in power. When the middle area in the system is occupied, government change usually takes the form of peripheral substitution in the composition of the cabinet. As Figure 6.5 shows, among the group of cases in the dataset 40 alternations (that is, 48.2 per cent) occurred when the seat-share of the centre parties is lower than 10 per cent. If we enlarge the perspective a little, 77 per cent of all alternations took place when the parliamentary strength of the centre does not pass the 20 per cent threshold. Hence, centrism, meaning the

physical occupation of the middle space in the system, seems a crucial factor for the explanation of the pattern of government turnover in Western democracies. Yet, it is a factor strongly dependent on other structural variables operating in the system, such as, for instance, the presence of anti-system parties located at the extreme ends of the party systems (Sartori 1976; Hazan 1995). We do not know, at this stage of the research, which factor prevails on, or anticipates, the others. Nevertheless, as the data clearly show, the role of the centre parties should be neither neglected nor underrated.

Fig. 6.5. Absolute number of government alternations by seat-share of the centre parties



Whether a creator of ideological polarisation or a messenger of political moderation, the centre in politics is a hot-spot. It affects the process of government formation as well as that of government termination. When the centre is physically occupied, coalition building is often more cumbersome and time-consuming. Furthermore, a centre party plays a crucial role in the way governments change or rotate in power. In short, relevant centre parties matter. However, their power may be enhanced if and when they become the largest party in the parliament. Put differently, when 'centrality' meets 'dominance' a party becomes the pivot in the system.

That said, we can analyse the effect of the pivotalness on the functioning of the party system. Table 6.12 breaks down the level of government turnover by three levels of seat-share held by the pivot party: low (0-20 per cent), medium (20-40 per cent) and high (40-60 per cent). When the pivot is weak or inexistent, the mean level of government turnover hits its peak, 60.2. On the opposite side, in case of 'high' pivotalness, the turnover in government is 32 points lower, i.e. 28. The same trend, albeit not so clear, emerges also for the degree of government turnover, with lower values for the cases characterised by the presence of a strong pivot actor. Hence, in line with our discussion concerning the centre parties, a pivot-based party system is neither prone nor conducive to sizeable replacements in the cabinet composition.

Tab. 6.12. Pivotal party and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Pivotal party (% seats)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (0-20%)	33.3	60.2
Medium (20-40%)	28.7	39.1
High (40-60%)	17.3	28.0

If we now consider the dimensions of alternation, the negative direction of the association between pivotalness and rotation in power is even more evident (Table 6.13). As a matter of fact, the frequency of alternation is virtually nil (1.5%) when the pivot party gets more the 20 per cent of seats. Similarly, looking at the probability, this pattern is remarkable: the likelihood of a wholesale rotation in government is 41.5 per cent when the seat-share of the pivot is lower than 20 per cent, whereas that likelihood drops to 2.1 when the pivot is a strong dominant actor in the legislature. This association holds true also for the dimension of the possibility of alternation, which tends to decrease when the seat-share of the pivot party becomes higher than 20 per cent.

Tab. 6.13. Pivot party and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (% values)

Pivot party (% seats)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-20%)	22.9	41.5	42.5
Medium (20-40%)	1.5	2.1	9.2
High (40-60%)	3.3	5.4	5.0

So far, we have analysed the relationship between alternation and the pivot party through the creation of three, absolutely arbitrary, categories of pivotalness. Table 6.14, which distinguishes all the cases on the basis of the status of the pivot party (present or not present in the parliament or cabinet), provides a different and telling perspective. Whenever a pivot party is not in the legislature, the typical type of government change is alternation (41.2%). A similar figure emerges for the 'pivotless' cabinets, which are more prone to experience a wholesale turnover in office (40.4%) than the cabinet including the pivot party. By contrast, when the legislature or the cabinet include the pivot, alternation is indeed a *rarissima avis* and accordingly the typical form of government change is through micro-substitutions of small parties at the periphery of the pivotal party.

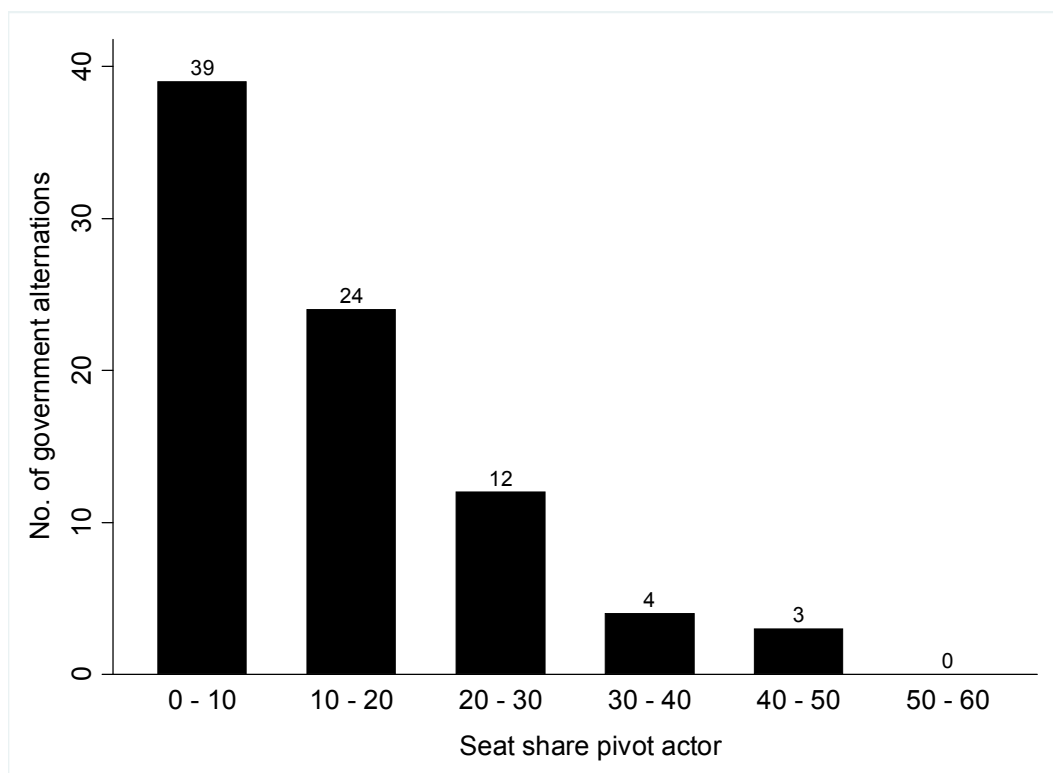
Tab. 6.14. Type of government change by presence (in parliament or cabinet) of the pivotal party in West European countries, 1945-2015 (% values)

	Micro-substitution	Semi-rotation	Alternation
Pivot party in parliament	55.3	41.2	3.5
Pivot party in the cabinet	57.9	40.8	1.3
Parliament without pivot party	33.5	25.3	41.2
Cabinet without pivot party	33.5	26.1	40.4

Before concluding this section, one final point must be adequately underlined. The degree of pivotalness of a party system contributes to the explanation of the dynamics of alternation but it does not entirely exclude the possibility of a complete replacement of the governing parties. This is to say that the negative association between alternation and pivotalness is, on the one hand, probabilistic and not deterministic, and, on the other, it is a matter of degree rather than a binary relationship. In this sense, alternations in governments, as Figure 6.6 reveals, can and do take place also when the seat-share of the pivot actor reaches more than 40 or 50 per cent of seats. Yet, these outliers or uncommon cases do not

contradict the fact that the lowest level of pivotalness records the highest number of government alternations (39).

Fig. 6.6. Absolute number of government alternations by seat-share of the pivot party, 1945-2015



In summary, party dominance is a decisive factor for the explanation of the different patterns of government turnover. However, in contrast with the *communis opinio* in the field, the presence of a dominant actor in the system is not *per se* a bottleneck for the occurrence of alternation in power. On the contrary, the existence of a strong party may represent a driving force behind the process of turnover. That said, the dominance of an actor may also be the product of its location in the system. In this sense, a centre party takes advantage of its critical position by tipping the balance of power, from time to time, towards its left or its right. A party in the middle of the system is, therefore, a powerful actor that can get, and remain in, power also in hard times, in spite of its electoral result. Even though the centre is, nowadays, more and more squeezed in the middle of the system, its bargaining power, especially when a centre party turns out to be pivotal, is still effective and remarkable. This is, however, the general picture. In order to have a better and firmer grasp on all these aspects, it is time to shift the focus of the analysis to the country level.

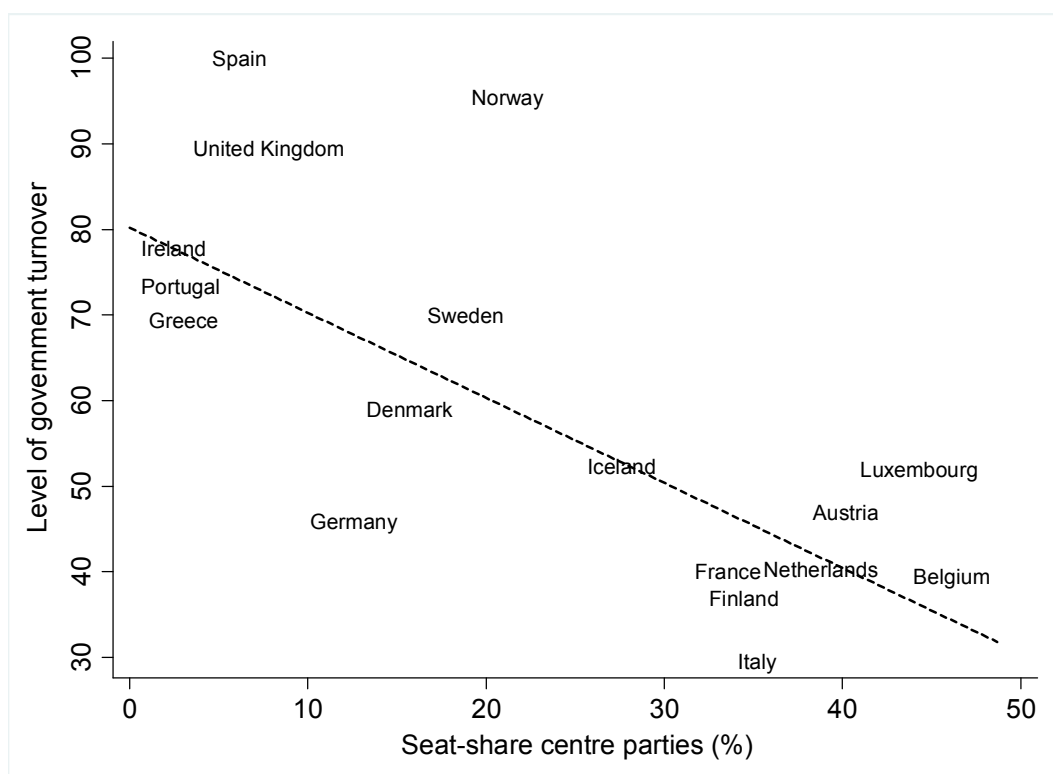
6.6. The strength of the association

The waning of the centre parties does not imply the waning of the power of the centre parties. Although the parties located in the middle area between two poles are gradually losing votes and seats, when they get into parliament, they are still able to exercise a considerable amount of bargaining power. For this reason, it is useful to analyse, as a first step in this section, the association between the strength of the centre parties and the pattern of government turnover. In Figure 6.7 the mean level of turnover in office is graphed against the combined seat-share controlled by the parties located in the middle area of the system. As the data clearly reveal, the existence of a negative relationship between the strength of the centre and government turnover finds further confirmation. Indeed, countries where the centre is strong, such as Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Finland, France and Italy, show a low level of government rotation.

At the opposite end, there are countries such as Spain, Ireland, Greece, Portugal and the United Kingdom, where the centre parties are weak and, by implication, the level of government turnover is high, at more than 70 per cent.

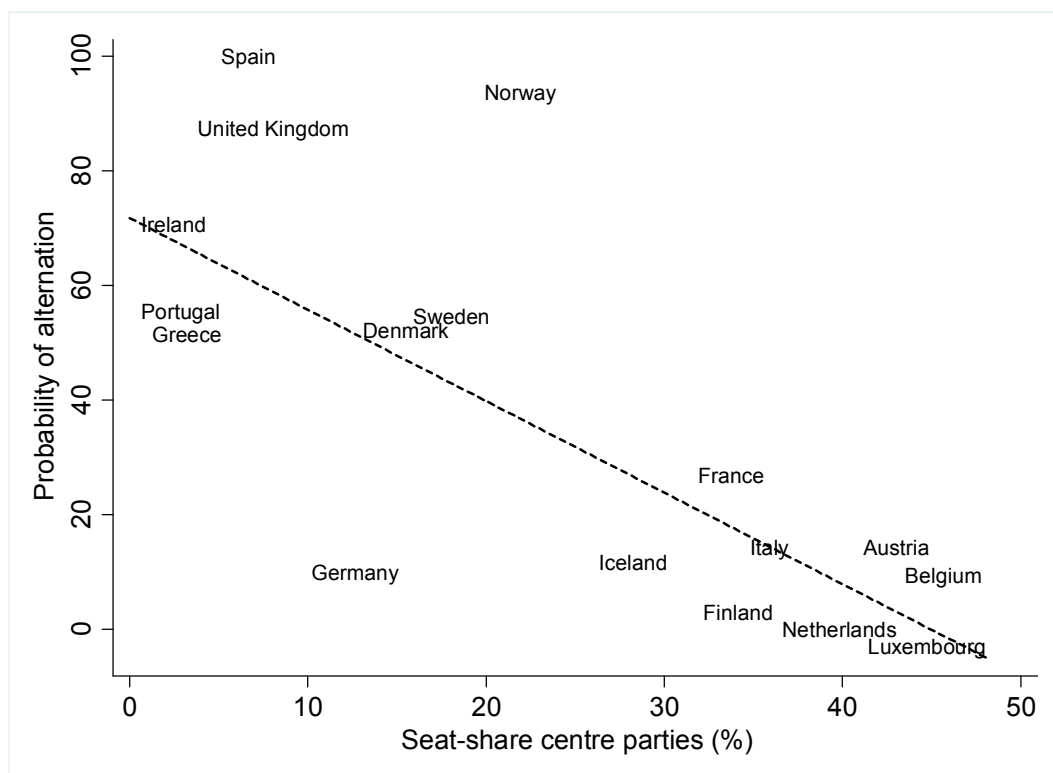
Within this picture, Germany is an interesting case because it shows that, despite the existence of a relatively weak centre party, the mean level of turnover is limited. This figure reveals, hence, the strong influence that the FDP had in the coalition-building in Germany, at least until the 2009 legislative election, playing a pivotal role without being a dominant actor in the assembly. From this viewpoint, Norway represents another interesting case. In fact, in spite of a relatively strong centre party, Norwegian politics shows a high level of government turnover, in line with cases, such as Spain and the United Kingdom, where the centre is extremely weak. In this case, an overriding two-bloc format of party competition has encapsulated and nullified the effect of the centre parties on the pattern of government change.

Fig. 6.7. Mean level of government turnover and strength of the centre parties in Western Europe



The pattern of association between ‘centrality’ and turnover is confirmed by looking also at the probability of alternation. We know, for instance from the works of Keman (2011), that there exists a negative relationship between the strength of the centre and what he calls, somewhat misleadingly, the ‘rate’ or ‘degree of alternation’. Although Keman considers what I have more properly defined as ‘degree of government turnover’, the pattern of association between the two variables holds its validity. For clarity’s sake, Figure 6.8 plots the probability of alternation, that is, a wholesale government turnover, against the seat-share of the centre parties. Here again we find that the stronger the centre, the lower the likelihood of alternation in power. This generalisation is stronger at the extremes, namely when centre parties are extremely weak or extremely strong, but loses some of its predictive power in the middle, especially – as we have seen – in relation to the case of Germany, where the pivotal effect of the FDP was stronger than its sheer bargaining power.

Fig. 6.8. Probability of alternation and strength of the centre parties in Western Europe (% values)



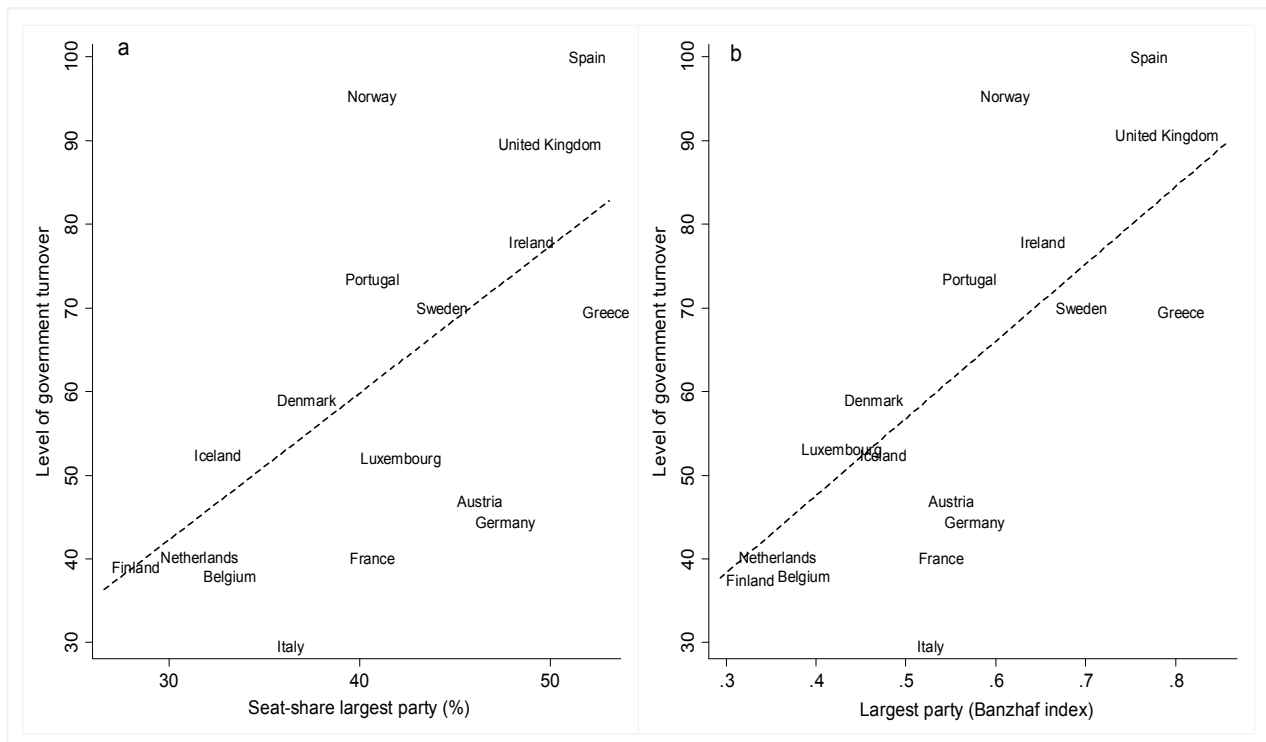
All in all, these figures reveal a strong impact of the centre on the pattern of government turnover. This effect is evident in the history of France and Italy. In both cases, the weakening of the centre has paved the way to the advent of so-called alternational party systems based on the existence of an 'Ins-Out' pattern of change in government. However, the data also show that the influence of the centre on the functioning of the system is not present everywhere or at any time. In some circumstances, the process of government turnover does not appear to be completely dependent on the role of the centre. In Germany, for instance, other structural or more contingent factors contribute to explain the lack of alternation in power until the late 1990s. Among the structural factors, as I have pointed out in the previous section, there is the strength of the largest party in the legislature, which can be measured as either its seat-share or its Banzhaf index. Figure 6.9 plots these two variables against the mean level of government turnover for the seventeen countries under investigation. Again, we find confirmation of the unexpected positive effect of party dominance on the rotation in office. In brief, the higher the seat-share of the largest party, the higher the level of government turnover.

This result is in vertical contrast with Poguntke's opinion, when he writes that 'Democrats don't like dominant parties... [because they] block the essential mechanism of democratic accountability, namely alternation in government' (Poguntke 2010: xvii). It is clear from Figure 6.9 that this is not the case. On the contrary, dominant parties are vehicles of alternation and, quite paradoxically, democrats should like them precisely for the opposite reason that they do not block, but induce, alternation in power. One more time, it is worth recalling that a dominant party is not a predominant party and, granted this difference, I can agree that 'democrats don't like predominant parties'. Accordingly, as long as, and as much as, a dominant party remains as such, the democrats, so to speak, should not be worried.

Furthermore, as the difference between Figure 6.9a and Figure 6.9b shows, in general party dominance matters, but its impact is stronger when it also takes into account the distribution of seats in the legislature, as the Banzhaf index does. In such a case, the coefficient of correlation ($r = 0.768$, $p < 0.01$) indicates a positive and statistically significant relationship between the bargaining power of the largest party

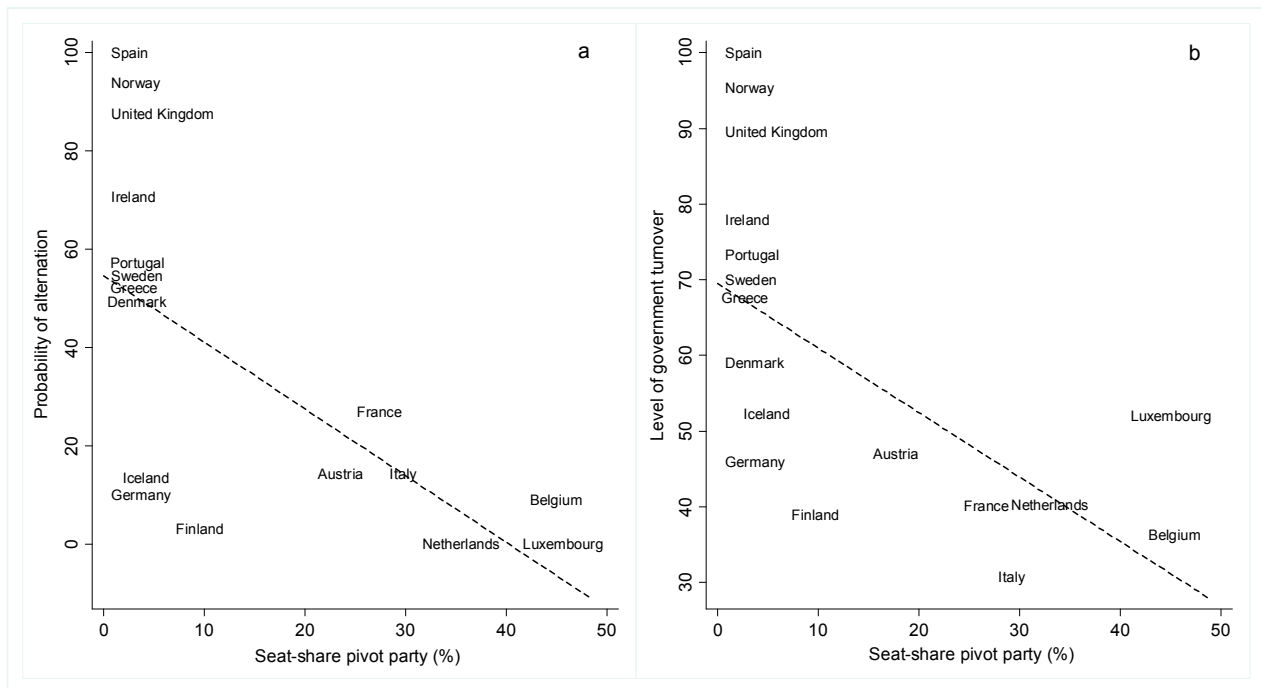
and the level of government turnover. This association is even stronger if we consider the probability of alternation, with a correlation coefficient equal to 0.807 ($p < 0.01$). In either case, party dominance turns out to be a carrier of, and not an obstacle to, alternation in power.

Fig. 6.9. Level of government turnover and party dominance in West European democracies, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



To recapitulate, in relation to the occurrence of alternation in government ‘centrality’ has a negative effect, whereas ‘party dominance’ has a positive effect. But what happens when these two properties are combined into the same political party? That is, when there is a pivot party located in the middle of the system? Figure 6.10 offers an answer to such a question. The association between party pivotalness and mean level of government turnover (Figure 6.10b) or alternation (Figure 6.10a) is, as expected, negative. That is to say: the higher the seat-share of the pivot party, the higher the likelihood of an alternation in power. However, this relationship is as straightforward as we would have predicted. More accurately, there are pivotless countries – such as Iceland, Germany or Finland – that, despite this absence, show a very low probability of alternation. As a consequence, the existence of a pivot party in the system is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition explaining the lack of alternation. Germany is, again, a good case in point. The small liberal party (FDP) was able to play a critical role in the system, blocking the occurrence of wholesale rotations in office, in spite of the fact that it was never a dominant force.

Fig. 6.10. Pivot party (% seats) and government alternation/turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



Being a party located in the middle of the system, whatever its size may be, is a bonus in terms of coalition-building and government change. A sufficiently large, but not necessarily dominant, party is more likely to stay in power for longer periods. Therefore, following Poguntke, if democrats are really concerned with the prospect of that ‘essential mechanism of democratic accountability’ called ‘alternation in government’, they should fear the presence of more or less strong parties located in the middle of the system. Admittedly, we reach this conclusion if we accept the assumption that alternation is an *essential* mechanism of democratic accountability (for a different theoretical perspective, see Pasquino 2011b); but if we relax that assumption the conclusions would be dramatically different.

In order to have a closer look at the strength of the association between the indicators of party dominance/centrality, in its *dimensional* or *spatial* form, and the pattern of government turnover, Table 6.15 reports the correlation coefficients for four dimensions of alternation. In line with the evidence collected thus far, we can see that the seat-share of the largest party has a positive impact for both the mean level of government turnover ($r = 0.238, p < 0.01$) and the frequency of alternation in office ($r = 0.140, p < 0.01$). Moreover, the strength of the largest party accounts for some 12 per cent of total variance in the probability of alternation.

A similar pattern of association emerges looking at the Banzhaf index of the strongest party. More precisely, the index of the bargaining power of the system is positively related with the level of turnover ($r = 0.210, p < 0.01$), the frequency of alternation ($r = 0.112, p < 0.1$) and the likelihood of wholesale partisan rotation in government ($r = 0.344, p < 0.01$). It is worth noting, in passing, that both measures of party dominance – seat-share and Banzhaf index of the largest party – are only weakly related with the possibility of alternation.

The association between our indicators of dominance or centrality and turnover gets stronger when we take into account the ‘centrality’ of the system. The existence of a strong centre party or pole significantly affects the pattern of rotation in office. As to the level of government turnover, the overall correlation with the strength of the centre parties in the legislature is $-0.453 (p < 0.01)$, which suggests that the strength of the centre bloc can account for 20 per cent of total variance in turnover. The association gets stronger if we

consider the probability of alternation. In this case, the overall amount of variance explained by the seat-share of the centre parties rises to 26 per cent. What is striking in these respects is that the effect of ‘centrality’ remains negative and, statistically speaking, significant also in relation to the possibility of alternation ($r = -0.373$, $p < 0.01$), meaning that a strong centre pole acts as a brake for the prospect of an alternation in power.

Finally, the existence and the relative strength of a pivot party in the system has a strong and statistically significant impact on all five dimensions of government turnover. As we have seen above, the expected direction of the relationship between pivotalness and government turnover is negative, which means that the stronger the pivot, the less likely is the occurrence of a considerable or complete replacement

Tab. 6.15. Correlation between indicators of party dominance and dimensions of government turnover

Indicator	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Largest party (% seat)	0.238***	0.140***	0.342***	0.049
Largest party (Banzhaf index)	0.210***	0.112*	0.344***	0.048
Centre parties (% seats)	-0.453***	-0.313***	-0.507***	-0.373***
Pivot party (% seats)	-0.353***	-0.226***	-0.363***	-0.332***

in the cabinet composition. The association between the seat-share of the pivot party and the mean level of government turnover is strong and significant ($r = -0.353$, $p < 0.01$), accounting for some 13 per cent of the overall variance.

In general, the most important factors in the explanation of different patterns of government turnover appear to be those that take into account the location of the parties in the system. As a matter of fact, the strongest correlations coefficients are recorded in conjunction with the measures of centrality or pivotalness. What is more, in contrast to the measures of *dimensional* party dominance, the other indices also have an impact on the possibility of alternation. In a nutshell, ‘centrality’ alone beats ‘dominance’ alone, but when these two properties meet one another the prospect of alternation becomes much more unlikely. Before concluding this section, it is useful to analyse the bivariate relationships presented above in two distinct periods of time, before and after 1980. Obviously, the decision to establish a specific temporal threshold is always an arbitrary choice, because all political phenomena or events are strictly interrelated and there is no clear *terminus ad quo* as well as a *terminus ad quem*. In politics, as in history, path dependency is an unavoidable constant that scholars must learn to deal with. Hence, it is unnecessary to dwell on the imperfections of these cut-off points. Suffice it to add that I have chosen the 1980s because, in light of the evidence discussed in section 6.1, this seems to be the period in which party dominance starts its decline in the West European democracies.

The contrast between the two periods confirms our earlier findings: on the one hand, a positive association between the strength of the largest party and alternation in power; on the other hand, a negative association between the strength of the centre parties (or the pivot party) and the occurrence of wholesale rotation in office. The direction of all coefficients remains constant in both phases. Two aspects, however, must be stressed. First, the positive effect of the largest party on the prospect of alternation has become stronger after the 1980s. This is, to a degree, surprising because in the same period West European party systems experienced a decline in party dominance (see Table 6.16). What emerges from these figures, therefore, is a twofold, but not contradictory, trend: a stronger influence of the largest party on the mechanics of the system and, simultaneously, a weakening of the strongest party in the legislative assembly. Put differently, the strongest party is becoming less and less strong but its influence on the pattern of government change, perhaps in conjunction with the increase in party system fragmentation shown in Chapter 4, has slightly grown.

Tab. 6.16. Correlation between indicators of party dominance and dimensions of government turnover, pre- and post-1980

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Largest party (% seats)	0.153* (143)	0.121* (250)	0.306*** (143)	0.041 (250)
Centre party (% seats)	-0.432*** (143)	-0.275*** (250)	-0.505*** (143)	-0.303*** (250)
Pivot party (% seats)	-0.280*** (143)	-0.179*** (250)	-0.305*** (143)	-0.266*** (250)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Largest party (% seats)	0.339*** (136)	0.178*** (231)	0.396*** (136)	0.090 (228)
Centre party (% seats)	-0.380*** (136)	-0.298*** (231)	-0.447*** (136)	-0.361*** (228)
Pivot party (% seats)	-0.377*** (136)	-0.263*** (231)	-0.400*** (136)	-0.381*** (228)

Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively.

Second, by the 1980s centre parties are not only losing voters and parliamentarians, but their impact on the system, in relation to the change in party composition, has partially declined, especially in terms of likelihood of alternation. The correlation coefficient for the first period (1945-1980) is -0.505 ($p < 0.01$), whereas the coefficient drops to -0.447 ($p < 0.01$) after the 1980s, which is equivalent to just 20 per cent of the total variance. To sum up, West European democracies are gradually becoming less centre-based than they were forty years ago and the effect of the parties in the middle of the system is also becoming less effective. However, when these 'in-between parties' are simultaneously dominant in the party system, the impact of the pivotal actor on the process of government change is even stronger. Yet, today this combination of properties within the same party is less frequent in European democracies and this downwards trend has paved the way to the explosion of alternation in Europe. At the moment, pivotal party systems are the exception in Europe and alternation in government can rest assured.

Chapter 7

Cabinet type and pre-election identifiability

7.1. Introduction: mind the gap

With the only exception of Spain, by the end of the Second World War all Western European democracies have experienced coalition cabinets. After the 2010 general election, even in the United Kingdom an unexpected government coalition, formed by the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats, made its entry in the motherland of the so-called “majoritarian” pattern or vision of democracy (Lijphart 2012, Powell 2000). In other words, as long as European parliamentary democracies remain valid instances of “party government” (Rose 1969, Katz 1987, Thomassen 1994, Mair 2014, McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014), the governing function is yet more frequently carried out by *parties in coalition*. In this sense, party government may be better understood as parties government or, better yet, parties-in-coalition government. This is an important development in Western Europe and many scholars have conveniently discussed, studied and analysed the consequences of this transformation for the functioning of the democratic regime.

As a result of the increased attention paid by many researchers on this field, we face today a burgeoning literature on the effects that different types of coalition cabinets have on the duration of government (Warwick 1994; 2006, the level of polarization (Keman 2011; Strøm 1990), voters’ satisfaction for the way the regime works (Dalton et al. 2011), the policy congruence between the action of the governors and the will of the governed (Powell 2009; Golder and Stramski 2010), the extent of public debt (Persson and Tabellini 2005), the stability of the political regime (Lijphart 2012) and the quality of democracy (Roller 2005; Diamond and Morlino 2005; Morlino 2011). As Müller et al. (2008: 9) put it, ‘the birth and death of coalitions have received most attention. Coalition researchers have rarely (though increasingly) focused on what occurs between the beginning and the end of coalitions, on what we may call coalition governance’. Put it differently, we know the impact of the cabinet types on the different stages of coalition politics (i.e., government formation, governance, government formation and parliamentary elections), but we still do not know in detail the effect that different cabinet types have on the process of government change. Of course, this process can be conceived of a specific phase in the cabinet life cycle, located somewhere in-between, in that grey area between government formation and termination. Yet, because of its hybrid nature (taking place when the old cabinet terminates and the new one has being formed), government substitution has been, to a large extent, neglected by political scientists. Consequently, by examining the impact that different types of government have on the patterns of government turnover, the present chapter shall try to fill that gap.

7.2. Cabinet types across space and through time

The starting point for any discussion concerning the type of government should start, so to speak, from the basics, that is the definition of the problem at stake. It is unnecessary to dwell here on the distinction between *government* and *cabinet*. As I have pointed out in chapter 2, despite the existing differences between the two concepts (for an overview, see Strøm et al. 2008; Laver and Shepsle 1990; Mershon 2002; Dodd 1976), in the course of this study I have treated them interchangeably. That said, the first distinction that should be drawn is between single-party and coalition cabinet. To put it bluntly, the latter term describes all those groups including at least two political parties, whereas the former concerns all those cabinets made up by one single actor, or party. The implicit assumption behind this very basic distinction is that we are

treating a party as a single actor and not as coalition of individuals or groups gathered, more or less, under the same label. Thus, we are assuming that parties act as a sort of monads, with a unique will and a cohesive behaviour.

The second distinction concerns the majority status of the cabinet. More specifically, both single-party and coalition cabinets can be of majority or minority status. In the words of Müller et al. (2008: 7), basically, a *'majority cabinet'* includes political parties jointly holding a majority of seats (a minimum of 50% + one seat) in the chamber of parliament to which the cabinet is accountable. A *minority cabinet* includes parties that jointly hold no more than 50 per cent of the parliamentary seats'. By crossing the two criteria – single-party vs. coalition and majority vs. minority status, we obtain four types (plus one) of government: a) minority single-party; b) minority coalition; c) single-party majority; d) minimal winning coalition. Furthermore, we can single out a fifth type of government, more precisely a sub-type of the majority coalition type (see Table 7.1). This sub-type, commonly known as 'oversized' or 'surplus' cabinet, include governments that contain more parties than are necessary for majority support in the legislature. Needless to add, this scenario cannot be logically met in the context of single-party cabinets.

Tab. 7.1. A typology of parliamentary cabinets

		Number of governing parties	
		One	More than two
Breadth of the parliamentary basis	Less than 50%	Single-party minority	Minority coalition
	More than 50%	Single-party majority	Minimal winning coalition
	More than 50% (plus 'surplus' partner)	-	Oversized coalition

Before turning to the historical trend in the cabinet type, one more specification is in order. By 'minimal winning coalition', we mean that a cabinet is: a) *minimal* in the sense that the cabinet does not include any party that is unnecessary to reach the majority status, and b) *winning* in the sense that the governing parties held a majority of seats in the assembly. Having specified that, we are finally well equipped to observe the frequency and the development of the cabinet types across space and through time. Table 7.2 reports the frequency of the five types of government in the post-war period in seventeen West European countries. The data are, to a large extent, concordant with prior findings in the literature (Strøm 1990, Laver and Schofield 1990, Woldendorp et al. 2000). In fact, minimal winning coalition accounts for 35.1 per cent of governments among the universe of cases in my dataset. Oversized coalition is the second largest category, accounting for 24 per cent of the overall cases. The third largest category is single-party minority type (15.9 per cent), while a further 14.3 per cent refers to single-party government. Last but absolutely not least, the category of minority coalition cabinets accounts for 10.7 per cent.

Overall, two main conclusions can be drawn from these figures. First, and in contrast with what Mitchell and Nyblade (2008: 207) argued, namely that 'unequivocally, non-minimal winning cabinets are the typical outcome of the government formation process in Western Europe', minimal winning coalition is the most common type of government. Even more so after the 1980s, as shown in Table 7.2, when this specific cabinet type account for 41 per cent of all governments in West European party systems. Therefore, coalition politics very frequently relies on coalitions with a majority status but not including surplus or unnecessary partners.

Tab. 7.2. Type of cabinet in Western Europe 1945-2015, by country

Country	Total	Single-party minority		Minority coalition		Single-party majority		Minimal winning coalition		Oversized coalition	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Austria	26	1	3.8	0	-	4	15.4	19	73.1	2	7.7
Belgium	36	1	2.8	2	5.6	3	8.3	21	58.3	9	25.0
Denmark	37	14	37.8	18	48.7	0	-	5	13.5	0	-
Finland	43	4	9.3	4	9.3	0	-	5	11.6	30	69.8
France	51	3	5.9	3	5.9	1	2.0	11	21.5	33	64.7
Germany	26	0	-	0	-	1	3.8	21	80.8	4	15.4
Greece	18	1	5.5	0	-	11	61.1	3	16.7	3	16.7
Iceland	27	2	7.4	0	-	0	-	24	88.9	1	3.7
Ireland	25	4	16.0	7	28.0	7	28.0	6	24.0	1	4.0
Italy	48	6	12.5	7	14.5	0	-	9	18.8	26	54.2
Luxembourg	20	0	-	0	-	0	-	19	95.0	1	5.0
Netherlands	24	0	-	1	4.2	0	-	14	58.3	9	37.5
Norway	31	13	41.8	6	19.4	6	19.4	6	19.4	0	-
Portugal	17	4	23.5	0	-	8	47.1	5	29.4	0	-
Spain	13	9	69.2	0	-	4	30.8	0	-	0	-
Sweden	30	16	53.3	5	16.7	4	13.3	5	16.7	0	-
United Kingdom	24	1	4.2	0	-	22	91.6	1	4.2	0	-
Overall	496	79	15.9	53	10.7	71	14.3	174	35.1	119	24.0
1945-1980	266	48	18.0	22	8.3	40	15.0	80	30.1	76	28.6
1980-2015	230	31	13.5	31	13.5	31	13.5	94	40.9	43	18.7

Note: caretaker, non-partisan and technocratic cabinet have been excluded from the computation.

Second, despite early coalition theories and theorists considered minority cabinet as illogical results of the bargaining process between poorly informed actors, governments with less than 50 per cent of seats (either single-party or coalition) constitute as many as 27 per cent of the governments formed in Europe since the end the Second World War. Moreover their frequency has slightly increased in the second period, that is after the 1980s: from 26.3 to 27 per cent.

In order to subject the types of cabinet to closer scrutiny, Table 7.3 offers a dynamic, longitudinal perspective of the types of government in Western Europe. The data show a clear trend towards governments with a smaller parliamentary support basis. To begin with, minimal winning coalitions steadily increased over time, especially after the 1980s. Notably, by the 2000s, on average one cabinet of out two can be included in the category of the minimal winning government. This trend implied, as a consequence, a sharp decline for the frequency of the oversized coalitions: one third of cabinets were surplus coalitions in the 1950s (36.1) and they drop to 15.3 per cent in the first decade after the advent of twenty-first century. Remarkably, oversized governments have risen sharply since the 2010s, perhaps as a consequence of the Great Recession that has recently hit European countries (Bermeo and Pontusson 2012, Kriesi and Pappas 2015) and led to the formation of Grand Coalitions aiming at avoiding as much as possible the blame for governing in dire straits. As to single-party majority cabinet, its trend seems to ebb and flow, with the only exception recorded in the last decade (3.5%): a development probably related to the same factors explaining the unexpected resurgence of surplus coalitions. A similar pattern can be also observe for the categories of government with minority status in parliament, with a growth, in terms of frequency, until the 1970s and then a slow decline. Notably, during the last five years in the dataset (2010-2015) no cabinet took the shape of single-party minority government.

Tab. 7.3. Types of government in Western Europe, by decade (% values)

Decade	Single-party majority	Single-party minority	Minority coalition	Minimum winning coalition	Oversized coalition	Total
1940s	11.6	9.3	7.0	32.6	39.5	100.0
1950s	17.4	14.0	10.5	22.1	36.0	100.0
1960s	14.8	19.7	6.5	41.0	18.0	100.0
1970s	14.5	26.3	7.9	29.0	22.3	100.0
1980s	16.8	18.2	14.3	31.2	19.5	100.0
1990s	12.3	18.5	12.3	40.0	16.9	100.0
2000s	15.3	8.5	10.2	50.9	15.3	100.0
2010s	3.5	-	20.7	48.3	27.5	100.0
<i>Mean</i>	<i>14.3</i>	<i>15.9</i>	<i>10.7</i>	<i>35.1</i>	<i>24.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

If we now focus exclusively on coalition cabinets, as Table 7.4 does, we can see that trend previously outlined looks even more impressive. The steady rise in minimal winning coalitions experienced, maybe, only a temporary stop after the Great Recession, but in the penultimate decade this category account for 63 per cent of government coalitions in Western Europe. By implication, the figures show also the decline, more or less marked across time, of the residual categories, minority and surplus coalition. Hence, to sum up: cabinet types show a large amount of cross-country and cross-time variation. From a longitudinal standpoint, the most striking development is the substitution as the most typical cabinet type of the surplus coalition with the minimal winning government. This trend can also be interpreted as a revenge – with at least thirty years of delay – of early coalition theorists, William Riker (1962) ahead, who predicted from a purely rational, game-theoretical and policy-blind perspective that the smallest minimal winning coalition will form in any situation.

Tab. 7.4. Types of coalition cabinets in West European countries, 1945-2015 (% values)

Decade	Minority coalition	Minimal winning coalition	Surplus coalition	Total
1940s	22.5	25.0	52.5	100.0
1950s	29.6	29.6	40.9	100.0
1960s	35.9	47.1	17.0	100.0
1970s	44.6	29.2	26.2	100.0
1980s	37.7	33.3	29.0	100.0
1990s	36.2	48.3	15.5	100.0
2000s	19.6	63.0	17.4	100.0
2010s	22.2	48.2	29.6	100.0
<i>Average</i>	<i>32.6</i>	<i>39.2</i>	<i>28.2</i>	<i>100.0</i>

The evidence collected hitherto indicates a lessening of the parliamentary base for majority cabinets. On average, in the last thirty years nearly one government out of two was formed with a minimal majority support in the legislature. This trend mirrored, as Table 7.5 reveals, the steadiness of the decline in terms of seat-share controlled by the cabinet parties. In the first years after the end of the Second World War, the mean cabinet seat-share was 64.4 per cent, while seventy years later it dropped to 57.1 per cent. In short, West European governments still control a majority of seats in the legislature, but the fraction of parliamentarians supporting the cabinet has significantly declined. This development can be tested also by looking at the frequency and strength of so-called Grand Coalitions. On this respect, I hasten to specify that a Grand Coalition can be conceived of as a sub-type of majority cabinet but with the addition of a crucial caveat: it must be made up exclusively by the two largest parties in the legislature. This situation has often occurred, for instance, in Germany, with a coalition between the CDU and the SPD, and more frequently in Austria between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic party (SPÖ).

That said, if we look at the data in Table 7.5, it is evident that the strength of Grand Coalitions suffered a severe decline. More precisely, the mean seat-share of Grand Coalitions was 77 per cent in the 1950s, while it has fallen to 65 per cent in the last decade. This is, so to speak, a direct consequence of what I have pointed out in chapters 5 and 6, namely a downwards trends in party dominance throughout Western Europe. If largest parties in parliament are not anymore as strong as they were in the heydays of mass politics, we can infer that also grand coalitions are not as “grand” as they were thirty or forty years ago. To illustrate, let us take the German case. In the late 1960s, the Grand Coalition headed by the Christian democrat Kurt G. Kiesinger held 90.3 per cent of seats, whereas the incumbent government led by Angela Merkel and formed by the CDU and the SPD in the wake of the 2013 general election has a parliamentary support amounting to less than 80 per cent of seats. Even more striking is the case of Austria, the motherland of Grand Coalition. Here, in 1964 the coalition between the ÖVP and SPÖ controlled 95.2 per cent of seats, while the incumbent cabinet, formed by the same pair of parties, is supported by 54.1 per cent of members of parliament. In a way, grand coalitions in post-war Western Europe are gradually transforming into minimal winning coalitions.

Tab. 7.5. Mean cabinet seat-share and frequency of Grand Coalitions in Western Europe, by decade

Decade	Cabinet seat share (%)	Grand Coalition (%)	Grand Coalition seat share (%)
1940s	64.4	13.0	75.5
1950s	58.2	12.8	77.0
1960s	57.9	16.4	76.6
1970s	52.6	2.6	61.7
1980s	55.0	9.0	65.9
1990s	54.7	13.6	64.5
2000s	53.9	13.6	61.7
2010s	57.1	17.2	65.0
<i>Mean</i>	<i>56.3</i>	<i>11.6</i>	<i>69.8</i>

As the data reveal, cross-time variation in seat-share of European government shows, to a degree, a uniform pattern towards the increasing formation of minimal winning coalitions. However, if we observe this pattern at the individual or country level, the overall picture is a bit more blurry. In fact, Table 7.6 shows that the seat-share of the governing parties varies substantially between countries, indicating no clear trend at this level of analysis. In some countries, such as Austria, France, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain, cabinet seat-share hits its negative peak in the last twenty years, whereas other polities (e.g. Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the United Kingdom) recorded the lowest values soon after the end of WWII. Taking all countries together, the average cabinet seat-share peaks in the mid-1940s (64.4 per cent) and reaches its second highest level (58.2 per cent) in the 1950s. However, across individual countries the distribution of values is, as we have just seen, random and there appears to be a lot of ‘noise’ in these country-level figures. Certainly, if we are aimed at accounting for the effects of cabinet types on the process of government turnover, we should not neglect such level of ‘randomness’ at the individual level.

Tab. 7.6. Share of seat controlled by cabinets in seventeen West European countries 1945-2015, by decade (% values)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	<i>Average</i>
Austria	94.9	92.9	84.2	50.7	65.8	69.0	60.5	54.1	<i>72.0</i>
Belgium	57.0	52.2	67.7	63.0	62.1	59.3	66.7	60.4	<i>60.7</i>
Denmark	32.1	42.6	48.0	35.2	38.2	41.2	37.7	38.6	<i>40.0</i>
Finland	64.5	50.7	58.8	58.4	61.1	61.8	59.8	62.5	<i>58.2</i>
France	67.9	64.9	65.1	62.8	55.4	62.7	58.4	52.1	<i>63.2</i>
Germany	52.0	62.2	62.9	53.4	55.2	54.1	58.8	89.7	<i>59.6</i>
Greece	-	-	-	57.0	64.9	54.3	52.9	64.2	<i>59.3</i>
Iceland	75.6	54.8	53.3	60.8	63.6	59.8	57.5	60.3	<i>60.7</i>

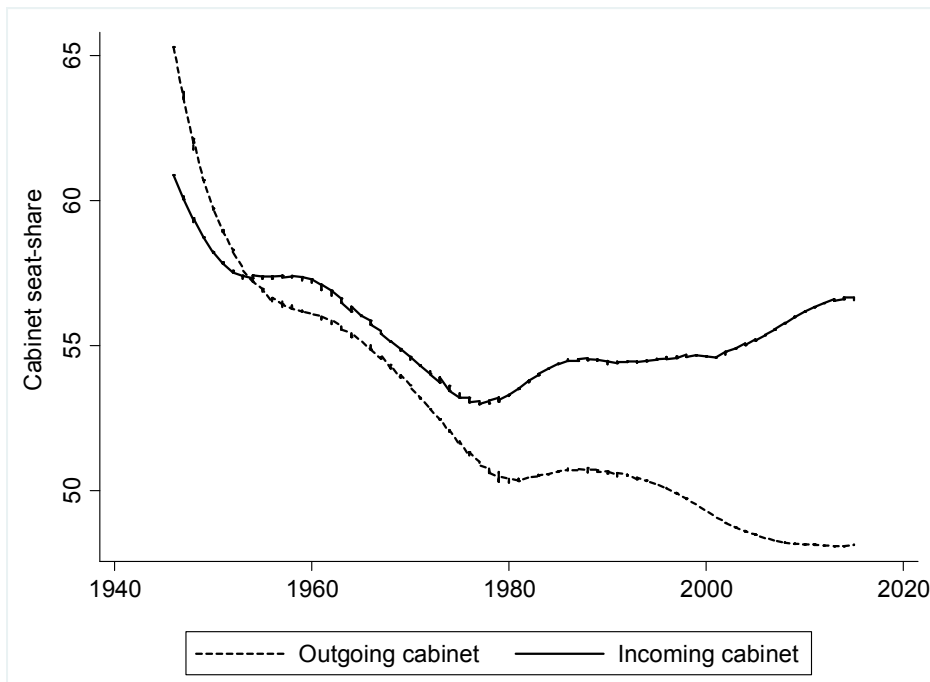
Ireland	50.3	50.9	50.2	54.7	49.5	52.6	52.4	68.1	52.0
Italy	67.1	50.7	50.0	51.7	57.8	53.6	54.3	65	54.8
Luxembourg	75.2	76.2	67.0	59.3	69.3	61.1	64.2	53.3	68.1
Netherlands	71.0	69.6	55.8	57.8	56.8	63.3	43.8	43.7	58.5
Norway	53.7	52.8	50.4	41.9	44.4	36.2	44.8	45.6	45.7
Portugal	-	-	-	48.7	53.8	52.2	49.6	57.4	52.2
Spain	-	-	-	47.9	51.9	45.0	49.1	53.1	49.5
Sweden	49.6	53.8	51.2	40.8	42.5	50.6	50.9	45.5	47.8
United Kingdom	54.6	54.8	49.2	56.3	63.0	55.3	57.7	56.0	55.6
<i>Average</i>	<i>64.4</i>	<i>58.2</i>	<i>57.9</i>	<i>52.6</i>	<i>55.0</i>	<i>54.7</i>	<i>53.9</i>	<i>57.1</i>	<i>56.3</i>

Note: bold = negative peak.

One final point requires further scrutiny. I have already pointed out that government substitution is a process that takes place in the grey area between government formation and government termination. In other words, when some parties get into government, others parties get out. Accordingly, it is necessary to distinguish between *outgoing* and *incoming* cabinet. The latter relates to the phase of government termination, while the former concerns the prior phase of government formation. Operatively, I measure the seat-share of the outgoing cabinet as the percentage of seats held by the previous governing parties at time $t+1$, that is, in the legislature formed after the new general election. By contrast, the seat-share of the incoming cabinet is measured as the percentage of seats controlled by the (new) governing parties. To illustrate, let us take a real example. From 2009 to 2013, the cabinet in Germany was made up by the CDU and the liberals (FDP). In my terminology, this is the outgoing cabinet in the perspective of the 2013 legislative election, when the CDU (and its Bavarian counterpart) got 49.3 of seats while the FDP, not having passed the 5 per cent electoral threshold, did not get into parliament. Hence, in 2013 the cabinet seat-share of the German outgoing cabinet was equal to the seats won by the Christian Democratic party. On the contrary, the share of seats of the incoming cabinet (CDU/CSU + SDP) is equivalent to the sum of seats obtained by the two parties (49.3 + 30.6, that is 79.9 per cent).

Bearing in mind this distinction, we can observe in Fig. 7.1 a significant twofold trend. On the one hand, we see a steady decline in seat-share for the outgoing cabinets. Bluntly put, governing parties are kick out of office with a lower share of seats than that they got in the previous legislature. This is not, of course, a surprising result. Indeed, the most recent findings in the literature shows the existence of an 'inverse incumbency effect' (Narud and Valen 2008: 379), in the sense that, on average, 'incumbent parties have in the post-war period lost 2.59 per cent of the total national vote'. To sum it up, in Western Europe governing has become a losing game and, as Strøm et al. (2008: 417) convincingly argued, if 'maximizing votes were all that mattered to European politicians, parties would currently be better off staying in opposition!'

Fig. 7.1. Incoming and outgoing cabinet seat-share (%) in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed line)¹



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

On the other hand, it is evident the decline in seat-share of the incoming cabinets until the 1980s and then a weak upwards countertrend that coincides, I argue, with the increased frequency in the last years of oversized governments, which tried to cope with the political effects of the economic crisis. At first sight, this twofold trend, that indicates a steady decline in parliamentary support for the outgoing cabinets and a more dynamic pattern of change for the incoming ones, might seem contradictory. However, if we accept the conclusion that, in general, ‘the more parties the ruling coalition includes and the more seats that it controls, the more severe are its losses’ (Strøm et al. 2008: 415), then the bifurcation that we observe in Figure 7.1 can be perfectly explained. Hence, the argument goes this way: the higher the seat-share of the incoming cabinets, the higher the losses of the outgoing cabinets. In short, the more you have, the more you lose.

To recapitulate, from the analysis of the typology of governments emerges a large variation both between and within countries, as well as between decades. Despite a general trend, that indicates an increasing frequency of minimal winning coalition, the universe of coalition type is varied and multifaceted. In some countries, especially the Scandinavian nations, the most common type of government has a minority status, either single-party or coalition. In other party systems, instead, most cabinets have a minimal winning format (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and Iceland), whereas in other polities oversized governments are the norm (Finland, Fourth French Republic and Italy until 1993). All this amount of cross-time and cross-space variation should be taken into account in the analysis of the relationship between cabinet type and patterns of government turnover.

7.3. Cabinet type and government turnover

Political science has cumulated deep and vast knowledge on the relationship between type or size of cabinet and the phases of government termination or formation. Nevertheless, it is fair to admit that we know nothing on the hypothetical link between the type of cabinet and the way governments change their

¹ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

party composition. To the best of my knowledge, the only exception is the research carried out by Strøm (1990) and transferred in a book-length monograph devoted to the study of the seemingly “uncommonness” of minority cabinets. Just in passing and not focusing further on this aspect, he argues that, especially in the Scandinavian countries, ‘minority governments are vehicles of alternation in office’ (Strøm 1990: 92). More specifically, and with a terminology much more in line with that adopted in the present dissertation, Strøm adds that ‘[s]ubstantive minority governments have been subject to the greatest amount of subsequent turnover’ (Strøm 1990: 126). From this argument we can extract the hypothesis that the lower the seat-share of the cabinet, the higher the level of government turnover and the frequency of alternation. Table 7.7 offers a test for this hypothesis.

Tab. 7.7. Cabinet type and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean, % values)

Cabinet type	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Single-party minority	38.1	75.1
Minority coalition	41.0	55.7
Single-party majority	23.3	85.4
Minimal winning coalition	32.8	54.2
Oversized coalition	19.4	28.0

In general, the greatest amount of degree of turnover (41.0 per cent) relates to the presence of a minority coalition, whereas oversized governments record the lowest value (19.4 per cent). It is worth noticing that minimal winning coalitions show a higher degree of turnover than single-party government. This result may be partially explained by the higher duration in office experienced by single-party cabinets. Inevitably, long-lasting governments are, by definition, detrimental for the overall amount of government turnover. If we now look at the level in which a government change takes place, it is evident that the *format* of the cabinet counts. To be more precise, single-party cabinets, whether with a majority support in the legislature or not, show the highest levels of turnover in government. For the single-party majority cabinets the level of reshuffling in the party composition is a staggering 85.4 per cent, while single-party governments with a minority situation in parliament shows a level of turnover equal to 75.1 per cent. It is no coincidence that the lowest level of turnover (28 per cent) is recorded in association with oversized coalitions. To make sense of these figures, we can assume that when a ruling coalition encompasses “surplus” partners, the pattern of change will usually involve the replacement of the ‘surpluses’ and the permanence in power of the ‘core’, irreplaceable party, or parties.

With regard to alternation in power, the figures in Table 7.8 confirms the generalization put forward by Strøm: minority cabinets are powerful vehicles of alternation. Indeed, they are *the most powerful* vehicle among our types of government. In terms of frequency, at least one third of all minority cabinets are the product of wholesale rotations in office, whereas only 21.2 per cent of single-party majority government are brought to power through an alternation. From this viewpoint, oversized coalition are confirmed as the type of cabinet least conducive to a pattern of complete substitution of the ruling parties.

Looking at the probability of alternation, the data reveals that, again, the most important factor accounting for the likelihood of wholesale government turnover is not the breadth of cabinet’s parliamentary base, but its format. More accurately, when a single actor forms the government, the probability of alternation in office is higher. The likelihood peaks in presence of single-party majority (77.8 per cent) and single-party minority (61.5 per cent) cabinet. Therefore, nearly two third of government changes in single-party government occur through alternation. Among minimal winning coalitions, the probability of alternation is 26.2 per cent, whereas in presence of oversized cabinets less than 2.0 of government changes entails a complete replacement of the ruling parties.

As to the possibility of alternation, the status of the cabinet in the assembly prevails on its format. In fact, single-party minority governments or coalitions that control less than 50% of seats in parliament show the highest level of possibility of alternation, respectively 73.7 and 61.5 per cent. Since our measure of the

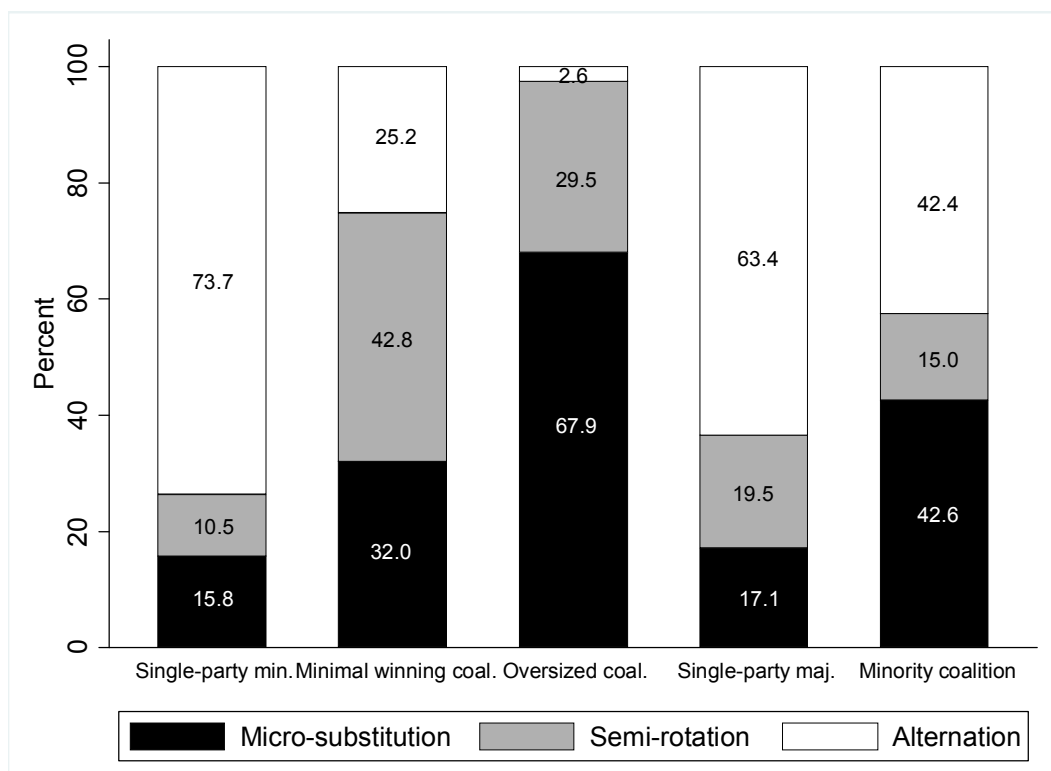
possibility of alteration is based on a purely policy-blind, arithmetical calculation, these data are not surprising. As the seat-share of the (outgoing) cabinet decreases, the possibility of alternation automatically increases.

Tab. 7.8. Cabinet type and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean, % values)

Cabinet type	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Single-party minority	31.2	61.5	73.7
Minority coalition	30.2	41.0	61.5
Single-party majority	21.2	77.8	20.6
Minimal winning coalition	15.9	26.2	24.7
Oversized coalition	1.8	2.5	11.6

As the foregoing implies, both the status and the format of the cabinet matter for the explanation of the occurrence of alternation, or lack thereof. These results are corroborated by the data reported in Fig. 7.2, which cross-tabulates the three types of government change against the cabinet type. Here again, alternation is the typical change of government for both single-party majority (73.7 per cent) and single-party minority cabinets (63.4 per cent). In a way, a government made up by only one actor is more prone to suffer a complete replacement. On the opposite, coalition cabinets show a much blurrier distribution. More precisely, the most frequent type of government change for minority coalitions is micro-substitution (43.6 per cent), whereas semi-rotation is the most common type for the minimal winning coalitions (42.6 per cent). Finally, surplus cabinets presents, simultaneously, the lowest frequency of alternation (2.6) and the highest level of micro-substitutions in governmental office. From this viewpoint, it is crystal-clear that the format of the cabinet and, to a lesser extent, its status (minority or majority) greatly contribute to account for the variation in government turnover and frequency of alternation.

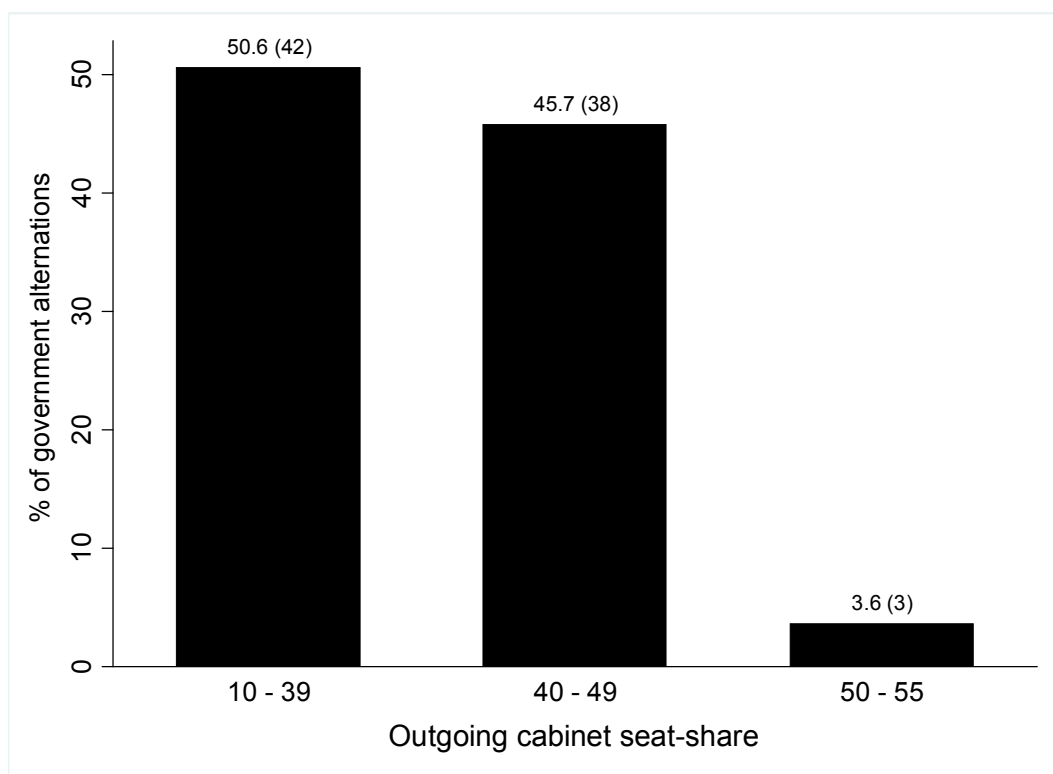
Fig. 7.2. Type of government turnover by cabinet type in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (% values)



If we now turn to the percentage of governmental alternations breaks down by three distinct levels of the outgoing cabinet seat-share, as reported in Figure 7.3, we can see that the majority of government alternations (50.6%) took place when the prior governing parties hold less the 40 per cent of seats in the new legislature. The second highest frequency of alternations (45.7) is found in conjunction with an outgoing cabinet share of seats that goes from 40 to 49.9 per cent of seats. There exist, finally, only two Norwegian cases of alternation taking place in 'curious' situations, that is when the outgoing ruling coalition still controls a majority of MPs. The first case is represented by an inter-election single-party minority cabinet that, formed in Norway in 1971 by the Labour's prime minister Per Borten, replaced *en bloc* the up to then incumbent bourgeois coalition whose members strongly disagree on the decision to apply for the European Common Market membership (Narud 1995).

The second case, still in Norway, involve three main actors: the incumbent non-socialist government led by Kåre Willoch, the main opposition embodied by the Labour Party and, third, the right-wing Progress Party (PP) that, with only two representatives, was able to tip the balance toward the centre-right or the centre-left. After the general election of 1985, the Progress Party decided to support informally, namely without taking up any governmental positions, the bourgeois (minority) cabinet headed by Willoch. Yet, in the spring of 1986 the PP decided to reject the budget proposal put forward by the non-socialist government and, once again, after the resignation of Willoch, a Labour's single-party minority cabinet took over (Narud 1995).

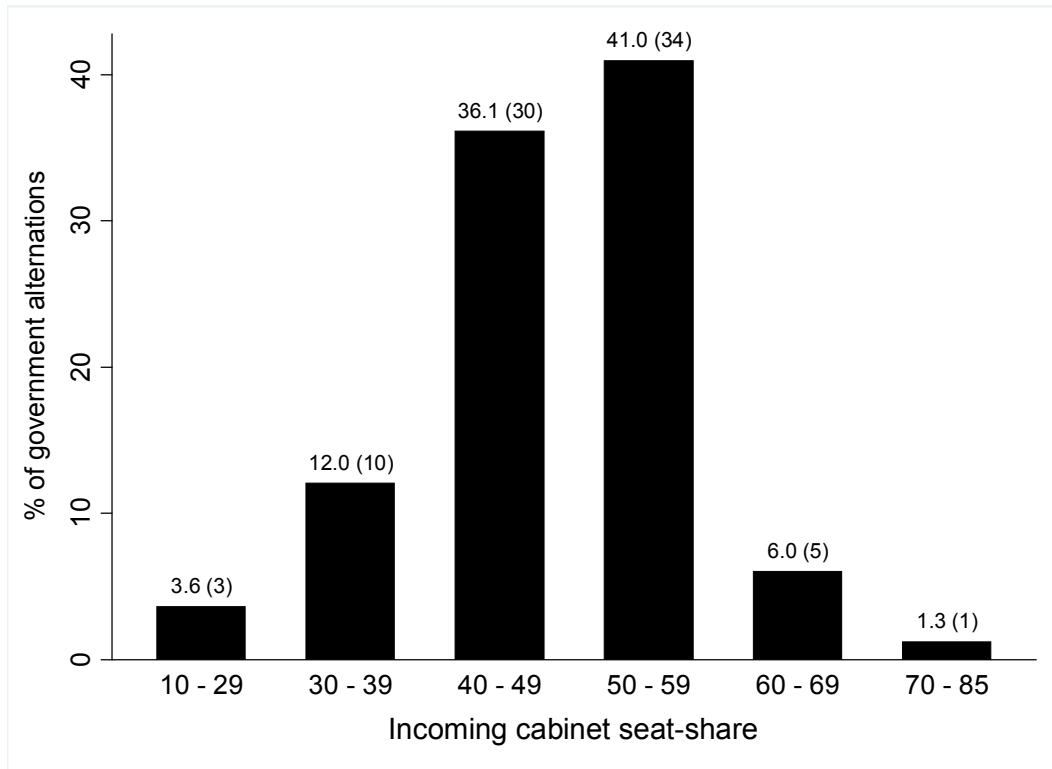
Fig. 7.3. Frequency of alternations in government and seat-share of the outgoing cabinet in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (% values)



Besides these two exceptions, all government alternations in the post-war period occurred when the outgoing cabinet did not hold any longer a majority of seats in the legislature. This is, so to speak, a precondition for wholesale cabinet replacements. If we now look at the strength of the incoming cabinet, the resulting picture is definitely more multifaceted. As Fig. 7.4 shows, the plurality of alternations (34) took place when the range of the cabinet seat-share goes from 50 to 59.9 per cent. Thus, barely majority cabinets are the most effective in terms of 'creation' of alternation in power. The second place goes to those minority

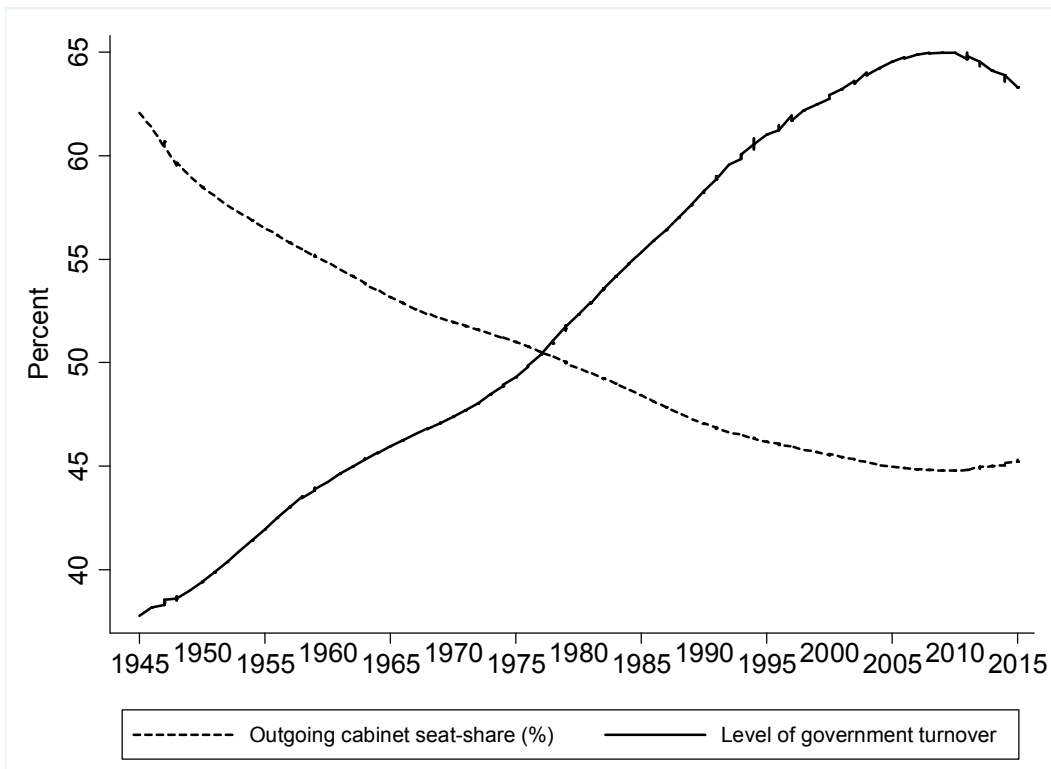
governments supported by no less than 40 per cent of representatives, while cabinets with a parliamentary base lower than 40 per cent account for 13 alternations. In general, the distribution of alternations in post-war Western Europe is almost perfectly split down in the middle: 43 cases brought about by minority cabinets and the remaining 40 alternations as the product of governments with a majority status in the assembly. Tautologically speaking, one can say that the weaker the outgoing cabinet (i.e., the lower the seat-share of the prior government in the new legislature), the higher the level of government turnover and the frequency of alternation.

Fig. 7.4. Frequency of alternations in government by seat-share of the incoming cabinet, 1945-2015 (% values)



As shown in Fig. 7.5, the data corroborates this hypothetical generalization. The decline in the outgoing cabinet seat-share matched a quasi-contextual rise in the level of government turnover. In this sense, the growth overtime of wholesale cabinet reshuffles may be due to the high(er) propensity of voters to punish severely their rulers, especially after the 1980s and even more so in times of economic turmoil. However, in some circumstances, for instance in the wake of the Great Recession (from 2008 up to now), this propensity of the voters may lead, in the medium-long run, to a slowdown in the growth of alternation in power. In fact, the recent formation of Grand Coalitions, oversized cabinets or technocratic governments with a very large partisan support has the unavoidable consequence of making unlikely the occurrence of alternation in power.

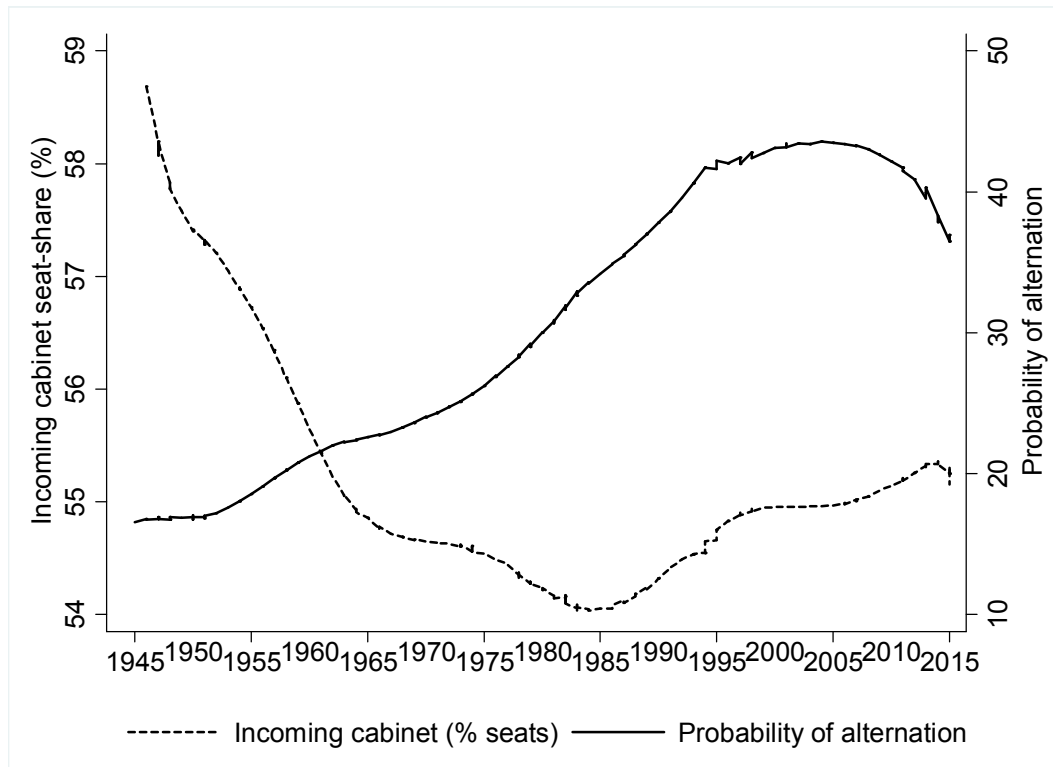
Fig. 7.5. Level of government turnover and seat-share of the outgoing cabinet (lowess smoothed line)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

This specific development is evident in Fig. 7.6, which plots the probability of alternation against the size of the new, or incoming, cabinet. As we can see, in the last decades, but especially during the last five years in the dataset, the trend indicates a rise in the seat-share of the West European governments and a decline in both level of turnover and probability of alternation. In hard times, the necessity or, better, the urgency to enlarge the parliamentary basis of the cabinets, in order to share as much as possible the burden of implementing austere policies, has put a brake on that steady growth of alternation that we have observed until the early 2000s.

Fig. 7.6. Probability of alternation and seat-share of the incoming cabinet (lowest smoothed line)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

We do not know whether this development represents only a temporary stop or, on the contrary, a U-turn in that process of transformation that the European party systems underwent at least in the last three decades. Put it differently, we do not know if (the growth of) alternation is here to stay or, with the partisan realignment brought about by the economic crisis, is bound to disappear. Be that as it may, what we know is that the future of alternation is strictly related to the strategy of coalition-building adopted by political parties which, in turn, try to cope with the increasing propensity of European voters to punish indiscriminately each and every government.

7.4. Cabinet identifiability and clarity of responsibility

By focusing exclusively on the democratic life cycle of coalition cabinets, political scientists have often neglected that phase in which parties try, formally or not, to create an alliance *before* the election. We are well aware that '[i]nter-party agreements are worked out under the shadow of the past as well as the shadow of the future' (Müller et al. 2008: 15), in the sense that the perceptions of the upcoming events will shape or sway the behaviour of the parties. Yet, only recently the 'shadow of the future' has found a place in the study of government formation and, in particular, in the creation of pre-electoral coalitions (Golder 2005; 2006). Such alliances, which are not at all rare events despite the high complexity of strategic coordination they imply, may substantially affect the process of cabinet formation and, perhaps to a greater extent, the way in which governments across space and through time. One of the most striking example of this kind of pre-election coordination is provided by Germany when, in 1998, experienced its first and thus far only case of alternation in power, produced by an alliance between the SPD and the Greens. In a way, the existence of pre-electoral agreements may, in some circumstances, paves the way to the occurrence of wholesale replacements of prior ruling coalition.

What is more, pre-electoral coalitions have profound normative implications. In fact, if 'all the resources necessary for policy making are controlled by a unified, identifiable set of political officials, it will

be easy for citizens to perceive accurately that those officials are responsible for the policies made' (Powell 2000: 51). Needless to say, this "clarity of responsibility" in two-party systems, where only two parties alternate in power and exercise executive power by turn. In contrast, the clarity of responsibility may be undermined when the chain of delegation between voters and rulers is, so to speak, mediated or blurred by the creation of governments that are the product of a process of, often cumbersome, post-election bargaining between parties in the legislature. Pre-electoral alliances may, nonetheless, alleviate this problem by allowing voters to identify government alternatives at election time. In the sense, agreements between parties before election can bring a grain of clarity in a process that often takes place within the so-called smoke-filled rooms.

That said, both clarity of responsibility and the existence of pre-electoral agreement are inevitably intertwined with the concept 'identifiability' of the political alternative at election time. As Powell (2000: 71) put it, if 'two and only two parties compete in the national elections, it is easy for everyone to identify the future government. Most democracies do not offer their voters a straight two-party choice'. Accordingly, in the vast majority of competitive party systems government formation entails a complex period of bargaining between the parties to form a coalition government and, as a consequence, pre-election identifiability is very low, not to say nil. In order to grasp empirically this concept, Strøm (1990) and, later on, Huber and Powell (1994) developed an impressionistic measure of the regularity with which voters face clear choices of alternative and competing government at election time. Following the guidelines put forward by Matthew Shugart (2003: 30; see also 2001), I have impressionistically coded all elections in the dataset taking into account their level of identifiability. More precisely, an election is scored 1 when it presents a clear choice between two rival teams of would-be rulers. An election is coded 0.5 'when there are two opposing blocs but neither can form a government without the support of parties that remain unaligned during the campaign... [or] when one side of the left-right divide is clear to voters but the other side is inchoate' (Shugart 2001: 30). Finally, an election scored 0 when voters have no clue about the party composition of the incoming cabinet.

With these two measures of the clarity of responsibility, that is, the existence of cabinet formed as a result of pre-electoral coalition and the index of pre-election identifiability, we can analyse, first, if the clarity of government formation has increased or decreased over time and, second, if this phenomenon contributes to the explanation of the variation in government turnover. Table 7.9 reports, for each country, the frequency of cabinets made up by parties that formed a pre-electoral alliance before elections and the mean value in the index of pre-election identifiability. In 343 coalition cabinets used in this study, 16.6 per cent (57) is the direct consequence of a pre-electoral agreement. On this respect, there is a significant cross-country variation. For instance, in Austria and in Norway more than one government out of two can be described as a pre-electoral government, whereas in other party systems (Finland, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg) there is no instance of such strategy of coordination between governing parties. In addition, it is worth noting that the frequency of cabinets formed in the wake of pre-electoral agreement after the 1980s is as twice as high that recorded before the 1980s. From this point of view, pre-election agreement has become a more common practice in Western Europe during the last thirty years (Golder 2006) and this development can account for the rising level of pre-election identifiability, from 0.34 until the 1970s and 0.44 since the 1980s.

Tab. 7.9. Pre-electoral coalition and pre-election identifiability in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values)

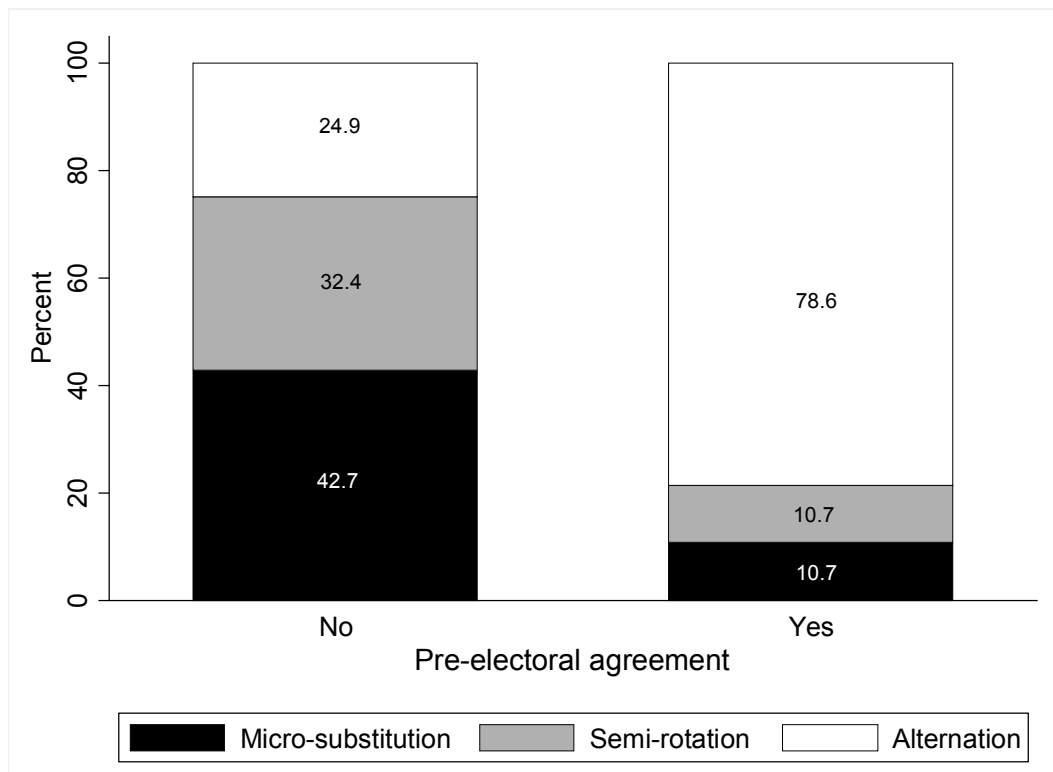
Country	Pre-electoral coalition cabinet		Pre-election identifiability
	<i>N</i>	% ^a	0-1
Austria	10	52.6	0.25
Belgium	1	3.1	0
Denmark	2	8.7	0.64
Finland	0	0	0
France	9	19.6	0.45
Germany	7	28.0	0.50

Greece	0	0	0.79
Iceland	0	0	0
Ireland	5	35.7	0.60
Italy	5	11.9	0.20
Luxembourg	0	0	0
Netherlands	3	12.5	0
Norway	8	66.7	0.68
Portugal	2	11.8	0.76
Spain	0	0	1.00
Sweden	5	5.0	0.61
United Kingdom	0	0	0.96
<i>Average whole period</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>16.6</i>	<i>0.39</i>
<i>Average 1945-1980</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>11.4</i>	<i>0.34</i>
<i>Average 1980-2015</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>22.2</i>	<i>0.44</i>

Note: percentage calculated on the total of coalition cabinets.

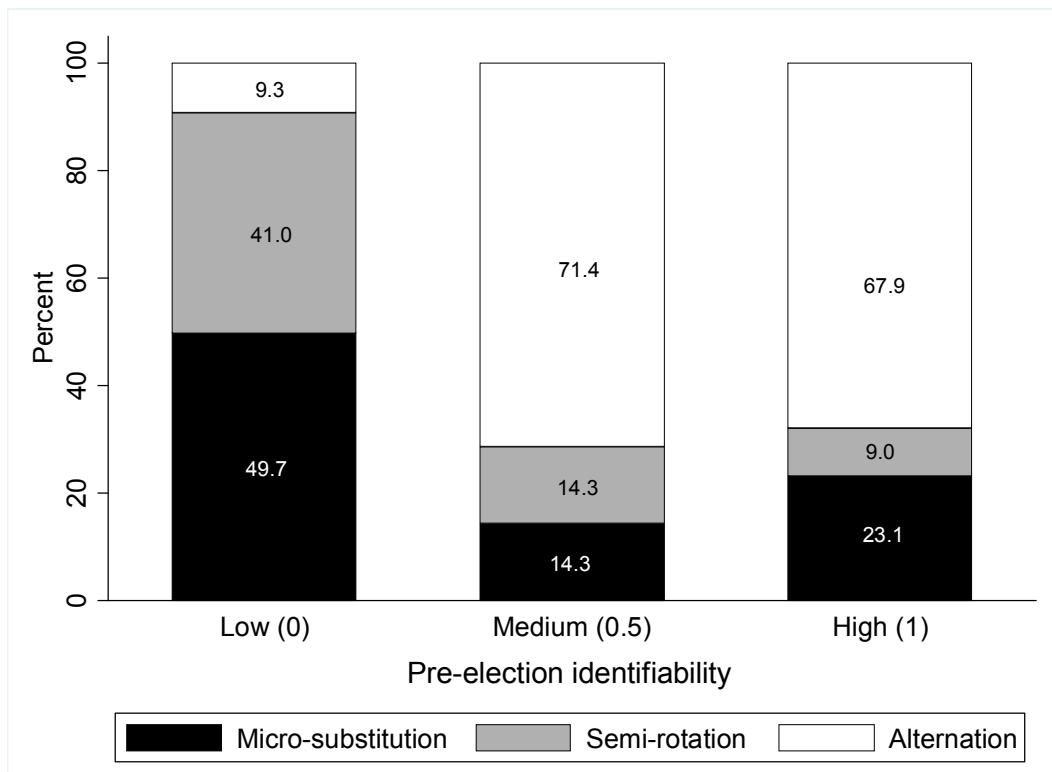
All in all, the clarity of responsibility has increased over time, perhaps as a consequence of the increasing bipolarity experienced by European party systems (Bale 2003) and the growth in pre-electoral coalition. By what is the likely impact of this development on the patterns of government alternation? The answer can be found in Fig. 7.7, which reports the distribution of the three types of government turnover on the basis of the existence (or absence) of a pre-electoral agreement. As the data clearly show, alternation is the most frequent government change in the presence of a pre-electoral coalition. In other words, alternation in power is more likely when the incoming coalition cabinet already acted as such during the electoral campaign. More specifically, 78.6% of pre-electoral coalition cabinets has produced an alternation, whereas only 10.7 per cent of them brought about micro-substitutions or semi-rotations. As to the cabinets with no pre-electoral agreement, the most frequent type of government change is micro-substitution (42.7 per cent), whereas alternations accounts only for 24.9 per cent of the cases.

Fig. 7.7. Type of government change by the existence of a pre-electoral agreement in Western Europe (% values)



If we now look at the relationship between government alternation and pre-election identifiability, Fig. 7.8 indicates that most alternations tend to occur in those circumstances in which elections provide voters with clear choices of competing team of rulers. To be more precise, alternation is the most frequent type of cabinet change when the level of pre-election identifiability goes from medium to high (respectively, 71.4 and 67.9 per cent). By contrast, micro-substitution is the most frequent type of cabinet change (49.7 per cent) in those situations characterized by a low level of identifiability before election. Therefore, there appear to be a link, albeit not perfectly linear, between the possibility for the voters to choose between alternative governments and, accordingly, to kick one of them out of power. This is, in a way, the other side of the clarity of responsibility, which implies the possibility for the voters to evict a government from office. As Powell argued (2000: 71), if 'citizens in a democracy cannot identify responsibility for policy, they cannot use elections precisely to hold policymakers retrospectively accountable for their actions'. Briefly put, the clearer the responsibility in power, the easier for the voters to punish their rulers and, consequently, the higher the probability of alternation.

Fig. 7.8. Type of government change by level of pre-election identifiability in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (% values)

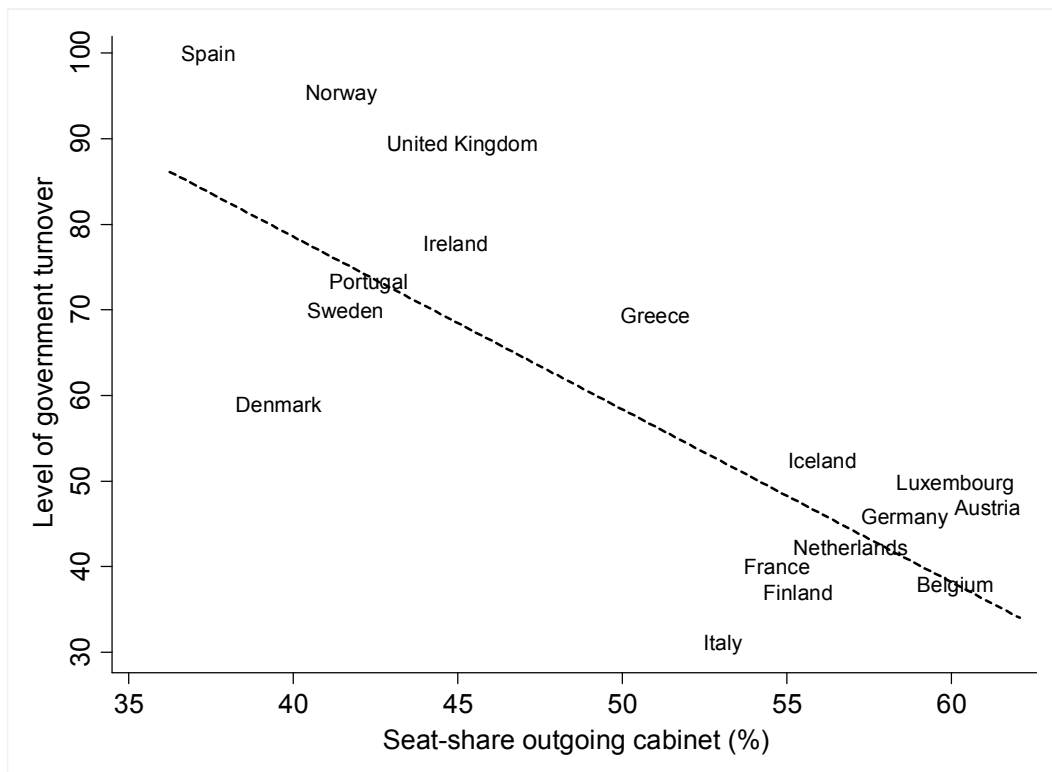


After this detour into the multi-faceted concept of “clarity of responsibility” and, in particular, on its impact on government formation, it is time to move on taking a step back, namely analysing the strength of the association between government type, also in the light of the evidence collected in this section, and the occurrence of alternation, across time and space.

7.5 Assessing the association

Squeezed between government formation and government termination, when an old cabinet dies and a new cabinet arises, government substitution has not received enough attention by scholars and, in particular, political scientists. As we have seen above, the cabinet size seems to contribute, to some extent, to the pattern of government change, but this relationship should take into account cross-country and cross-time variations. As to the former source of variation, it is useful to observe at the individual level the existence of an association between the average share of seats controlled by the cabinet and the level of government turnover. As evident from Figure 7.9, there is a negative association between the level of governmental turnover and the parliamentary strength of the cabinet. In other words, the more a cabinet resembles a surplus coalition, the higher the level of rotation in power.

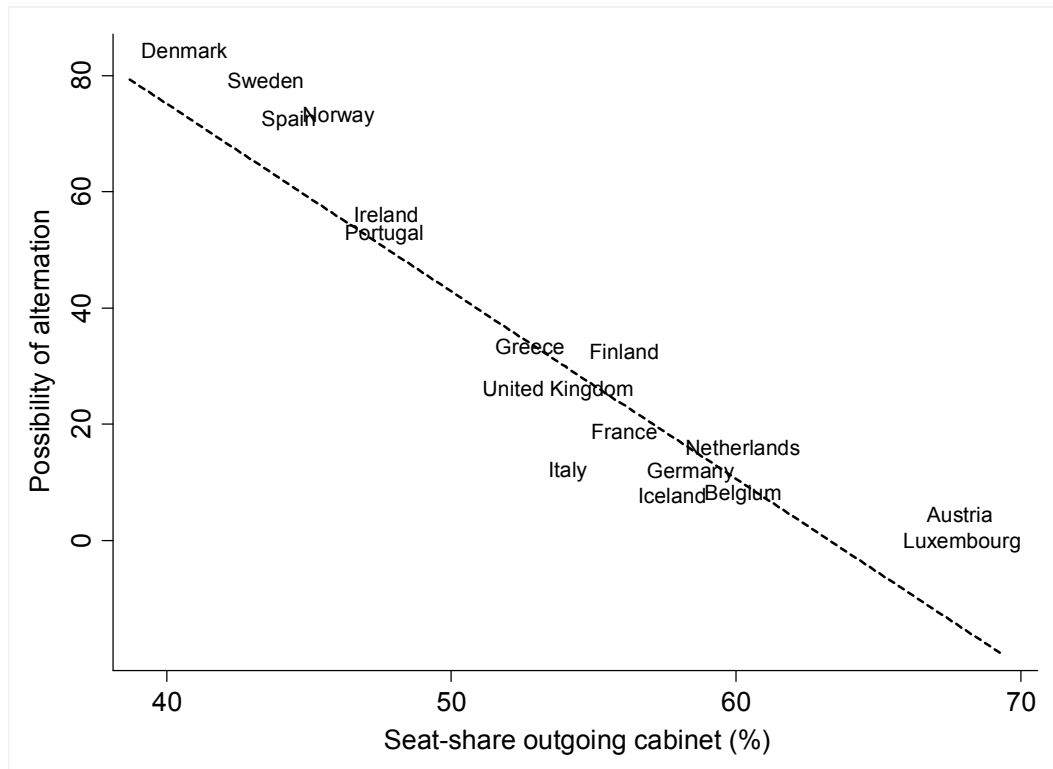
Fig. 7.9. Level of government turnover and seat-share of the outgoing cabinet in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



In the lower left corner of the figure, there are those party systems characterized by the prevalence of single-party or minority government: Spain, Ireland, Portugal, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Here, the high level of turnover appears to be connected to the relatively limited parliamentary basis of these vulnerable cabinets. On the opposite extreme of the figure, there is a cluster of countries (Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Luxembourg, Italy and Germany) in which minimal winning and, especially, oversized coalitions impeded a substantial rotation in power. Note, on these respects, that the values are country-means, which obfuscate drastic changes occurred throughout the post-war period. For instance, the figures of France and Italy have changed quite a lot during this period, in particular with the formation of the Fifth French Republic (1958) and, for the Italian case, the breakdown of the party system in 1992-93. In these two countries, the increasing adoption of minimal winning coalitions has enhanced, not to say allowed, the emergence of a pattern of inter-party competition based on an all-or-nothing logic.

A similar, and even stronger, pattern of association emerges if we observe the size of the outgoing cabinet and the possibility of alternation in office. Looking at Fig. 7.10, when the outgoing cabinet holds a majority of seats in the new legislature, the possibility of alternation is about 20 per cent or lower. On the opposite, when the old cabinet is weak, the possibility of alternation increases to 60 (Portugal and Ireland) or 80 per cent (Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Spain). This set of countries is characterized by a high frequency of minority cabinets, which, as we have already pointed out, operate as effective vehicles of alternation at the governmental level. It is worth noting also the position of two countries in which Grand Coalitions have been a common feature in terms of coalition governance: Austria and Luxembourg. Here, the alliance between the two strongest parties in the system had the consequence to make virtually unthinkable the instauration of any pattern of government alternation. Thus, Grand Coalitions cabinets are, for the politicians, risk-avoiding arrangements that allow ruling parties to make, if needed, relevant decisions in the shadow of a not too grey or disappointing future.

Fig. 7.10. Possibility of alternation and seat-share of the outgoing cabinet (mean values, %)



If we now move our focus to the size of the incoming cabinet, the direction of the relationship is less crystal-clear. Fig. 7.11 offers a closer look at this association in two distinct periods of time: before and after the 1980s. In the first phase, most countries were concentrated in the upper left quadrant, where a low probability of alternation goes hand in hand with a government share higher than 50 per cent of seats. In the lower left quadrant there is only one country (Sweden) that, at that time, was a predominant party system based on the critical role of the Social Democratic Party. On the other side of the figures, there are four countries: the United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway and Denmark. These polities show a high probability of alternation, but they differ in terms of cabinet share.

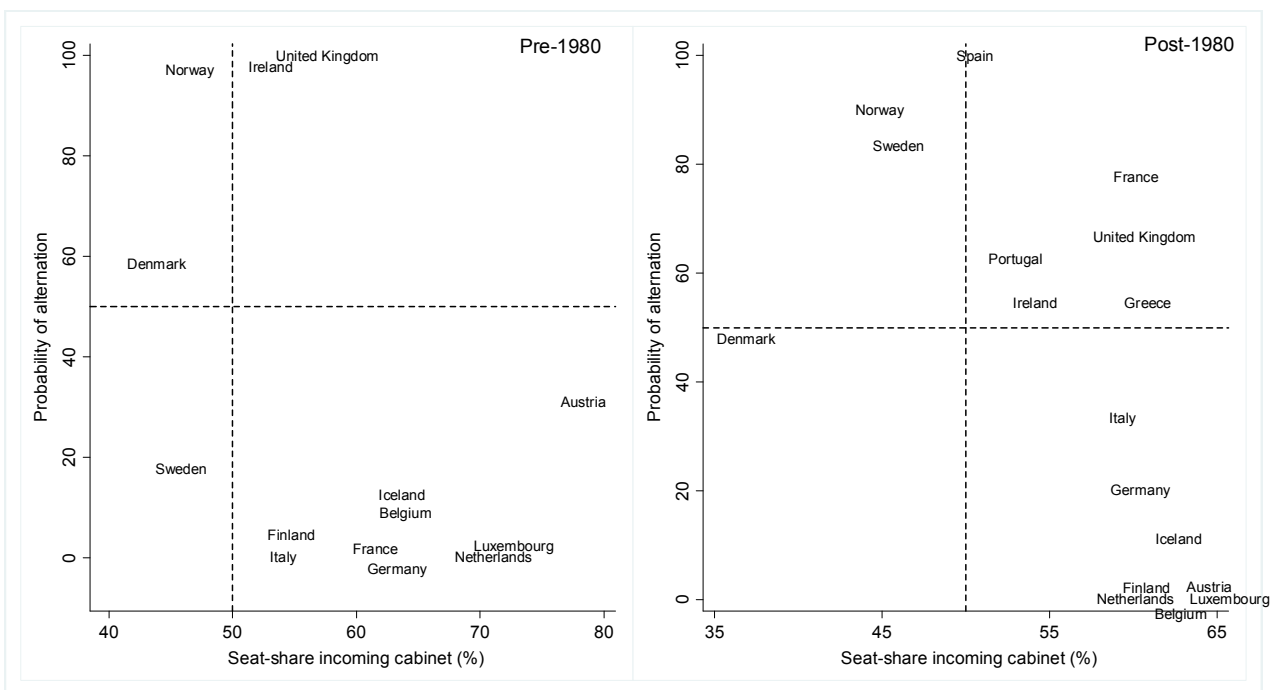
After the 1980s, we can see a much more different scenario. First of all, many countries moved from left to right, that is, in the direction of a higher likelihood of government alternation. This is, for instance, the case of France and, to a lesser degree, Italy: two countries that, in different periods and modes, underwent a process of regime-change. Furthermore, by the 1980s three new democratic countries enter the picture: Greece, Spain and Portugal. Their democratic consolidation, which was a process that, in different ways and waves, involves political parties, institutions, pressure groups and society at large (Morlino 1998), culminated in the creation of party systems based on a bipolar logic of interparty competition where two parties regularly alternate in power.

The transformation of the Swedish party system is absolutely revealing in the context of this study. The gradually weakening of the predominant social-democrats changed the mechanics of the system and moved Sweden from the lower left to the lower right quadrant, with a sizeable increase in terms of probability of alternation. More in general and despite the counter-movement showed by Denmark in the last three decades, all the three Scandinavian countries share today similar features, namely a relatively high frequency of government alternation and a low cabinet seat-share. This is, as we have seen in previous sections, the “efficient secret” of Scandinavian polities: the more or less regular rotation in power of minority governments that allows a pattern of moderation in policy-making (Bergman 2003: 615). These are instances of what we might call “minority alternational party systems”, in which alternation in power is granted by the cabinets with a minority status, a low level of ideological polarization and all the arrangements of the so-

called negative parliamentarism (Strøm 1990). A second type of alternational party systems, extremely more blurred and heterogeneous, is represented by the case of Spain, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Portugal, France and, more recently, Italy. Within this category of 'majority alternational party systems, a high probability of government alternation is the result of cabinets with a majority status. In this case, it would be useful to distinguish between two-party alternational systems (e.g., Spain, Greece until 2012 and the United Kingdom until 2010) and two-bloc alternational systems, currently at work in France, Italy, Ireland and Portugal. Finally, there exists a set of countries where the likelihood of alternation in power is low (Germany, Iceland) or nil (Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and Austria) and the government share is, on average, higher than 60 per cent.

Overall, we can argue that in the last thirty years we have observed a slow movement from left to right, but not along the diagonal that unites the two extremes of the figure. In other words, alternation has become more frequent, even though in some countries the seat-share of the cabinet has remained stable or slightly decreased. The three Scandinavian countries (without Finland) are, within this analytical framework, exceptional, in the sense that they are able to combine a distinguishing mark of the "majoritarian vision" of democracy, that is alternation in power, without majority cabinets and, consequently, with the need for a consensus-oriented style of decision making.

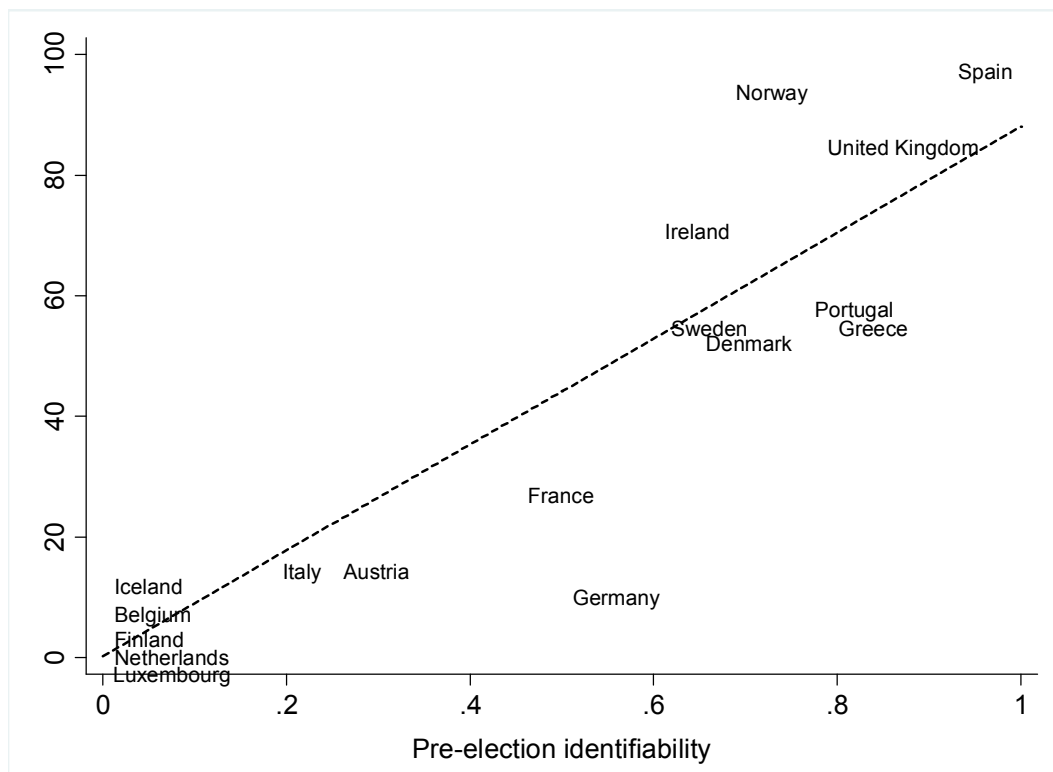
Fig. 7.11. Probability of alternation and incoming cabinet seat share in Western Europe, before and after the 1980s (mean values, %)



To recapitulate our argument thus far: the parliamentary strength of the cabinet has a negative impact on the pattern of government alternation, in the sense that a larger share of seats controlled by the ruling parties make alternation extremely unlikely. This association can also be turned upside down, looking at the identifiability of alternative competing teams of would-be rulers. As shown in section 7.4, when voters can easily identify the composition of the government before election, the level of turnover tends significantly to increase as well as the probability of alternation. Figure 7.12 provides a further evidence of this pattern of association: the higher the identifiability of political supply, the more likely the occurrence of an alternation in power. At the two extremes of this relationship, we see, on the one hand, Spain, Norway and the United Kingdom, which combine high probability of alternation and very high level of identifiability of competing alternative governments before election. On the other hand, there are countries, such as

Belgium, Finland and the Netherlands, where the existence of oversized cabinets makes alternative governments hardly identifiable and the complete eviction of the incumbent rulers very unlikely.

Fig. 7.12. Probability of alternation and pre-election identifiability in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



On the whole, taking into account also cross-country sources of variation over time, we can argue that the strength or, more accurately, the weakness of the cabinet matter for the explanation of distinct patterns of rotation in office. When the clarity of responsibility is high, it is easier for voters to punish or reward a government. In other words, an identifiable cabinet assures both ‘input responsibility’, because voters know who is responsible for the policy-making, and ‘output responsibility’, in the sense that the Election Day turns out to be the Judgment Day on the actions of the incumbent government. In short, the easier to hire, the easier to fire.

Taking into account the difference between incoming and outgoing cabinet, Table 7.10 compares the effects of the two variables over time or, more precisely, in two distinct periods, before and after the 1980s. On this respect, three aspects must be adequately underlined. First, the impact of the outgoing cabinet (-0.543; $p < .01$) is stronger than that of the incoming one (-0.304, $p < .01$) in both periods of time. In a nutshell, alternation is more the indirect product of the parties getting out from office rather than the direct result of the parties getting into power. Second, the effect of the outgoing government share has increased after the 1980s, whereas the impact of the strength of the incoming cabinet has slightly declined. Hence, the rise in government turnover and alteration experienced in Western Europe in the last thirty years may be better explained by the increasing electoral and parliamentary losses suffered by incumbent governments. Third, clarity of responsibility contributes to the explanation of the variation in government turnover and alternation. Notably, the index of pre-election identifiability shows a positive and statistically significant association with reference to all four dimensions of turnover. The same pattern emerges for the dummy variable indicating the existence of a coalition formed in the wake of a pre-electoral agreement. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the effect of both these variables increases over time, after the 1980s. As we have seen in section 7.4, clarity of responsibility has become a common feature in the three decades

and a rising trend towards more clearly identifiable cabinets accounts for the growth in government alternation in Western European democracies.

Tab. 7.10. Correlation between indicators of party dominance and dimensions of government turnover, pre- and post-1980

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Outgoing cabinet	-0.361*** (138)	-0.327*** (240)	-0.403*** (138)	-0.512*** (240)
Incoming cabinet	-0.302*** (138)	-0.257*** (240)	-0.337*** (138)	-0.340*** (240)
Pre-election ident.	0.428*** (138)	0.330*** (240)	0.596*** (138)	0.345*** (240)
Pre-electoral agreem.	0.181** (138)	0.123* (240)	0.255*** (138)	0.015 (240)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Outgoing cabinet	-0.564*** (135)	-0.622*** (230)	-0.652*** (135)	-0.686*** (230)
Incoming cabinet	-0.121 (135)	-0.204*** (230)	-0.295*** (135)	-0.419*** (230)
Pre-election ident.	0.547*** (135)	0.312*** (230)	0.615*** (135)	0.313*** (230)
Pre-electoral agreem.	0.386*** (135)	0.260*** (230)	0.401*** (135)	0.076 (230)
<i>Whole period</i>				
Outgoing cabinet	-0.484*** (273)	-0.478*** (470)	-0.543*** (273)	-0.601*** (470)
Incoming cabinet	-0.208*** (273)	-0.227*** (470)	-0.304*** (273)	-0.369*** (470)
Pre-election ident.	0.503*** (273)	0.330*** (470)	0.614*** (273)	0.343*** (470)
Pre-electoral agreem.	0.329*** (273)	0.223*** (470)	0.368*** (273)	0.077* (470)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively.*

Table 7.11 examines further the association of the cabinet size with government alternation at the individual level. The figures reveal that the strong negative relationship noted across the universe of cases as a whole is reflected in all seventeen countries in the dataset. The only minor and partial exception is Norway, which records a positive, but not statistically significant, relationship for the level of government turnover and the probability of alternation. In the other two dimensions (i.e, frequency and possibility of alternation), the correlation in Norway gets, however, the expected sign. Beside the Norwegian case, the weakness of the outgoing cabinet has a positive impact on the occurrence of alternation in power in West European countries. Note, in addition, the weak correlation between the outgoing government share and the possibility of alternation in Italy. This value can be explained by the fact that, in the Italian party system, a wholesale replacement in government was unlikely because of the existence of anti-system parties with no coalition potential. As a result, the impossibility of alternation was due to other factors that were only indirectly correlated with the strength of the incumbent government.

Tab. 7.11. Correlation between seat-share of the outgoing cabinets and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

Country	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	-0.113 (6)	-0.239 (24)	-0.306 (6)	-0.348* (24)
Belgium	-0.380* (24)	-0.330* (33)	-0.365* (24)	-0.377** (33)
Denmark	-0.540*** (22)	-0.457*** (36)	-0.523** (22)	-0.358** (36)
Finland	-0.347** (33)	-0.294* (42)	-0.314** (33)	-0.626*** (48)
France	-0.772 (26)	-0.651*** (48)	-0.779*** (26)	-0.654*** (48)
Germany	-0.117 (10)	-0.301 (23)	-0.343 (10)	-0.435** (23)
Greece	-0.655** (11)	-0.713*** (17)	-0.758*** (11)	-0.714*** (17)
Iceland	-0.591** (17)	-0.332* (26)	-0.332 (17)	-0.332* (25)
Ireland	-0.358 (17)	-0.592*** (25)	-0.467* (17)	-0.568*** (25)

Italy	-0.339** (34)	-0.517*** (46)	-0.530*** (34)	-0.199 (46)
Luxembourg	-0.582* (11)	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	-0.292 (17)	- ^a	- ^a	-0.389* (22)
Norway	0.154 (15)	-0.485*** (30)	0.154 (15)	-0.582*** (30)
Portugal	-0.297 (8)	-0.545** (16)	-0.318 (8)	-0.478* (16)
Spain	- ^a	-0.701** (11)	- ^a	-0.737*** (11)
Sweden	-0.341 (11)	-0.406** (29)	-0.220 (11)	-0.489*** (29)
United Kingdom	- ^a	-0.761*** (23)	- ^a	-0.761*** (23)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

In conclusion, in this chapter we have seen that the both government type and the parliamentary strength of the cabinet contribute to the explanation of the variation in governmental turnover. We have also analysed the differences between outgoing and incoming cabinet in relation to their impact on the probability of alternation in power. It turns out that the weakness of the “dying” cabinet counts more than the strength of “nascent” one. Arguably, alternation is an unintended gift that the incumbent government offers to the parties at the opposition. This is even more so when the structure of interparty competition allow voters to distinguish between alternative team of rulers. In sum, variance in the level of government turnover in Western Europe is in part a function of variation in the multifaceted universe of coalition politics.

However, as the extensive literature on government formation and termination has shown, variance in cabinet type and size, both cross-space and through time, is explained by a bunch of institutional, structural or institutional factors that can have, albeit indirectly, an effect on alternation in government. It may well be the case that a cumulation of all these effects, whose interaction changed in relation to the country and the period, explains variation in government turnover. Only a multivariate analysis can disentangle the impact of each factor on the phenomenon under investigation. But this is a task I shall carry out in chapter 12.

Chapter 8

Electoral competitiveness and uncertainty

8.1. Losable elections and beyond

Competition and democracy presuppose pluralism. Without a plural structure of actors, interests, preferences, or simply wills, political as well economic competition is unthinkable. The same argument applies to democratic regimes, that can be described as such when more than one, or new, parties can freely enter the electoral market. In sum, pluralism makes a political regime a *democratic* regime. Put it differently, “Pluralism is a necessary condition of democracy. At the same time it is also a necessary condition of competition. Yet pluralism need not to be ‘competitive’” (Bartolini 1999: 445). Democratic polities necessarily requires, therefore, a certain degree of “electoral contestation” (Hyde and Marinov 2002), or “contestability” (Strøm 1989; Bartolini 1999). In this sense, a given election is contestable when more than one party is allowed and multiple parties are, whether formally or not, legal. When these basic conditions are simultaneously met, elections can be lost. On the contrary, when elections are not contestable, the unchangeable incumbent government cannot lose them. In my terms, unlosable elections are those in which *ex ante possibility of alternation* is not contemplated.

We have already discussed the crucial distinction between *ex ante* and *ex post* possibility of alternation, and I do not need to dwell on this point again here (see Chapter 2). Suffice it say that the latter can be evaluated mathematically after the election, when citizens have cast their votes and seats have been allocated to the political parties contesting the election. Alternation is possible (*ex post electione*) if the previous sitting government does not control a majority of seats in the new legislature. Hence, there is no uncertainty about or around this form of possibility. Yet, it is another thing altogether if we consider the (*ex ante*) possibility of alternation, which is necessarily related to the concept of uncertainty of the electoral returns. In Przeworski et al.’s (2000: 16-17) terms, ‘Uncertainty is not synonymous with unpredictability: The probability distribution of electoral chances is typically known. All that is necessary for outcomes to be uncertain is that it be possible for some incumbent party to lose’. It follows that democratic elections are those that can be lost because they are contestable at the origin, uncertain at the end and operate under the constant shadow of the *ex ante* possibility of alternation.

That said, in democratic regimes all elections can be lost, sooner or later. Which is to say that all governing parties at election time are, to a degree, afraid to be dislodged from office. How much sooner or later this eviction will take place is not only a matter of degree but, as we have been seeing along this dissertation, it is function of a configuration of factors that change across countries and through time. In any case, by saying that democratic elections are elections that *can be* lost I am not arguing that elections *ought to be* lost in order to be included in the democratic family. What matters here is not the actual occurrence of alternation, but the *expectation* that such an event can occurs someday. This is, in my terms, the distinction between *actuality* and (*ex ante*) *possibility* of alternation: the former describes a real-existing phenomenon, while the latter refers to a future, potential circumstance.

Unfortunately, to some extent Sartori (1976: 165) conflates and mixes up these two dimensions when he argues that: ‘*Alternation* should be loosely understood as implying the *expectation* rather than the actual occurrence of governmental turnover. Alternation only means, then, that the margin between the two major parties is close enough, or that there is sufficient credibility to the expectation that the party in opposition has a chance to oust the governing party. In other words, the notion of alternation shades into the notion of competitiveness’. In this sense, the more losable the elections, the more credible the expectation of an

alternation. In any event, what Sartori suggests to operationalize as “the margin between the two major parties” is not, as he maintains, the concept of alternation but the notion of probability of alternation. Consequently, his hypothesized operationalization should be rephrased as follows: the notion of probability of alternation shades into the notion of competitiveness. This is, however, more a hypothesis to test rather than an operational definition to accept. In brief, is it true and, in the affirmative, to what extent that the concept of competitiveness contains the notion of likelihood of alternation?

Yet, in order to address that issue, which is the objective of this chapter, the notion of competitiveness should be clarified well in advance. In this case it is very useful as a starting point the distinction, suggested by Sartori (1976: 194), between *competition* as ‘a structure, or a rule of the game’ and *competitiveness* as ‘a particular state of the game’, that is, “one of the properties or attributes of competition’. Accordingly, only a contestable election – which implies the participation of more than one party – can be *more or less competitive*. So far, so good. But problems arise when one tries to pin down empirically the concept of electoral competitiveness, which can be assessed both *ex ante* and *ex post*, as well as both at the ‘mechanical’ or ‘psychological’ level. Briefly put, an election is considered as competitive either by referring to the electoral returns (*ex post*) or by taking into account survey or pre-election poll (*ex ante*). In a similar vein, electoral competitiveness can be analysed either by looking at the mechanical effect of the voting system, namely the way votes are translated into seats, or by considering the psychological effect linked to the absence of certainty of the electoral outcome.

It goes without saying that each distinct approach has led to a panoply of operationalizations and indicators, which is even difficult to survey in all its entirety. At any rate, what is important to stress here is that the concept of electoral competitiveness touches upon to the notion of “incumbency vulnerability”, which is, so to speak, the other side of the *ex ante* possibility of alternation or, in Bartolini’s (2000a: 52) words, ‘the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voters’ choices’. Therefore, the notion of competitiveness we are interested in must convey a sense of unsafety or vulnerability, for the voter and/or the parties alike, otherwise it would be difficult to establish a link between the likelihood of alternation and the competitiveness of the electoral race. How this notion can be effectively operationalized is a question that I shall address in the next section.

8.2. Shades of competitiveness

The property of parallel lines is that they never meet. A similar property can be imagined for the trajectory of electoral competitiveness and alternation in power. To be sure, they are not parallel lines, in the sense that they *can* meet from time to time. Nonetheless, these meetings can be so rare or remote that one would question whether the concepts are travelling along separate tracks or not. It is well known that alternation may be present without a highly competitive contest and vice versa. In other words, competitiveness, ‘[c]loseness and uncertainty may not result in turnover but still provide their supposed effect on competition’ (Bartolini 2000a: 52).

Hence, alternation and competitiveness may well live their parallel lives, never meeting one another. Let me point out that this holds true only if we do not assume that alternation is *per se* a measure of competitiveness. More precisely, if competitiveness is measured – following Sartori (1976: 195) – as the ‘the frequency with which parties take over from one another’, then the two concepts are so overlapped or conflated that becomes impossible to distinguish one from the other. Thus for the purpose of this dissertation, one of the solutions put forward by Sartori is a dead end: we cannot measure the impact of competitiveness on alternation through a measure of alternation. To avoid the circularity of this argument, we are in need of a different indicator of electoral competitiveness, not based on the notion of alternation. Sartori himself offers an alternative solution to our problem, but before getting to that it is useful to establish a viable definition of competitiveness. Following Blais and Lago (2000: 95), I define ‘a competitive election as

an election in which the outcome of the election is *uncertain*, whereby 'the most uncertain the outcome of the election, the most competitive it is'. Hence, the core of the concept of competitiveness is the *uncertainty* concerning the electoral outcome (Franklin 2004: 56-57). Having specified that, a number of viable indicators of competitiveness can be devised. The first, that is, the closeness of the returns, is the most common in the literature, especially by those scholars interested in the development of electoral turnout. The closeness of the election is usually operationalized as the percentage margin of victory, namely the difference between the leading and the second parties (Cox 1988, Blais and Lago 2009).

This solution is appropriate for most presidential regimes and two-party systems, but it poses a number of questions for multi-party systems, where the government-opposition divide is frequently blurred and coalition governments are the rule. Furthermore, as noted by Grofman and Selb (2009: 1), 'the difference between the winner and the second place finisher has no self-evident counterpart in multi-member PR districts'. In these circumstances, we can work out a different, or adjusted, indicator of (national) competitiveness that takes into account the fact the political competition involves, in particular in Western Europe, more than two parties. In many circumstances, political competition in Western Europe takes place around two distinct coalitions or alliances of parties. Put it another way, inter-party competition is often based on a bipolar structure of confrontation, whereby alternative cabinets are used to rotate into power. If election closeness is an indicator of the uncertainty surrounding the electoral results (in relation to the ensuing cabinet composition), it can be applied only to those situations in which voters actually face a choice between two clearly identifiable teams of would-be rulers. In all other circumstances, that is, in all non-bipolar settings, elections are not close at all because it would be impossible to identify the potential alternative government. Thus, my measure of competitiveness is calculated as the electoral margin of victory between two alternative teams (party or coalition) of would-be rulers, *when these alternative cabinets can be identified before election*. In all other circumstances, competitiveness is absent and then is set to its lowest value.

In order to identify those elections in which there exists a bipolar structure of inter-party competition, I rely on the same procedure adopted in Chapter 5, whereby bipolarism implies the absence of a pivotal party in the system¹. Hence, summing up, competitiveness is measured as the margin of victory between two parties or coalitions in bipolar systems, whereas in pivotal multi-party systems is assumed non-existent (with the value 0). In operational terms, the index of electoral competitiveness measures the percentage of the total vote that separates the two main parties or coalitions, *subtracted from 100*². On this index, 100 indicates full competition, while 0 indicates the lowest value of electoral competitiveness:

$$\text{Index of electoral competitiveness} = 100 - (\% \text{ vote first party/coalition} - \% \text{ vote second party/coalition})$$

This measure is an ex post estimate of the climate of uncertainty that regularly accompanies the electoral campaigns. Although it 'is not unreasonable to assume that pre-election beliefs are correct on average, in the same way that polls are, so that actual election results can be used as proxies for pre-election beliefs' (Cox 1988: 769), it is reasonable to presume that a great deal of electoral uncertainty is better grasped by pre-election surveys. Unfortunately, these data are not available for longitudinal study or large-N cross-country comparison. For this reason, in this chapter I will rely – *faute de mieux* – on past electoral results.

To sum up, the concept of electoral competitiveness implies a certain degree of uncertainty about and around the elections. The common way to pin down empirically the notion of electoral uncertainty is by making reference to the closeness of the results. Nonetheless, 'the element of uncertainty and lack of safety associated with the concept of incumbents' vulnerability are not fully tapped by measures of closeness or

¹ For the definition of pivotal party, see Chapter 6.

² By subtracting the margin of victory from 100, the index score declines progressively as the gap between the two blocs widens. In doing so, low values correspond to low level of electoral competition, while high values to high competitiveness. For a similar approach, see Kornbluh (2000: 175).

distance alone' (Bartolini 2000a: 53). Other indicators, which take into consideration the properties of the party system, can be devised. For instance, in Chapter 7 we have analysed the impact that cabinet type and size, as sources of electoral uncertainty, has on the pattern of government turnover. Likewise, in the next chapter we shall see whether or not the electoral mobility of the voters pave the way to the occurrence of alternation. Yet, two more indicators can be suggested and employed in this chapter. The first, proposed by Ieraci (2012: 540), is the percentage margin between the governing parties (as a unit) and the parties in opposition (as a unit). As Ieraci (*ibid*) specifies, 'if the majority supporting the government or the party in government is too strong, there would be no realistic expectation of a government turnover'. In the previous chapter, I have introduced the notions of 'incoming' and 'outgoing' cabinet, which are of course associated with that of government-opposition differential, but in this case I shall take into account more specifically the margin between the incumbent cabinet and its respective opposition in the assembly.

A second indicator of uncertainty concerns the 'electoral performance' of the incumbent rulers. How this concept is related to the notion of political competition is efficaciously addressed by Rose and Mackie (1983; for a summary see also Narud and Valen 2008). They begin by specifying that any election may yield three distinct outcomes for the parties: winning votes, losing votes, or staying about the same. The model in which the governing parties do not change their share of votes is called the 'equilibrium model', which describes a perfect or stable competition. The second model predicts a rise in the vote of the incumbent parties and is dubbed as 'exploiting office'. Finally, the 'pendulum swing' model predicts that governing is a losing game that 'costs votes' for those who take the responsibility to run the state. It follows that the most uncertain contests are those taking place within the third model, that is, where elections can be concretely lost by the rulers. Therefore, the higher the propensity of voters to punish the incumbent, the more unsafe the position of the governing parties. The cabinet electoral performance is, thus, used as further indicator of uncertainty of the electoral results and it is measured by looking at the share of the aggregate vote received by the governing parties (as a unit) between two successive elections. (Narud and Valen 2008: 379, Barreiro 2008: 22).

Tab. 8.1. Indicators of electoral competitiveness and uncertainty

Indicator of electoral competitiveness	Operationalization
Electoral competitiveness	Percentage margin of victory (in votes or seats) between the two major coalitions (subtracted from 100)
Government-opposition differential	Percentage difference between the seat-share of the cabinet and the seat-share of the parties in the opposition
Cabinet electoral performance	Share of the aggregate vote gain or lost by the governing parties (in entirety) between two successive elections

To recapitulate, in this chapter I want to investigate whether the hypothesis put forward by Sartori, namely that the notion of (likelihood of) alternation shades into the notion of competitiveness, is empirically grounded or not. For doing so, I have singled out three indicators of competitiveness, which try to convey to some extent a sense of uncertainty about the electoral returns. Table 8.1 shows and summarizes these indicators. With this array of tools at hand, we thus can begin our empirical investigation.

8.3. Competitiveness across time and space

How much uncertain is the electoral landscape in Western Europe? And how much did it change during the last seventy years of mass politics? Table 8.2 offers a first, tentative answer to these questions. Electoral competitiveness steadily increased over time, from 27.9 per cent in the mid-1940s to a record-high 78.4 in the mid-2010s. In this perspective, the margin between the leading and the runner-up parties has grown on average by more than 50 percentage-points, making electoral races more competitive and the outcome more uncertain. Among other elements, this pattern of rising electoral competitiveness is linked to the growth of

bipolarism that I have pointed out in Chapter 5. Put it another way, as the logic of party competition assumes more and more a bipolar format, the election has become progressively more competitive.

Tab. 8.2. Electoral competitiveness in Western Europe, by decade (mean values, %)

Decade	Electoral competitiveness (%)
1940s	27.9
1950s	42.7
1960s	58.5
1970s	69.2
1980s	70.4
1990s	68.9
2000s	72.5
2010s	78.4
<i>Average</i>	<i>61.2</i>

Table 8.3 offers a different look at the concept of competitiveness. With regards to the measure of government-opposition differential, it appears quite evident the decline in the margin between the governing parties and those in the opposition. More precisely, the figures show a slight erosion of the seat-margin, albeit in an erratic way. Indeed, the lowest differential (3.5 per cent) is recorded during the 1970s, while the peak in the decades immediately after WWII. Nevertheless, in the last three decades one can detect a sizeable decrease in the margin of seat between government and opposition, and thus a rising level of competitiveness.

Finally, the measure of cabinet electoral performance reveals a much more regular and consistent development over time. On average, the incumbency costs for the whole period are -3.7 per cent, which means that the governing parties have collectively lost votes rather than gained. The electoral cost of governing was quite limited, and perhaps bearable, until the 1970s, but then it begins to increase quite a lot during the 1980s, reaching its peak in the 2000s, probably in conjunction with the advent of the Great Recession. Obviously, as finely noted by Barreiro (2008: 29), ‘the general tendency for incumbents in democracies is to lose votes, moderately. [...] Huge electoral variations are produced by extraordinary events in bad economic and political contexts’. Nevertheless, these extreme variations should not eclipse the general trend observed in Western Europe, which points to a declining electoral fate for the governing parties.

Tab. 8.3. Government-opposition differential and cabinet electoral performance in Western Europe, by decade (mean values, %)

	Gov-Opp differential (% seats)	Cabinet electoral performance (% votes)
1940s	18.7	-0.5
1950s	22.3	-1.7
1960s	12.6	-2.9
1970s	3.5	-2.7
1980s	11.3	-3.5
1990s	9.4	-4.8
2000s	9.2	-7.7
2010s	11.2	-5.5
<i>Average</i>	<i>11.5</i>	<i>-3.7</i>

In general, we have seen that election competitiveness, especially if conceived as uncertainty at election time, has increased over time in Western Europe. However, this trend is more visible at the electoral

level rather than the parliamentary level. In the light of this changing scenario, parties have tried to react to the new challenges brought about by a rising electoral uncertainty by giving birth to larger and hopefully competitive coalitions. Moreover, since the 1980s it is a grim time for the governing parties. The more time they spend in government, the more severe will be the loss at the polls. If democratic elections are, as argued by Hyde and Marinov (2012), ‘losable elections’, the extent to which parties in government have been experiencing electoral losses in the last years makes the elections in West European party systems unquestionably democratic.

The historical trend in competitiveness is, to a degree, presents also in the seventeen individual countries. As Table 8.4 shows, in 11 of the 17 West European democracies electoral competitiveness peaks in the last four decades, the exceptions being Germany, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom. In other words, the electoral margin between the two largest parties or coalition has declined over time and this development is quite consistent across the individual countries. Moreover, this trend has been reinforced by the entry of the three ‘third wave’ countries in the dataset (Greece, Portugal, Spain), where the existence of a bipolar structure of inter-party competition has led to the emergence of highly competitive electoral races. By contrast, it is interesting to underline the absence of any trend in those party systems based on a pivot actor. In Belgium, Luxemburg, partially the Netherlands and (until the 1990s) Italy elections are, or were, uncompetitive, in the sense that voters have no possibility to choose between alternative cabinets. In such countries, the uncertainty about the composition of the future government is minimal because it entails exclusively the substitution of marginal, in some cases also unnecessary, coalition partners of the pivotal party.

Tab. 8.4. Electoral competitiveness (% vote) in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	0	0	0	93.2	96.4	90.6	72.4	97.2	52.3
Belgium	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Denmark	89.1	82.4	81.7	80.4	87.2	84.5	98.3	97.2	86.0
Finland	64.1	58.5	37.6	93.2	97.5	19.8	0	59.2	58.9
France	0	0	79.1	93.9	92.0	89.3	92.7	97.7	45.6
Germany	96.0	92.3	97.5	91.4	94.5	94.0	93.4	84.2	94.1
Greece	-	-	-	83.4	90.7	93.3	95.0	93.6	92.5
Iceland	83.7	81.9	88.7	88.0	89.0	84.2	93.8	0	83.4
Ireland	85.7	91.8	97.0	93.5	98.6	94.3	94.4	83.3	94.3
Italy	0	0	0	0	0	56.7	92.2	96.7	24.6
Luxembourg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Netherlands	0	0	0	0	24.7	0	0	98.7	21.1
Norway	89.0	97.2	98.4	62.8	90.7	95.4	88.2	96.0	93.8
Portugal	-	-	-	87.7	84.2	85.5	92.5	91.6	87.5
Spain	-	-	-	95.2	85.2	97.4	91.8	84.1	90.5
Sweden	98.6	94.9	96.7	92.8	98.2	93.8	91.4	95.1	95.1
United Kingdom	92.0	97.3	95.9	96.4	86.9	89.5	95.1	93.2	94.4
<i>Average</i>	27.9	42.7	58.5	69.2	70.4	68.9	72.5	78.4	61.2

Note: bold = peak.

With regards to the differential between the government and the parties in the opposition, the figures included in Table 8.5 do not reveal any trend towards the growing unsafety of the incumbents vis-à-vis their opposition. In fact, in some polities the government-opposition differential is very high in a given decade, while in others, in the same decade, is very low. In addition, the distribution among the seventeen European countries of the elections with the smallest differential is quite random and does not follow a specific historical pattern. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that, on average, the countries showing the lowest differentials (Denmark, Norway, Spain and Sweden) present – as we have seen in the previous chapter – a high frequency of minority cabinets, which can be considered as the most ‘unsafe’ cabinet types

or, in other words, the most conducive to sizeable turnover at the executive power. Hence, the unsafety created by minority or minimal-winning coalitions seems to be associated with a pattern of government alternation.

Tab. 8.5. Government –opposition differential (% seat) in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	74.6	85.9	46.7	4.1	41.5	38.8	23.5	8.2	37.2
Belgium	26.4	0.5	41.2	32.5	18.9	16.0	27.3	20.7	22.9
Denmark	-24.0	-14.3	-7.9	-37.9	-24.0	-24.4	-22.9	-14.0	-22.2
Finland	-46.0	27.7	4.5	11.0	17.0	29.3	20.5	25.0	15.7
France	47.2	29.1	19.9	21.7	6.1	34.1	21.4	6.4	22.0
Germany	-	24.6	13.9	5.8	9.6	8.3	18.2	59.8	15.9
Greece	-	-	-	14.0	33.8	7.6	5.9	13.7	15.9
Iceland	50.0	34.7	10.0	26.7	39.0	20.6	19.6	20.6	27.3
Ireland	-15.6	-0.7	0.1	7.5	-1.0	9.6	4.8	36.2	3.0
Italy	27.6	-1.0	3.5	-8.1	17.9	7.7	10.0	42.0	8.8
Luxembourg	21.6	47.4	33.9	18.6	38.6	20.0	28.3	6.6	29.9
Netherlands	52.0	52.5	18.6	13.7	24.7	26.0	12.4	-12.7	22.5
Norway	13.4	3.3	2.2	-11.0	-15.0	-33.9	-6.7	-8.8	-8.1
Portugal	-	-	-	-	5.4	4.9	-2.3	14.8	4.2
Spain	-	-	-	-21.2	6.9	-10.0	-1.7	6.2	-1.9
Sweden	-2.6	7.5	0.8	-3.6	-8.1	-11.8	-7.7	-11.1	-4.2
United Kingdom	-	7.3	7.9	1.7	18.8	15.2	17.9	12.0	9.8
<i>Average2.0</i>	<i>18.7</i>	<i>22.3</i>	<i>12.6</i>	<i>3.5</i>	<i>11.3</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>9.2</i>	<i>11.2</i>	<i>11.5</i>

Note: bold = negative peak.

Instead, where data do not leave any room to imagination is about the electoral performance of the cabinet. As shown in Table 8.6, all countries report, on average, electoral losses in a range that goes from -6.9 per cent, in Greece, to -1% per cent, in Denmark. But what is worth marking out is that in 15 of the 17 individual democracies the negative peak in the measure of cabinet electoral performance is recorded in the last thirty years, that is, after the 1970s. In a nutshell, the trend that we have observed at the aggregate level finds further confirmation at individual level. At least for the governing-oriented parties, the electoral landscape in Western Europe has become more and more uncertain because highly unsatisfied voters tend to punish the sitting government, no matter the ‘colour’ or the composition of the specific cabinet. As correctly summarised by Strøm et al. (2008: 417), ‘If maximizing votes were all that mattered to European politicians, parties would currently be better off staying in opposition’. As we know, politicians and parties as well are not only *vote-oriented* actors, but they take their decision because they are interested in the implementation of some *policies* and/or they aim at controlling specific *offices*. At any rate, whenever they got into office, in particular in the executive arena, they will leave the charge with a significantly lower number of votes. This scenario makes more unsafe the life cycle of European governments and more uncertain the general electoral context. Yet, this uncertainty is not a product of a close or tight election, but it simply derives from the fact the pendulum controlled by the voters has begun to swing more frequently and more in-depth.

Tab. 8.6. Cabinet electoral performance (% votes) in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	-5.7	2.0	-1.1	-0.2	-4.7	-4.9	-6.8	-	-3.0
Belgium	-0.8	-4.7	-7.0	-3.0	-3.3	-2.9	-8.3	3.3	-3.8
Denmark	1.9	-0.8	-3.9	0.5	-1.9	1.1	-7.7	-	-1.0
Finland	2.3	-2.7	-8.5	-1.7	-6.2	-3.7	7.5	7.3	-3.8

France	-	3.2	-2.9	3.6	-11.1	-6.6	-2.1	-	-3.8
Germany	11.1	-3.1	-0.2	-0.4	-3.1	-4.7	-6.8	-	-2.3
Greece	-	-	-	-6.0	-2.8	-3.6	-11.5	-15.3	-6.9
Iceland	-1.3	-0.8	-4.5	-7.1	-1.7	-4.8	-13.6	-	-5.0
Ireland	-5.1	-5.7	0.8	-6.0	-4.6	-3.7	-15.5	-	-5.2
Italy	-5.4	-2.6	-1.8	-2.9	-1.6	-10.4	-8.9	-	-5.4
Luxembourg	-1.4	-5.1	-2.6	-3.6	-6.4	-2.6	-2.8	-	-3.6
Netherlands	1.6	-2.8	-5.6	-3.1	-7.0	-17.6	-8.8	0.9	-5.7
Norway	2.8	0.1	-3.0	0.9	-1.6	-3.1	-6.1	-	-1.8
Portugal	-	-	-	-8.2	0.6	-7.6	-10.0	-	-4.9
Spain	-	-	-	-13.9	-3.1	2.5	-7.0	-	-5.3
Sweden	-0.1	1.2	-0.8	-2.1	-2.6	-3.6	-1.9	-11.0	-2.0
United Kingdom	-1.9	-0.5	-0.5	-2.5	-0.3	-6.9	-5.8	-	-2.4
<i>Average</i>	<i>-0.5</i>	<i>-1.7</i>	<i>-2.9</i>	<i>-2.7</i>	<i>-3.5</i>	<i>-4.8</i>	<i>-7.7</i>	<i>-5.5</i>	<i>-3.7</i>

Note: bold = negative peak.

Taking all these figures together, we can draw two main conclusions. First, electoral competitiveness has progressively increased over time, especially in those countries characterized by a bipolar-style of inter-party competition. When voters face a choice between alternative teams of governing parties or coalitions, electoral races have become more competitive and uncertain. Second, the government-opposition differential and the cabinet electoral performance follow different trajectories over time. The former is quite irregular in its distribution through time, whereas the latter reveals a slow but constant decline, with a remarkable acceleration by the 2000s, perhaps in conjunction with the economic crisis that hit the vast majority of European party systems. Third, there is a huge variation under the sky of electoral competitiveness, but different concepts light up distinct and not always overlapping trends. This is an aspect that we should take into consideration when, in the following section, we shall try to investigate the association between government alternation and the uncertainty of the electoral outcome.

8.4. The association between alternation and competitiveness

As we have seen above, Sartori (1976: 165) argued that alternation only means 'that the margin between the two major parties is close enough'. Hence, the closer, or tighter the election, the more likely to observe a wholesale rotation in government. The best way to test this argument is by considering the closeness of the electoral returns for the two largest parties. Table 8.8 reports the mean levels of government turnover associated with three categories of closeness: *a)* low, when the index of competitiveness is below 70 percent; *b)* medium, when the margin goes from 70 to 85 per cent; and *c)* high, when the index is higher than 85 per cent. The figures show that the level of government turnover tends to be higher when elections are fairly or very close. More accurately, the highest level of rotation in office (63.7%) is recorded for the medium category.

Tab. 8.7. Electoral competitiveness and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral closeness (% vote)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (<70%)	21.8	33.7
Medium (70-85%)	36.6	63.7
High (>85%)	34.9	63.5

As we know, however, there can be significant differences between turnover and alternation in government and, accordingly, the results observed above may be totally reversed if we look at a specific type

of government change. Table 8.8 shows both the frequency and the likelihood of alternation associated with the three categories of electoral competitiveness.

Here again, the figures reveal a similar pattern: the more competitive the election, the higher the probability of a complete reshuffle in the composition of the cabinet. In this sense, in Sartori's words, alternation shades into the notion of competitiveness. More specifically, the probability of alternation peaks (46.2%) when the index of electoral competitiveness is higher than 85 per cent, while it reaches the lowest level (38.1%) in association with the category of the uncompetitive elections. A similar pattern emerges for the possibility of alternation. When electoral races are tighter, the possibility in the assembly for a wholesale substitution of the ruling parties is higher (61%). On the opposite, the possibility of alternation reaches its lowest value (10.5%) in those circumstances characterized by the lack of bipolarism in the party system.

Tab. 8.8. Electoral competitiveness and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral competitiveness (% vote)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (<70%)	2.5	38.1	10.5
Medium (70-85%)	25.0	43.5	58.3
High (>85%)	25.4	46.2	61.0

So far our findings so far has revealed the existence of a positive relationship between the pattern of government turnover and the closeness of the electoral returns for the two major parties or coalitions. As I have specified in section 8.2, the source of uncertainty about the electoral outcome as well as for the unsafety of the incumbent rulers can also be found in the legislature or, better, in the balance of power between government and opposition. Ieraci (2012: 540) pointed out that 'would be unrealistic' to expect an alternation when the percentage difference between the parties in the cabinet and those in the opposition is too high. And it would be unrealistic because it is hard for the opposition to gain a sufficient number of seats to become the new majority. Hence, the higher the differential between the sitting cabinet and the opposition, the less likelihood there is an alternation in power. To test this proposition, I have divided the government-opposition differential in three categories: a) low, when the difference is negative or below 0; b) medium, when the difference ranges from 0 to 10 per cent; and c) high, when the percentage difference exceed 10 per cent.

Table 8.9 reports the mean levels of government turnover associated with the three categories of government-opposition differential. That said, the evidence shows that the level of rotation in office is higher when there is a certain amount of balance of power between the outgoing government and the parties in the opposition. More precisely, when the opposition holds more seats than the incumbent cabinet, the level of turnover is 72.6 per cent, whereas it shrinks to 51.4 when the parties in government control 10 per cent of seats more than the opposition.

Tab. 8.9. Government-opposition differential and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Δ Gov-Opp (% seat)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (<0%)	46.7	72.6
Medium (0-10%)	44.7	72.4
High (>10%)	30.8	51.4

As to the occurrence of alternation, the impact of the strength of the incumbent on the pattern of rotation in power looks even stronger. In fact, among the whole universe of cases in the dataset, only 9.8 per cent of all governments is the product of an alternation in party systems where the percentage difference between cabinet and opposition was higher ten per cent. By contrast, where the distribution of seats is more

balanced, one government out of three is formed in the wake of a complete replacement of old rulers. Looking at the probability of alternation, in case of minority cabinets more than 6 government change out of 10 occurred through an alternation. In other words, if a cabinet changes its composition, 61.1 per cent of the times it takes place a complete reshuffle. Notably, this probability drops to 16.5 per cent when the government-opposition differential overcomes the 10 per cent threshold (see Table 8.10).

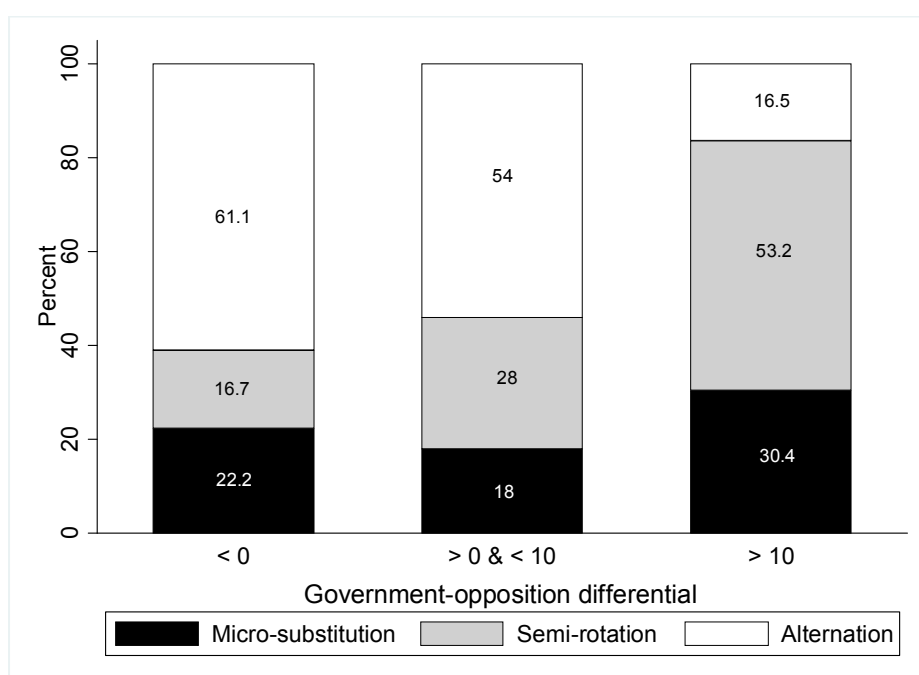
The overall picture is even clearer if we analyse the possibility of alternation. It is not a surprise, especially in the light of the findings presented in Chapter 7, that a minority situation in parliament is indeed an incubator of alternations. This property is rather visible here, too. In fact, the possibility of alternation hits its peaks exactly in combination with those situations in which the opposition control more seats than the sitting cabinet. On the contrary, when the government is sufficiently stronger than the opposition, the prospect for an alternation falls to 12.3 per cent.

Tab. 8.10. Government-opposition differential and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Δ Gov-Opp (% seat)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (<0%)	39.3	61.1	75.3
Medium (0-10%)	33.3	54.0	49.4
High (>10%)	9.8	16.5	12.3

The evidence collected so far indicates that the balance of power in the assembly matters, in spite of the level of cohesion shown by the cabinet or the parties in the opposition. In sum, the stronger the sitting cabinet, the harder will be for the opposition to replace it en bloc. This aspect is quite visible in Fig. 8.1, which breaks the types of government change by three categories of government-opposition differential (low, medium and high). The figures make clear that alternation is the most frequent type of rotation in power in two circumstances: when the opposition holds more seats than the cabinet (61.1%) and the percentage difference between the two is lower than 10 per cent. In all other situations, alternation is only a marginal event, taking place less than 17 per cent of the time. In fact, when the differential exceeded the 10 per cent of seats, the most common type of cabinet replacement is semi-rotation (53.2%).

Fig. 8.1. Types of government change by level of government-opposition differential (% values)



As seen above, the electoral cost of governing has remarkably increased over the last decades in Western Europe. This process has made absolutely uncertain the context in which political parties operate and take decisions. We can imagine, in addition, that the higher propensity of voters to punish the incumbent is reflected, to a certain degree, in the pattern of rotation in the executive power. Moreover, as shown by Powell (2000: 48), there appears to be ‘a strong relation between the incumbent parties’ gain or loss of votes and their being retained or replaced in office’. To test further this argument, Table 8.11 reports the mean level of government turnover breaks down by three categories of electoral performance: *a*) none or gain, if the incumbent parties do not lose election between two consecutive elections; *b*) medium losses, when the governing parties lose a percentage of votes that range from 0.1 to 5 per cent; *c*) high losses, when the government loses more than 10 per cent of votes. The figures clearly shows that the expected association finds confirmation in the data. Both degree and level of government turnover progressively increase, as the losses of the outgoing cabinet get greater. When the government loses over 10 per cent of its previous share of votes, the level of government turnover is a significant 75.6 per cent, while in the opposite scenario, that is, when the rulers gain or break even in votes, the turnover in office is much lower (55.8%). Hence, if voters ‘are not shy about showing their disapproval of incumbent officeholders’ (Powell 2000: 48), their behaviour may have significant and direct consequences on the status of the governing parties.

Tab. 8.11. Cabinet electoral performance and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral performance (%)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
None or gain (<0%)	25.0	55.8
Medium losses (0-5%)	28.6	55.1
High losses (over 5%)	62.4	75.6

If we now look at the association between the cabinet electoral performance and the pattern of alternation, it is quite evident that governments are retained in entirety when it gains (or does not lose) votes. More precisely, as shown in Table 8.12, 43.5 per cent of the governments losing 5% or more are completely ousted from office. Only 12% per cent, instead, faces the same fate when the cabinet parties gain votes in the next election. In this sense, I concur with Powell (*ibid*) in saying that ‘the elections do make a difference’, and this difference is function of the level of voters’ dissatisfaction against the incumbent. In brief, the more dissatisfied the electorate, the more likely the occurrence of an alternation. On the opposite, the probability of alternation is limited when the incumbent parties gain votes. In fact, in these circumstances only almost three governments out of ten are rejected in entirety.

Furthermore, it must be stressed that cabinet electoral performance affects also the possibility of alternation, which peaks when government loses over 5 per cent, whereas it drops to 28 per cent when the cabinet parties gain votes. Thus, elections function as effective instruments of democracy, making more vulnerable the incumbent, as the voters become increasingly dissatisfied or disgruntled for the way democracy works or performs.

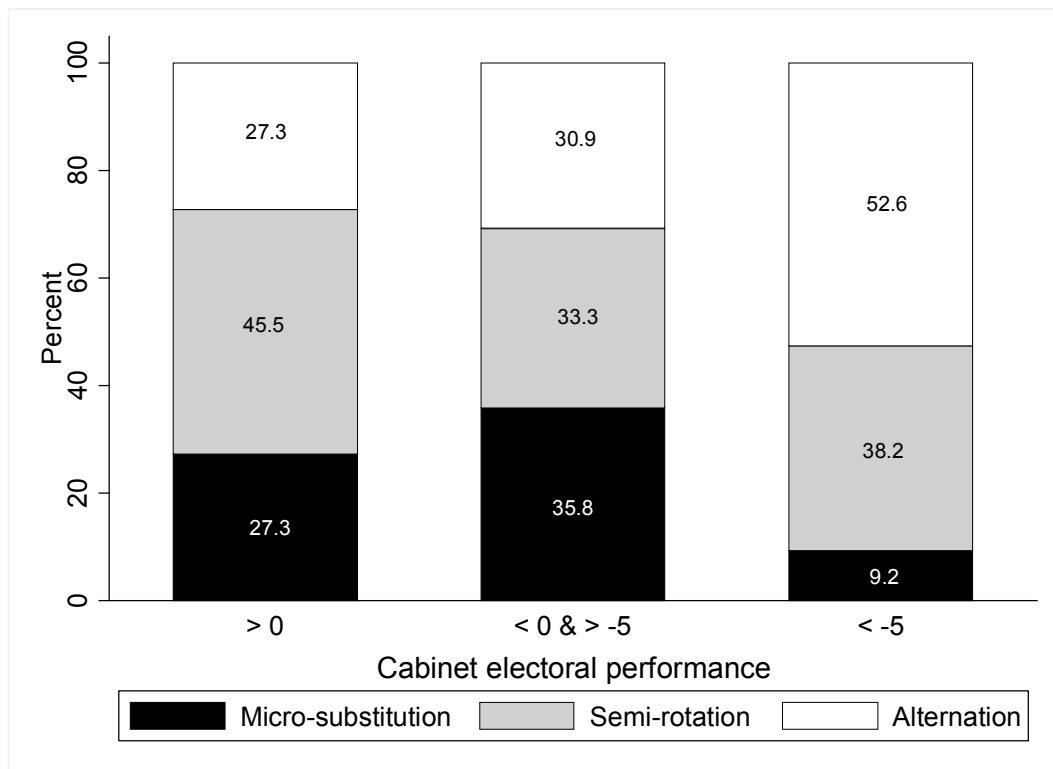
Tab. 8.12. Cabinet electoral performance and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Cabinet electoral performance (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
None or gain (<0%)	12.0	27.3	28.0
Medium losses (0-5%)	16.0	30.9	36.5
High losses (over 5%)	43.5	52.6	52.7

Finally, it is worth marking out that alternation is the most straightforward way to punish incumbents experiencing severe losses at election time. In this regard, Fig. 8.2 breaks down the three types of government

change by level of electoral performance. The evidence reveals clearly that when the governing parties lose over 5%, half of the change occurs through a complete eviction of the incumbent. In these situations, the election day is really a Judgment Day, because voters can decide which parties can control the executive power and which one must be sent packing. Instead, when the electoral losses of the rulers is, all in all, limited (from 0.1 to 5%), all the options of government change are open, although the most frequent (35.8%) is micro-substitution. It is not a surprise, then, alternation is the most uncommon type of change in government when the cabinet parties gain or do not lose votes. In fact, in these circumstances, only 27.3 per cent of all changes entails a wholesale turnover in office.

Fig. 8.2. Types of government change by level of cabinet electoral performance (% values)



At the end of this empirical investigation on the impact of different measures of electoral competitiveness on the pattern of alternation in power, we can draw a couple of conclusion. First, it is not the closeness of the electoral results that make concretely unsafe or uncertain the life of the incumbents. Quite the contrary, incumbents must be worried by “landslide elections” that more often than not bring into power a new set of rulers. Second, especially in the last thirty years, the most effective source of uncertainty was a direct product of an increasingly dissatisfied electorate.

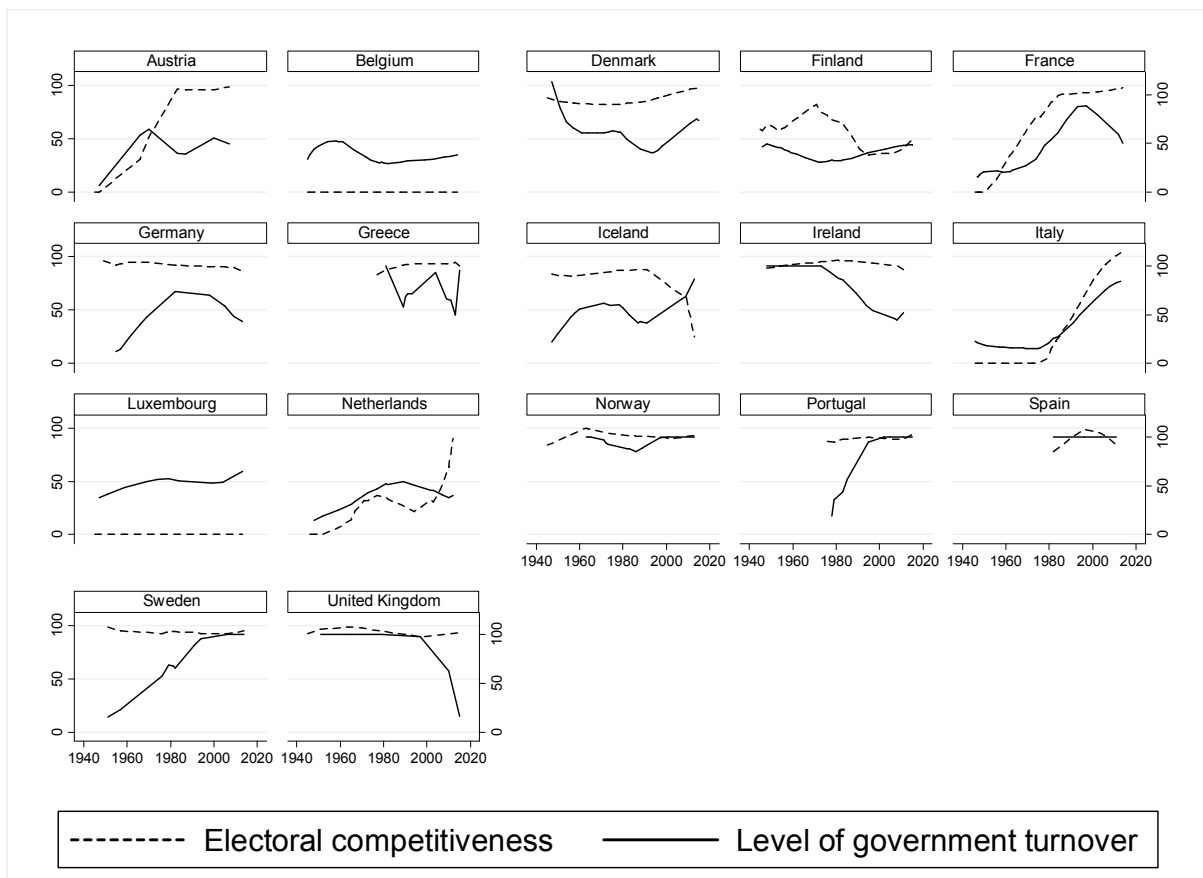
The growth of critical citizens in Western Europe has transformed the exercise of the executive power into a losing game where the only rule is that the cabinet parties will leave the office with much less support than when they get in. Third, many scholars have focused too much on the role of elections as an instrument of democratic accountability, but they ended up neglecting the role of institutions or other structural variables as source of uncertainty for the parties. As noted by Bartolini (2000a: 54), incumbents’ vulnerability also ‘results from specific configuration of the number, the strength, and the alliance-opposition relationship among the units of the system’. This is exactly the case for the probability of alternation, which, as we have seen above, is somewhat related to the specific configuration of the party system and the balance of power existing between the ‘units’.

8.5. National trends

The variation in the frequency of alternation is not strictly related to the variation in both party and coalition closeness. As we have pointed out above, the trend over time of competitiveness at the aggregate level often follows irregular, if not erratic, patterns that cannot be directly associated with the growth of governmental turnover occurred in the last three decades. However, this lack of a clear association at the aggregate level may be present, instead, at the individual level, that is, among the seventeen West European party systems here under investigation. To have a closer look at this relationship, Figure 8.3 charts the levels of electoral competitiveness and government turnover over time in each country. The evidence collected at the individual level reveals that there are countries where closeness and turnover seem to follow a similar pattern. For instance, in Italy, France and Norway the rise in electoral competitiveness has been accompanied by a steady growth in the mean level of government turnover. We can imagine that, in these three countries, the erosion of the support for the larger/dominant party has slowly paved the way to a pattern of significant turnover in the cabinet and a tighter electoral context.

By contrast, in many party systems the relationship between electoral competitiveness and rotation in power is loose and blurry. For instance, in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden the two trends are quite disjointed and do not share a common path. All these cases reveal that the level of government turnover can go up, while competitiveness goes down, or remains quite stable.

Fig. 8.3. Electoral competitiveness and level of government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)³



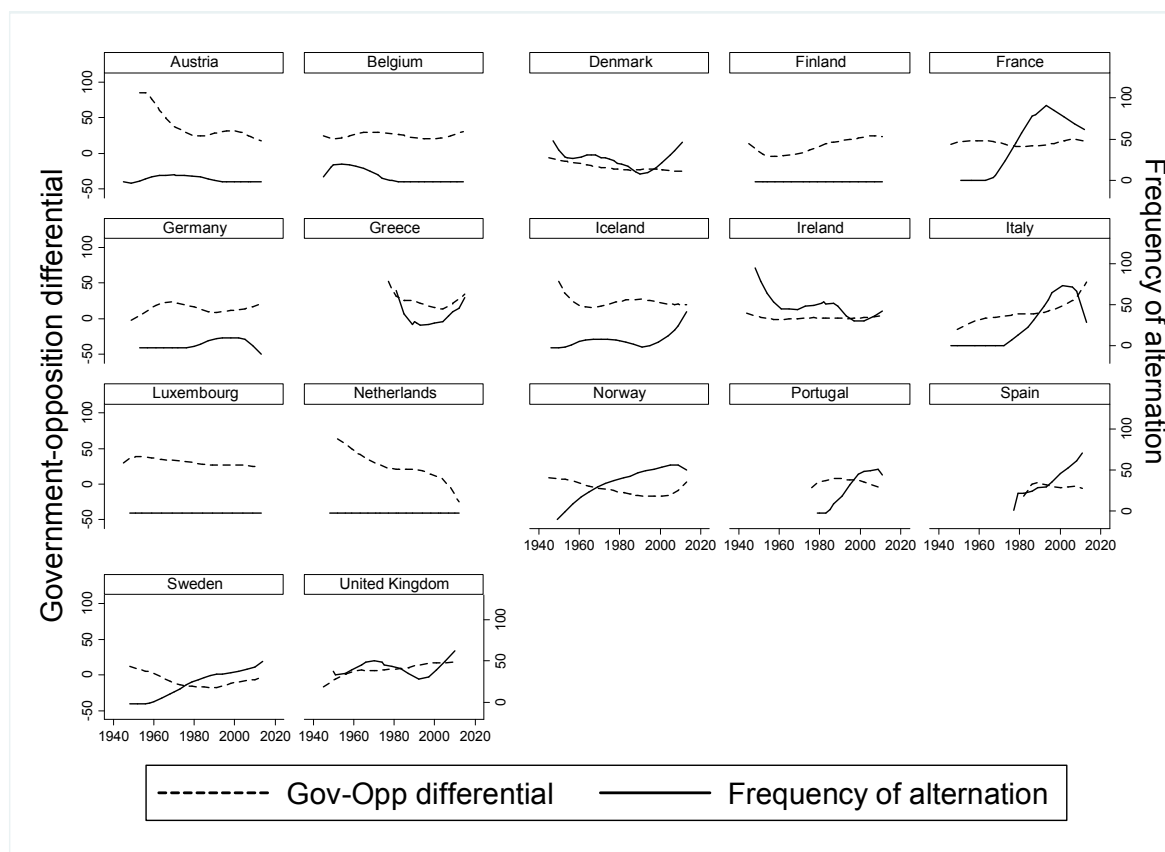
Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

³ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

As to the impact of the percentage seat-margin between the government and the parties in the opposition, the evidence included in Figure 8.4 shows that the association with the frequency of alternation is far from constant at the country level. More accurately, this relationship is stronger in Norway and Sweden, where the frequency of alternation in power is linked to a decline in the seat-share differential between government and opposition. It is worth noticing, in addition, that there are party systems where a stable pattern of (non)alternation coexists with a high differential between cabinet parties and the opposition. For instance, in Austria and the Netherlands the strength of the government vis-à-vis the opposition appears to be completely disconnected from the pattern of alternation. A similar development seems to be present in France, where the frequency of wholesale turnovers is coupled with an extremely stable level of government-opposition differential.

Finally, there are countries where the two trends remain stable over time and the government controls more seats than the parties in the opposition. This description fits perfectly the Belgian and Finnish cases, where the lack of alternation in power goes hand in hand with a legislature in which the majority supporting the government is larger than the share of seats held by the opposition. In any case, all these figures confirm the existence of a 'rather weak' (Ieraci 2012: 540) association, at least at the individual level, between the government-opposition differential and the frequency of alternation in office.

Fig. 8.4. Government-opposition differential (%) and frequency of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)⁴



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter points towards a growing electoral voters' dissatisfaction. In our seventeen democracies, the party or parties in office lost votes much more often than

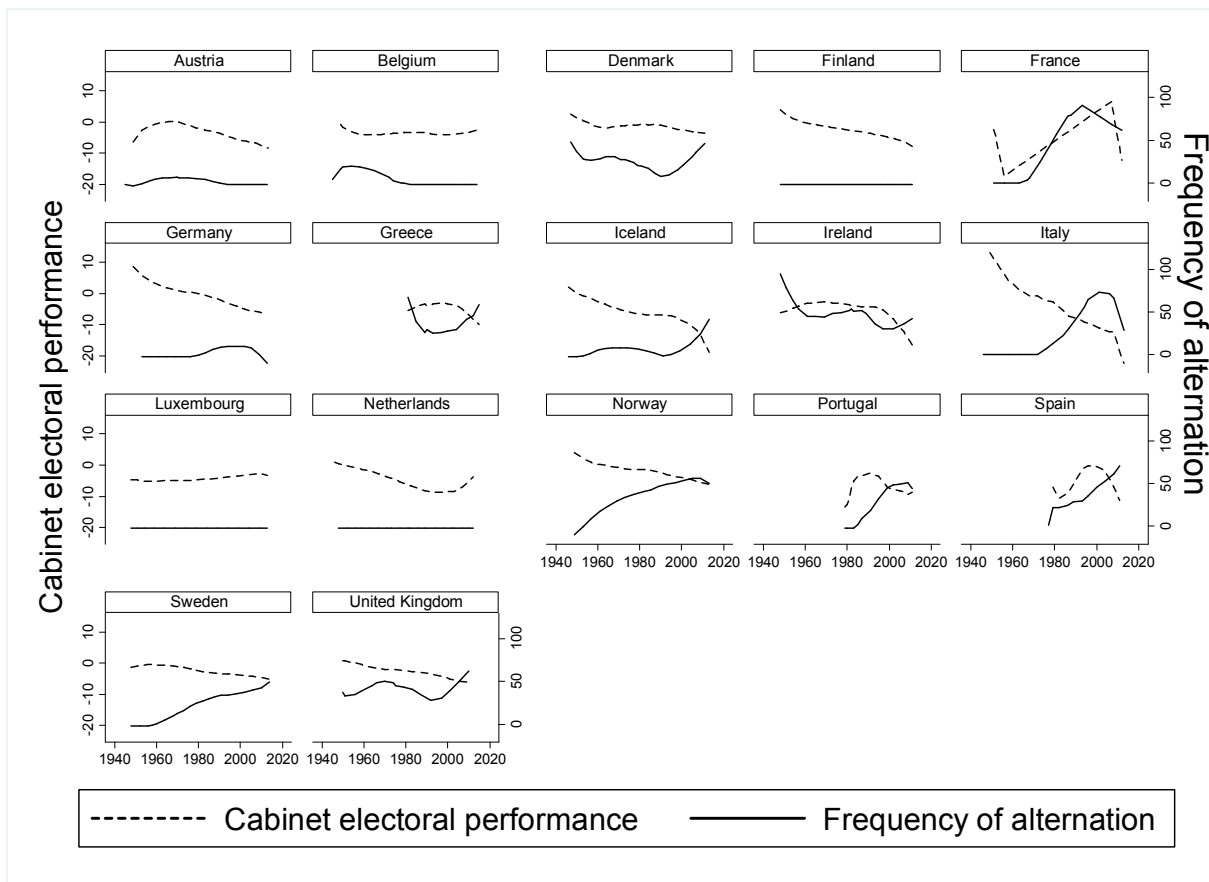
⁴ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

not. On average, governing parties lost about 4 per cent of the vote during the last seventy years, a tendency that is even more marked in the most recent decades. But is this trend associated with the frequency of alternation recorded in the individual countries? Figure 8.5, which shows the development of the cabinet electoral performance over time in seventeen West European democracies, reveals that the association with the pattern of alternation in power is far from uniform. In fact, in some countries there is no linkage between the electoral fate of the incumbent and the frequency of complete turnovers. In these respects, the Finnish and Dutch cases are extremely revealing. Despite the significant electoral losses experienced by the incumbents, the prospect for an alternation in power is absolutely limited. In other polities, such as Sweden and especially Norway, the higher frequency of alternation appears to be associated with the electoral fate of the incumbents. In other words, the more severe the electoral losses suffered by the rulers, the more likely there is an alternation in power.

From this viewpoint, it is interesting to note the Italian case, which shows a twofold trend. Until the late 1980s, the increasing losses experienced by the incumbents did not lead to any significant turnover at the governmental level. In this case, there was no connection between the electoral and governmental arena. The elections did not bring about any relevant consequences for the composition of the cabinet. Arguably, at the time Italy was witnessing the undergoing a process of “enfeeblement of the centre” (Sartori 1976: 120), that is, a consistent and persistent loss of votes to one of the extreme poles. However, this loss of votes was not translated into a loss of (executive) power, given the specific configuration of the polarized party systems. Things changed considerably in the early 1990s when, instead, the electoral losses of the incumbent bring about repeated alternations in power, until the 2013 general election.

By and large, these figures make clear that the impact of the electoral returns on the government turnover may be, to some extent, filtered the specific configuration of power existing in the parliamentary arena. Where democracy is, in Duverger’s (1982) terms, ‘mediated’, in the sense that the chain of delegation from the citizens to the government is ‘interrupted’ or loosened by the legislature (and its members), the negative impact of electoral losses for the incumbents may be somewhat weakened. In contrast, where the chain of delegation directly links the voters to the cabinet in a sort of non-mediated or *immediate* democracy, then the consequences of the election on the sitting government are much more strong and direct. At any rate, this discussion reveals, once again, that our theoretical debates on the conditions affecting the occurrence of alternation must find a better way to accommodate the decisive role of institutions within a larger or more fine-grained analytical framework.

Fig. 8.5. Cabinet electoral performance (%) and frequency of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)⁵



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

8.6. Strength (and weakness) of the association

We have started this chapter by saying that most of the scholarly literature in the field of comparative politics have identified a sort of special relationship between electoral competitiveness, on the one hand, and the pattern of government turnover. From a purely theoretical standpoint, Giovanni Sartori argues that the notion of alternation is nothing less than a shade of competitiveness. Yet, the empirical evidence collected and discussed has shown that this hypothesized relation lies on shaky grounds. In particular, when we conceive electoral competitiveness as the closeness of the electoral outcome the association with the actuality of alternation in government turns out to be not as straightforward or linear as we have imagined. By contrast, when we analyse the specific balance of power existing in the assembly or, to a lesser extent, the electoral performance of the incumbent, the linkage with the pattern of alternation is stronger, better yet, less weak. In other words, the notion of alternation does shade into the notion of competitiveness as long as we do not simplistically reduce it to the margin of victory between the two leading parties or coalitions.

That said, in order to have a better grasp on this aspect and precisely assess the strength of the relationship between alternation and competitiveness, Table 8.13 offers the results of the bivariate relationship between electoral competitiveness and four different dimensions of government turnover/alternation at the individual level. In general, the figures shows that there is no clear pattern in this relationship. In some cases the correlation coefficient is positive, while in other is negative (and in very many

⁵ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

cases it is statistically significant). Moreover, besides few exceptions, the strength of the correlation is rather weak, meaning that electoral competitiveness and alternation are not strictly interrelated. The only exceptions are France, Germany, Iceland and Italy: here the correlation coefficients are high but absolutely contradictory. More precisely, in France and Italy the index of electoral competitiveness is positively correlated with the frequency of alternation, while in Germany and Iceland the association is negative.

A similar contradictory pattern emerges by looking at the correlation with the possibility of alternation. The coefficients are positive in the majority of countries, but there are still few significant exceptions. In Germany, for instance, electoral competitiveness is *negatively* associated with the possibility of a wholesale reshuffle in government. In this case, alternation *does not* shade into either the notion or the practice of competitiveness. Closers electoral races are not conducive to complete substitution of the ruling parties.

Tab. 8.13. Correlation between index of electoral competitiveness and dimensions of government turnover/alternation, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.437 (6)	0.181 (21)	0.256 (6)	0.274 (21)
Belgium	– ^a	– ^a	– ^a	– ^a
Denmark	0.232 (16)	0.136 (25)	0.231 (16)	0.144 (25)
Finland	-0.457*** (15)	-0.191 (17)	0.236 (10)	-0.046 (17)
France	0.430** (10)	0.397*** (15)	0.550** (10)	0.453*** (15)
Germany	-0.373 (7)	-0.333 (17)	-0.406 (7)	-0.507*** (17)
Greece	-0.326 (9)	0.217 (13)	-0.291 (9)	-0.106 (13)
Iceland	-0.457* (13)	-0.645*** (20)	-0.637*** (13)	-0.645 (20)
Ireland	-0.178 (15)	-0.126 (19)	-0.076 (15)	0.090 (199)
Italy	0.853*** (14)	0.625 (17)	-0.749*** (14)	0.666** (16)
Luxembourg	– ^a	– ^a	– ^a	– ^a
Netherlands	0.347 (16)	– ^a	– ^a	0.147 (21)
Norway	0.035 ^a	-0.049 (17)	0.035 ()	-0.040 (17)
Portugal	0.204 (7)	0.331 (12)	0.229 (7)	0.510** (12)
Spain	– ^a	0.164 (11)	– ^a	-0.412 (10)
Sweden	-0.260 (7)	-0.305* (21)	0.157 (7)	0.198 (21)
United Kingdom	0.158 (8)	0.152 (17)	0.158 (8)	0.152 (17)

Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.

As we have pointed out in previous section, the balance of power between the winning-seat parties may be crucial for the explanation of the variation in the frequency of alternation. As shown in the Table 8.14, the correlation between the government-opposition differential and the pattern of turnover in office is always negative and quite strong. More specifically, the data reveal that the larger the seat-share margin that separates the government from the opposition, the less likely an alternation in power. This pattern is consistent among all the seventeen countries, with only one exception: Italy. In fact, the Italian case is here an outlier because it shows that as the incumbent government gets stronger, the frequency of complete turnovers tends to decline. This peculiar result can be explained by the fact that, as noted above, Italy was a classic example of polarized multi-partism, in which the centre was “bound” to govern because of the anti-system nature of the parties located at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. In such a circumstance, the strength of the government vis-à-vis the opposition was not the crucial factor explaining the emergence of a process of alternation in power. Other conditions, *in primis* the existence of strong anti-system actors, had a much stronger impact on the mechanics of the party system.

In sum, although the government-opposition differential must not be considered as ‘the necessary and sufficient condition of the government turnover’ (Ieraci 2012: 540), our data tell that alternation is more likely when the cabinet has not a pivotal role in the legislature and, accordingly, the opposition has a credible expectation that the next turn of the elections can be *its* turn.

Tab. 8.14. Correlation between government-opposition differential and four dimensions of government turnover/alternation, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	-0.088 (6)	-0.250 (19)	-0.409	-0.409* (19)
Belgium	-0.544** (17)	-0.418* (20)	-0.444* (19)	-0.444* (20)
Denmark	-0.298 (15)	-0.198 (24)	-0.375* (25)	-0.375* (24)
Finland	-0.061 (15)	- ^a	-0.499** (17)	-0.499* (17)
France	-0.175 (10)	-0.296 (15)	-0.296 (15)	-0.296 (15)
Germany	-0.019 (6)	-0.186 (15)	-0.302 (15)	-0.302 (15)
Greece	-0.600* (9)	-0.473 (13)	-0.551* (13)	-0.551* (13)
Iceland	-0.378 (13)	-0.134 (19)	-0.134 (19)	-0.134 (19)
Ireland	-0.160 (14)	-0.121 (18)	-0.029 (18)	-0.029 (18)
Italy	0.370 (13)	0.038 (16)	0.472* (15)	0.472* (16)
Luxembourg	-0.186 (10)	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	-0.205 (15)	- ^a	-0.343 (19)	-0.343 (19)
Norway	- ^a	-0.461 (16)	-0.540 (16)	-0.540** (16)
Portugal	-0.472 (7)	-0.114 (12)	0.236 (12)	0.236 (12)
Spain	- ^a	-0.396 (9)	-0.429 (9)	-0.429 (9)
Sweden	0.872** (7)	-0.168 (21)	-0.433** (21)	-0.433** (21)
United Kingdom	- ^a	-0.234 (16)	- ^a	-0.047 (16)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

There is one final point that should be discussed before concluding this chapter. Until now, I have argued that the structural factors, such as the distribution of seats in parliament or the cabinet size, contribute to the explanation of occurrence of alternation more than the competitiveness of the electoral returns. Let me hasten to say that this does not mean that elections have no role in the emergence of a specific pattern of government turnover. It simply means that the variation in the frequency of alternation cannot be explained exclusively by the variation in the election closeness. What is more, elections are, indeed, an instrument of democratic accountability, but because voters use them as a Damocles’ sword over the head of the incumbent rulers. The data presented in section 8.2 show that the electorate is not shy about using more and more that sword. But how this attitude towards the incumbents impact on the process of government change at the individual level?

In order to address this issue, Table 8.15 reports the results of the bivariate relationship between the cabinet electoral performance and alternation in government for each of the seventeen West European countries. First of all, it is worth underling that, as to the frequency of alternation, the association is negative for all the countries. In other words, the higher the electoral losses for the cabinet parties, the more frequent a total eviction of the government. The same happens for the mean level of government turnover. By implication, these figures reveal that the more the governing parties lose votes, the deeper will be the reshuffle within the cabinet.

A second aspect that must be underlined concerns the strength of this association. In fact, if the (negative) sign of the correlation is the same for all the party systems, the strength of the relationship shows a high range of variation. More precisely, the relation between alternation and the electoral performance of the cabinet is particularly strong in Norway (-0.764), Greece (-0.751), Spain (-0.662), Sweden (-0.597) and the

United Kingdom (-0.582). These democracies share a common feature, namely the fact their party systems show a limited level of party fragmentation and, in Powell's (2000) words, a remarkable clarity of responsibility, in the sense that citizens 'have a fair opportunity to cast a meaningful vote for or against the policymakers'. Given the specific configuration of the party system, in these democratic regimes the impact of the elections on the pattern of government turnover is stronger and more direct.

On the contrary, where the responsibility of governing is blurred and the party system is more fragmented the chain linking elections to the probability of alternation is much weaker. In these cases, in fact, the "power of the voters" is reduced by the fact that they do not really know precisely who is responsible for the adopted policies and the changes in government are not sensitive or responsive to the verdict of the electorate. In brief, in these circumstances voters/Damocles' sword is not that scary for the rulers.

Tab. 8.15. Correlation between cabinet electoral performance and dimensions of government turnover/alternation, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	-0.052 (6)	-0.029 (20)	-0.081 (6)	-0.142 (20)
Belgium	-0.003 (18)	-0.065 (21)	-0.096 (18)	-0.065 (21)
Denmark	-0.099 (16)	-0.143 (25)	-0.108 (16)	0.044 (25)
Finland	-0.007 (15)	^a	^a	-0.198 (17)
France	-0.500 (10)	-0.479 (15)	-0.356 (10)	-0.379 (15)
Germany	-0.384 (7)	-0.273 (17)	-0.257 (7)	-0.329 (17)
Greece	-0.825** (8)	-0.751*** (12)	-0.814** (8)	-0.721** (12)
Iceland	-0.549* (13)	-0.534* (20)	-0.525* (13)	-0.534** (20)
Ireland	-0.281 (15)	-0.406* (19)	-0.263 (15)	-0.278 (19)
Italy	-0.530 (12)	-0.348 (15)	-0.287 (12)	-0.533** (15)
Luxembourg	0.140 (10)	^a	^a	^a
Netherlands	-0.159 (16)	^a	^a	0.247 (21)
Norway	^a	-0.764*** (17)	^a	-0.456* (17)
Portugal	0.253 (7)	-0.315 (12)	0.336 (7)	-0.465 (12)
Spain	^a	-0.662** (10)	^a	-0.317 (10)
Sweden	-0.554 (7)	-0.597*** (21)	-0.554 (7)	-0.190 (21)
United Kingdom	^a	-0.582** (17)	^a	-0.582** (17)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

Summing up, the evidence from the analysis at the individual level has shown that electoral closeness is not a good predictor of government alternation. Only in some countries, in fact, the bivariate relationship has the expected (positive) sign, while in many others closer electoral races are not associated with large turnovers. Yet, if we measure electoral uncertainty as a systemic property of the party system or as the propensity of the voters to punish the incumbent, then we can argue that higher levels of competitiveness are related with a higher likelihood of rotation in power.

When we zoom out the data and make a step back at the aggregate level, it is evident that some evidence just singled out finds a further confirmation. Table 8.16 report the bivariate relationship between three indicators of electoral uncertainty and the patterns of government alternation. Moreover, in order to investigate whether the strength of the association has changed over time, the table reports the bivariate relationship in two phases: before and after 1980.⁶

⁶ This cut-off year has been chosen because, as we have seen in Chapter 3, this is approximately the moment in which the frequency of alternation in power begins to increase significantly.

Tab. 8.16. Correlation between indicators of electoral competitiveness and dimensions of government turnover/alternation, by period

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Pre-1980				
Electoral competitiveness	0.397*** (78)	0.256*** (135)	0.414*** (78)	0.343*** (135)
Gov-Opp Differential	-0.297** (72)	-0.283*** (121)	-0.343*** (72)	-0.478*** (121)
Electoral performance	-0.235** (74)	-0.197** (126)	-0.135 (74)	-0.040 (126)
Post-1980				
Electoral competitiveness	0.335*** (105)	0.271*** (164)	0.418*** (105)	0.385*** (164)
Gov-Opp Differential	-0.234** (104)	-0.307*** (163)	-0.406*** (104)	-0.510*** (163)
Electoral performance	-0.303*** (97)	-0.329*** (156)	-0.235** (97)	-0.174** (156)
Whole period 1945-2015				
Electoral competitiveness	0.403*** (183)	0.283*** (299)	0.442*** (183)	0.391*** (299)
Gov-Opp Differential	-0.263*** (176)	-0.290*** (284)	-0.366*** (176)	-0.484*** (284)
Electoral performance	-0.296*** (171)	-0.298*** (282)	-0.225*** (176)	-0.165*** (282)

First of all, the figures reveals that at the aggregate level and in both phases electoral competitiveness is *positively* associated with government turnover and alternation. In other words, as the margin between the main parties/coalition gets smaller, the likelihood of a rotation in office gradually grows. Despite the significant variation at the national level, the pattern of association between competitiveness and alternation partially confirms, though not in a straightforward way, the hypothesis suggested by Sartori forty years ago: the closer the election, the higher the probability to observe an alternation in office. Nevertheless, these two phenomena are not perfectly overlapped and there remain several cases in which electoral competitiveness does not produce a government alternation.

As to the other indicator of electoral uncertainty, the association between the seat-share differential between the cabinet and the parties in the opposition turns out to be significantly associated with the occurrence of alternation. More precisely, the relationship between the government-opposition marginal and the probability of alternation is quite strong, with a correlation coefficient of -0.366, which is equivalent to 13 per cent of the variance. It is worth noticing, in these respects, the strength of the association increases in the second phase (from -0.343 to -0.406 after 1980). Therefore, the distribution of seats in the legislature and, especially, the share of seats controlled by the cabinet contribute to explain the variation in the likelihood of alternation across the whole bunch of cases.

Lastly, cabinet electoral performance appears to be, in particular in the second period, one of the most important determinants of government alternation. Put it differently, the higher voters' propensity to change party choice and, most importantly, to punish the incumbent rulers is a factor that partially contribute to account for the emergence of a pattern of wholesale turnover in office. To be more precise, the bivariate relationship between the electoral performance of the governing parties and the frequency of alternation yields a coefficient of -0.298 for the whole period (1945-2015), which increase to -0.329 if we consider exclusively the phase that goes from 1980 to nowadays.

On this matter, the conclusion is clear – elections as important instruments of democracy matter. In this respect, voters' propensity to set in motion the democratic pendulum between sitting cabinet and alternative government-in-waiting is a crucial variable for the explanation of alternation in power. Of course, this is only one factor among a much wider set of influential elements that interact and, in some cases, cancel each other out. In any case, the main takeaway from this chapter is that electoral competitiveness, traditionally considered as the leading indicator of government turnover, is not always (and not everywhere) significantly associated with the pattern of government alternation. In other words, in the empirical world, *pace Sartori*, the notion of alternation and that of competitiveness *may* live parallel lives.

Chapter 9

The role of anti-system parties

9.1. Fighting against the system

Up to now, I have assumed that all the political parties in the system are equally *coalitionable*, in the sense that they share the same positive attitude toward occupying a seat on the government benches. In other words, so far the assumption has been that all parties are office-oriented actors aiming to control cabinet offices for their own sake, or survival, and for reaching policy goals. Nevertheless, the history of West European countries has been dominated, and to a certain degree is still characterised, by the problem of access to government responsibility, with specific parties (i.e., Rokkan's threshold of the executive power) treated 'as untrustworthy outsiders or otherwise unreliable partners by the dominant and established forces' (Bartolini 1998: 37). This problem has concerned mainly Communist/Socialist parties (Bartolini 2000b) or far-right and nationalist movements (Mudde 2002). However, more recently, other parties have reached this sort of pariah status in the political system, both on the extreme left and right (those parties declaring themselves to be 'above, or beyond, left and right').

As far as alternation is concerned, the existence of parties considered as non-coalitionable, or as unacceptable partners, has a direct bearing on the way cabinets rotate in office. More precisely, the presence of non-coalitionable actors has two main consequences for the functioning of the system. First, they automatically raise the threshold of the executive power and, accordingly, reduce the space of inter-party competition only to those parties with a governing bent or that, to put it another way, have crossed the threshold of government. Second, the existence of unacceptable partners restricts the array of governing formulas that can be used by those parties that accept the cost of governing. Accordingly, the combination of these two factors reduces the options at the disposal of the ruling parties and, at the same time, makes alternation in power less likely. When an entire portion of the party system is *out of competition*, the race for government is limited to those 'accepted' parties included in the governing area and, as a consequence, the room for manoeuvre for potential alternative cabinets is narrow.

Obviously, all this discussion is strictly related to the slippery concept of the 'anti-system party', which has a precise origin but an uncertain historical trajectory. For certain, the term 'appeared in the modern political science literature in the early 1960s' (Capoccia 2002: 11) but, then, perhaps in conjunction with the so-called 'end of ideology' (Bell 1960) and the subsequent, even more ambitious, 'end of History' (Fukuyama 1992), the concept of anti-system party almost disappeared from the literature or was swallowed up by the proliferation of countless 'anti' labels in comparative politics.

The temporary disappearance of the concept can be readily interpreted as a consequence of the waning of totalitarian ideologies that occurred in Europe with the end of the Second World War and, later on, the breakdown of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless, the vanishing of Nazism, Fascism or Communism did not automatically undermine the utility of that category of parties that, in Daalder's (1966: 64) words, 'participated in order to destroy' the system. As a matter of fact, 'anti-systemness' maintains all its validity also in polities where ideologies play a minor or negligible role. That happens because anti-system parties cannot only be described through an ideological lens but, more importantly from the perspective of this thesis, through a *systemic* lens. In other words, rather than being characterised exclusively by its ideological trait, anti-systemness may originate from the relative location of the parties in the system.

As Capoccia (2002: 14) correctly pointed out, '[w]hat is important to recognize here is that the content of ideology as such does not render a party anti-system, what matters instead is when such content

is considered in relation to the basic values of the regime within which the party operates.’ In the light of this differentiation, Capoccia distinguishes between *ideological* and *relational* anti-systemness: the former refers to an opposition of principle to democracy, whereas the latter exclusively implies a ‘high distance from the other parties on the ideological space, and [the] adoption of “isolationist” coalition strategies and centrifugal propaganda tactics’ (Capoccia 2002: 24). The notion of relational anti-systemness fits perfectly with the scope of this research since it emphasises the impact of the type of party on the mechanics of the system and the process of coalition building.

Before analysing the relationship between alternation and anti-systemness, one must single out the starting point of this entire discussion. In fact, the concept of anti-system party is an essential component of Sartori’s theory of party systems. It is here that the anti-systemness gets its *relational* accent, namely it is conceived of for its impact on the pattern of competition between political parties. As Sartori argued, when ‘a political system obtains anti-system, bilateral oppositions and discourages – by the very fact that the centre is physically occupied – centripetal competition’, the party system turns out to be highly polarised, with the creation of two-poles apart, ideologically distant from one another, that make the emergence of a pattern of government alternation very unlikely. In brief, the existence of relevant anti-system parties creates a situation in which the centre is out of competition and the centrifugal forces prevail on the centripetal ones. This constellation of factors, that Sartori (1976) summarised in the ‘extreme and polarized’ type of party system, were by definition detrimental to any substantial reshuffling in the party composition of the government.

9.2. Anti-system parties as non-coalitionable partners

As we have just seen, the association between anti-system parties and alternation put forward by Sartori is straightforward. However, he does not dwell on the size or the type of the anti-system parties. He simply confines his argument to the distinction between a broad and a strict definition of anti-systemness. As to the former, a party can be defined as anti-system ‘whenever it *undermines the legitimacy* of the *regime* it opposes’ (Sartori 1976: 118). This is a very abstract definition that encompasses many kinds of political party or movement, from the classic Italian Communist Party until the 1990s or the (neo-)Fascist parties to the more recent challenger or anti-establishment parties (Abedi 2002), no matter where they are located along the left-right dimension in the system. The minimal common denominator for all these parties is their delegitimising impact on the party system.

Conversely, the strict definition points to the fact that ‘an anti-system party would not change – if it could – the government but the very system of government’ (Sartori 1976: 118). Accordingly, anti-systemness takes on at this level its *relational* property which implies, first, a high ideological distance in the polity and, second, the existence of one or more parties with no (or very low) coalition potential (Bartolini 1998). For anti-system parties aim at changing the whole system of government, the pro-system parties will treat them as a pariah, that is, adopting an isolationist strategy against those actors that question the legitimacy of the political regime. Peter Mair (2014: 297) finely describes this aspect when he writes that “‘anti-systemness”, like beauty, here lies in the eyes of the beholder’, in the sense that anti-system parties are regarded by other parties in the system – or they regard themselves – as *unacceptable partners*.

In sum, whether broadly or strictly defined, anti-systemness ‘covers, or may cover, a wide span of different attitudes ranging from “alienation” and total refusal to “protest”’ (Sartori 1976: 117). In this case, there is no difference in kind but simply a difference of degree. Anti-systemness is a continuous property that is bound to vary over time and across countries, but ‘at the level of the system the consequences of alienation and/or protest are not markedly different: Whatever the nature, at the source, of the anti-attitude, a government faces the same daily difficulties’ (*ibidem*). Yet this is a very strong assumption that some scholars have recently questioned. For instance, Capoccia (2002) suggests a useful distinction among the group of the relational anti-system parties. More precisely, he distinguishes between ‘typical’ and ‘polarising’ anti-system

parties. Although I do not agree with the terminology adopted by Capoccia because both types of anti-system parties have *polarising* effects on the dynamics of competition, I concur with him on the necessity to treat differently the different types of anti-systemness.

In the light of this, I define as *ideological anti-system parties* those parties, called 'typical' by Capoccia (2002: 26), 'which both challenge democracy and have polarizing effects on the party system functioning.' By contrast, I will adopt the label *non-ideological (or functional) anti-system parties* for those actors 'which do not display any ideological characteristics of anti-systemness but which do, however, encourage a polarized mechanics in the party system on a minimally durable basis, practicing outbidding in the electoral competition, and being non-coalitionable or disloyal in coalitions' (*ibidem*).

It should be clear that this classification cuts across any longitudinal or temporal dimension, in the sense that one should not treat the ideological anti-system parties as the *old* type of anti-system party and, by implication, the functional anti-system party as a *new* type of anti-systemness. Indeed, a party that struggles against the current system can be simultaneously new and ideological or old and non-ideological. To illustrate this point, let us briefly examine two examples of new anti-system parties: the Five Stars Movement in Italy and Golden Dawn in Greece. The former made its flamboyant entry in parliament in the wake of the 2013 general election with a platform based on environmental issues, hyper-democratic perfectionism and an 'anti-system struggle' (Gualmini and Corbetta 2013; see also Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Tronconi 2015) against the established or mainstream parties. Its leader, the showman Beppe Grillo (2013), made clear in his blog that the main goal of the *Movement* is 'to change the system' and, consequently, the party resorted to an obstinate isolationist strategy and propaganda. As a result, the Five Stars Movement can be readily included among the (new) *functional* anti-system party.

On the other hand, the electoral breakthrough of Golden Dawn (GD), which occurred between the 2009 and the 2012 legislative elections, has been interpreted by different scholars as the birth of a new anti-system party 'whose ideological proclivity to Nazi ideas is reinforced by GD's anti-system, anti-Semitic and anti-Communist rhetoric' (Ellinas 2013: 550). Hence, Golden Dawn is a party that – if it could – would completely change the *democratic* political regime. As Takis Pappas noted (2014: 106) the core characteristics of this Greek neo-Nazi party is 'its fundamentally anti-democratic, thuggish and, awaiting judicial review, outright criminal nature.' With no doubt, the Golden Dawn is a perfect exemplar of the first category of anti-systemness: a (new) ideological party that challenges the democratic system (Pappas and Aslanidis 2015).

To recapitulate before moving on, anti-system parties have not disappeared from the political landscape of West European party systems. They are still present and, to a certain degree (that we shall analyse in the next sections), they affect the functioning as well as the stability of the system. However, in order to grasp effectively this phenomenon, it is useful to distinguish between two types of relational anti-systemness – ideological and non-ideological (or functional). Both types presuppose *unequal intervals* between parties along the ideological space, which means that some parties are 'perceived as being more or less "alien", more or less "extraneous"' (Sartori 1976: 305). How alien or extraneous is not a question addressed by Sartori because his notion of anti-systemness is abstract and all-encompassing. Nevertheless, in distinguishing between ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties, we can assume the former to be more alien or *less coalitionable* than the latter. Functional anti-system parties stretch, perhaps in more than one dimension, the ideological space, making more cumbersome and constrained the coalitional game. In spatial language, this kind of party produces a *stretched or extended space* of competition that, inevitably, makes more complex the formation of alternative coalitions.

On the contrary, ideological anti-system parties create what Sartori (1976: 306), in passing, described as a '*disjointed space*,' namely, a party system in which parties (and voters, too) encounter breaking, or no-return, points that break the space of competition. Both types of ideological space bring about unequal intervals in the system, but the ideological anti-systemness makes that inequality qualitatively different. From this perspective, the functional anti-system parties are, at least in the long run, more easily absorbable from the system, either with formal or informal practices, whereas the ideological actors require a *rupture*

that is more difficult to manage and cope with. This argument appears to find, partially, some confirmation in the data discussed in Chapter 10, which investigates the trend in electoral volatility. As we will see in that chapter, the transferability of votes across the pro-system/anti-system divide has significantly increased after the 1980s, when the functional anti-system parties take the lead over the ideological ones. For sure, this development may have different interpretations but, nonetheless, reveals a higher porosity at the voter level between the defenders of the system and their foes. If this electoral porosity will be transferred also in the parliamentary arena, its effects on the functioning of the party system would be significant, making, sooner or later, alternation in power a real possibility.

In the light of the above, it is possible to develop two hypotheses on the association between alternation in office and strength of anti-system parties. First, in line with the theoretical implications derived from the framework for the analysis of party systems laid out by Sartori, we can hypothesise an inverse relationship between level of turnover (or probability of alternation) and level of anti-systemness existing in the system. However, different anti-system parties (with a more or less pronounced ideological bent) may have a different impact on the dynamics of the party system. Accordingly, the second hypothesis will be the following: the level of government turnover is a function of the share of seats controlled by anti-system parties, whereas the effect of non-ideological anti-system actors on the way governments rotate in office is more nuanced and limited. These are the working hypotheses that will orient the research in the rest of the chapter.

9.3. Anti-systemness in comparative perspective

As noted by Mair (2013: 52), in contemporary politics ‘it has become less and less easy for any one party or bloc of parties to monopolise power, with the result that shared government has become more common. As all parties become coalitionable, more or less, coalition-making has become more promiscuous.’ In this argument, it is implicit that parties with low or nil coalition potential have almost disappeared and more and more parties are eager to get into office. However, as I have pointed out above, there still exist parties that refuse to enter government or are regarded as unacceptable allies. These parties, with their sheer existence in the system, restrict the area of competition exclusively to the governing-oriented parties and, accordingly, constrain the process of government substitution. That said, since not all parties have become coalitionable (as the cases of the M5S or GD eminently prove), it is useful to analyse the trajectory of non-coalitionable parties in Western Europe.

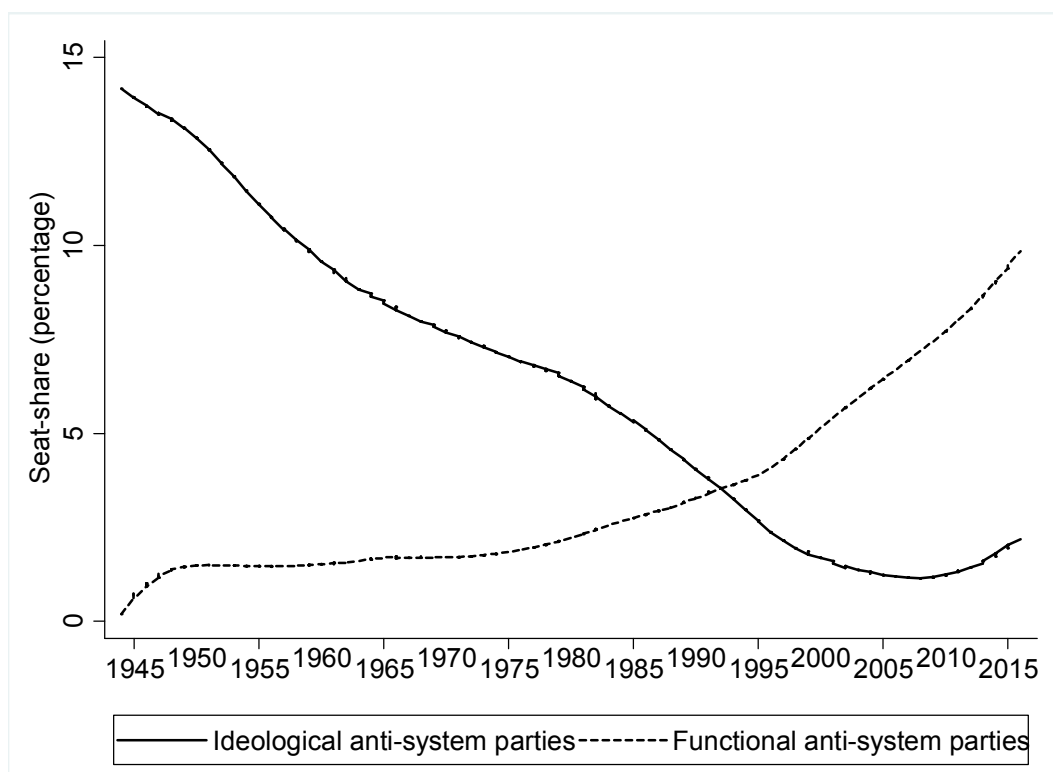
Table 9.1 reports the parliamentary strength of both ideological and functional anti-system (relevant) parties. As the data clearly shows, post-war West European party systems experienced a twofold trend. On the one hand, we observe the decline of the ideological anti-system party: on average, they controlled 11.3 per cent of seats in the 1950s and, sixty years later, they control less than 2 per cent of representatives in the legislature. On the other hand, the functional anti-system parties reveal a completely different and symmetrical trend; their seat-share steadily grows from the mid-1940s (0.4 per cent) to the mid-2010s, reaching its record high of 10.6 per cent. In short, the ideological anti-systemness was typical until the 1980s, while by the 1990s the functional anti-system party has become the most frequent channelling of the protest against the system. If we had lumped together both types of parties, we would have obtained an ebb and flow trend, as the last column of Table 9.1 shows, without any clue about the driving force behind the ups and downs in anti-systemness.

Tab. 9.1. Ideological and functional anti-system parties in Western Europe, by decade (percentage values)

Decade	Ideological anti-system parties (% seats)	Functional anti-system parties (% seats)	Anti-system parties (% seats)
1940s	14.5	0.4	14.9
1950s	11.3	2.3	13.6
1960s	6.6	0.8	7.4
1970s	7.6	2.6	10.2
1980s	6.5	1.4	7.9
1990s	2.3	4.4	6.7
2000s	0.4	5.6	6.0
2010s	1.9	10.6	12.5
Mean	6.6	3.0	9.6

As Figure 9.1 clearly reveals, anti-system parties have not disappeared but, in a more complex and unexpected way, have changed their nature. Nowadays and with minor exceptions, the unacceptable partners in coalition-making do not have any ideological imprinting, but they challenge the system with different tools, platforms and from a different, more malleable, perspective. Notably, the two lines show a common upwards trend only in the very last period, that is, in conjunction with the arrival of the economic crisis in Europe. In a way, the so-called Great Recession has given a boost to the rise of the functional anti-system parties and, at the same time, has halted the decline of the ideological ones. Be that as it may, the bottom line is that unacceptable parties, whatever their nature, are still around in West European party systems and can affect the dynamics of interparty competition.

Fig. 9.1. Anti-system parties in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed line)¹



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

¹ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

Thus far, we have observed the development in anti-systemness in Western Europe over time and at the aggregate level. However, as Table 9.2 shows, anti-system parties are not uniformly distributed among the seventeen countries examined in this study. For instance, if we take into consideration the strength of the ideological anti-system parties, it is evident that such parties never existed or, better, never got seats in Iceland, Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom. Recall here that the parties we are talking about are exclusively, in Sartori's terms, 'relevant' parties, which have governing or blackmail potential. Accordingly, fringe or flash parties, without one of the two properties, are excluded from the picture. Furthermore, it is worth noting that for most countries the peak in ideological anti-systemness is recorded in their initial period of democratic consolidation, that is in the mid-1940s and, for two of the so-called 'Third Wave democracies' (Portugal and Spain), during the 1940s. Observed from this viewpoint, Greece is the only exception. In fact, here the seat-share of the ideological anti-system parties peaks in the mid-2010s because of the electoral breakthrough of Golden Dawn and, given the new distribution of forces in the assembly, the renovated political relevance of the Communist Party (KKE).

Overall, the countries with the highest level of ideological anti-systemness are, on average, Finland (15.4 per cent) and Italy (28.5 per cent). Both party systems had strong Communist parties and, in addition, Italy included also a second ideological anti-system party located at the extreme right of the political spectrum, that is, the neo-Fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI). Despite their strength during the phase of democratic consolidation, the seat-share of these anti-system parties shows a general downward trend and, in the last fifteen years, only two countries – Greece and Portugal – contemplate the existence of ideological anti-system actors.

Tab. 9.2. Seat-share of ideological anti-system parties in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Mean
Austria	5.8	7.1	4.5	0	0	0	0	0	2.2
Belgium	9.8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1.3
Denmark	9.1	4.4	0	2.2	0	0	0	0	1.6
Finland	22.7	21.7	22.6	18.9	14.0	0	0	0	15.4
France	29.6	20.2	0	0	0	7.6	0	0	11.4
Germany	3.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.1
Greece	-	-	-	5.3	1.1	0	0	12.9	3.5
Iceland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Italy	40.3	43.7	39.2	37.4	38.2	11.2	0	0	28.5
Luxembourg	9.9	6.6	9.8	4.3	0	0	0	0	4.5
Netherlands	9.0	5.2	4.9	4.5	0	0	0	0	2.9
Norway	3.7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.2
Portugal	-	-	-	15.2	16.2	7.1	5.8	6.1	11.4
Spain	-	-	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sweden	0	0	0	5.2	5.6	0	0	0	1.8
United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Mean</i>	<i>14.5</i>	<i>11.3</i>	<i>6.6</i>	<i>7.6</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>2.3</i>	<i>0.4</i>	<i>1.9</i>	<i>6.6</i>

Note: bold = peak

If we now turn our attention to the development of non-ideological anti-system parties in Western Europe, the resulting picture, reported in Table 9.3, is perfectly symmetrical to that observed above. Indeed, twelve out of seventeen countries experienced a peak in functional anti-systemness in the twenty-first century, with the highest values recorded in Austria, Norway and Sweden. In these cases, especially the emergence of new post-industrial right-wing parties (Ignazi 2003), such as the Danish Progress Party, the Austrian Freedom Party or the Norwegian Progress Party, strongly reinvigorated the class of the functional

anti-system parties. However, despite their electoral success, it is important to stress the higher level of flexibility, or porosity, revealed by these parties in contrast to their ideological counterparts. In fact, even though they are usually treated as unacceptable coalition partners, some cabinets relied on, a more or less formal, agreement with functional anti-system parties. *Inter alia*, this is the case, for instance, of the minority cabinet formed in the Netherlands by Mark Rutte in 2010: a coalition made up of the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Christian Democrats (CDA), with the crucial support in the legislature of the Party for Freedom (PVV). Therefore, most functional anti-system parties are considered unacceptable allies *up to a point*, in the sense that in some circumstances pro-system actors can ask for their not explicit support in exchange for policies that are well-accepted by outsider parties.

Tab. 9.3. Seat-share of functional anti-system parties in seventeen West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Mean
Austria	0	0	0	4.3	1.5	26.8	17.4	41.0	9.2
Belgium	0	0	0	0	0	5.8	11.5	5.0	2.1
Denmark	0	0	0	9.9	7.0	6.6	13.4	12.3	5.8
Finland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.8	15.3	1.5
France	0	11.6	8.1	13.8	1.5	0.1	0	2.1	6.4
Germany	0	0	0	0	0	4.2	8.1	10.1	1.8
Greece	-	-	-	31.0	6.2	0	0	7.3	5.1
Iceland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9.5	0.4
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.6	8.4	0.9
Italy	4.1	0	0	0	0	0	0	11.5	1.1
Luxembourg	0	0	0	0	3.4	9.4	7.5	5.0	2.8
Netherlands	0	0	0	0	0	0	2.0	13.0	1.4
Norway	0	0	0	0	2.2	10.2	19.3	17.2	4.8
Portugal	-	-	-	0	0	0	2.6	3.5	0.8
Spain	-	-	-	6.0	2.9	5.6	0	2.6	3.1
Sweden	0	0	0	0	0	9.2	7.5	12.6	2.8
United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Mean</i>	0.4	2.3	0.8	2.6	1.4	4.4	5.6	10.6	3.0

Note: bold = peak

Bringing all these figures together, Table 9.4 reports the sum of the seat-share of the two types of anti-system parties for the seventeen West European party systems. In this case, the data show no clear pattern, but an ebb and flow trend with at least two peaks: the first in the mid-1940s and the second in the mid-2010s. As we know from the discussion above, the driving forces behind these two peaks are different: the former is produced by ideological anti-system forces, while the latter results from the emergence of functional anti-system parties. All in all, one observes a slight decline in anti-systemness starting in the 1980s, with a burst, perhaps temporary, ignited by the Great Recession in the 2010s. In any case, anti-system parties are not collector's items to conserve in antiques shops specialised in comparative politics, but are existing actors that can substantially affect the dynamics of inter-party competition.

Tab. 9.4. Anti-system parties (% seats) in seventeen West European countries

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Average
Austria	5.8	7.1	4.5	4.3	1.5	26.8	13.4	41.0	11.4
Belgium	9.8	0	0	0	0	5.8	11.5	5.0	3.5
Denmark	9.1	4.4	0	12.3	7.0	6.6	13.4	12.3	7.5
Finland	22.7	21.7	22.6	18.9	14.0	7.6	0.8	15.3	16.9
France	29.6	31.8	8.1	13.8	1.5	0.1	0	2.1	17.8

Germany	3.6	0	0	0	0	4.2	8.1	10.1	1.9
Greece	-	-	-	36.3	7.3	0	0	20.2	8.5
Iceland	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	9.5	0.4
Ireland	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.6	8.4	0.9
Italy	44.4	43.7	39.2	36.8	35.8	11.2	0	11.5	29.0
Luxembourg	9.8	6.6	9.8	4.3	3.4	9.4	7.5	5.0	7.3
Netherlands	9.0	5.2	4.9	4.5	0	0	2.0	13.0	4.3
Norway	3.7	0	0	0	2.2	10.2	19.3	17.2	5.0
Portugal	-	-	-	15.2	16.2	7.1	8.4	9.6	12.2
Spain	-	-	-	6.0	2.9	5.6	0	2.6	3.1
Sweden	0	0	0	5.2	5.6	9.2	7.5	12.6	4.6
United Kingdom	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Average</i>	14.9	13.6	7.4	10.2	7.9	6.7	6.0	12.5	9.6

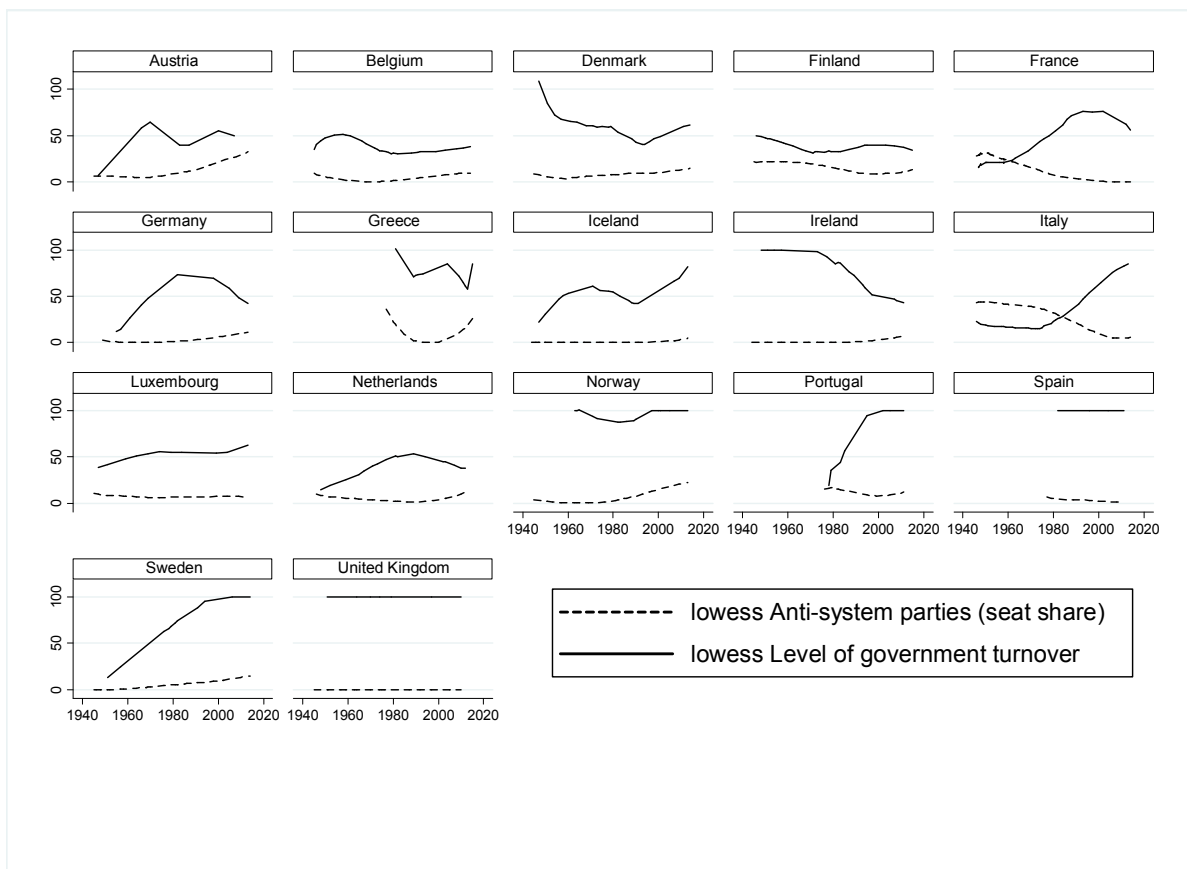
Note: bold = peak

9.4. An uneasy relation: anti-systemness and alternation

The level of anti-systemness is far from constant, either across countries or through time. What is more, different types of anti-system parties appear in some countries rather than in others in different time periods. Therefore, if we aim at explaining the amount of variation in government turnover due to the level of anti-systemness, we should take into account both spatial and temporal variation. Figure 9.2 offers a closer look at this association at the individual level. It is evident from the figures that the association between the strength of anti-system parties (either ideological or functional) and the level of government turnover exists in some countries while it disappears in other contexts. More precisely, we can see that the decline in anti-systemness experienced in France in the early 1960s and in Italy in the late 1990s prompts a significant increase in the level of rotation in office. In Greece, too, the association seems rather clear: the U-shape curve identifying the strength of the anti-system parties mirrors very closely the trend in the level of government turnover. It must also be emphasised that in Spain and the United Kingdom the two lines run over time in a perfectly parallel way – the absence of anti-systemness goes hand in hand with the maximum level of replacement at the governmental level.

Yet in other countries the association appears to be weaker or, at first glance, counterintuitive. For instance, in Sweden a rising level of government turnover is accompanied by a similar upward trend, albeit weak, in the strength of the (non-ideological) anti-system parties. Likewise, the increase in anti-systemness experienced in Norway during the 1980s seems to be unconnected with the stability in government turnover.

Fig. 9.2. Mean level of government turnover and strength of anti-system parties in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)



From this preliminary examination, it emerges that the relationship between rotation in power and the strength of the anti-system parties is far from clear or linear. First of all, different party systems may experience different patterns of association through time. As a consequence, any account of the variation in alternation must be able to combine cross-spatial and cross-temporal development. Secondly, the overall picture is made trickier by the existence of two distinct types of anti-systemness, whose effects on the pattern of alternation, as I have hypothesised above, may be different. For the present purposes, hence, it is useful to analyse this association taking into account the differences between ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties. However, before addressing this aspect explicitly, the impact of different levels of anti-systemness on the patterns of government turnover must be assessed.

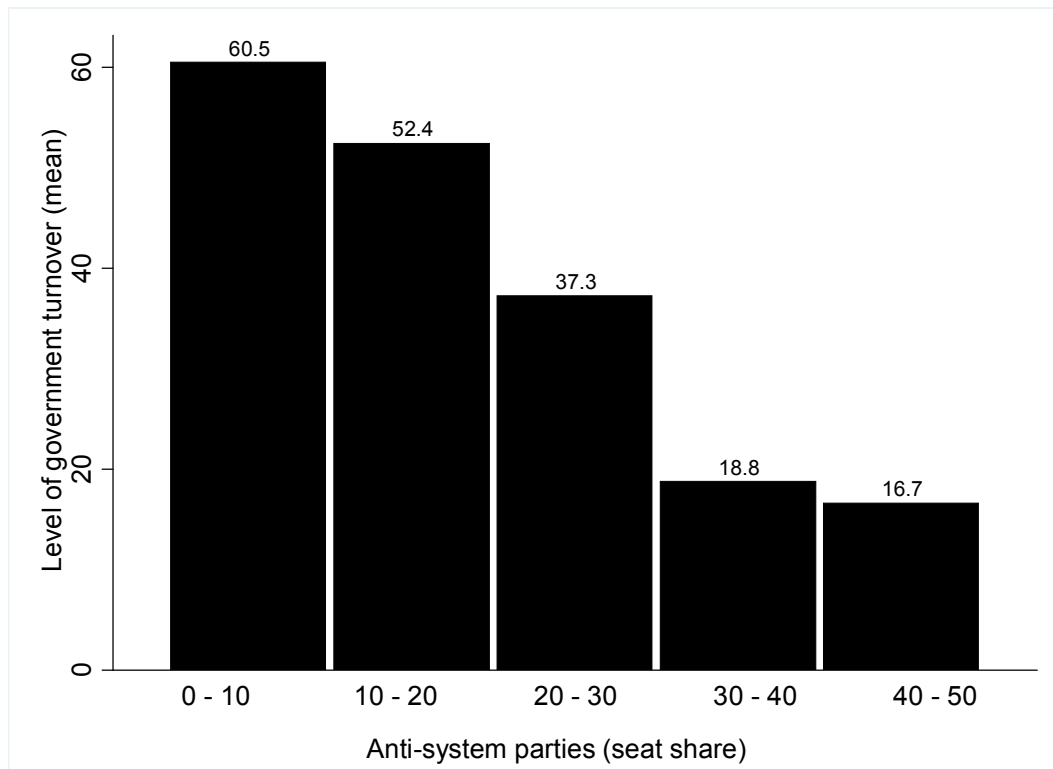
As Table 9.5 shows by breaking down the strength of anti-system parties into three categories (i.e., low, medium, high), the degree as well as the level of government turnover is affected by the existence of anti-system actors. More specifically, when the level of anti-systemness is low (absent or lower than 10 per cent in seats), the mean level of turnover in office is about 60 per cent, whereas when anti-system parties control more than 20 per cent of representatives in the assembly, the level of turnover is 40 percentage-points lower (15.9). In other words, when anti-system parties are absent or very weak, the respective party systems reveal a higher exploitative nature in terms of rotation in office.

Tab. 9.5. Anti-system parties seat-share and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Anti-system parties	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (0-10%)	33.4	61.3
Medium (10-20%)	36.8	53.4
High (higher than 20%)	15.9	25.1

As the foregoing implies, the association between the strength of anti-system parties and government turnover is negative: that is, the higher the level of anti-systemness, the lower the amount of change in government. This generalisation is visible in Figure 9.3, which reports the mean level of government turnover associated with five different levels of strength, or thresholds, of anti-system parties. These figures show, even more clearly than before, the inverse relationship between level of turnover and anti-systemness. More specifically, rotation in office decreases gradually from the first category, when the seat-share of the anti-system parties is lower than 10 per cent, to the last category.

Fig. 9.3. Level of government turnover by level of anti-systemness in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)



Thus far, I have focused on the relationship between anti-system parties and the pattern of government turnover. But what about alternation in power, which is a specific type of government change? Table 9.6 reports the mean values for the three dimensions of governmental alternation in association with three categories of anti-systemness. To begin with, it is noticeable, though not surprising in the light of our previous discussion, that when the seat-share of the anti-system parties is higher than 20 per cent both frequency and probability of alternation is almost nil. In the whole dataset, there exists only one case of alternation occurring in combination with a high level of anti-systemness. More precisely, this unusual combination of factors took place in Norway, after the 2005 general election, when Jens Stoltenberg formed a Red-Greens minimal winning coalition and replaced *en bloc* the bourgeois ruling coalition, in spite of the presence in the assembly of a non-ideological anti-system party, that is, the extreme right-wing Progress Party (with 22.5% of MPs).

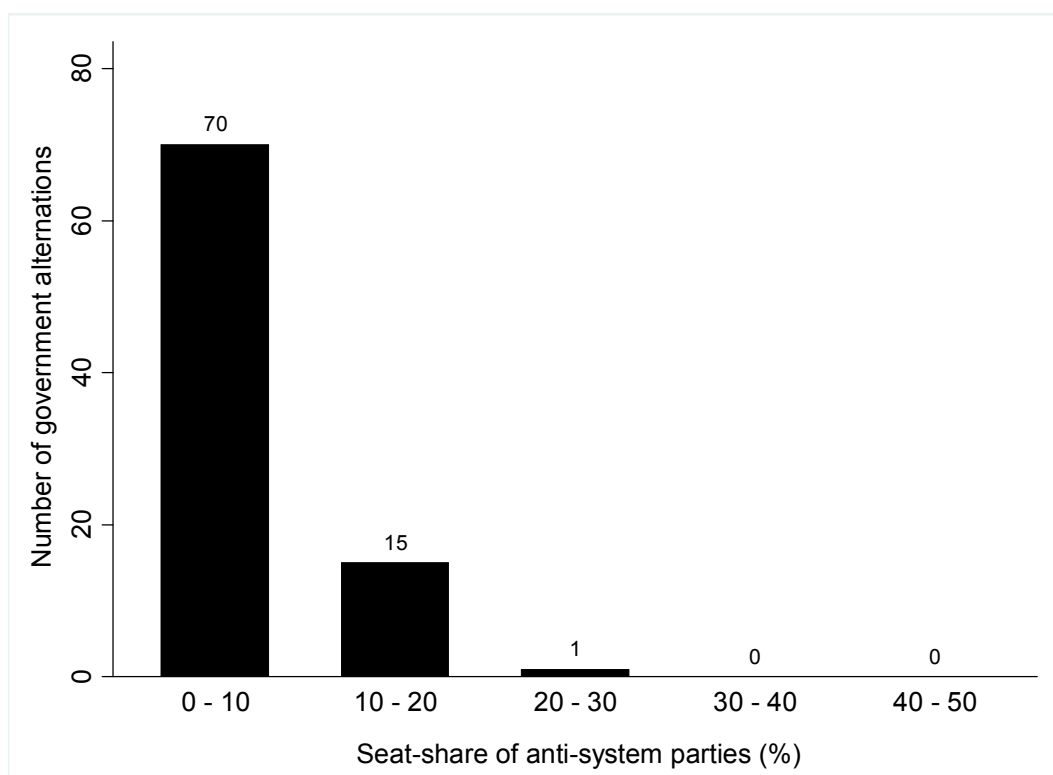
That said, it must nonetheless be stressed that all the remaining alternations that have occurred in Western Europe since the end of WWII have taken place in legislatures where the level of overall anti-systemness was below the 20 per cent threshold. Put slightly differently, it is possible to argue that, until today, no alternation has occurred when the anti-system front has obtained more than 23 per cent of seats.

Tab. 9.6. Anti-system parties seat-share and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (percentage values)

Anti-systemness (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-10%)	21.9	39.9	36.7
Medium (10-20%)	19.7	28.6	48.6
High (higher than 20%)	1.1	1.8	9.9

Therefore, the evidence collected so far confirms, at the aggregate level, the negative direction in the association between anti-systemness and alternation in power. When the parties that challenge the legitimacy of the system are absent or very weak, party systems are more prone to exploit all the possibilities of alternation provided by the voters. On the other hand, when the system contains parties that aim to change or overturn it, the room for manoeuvre for the governing-oriented parties is largely constrained. This aspect is evident in Figure 9.4, which reports the number of alternations associated with five categories of anti-systemness. In numbers, more than 80 per cent of all government alternations (70) took place when the seat-share of the anti-system parties was lower than 10 per cent, while 15 alternations are recorded when the strength of the parties challenging the system goes from 10 to 20 per cent of seats. With the already discussed Norwegian exception, no case of alternation exists where the level of anti-systemness passes the 20 per cent threshold.

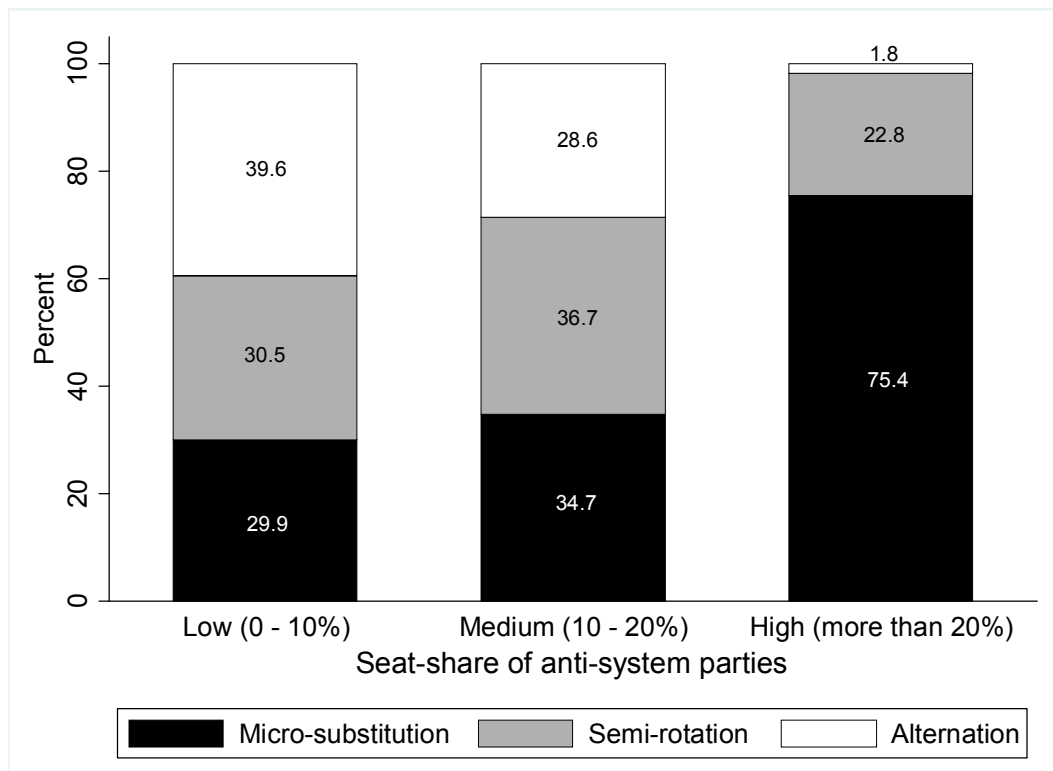
Fig. 9.4. Number of government alternations by level of anti-systemness in Western Europe, 1945-2015



Summing up our findings, we can argue that anti-system parties function as alternation-repellent, in the sense that, when anti-systemness reaches a certain threshold, pro-system actors are ‘obliged’ to coalesce in order to preserve the whole system of government. This pattern is evident in Figure 9.5, which reports the distribution of the three types of government change on the basis of the strength of the anti-system parties. Alternation is the typical government change (39.6 per cent) when anti-system parties control less than 10 per cent of seats, whereas is the most uncommon (1.8 per cent), virtually absent, in cases of anti-systemness.

With regards to semi-rotation, this is the most frequent type in the medium category, while micro-substitution owns the golden share (75.4 per cent) in all those situations where one or more anti-system parties got more than 20 per cent of seats.

Fig. 9.5. Type of government change by level of anti-systemness in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (% values)



Thus far, I have proceeded in a very abstract way, assuming that the two types of anti-system parties have the same effect on the process of government turnover or alternation. However, as I have argued in section 9.2, the effect of ideological anti-system parties may be more pervasive and substantial. In order to test this hypothesis, I carry out the analysis of the investigated association separately for the two types of anti-systemness. Table 9.7 shows the mean value for four dimensions of government turnover or alternation in relation to three categories of strength of the anti-system parties. The figures indicate, as expected, a negative association, almost perfectly in line with those related to the whole category of the anti-system party. It is worth noting, at this stage, that both frequency and probability of alternation is nil when the ideological anti-system parties pass the 20 per cent threshold. Moreover, it must be underlined that only two cases of alternation occurred when the seat-share of the anti-system parties goes from 10 to 20 per cent of seats. The first case took place in Finland, when a Social Democrats minority single-party government was replaced by a very short-lived inter-election minority coalition, led by Urho Kekkonen and made up of the Centre Party, the Swedish People’s Party and the National Progressive Party. The only alternation occurred in Finland, in part due to the fact that the Social Democrats temporarily ‘incurred the enmity of Moscow’ (Forster 1963: 344), and happened in a context where the ‘contingent nature of the Cold War’ (Arter 2009: 238) or, better, the ‘low degree of international autonomy vis-à-vis the USSR’ (Sartori 1976: 144) made less dangerous the existence of an ideological anti-system party such as the Communist-dominated Finnish People’s Democratic League (SKDL).

The second case of alternation occurred in Greece, with the replacement of a ‘mainstream cabinet’, formed by New Democracy (NY) and the Panhellenic Socialist Party (PASOK), by a minimal winning coalition government led by Alexis Tsipras (SYRIZA) in alliance with the Independent Greeks (ANEL). The wholesale government turnover took place after the 2015 general election, in a party system where two ideological

anti-system parties – Golden Dawn (GD) and the Greek Communist Party (KKE) – controlled exactly 10 per cent of the overall representatives.

Tab. 9.7. Ideological anti-system parties (% seats) and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Anti-systemness (%)	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-10%)	61.1	22.3	40.2	39.5
Medium (10-20%)	41.8	5.3	9.1	18.0
High (higher than 20%)	22.9	0	0	9.9

In general, the data confirms a negative association between anti-systemness and alternation, even taking into account the ideological orientation of the parties. More specifically, in considering the three types of government change (see Table 9.8), it is clear that alternation is absent in cases of ‘high’ anti-systemness, whereas it is the most frequent type of change when anti-system parties are weak or absent. More specifically, in those circumstances in which the anti-system camp controls less than 10 per cent of seats, on average four changes in government in ten occur through a complete reshuffle in the party composition of the cabinet.

Tab. 9.8. Type of government change by level of ideological anti-systemness in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Anti-systemness (%)	Micro-substitution	Semi-rotation	Alternation	Total
Low (0-10%)	29.2	30.6	40.2	100.0
Medium (10-20%)	45.5	45.5	9.0	100.0
High (more than 20%)	79.3	20.7	0	100.0

The picture utterly changes if we turn to the strength of non-ideological anti-system parties. In fact, as shown in Table 9.9, the level of government turnover is the lowest (51.8 per cent) when anti-systemness is weak and it gradually increases in association with the growth of seat-share of the anti-system parties. A similar, albeit less neat, pattern emerges if one observes the frequency of alternation. In other words, alternation is more common in the ‘medium’ category – that is, when anti-system parties get between 10 and 20 per cent of seats. In a similar vein, it is interesting to note that also the possibility of alternation associated with a low level of functional anti-systemness is lower than that for the medium category (52.9 per cent).

Tab. 9.9. Non-ideological anti-system parties (% seats) and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Anti-systemness (%)	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-10%)	51.8	17.3	29.3	31.8
Medium (10-20%)	57.8	23.5	37.5	52.9
High (higher than 20%)	53.5	8.3	33.3	14.3

In sum, the negative association between anti-system parties and turnover in power appears to be weaker for the non-ideological actors that challenge the system. Put differently, the higher porosity, or flexibility, of the functional anti-systemness forces creates situations in which alternation in power is not ruled out as a practical solution of government change. If, so to speak, strong ideological anti-system parties makes alternation virtually impossible, non-ideological anti-system parties makes it only less likely. Table 9.10 offers a closer look at these data, even though their interpretation may be misleading, given the limited number of cases. In fact, as I have pointed out, only two cases of government change occurred when the

level of anti-systemness overcome the 20 per cent threshold. As a result, in this context only one alternation accounts for one-third of the whole distribution in the last category. Nevertheless, it is striking that alternation is no longer the typical government change when the seat-share of the anti-system parties is lower than 10 per cent, whereas it becomes the most frequent type in those party systems in which the level of anti-systemness is between 10 and 20 per cent.

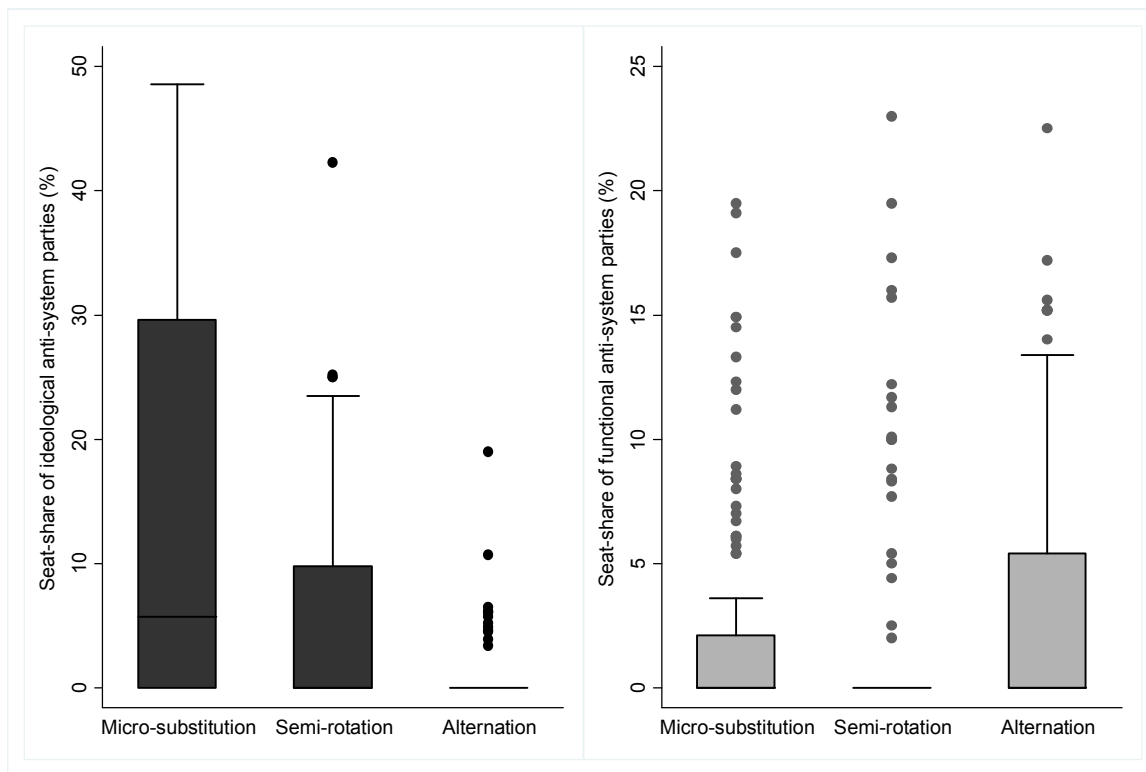
Tab. 9.10. Type of government change by level of ideological non-ideological anti-systemness in Western Europe, 1945-2014 (% values)

Anti-systemness (%)	Micro-substitution	Semi-rotation	Alternation	Total
Low (0-10%)	41.0	29.7	29.3	100.0
Medium (10-20%)	31.3	31.3	37.5	100.0
High (more than 20%)	33.3	33.3	33.3	100.0

In summary, the relationship between alternation and the strength of anti-system parties turns out to be an uneasy one. The association is straightforward when considering the ideological anti-systemness, while it progressively loses strength with the emergence of non-ideological actors that try to overturn the system. Because of their higher flexibility, which stretches the space of competition without breaking it, functional anti-system parties allow a larger room of manoeuvre for pro-system actors, creating the conditions for the occurrence of alternation in power.

This ambivalent pattern of association between anti-system parties and government turnover is evident in Figure 9.6, which reports the distribution of frequency for the three types of government change against the share of seats controlled by the anti-system actors. As the figures on the right-hand of the graph show, alternations in office are frequent especially in conjunction with a limited share of seats in the hands of *ideological* anti-system parties. By contrast, micro-substitutions are more frequent when the level of anti-systemness in the polity passes the 20 per cent threshold. If we now look at the figures included in the left-hand of the graph, it is visible that the seat-shares of the *functional* anti-system parties lose explanatory power in terms of patterns of government substitution. More specifically, the frequency distribution of the three types of government change does not reveal any specific pattern of association and the number of outliers are homogeneously distributed. What is more, a closer examination of the data suggests that alternation in power tends to be equally (if not more) frequent vis-à-vis micro-substitution and semi-rotation when the level of non-ideological anti-systemness exceeds the 15 per cent threshold.

Fig. 9.6. Distribution of types of government change in Western Europe (1945-2015), by seat-share of anti-system parties (%)



Note: box plots show distributions of the three types of government change on the seat-share of anti-system parties (ideological on the left; non-ideological on the right). The boxes span the interquartile range and the vertical bar inside each box indicates the median imputation.

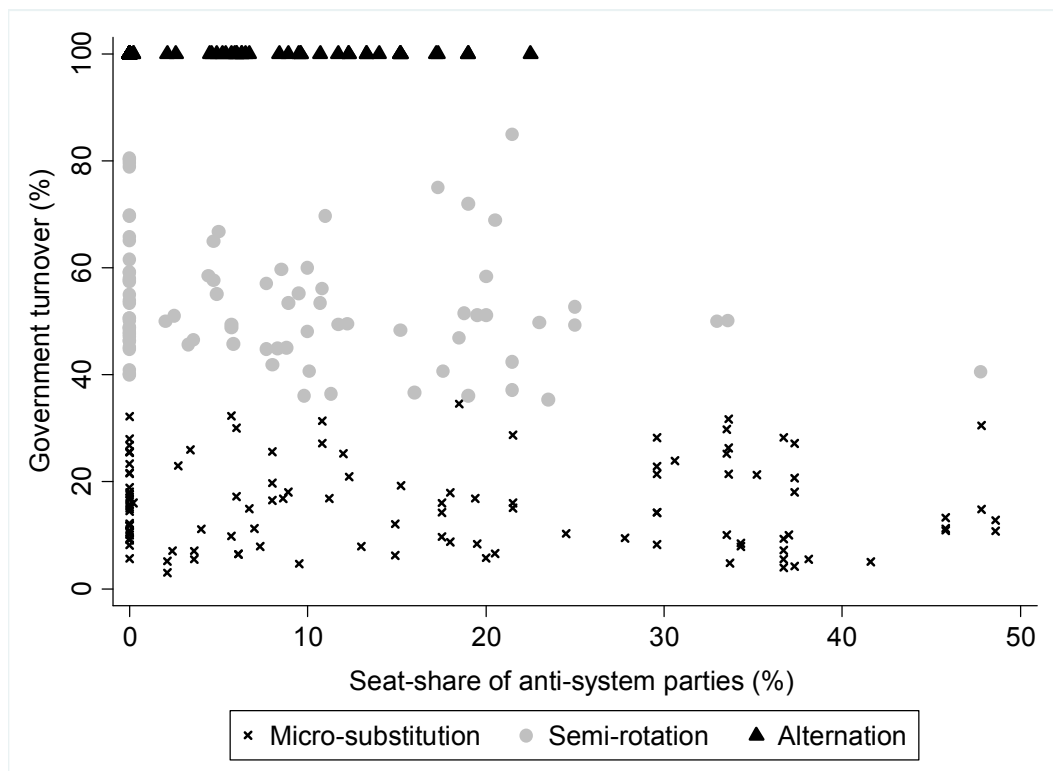
Hence, it is possible to conclude that only the existence of ideological anti-system parties plays a role in the pattern of alternation in government, whereas the impact of non-ideological anti-system actors seems to be limited or virtually inexistent. In this sense, alternation and polarisation are not always at odds but only when the latter is the product of those actors that do not accept any form of cooperation with the mainstream parties on the basis of strong ideological orientation. By contrast, when polarisation is generated by more flexible and pliable (non-ideological) forces, alternation is not fated to fail.

9.5. National trends and cross-country variation

Not all anti-system parties have the same impact on the mechanics of the system. In Sartori's (1976) analytical framework, the existence of *ideological* anti-systemness was an implicit assumption. In other words, all the parties whose main ambition was to change the system of government were lumped together in the same all-encompassing category. However, as the analysis carried out above implies, different types of anti-systemness have different effects on the pattern of rotation in office. Figure 9.7, which plots levels of government turnover against the seat-share of anti-system parties, shows that the relationship between change in government and strength of the anti-system parties is negative – the higher the level of turnover in government, the lower the share of seats controlled by anti-system actors. The overall correlation is 0.410 ($p < 0.1$), suggesting that the level of anti-systemness accounts for about 17 per cent of total variance in government turnover. The episodes of alternation are all located in the upper right-hand side of the graph, which means that wholesale turnovers in office tend to be associated with a limited number of seats in the hands of anti-system actors. The most evident deviant example is the case (discussed above) of the

alternation that occurred in Norway in 2005, in combination with a share of seats got by a non-ideological anti-system party higher than 20 per cent. Excluding this case, all the remaining episodes of change in government taking place when the level of anti-systemness exceeds the 20 per cent threshold occur through a form of partial turnover, either micro-substitution or semi-rotation.

Fig. 9.7. Mean level of government turnover and anti-system parties (seat-share, %) in Western Europe, 1945-2015

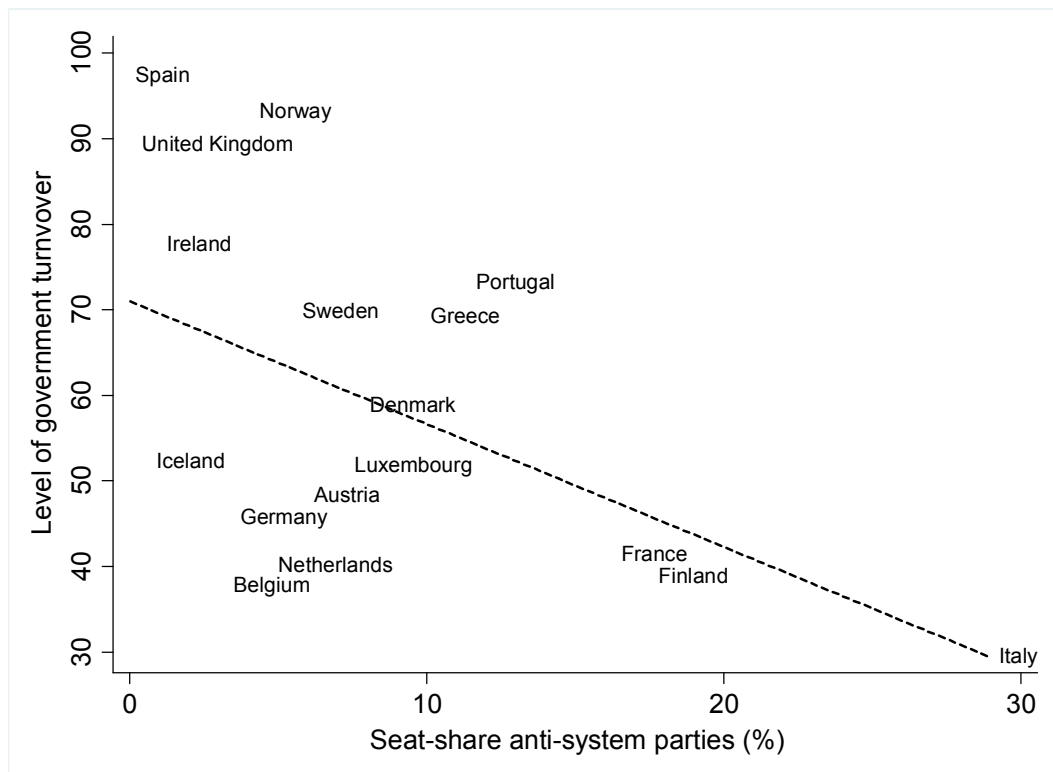


If we then analyse the same association at the country-level (see Figure 9.8), it is evident that the countries where the anti-system forces were (electorally speaking) strong show a remarkably lower level of government turnover. This is the case, for instance, of Finland, France and Italy: three countries with the strongest communist parties in Western Europe. What is more, French and Italian party systems entailed, in addition, a bipolar anti-system opposition to the system. In France, the Gaullists represented a case of non-ideological anti-system party that, among other domestic and international factors, contributed to the breakdown of the Fourth Republic. In Italy, instead, the second anti-system pole was controlled by an ideological actor, the neo-Fascist Italian Social Movement, which made the Italian system even more blocked at the centre.

That said, it is worth noting that the figures also reveal the existence of party systems, for instance in the Benelux countries, where, in spite of a low level of anti-systemness, the mean level of rotation in government is extremely limited. Recall, however, that here a specific tradition of power-sharing and elite-accommodation arrangements were set in place with the precise goal of avoiding the transformation of a segmented society into a polarised polity. In a way, the weakness of the anti-system parties and the limited turnover in office were both a cause and a consequence of the inclusive cooperation among the different political elites.

Finally, it is useful to point out the position of Spain and the United Kingdom, two cases of (faltering) two-partism in which the absence or extreme weakness of the anti-system parties were mirrored in the highest level of governmental turnover.

Fig. 9.8. Level of government turnover and anti-system parties (seat-share, %) in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

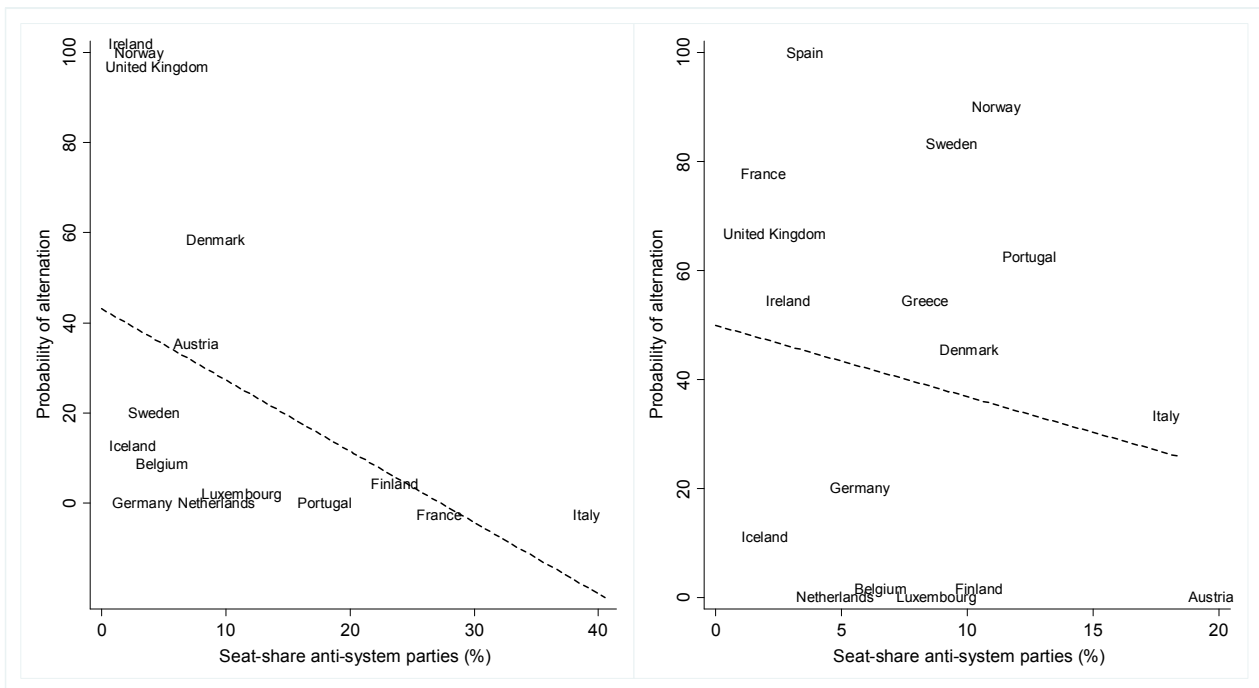


If at the aggregate level the relationship between turnover in power and anti-systemness is negative, when we split the dataset in two distinct time-periods – before and after the 1980s – the resulting picture is far less neat (see Figure 9.9). The 1980 cut-off point, though inevitably arbitrary, identifies *grosso modo* the phase in which, as shows in section 9.2, the non-ideological anti-system parties begin to increase throughout Western Europe and, more or less simultaneously, the level of ideological anti-systemness slopes downward. From this vantage point, we can assess whether or not the effect of the anti-system parties change in relation to their twofold nature.

As the figures reveal, the association between probability of alternation and strength of the anti-system parties is stronger in the first phase, that is, in the heydays of the ideological anti-system parties, than in the second, when the non-ideological anti-system parties prevail. Before the 1980s, the pattern of association is clear – the existence of strong anti-system parties in the polity is detrimental to the occurrence of alternation in power. These two variables were, to a large extent, mutually exclusive until the 1970s, but then became a pair of particularly strange bedfellows in the subsequent period. Of course, many factors explain this development, starting from the fact that all parties, including those fighting the current system of government, have witnessed a robust decline in size, both at election time and in the legislature. Bluntly put, anti-system parties are not as strong as they were in the past. However, in addition to this trend, the transformation in the nature of anti-systemness can be aptly considered as an intervening factor in the explanation of alternation in government.

To conclude on this point, we can argue that the decline in ideological anti-systemness observed in the last three decades has created a new structure of opportunities for the parties in the legislature. As a matter of fact, the slow disappearance of breaking, or no-coalition, points along the ideological space of interparty competition has led to a more ‘open’, innovative or promiscuous form of coalition-making that, as a consequence, paved the way to a pattern of alternation in power.

Fig. 9.9. Probability of alternation and seat-share of anti-system parties before and after the 1980s, (mean values, %)



To better assess the strength of the investigated association, Table 9.11 offers the correlation coefficients for each measures of government turnover and type of anti-system party. It is evident what we have found above, that is, a stronger correlation between alternation in power and ideological anti-systemness. It is worth underlining that the effect of the ideological anti-system parties is always negative and, more importantly, always stronger than that of the functional anti-system party, both before and after the 1980s. More specifically, the correlation coefficient for the probability of alternation is -0.350 ($p < .01$) in the case of ideological anti-system parties, while it becomes positive (0.074), though not statistically significant, for the non-ideological type of anti-systemness. Moreover, this difference is even stronger if we analyse the pattern of association before the 1980s, when the correlation coefficient between likelihood of alternation and ideological anti-system parties arrives at -0.374 ($p < .01$).

In sum, the impact of anti-system actors on the process of government change is negative and substantial. Both the level of government turnover and the three dimensions of government alternation (frequency, probability and possibility) appear to be negatively associated with the presence of anti-system parties and their relative size. The highest correlation coefficient is recorded for the level of government turnover, that is, -0.410 ($p < 0.1$), which accounts for some 17 per cent of the overall variance.

Tab. 9.11. Correlation between indicators of anti-systemness and four dimensions of government turnover, pre- and post-1980

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Ideological anti-system	-0.436*** (143)	-0.220*** (249)	-0.374*** (143)	-0.196*** (249)
Non-ideological anti-sys	-0.126 (143)	-0.057 (249)	-0.043 (143)	-0.078 (249)
Anti-system parties (%)	-0.457*** (143)	-0.225*** (249)	-0.376*** (143)	-0.210*** (249)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Ideological anti-system	-0.358*** (136)	-0.159** (231)	-0.241*** (136)	-0.209*** (231)
Non-ideological anti-sys	0.065 (136)	-0.010 (231)	0.045 (136)	0.105 (231)
Anti-system parties (%)	-0.285*** (136)	-0.140** (231)	-0.192** (136)	-0.094 (231)
<i>Overall</i>				
Ideological anti-system	-0.436*** (279)	-0.215*** (480)	-0.350*** (279)	-0.249*** (480)
Non-ideological anti-sys	0.035 (279)	0.020 (480)	0.074 (279)	0.074 (480)
Anti-system parties (%)	-0.410*** (279)	-0.196*** (480)	-0.320*** (279)	-0.183*** (480)

Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively.

Reverting to the cross-country source of variation, Table 9.12 provides a statistical analysis of the association between anti-systemness and alternation in the individual countries. The figures reveal that the negative relationship noted across the universe of cases as a whole is also reflected in most of, though not all, the seventeen countries, especially when we consider the probability of alternation. The direction of the association is confirmed, for instance, in France, Italy and Portugal, where the correlation coefficient is particularly high and statistically significant. Conversely, the association is much weaker, or in some cases even positive, in those party systems characterised, on average, by a low level of, often non-ideological, anti-systemness. For instance, in Germany, Iceland, Norway and Sweden both the level of government turnover and probability of alternation show a positive correlation with the strength of the anti-system parties. As we know, this somewhat unexpected trend may be explained, on the one hand, by the weaker level of anti-systemness recorded in these countries and, on the other, by the non-ideological nature of the parties regarded as unacceptable by the other members of the legislature.

Tab. 9.12. Correlation between seat-share of anti-system parties and the four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.064 (7)	-0.202 (26)	-0.323 (7)	0.003 (26)
Belgium	-0.051 (28)	-0.173 (37)	-0.189 (28)	-0.210 (37)
Denmark	0.099 (22)	0.109 (36)	0.081 (22)	0.205 (36)
Finland	-0.061 (33)	0.050 (42)	0.038 (33)	0.336 (42)
France	-0.513*** (26)	-0.469*** (49)	-0.655*** (26)	-0.551*** (49)
Germany	0.217 (10)	0.202 (24)	0.123 (10)	0.656*** (24)
Greece	-0.483 (11)	-0.280 (17)	-0.453 (11)	-0.356 (17)
Iceland	0.458* (17)	0.693*** (26)	0.685*** (17)	0.693*** (26)
Ireland	-0.240 (17)	-0.082 (25)	-0.153 (17)	-0.016 (25)
Italy	-0.781*** (35)	-0.642*** (47)	-0.754*** (35)	-0.609*** (47)
Luxembourg	-0.471 (11)	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	-0.312 (17)	- ^a	- ^a	-0.089 (23)
Norway	0.243 (15)	0.370* (30)	0.243 (15)	0.191 (30)
Portugal	-0.857*** (8)	-0.546** (16)	-0.931*** (8)	-0.109 (16)
Spain	- ^a	-0.204 (12)	- ^a	0.272 (12)

Sweden	0.707** (11)	0.445** (29)	0.617** (11)	0.523*** (29)
United Kingdom	-. ^a	-. ^a	-. ^a	-. ^a

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

The conclusion is rather simple – anti-systemness matters, and variance in the strength of the anti-system parties contributes substantially to the explanation in the variance in government turnover and alternation. However, in addition to this, it is also the intrinsic nature of anti-systemness, either ideological or functional, that accounts for the occurrence of alternation in power. Strong ideological anti-system parties are, in effect, the worst enemy of alternation. Nevertheless, since both large parties and ideological anti-systemness are in decline, government alternation has found, and perhaps might find in the future, new space to flourish.

Chapter 10

Electoral availability and incumbent vulnerability

10.1. Introduction

It almost goes without saying that some degree of voters' mobility along the space of competition is needed to observe some kind of turnover at the governmental level. In Bartolini's (1999; 2000a) terms, the voters' availability to change their minds and votes is a precondition for the vulnerability of the incumbents, that is, the possibility that the government is – wholesale or partially – ousted from office. More precisely, 'the necessary condition of incumbent's vulnerability is that voters are willing to punish and reward; that is, they are available to modify their electoral choice. If they are not, incumbents are safe and vulnerability is unthinkable' (Bartolini 1999: 454).

To sum up, the amount of elasticity on the demand side has, or may have, some implications for the pattern of rotation at the governmental level. Of course, if we put it this way, we are implicitly assuming a direct link, more or less stringent, between the electoral arena and the parliament or government. However, this assumption, which sounds plausible at the theoretical level, is awaiting judgement and analysis at the empirical level. Put differently, the generalisation whereby the higher the voters' availability, the higher the incumbents' vulnerability must be proved at the empirical level. In a way, we are moving here to the crossroads between what Aristotle called *actuality* and *potentiality*, or possibility, that is, between what already exists (actuality) and what may come into being (potentiality). The association between voter's availability and incumbent's vulnerability has been, thus far, taken for granted as a possibility. Yet, now the time has come to prove that association on the empirical ground, to wit in the realm of actuality. This is my task for the present chapter.

10.2. The Voter is fickle

As argued by Strøm and his colleagues (2008: 426), in the last decades 'voters have become increasingly restive, fickle, and punitive'. If in the past, that is, in the heydays of mass politics, scholars disputed the existence of a 'bias towards stability' (Bartolini and Mair 1990: 68-95), in particular in Western Europe, nowadays one can find a broad *consensus scholarum* about the existence of a very volatile political landscape. The *terminus a quo* of this phenomenon sometimes changes from scholar to scholar or, still worse, from research technique to research technique. Some of them trace the starting point of this process to the mid-1970s, when party systems revealed the first signs of the de-freezing of political cleavages, whereas other scholars prefer to emphasise the culmination or, better, the simultaneous peak in most countries of the electoral instability during the last decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in spite of these methodological disputes, the point worth stressing is that the cleavage structure that organised, and regimented, interparty competition until the late 1970s has gradually come to end or, less emphatically, has lost its reach on the demand side of the party system. This process of electoral destructuring, or deinstitutionalisation, had its first manifestation in two Nordic countries, more precisely in Finland (1971) and, to a larger extent, in Denmark, with the 1973 electoral earthquake. Those electoral shocks, initially treated as the product of short-term and absolutely idiosyncratic factors, assume a completely different light when observed in a longitudinal or historical perspective. Indeed, more aptly they represent the initial – and unforeseeable at that time – phase of the subsequent process of electoral instability experienced by advanced Western democracies.

This is, so to speak, where the whole story begins. Yet, in order to grasp effectively the emergence and development of this phenomenon, one requires the appropriate conceptual and methodological tools for this endeavour. In doing so, we need, first of all, to distinguish between *individual* and *aggregate* level of electoral change. The former refers to the electoral behaviour of the single voter, whereas the latter implies, whether implicitly or not, some form of accumulation of the individual voting shifts. Furthermore, at the individual level we can identify – following the systematisation suggested by Butler and Stokes (1971; see also Valen 1981, Ersson and Lane 1998) – three different types, or routes, of electoral mobility. The first, called ‘party switching’ – or, as I suggest, ‘voter switching’ – stands for those voting in two consecutive elections who change their party choice from one election to another. The second – commonly known as ‘gross volatility’ – refers to the behaviour of those voters who change between voting and non-voting. Third, the so-called ‘overall volatility’ concerns ‘the total electorate, thus including those entering or leaving the electorate, which is also an indicator of change’ (Ersson and Lane 1998: 22).

With regard to the aggregate level, we can identify two main approaches. The first approach measures electoral change at the aggregate level as a system property; that is, without any reference to, or assumption on, the individual voting shifts. This is, for instance, the pioneering approach of Adam Przeworski (1975) in his study on the relationship between electoral mobilisation and the level of institutionalisation of the system. The second approach, which is also the most common in the literature, is usually known as ‘total volatility’ (Pedersen 1979, Bartolini and Mair 1990) or ‘net volatility’ (Ersson and Lane 1998), and implies the possibility of inferring the behaviour of aggregates from that of individuals. Needless to say, this inference is replete with slippery methodological issues but, as shown by Bartolini and Mair (1990: 34-40), the two levels appear to be empirically and statistically correlated.

Of course, different concepts of electoral mobility, either at the electoral or at the aggregate level, imply different measuring techniques. Electoral change at the individual level can be assessed with survey panel data covering at least a pair of elections. As one can easily imagine, such types of data are very difficult to collect, especially if we are interested – as I am here – in the study of electoral volatility in a long longitudinal perspective. By contrast, measures of volatility at the aggregate level can be obtained for longer periods of time and for many countries. In light of this, in this chapter I shall rely on ‘the chief indicator on net volatility’ (Ersson and Lane 1998: 27), which is the index devised by the Danish political scientist Mogens Pedersen (1979), calculated as follows:

$$\text{Total volatility} = \sum_{i=1}^n \left| \left(\frac{P_{it} - P_{i(t+1)}}{2} \right) \right|$$

where n is the number of parties and p_i represents the percentage of votes received by that party in time periods t and $t + 1$. The sum of the individual party shifts is normally divided by 2 on the assumption that accumulated net gains are equal to accumulated net losses. Accordingly, the theoretical range of the index goes from 0 (no volatility) to 100 (maximum volatility). In sum, this is our crude measure of voters’ availability, namely their predisposition to change *party* from one election to another. However, electoral volatility can also be measured at the level of blocks of parties. More specifically, this is what Bartolini and Mair (1990: 28-33) refer to as ‘block volatility’, which represents the net change in the aggregate vote for the parties that, sharing a common property, come from the same block. In numbers, the formula for computing block volatility is the following:

$$\text{Block volatility} = \frac{|P_iV + P_jV \dots + P_kV| + |P_eV + P_nV \dots + P_mV|}{2}$$

where PV are the individual volatilities of parties $l, j, k, e, n,$ and m , and where the first three parties are considered as a block. It is worth noticing that block volatility is, by definition, a component of total volatility and represents the portion of net electoral interchange which occurred between a specific set of parties that has been treated as a block. As a consequence, the residual volatility (total volatility *minus* block volatility) indicate the amount of electoral mobility taking place within each block of parties.

It is obvious that such a measure of block volatility relies on a definition of the block itself or, better, a description of its membership. Put differently, who is in or who is out the block depends on the arbitrary aggregation of parties adopted by the researcher. For instance, Bartolini and Mair (1990, see also Bartolini 2000b) used the class cleavage as the main dividing line between political parties, but other configurations of parties can be suggested. For the purposes of this research, I will make reference to two different types of party aggregation (block). The first – *incumbency volatility* – is measured by treating the governing party or parties as a single block and the opposition parties as a separate block. In doing so, we obtain a measure of the trading of votes along the government-opposition dimension. Looking at the interaction between voters' availability and alternation in power, this dimension of competition is crucial in that it reveals how elastic, or inelastic, the demand-side of the 'electoral market' really is. More specifically, it identifies the share of voters who are willing to cross the dividing line between government and opposition.

As we have argued, government turnover implies, to a certain degree, some kind of electoral mobility. However, if one is concerned with the relationship between incumbent's vulnerability and volatility, the incumbency dimension is 'unquestionably crucial' because what matters in these circumstances is 'more the "decisive location" of the available electorate than its sheer quantity (although one can say that the larger the quantity is, the greater the likelihood that a sufficient share of it will be located so as to contribute to vulnerability)' (Bartolini 2000a: 55). Therefore, what we have here is, *in nuce*, the elaboration of a twofold hypothetical argument. On the one hand, we can assume that the higher the share of available voters, the higher the level of government turnover (and the probability of alternation). On the other hand, and more specifically, we can hypothesise that the higher the level of available voters along the incumbency dimension, the higher the turnover at the governmental level. These are two testable arguments that I shall try to address in the following section.

The second type of volatility – *anti-system volatility* – stands for those parties that, as I have shown in Chapter 9, share the common feature of being against, or challenging, the current system of government. In other words, the anti-system divide lumps together and considers as a single block all those parties that, either ideological or non-ideological, question and undermine the legitimacy of the system. In general, it is possible to argue that when the hold of the anti-system cleavage is strong, the likelihood of alternation in power substantially decreases. In fact, the higher the level of encapsulation of voters within an anti-system block, the lower the probability to observe a wholesale rotation in power. This is tantamount to saying, therefore, that alternation requires, or at least favours, a polity where a considerable degree of legitimacy of the rules of the game allows a form of inter-party competition based on the existence of temporary winners (who take all), and temporary losers (who lose all). In these circumstances, the *collusion* of the political elites on the fundamentals of the party system sets the stage for a more intense form of political competition or, better yet, for a greater incumbent's vulnerability.

The distinction between *total* and *block* volatility, or volatilities in our case, admits the introduction of a second measure associated with the concept of electoral change. Indeed, the relationship between total and block volatility may be interpreted as an indicator of the *strength* of a specific cleavage. To illustrate, let us take the case of incumbency volatility. If the proportion of this type of volatility over the overall amount of electoral mobility is low – let us say, in percentage terms, below 20 per cent – it means that the trading of votes along the dividing line between government and opposition is only a small portion of the total electoral change in the system. In turn, it implies that the incumbency cleavage is not *salient* for the voters because their electoral behaviour follows other vectors or trajectories. Whereas, if the proportion of incumbency volatility over the total electoral change is high, it indicates that most volatility has occurred along the divide that separates the governing parties from the opposition parties. Therefore, the *salience* of that divide – calculated as the proportion of block volatility over total volatility, and multiplied for 100 – indicates the relative importance in the system of the specific political divide we are investigating. In my case, I will have two types of cleavage (or divide) salience, that is, one for each divide singled out above: incumbency salience and anti-system salience.

Having set the stage for the empirical part of the chapter, it is time now to turn our attention to the specific trend, both cross country and through time, in electoral volatility. This is what I shall try to do in the next section, leaving the analysis of the association between voters' availability and the patterns of government turnover for the subsequent section.

10.3. How much electoral mobility is out there?

As note by Knutsen (2013: 200), 'electoral politics has become dealigned related to the impact of social structure and more volatile from one election to the next'. This is a conclusion that the vast majority of scholars in the field of electoral change would endorse without issue. Problems arise, as we have seen, on the interpretation of this process, especially with regard to its causes and date of origin. Some scholars emphasise the *social* transformation experienced by advanced democratic regimes, in particular after, or in conjunction with, the so-called post-industrial revolution, which has led to the creation of new bases of social cleavages. Other scholars, not necessarily in contrast to the first tradition of research, have put an emphasis on the transformation of the bureaucratic mass-based political parties into new ideology-insensitive catch-all people's parties (Kirchheimer 1966), or professional-electoral parties (Panebianco 1988), namely a model of party that undoes the old emphasis on strong organisational links 'in favour of recruiting voters among the population at large' (Kirchheimer 1966: 191).

These two *social* and *political* explanations reinforce each other and are not mutually exclusive. Eventually, only the combination of the two factors can effectively account for the electoral change that has occurred in the last three or four decades. At the aggregate level, the figures included in Table 10.1 reveal that the total volatility has steadily increased over time, especially after the 1980s. If we discard the first period, in the mid-1940s, when many political regimes underwent a laborious process of democratic transition and consolidation, electoral volatility was, on average, circa 8 per cent in the 1950s, that is, more than five percentage points lower than the average of the period that goes from the 1980s to nowadays. The average for the whole postwar period is 10.2 per cent, but it is worth noting that all decades after the 1980s shows a greater value. In sum, in that period something broke and interrupted that pattern of relative electoral stability that existed in the first thirty years after the Second World War.

If we now turn our attention to the two types of electoral volatility, we can observe, first, that incumbency volatility shows a steady and constant upward trend over time, from 3 per cent in the mid-1940s to the peak of 10.3 in the last years of the twenty-first century. The volatility across the incumbency divide hits its peak in the last period, which is in conjunction with the advent of the Great Recession. In fact, the political instability related to the economic crisis brought about a higher proportion of voters willing to withdraw their support for the incumbent government. By the way, it is exactly in light of this phenomenon that, during the last years, many countries have experienced blame-avoiding mode of governance – such as 'technocratic governments' (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014) or Grand Coalitions – in order to cope with the electoral instability in the system and the punitive orientation of the voters.

With regard to anti-system volatility, the figures show a revealing twofold trend: a decline until the 1970s and then a sharp rise after the 1980s. This peculiar development may be related, as I have pointed out in Chapter 9, to the increasing occurrence of a new, non-ideological type of anti-system party. More precisely, given the nature of their *message*, ideological anti-system parties were more capable of encapsulating and controlling their voters. Crossing the line between ideological anti-system parties and pro-system actors was considered as a sort of political betrayal, an ineradicable stigma. It is no coincidence that the lowest levels of anti-system volatility are recorded in the 1960s and the 1970s, that is, when the level of ideological fever in the system peaks. On the contrary, given the higher porosity of the non-ideological anti-system parties, volatility along the anti-system cleavage increases in the last thirty years, when these parties become relevant actors in the system. Moreover, it is striking that anti-system volatility peaks in the mid-2010s, in combination with the economic crisis. Since in many circumstances the dividing lines between left and right,

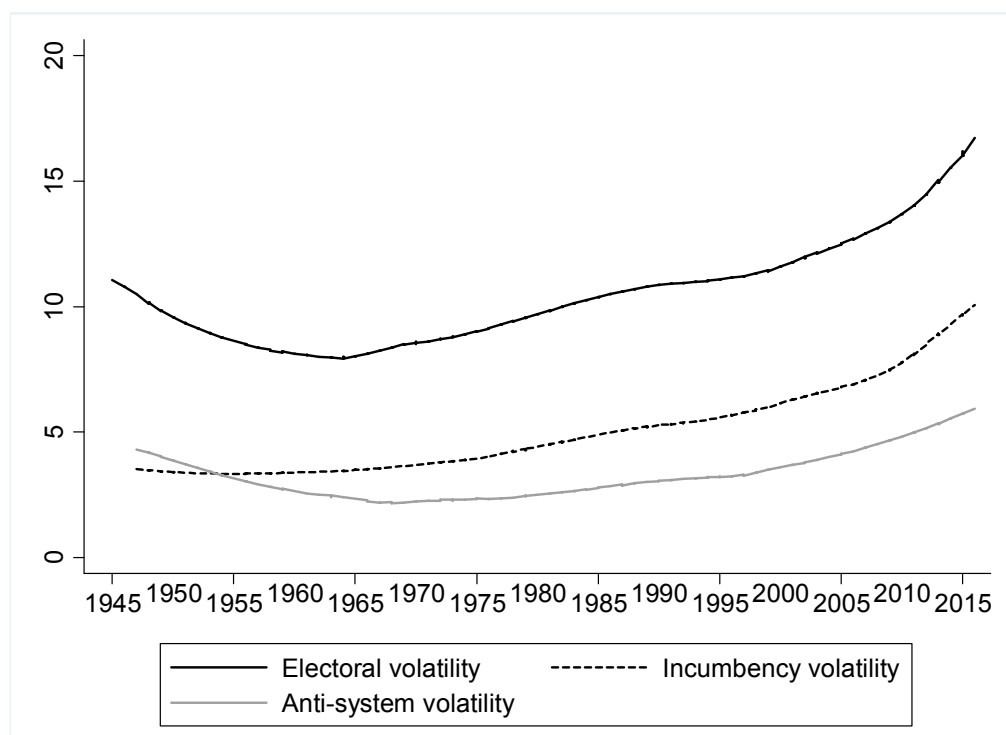
or incumbent and opposition, were blurred, many disgruntled voters found, more or less temporary, refuge among the anti-system actors.

Tab. 10.1. Electoral volatilities in Western Europe by decades (mean values, %)

	Electoral volatility	Incumbency volatility	Anti-system volatility
1940s	11.2	3.0	3.8
1950s	7.9	3.2	3.0
1960s	7.3	3.4	1.6
1970s	8.8	4.0	1.5
1980s	10.3	4.4	3.4
1990s	11.7	6.4	3.1
2000s	10.8	5.5	3.4
2010s	17.2	10.3	6.8
Mean (1945-2015)	10.2	4.9	3.3

To sum up, during the last thirty years or so West European party systems underwent a sizeable process of electoral instability. To put it another way, voters are much more *available* now than sixty or fifty years ago. Adopting the analogy with the economic market, the elasticity of the demand has grown substantially. Within this picture, as Figure 10.1 reveals, the role of the incumbency cleavage must be stressed. If what matters in the relationship between alternation and voter's availability is the decisive location of the switching voters, then one can argue that the rising incumbency volatility has made more uncertain and vulnerable the life-cycle of the incumbent governments. And this, in turn, may have led to a higher frequency of alternation in power.

Fig. 10.1. Trends in electoral volatilities in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)¹



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

The amount of electoral change tells us how many voters change their parties from one election to another, and where or along which cleavage this change occurs. Yet, in order to assess the strength or the

¹ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

importance over time of each cleavage, we should resort to the measure of cleavage or divide salience. Table 10.2 breaks down the salience of the two types of electoral volatility by decade. As to incumbency volatility, the figures reveal that its salience has constantly increased over time, reaching its peak in the 2010s, that is, 57.9 per cent. In short, almost 60 per cent of the electoral mobility in the seventeen European countries occurred along the line that divides the government from the opposition. From this standpoint, the incumbent government has gradually become more vulnerable because more voters tend to base their party choice in the light of the activities of the government, either prospectively or retrospectively.

In terms of anti-system block salience, the figures show a much more erratic trend: it declines until the 1970s, it goes up in the 1980s and then, with the exception of the last decade before the end of the twentieth century, it increases to 39.7 in the mid-2010s. As well as the randomness of this development, a point should be underlined, namely the rising salience of the anti-system block during the years of the Great Recession. In this period, the divide between the defenders and the foes of the systems has become one, although not the most important, dimension of competition between political parties. More voters tended to cross that divide, which, in the meanwhile, has acquired a noticeable relevance in the eyes of the citizens and, accordingly, of the parties.

Tab. 10.2. Block cleavages salience in Western Europe, by decade (mean values, %)

	Incumbency volatility salience	Anti-system volatility salience
1940s	31.2	33.7
1950s	42.6	27.4
1960s	45.1	20.8
1970s	46.5	20.9
1980s	41.7	31.5
1990s	51.5	28.1
2000s	50.3	30.8
2010s	57.9	39.7
<i>Mean (1945-2015)</i>	<i>46.6</i>	<i>28.8</i>

Thus far, we have observed the development of electoral change only in a temporal perspective, assuming a uniform spatial distribution among West European party systems. However, in order to have a better grasp on these aspects, it is useful to break down the figures at the individual country level. Table 10.3 reports the level of electoral volatility in seventeen European countries, from the end of WWII up to now. As the data reveal, the majority of countries experienced their most volatile elections in the last period in our dataset, that is, in the mid-2010s. What is more, it is worth noting that the least volatile period occurred in the twenty years that go from 1950 to 1969. No country in this time-span recorded their lowest value in electoral volatility. That said, some countries show a more erratic trend, such as Denmark and, especially, Luxembourg (where volatility actually decreases after the 1980s) but, on the whole the downward trend observed at the aggregate temporal level finds a high degree of confirmation also at the country level. If we, in fact, exclude the period of democratic transition or consolidation, only Norway reaches its peak in electoral mobility before the 1980s.

Tab. 10.3. Total volatility in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	<i>Mean</i>
Austria	12.0	4.4	2.9	2.3	6.3	9.4	13.4	13.5	<i>7.4</i>
Belgium	10.1	7.6	10.2	5.4	9.7	11.8	14.2	20.8	<i>10.5</i>
Denmark	16.7	5.5	8.7	15.5	9.0	11.7	9.9	11.6	<i>10.8</i>
Finland	3.8	4.4	7.0	5.7	11.3	9.2	5.5	14.3	<i>7.3</i>
France	6.0	22.3	11.5	8.8	13.7	13.6	14.8	19.6	<i>14.3</i>
Germany	-	15.2	8.4	5.0	6.1	7.8	9.0	15.4	<i>8.8</i>
Greece	-	-	-	21.0	9.8	7.6	6.6	15.1	<i>9.9</i>

Iceland	-	5.5	3.2	11.6	15.6	14.2	11.9	35.0	11.8
Ireland	15.2	10.3	7.0	5.7	7.9	10.6	7.8	29.6	9.7
Italy	23.0	5.2	8.2	6.6	8.0	21.6	12.8	39.5	13.9
Luxembourg	15.0	14.1	9.8	11.5	13.0	8.3	7.3	8.8	11.0
Netherlands	5.6	5.2	7.9	12.1	9.7	18.0	16.2	18.9	11.4
Norway	7.0	3.4	5.3	15.3	9.4	15.1	12.8	14.0	10.1
Portugal	-	-	-	10.0	13.4	9.6	10.5	13.0	11.5
Spain	-	-	-	7.5	19.0	8.3	8.1	15.5	12.1
Sweden	9.8	4.8	4.0	6.3	7.9	13.9	16.4	7.9	8.4
United Kingdom	-	4.3	5.3	8.3	3.3	8.5	5.5	6.3	6.0
<i>Mean</i>	11.2	7.9	7.3	8.8	10.3	11.7	10.8	17.2	10.2

Note: bold = peak.

If we now analyse the development in incumbency volatility at the country level, the overall picture is even clearer. With only two exceptions (Denmark and Luxemburg), incumbency volatility peaks in all countries after the 1980s, that is, in the last twenty-five years (see Table 10.4). Taking into account only four decades after the end of the Second World War (1950-1999), Peter Mair (2011: 83) concluded his research in saying that ‘the incumbency dimension of competition became more pronounced at the end of the century, with the trading of votes across the government-opposition divide reaching their highest levels at the end of the twentieth century’. Now, after almost twenty years we can conclude that the trend identified by Mair has continued, and perhaps accelerated, in the subsequent decades. As these figures show, in fact, incumbency volatility became even more pronounced *after the end* of the century. This implies that many voters adapt their party choice on the basis of the decisions taken, or not taken, by the governing parties.

Tab. 10.4. Incumbency volatility by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Mean
Austria	5.4	2.1	0.5	1.6	1.2	8.5	7.3	4.5	4.0
Belgium	1.8	3.1	7.8	2.5	5.1	6.8	4.9	9.0	5.1
Denmark	4.2	1.0	2.7	7.7	3.2	2.7	3.1	5.0	3.7
Finland	1.3	1.6	2.8	7.7	3.2	6.0	2.5	10.7	3.7
France	-	7.7	4.1	4.1	7.2	12.1	9.8	10.8	7.5
Germany	-	2.1	4.8	4.7	4.6	4.2	6.0	2.1	4.4
Greece	-	-	-	-	3.8	5.0	4.4	9.6	5.1
Iceland	-	2.5	1.0	7.5	5.6	4.4	6.6	27.7	5.9
Ireland	-	5.6	2.4	3.6	4.5	4.9	1.1	29.5	5.3
Italy	2.8	2.3	0.8	1.7	3.1	15.3	3.8	18.7	6.2
Luxembourg	2.4	8.8	6.7	4.0	5.9	3.3	0.2	5.6	5.0
Netherlands	2.5	3.2	3.1	6.6	2.6	12.2	12.5	8.2	6.3
Norway	4.7	1.3	2.0	5.7	4.9	3.2	5.0	7.2	4.0
Portugal	-	-	-	-	9.2	5.7	9.3	8.5	8.3
Spain	-	-	-	0.4	5.4	1.0	15.0	9.2	4.9
Sweden	1.5	2.6	1.6	2.3	2.1	6.6	4.1	5.6	3.3
United Kingdom	-	1.4	5.0	3.5	0.8	5.9	4.0	6.2	3.3
<i>Mean</i>	3.0	3.2	3.4	4.0	4.4	6.4	5.5	10.3	4.9

Note: bold = peak.

However, as I have pointed out above, the growth in incumbency volatility may not represent any specific trend. It only means that there is an exchange of votes along the government-opposition divide, but this does not imply *per se* that the incumbency dimension has become, notwithstanding their rising volatility, more salient over time in all West European countries. We have seen that this is the case at the aggregate temporal level, but if we analyse the cross-country variation in the incumbency salience, we obtain a more

variegated and less straightforward picture. Although the salience of the incumbency dimension peaks in 12 of 17 individual democracies in the last twenty-five years, there are countries where this dimension reaches its highest levels in the mid-1940s (Norway), 1960s (Belgium and Luxembourg), and 1970s (Denmark and Germany). All in all, even though the data reported in Table 10.5 are more scattered and random, there is an evidence, albeit not perfectly homogeneous, of a trend towards growing importance of the incumbency divide vis-à-vis other dimensions of competition in Western Europe.

Hence, at this point a question may be raised: What is the impact of this development in electoral mobility on the patterns of turnover at the governmental level? This is a legitimate question in particular in the light of the trend in government alternation that we have observed in Chapter 3, namely a development towards more frequent wholesale turnover in office in the last thirty years. Are these two processes – electoral volatility and government turnover – associated? And, if yes, to what extent and in which circumstances? As the data collected and discussed in this section have shown, electoral mobility saw a substantial boost after the 1980s – on average, it was 8.4 per cent before the 1980s and goes up to 11.7 in the second phase. Furthermore, all types of electoral volatility examined here have revealed an upwards trend. Notably, incumbency volatility shows the most substantial growth: its level has almost doubled after the 1980s.

Tab. 10.5. Incumbency salience in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Mean
Austria	45.0	40.0	22.1	58.9	26.2	92.8	62.2	33.3	52.9
Belgium	17.8	52.9	68.9	45.4	43.9	56.7	33.2	42.2	47.3
Denmark	28.6	24.0	29.9	48.8	34.6	28.2	28.8	43.1	33.6
Finland	34.2	26.7	38.4	51.6	7.7	63.1	40.5	74.8	41.5
France	-	38.1	32.8	43.5	49.9	88.5	72.9	55.1	51.7
Germany	-	14.2	57.5	95.0	69.7	57.7	55.9	13.6	56.1
Greece	-	-	-	-	43.1	70.2	64.6	63.0	59.0
Iceland	-	54.9	65.4	53.4	30.1	32.8	58.2	79.1	49.3
Ireland	-	53.3	41.4	50.7	70.3	46.4	13.7	99.7	51.0
Italy	12.2	44.2	10.3	20.8	37.2	57.5	37.8	47.3	35.8
Luxembourg	16.0	59.0	66.5	33.7	42.0	39.8	2.6	63.6	41.7
Netherlands	44.6	60.6	37.9	54.3	29.1	59.6	75.8	36.9	50.1
Norway	67.1	45.9	36.4	38.0	46.4	21.7	31.3	52.9	39.6
Portugal	-	-	-	-	57.4	35.3	86.5	65.4	59.8
Spain	-	-	-	5.3	41.2	14.6	56.4	98.1	42.5
Sweden	15.3	50.6	37.2	36.1	27.1	47.0	24.9	59.5	38.8
United Kingdom	-	36.6	92.6	43.8	26.5	51.1	70.1	98.4	53.0
<i>Mean</i>	<i>31.2</i>	<i>42.6</i>	<i>45.1</i>	<i>46.5</i>	<i>41.7</i>	<i>51.5</i>	<i>50.3</i>	<i>58.5</i>	<i>46.7</i>

Note: bold = peak

In addition, looking at the figures in terms of block salience reported in Table 10.6, it is evident that the incumbency divide is 'salient' in both periods of time (before and after 1980). In both phases, the trade of votes across the government-opposition divide adds to roughly half the total exchange of votes between the parties in the system. A trend, by the way, which seems to grow in the last decades, where electoral mobility is often coupled with incumbency mobility. In any case, this cursory look at the rhythm and the waves of electoral change in Western Europe points to a clear concluding remark: more voters are available now than in the past and more often than not they tend to take into consideration the divide that separates the governing parties from those in the opposing camp. In brief, not only has the portion of available voters increased, but also their decisive location in the electoral market makes them extremely 'dangerous' for the fate of the incumbent governments. Yet, these are only hypothetical considerations that will be controlled, with the comparative method, in next section.

Tab. 10.6. Level of volatilities and block saliences before and after the 1980s (mean values, %)

	Pre- 1980s	Post-1980s
Electoral volatility	8.4	11.7
Anti-system volatility	2.3	4.0
Incumbency volatility	3.5	6.0
Anti-system salience	24.8	31.7
Incumbency salience	44.1	48.8

10.4. Alternation and electoral availability

We know that voters' predisposition to change their party choice is a precondition for incumbent's vulnerability. However, as Bartolini made clear (1999: 454), one 'does not need to postulate full elasticity of the vote, but some predisposition to electoral switch must be present if vulnerability is to be conceivable'. The quota or threshold of electoral availability is difficult to establish but, given the conceptual tools that I have collected so far, we can try to analyse the strength of the relationship between electoral mobility and the actual occurrence, at the empirical level, of government's vulnerability. To begin with, one can observe in Table 10.7, the association between electoral volatility and specific dimensions of government turnover. The pattern of association is rather telling, especially in terms of mean level of government turnover in office. More specifically, the level of rotation in power is higher (59.9 per cent) in the 'medium' category of total volatility, that is, when the overall trade of votes goes from 10 to 20 per cent. These circumstances, characterised by a fairly moderate exchange of votes in the system, are the most conducive to substantial replacement within the cabinet. It is interesting to note, moreover, that the lowest level of government turnover is recorded in association with the highest volatile elections. From this standpoint, therefore, *excessive voters' availability*, which frequently happens during dramatic periods or immediately after phases of electoral dealignment, hinders a process of sizable reshuffling at the governmental level. These situations of high volatility may, in fact, stimulate a sort of competition-avoidance arrangement among the governing parties.

To some extent, the theory of the cartel party devised by Richard Katz and Peter Mair (1995; 2009) may be interpreted within this framework. More precisely, a more uncertain, unstable or unpredictable electoral landscape may lead some parties – described, somewhat confusingly, as 'mainstream' by Katz and Mair – to coalesce, or collude, setting in place a sort of 'constrained competition' in order to cope with an excessive voters' propensity to change their party choice. This is not the place, nor the time, to discuss the validity of the cartel party theory (but see Kitschelt 2000, Koole 2006, Krouwel 2006); suffice it to say at this stage that the simplistic association between electoral availability and government turnover, or incumbents' vulnerability, must be somewhat re-evaluated and, in particular, should take into account the supply side of the electoral market, namely the way political parties try to react to or neutralise the excessive elasticity of the vote.

Let us now take a step back after this brief theoretical detour. The evidence collected in Table 10.7 depicts a mixed scenario. Both low and high levels of electoral mobility are, to a degree, detrimental for a pattern of substantial change in the party composition of government. On the contrary, it is in the medium category that the association between turnover and volatility turns out to be positive. Too few *and* too many available voters do not seem to represent a credible menace for the incumbents.

Tab. 10.7. Electoral volatility and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral volatility (%)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (0-10%)	24.6	47.9
Medium (10-20%)	41.3	59.9
High (higher than 20%)	27.8	45.9

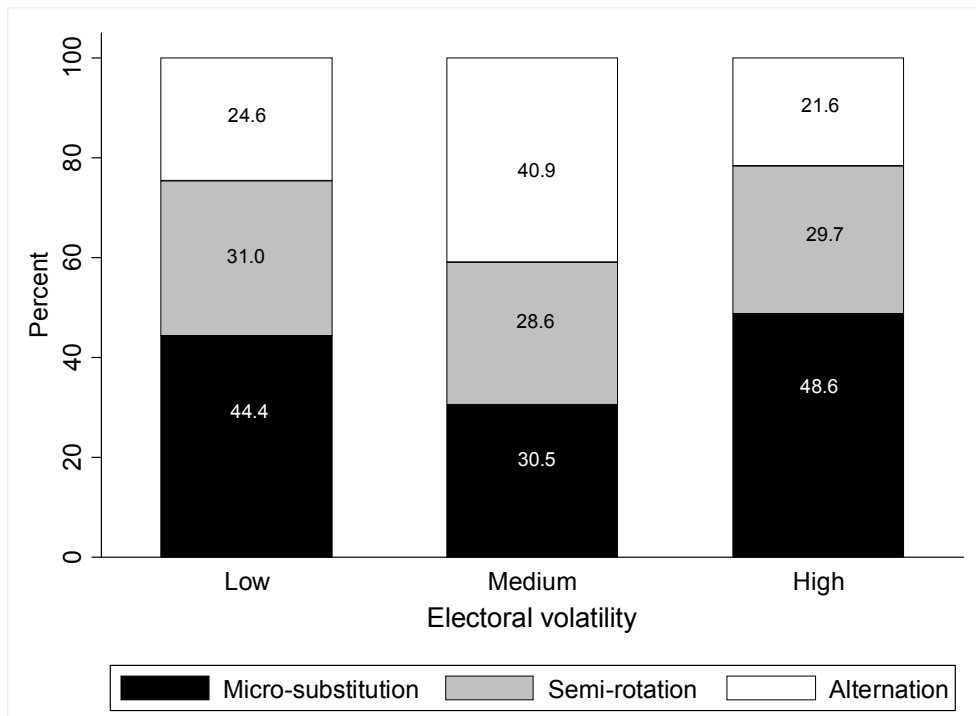
If we now turn to the relationship between total volatility and alternation in power, the results are concordant with those sketched above. Indeed, alternation is both more frequent (27.7 per cent) and likely (40.2 per cent) when the overall exchange of votes goes from 10 to 20 per cent. In terms of probability, the value drops to 24.3 per cent, when volatility is below the 10 per cent threshold, and to 21.6 when the trading of votes is higher than 20 per cent. Once again, hence, the excess of electoral availability turns out to be deleterious for the actual occurrence of alternation in power. What is more, this pattern of association holds also if we take into account the possibility of alternation. Indeed, the highest value (47.7 per cent) is recorded when the level of electoral mobility is medium, whereas the lowest (16.7 per cent) is associated with the most volatile scenarios.

Tab. 10.8. Electoral volatility and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral volatility (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-10%)	12.5	24.3	28.0
Medium (10-20%)	27.7	40.2	47.7
High (higher than 20%)	13.1	21.6	16.7

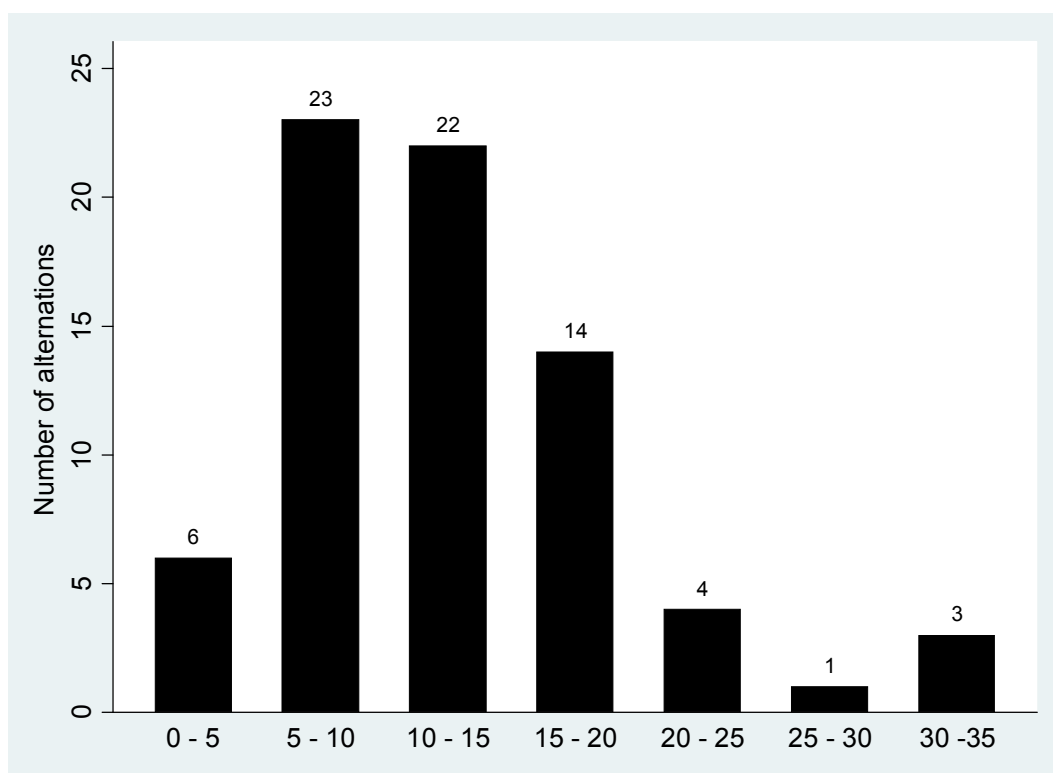
Looking at the relationship between type of government change and level of electoral availability, Figure 10.2 confirms our previous findings. Micro-substitution in power is the most frequent type of government change when the amount of volatility is low. Conversely, alternation becomes the most common way to replace a cabinet when total volatility is moderately but not excessively high. In fact, when electoral mobility is in the medium category, four alternations out of ten occurred through a wholesale replacement of the governing parties. By contrast, in case of low and high electoral change, micro-substitution is the most common type, respectively 44.4 and 48.6 per cent.

Fig. 10.2. Type of government change by level of electoral volatility, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



On the whole, it is evident that alternation requires *some* degree of electoral availability, but neither too little nor too much. It is difficult to establish the 'perfect' quota of available voters that makes the incumbent government concretely vulnerable but, in the light of the evidence discussed so far, one can argue that a government is more vulnerable when the overall exchange of votes goes from 10 to 20 per cent. In fact, as Figure 10.3 shows, 36 electoral alternations out of 73 occurred when volatility is between 10 and 20 percent, while we find only 8 alternations in those circumstances characterised by extremely high elasticity of the vote (more than 20 per cent). It must be underlined, on the contrary, that 23 alternations took place in conjunction with cases of fairly low volatility, that is, between 5 and 10 per cent. Finally, in line with our theoretical predictions, alternation is indeed a rare event when the portion of available electorate is below 5 per cent. Nevertheless, as we will see below, these cases of alternation with low electoral volatility are absolutely interesting because they reveal that other factors, for instance the elasticity (or changeability) of the supply side, may pave the way to wholesale rotation in power.

Fig. 10.3. Number of alternations by level of electoral volatility in Western Europe, 1945-2015



As we have discussed in section 10.2, voters' availability is only one side of the coin called 'vulnerability'. The other side, often neglected or not fully analysed, concerns the *decisive location* of the available voters, in particular, the propensity to change their party choice along the government-opposition divide. In order to test empirically this argument, Table 10.9 breaks down our measures of government turnover into three categories of incumbency volatility (low, medium and high). Here again, the medium category – when incumbency volatility is higher than 10 and lower than 20 per cent – is where both the degree and the level of government turnover show the highest value, respectively 64.0 and 73.5 per cent. The trade of votes along the incumbency cleavage seems, therefore, an efficient carrier of cabinet turnover, even though we find further confirmation that also an excessive level of volatility along this divide is detrimental in terms of rotation in power.

Tab. 10.9. Incumbency volatility and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Incumbency volatility (%)	Government turnover	Level of government turnover
Low (0-10%)	35.2	61.2
Medium (10-20%)	64.0	73.5
High (higher than 20%)	18.4	34.0

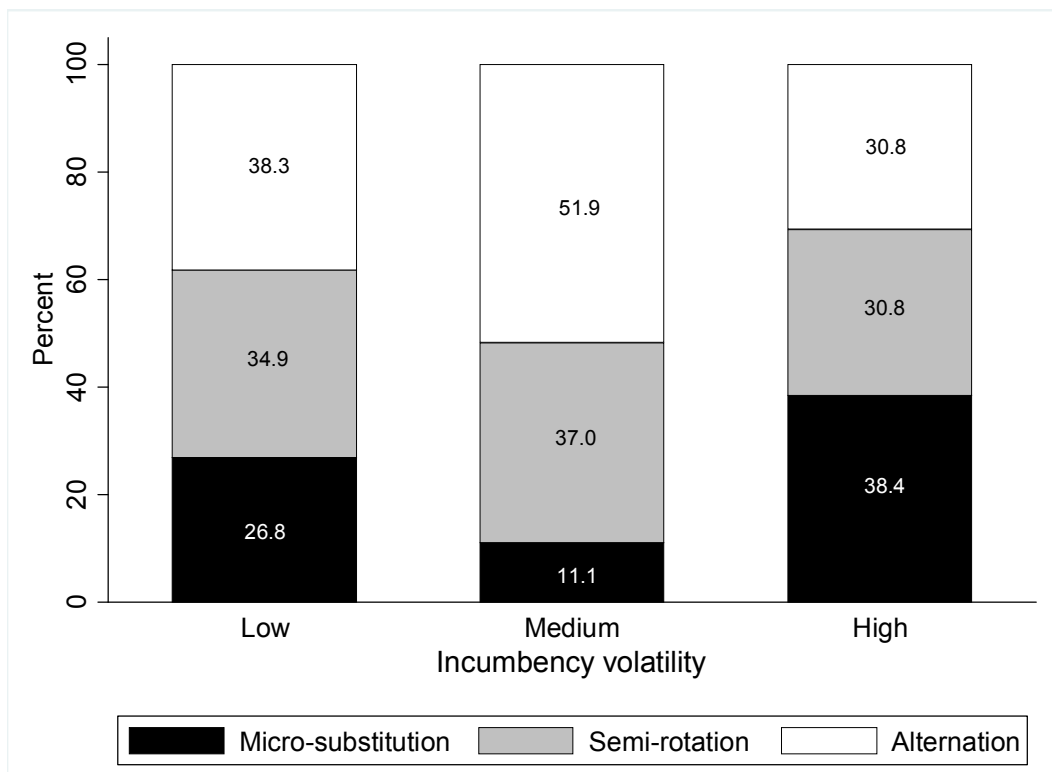
In terms of alternation in power, Table 10.10 – which adopts the same three categories of intensity of government-opposition volatility – shows that the decisive location of the available voters matters both for the frequency and the probability of alternation, in the sense that the higher the exchange of votes along the incumbency divide, the more likely a wholesale rotation in office. Yet, the same caveat must be applied – extremely high values of incumbency volatility are associated with a lower frequency of alternation in power (7.1 per cent). Again, from the perspective of governmental alternation, the most exploitative elections are those with a moderately high level of volatility.

Tab. 10.10. Incumbency volatility and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Incumbency volatility	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-10)	21.7	37.7	40.3
Medium (10-20)	45.2	51.8	54.8
High (higher than 20)	7.1	13.2	19.3

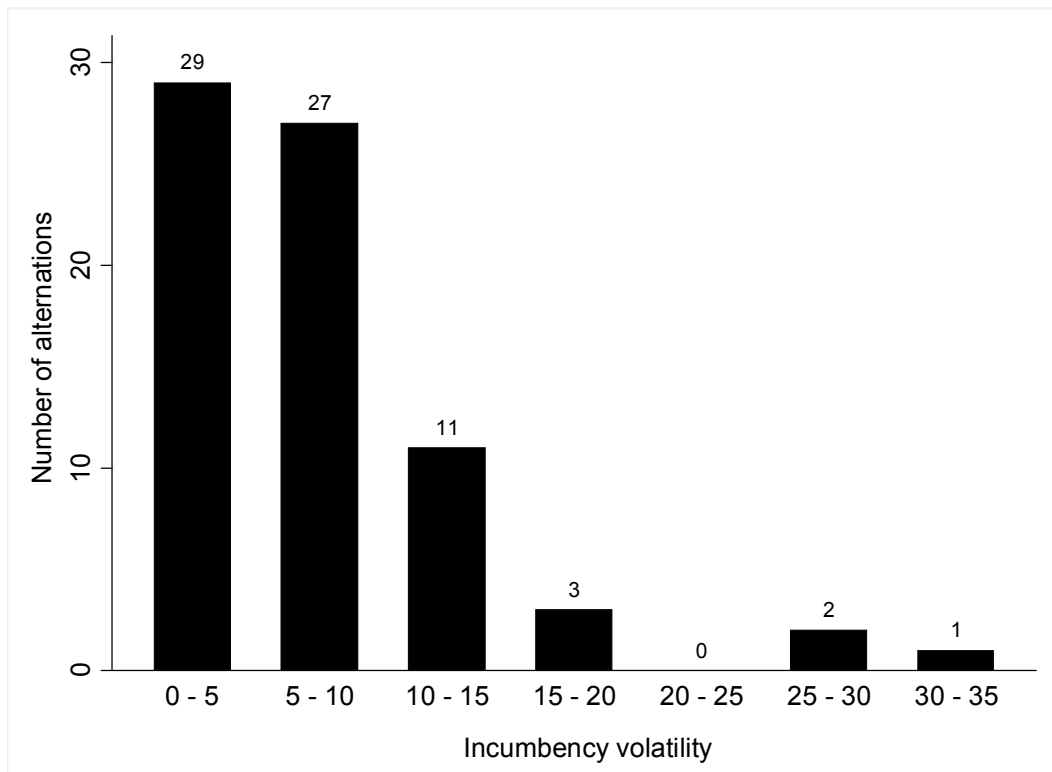
From a different viewpoint, it can be seen that among the three types of government change – micro-substitution, semi-rotation, and alternation – elections where the volatility along the incumbency dimension is extremely high are more prone to experience micro-substitution in government, that is, limited reshuffling within the incumbent coalition (see Figure 10.4). On the contrary, alternation prevails (51.8 per cent) when block volatility is low (37.7 per cent) or medium (51.8 per cent).

Fig. 10.4. Type of government change in Western Europe by level of incumbency volatility, 1945-2015 (percentage values)



Moreover, if we count exclusively the alternations that occurred at election time, it emerges that 29 cases of complete government turnover took place when the level of incumbency volatility is below 5 per cent, that is, in circumstances that are not extremely competitive from the point of view of government-opposition dynamic of competition. Of course, in two-party systems even the swing of a small share of voters may be decisive, but in other types of party systems the same quota of available voters to switch from government to opposition or vice versa may not be influential. This is to say that, regardless of their location, the same portion of available voters may have different effects in different political contexts. Arguably, this is the point where the elasticity of the demand (votes) as a precondition of incumbents' vulnerability meets, and perhaps collides, with the elasticity of the political supply (parties).

Fig. 10.5. Number of alternations by level of incumbency volatility



10.5. Voters and parties' mobility

In the light of the data presented above, it seems plausible to claim that the drivers of alternation can be found on both sides of the electoral market, i.e., demand and supply. To illustrate this aspect, it is useful to have a look at Table 10.11, which contains a typology of alternations based on their different causes or sources. For the sake of clarity, the typology is presented as the product of two binary options (yes/no), but in reality they are continuous measures (more-less) of elasticity in the demand or the offer side of the political market. In the lower right cell, there is the simplest case, which does not need any complex discussion – where there is no change both in the political demand (votes) and in the political offer (parties), alternation in power is an unthinkable outcome. In the opposite scenario, that is, in the upper left cell where both political demand and offer change, alternation is 'complete' in the sense that it is the result of two causes – a change in the offer (parties) *and* a change in the demand (electors). In other words, the elasticity of both sides of the political market conjure up each other in making alternation a concrete possibility.

Tab. 10.11. A typology of government alternations

		Change in the political demand	
		Yes	No
Change in the political supply	Yes	Bi-causal or 'complete' alternation	Party-induced alternation
	No	Voter-induced alternation	No alternation

That said, the most interesting cases are those included in the lower-left cell and in the upper-right cell. The former, which I define as ‘voter-induced alternation’, describes those cases in which a quota of available voters switches their support from the governing to the opposition parties (or vice versa) and, in so doing, produces a wholesale rotation in office. This is the classic example of the majoritarian model of democracy or two-party systems, where the format of the political offer is fixed and the pendulum of the voter may tip the balance from one side to the other. The latter scenario depicts, instead, a situation often neglected by scholars, either theory or empirical research-oriented. In multi-party systems, one can observe situations in which the elasticity of the demand is nil (low propensity to change previous party choice), but there exists a sufficiently large elasticity in the supply side. To illustrate this point, let us take a concrete example. Both the 1996 or 2001 Italian general elections were characterised by an extremely low level of incumbency volatility and, in spite of this, a sizeable exchange of votes *within* the two alternating multi-party coalitions. In brief, the propensity of the Italian voters to cross the government-opposition divide was absolutely limited and virtually all the trading of votes took place within the centre-left or the centre-right (Itanes 2001; 2006). Yet, on both occasions one party of the two coalitions does not accept a pre-electoral agreement: the Northern League for the centre-right in 1996 and the Italy of Values (*Italia dei Valori*) for the centre-left in 2001. These modifications in the political offer, especially in a context characterised by a low level of incumbency volatility, created the conditions for the occurrence of alternation in government. In a similar vein, also the one and only, so far, German alternation in 1998 can be defined as a case of ‘party-induced alternation’ because a relatively low level of incumbency volatility (4.8 per cent) was combined with a significant change in the political offer, namely the creation of two pre-electoral coalitions (CDU/CSU + FDP and SPD + Greens).

This typology of alternation also casts a new light on the theoretical discussion concerning the relationship between electoral availability and incumbents’ vulnerability. Partially in contrast with Bartolini, in fact, we can argue that the incumbent government may be vulnerable also if and when the demand side of the political market is inelastic, because of the changeability in the supply side. More precisely, if Bartolini (1999: 454) maintains that ‘the necessary condition of incumbents’ vulnerability is that voters are willing to punish and reward; that is, they are available to modify their electoral choice’, I would rather say that electoral availability or elasticity is not a *necessary* but a *sufficient* condition of vulnerability and, in turn, of alternation in power. Accordingly, the elasticity of the offer should also be considered as a *sufficient* condition of incumbents’ vulnerability.

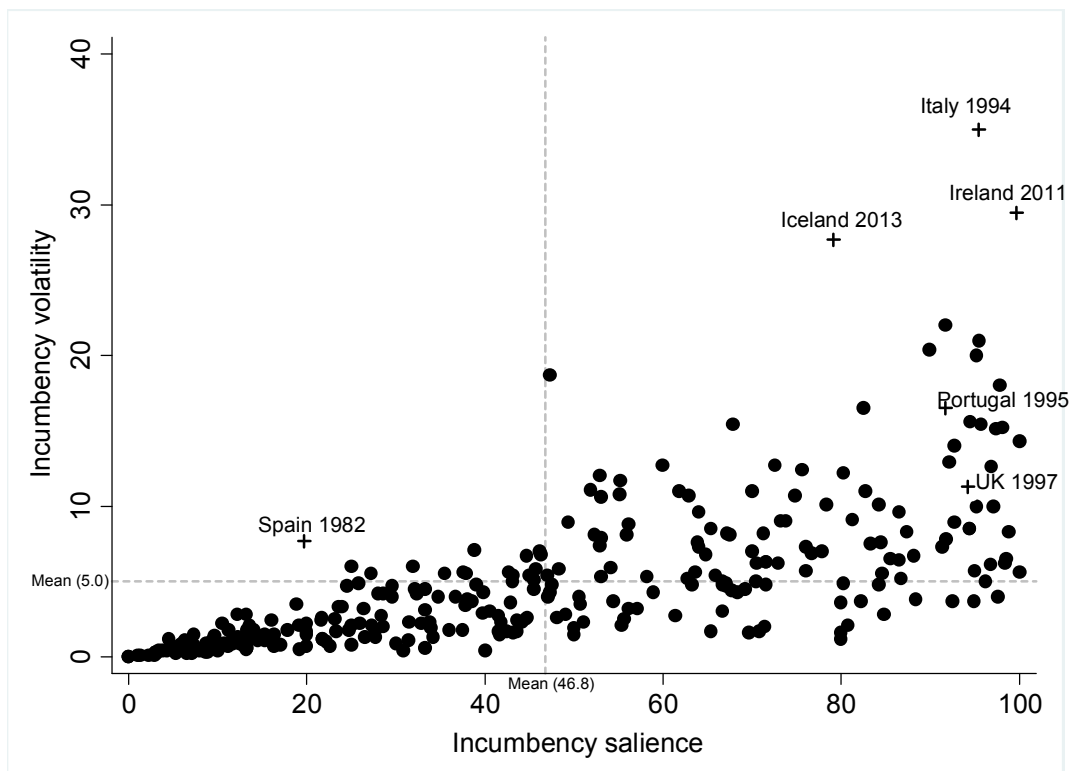
To have a better grasp of this aspect, we can observe Figure 10.6, which charts all cases of electoral alternations on the basis of the level of incumbency volatility (y axis) and its salience vis-à-vis the overall level of volatility (x axis). As the figures show, many alternations are concentrated in the lower left corner, where the exchange of votes along the incumbency divide is extremely low and the importance of that cleavage vis-à-vis other dimensions of competition is limited. In this context, one can find many cases of alternations in some Scandinavian countries (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, and Norway), where a small share of switching voters or a different configuration in the alternative coalitions set the stage for a wholesale turnover in office. This is the case, for instance, of the 1997 Norwegian alternation – the then Labour Prime Minister Thorbjørn Jagland declared before the election that the cabinet would step down unless it gained at least 36.9 of the votes, that is, the vote-share gained by the Labour Party in the 1993 general election. Whilst Labour won a plurality of seats (65 out of 165), it gained only 35.0 per cent of the votes, two percentage-points lower the threshold established by the Prime minister. As a consequence, the Jagland cabinet resigned and a new centrist cabinet, led by Kjell Bondevik with external support of the Progress Party and the Conservative Party, was appointed. This is a crystal-clear example of how the demand and the supply side of the electoral market may interact and pave the way to an alternation in office.

At the other corner of the figure, we find a classic case of voter-induced alternation, namely the 1997 government turnover that occurred in the United Kingdom, when Tony Blair’s Labour Party defeated, after eighteen years of uninterrupted government, the incumbent Conservative Party. In that case, a high level of

incumbency volatility went hand in hand with a high salience of the government-opposition cleavage, meaning that the incumbency divide was a significant dimension of interparty competition in the United Kingdom and that a substantial share of available voters were willing to cross it.

Finally, it is interesting to note the locations of three cases of alternation in Figure 10.6: Italy 1994, Ireland 2011, and Iceland 2013. All these three cases reveal both extremely high levels of incumbency volatility and salience. The Italian case took place immediately after the collapse of the old party system and the disappearance of the pivotal Christian Democracy (DC), whereas the other two cases of alternations occurred during the financial crisis that hit Ireland and Iceland in 2009. These three cases describe peculiar phases of electoral dealignment in which, through the channel of the government-opposition divide, the party system assumed thereafter a completely different configuration. However, if the Irish and Icelandic cases entailed a regular – so to speak – defeat, albeit extremely severe (Little 2011; Indridason et al. 2016), of the incumbent government, the 1994 Italian case brought about in addition a party-system change whereby the long-established political parties utterly disappeared.

Fig. 10.6. Electoral alternations in Western Europe by incumbency volatility and salience, 1945-2015 (%)

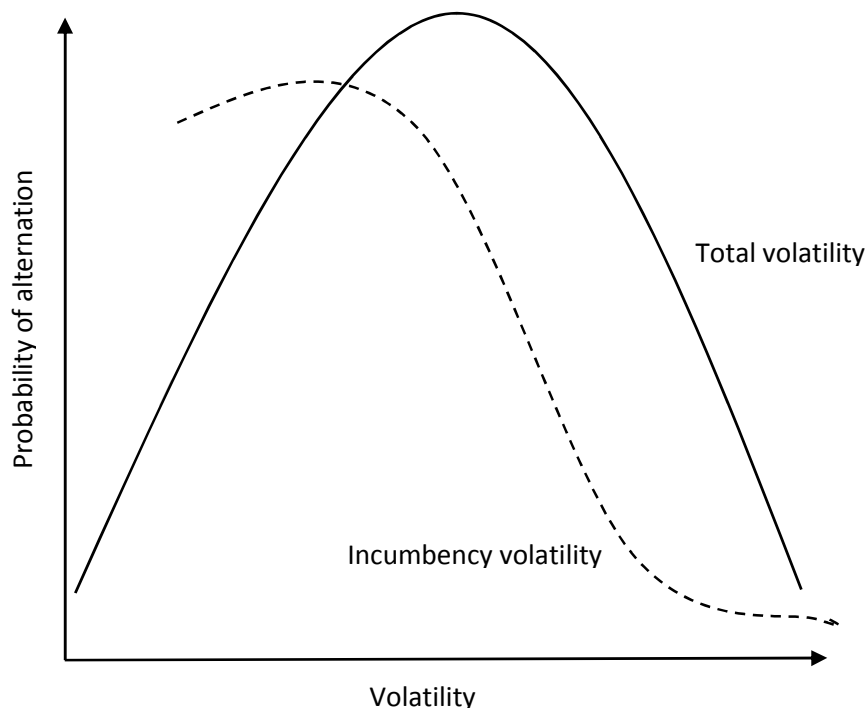


To recapitulate, alternation in power is not exclusively the product of the will of the voters. Indeed, in some circumstances, different configurations in the supply side of the political market may set the stage for an alternation even though the propensity of voters to change their party choice is relatively low or absent. By bearing in mind only the classic example of political turnover in two-party systems, many scholars have neglected the offer side of the story, namely that it is also the strategies adopted by political parties that can make a government alternation a real possibility. In this sense, as I have underlined above, electoral availability, especially if located at the crossroads between government and opposition, can be conceived of as a *sufficient* condition for incumbents' vulnerability, both in its actuality and possibility.

Moreover, we have seen that the association between alternation and volatility is positive *up to a point*, in the sense that when voters become *too mobile* and the electoral market goes through a turbulent phase the effect of volatility on the pattern of government turnover turns out to be negative. In the light of this, it is possible to hypothesise that when volatility – both total and along the incumbency cleavage –

overcomes the 20 per cent threshold, the likelihood of an alternation in office decreases substantially. For the sake of the argument, the association between volatility and alternation can be depicted as a reverse U-shape curve – when the electoral mobility is either extremely low or extremely high, alternation in power is unlikely, whereas the likelihood of a complete replacement of governing parties reaches its maximum level when volatility is in the mid-range. By contrast, as shown in Figure 10.7, the association between incumbency volatility and alternation takes the shape of a curve with a peak around the medium-to-low level of electoral mobility. There exist, as we have seen, cases of alternation created by an extreme, almost pathological, level of incumbency volatility but, on average, most alternation occurred when the trading of votes along the government-opposition divide is limited, that is, below the 10 per cent threshold.

Fig. 10.7. Theoretically expected association between probability of alternation and electoral volatility



In summary, electoral availability is a crucial, though not strictly necessary, condition for the occurrence of alternation in government. If voters are eager – as the famous dictum goes – to ‘throw the rascals out’, some of them should change their previous party choice and cast their vote accordingly, thus punishing the rascals. The elasticity of the demand in the political market makes the incumbents vulnerable and alternation a concrete possibility. However, the association is not linear or steadily positive, as we might have thought. A modicum of mobility seems to be conducive to a process of substantial turnover in the executive power but, when volatility takes the form of dramatic electoral earthquakes, its effect on alternation is much more muted and weakened. The time has come to test empirically this set of theoretical hypotheses.

10.6. Dimensions of competition and government alternation

Thus far, we have analysed the relationship between alternation and electoral mobility without taking into account the importance of each divide in the system. In other words, we did not consider whether or not the salience of the political divides accounts for the occurrence of alternation in power. One way to evaluate this association is by combining the two indicators of volatility, that is, the measure of cleavage, or divide, closure and its measure of salience. The result of this combination for the incumbency dimension is

shown in Table 10.12. As the figures reveal, the plurality of electoral alternation (49.3%) occurred when the incumbency divide is indeed a ‘dimension of competition’, meaning that its salience is high and the interchange of votes between government and opposition is sizeable. From this perspective, we can say that alternation in power is more likely when the incumbency dimension is relevant in the system and for the voters. Nonetheless, there exist a minority of cases (18 out of 73) of alternation in electoral contexts where the salience of the incumbency divide was not low as well as the level of closure of the divide. These are cases where the government-opposition dimension was simply a domain of identification and does not structure the voting pattern of the electorate. Accordingly, alternations take place following other, more salient, lines of political competition. One of them might be the class cleavage, that is, the separation between the class-left parties (Socialist and Communist parties) and the other centre or right-wing parties.

Tab. 10.12. A typology of government alternations by level of incumbency volatility and salience of the incumbency divide

		Incumbency volatility (Mean: 5.0)	
		High	Low
Incumbency salience (Mean: 46.7%)	High	36 (49.3%)	8 (10.9%)
	Low	11 (15.1%)	18 (24.7%)

Note: the cut-offs are for the two categories (i.e., high and low) are represented by the two mean values.

The line separating anti-system parties from pro-system forces represents another source of political divide. As Table 10.13 shows, in this case the total sum of alternations (31) is lower because, in many circumstances, a relevant anti-system party was absent in the system. Nevertheless, in line with our expectation we can see that the vast majority of electoral alternations (64.5%) occurred when the anti-system cleavage was not an important dimension of competition. Only in 8 cases did alternation in power take place when this cleavage was considered salient and the interchange of votes was above the mean. Notably, all these 8 alternations are recorded after the 1980s when – as I have pointed out in Chapter 9 – non-ideological anti-system parties, more prone to affect and suffer electoral volatility than their ideological counterpart, prevail in West European party systems.

Tab. 10.13. A typology of government alternations by level of anti-system volatility and salience of the anti-system divide

		Anti-system volatility (Mean: 3.3)	
		High	Low
Anti-system block salience (Mean: 28.7%)	High	8 (25.8%)	3 (9.7%)
	Low	0	20 (64.5%)

Note: the cut-offs are for the two categories (i.e., high and low) are represented by the two mean values.

Therefore, on the basis of the evidence collected in this section we can claim that alternation is a common practice where the incumbency divide is a relevant dimension of competition, meaning that many voters are not strongly encapsulated, or isolated, in the political blocks and have a high propensity to cross

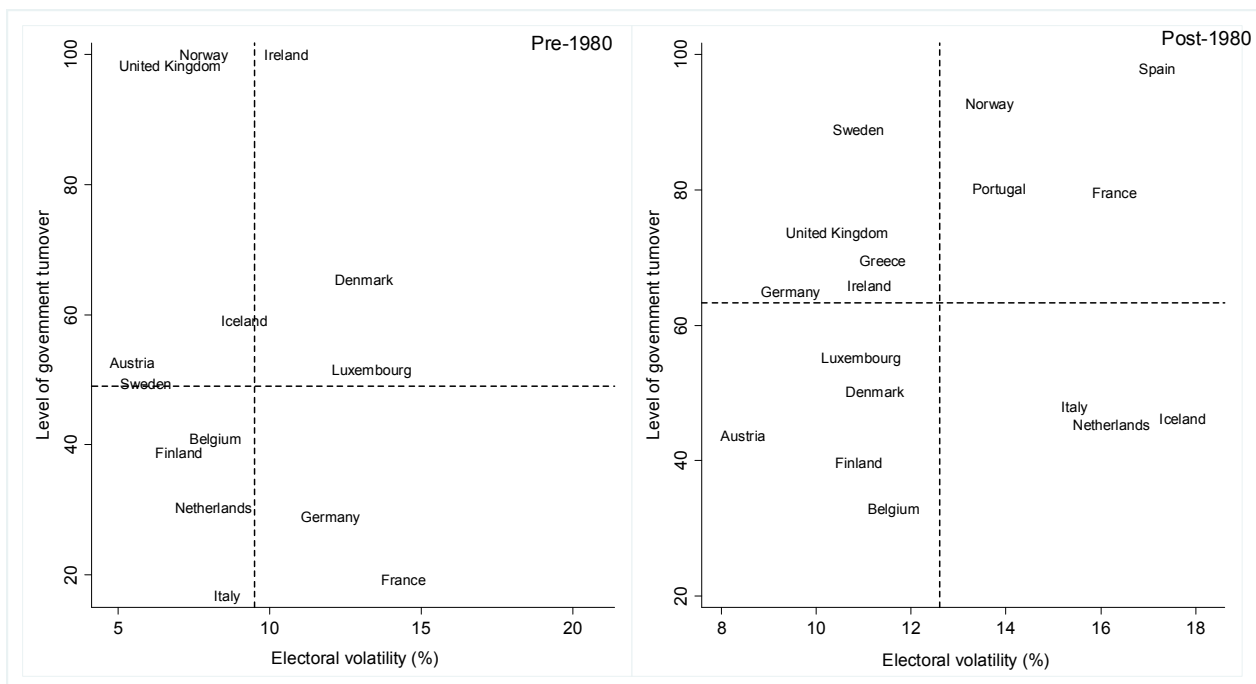
the dividing line. Moreover government alternations are more likely not only when voters are willing to switch their party choice along the incumbency line, but in particular when this divide is considered as an important dimension of competition in the system. The combination of these two factors – an *open* and *salient* incumbency divide – makes the incumbents more vulnerable and alternation in power more likely. However, these are generalisations that we have inferred from the aggregate level, without taking into consideration cross-country and cross-time variations in electoral volatility. The next section shall carry out this task, analysing the association between patterns of alternation in power and voters' availability at the individual level and in specific periods of time.

10.7. National variations and temporal trends

As we have seen so far, electoral mobility shows some links with the process of government turnover. When voters have a sufficient propensity to change their party choice, rotation in power may take the form of a wholesale replacement of the incumbent government. However, despite a common upward trend in electoral mobility, especially after the 1980s, there still exists a large amount of cross-country variation that can have a specific impact on the process of alternation in government. In other words, what we should try to understand is whether the rising occurrence of alternation may be explained, at least partially, by the increasing volatility experienced in Western Europe during the last thirty years. In order to address this question, I will first analyse at the individual level the existence, or the lack, of a relationship between the level of government turnover and the amount of electoral availability existing in the system.

Figure 10.8 plots the level of government turnover for each of the seventeen countries against the mean value of electoral volatility in two distinct phases, before and after the 1980s. First and foremost, it is evident that these figures do not reveal any significant pattern of association between the measure of volatility and mean level of rotation in office. More precisely, there are countries (e.g., Germany and, especially during the Fourth Republic, France) where volatility goes hand in hand with a limited level of government turnover, whereas other party systems combine high electoral mobility with medium-to-high level of government turnover. For instance, in the second phase (post-1980), Iceland, Italy and the Netherlands are grouped in the upper-left quadrant, characterised by high volatility and low level of government turnover. It is interesting to note that two countries – Germany and France – that were in this quadrant in the first phase have now changed their location. Germany is in the lower-left corner, meaning that it has been able to handle a moderate, and slightly decreasing, level of volatility with a large pattern of rotation in the party cabinet composition. Instead, France went, as expected, in the upper-left quadrant, joining both high levels of electoral mobility and government turnover. It is also noteworthy that two countries from the 'Third wave' of democratisation – Spain and Portugal – entered directly in the 1980s the upper-right quadrant, showing the coexistence of a highly available electorate with substantial replacement within the cabinet. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the most populated quadrant is that in the lower-right corner, namely those circumstances in which a limited amount of electoral mobility is accompanied by deep reshuffling in the composition of the cabinet.

Fig. 10.8. Electoral volatility and level of government turnover in Western Europe (mean values, %)

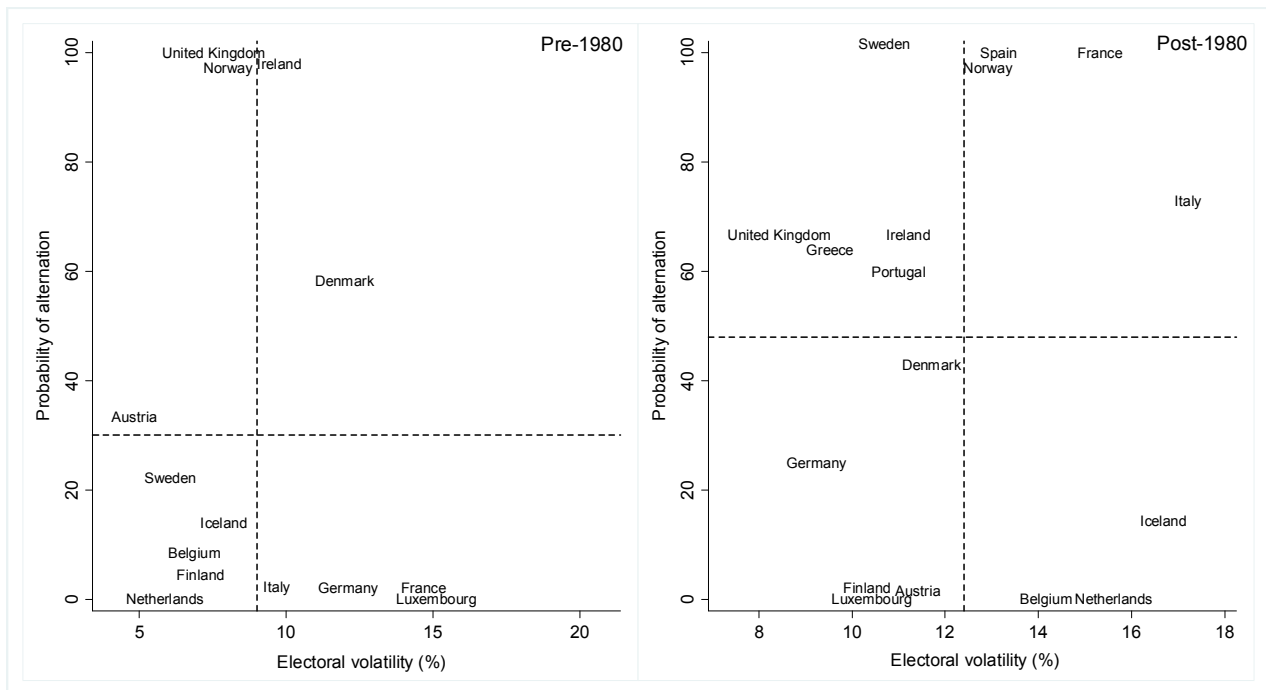


Note: the dotted lines represent the mean values of the variables for the two periods under examination.

Therefore, at least from this individual perspective, the impact of volatility on the pattern of government turnover seems not to be robust and homogeneously distributed. Interestingly, the picture does not change if observed from a different angle; that is, taking into account the measure of probability of alternation. Figure 10.9 plots all the seventeen West European countries on the basis of the amount of electoral volatility and the likelihood of alternation in office, again in two phases: pre and post the 1980s. The dotted lines in the figure represent the mean of the variables in the two periods of time. That said, the data shows the absence of a clear pattern of association between voters' availability and probability of alternation. In the first phase, only Denmark and Ireland combine a high level of electoral mobility with a remarkable propensity to experience an alternation in office. By contrast, most countries are in the opposite (lower-left) quadrant, showing an extremely low likelihood of alternation and a corresponding limited level of interexchange of votes.

More importantly, we can see that in the first phase there are four countries – Germany, France, Italy and Luxembourg – where the prospect of an alternation remains limited, in spite of a sizeable amount of electoral mobility in the system. At the same time, Austria, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom reveal that alternation in power can be a likely event even when the amount of available voters willing to change their previous choice is rather limited. With the exception of Austria, in the remaining party systems, traditionally dominated by single-party cabinets or minority coalitions, the swing of a small portion of the electorate was conducive to a government alternation. If we observe the scenario post-1980, we see again that a large share of electoral availability can withstand both low and high likelihood of government alternation. For instance, Belgium, Iceland and the Netherlands combine high volatility with a limited probability of alternation in office. Conversely, in France, Italy, Norway and Spain alternation is a recurring event accompanied by a significant shift in the party choice of the electorate. In this respect, it is interesting to note the differences between two cases of two-partyism: Spain and the United Kingdom. Despite their similar and elevated level of probability of alternation, these two countries show extremely different levels of electoral volatility. In Spain, on the one hand, alternations imply a sizeable exchange of votes between the two main parties, whereas, on the other hand, in the United Kingdom even a minimal oscillation of the electorate, perhaps amplified by the functioning of the electoral system, can oust the ruling party.

Fig. 10.9. Electoral volatility and probability of alternation in Western Europe, pre and post-1980 (mean values, %)

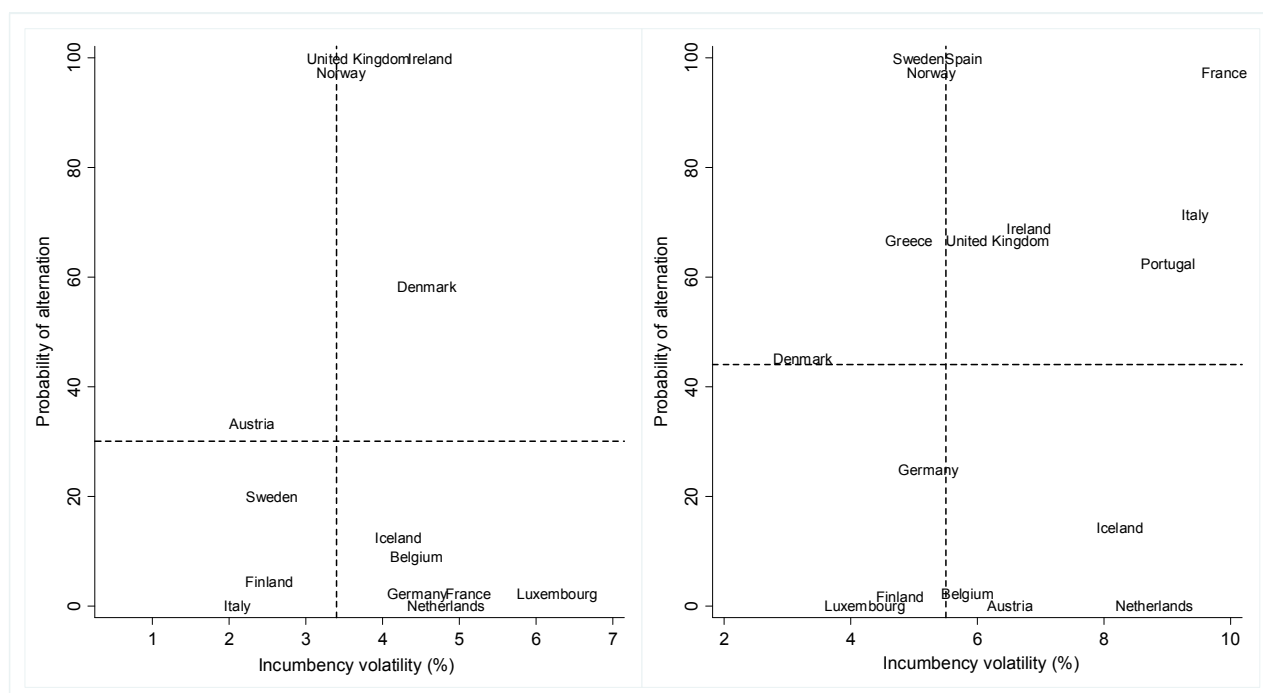


Note: the dotted lines represent the mean values of the variables for the two periods under examination.

By and large, the association between electoral availability and alternation at the individual level is not very strong and straightforward. In fact, in many cases, as we have just seen, even a small (switching) portion of the electorate may provoke an alternation in power. In other countries, by contrast, notwithstanding an available electorate, a wholesale rotation in government remains an unlikely event. However, electoral mobility *per se* may not be directly linked to any specific pattern of government turnover. What matters, in this sense, is the 'decisive location' of the switching voters. As a matter of fact, if the available voters are located along the government-opposition divide, alternation can be a concrete possibility. In order to control the validity of this generalisation, Figure 10.10 plots levels of incumbency volatility against the probability of alternation across the seventeen West European countries in the usual two periods of time, before and after 1980. Notwithstanding deviant cases, we can observe that most countries where alternation is more likely show a remarkable degree of incumbency volatility. More precisely, in the upper-right quadrant there are countries in which a large amount of interchange of votes along the incumbency cleavage goes hand in hand with a high probability of alternation in power. It is worth noticing, moreover, that the lower-right quadrant is the least crowded, which means that a rising level of incumbency mobility tend to be associated with, or to led to, a complete replacement of the governing parties.

Despite this overall trend, it must be underlined the position of those countries locate in the upper-left corner, which reveals a low probability of alternation notwithstanding a high level of mobility across the government-opposition divide. Here we find countries such as Iceland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg (before 1980) and Belgium (after 1980), namely party systems where a tradition of inter-elite accommodation and power-sharing was able to weaken, if not neutralise, the effect of a highly volatile electorate.

Fig. 10.10. Incumbency volatility and probability of alternation in Western Europe, pre and post-1980 (mean values, %)



Note: the dotted lines represent the mean values of the variables for the two periods under examination.

Summing up, an available electorate does not imply, by definition, the existence of an electorate available to switch its support from the incumbent rulers to the opposition parties, or vice versa. It is evident from the data collected here that the pendulum of the executive power does not always line up with that of the electorate. This is tantamount to saying that other, either short or long-term, factors filter the effect of the electoral mobility on the pattern of turnover in government. Nevertheless, when volatility is sufficiently concentrated in that decisive area between government and opposition, its effect on the type of government change turns out to be more direct and profound. In order to have a closer look at these specific trends, we can observe the figures in Table 10.14, which reports the correlation coefficient of the bivariate relationship between total volatility and four measures of government turnover or alternation.

It is not possible to single out any specific pattern of association from these data – electoral availability *per se* does not seem to have any significant impact on the process of rotation in power. More specifically, the bivariate relationship yields both negative and positive results, meaning that in some countries (e.g., Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway) the higher the level of electoral mobility, the lower the likelihood of alternation, whereas in other polities that association turns out to be positive. Yet, by and large, the strength of the association between voters’ availability and government turnover appears to be extremely weak and only in very few cases statistically significant.

Tab. 10.14. Correlation between total volatility and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.032	-0.092 (24)	-0.433	0.030 (24)
Belgium	0.020	-0.167 (33)	-0.154	-0.232 (33)
Denmark	0.323	0.362** (36)	0.338	0.001 (36)
Finland	-0.309*	-0.154 (41)	-0.163	0.056 (41)
France	0.172	0.090 (49)	0.141	0.022 (49)
Germany	-0.654*	-0.122 (24)	-0.246	0.015 (24)

Greece	0.202	0.204 (17)	0.225	0.070 (17)
Iceland	0.140	0.401* (24)	0.383	0.401* (24)
Ireland	0.187	0.203 (25)	0.115	0.085 (25)
Italy	0.477***	0.241 (44)	0.336*	0.311* (44)
Luxembourg	-0.294	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	0.476*	- ^a	- ^a	0.385* (23)
Norway	-0.011	0.257 (30)	-0.011	0.577*** (30)
Portugal	0.168	0.295 (16)	0.096	0.440* (16)
Spain	- ^a	0.494 (11)	- ^a	0.178 (11)
Sweden	0.474	0.367* (29)	0.538*	0.415** (29)
United Kingdom	- ^a	0.710*** (23)	- ^a	0.710*** (23)

Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.

Contrariwise, if we analyse the bivariate relationship between incumbency volatility and the same four dimensions of government turnover at the country level (see Table 10.15), it is clear that the association is stronger than that concerning total volatility. In this case, in fact, the figures reveal that the existence of a relatively strong relationship noted at the aggregate level is also reflected in most of the individual countries. The only exceptions are Belgium and Luxembourg, which record a negative relationship between incumbency volatility and both level of government turnover and probability of alternation.

Furthermore, in terms of frequency of alternation, in twelve of the seventeen countries the relationship under scrutiny is strong and with the expected sign. From this viewpoint, particularly noticeable is the correlation coefficient for the United Kingdom (0.616), Denmark (0.553), Norway (0.559), Sweden (0.448) and Spain (0.538) – all countries where the existence of specific cabinet types makes particularly effective and decisive the oscillation occurring at the electoral level.

Tab. 10.15. Correlation between incumbency volatility and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.150 (6)	-0.016 (20)	0.062 (6)	0.115 (20)
Belgium	-0.114 (18)	-0.042 (21)	-0.043 (18)	-0.042 (21)
Denmark	0.602** (16)	0.553*** (25)	0.619** (16)	-0.125 (25)
Finland	0.217 (15)	- ^a	- ^a	0.225 (17)
France	0.651** (10)	0.357 (15)	0.635** (10)	0.357 (15)
Germany	0.052 (7)	0.034 (17)	-0.091 (7)	-0.072 (17)
Greece	0.201 (9)	0.460 (13)	0.318 (9)	0.392 (13)
Iceland	0.437 (13)	0.422* (19)	0.390 (13)	0.422* (19)
Ireland	0.296 (15)	0.364 (19)	0.277 (15)	0.199 (19)
Italy	0.442 (12)	0.351 (15)	0.306 (12)	0.523* (15)
Luxembourg	-0.304 (10)	- ^a	- ^a	- ^a
Netherlands	0.399 (16)	- ^a	- ^a	0.107 (20)
Norway	- ^a	0.559** (17)	- ^a	0.527** (17)
Portugal	0.351 (7)	0.313 (12)	0.322 (7)	0.345 (12)
Spain	- ^a	0.538 (10)	- ^a	-0.038 (10)
Sweden	0.424 (7)	0.448** (21)	0.424 (7)	0.222 (21)
United Kingdom	- ^a	0.616*** (17)	- ^a	0.616*** (17)

Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.

Finally, it is interesting to assess the strength of the association between voters' availability and alternation in power through time, that is, taking into account the variation that occurred around the 1980s. To do so, Table 10.16 breaks down the relationship in two phases, before and after 1980. There are, in these respects, many points that are worthy of discussion. The first aspect that should be adequately underlined concerns the effect of voters' availability on the pattern of government alternation. More specifically, it is interesting to note that the impact of total volatility is nil or absolutely low in the first phase, while it becomes stronger and statistically significant in the second period. In other words, only after 1980 does electoral mobility account for the variation in terms of government turnover and alternation. In this sense, we can argue that the positive effect recorded for the whole period is mainly a product of the variation that occurred in the last thirty years.

Second, among the four types of block volatility examined here, the most effective for the amount of rotation in power is the incumbency volatility, that is, the interchange of votes occurring across the government-opposition divide. Even though its effect is visible also in the first phase, the association between incumbency mobility and alternation becomes stronger after 1980. What is more, the impact of this type of volatility is also stronger than that associated with total volatility; this is to say that the 'decisive location' of the available electorate is more influential than the sheer stock of available voters in the system. This pattern fits perfectly, for instance, in the case of the United Kingdom where, notwithstanding a low level of total volatility, the frequency of alternation is associated with a high interchange of votes across the incumbency dimension. Put differently, with regard to turnover in government, quality of volatility matters more than its mere quantity.

Finally, it is worth noting the twofold trend shown by the anti-system volatility. More precisely, its effect on the likelihood of alternation is negative in the first phase, while it utterly changes direction in the second. Although the association in both periods is remarkably weak, it is noteworthy that after the 1980s the impact of an available electorate along the anti-system divide is not at odds with a pattern of alternation in government.

Tab. 10.16. Correlation between electoral volatilities and dimensions of government turnover

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Electoral volatility	-0.054 (133)	0.011 (235)	0.001 (133)	-0.073 (245)
Incumbency volatility	0.227** (75)	0.160* (129)	0.138 (75)	-0.036 (129)
Anti-system volatility	-0.134 (43)	-0.064 (67)	-0.106 (43)	-0.164 (67)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Electoral volatility	0.215** (136)	0.219*** (231)	0.168* (136)	0.166** (231)
Incumbency volatility	0.263*** (105)	0.289*** (164)	0.191* (105)	0.152* (164)
Anti-system volatility	0.027 (58)	0.000 (92)	-0.036 (58)	-0.046 (92)
<i>Whole period (1945-2015)</i>				
Electoral volatility	0.158*** (269)	0.162*** (466)	0.153** (269)	0.103** (466)
Incumbency volatility	0.275*** (180)	0.271*** (293)	0.206*** (180)	0.129** (293)
Anti-system volatility	0.046 (101)	0.045 (159)	0.022 (101)	-0.001 (159)

If we now move the focus to the salience of the political divides and their relationship with the patterns of government turnover or alternation, the conclusion that one can reach is, at least, twofold. First, alternation in power is more likely when the incumbency divide becomes a relevant dimension of competition in the system. Moreover, since the strength of this cleavage has increased over time, as I have pointed out above, its impact on alternation has also become stronger. As Table 10.17 shows, the correlation coefficient between incumbency salience and the level of government turnover is 0.114 in the first phase and increases to 0.307 after 1980. A similar pattern is visible also in relation to both the frequency and the probability of alternation.

The second conclusion relates to the role of the anti-system cleavage. If, as we have just seen, the most important dimension of competition for the occurrence of alternation is the incumbency divide, the anti-system dimension reveals a negative relationship between our measures of government turnover. In other words, the more salient the anti-system divide in the system, the lower the likelihood of a government alternation. Obviously, this is not a surprising finding but it casts a new light on the relationship between alternation and anti-system parties. To put it another way, when interparty competition is mainly structured along the line that separates pro-system from anti-system parties, which in turn implies a low level of legitimacy of the regime and an effective encapsulation of the voters within the two blocks, the prospect of alternation appears rather limited. By contrast, when other dimensions of competition prevail, a complete eviction of the incumbent government becomes a credible expectation.

Tab. 10.17. Correlation between block salience and dimensions of government turnover

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Incumbency salience	0.176 (75)	0.092 (128)	0.114 (75)	-0.101 (128)
Anti-system salience	-0.274* (43)	-0.131 (67)	-0.196 (43)	-0.189 (67)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Incumbency salience	0.292*** (103)	0.251*** (162)	0.220** (103)	0.078 (162)
Anti-system salience	-0.254* (58)	-0.217** (92)	-0.238* (58)	-0.222** (92)
<i>Whole period 1945-2015</i>				
Incumbency salience	0.262*** (178)	0.197*** (290)	0.197*** (178)	0.019 (290)
Anti-system salience	-0.231** (101)	-0.150* (159)	-0.193* (101)	-0.151* (159)

In the end, electoral availability has a role in the occurrence of alternation, but its effect is based on the types of competition that shape and structure the behaviour of the parties and the voters. When the confrontation takes the shape of a duel between the government and an alternative government-in-waiting, even a small portion of the available electorate may tip the balance in favour of one team of rulers. In other circumstances, instead, the impact of electoral volatility is filtered by elites' behaviour or by the effect of other factors. For instance, government type is a crucial intervening factor in this relationship. Where the cabinet is made up by a single party or it does not control a majority of seats, a small oscillation in the preferences of the electorate may provoke an earthquake at the governmental level. On the contrary, when the cabinet has a large parliamentary basis or is a Grand Coalition, it may well be the case that a 'Tsunami election' brings about only marginal and partial replacements in the composition of the government.

Electoral mobility is, therefore, an important factor accounting for the variation in the frequency of alternation across West European countries. However, its effect is conditional on the presence of other short or long-term factors, which may hinder or foster the process of government turnover. Different types of electoral volatility have different effects on the pattern of government turnover. Only when the interchange of votes takes place across the incumbency dimension may alternation in power benefit from a more volatile electoral market. In other circumstances, an increasing electoral mobility may indeed have, so to speak, unintended consequences, such as the creation of cartels among the governing-oriented parties in order to neutralise the rising unpredictability of the voters. Be that as it may, the conclusion is clear – the relationship between volatility and alternation is not as straightforward as we would have expected from a purely theoretical standpoint. At the empirical level, the association presents many problems and nuances that can be disentangled only with a precise conceptual tool, a thorough comparative analysis and, as Chapter 12 will try to do, with the adoption of multivariate statistical techniques.

Chapter 11

Electoral systems and disproportionality

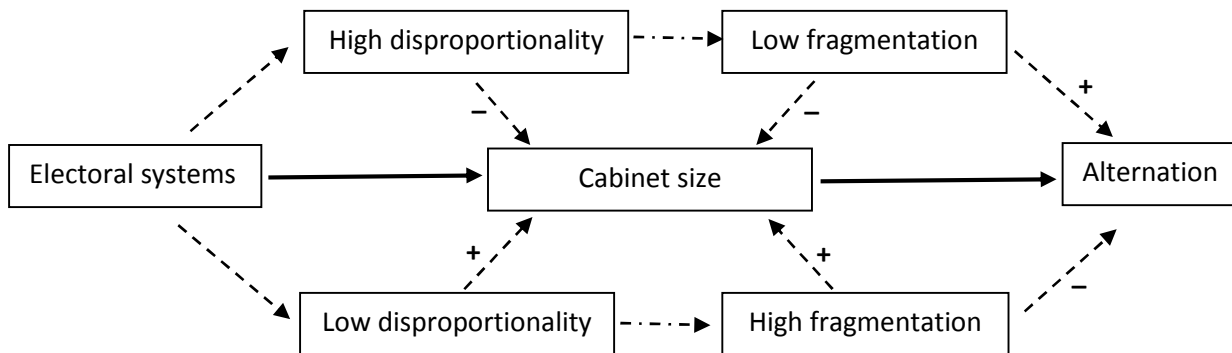
11.1. Introduction: a building on shaky grounds

The conventional wisdom, dating back at least to the seminal work of Maurice Duverger (1954), maintains that there is a direct link between the nature of the electoral system and government formation. In the famous, albeit widely questioned, law-like generalization suggested by Duverger, *'the simple-majority single-ballot system favours the two-party system'* (1954: 217) and, accordingly, the formation of one-party government. In contrast, proportional electoral systems and, to a lesser extent, majority run-off favour multi-partyism and, in turn, the creation of coalition government. This is, in a nutshell, the tradition of research that very aptly Matthew Shugart (2005: 28) has recently described as the "Duvergerian agenda in modern political science" and that has been largely driven by the search for generalizations about the association between electoral systems and the party-system fragmentation or the (dis)proportionality of the outcomes. Building upon this tradition, other scholars have then been concerned with the implications of the electoral systems on government formation, in particular with the possibility of single-party or coalition government. Although I do not concur with the rather optimistic view of Farrell (2001: 168), who claims that 'the debate on the proportionality and party system effects of electoral systems is pretty much complete', I must acknowledge that the findings in the original Duvergerian agenda are much more robust and widely accepted than those referring to the more recent stream of research, which aims at establishing an association between electoral systems and government formation.

In other words, if we know when and how different electoral systems affect the *format* of the party system, we are still wondering whether and to what extent the functioning of the electoral system impact on the *mechanics* of the system. If we then turn our focus on the relationship between electoral systems and alternation in power, our scarce knowledge is mainly based on an array of unproved and indirect generalizations. Such a dismal state of the art is perfectly expressed by Kaiser and his colleagues (2002: 317), who deserve to be quoted in full: 'The more disproportional an electoral system is, the more likely it is that small changes in votes are amplified into large shifts on the representative level. Therefore, a highly disproportional electoral system allows alternation with small changes on the electoral level, and gives a smaller group of disappointed supporters of the acting government the chance to punish it'. Following the same approach, Pellegata (2016: 54) notes that 'the possibility of alternation is maximised by political systems that presents few parliamentary parties and have a highly disproportional electoral system'. What is surprising here is the chain of logical steps that links electoral systems with alternation in power and that can be represented, for the clarity's sake, as the following Fig. 11.1.

More precisely, in the scholarly literature we find many studies that, taking for granted the linkages between electoral systems, disproportionality, number of parties and cabinet types, establish a direct, clear-cut link between the way votes are translated into seat and specific pattern of (non)alternation in power. The most troubling cases are those in which an alleged cause-effect relationship between disproportionality of the electoral system (or the format of the system) and alternation is transformed *by fiat* in an equivalence relation whereby a high disproportional system is equivalent to, or treated as an indicator of, possibility of alternation.

Fig. 11.1. Chain of causation between electoral system and alternation in government



Yet, as I have pointed out in the course of this dissertation, many of those associations that the literature assumes as fixed or given when put to test reveal all their weaknesses. In Chapter 5 we have seen that the relationship between party-system format and alternation is not as strong as one would have expected. The same holds true also for the association between government type and turnover in government, as shown in Chapter 7. If we add the consideration that even the linkage between electoral systems and disproportionality is far from straightforward, because it is conditional on the number and strength of “issue dimensions” (Lijphart 1984) or social cleavages (Taagepera and Shugart 1993, Stoll 2013) present in the system, then the relationship between some features of the electoral system and alternation must be taken *cum grano salis*. The same caveat must be applied to the conventional wisdom concerning the impact of electoral system on government formation, which, ‘like most conventional wisdom, [...] is neither wholly true nor entirely groundless’ (Gallagher 2005: 562). In sum, before establishing a definite link between electoral systems and government alternation, especially on the basis of uncertain and shaky grounds, it is necessary to assess whether and to what extent different electoral systems make an alternation in power more or less likely. This is the mission of the present chapter.

11.2. A matter of definitions and operationalisations

Before analysing the relationship between electoral systems and alternation, few definitional questions must be spelled out. First, in a very abstract but useful way, electoral systems should be defined as “the means by which votes are translated into seats in the process of electing politicians into office” (Farrell 2001: 4). In a nutshell, this is the main function carried out by any electoral system. However, the translation of votes into seats may take different forms and follow different procedures. To begin with, there are three main elements affecting the translation of votes into seats: a) ballot structure; b) district magnitude; c) electoral formula (Rae 1969). The ballot structure describes how voters cast their votes, and can further lead to a distinction between categorical and ordinal ballot. Since ballot structure has no direct impact on the proportionality (i.e., the relationship between votes and seats) of the electoral outcome, I do not have to dwell on that too much here.

The second element – district magnitude – determines the number of seats assigned to the district and it is generally considered as one of the most important determinant of (dis)proportionality of the electoral systems. The common view in the scholarly literature is that in proportional systems (PR) greater district magnitude increases proportionality, whereas in non-proportional systems, where usually the district counts one single seat, district magnitude decreases proportionality. Although the evidence of this generalization has produced, on the whole, only mixed results (Niemi et al. 1985, Blais and Carty 1987, Cox 1997, Ware et al. 2001), we can agree with the conclusion reached by Lijphart (1999: 150): ‘the district magnitude in plurality and majority [i.e, non-proportional] systems entails greater disproportionality and

greater advantages for large parties, whereas under PR it results in greater proportionality and more favourable conditions for small parties’.

Thirdly, the electoral formula concretely manages the translation of votes into seats. Among the extreme variety of formulas currently at work in democratic regimes, scholars are used to identify three main types of electoral rules: plurality, majority and proportional. The plurality formula – usually known as ‘first-past-the-post’ – implies that the candidate who receives the most votes get elected. In this sense, the *winner takes all*, at least at the district level. The majority formulas (either with a run-off ballot or a second round) and the alternative vote, used in Australia, require not a plurality but an absolute majority of votes for election. Finally, there is the crowded family of the proportional formulas which, as we have seen above, assigned seats to parties ‘in some proportion’ to the votes they won. On this respect, the noteworthy point is that proportional formulas display ‘very diverse degrees of proportional correspondence between votes and seats, ranging from highly impure (disproportional) to pure (exactly proportional) fits’ (Sartori 1986: 53). Therefore, taking into consideration these three types of electoral formula, one can conclude that there are different *degrees of (dis)proportionality* that cut across the crude distinction between proportional and non-proportional electoral systems and, consequently, we are in need of a measure of disproportionality that keeps together plurality, majority, and proportional formulas. Although various way of measuring disproportionality can be found in the literature, the most common index (called ‘Least Square Index’) has been devised by Michael Gallagher (1991) and take account not only of the total amount of vote-seat deviation, but also of the relative weight of each deviations. More concretely, the Disproportionality Index (DI) is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Disproportionality Index: } \sqrt{\left(\frac{\sum(S_i - V_i)^2}{2}\right)}$$

where s_i stands for the share of the seats of the party i and v_i for its respective share of votes. Its theoretical range goes from 0 (perfect proportionality) to 100 (maximum disproportionality).

Thus far, I have pointed out that all electoral systems vary on the basis of their more or less disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats. However, as aptly underlined by Rae (1967) and Lijphart (1999), all electoral systems have important effects in common: ‘1) all electoral systems tend to yield disproportional results; 2) all electoral systems tend to reduce the effective number of parliamentary parties compared with the effective number of electoral parties, and 3) all electoral can manufacture a parliamentary majority for parties that have not received majority support from the voters’ (Lijphart 1999: 165). Nevertheless, these common trends vary, again, in proportion to the disproportionality of the electoral formula and the district magnitude; and in turn the systematic advantage for the larger parties increases as one moves from “pure” to highly “impure” proportional, let alone plurality or majority, systems. Eventually, the advantage for the large parties is reflected in the majority premium that all electoral systems award to the parties forming a (majority) cabinet.

Precisely on this matter, Rae (1967: 74-77) introduced the concept of “manufactured majorities”, that is, artificially created by the internal working of the electoral system. As for the electoral threshold of representation, it is useful to distinguish here between *formal* (or legal) and *informal* majority bonus. The latter is a premium in seats established by the electoral law and awarded to those parties or alliances that have crossed a previously specified share of votes. To be more precise, to date only two countries in Western Europe adopt an electoral law with a majority bonus: Greece and Italy. The Greek electoral system, that I define as “majority-boosting PR”, awarded a 50-seat premium to the largest parties, despite it will get or not an absolute majority in the legislature. By contrast, the new Italian electoral law, approved in 2015, can be defined as ‘run-off majority-assuring PR’, which concretely means that a majority bonus is awarded to the party that obtains at least 40 per cent of the national vote but, if no party passes that threshold, a run-off election will be called and the winning party will get 54 per cent of the seats. Beside these two exceptions, all the other electoral systems in Western Europe make no provision for formal majority bonus. Nevertheless, an informal majority premium exists even though no formal arrangement has been included in the electoral

law. In fact, the disproportionality through which any electoral system favours large parties is automatically reflected in the seat-bonus assigned to the governing parties. To make a long story short, this informal electoral bonus awarded to the cabinet parties is simply calculated as follows:

$$\text{Electoral bonus: } S_g - V_g$$

where V_g is the share of the votes won by the governing parties and S_g is the respective share of the seat controlled by the cabinet.

Summing up, classifying electoral systems is a demanding task that requires both dichotomous concepts as well as fine-grained continuous measures. However useful the crude distinction between proportional and non-proportional may be, all electoral systems greatly vary in the way they translate votes into seats. In order to grasp the degree of disproportionality embedded in each electoral systems, I have eventually come up with two indicators: a) Disproportionality or Least Squares Index; and b) Electoral bonus for the cabinet.

Table 11.1 reports the mean of the two indicators for the seventeen West European countries. The first aspect to point out is that the proportional electoral system is the most common among the party systems here under examination, the only exceptions being France (with a majority system) and the United Kingdom, with its traditional plurality or first-past-the-post system. It is thus not surprising that the two non-proportional countries record the highest values in the Disproportionality index, respectively 14.0 for France and 11.7 for the United Kingdom. These data reflect also the low level shown by the electoral bonus. To be more precise, government in France and in the United Kingdom enjoyed, on average, a bonus of 14.6 and 10.7 per cent artificially created by the electoral mechanism. In the other proportional systems, the average of the electoral bonus shows a great deal of variation: from 1.1 per cent of the Danish case to 8.4 per cent recorded in Spain, where a low district magnitude makes the electoral system working in a rather disproportional way. If we consider the Disproportionality index, the least 'impure' proportional systems are those at work in the Netherlands (where seats are assigned within a nationwide district) and Denmark, whereas the most 'impure' systems are the Greek (7.6) and the Spaniard (7.5).

Tab. 11.1. Electoral systems and degree of disproportionality in Western Europe (lower chambers), 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Country	Electoral formula	Disproportionality index	Electoral bonus
Austria	PR flexible list	2.7	2.7
Belgium	PR flexible list	3.5	3.9
Denmark	PR open list	1.8	1.1
Finland	PR open list	3.0	3.4
France	Two-ballot majority	14.0	14.6
Germany	PR closed list + SMD tier	3.1	3.5
Greece	Majority-boosting PR closed list	7.6	8.2
Iceland	PR flexibe list	3.8	3.2
Ireland	PR single transferable vote	4.1	4.3
Italy	Majority-assuring PR semi-open list	4.9	4.8
Luxembourg	PR panachage	3.2	4.5
Netherlands	PR latent list	1.3	1.8
Norway	PR flexible list	4.1	3.8
Portugal	PR closed list	4.7	6.5
Spain	PR closed list	7.5	8.4
Sweden	PR open list	1.9	1.5
United Kingdom	SMD plurality	11.7	10.7
<i>Mean</i>		<i>4.6</i>	<i>4.6</i>

11.3. Where (and when) disproportionality comes from

As we have just seen, electoral disproportionality is far from constant either across countries or through time. Indeed, there is significant variation across countries and, more importantly, also within the same type of electoral system. Furthermore, there is evidence of an almost steady growth of electoral disproportionality through time, as can be observed in Table 11.2, which shows trends in two indicators of disproportionality by decade. It is worth noticing that, by the 1980s, both Disproportionality index and the measure of electoral bonus reveal an upwards trend and hit their peak in the mid-2010 with a similar level of disproportionality (6.2 per cent). From this viewpoint, parliamentary election in the post-war period have become more and more disproportional, without any further distinction between different types of electoral system. Interestingly enough, this growth in disproportionality has been accompanied by an almost simultaneous growth in the fragmentation of the West European party systems, as we have seen in Chapter 4.

Thus, at least at this level of aggregation, disproportionality and number of parties do not seem to be deterministically correlated, and other intervening factors can weaken the strength of that association. In other words, in the last thirty years in Western Europe a rising party-system fragmentation coexisted with a similarly rising level of disproportionality. In this sense, the assumption that alternation in power may be derived from the disproportionality of the electoral system *given* its potential *reductive* effect on the number of parties appears to stand on very shaky grounds.

Tab. 11.2. Trends in electoral disproportionality In Western Europe, by decade (mean values, %)

Decade	Disproportionality index	Electoral bonus
1940s	3.9	3.4
1950s	3.9	3.8
1960s	4.3	4.5
1970s	4.0	3.8
1980s	4.5	4.5
1990s	5.0	5.6
2000s	5.2	5.5
2010s	6.2	6.2
<i>Mean</i>	4.6	4.6

By analysing the trend in electoral disproportionality at the country level, it emerges that a lot of ‘noise’ or randomness in the data, with no clear pattern (see Table 11.3 below). In a group of countries, electoral disproportionality peaks in the last three decades, whereas other party systems – Denmark, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden – record highest values in the four decades immediately after the end of the Second World War. In addition, it is worth noting that four countries (Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) experienced their trough of disproportionality in the mid-2010s. Hence, when the overall, or aggregate, trend breaks down at the individual level, we observe a significant amount of cross-country variation or deviation from the general pattern. In brief, electoral systems in West European party systems brought about more disproportional results, but this effect is more common in some countries than in others.

Tab. 11.3. Disproportionality index in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

Country	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	<i>Average</i>
Austria	3.1	4.1	4.0	1.5	1.9	1.3	3.1	4.6	2.7
Belgium	3.4	3.3	3.1	2.3	3.3	3.2	4.3	4.7	3.3
Denmark	4.5	1.4	1.9	1.7	1.8	1.8	1.2	1.0	1.8
Finland	3.1	2.3	3.3	2.7	3.1	3.7	3.2	3.1	2.9
France	3.1	8.5	18.1	11.8	12.8	18.4	19.9	17.7	11.6

Germany	2.3	3.1	0.8	2.1	3.1	4.1	3.3	8.6	2.7
Greece	-	-	-	13.6	7.5	7.1	7.1	9.4	8.1
Iceland	1.6	9.0	2.6	2.8	2.6	1.9	2.4	6.2	3.8
Ireland	5.6	3.4	3.5	4.1	3.2	4.1	6.1	6.0	4.1
Italy	3.6	3.4	2.7	2.5	2.6	6.3	8.0	13.4	4.7
Luxembourg	2.8	2.4	2.9	3.5	4.0	4.2	3.8	3.1	3.2
Netherlands	1.2	1.4	1.4	1.5	1.3	1.2	1.0	0.8	1.2
Norway	9.2	5.3	3.4	4.7	4.8	3.8	3.1	1.9	4.3
Portugal	-	-	-	3.7	4.0	5.2	5.2	5.7	4.6
Spain	-	-	-	10.6	8.8	6.2	6.4	8.4	7.8
Sweden	3.5	2.5	2.6	1.4	1.8	1.5	2.3	0.9	2.0
United Kingdom	11.6	4.6	8.2	12.7	16.2	15.0	17.1	15.1	11.3
<i>Average</i>	3.5	4.4	4.4	4.1	4.4	5.5	5.9	6.6	4.7

Note: bold = peak.

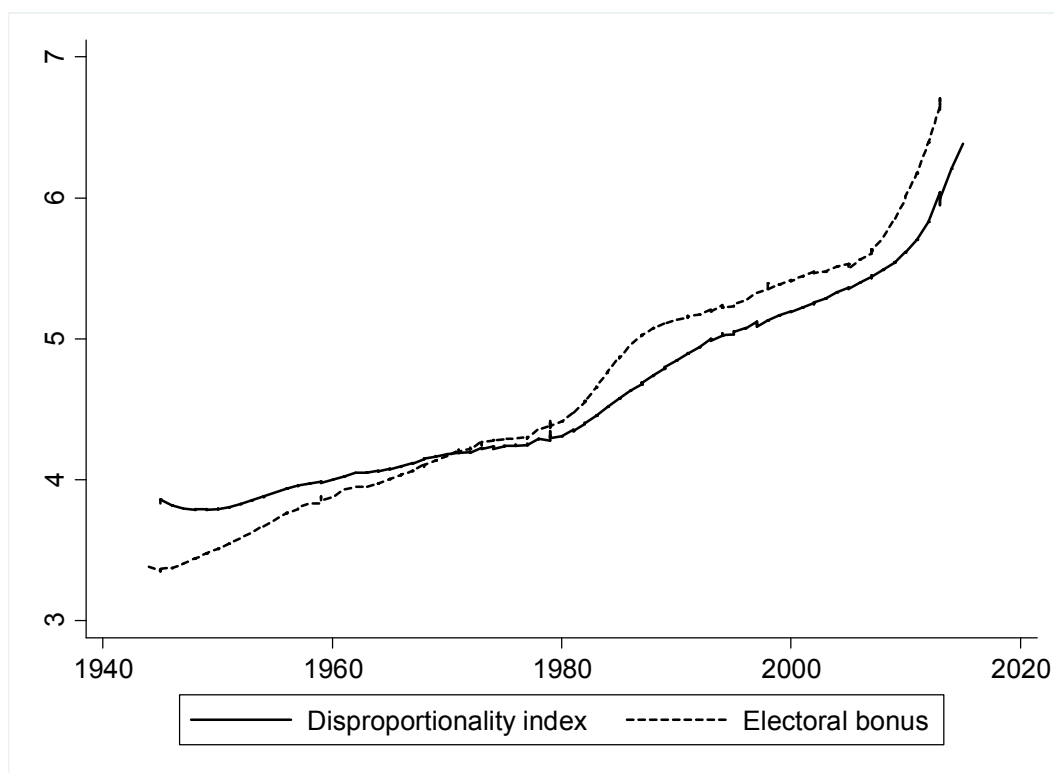
A similar picture emerges by looking at Table 11.4, which reports the mean values for the electoral bonus, that is, the seat-premium received by the governing parties as an indirect effect of the mechanical working of the electoral system. Here again, although some countries hit the peak in the last three decades, the cross-country variation reveals a great deals of randomness. To be more precise, the 1960s is the only decade that does not record any peak at the individual level, while in all other periods at least two countries reaches their highest values. Even though in the mid-2010s electoral bonus peaks in four countries (e.g, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, and Italy), it is also interesting to note that, for the first time, we report an “electoral *malus*” (i.e., a negative bonus in the motherland of the Westminster model of democracy, that is, in the United Kingdom). More specifically, the first coalition cabinet led by David Cameron in 2010, made up of the Conservative Party and the Liberal-Democrats, controlled a number of seats in the legislature (56 per cent) lower than the sum of their shares of the votes (59 per cent). Curiously enough, despite this electoral *malus*, the UK party experienced, as usual, an alternation in power (albeit through the formation of an unusual coalition government).

Tab. 11.4. Electoral bonus in Western Europe, by country (mean values, %)

	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	<i>Average</i>
Austria	2.6	5.8	5.2	0.7	2.5	1.4	2.8	3.3	2.9
Belgium	2.8	2.8	3.5	1.8	3.6	5.3	8.4	6.0	3.8
Denmark	0.4	0.4	4.0	0.8	0.4	0.8	0.1	0.1	1.0
Finland	2.1	2.0	3.5	3.5	5.7	3.2	4.5	2.0	3.1
France	-	15.9	15.8	11.2	12.8	23.7	20.3	18.3	16.8
Germany	5.1	5.0	3.3	0.5	0.7	3.9	3.8	15.3	3.5
Greece	-	-	-	15.1	6.6	8.8	9.2	10.5	9.0
Iceland	0.1	5.0	0.5	1.8	2.3	1.9	3.1	9.2	4.1
Ireland	4.9	3.3	3.9	4.7	2.3	3.9	4.5	12.6	4.1
Italy	2.9	3.0	2.5	2.4	2.5	7.1	7.3	12.4	4.2
Luxembourg	2.7	4.2	5.5	5.7	5.6	6.2	4.6	4.6	4.7
Netherlands	2.1	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.9	1.9	1.6	1.0	1.9
Norway	10.3	6.0	2.7	4.6	3.6	2.6	2.7	2.5	4.1
Portugal	-	-	-	5.7	7.6	6.3	4.7	7.0	6.4
Spain	-	-	-	13.3	10.2	6.5	5.5	8.5	8.8
Sweden	3.1	1.8	2.4	0.8	0.1	1.1	2.1	0.9	1.3
United Kingdom	13.6	4.7	9.8	10.1	17.1	15.1	20.4	-3.1	10.8
<i>Average</i>	3.2	3.5	4.7	4.0	4.4	6.1	6.3	6.4	4.8

Summing up, the overall picture, reported in figure 11.2, shows a remarkable steady growth in the degree of incongruence between votes and seats. In this perspective, the 1960s and 1970s appear as a phase of relative stability in the disproportionality of the electoral systems, while by the 1980 parliamentary elections in Western Europe tend to become more and more disproportional. However, as pointed out above, this general development hides a huge amount of within-country variation, meaning that in some countries the aggregate upwards trend is more muted or even inexistent. In any case, it is precisely this stock of variation that many scholars have used for analysing the impact of different electoral systems on the format and the dynamics of party system. However, to the best of my knowledge, no study has so far analysed the effects of different levels of disproportionality on the pattern of alternation in power. Until now, most scholars have preferred to take for granted the existence of this association, without questioning its theoretical premises or its empirical validity. Hence, in the rest of the chapter I will test the hypothesis whereby more disproportional electoral systems are associated with higher levels of government turnover and more frequent alternations in office.

Fig. 11.2. Trends of Disproportionality index and Electoral bonus in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowest smoothed lines)



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

11.4. Testing the association between turnover/alternation and disproportionality

Any electoral system, “weak” or “strong”, “pure or impure”, in Sartori’s (1986) terms, is a ‘mechanism for determining victors and losers, which clicks into action once the campaign has ended’ (Farrell 2001: 3). Nevertheless, this mechanism can be more or less effective in relation to the specific characteristics of the electoral system at work. Lijphart (1999: 165) is certainly right in saying that ‘different electoral systems have varying impacts on party systems’, but we also know, at least from the pioneering work of Sartori (1968), that also the characteristics of the party system – first and foremost its degree of (de)structuration – affect the potential manipulative impact of the electoral systems. In a recent attempt of reinventing the wheel,

many US scholars have eventually reached the (not) surprising conclusion that “context matters”, to be more precise that ‘context can shape the party system independently of the electoral system’ (Ferree *et al.* 2014: 429).

At any rate, as I have tried to make clear in section 11.1, the consequences of electoral laws on the pattern of government change are usually based on a relatively long chain of causation that can be, to some extent, weakened or even interrupted by short-term or simply contextual factors. In order to test the direct association between alternation and electoral systems, Table 11.5 shows the impact that different levels of disproportionality have on the government turnover. Looking at the level of rotation in office, it is evident that the higher the disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats, the deeper the reshuffling in the cabinet. More accurately, the mean level of government of turnover is 56.7 per cent when the Disproportionality index is lower than 5 per cent, whereas it goes up to 85 per cent when the electoral distortion pass the 10 per cent threshold. In brief, the *stronger* the electoral system, the higher the level of turnover in office. This is to say that when the congruence of votes and seats is less proportional, there exists more room of manoeuvre for the parties at the opposition to replace the incumbent rulers.

Tab. 11.5. Disproportionality index and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Disproportionality index	Government turnover	Mean level of government turnover
Low (0-5)	35.7	56.7
Medium (5-10)	47.3	82.7
High (>10)	46.9	85.0

If we now look at the relationship between alternation and disproportionality, we can see (in Table 11.6) that the expected positive association finds confirmation but with some caveats. First, frequency of alternation is lower (17.8 per cent) when the level of vote-seat distortion is below 5 per cent. Nevertheless, neither the frequency nor the probability of alternation grow gradually with the disproportionality of the electoral systems. In fact, the figures show that the frequency of alternation is higher where the degree of disproportionality is in the medium category, ranging from 5 to 10 per cent. A similar result emerges by looking at the possibility of alternation, which hits its peak (52.1 per cent) when the electoral distortion is not very high.

Tab. 11.6. Disproportionality index and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

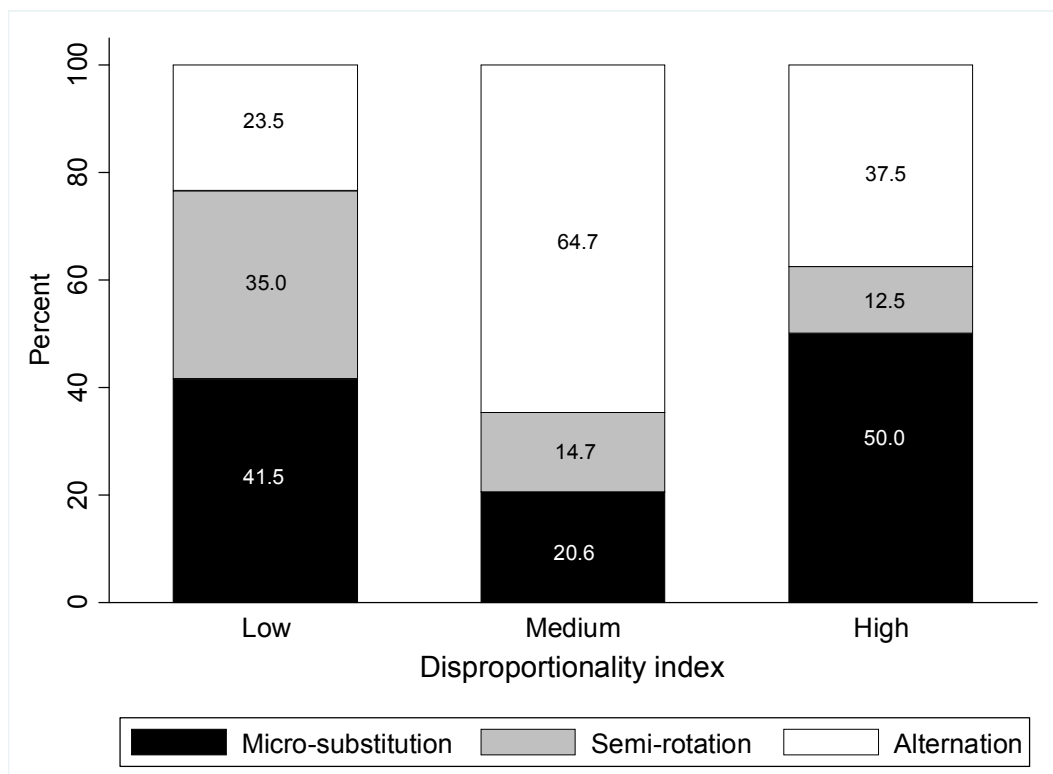
Disproportionality index (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-5%)	17.8	28.3	37.4
Medium (5-10%)	42.9	75.0	52.1
High (<10%)	41.4	75.0	46.7

In sum, both level of government turnover and alternation in power are positively associated with the disproportionality of the electoral system. Yet, in regard to the level of turnover, the relationship appears to be linear, whereas the association between electoral disproportionality and probability of alternation might be better described as a curvilinear relationship, in the sense that as the former variable increases, so does the latter but *up to a certain point*. This is tantamount to saying that a very high level of disproportionality can be, to some extent, detrimental to the occurrence of alternation in power. A scenario that was never contemplated by those scholars who based hitherto their works on ungrounded theoretical assumptions.

What we have already observed finds a further confirmation in the analysis of the impact of disproportionality on the frequency of the three types of government change (i.e., micro-substitution, semi-

rotation, alternation). As Fig. 11.3 reveals, micro-substitution is the typical form of government change when disproportionality is lower than 5 per cent, whereas alternation is more common (64.7 per cent of the cases) in conjunction with a medium level of disproportionality. It is interesting to note also that micro-substitution is the most frequent method of government change when the disproportionality passes the threshold of 10 per cent and the “manipulation” of the electoral system is remarkably high.

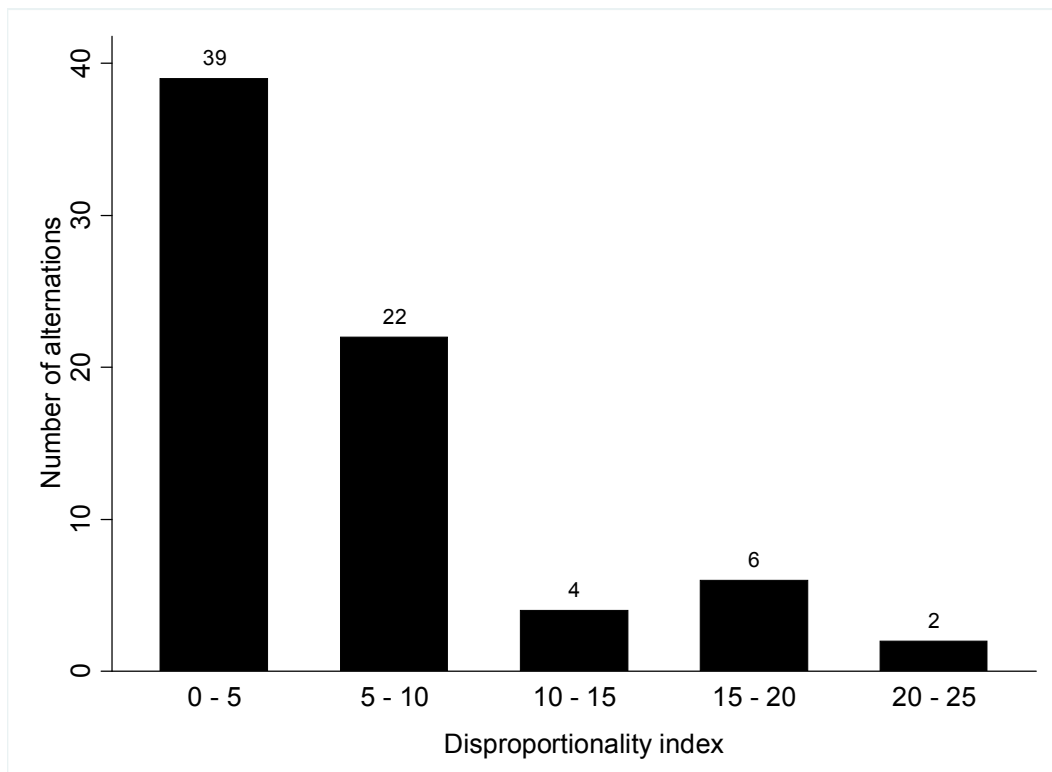
Fig. 11.3. Type of government change by level of disproportionality in Western Europe (percentage values)



Moreover, if we focus exclusively on the number of electoral alternations, that is, wholesale turnover occurred at election time, it is evident that low levels of disproportionality are not in contradiction with the complete eviction of the incumbent government. Indeed, as Fig. 11.4 reveals, in Western Europe 39 electoral alternations took place when electoral disproportionality ranged from 0 to 5 per cent, and 22 alternations in the next quintile. In general, hence, nearly 85 per cent of the total electoral alternations occurred in a context where the incongruence between votes and seats was limited. In other words, the most proportional electoral systems are, against the received wisdom, those recording the highest number of alternations in power.

Needless to say, this does not contradict the opinion of those who argue that ‘partial changes [in government] were common in the proportional design systems’, whereas changes of government of the “all-or-nothing” sort are reserved to the majoritarian constitutional design (Powell 2000: 68). Nevertheless, these findings points out to that the never-ending debate on the performance of majoritarian *versus* proportional visions (or models) of democracy is, in many respects, utterly misleading because features of one type “democratic vision” may be present at the same time also in the other type. More precisely, if the ‘majoritarian vision sees elections as enabling citizens directly to choose between alternative governments... [and] the proportional vision sees elections as choosing representatives who can bargain for their voters’ interests in postelection policy making’ (Powell 2000: 26), this crude categorisation of democratic regimes should find a way to somehow accommodate the significant occurrence of alternation in government within the proportional category.

Fig. 11.4. Number of electoral alternations by level of disproportionality in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (absolute values)



If we now turn our attention to the impact of the electoral bonus, which is, as we have seen above, strictly linked to the disproportionality index, the results are in line with those discussed so far. Rotation in power increases as the extent of the electoral bonus becomes larger (see Table 11.7). More specifically, when the seat-share bonus is lower than 5 per cent, the mean level of government turnover is 59.3, while it gradually goes up to 75.1 when the electoral system awards a bonus of more than 10 per cent in seats. The same pattern of association emerges if we observe the degree of government turnover, that is, the total accumulation of rotation in office over time. In this perspective, the higher the electoral bonus allocated to the governing parties, the higher the degree of turnover in the executive power.

Tab. 11.7. Electoral bonus and government turnover in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral bonus (%)	Government turnover	Mean level of government turnover
Low (0-5%)	37.8	59.3
Medium (5-10%)	37.9	71.2
High (>10%)	45.5	75.1

With regards to alternation in office, the positive impact of the electoral bonus finds confirmation. More precisely, a wholesale replacement of the ruling parties is more likely when the electoral system awards a bonus to the incoming cabinet (see Table 11.8). In numbers, one change in government out of three (33.1 per cent) occurs through an alternation when the size of the electoral bonus ranges from 0 to 5 per cent, whereas one change in government out of two takes the form of a wholesale turnover when the bonus overcomes the 5 per cent threshold. That said, it is interesting to note that as to the possibility of alternation the size of the electoral bonus does not seem to be decisive. In fact, in the three categories of electoral bonus alternation is an arithmetical possibility at about 40 per cent of the time.

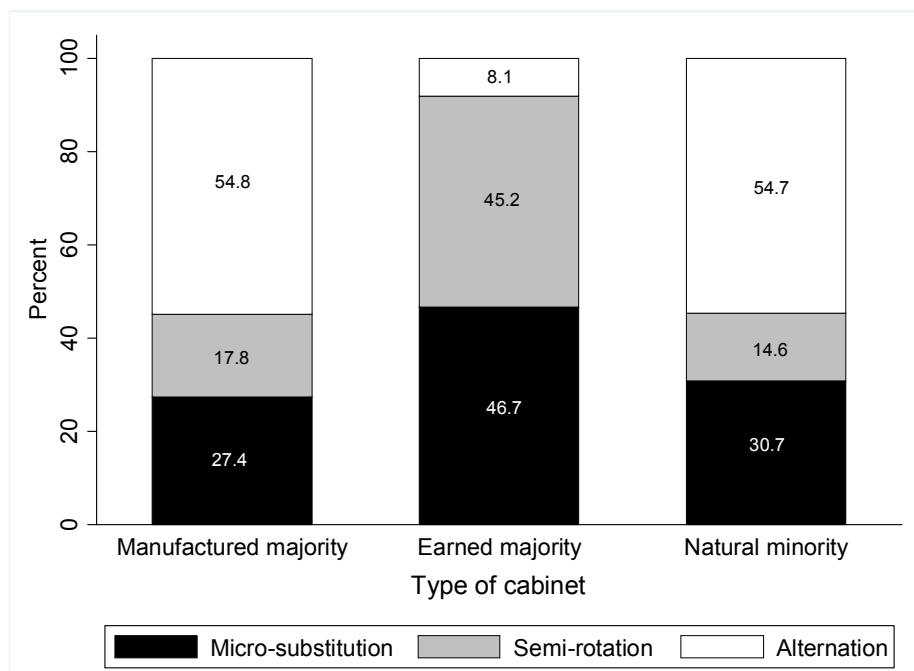
Tab. 11.8. Electoral bonus and government alternation in West European countries, 1945-2015 (mean values, %)

Electoral bonus (%)	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Low (0-5%)	21.1	33.1	41.2
Medium (5-10%)	29.0	54.5	40.3
High (<10%)	34.2	56.5	39.5

The concept of electoral bonus is useful, or more useful, if observed in the perspective of government formation. It is here, in fact, that the concept of “manufactured majority” – suggested by Rae (1967) – makes its entry on the scene. As pointed out by Lijphart (1999: 167), manufactured, or artificially created, majorities, ‘may be contrasted with earned majorities, when a party wins majorities of both votes and seats, and natural minorities, when no party wins a majority of either votes or seats’. By adapting this conceptual framework to the present discussion, it is possible to analyse the relationship between electoral systems and alternation in a different light.

Fig. 11.5 reports the percentage incidence of manufactured and earned (governing) majorities, and of natural minorities, for the three types of government change. All three are capable of artificially creating majorities but this ability is especially strong in cases of alternation. In other words, almost 55 per cent of all fabricated majorities have come to power through a wholesale replacement of the incumbent parties, whereas only 8.1 per cent of all earned majorities have passed through an alternation. Finally, it is worth noticing that cabinets formed as ‘natural minorities’ came to power, and probably resigned, in the wake of an alternation in 54.7 per cent of the time. Minority cabinets confirm, therefore, their capacity to act as vehicle of alternation, while it is not surprising that among the earned majorities the most typical way of government change is micro-substitution (46.7 per cent), closely followed by semi-rotation (45.2 per cent).

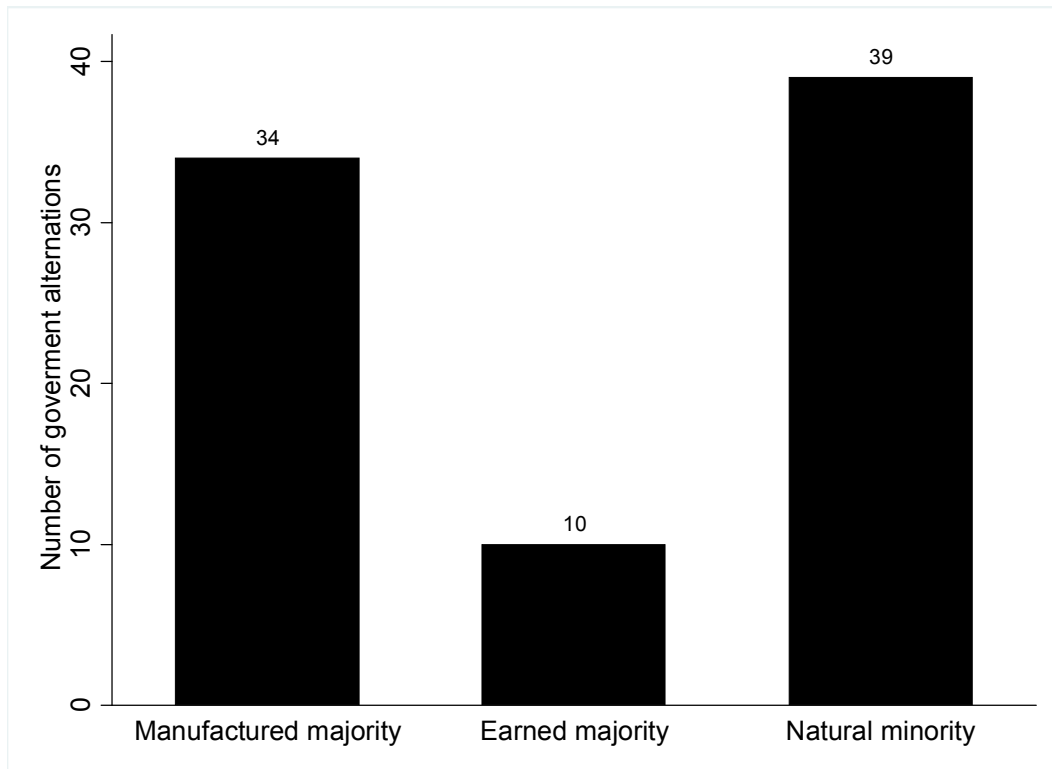
Tab. 11.5. Type of government change by level of electoral bonus in Western Europe, 1945-2015



Finally, if we consider all 83 government alternations in the dataset, 34 cases can be described as ‘manufactured alternations’, which means that they occur thanks to the artificial electoral bonus included in the electoral system (see Fig. 11.6). In contrast, the dataset includes only 10 cases of ‘earned alternations’,

which are the product of governing parties that got a majority at the polls; and lastly there are 39 cases of ‘minority alternations’ created by parties that do not control a majority of seats in the legislature. At this stage, it is important to stress that, if most manufactured alternations occurred in countries with non-proportional electoral systems (France and the United Kingdom), the vast majority of minority alternations took place in polities with proportional systems, such as Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and Spain. Once again, therefore, the two allegedly conflicting “visions” of democracy share one important characteristic that was supposed to discriminate between them.

Fig. 11.6. Number of government alternations in Western Europe by type of majority, 1945-2015



To recapitulate our findings so far, it must be stressed that electoral disproportionality shows a certain degree of association with government turnover and alternation. However, the strength of this relationship appears to vary substantially on the basis of the indicator adopted in the analysis. Moreover, some measures show that the disproportionality affects turnover in a linear way, while the association with the probability of alternation may be better described as a curvilinear relationship. Be that as it may, the point that must be underlined is that alternation is not a monopoly of non-proportional or majoritarian constitutional designs. Indeed, its occurrence in proportional systems calls for a further thorough examination, especially at the individual level, of the relationship between electoral system and rotation in the executive power. This is the goal of the next section.

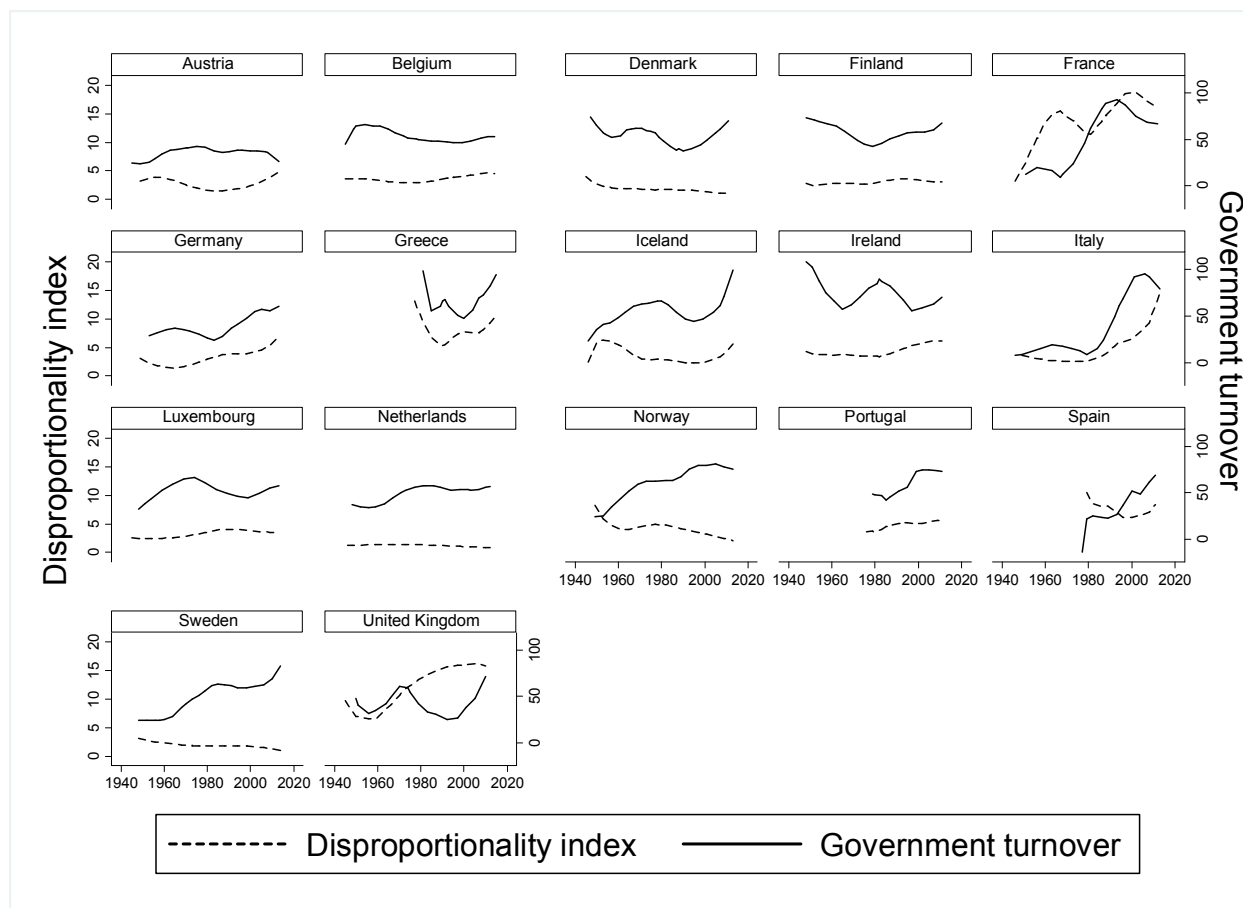
11.5. National and temporal trends

In general, that is, at a very abstract level, the analysis of variation across the universe of cases suggests that disproportionality may contribute, to some degree, to explaining differences in the levels of turnover in government. Given the nature of this relationship, therefore, different levels of disproportionality should also help account for variation in government turnover and alternation at the individual, or country, level. The association of the Disproportionality index with government turnover in the seventeen West European countries is shown in Fig. 11.7, which reports in the left y-axis the level of disproportionality and in

the right y-axis the mean level of turnover over time. The figures reveals that the relationship is not strong and consistent in all party systems.

To be more precise, in some countries the fluctuations of disproportionality and turnover in government appear to follow a similar pattern, whereas in other polities the two lines show very disjointed paths. In France, Italy, Iceland, Germany and, to some extent, Luxembourg government turnover goes hand in hand, though not perfectly, with the degree of incongruence in the translation of votes into seats. By contrast, in Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden the association is very weak and does not fit the expected pattern. In these respects, Norway and Sweden show the most revealing trajectory – the rising level of government turnover has been accompanied by a slight decline in electoral disproportionality. Furthermore, a similar tendency is quite visible also in Spain and the United Kingdom, especially since the 1990s, where a growth in disproportionality did not bring about an increase in the degree of turnover in office. Quite the contrary.

Fig. 11.7. Disproportionality index and government turnover in Western Europe, 1945-2015 (lowess smoothed lines)



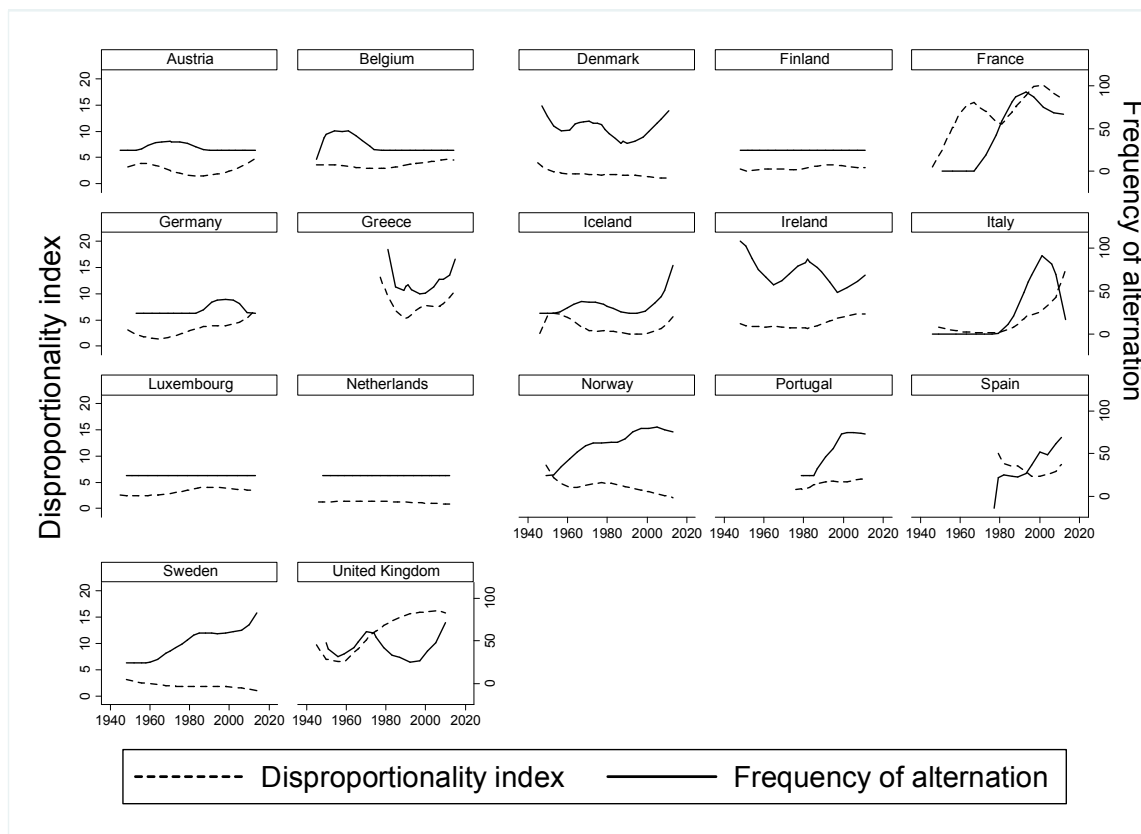
Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

All in all, the relationship between disproportionality and government turnover seems to be very strong in some countries, weak or very weak in others, and totally absent where, instead, we would have expected a different, or positive, result. If we now consider the association with the frequency of alternation, we obtain a very similar picture. Fig. 11.8 reports the smoothed lowess¹ for the disproportionality index (left y-axis) and the frequency of government alternation (right y-axis) over time. In this regard, it is worth noticing

¹ For more details on lowess smoothed data, see note 2 in Chapter 3.

that electoral disproportionality is indeed a good predictor for the occurrence of alternation in France, in particular during the Fifth Republic; in Italy, where the reform of the electoral system adopted in the early 1990s paved the way to the creation of a bipolar form of interparty competition; and in Greece, where disproportionality and alternation appear to be two faces of the same coin. On the contrary, in other West European party systems, especially in the Scandinavian countries (with the Finnish exception), disproportionality is a poor predictor for a pattern of wholesale replacement of the incumbent rulers. As we have observed just above, in these polities a slight decline in the votes-seats distortion of the electoral system goes along with a rising frequency of alternation. Although this unexpected pattern is not restricted exclusively to the three Nordic countries, one can speculate that here the crucial factor explaining the variation in the frequency of alternation is the relatively high occurrence of minority cabinets, which operate as harbingers of alternation (see, on this point, Chapter 7). Therefore, as I have pointed out in the introductory section, assuming a strict relationship between the disproportionality of the electoral system and a specific pattern of government turnover is a too big risk that in many cases turns out to be a losing bet. And this is even more so for all those studies that, implicitly or not, establish a sort of logical equivalence between the degree of congruence between votes and seats and an usually poorly specified ‘chance of alternation’. As the evidence collected here makes clear, the world of government alternation is much more complex and cannot be readily reduced only to one factor.

Fig. 11.8. Disproportionality index and frequency of alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015



Note: bandwidth for smoothed line is .7. Annual data points even if not all years appear in the category axis.

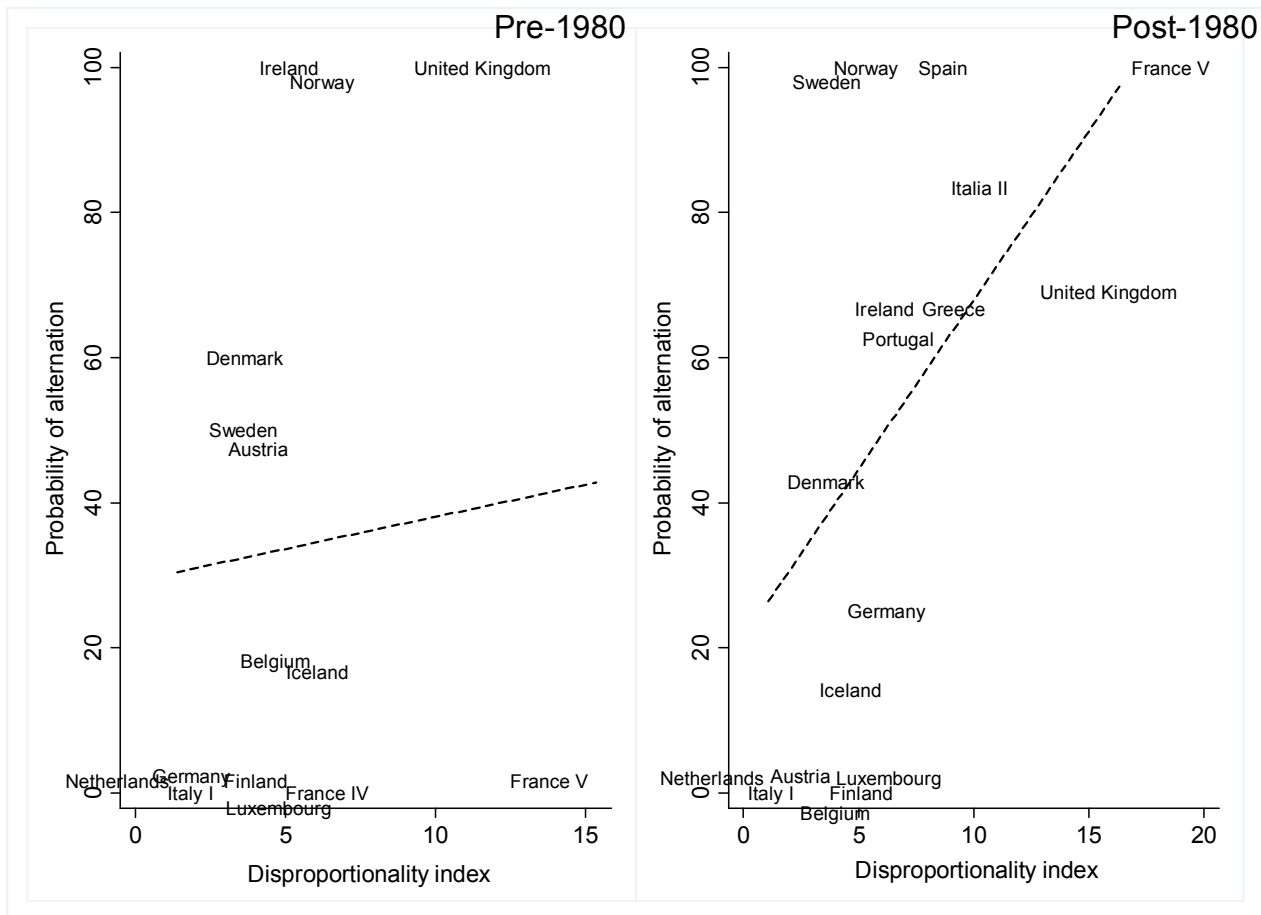
To have a closer look at the not straightforward relationship between disproportionality and turnover in the executive power it is also useful to observe it in a temporal, or longitudinal, perspective, taking into account the mean level of rotation in office for each country. Fig. 11.9 allows us to examine the relationship of disproportionality with the probability of alternation in two distinct phases, before and after 1980s. The first aspect to stress is that, in general, the association is not very strong among the seventeen West European countries. Yet, and this is the second aspect to point out, the relationship between disproportionality and

the probability of alternation get stronger in the second phase, that is, in the last thirty years. This trend is partially due to the entrance in the dataset of three 'third wave democracies' (Greece, Portugal, and Spain), which show both relatively high levels of disproportionality and likelihood of alternation. Moreover, the increasing strength of the relationship can be explained by the Italian case, whose relevant change in the electoral system in the early 1990s entailed a drastic increase in disproportionality and shortly after the occurrence of the first alternation in power since the end of the Second World War. Finally, the 1981 Socialist alternation in France (Aron 1982) inaugurated a pattern of interparty competition based on an 'all-or-nothing' approach in the exercise of the executive power.

In any case, it must be acknowledged that among the countries that use a relatively "pure" PR systems, there exists a remarkable variance in terms of probability of alternation. More precisely, on the one hand one finds Germany, Italy (until 1992), Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Fourth French Republic and Finland, where low disproportionality is associated with an almost absent frequency of alternation. On the other hand, there are Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Denmark and Portugal – all cases in which low disproportional systems coexist with frequent alternations in power.

Finally, two more aspects are worth mentioning. First, similar electoral systems or, better, electoral formulas, even though they share similar level of disproportionality, may bring about very dissimilar consequences in regard to rotation in power. This is not to say, however, that electoral systems do not matter. To put it in very mundane way, this means that the variation in the occurrence of alternation might be linked to the existence (or lack thereof) of other, more important factors. That said, the second aspect to be stressed is, in a way, a simple follow-up of the previous argument. Electoral systems might not be the decisive factor, but when a democratic regime undergoes a profound reshape of its electoral law, as occurred in France and Italy, the impact on the pattern of government turnover can be significant. Nevertheless, the effect of a change in the electoral system should not be overrated. It is certainly true that alternation appeared in Italy as well as in France in the wake of significant electoral reforms, but this event was accompanied by the disappearance of large anti-system parties and the creation of a bipolar mode of interparty competition. It follows, from this, that alternation is not a product of a single dominant factor but, more aptly, the result of a constellation of factors that can vary from time to time and from country to country.

Fig. 11.9. Disproportionality index and probability of alternation in Western Europe, before and after 1980 (mean values, %)



The accumulation of evidence concerning the impact of the electoral systems on the pattern of rotation in power suggests that disproportional systems may offer, to some extent, a partial explanation of the variance in alternation between the countries. However, in order to test the strength of this association across the universe of cases, I have analysed the bivariate relationship between two indicators of disproportionality (i.e., Disproportionality index and electoral bonus) and four dimension of government turnover/alternation. Table 11.9 offers the results of the bivariate relationship between the Disproportionality index and the level of government turnover. The figures reveal that the association is quite weak and in four cases (Belgium, Iceland, Ireland, and the Netherlands) also negative, which means that an increase in disproportionality is accompanied by a decrease in the level of government turnover. Nevertheless, the correlation coefficients are rather strong in Portugal (0.894), Italy (0.596) and France (0.498). The strength of the bivariate relationship in the last two cases is revealing because both countries underwent in different periods of time a process of electoral engineering with the specific objective of reducing party-system fragmentation and promoting a bipolar confrontation between the political forces. In this perspective, the change of electoral system seems to have effectively accomplished the task for which it was originally designed.

If we now look at the relationship with the frequency of alternation, it is evident that no straightforward result emerges from the figures. In some countries the association is positive, while in other it goes in the opposite direction. In Spain and the United Kingdom, classic instances of two-partyism, the coefficient is negative, meaning that the higher the Disproportionality index, the lower the frequency of a government change. A similar trend can be also observed in Sweden, Norway, Ireland and Belgium. Therefore, the association between disproportionality of the electoral formula and alternation cannot be

taken for granted or aprioristically assumed as a *fait accompli*. The consequences of electoral systems vary quite substantially from country to country and no single, or uniform, pattern can be singled out from the data. By looking at the possibility of alternation, this conclusion is even clearer – the relationship between disproportionality and specific patterns of turnover in government is relatively weak and far from homogeneously distributed among West European party systems.

Tab. 11.9. Correlation between disproportionality index and four dimensions of government turnover, by country

	Mean level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
Austria	0.057 (6)	0.050 (20)	0.067 (6)	0.122 (20)
Belgium	-0.098 (19)	-0.015 (22)	-0.045 (19)	-0.022 (22)
Denmark	0.236 (16)	0.364* (25)	0.220 (16)	-0.294 (26)
Finland	0.107 (15)	^a	^a	-0.119 (17)
France	0.498 (10)	0.403 (15)	0.588* (10)	0.403 (15)
Germany	0.366 (7)	0.192 (17)	0.260 (7)	0.461* (17)
Greece	0.428 (9)	0.165 (13)	0.327 (9)	-0.145 (13)
Iceland	-0.073 (13)	0.079 (20)	0.020 (13)	0.079 (20)
Ireland	-0.128 (15)	-0.172 (19)	-0.088 (15)	-0.269 (19)
Italy	0.596** (13)	0.338 (16)	0.281 (13)	0.719*** (15)
Luxembourg	0.316 (10)	^a	^a	^a
Netherlands	-0.436* (16)	^a	^a	-0.236 (21)
Norway	^a	-0.307 (17)	^a	-0.246 (17)
Portugal	0.894*** (7)	0.251 (12)	0.876*** (7)	-0.119 (17)
Spain	^a	-0.163 (10)	^a	-0.016 (10)
Sweden	0.231 (7)	-0.066 (21)	0.231 (7)	-0.322 (21)
United Kingdom	^a	-0.128 (17)	^a	-0.125 (17)

*Note: *, ** and *** significant at 0.1, 0.05 and 0.01 level, respectively. Number of cases in parenthesis. ^a = no variation or insufficient cases to compute correlation.*

Before closing this chapter, it is useful to investigate whether or not the relationship between the disproportionality of the electoral systems and alternation in power changes through time. As we have seen in section 11.2, electoral disproportionality rose in the 1980s, in conjunction with a growth in frequency of wholesale turnover at the governmental level. For this reason, it is worth investigating further this issue, in order to assess if and to what extent the two development are correlated. Table 11.10 reports the correlation coefficients between disproportionality and distinct dimensions of government turnover/alternation according to different temporal aggregation of elections. More specifically, using the 1980 as a cut-off point, all elections have been divided in two sub-sets and this aggregation allows us to evaluate the impact of the electoral system within the two phases. As the figures reveal, the indicators of disproportionality yield stronger, and statistically more significant, coefficient in the second phase, that is, since the 1980s. For instance, the bivariate relationship between the Disproportionality index and probability of alternation gets a coefficient of 0.219 before 1980 and it is doubled in the second phase, when the correlation coefficient is 0.404, equivalent to 16 per cent of the variance.

Needless to say, these figures does not automatically imply that the upwards trend in alternation can be explained by the nature of the electoral system. In other words, the higher strength of the association may be due to the simultaneous decline of other factors that were used to have a positive (or negative) impact on the occurrence of alternation. In brief, it is possible to imagine a scenario in which the decreasing trends of other factors, such as the de-freezing of the traditional political cleavages, the slow waning of ideological anti-system parties or the electoral enfeeblement of the large mass-based parties, has progressively make more effective the impact of the electoral system. That is equivalent to say that when

the electoral market is less constrained or, in a way, more 'elastic' (which does not mean 'unstructured'), the electoral system can exert its potential effects on the dynamics of party system more freely and efficiently.

Tab. 11.10. Correlation between electoral disproportionality and dimensions of government turnover

	Level of government turnover	Frequency of alternation	Probability of alternation	Possibility of alternation
<i>Pre-1980</i>				
Disproportionality index	0.192* (77)	0.076 (132)	0.219* (77)	-0.062 (132)
Electoral bonus	0.070 (77)	0.017 (132)	0.086 (77)	-0.050 (132)
<i>Post-1980</i>				
Disproportionality index	0.319*** (104)	0.297*** (162)	0.404*** (104)	0.113 (162)
Electoral bonus	0.226** (104)	0.167** (162)	0.236** (104)	-0.025 (162)
<i>Whole period (1945-2015)</i>				
Disproportionality index	0.342*** (181)	0.236*** (294)	0.364*** (181)	0.071 (296)
Electoral bonus	0.198*** (181)	0.136** (294)	0.211*** (181)	-0.002 (294)

Drawing conclusions from the evidence collected and discussed along this chapter, it is fair to argue that the variance in government alternation in Western Europe is in (small) part a function of variation in the multifaceted world of electoral systems. Yet, as I have pointed above, the relevant factor does not lie in the too crude distinction between proportional and non-proportional systems. Indeed, alternation in power is a common element for both systems and for the respective 'visions' of democracy. Even though the majoritarian model of democracy has, to speak, build its own success on the beneficial possibility of rejecting the sitting government, this opportunity of democratic accountability exists and is frequent, sometime even more frequent, in proportional systems. In short, the distinction between proportional and non-proportional systems does not distinguish between alternational and non-alternational systems. Or, even more bluntly, if all non-proportional systems are alternation-based party systems, the other way around is not empirically grounded.

A second aspect that must be stressed concerns specific characteristics of the electoral laws. To be more precise, in spite of the fact that many scholars have frequently established a sort of functional and conceptual equivalence between government turnover and disproportionality, my findings suggest that this equivalence is based more on conventional wisdom rather than empirical research. Alternation as well as turnover in government are only weakly correlated with the congruence through which votes are translated into seats. What is more, in some circumstances that association turns out not only to be extremely weak, but also negative, in the sense that more 'pure' proportional systems appear to be correlated with frequent alternations. In any case, the main conclusion we draw from this chapter is that the discussion on the consequences of the electoral law is far from being exhausted, and the further away we get from unsustained conventional wisdom, the better.

Chapter 12

Explaining government alternation in Western Europe: a dynamic perspective

12.1. Introduction

In the previous chapters included in Part II of this dissertation I have tried to take into consideration both types of variation in government alternation, i.e. space and time. More precisely, I have analysed the variance across-time and across-space (country) for each factor that can theoretically be associated with the pattern of turnover in government. According to Bartolini (1993: 144), in some circumstances 'the past is mainly seen as a fishing area for certain types of instance which can be considered comparable [...] nevertheless, in substance, the cases drawn from the past are not interpreted in a developmental perspective, but rather are conceived as additional unit of analysis'. This is precisely the kind of trap or error that I have tried to avoid throughout this dissertation. Taking time seriously as a distinct dimension of variation, both for alternation and its correlates, all analyses included in this study have jointly taken into account synchronic cross-national variance with diachronic (i.e., through time) variation. In so doing, I have identified both specific *temporal units*, namely time-spots for the measurement of single properties, and *periods*, 'characterized by a specific *stable combination* of values of multiple properties' (Bartolini 1993: 153). As far as temporal units are concerned, the analysis has focused on the formation and termination of cabinets in Western Europe since the end of WWII. Any meaningful change in the partisan composition of the cabinet has – so to speak – to set the rhythm for the analysis of temporal variance across the whole universe of cases. By contrast, in some circumstances I have also introduced a specific aggregation of the temporal units in order to identify two sufficiently homogenous periods of time, in which a group of explanatory factors seemed to follow a common path. More precisely, the year 1980 has been used as a watershed-date for separating a period characterised by a stable electoral and political landscape from a period in which the birth of 'new' parties, the 'de-freezing' of the traditional political cleavages, and the emergence of a pattern of electoral dealignment between parties and voters have cleared the way for a more volatile, unstable and unpredictable electoral market.

By combining these dimensions of temporal variation, we have seen that the occurrence of alternation has significantly changed across countries *and* through time. Since the 1980s, wholesale turnover in office has become more frequent almost everywhere in Western Europe, and this trend has been accompanied by changes in parties or voters' behaviour. Bluntly put, it would have been impossible to understand the extreme variance in the occurrence of alternation without taking into consideration its historical development. Incidentally, this is the reason why I have devoted one chapter to each factor (or cluster of factors) that in the scientific literature are usually associated with a specific pattern of government turnover. Only in-depth analyses, both across countries and through time, allow the identification of those processes explaining the existence of that set of conditions fostering or hindering government alternation.

That said, the focus on the temporal evolution of the patterns of government change in Western Europe in the last seventy years has not obfuscated the analysis of the variance across nations. All previous chapters have also included synchronic comparisons between the seventeen countries under examination. Countries that have never experienced a wholesale turnover in office have been compared with political systems where alternation is 'the rule', trying to assess which variables better explain this difference. Again, the evidence collected in the previous chapter tells us that there is no single, or superior, predictor for explaining the level of government turnover or the probability of alternation over time. Time-varying factors may be at work in a given nation for a period of time and then change for endogenous or exogenous reasons,

altering the structure of conditions that explain the (non) occurrence of alternation. In any case, the bottom line is that if we want to investigate the determinants of alternation in government, we must make room in our analysis for both sources of variation, i.e. temporal and spatial. That is the only way to grasp the political phenomenon that I have been analysing.

Nevertheless, the analysis conducted so far has been based on a set of bivariate associations between a specific dimension of governmental alternation on the one hand, and all potential correlates on the other. In doing so, I have investigated the amount of variation explained by a single factor *without* controlling at the same time for the effect that other correlates may have on the so-called *explanandum*. Up to now, the occurrence of alternation, as well as the amount of change in the partisan composition of the cabinet, has been studied, so to speak, in a ‘bivariate world’, as complex and changing through time as it could be. Now, it is time to take a step further, by bringing the analysis of alternation into a multivariate context. However, before proceeding this way, it is useful to summarise the results obtained so far and to lay out our expectations for the next step of the research.

12.2. Results from previous studies and future expectations

According to the scattered pieces of theory on the conditions explaining the occurrence of alternation, one can find different types of factors referring to the structure of the party system, the preferences of the parties, the behaviour of the voters or other short-term, idiosyncratic elements. Following Strøm et al. (2008), for the purposes of this chapter it is possible to gather together all factors associated with government turnover or alternation into four clusters of variables. The first cluster of factors encompasses the *structural* attributes of the party system. As Bergman et al. (2008) put it, structural attributes ‘come primarily in three types: features of the political system, of the parliamentary system, and of the cabinet itself’. Table 12.1 includes the main variables that I have presented and discussed throughout this dissertation and that can be considered as structural factors. To begin with, the variable called ‘bipolarism’ measures the strength of two major parties or poles exclusively in those circumstances in which the mode of inter-party competition follows a dual (or bipolar) structure, between a team of rulers, on the one hand, and a team of opposition parties on the other side of the divide. Recall that this measure of bipolarism is different from the others usually utilised in comparative research, where the ‘index of bipolarism’ is commonly calculated as the sum of the two major parties or coalitions, with no reference to the dynamics of competition (i.e., bipolar or multipolar). From this point of view, ‘bipolarism’ – as defined and calculated here – has a value of 0 when inter-party competition does not take place among two alternative sets of rulers, whereas it is measured as the sum of the two largest poles (either parties or coalitions) in those situations characterised by a dualist form of party confrontation. As such, it can be included among the structural attributes potentially affecting the occurrence of alternation. In Chapter 5, we have seen that the impact of bipolarism on both government turnover and probability of alternation has remained quite stable over time, albeit this pattern is not homogeneous across countries.

Tab. 12.1. List of the expected determinants of government turnover and alternation

Variable	Type of variable	Expected association	Expected change in the association after 1980
<i>Structure</i>			
Number of relevant parties	Continuous	-	stronger
Effective number of legislative parties	Continuous	-	stronger
Index of bipolarism	Continuous	+	stable
Cabinet size	Continuous	-	weaker
<i>Preferences</i>			
Seat-share pivotal party	Continuous	-	stronger
Seat-share of anti-system parties	Continuous	-	weaker

<i>Institutions</i>			
Disproportionality index	Continuous	+	stronger
Pre-electoral coalition	Dichotomous	+	stable
Pre-election identifiability	Ordinal	+	stable
<i>Short-term factors or critical events</i>			
Electoral volatility	Continuous	+	stronger
Cabinet electoral performance	Continuous	-	stable
Electoral competitiveness	Continuous	+	stable

The second factor included in the block of structural attributes is the number of parties. I have relied on two variables to effectively grasp the level of party-system fragmentation: the number of ‘relevant’ parties and, alternatively, the so-called ‘effective number of legislative parties’. As is clear, both measures count the number of parties, but they differ, so to speak, in terms of the ‘weight’ assigned to each party. The latter gives each party weight according to the ‘size of the pie’ that it controls in the legislature, while the former counts only those parties that have coalition or blackmail potential. Despite these conceptual and methodological differences, the analysis carried out in Chapter 4 has provided unambiguous results: party-system fragmentation is negatively associated with turnover in government but its effect is modest. Moreover, the impact that the number of parties has on the occurrence of alternation is not direct but appears to be related to the presence of other moderator or accelerator factors. In any case, the effect of the number of parties has slightly increased over time, especially after the 1980s.

Finally, the third structural attribute that I have taken into consideration is the strength of the cabinet parties or, more correctly, the share of seats controlled by those actors that explicitly and formally support the cabinet. In line with the number of parties, also the cabinet seat-share has shown a negative association with alternation – the lower the share of seats controlled by the cabinet, the higher the amount of change in government as well as the prospect for a complete turnover in office. All countries present a similar pattern, but it emerges in all its clarity especially in the Scandinavian countries, where the practice of minority cabinets has repeatedly paved the way for frequent alternations in government.

The second block of variables taps into the *preferences* of the actors. In other words, while ‘structural attributes constrain actor behaviour from the “outside”, the next cluster focuses on the goals of the actor themselves’ (Müller et al. 2008: 21). The first factor falling within this block is the level of polarisation existing in the legislature, which I measured as the seat-share of the anti-system parties. In accordance with the theoretical framework elaborated by Sartori (1976), polarisation is antithetical to alternation in the sense that the growth of the former implies almost automatically a reduction of the latter. However, the evidence collected in Chapter 9 has presented mixed results. The seat-share of anti-system parties is negatively associated with the occurrence of government alternation approximately until the 1980s, but after this period the association loses its strength and the impact on the pattern of turnover appears to be more ambiguous. In order to grasp this twofold trend, I have introduced the distinction between ideological and ‘functional’ (non-ideological) anti-system parties.

Following the path traced by Bergman et al. (2008: 99), ‘[m]any of the measures we place in the preferences cluster are based not simply on the preference of parties, but on the intersection of the parties’ preferences and their size’. Consequently, many of the factors that I have analysed in Chapter 6 about the ‘dominant’ and ‘pivotal’ parties can be easily accommodated within this block of attributes. As we have seen in that chapter, the variable showing the most significant pattern of association with the occurrence of alternation is the seat-share of the pivot party defined as the party that is simultaneously the largest in the legislature *and* located at the centre of the party system (or, more precisely, that is classified as a centre party). When these two properties (centrality and dominance) are shared by a single actor, the prospect for alternation significantly decreases. Moreover, the impact of the pivotal party on the pattern of turnover in government has increased over time, in particular since the 1980s. Hence, one can expect a negative

association between the strength of the pivotal party and government alternation, whose effect has become stronger over time.

As Table 12.1 shows, the third block of variables focus on institutions and especially electoral rules (or their by-products). To begin with, this set of attributes includes a measure of the degree of disproportionality of the electoral system (Gallagher's index), which is an indicator of the "distortion" to which a given electoral system translates, more or less proportionally, votes into seats. The analysis conducted in Chapter 11 has shown that the influence of the electoral system is, to say the least, extremely modest and weak. What is more, the impact of the electoral system on the pattern of government turnover is negligible in the first period, while it becomes more robust in the subsequent phase, that is, during the last thirty years. In a nutshell, the association between the disproportionality of the electoral system and government alternation is weak and negative, but this is evident only since the 1980s.

A second *lato sensu* institutional variable makes reference to the practice of forming a pre-electoral coalition, in particular among those parties that, before the election day, decide to coordinate their strategies and participate at the electoral campaign as a single entity or alliance¹. This coordination strategy, which has progressively become more common in the last decades in Western Europe (Golder 2006), may have a positive effect on the occurrence of alternation in that it creates a sort of bipolar structure in disguise. In a way, the existence of a pre-electoral coalition may mitigate or accentuate the impact of other factors on the pattern of governmental turnover. For instance, it can reduce the negative effect of a high level of party-system fragmentation or, conversely, it can bolster the positive impact of bipolarism on alternation. Chapter 7 has shown that this is indeed the case – namely, that the existence of a pre-electoral coalition is associated with a higher frequency of alternation in office.

At mid-way between the electoral system and the practice of pre-electoral coalition one finds the third institutional variable. As such, the index of pre-election identifiability is not an *institution*, neither electoral nor parliamentary. Nevertheless, it lives at the intersection between the incentives of the electoral system, the structure of the party system and the goal of the party actors. More precisely, the index of pre-election identifiability is an ordinal variable measuring the ease with which voters can identify the possible alternative teams of rulers. In a two-party system the identifiability of the cabinet composition is very high, while in multi-party settings it varies on the basis of different factors and strategies. As expected, the evidence collected in Chapter 7 has revealed the existence of a positive association between the measure of pre-election identifiability and the occurrence of alternation in government. Briefly put, the easier it is for the voters to identify the possible rulers before the election, the higher the possibility of observing an alternation. Furthermore, this positive association appears to be robust and constant over time.

Finally, the fourth cluster of variables brings together factors that the literature has considered as strictly related to the concept of government turnover. To be more precise, this cluster includes those short-term attributes that can exert an influence on the fate of the cabinet. In other words, these variables measure those critical electoral events that may affect the change in the partisan composition of the cabinet. Electoral volatility is the first variable that falls within this block of attributes. When a significant amount of voters is available to change their party preferences, the fate of the cabinet is more uncertain, especially in those circumstances in which the government-opposition divide is a relevant dimension of competition. Hence, the multivariate analysis will test for the existence of this (positive) association between the volatility of the electoral market and the volatility of the executive arena.

The second short-term factor focuses on the electoral performance of incumbent parties at the end of their parliamentary term. 'Cabinet electoral performance' is calculated as the difference between the

¹ Many scholars have recently emphasised the role of institutions in structuring the coalition formation process (Martin and Stevenson 2001; De Winter 2012). Among these institutional characteristics of the political system, scholars have included institutions structuring pre-formation bargaining as well as post-formation government (i.e., ministerial autonomy rules, qualified majority voting, explicit vote of confidence, etc.). Pre-election agreements, anti-pact rules (Geys, Heyndels and Vermeir 2006) or other similar arrangements are included in the former category.

share of the aggregate vote received by the governing parties at election t and election $t-1$. If voters express their preferences retrospectively upon the performance of the parties in office, alternation is more likely when a significant portion of the electorate negatively judges the performance of the government. Accordingly, our expectation would be that the worse the electoral performance of the incumbent parties, the higher the level of government turnover. However, as discussed in Chapter 7, this association is very weak and does not present any clear trend over time. Other factors, such as the size of seat-share controlled by the cabinet parties or the existence of a bipolar structure of competition, may interfere in the association between the electoral fate of the governing parties and their survival, or resistance, in office.

Lastly, the third factor that can be included among the short-term, or contingent, variables is the electoral margin of victory between two alternative sets of rulers. In this case, the same argument introduced for the concept of bipolarism can be applied here. Closeness of elections as an indicator for the uncertainty surrounding the electoral results applies only to those situations in which voters actually face a choice between two clearly identifiable teams of would-be rulers. In all other circumstances elections are not close at all because it would be impossible to establish the potential alternative governments. Thus, our measure of electoral competitiveness goes from 0 (when there is no dualism in the party system) to 100 (two parties or coalitions get the same share of the votes). In line with our expectation and, most importantly, the hypotheses discussed in the literature, the association between electoral competitiveness and the occurrence of alternation is positive. Alternation in government seems to be associated with competitive electoral races, albeit this association is not as straightforward or linear as we have predicted.

Table 12.1 reports all variables that will be utilised as predictors in the multivariate analysis and their expected association with the main dependent variables under examination here: government turnover and the probability of alternation. In many analyses, the inclusion of variables that are highly correlated or capture, to a degree, the same phenomenon will not be included simultaneously in the models. Although the standard test for detecting multicollinearity among the predictors does not indicate any serious problem², I will choose whichever measure is superior for theoretical reasons or empirical evidence derived from the bivariate analyses conducted in previous chapters. Moreover, in particular circumstances the analysis will focus on specific dimensions of a given variable. More precisely, for understating the impact of the anti-system parties on the pattern of alternation I will rely on the distinction between the ideological and non-ideological anti-system party. Similarly, in the analysis of the effects that electoral volatility may exert on government turnover I will take into account that dimension of volatility that refers to the incumbency (government vs. opposition) divide.

However, before proceeding to the multivariate analysis it is useful to discuss in depth the structure of my dataset and the statistical techniques that best fit them.

12.3. Statistical techniques and structure of the dataset

The dataset constructed to identify the determinants of government turnover and alternation can be defined as 'time-series-cross-section' (TSCS) (Beck and Katz 1995). Contrary to most quantitative analyses in political economy and comparative political research,³ the unit of analysis in the dataset is not simply country-year, but it takes into account what Immergut and Abou-Chadi (2014: 276) called 'a political configuration', that is, a span of time characterised by the investiture of a new government and its termination. In other

² I tested multicollinearity with a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test. In the basic explanatory model used here, the mean VIF value is 3.8. Moreover, each variable presents a tolerances value ($1/VIF$) higher than 0.1.

³ As Schmitt (2016: 1449), in 'panel data analyses, typically only one coefficient for all countries and years is estimated, implying the assumption of slope homogeneity and a homogenous lag structure. Within a standard panel data analysis based on country-years, this means that the changes at every point in time are assumed to have the same effect on the dependent variable within one year in every country. This implication is quite implausible [...]. One simple alternative to counter this problem is to adjust the units of observation substantively informed and use cabinets instead of country-years'.

words, the unit of analysis here is represented by each cabinet that, *in a given year*, has been formed in Western Europe since the 1945. Accordingly, I make use of panel data with cabinet-year as unit of analysis nested in 17 countries⁴. As is clear from Table 12.2, the dataset is unbalanced with a time-frame running from 1945 to 2015 and a number of cabinets per country between 14 (in Spain) and 51 (in Italy).

Tab. 12.2. Countries, unit of analysis and years in the dataset

<i>Country</i>	<i>N. of cases (cabinet-year)</i>	<i>Time-frame</i>
Austria	27	1945-2013
Belgium	37	1945-2014
Denmark	38	1945-2015
Finland	44	1945-2015
France	40	1946-2014
Germany	26	1949-2013
Greece	19	1977-2015
Iceland	27	1945-2013
Ireland	26	1945-2011
Italy	51	1945-2014
Luxembourg	20	1945-2013
Netherlands	24	1945-2012
Norway	31	1945-2013
Portugal	18	1976-2015
Spain	14	1975-2011
Sweden	30	1945-2014
United Kingdom	25	1945-2015

As noted throughout this dissertation, the concept of government alternation can be analysed at different levels on the ladder of generality and along different dimensions. For the purposes of this chapter, I will take into consideration three dependent variables: 1) the level of government turnover; 2) the probability and 3) the possibility of alternation. The former is a continuous variable, whereas the other two have a dichotomous nature. It follows that different types of dependent variables require different treatments and their variation can be analysed with specific techniques. Let us start with the level of government turnover.

As specified above, pooled analysis combines time series for several cross-sections (countries), with no specification about the length of the time period or the width of the cross-national analysis. In this case, we have a ‘long’ dataset in which the temporal dimension (T , country-year unit of analysis) prevails over the spatial dimension ($N = 17$). Technically speaking, the dataset that will be utilised in this chapter is defined as ‘temporal dominant’, because the temporal units outnumber spatial units⁵. Given the nature and the structure of the dataset, it is possible to capture not only the temporal or spatial variation, but also the variation taking place in these two dimensions *simultaneously*. This is because, ‘instead of testing a cross-section model for all countries at one point in time or testing a time series model for one country using time series data, a pooled model is tested for all countries through time’ (Podestà 2002: 8; see also Pennings, Keman and Kleinnijenhuis 1999: 172).

Hence, pooled TSCS analysis is, in this context and with a continuous dependent variable, the right approach to take; however, it is not a straightforward approach without obstacles, restrictions and

⁴ More precisely, the basic unit of analysis is cabinet in a given year. This means that for the years in which there was no change in government, the information of the previous year applies. For cases of more than one cabinet during the same year, the cabinet formed after a general election has been retained. When no election took place, the last cabinet of the year has been retained if it is the one with the longest duration in the executive.

⁵ As Beck and Katz (1995) pointed out, panel-corrected standard errors (Pcse) estimation is appropriate for a panel with a limited number of cross-sections for a long time-period.

limitations. In fact, pooled TSCS design violates many basic assumptions of the standard Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. More precisely, there are four potential violations of OLS standard assumptions when applied to panel data:

- 1) Serial correlation of errors – that is, errors tend to be autocorrelated and not independent from one period to the other;⁶
- 2) Panel heteroscedasticity – errors tend to have different variances across sections/countries;
- 3) Contemporaneous correlation of errors – due to common exogenous shocks, errors can be correlated across units;
- 4) Autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity of the error at the same time.⁷

In recent years, many scholars in comparative political research have paid considerable attention to these shortcomings, trying to find out those statistical techniques that can control for, or mitigate, the problem generated by the adoption of OLS regression within a pooled TSCS design. In order to deal with problems of contemporaneous correlation and panel heteroscedasticity, Beck and Katz (1995) suggested a procedure that adopts robust (i.e., panel-corrected) standard errors and eliminates any serial correlation either through the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable in the set of explanatory variables or estimating a model for autoregressiveness⁸. As Plumper et al. (2005) have convincingly argued, ‘the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable and/or period dummies tends not only to absorb large parts of the trend in the dependent variable, but likely biases results’. Consequently, in this chapter I will rely on the combination of panel-corrected standard errors with an autoregressive error model (AR1) – the so-called Prais-Winsten transformation – to eliminate serial correlation of errors. The adoption of these specifications to the empirical model will address all four potential problems of OLS assumptions applied to pooled TSCS data.

Moreover, for analysing the different impacts that some predictors may have on the pattern of government turnover through time I will split the dataset into two halves – before and after 1980. In doing so, it is possible to compare the strength of the association between the variables included in the model in two distinct periods of time. In addition, as robustness check, I will run the statistical analysis under two different model specifications: 1) a standard OLS regression with robust standard errors clustered on each country; and 2) an OLS regression with (robust) Newey-West (1987) standard errors⁹.

As far as the probability and possibility of alternation are concerned, the first aspect worth mentioning is that, in this case, the nature of the dependent variable is dichotomous. Consequently, any form of linear regression is ruled out as a viable statistical technique for analysis. For this reason, I will rely on a logit model, which is the standard technique (along with the probit model) in the literature to test hypotheses when the *explanandum* is a binary variable. More precisely, I will test which factors, according to the expectations discussed at length in previous chapters, mostly affect the likelihood of alternation in Western Europe. To do so, I will run both static and dynamic logistic regressions with observations clustered by country in order to determine whether any unobserved factors specific to each country affect the probability of alternation.

Also in this context, I will split the dataset into two periods in order to evaluate the changing impact of some factors on the predicted probability of alternation in government. Furthermore, to validate the robustness of my findings, as an alternative to the logit regression I will specify a Cox proportional hazard model in which the dependent variable is an event count (length of time, or duration, with no alternation in

⁶ The conventional Fisher type unit root test for unbalanced panel data indicates that the time series in my dataset is non-stationary. On the difference between stationarity and non-stationarity in time series analysis, see Nason (2006).

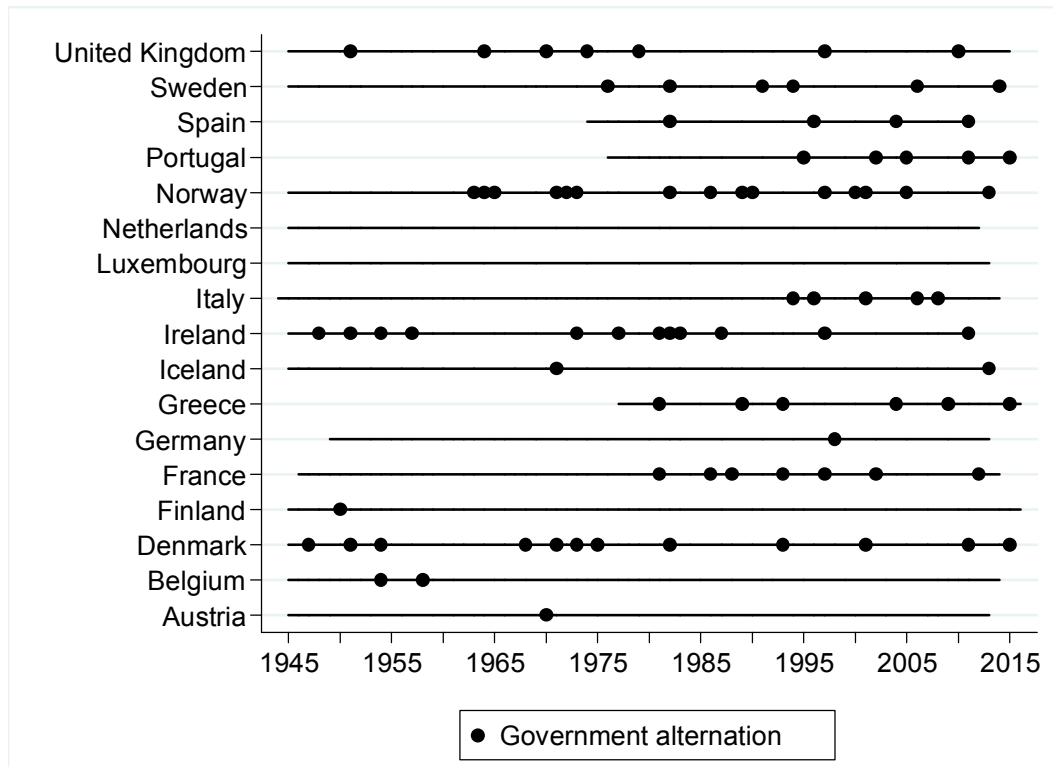
⁷ To verify the hypothesis of heteroscedasticity in the model, the Breusch-Pagan test was employed. The result of the test rejects the null hypothesis on the homoscedasticity.

⁸ According to this model, all effects of past errors on the contemporaneous one are channelled through the immediately preceding error for the same unit (Stimson 1985).

⁹ For a similar approach on electoral data, see Stoll (2013).

each country)¹⁰. As Figure 12.1 makes clear, government alternation can be conceived as a more or less repeated series of events (or *failures* in the statistical jargon of event-history analysis) that subdivide each country-period in different spells of time on the basis of the (non)occurrence of alteration. The Cox model adopted in this chapter assumes that observations from different countries may have different baseline hazard rates, but the coefficients that relate changes in the independent variables to the change in the hazard rate are constant across countries.

Fig. 12.1. The timing of government alternation in Western Europe, 1945-2015



To sum up, in the following section I will investigate quantitatively the determinant of government turnover. In section 12.4, the analysis will be based mainly on a panel-corrected standard errors (Pcse) model that is aimed at testing which factors better predict, both across countries and through time, the variance in the level of government turnover. Instead, in section 12.5 and 12.6 I will move on to the analysis of, respectively, the probability and possibility of alternation. The adoption of the logit model makes possible to estimate the impact of the different explanatory factors on the predicted probability/possibility of alteration. Lastly, in the concluding section (12.6) I will recapitulate the main findings of this chapter and discuss their implications for future research in this field.

12.4. The determinants of government turnover: a multivariate approach

Before turning to the results of the statistical analysis, it is useful to get a general feel of the data. Table 12.3 reports the descriptive statistics for the variables that will be included in all models presented in this section and in the following ones. Recall that the level of government turnover measures the amount of change (in percentage terms) in the partisan composition of the cabinet. In other words, it does not measure whether a cabinet changes its composition or not, but the level of turnover whenever a change of government actually occurs. Moreover, I have added two control variables to the battery of independent

¹⁰ For reasons of space, the results of this analysis are reported in the Appendix.

variables to be included in the model. The first is the number of years elapsed since the end of WWII and it is aimed at controlling for the (rising) trend in government turnover that we have observed in the last seventy years and discussed in depth in Chapter 3. The second control variable is called ‘election time’: a dummy variable (0 = no election, 1 = election) indicating whether a cabinet immediately follows an election or is the product of an agreement *between* elections. The expectation here is that elections *per se*, as vehicle of electoral uncertainty, are positively associated with the level of turnover taking place within the executive arena.

Tab. 12.3. Descriptive statistics: overview of variables included in the statistical analyses

Variables	N.	Mean	Sd	Min	Max
<i>Dependent variables</i>					
Level of government turnover	278	53.1	36.0	0	100
Probability of alternation	278	0.3	0.5	0	1
Possibility of alternation	476 ¹¹	0.3	0.5	0	1
<i>Independent variables: structural</i>					
N. of relevant parties	497	4.5	1.7	2	9
Effective number of legislative parties	477	3.9	1.4	2.0	9.1
Cabinet size (%)	471	55.3	12.9	11.2	98.9
Index of bipolarism	485	53.3	39.3	0	100
<i>Independent variables: preferences</i>					
Ideological anti-system parties (%)	491	6.2	11.5	0	48.6
Functional anti-system parties (%)	490	2.9	6.1	0	41.0
Anti-system parties (% seat-share)	491	9.0	12.1	0	48.6
Pivot party seat-share (%)	490	10.0	17.3	0	53.1
<i>Independent variables: institutions</i>					
Index of disproportionality (Gallagher)	477	4.8	4.5	0.4	25.3
Pre-election identifiability	493	0.4	0.49	0	1
Pre-electoral coalition	493	0.1	0.3	0	1
<i>Independent variables: short-term factors</i>					
Total volatility	470	10.2	6.3	1	39.5
Incumbency volatility	299	5.0	5.1	0	35.0
Electoral competitiveness	485	62.8	43.3	0	100
Cabinet electoral performance (%)	459	-3.8	6.8	-35.6	20.7
<i>Control variables</i>					
N. of years elapsed since 1945	497	34.3	20.4	0	70
Election time	497	0.6	0.5	0	1

That said, it is now possible to present the results of the empirical analysis on the determinants of government turnover in Western Europe. Table 12.4 shows the results of cross-sectional regression analyses under different model specifications. At this stage of the analysis, I have included the most significant – theoretically speaking – variables. More importantly, I have avoided combining variables that capture more or less the same concept (e.g., the number of relevant parties and the effective number of legislative parties as indicator of party-system fragmentation) or that are highly correlated (e.g., the index of bipolarism with that of pre-election identifiability). First of all, despite the different statistical techniques adopted in the six models, it is evident that there are no relevant differences between them. The findings are robust under

¹¹ The number of cases of both the level of government turnover and the probability of alternation (N = 278) is lower than that of the possibility of alternation (N = 476) because the former refer exclusively to the cases of *cabinet change*, whereas the latter takes into account all universe of cases included in the dataset.

different specifications. Even the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable on the right side of the equation (Model 2), as suggested by Beck and Katz (1995), does not alter the results of the analysis.

Substantially, among the structural factors included in the explanatory models it is evident that the number of parties is – in line with our expectation – negatively associated with the level of government turnover, but this association is not statistically significant. In other words, the number of parties with either a governmental or blackmail potential is not a good or safe predictor of the level of partisan rotation in office. By contrast, the impact of both the bipolarism and cabinet size is robust and overcomes the conventional test of statistical significance. More precisely, a one-percentage point increase the index of bipolarism produces a .61 increase in the level of government turnover. Similarly, a growth of one-percentage point in the cabinet seat-share is associated with a reduction in the dependent variable equal to 0.42.

As far as the block of independent variables linked to the preferences of the actors are concerned, it is evident that the most significant is the share of seats in the hands of anti-system parties. The negative relationship between government turnover and the strength of anti-system actors is highly significant under all specifications of the explanatory model. In terms of substantive magnitude, an increase in seat-share of anti-system parties of 10 per cent would, all else being equal, result in about an 8 per cent decrease in the level of government turnover. Hence, this finding lends support to the argument that the existence of a (strong) anti-system actor in the legislature impedes or obstructs the emergence of a pattern of turnover based on large reshuffles in the partisan composition of the cabinets.

Concerning the effect of the pivotal party, the relationship with the level of government turnover is, as expected, negative but not significant in statistical terms. This result may be linked to the impact – which I have already discussed – of the anti-system parties on the change within the cabinet. Put another way, the existence of anti-system actors appears to be one of the main driving forces behind government turnover and the relevance of the pivotal party is, to a degree, a by-product of the existing level of anti-systemness. Bluntly put, the existence of anti-system forces explains the relevance of a pivotal party, and not the other way around. Accordingly, the relationship between government turnover and the pivotal party is partly mediated by the parliamentary strength of the anti-system actors.

As to the institutional component of the independent variables, the model includes Gallagher's index of disproportionality. In contrast with all the literature that assumes a strict connection between the disproportionality of the electoral system and the level of government turnover, the coefficient for the effect of the electoral system (albeit correctly signed in the negative direction) falls short of statistical significance at conventional levels. The strength of the electoral system, namely, its 'manipulative' power in the translation of votes into seats, does not seem to be a good predictor for the level of rotation in the executive office as some scholars has hitherto theoretically assumed or predicted.

With regard to short-term or behavioural factors, the level of electoral volatility is significantly and positively associated with the amount of change in the partisan composition of the cabinet. The higher the propensity of the voters to change their party preferences between elections, the higher the level of government turnover. The substantive magnitude of this effect ($\beta = .975$, Model 1) is large and consistent under different specifications.

Lastly, electoral competitiveness reveals the expected sign (i.e., positive) in its relationship with the level of government turnover, but this finding runs against most of the theoretical assumptions that can be found in the literature. Highly contested races are neither an instrument of nor a good predictor for sizeable changes within the cabinet. Indeed, the evidence collected here shows that the most *uncompetitive* elections, in which the margin of victory between the two poles (if any) is large, are those resulting in significant turnover in governmental power. In brief, landslide victories produce change; feeble victories produce inertia.

Table 12.5 presents a series of variations in the baseline explanatory model. In the first column I have added a control variable (*election time*) for testing the validity of the model in a different setting. It is interesting to note that post-election cabinets are, on average, a product of a sizeable amount of turnover in

their partisan composition. To paraphrase Bingham Powell (2000), elections are an instrument of change. All other factors being equal, the level of government turnover is about 25 percentage-points higher for post-election cabinets than the level experienced by those cabinets formed between two elections. In this sense, for the cabinet parties it is better (and safer) to have a change in government today (in parliament) than a change in government tomorrow, dictated by the voters. As Müller et al. (2008: 15) put it, in politics 'the future matters because all democratic politicians are the servants of a fickle and often unforgiving master, the popular majority'. And, as we have just seen, the popular majority is also a severe master, much more severe, fickle and unpredictable than other party actors.

The second control variable added to Model 7 is the number of years elapsed since 1945. In the whole universe of cases, the relationship between the level of government turnover and the variable measuring the time elapsed since the end of WWII is positive but weak and not statistically significant at conventional levels. Hence, the rise in the level of government turnover that I have pointed out Chapter 3 is not just a matter of time, but can and must be explained by making reference to other more substantive factors. All in all, once controlled for the electoral period and the numbers of years elapsed since 1945, the model holds its explanatory power.

Tab. 12.4. The determinants of the level of government turnover in 17 West European countries, 1945-2015

Dependent variable	Level of government turnover (%)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Specification	Pooled TSCS			Pooled OLS		
	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse - LDV	Pcse (Time)	Pcse (Time & Country)	Ols - Newey-West	Ols with cluster
Lag govt. turnover (<i>t-1</i>)		-0.0372 (0.0575)				
N. relevant parties	-0.00215 (1.884)	-0.701 (1.898)	-1.945 (1.207)	-1.470 (1.948)	0.0557 (2.327)	-1.040 (1.412)
Bipolarism	0.607**	0.397	0.744***	0.618**	0.642**	0.732***
Cabinet size	(0.301)	(0.330)	(0.141)	(0.299)	(0.298)	(0.139)
Anti-system parties (%)	-0.414**	-0.397**	-0.562***	-0.395**	-0.426**	-0.568***
Pivotal party (%)	(0.170)	(0.172)	(0.156)	(0.169)	(0.166)	(0.110)
Disproportionality index	-0.772**	-0.864***	-0.638***	-0.775**	-0.734**	-0.683***
Total volatility	(0.315)	(0.322)	(0.175)	(0.325)	(0.292)	(0.163)
Electoral competitiveness	-0.0611	-0.117	-0.0418	-0.0540	-0.0462	-0.0677
Constant	(0.275)	(0.286)	(0.213)	(0.283)	(0.278)	(0.219)
	-0.278	-0.0540	-0.774	-0.540	-0.264	-0.612
	(0.780)	(0.815)	(0.588)	(0.810)	(0.765)	(0.527)
	0.975***	0.868***	0.795***	0.898***	0.940***	0.923**
	(0.313)	(0.310)	(0.294)	(0.322)	(0.317)	(0.372)
	0.392**	0.295	0.440***	0.397**	0.409**	0.425***
	(0.185)	(0.193)	(0.142)	(0.184)	(0.199)	(0.133)
	-	-	-	-	84.77***	79.61***
					(21.44)	(13.49)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time dummies	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
N. observations	265	257	265	265	265	265
R-squared	0.818	0.821	0.808	0.823	0.412	0.360
N. countries	17	17	17	17	17	17

Notes: All estimates are unstandardised regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses (Models 1-4). In Model 5 robust (Newey-West) standard errors are in parentheses, while Models 6 reports robust standard errors clustered by country. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Tab. 12.5. The determinants of the level of government turnover in 17 West European countries, 1945-2015 (alternative models)

Dependent variable Specification	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	Level of government turnover (%)					
	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse (Ar1)	Pcse (Ar1)
Effective n. of parties (ENLS)		-6.222*** (2.303)	-7.018*** (2.547)	-7.074*** (2.171)	-5.781** (2.257)	-5.741** (2.454)
N. relevant parties	-1.744 (1.985)					
Bipolarism (%)	0.483* (0.277)	0.365 (0.277)	0.203 (0.301)	0.175 (0.276)	0.0826 (0.298)	0.147 (0.317)
Cabinet size (%)	-0.452*** (0.155)	-0.485*** (0.152)	-0.474*** (0.152)	-0.542*** (0.147)	-0.477*** (0.151)	-0.639*** (0.184)
Anti-system parties (%)	-0.633** (0.308)	-0.628** (0.297)	-0.674** (0.295)	-0.674** (0.283)	-0.579* (0.307)	-0.993*** (0.337)
Pivotal party (%)	-0.117 (0.241)	-0.484* (0.273)	-0.560** (0.284)	-0.581** (0.263)	-0.522* (0.277)	-0.418 (0.329)
Disproportionality index	-0.119 (0.665)	-0.309 (0.667)	-0.145 (0.655)	0.0811 (0.631)	-0.0503 (0.661)	0.566 (0.762)
Total volatility	0.684** (0.286)	0.816*** (0.288)	0.782*** (0.295)	0.804*** (0.280)	0.786*** (0.284)	
Electoral competitiveness	0.335* (0.175)	0.340* (0.176)	0.378** (0.191)	0.260 (0.173)	0.205 (0.183)	0.108 (0.202)
Bipolarism*ENLS			0.0441 (0.0422)			
Pre-electoral coalition				19.75*** (5.884)		
Pre-election identifiability					16.21* (8.884)	
Incumbency volatility						1.617*** (0.369)
Election time	24.35*** (4.167)	24.00*** (4.146)	24.43*** (4.077)	19.97*** (4.126)	23.33*** (4.036)	43.03* (22.14)
Year since 1945	0.0355 (0.115)	0.0817 (0.113)				
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. observations	265	265	265	264	265	184
R-squared	0.845	0.848	0.848	0.858	0.850	0.889
N. countries	17	17	17	17	17	17

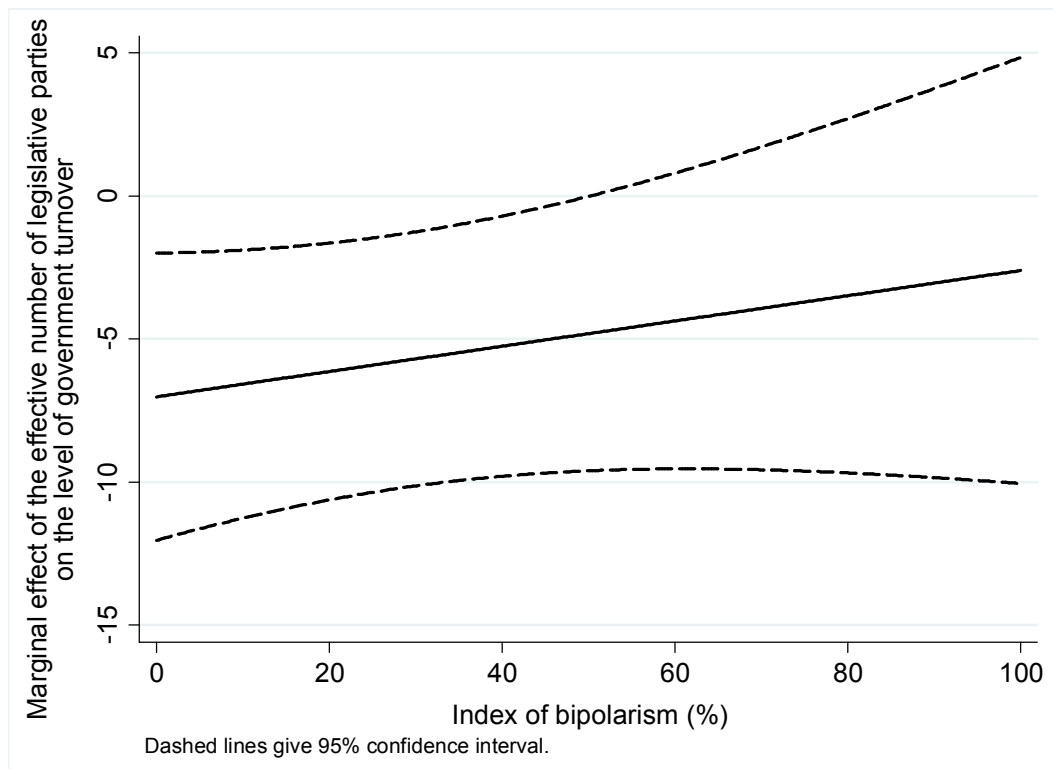
Notes: All estimates are unstandardised regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Interestingly, Model 8 introduces a new independent variable. To be more precise, it substitutes the number of relevant parties with a different measure of party-system fragmentation, i.e., the effective number of legislative parties (ENLP). As far as the analysis of the determinants of government turnover is concerned, this substitution has significant consequences. On the one hand, this measure of party-system fragmentation is highly significant in virtually all other specifications of the model (Models 8-11). In terms of substantive strength, one-unit increase in the effective number of legislative parties would bring about, *ceteris paribus*, a decrease of 6 percentage-points in the level of government turnover. In other words, party-system fragmentation has a negative and significant impact on the pattern of rotation in power. More fragmented party systems seem to be conducive to a pattern of turnover characterised by marginal substitutions among the governing parties.

On the other hand, in the presence of this variable (ENLP), the measure of bipolarism included in the model loses its statistical significance. To elaborate further on this aspect, it is possible to hypothesise that the effective number of legislative parties absorbs and cancels out the effect of a bipolar structure on government turnover. Arguably, it can also be maintained that the negative effect of party-system fragmentation is conditional on the existence of a dualist structure of inter-party competition. To put it another way, the effective number of legislative parties has a (negative) impact on the level of government turnover as long as the dynamics of competition between parties does not follow a bipolar logic. To test this argument, I have introduced in Model 9 an interaction term between ENLP and the index of bipolarism. Since I am dealing with an interaction effect of two continuous variables (Brambor et al. 2006), the clearest way of visualising it is through the graph that plots the marginal effects of ENLP on government turnover against the index of bipolarism. The solid black line indicates how this marginal effect changes with the strength of bipolarism. Figure 12.2 clearly shows that the marginal effect of party-system fragmentation on the level of government turnover is negative and statistically significant only when bipolarism is absent or weak. By contrast, the effective number of parties loses its predictive power as long as the index of bipolarism passed the 57 per cent threshold. In other words, the impact of party-system fragmentation on government turnover is constrained by, and limited to, systems in which a dualist dynamics of party competition is relatively weak or fragile. In any case, the conditional way in which party-system fragmentation influences the pattern of turnover at the governmental level is confirmed by the empirical analysis.

Fig. 12.2. Marginal effects of the number of legislative parties on the level of government turnover



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.5, Model 9. The continuous line represents the changes in the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum, as contextual conditions are modified. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals that indicate when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$); this will be the case when the two confidence intervals are simultaneously above or below 0.

The mitigating or constraining effect of bipolarism can be observed also from a different perspective. Model 10 in Table 12.6 introduces a new predictor in the equation – a dummy variable which is coded as ‘1’ if the cabinet is the result of a pre-election agreement and ‘0’ for all other circumstances. In line with our expectations, the effect of this variable on the level of government turnover is strong and significant ($\beta = 19.75$). In practice, the existence of a cabinet formed in the wake of a pre-election agreement moves the level of government turnover up by, all else being equal, about 20 percentage-points. Moreover, if this effect is added to that exerted by elections (*election time*), their joint impact approaches 40 per cent. Put differently, election-cum-agreement between allied parties represents an extremely risky institutional context for the incumbent rulers.

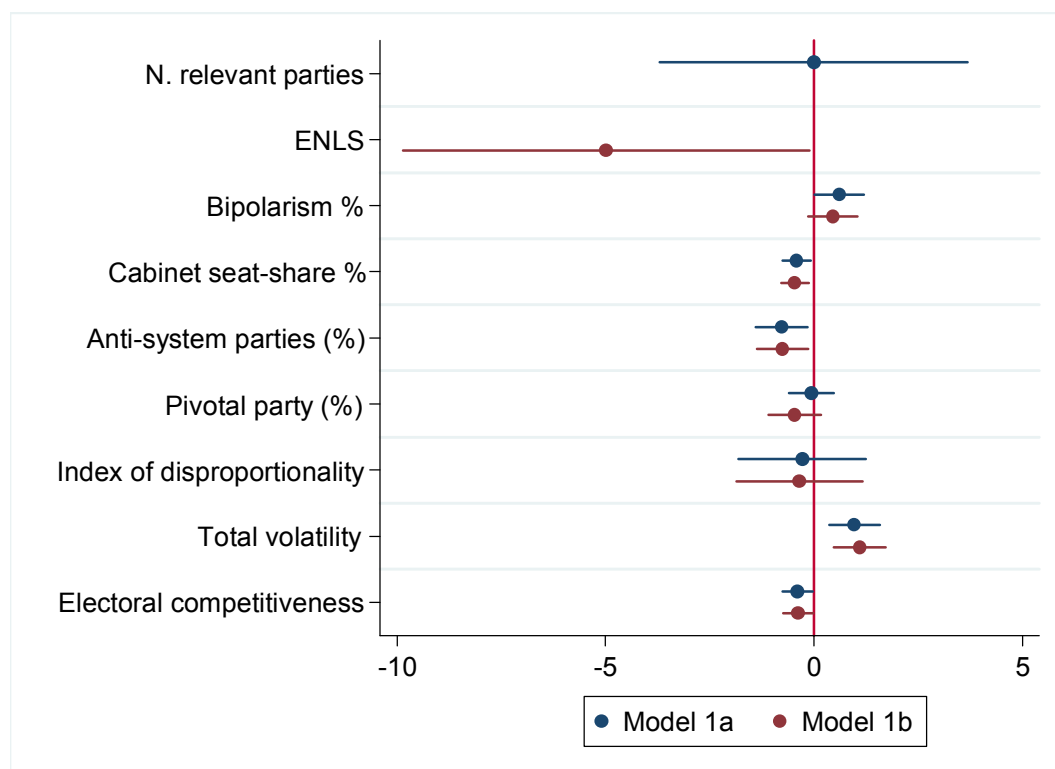
That said, it is also interesting to note that the inclusion of this new factor in the explanatory model virtually absorbs the effect of the index of bipolarism on the level of turnover (which is still positive but not statistically significant). In a certain way, pre-election coalition, as well as the index of pre-election identifiability (added in Model 11), can be conceived of as functional equivalents of real-existing cases of bipolarism. In other words, when a dualist structure does not ‘naturally’ emerge from the electorate (as, for instance, in the classic UK tradition) but it is artificially manufactured by specific institutional arrangements, the effect in terms of government turnover is rather similar. The recent Italian political experience is a good case in point. Immediately after the collapse of its ‘first party system’ (1946-1992), the emergence of what some scholars have dubbed as ‘destructured’ or ‘fragmented bipolarism’, thanks to the adoption of pre-electoral agreements and specific electoral laws with a majoritarian flavour, has allowed the coexistence of extreme fragmentation in the party system with a pattern of government turnover based on frequent alternations between alternative coalitions. As such, the Italian case confirms also the conditional effect of the number

of parties, whose influence on the level of turnover is strongly constrained by the existence of a dualist structure of inter-party competition.

Finally, Model 12 replaces ‘total volatility’ with a more specific measure of voters’ availability, that is, the electoral volatility occurring along the incumbency (government vs. opposition) divide. The association has the predicted sign (positive) and seems to be a good predictor for the amount of change in the partisan composition of the cabinet. In fact, a unit-increase in incumbency volatility is associated with a 1.6 increase in the level of government turnover, which is about twice what we have observed in the case of total volatility. This means that what really matters, in terms of turnover in government, is not the overall level of volatility but, more significantly, the propensity of the voters to change their preferences in accordance with the performances of the rulers and the promises of the opposition parties.

To sum up, the explanatory model of government turnover set out in Table 12.4 partially confirms our expectations and, at the same time, brings to the fore some unexpected results. First, the number of parties is not as good a predictor of government turnover as one could have assumed. Its effect may be positive or negative on the basis of other factors that can make it stronger or weaker. Second, the number of relevant parties and the effective number of legislative parties are neither synonyms nor equivalent concepts. They do measure different attributes of the party system and, accordingly, have a distinct effect on the way parties rotate into office (see fig. 12.3). The impact of the former is, to some extent, absorbed by other factors (existence of anti-system actors, pivotal parties and so on), whereas the latter is conditional on the presence of a dualist mechanics of inter-party competition.

Fig. 12.3. Determinants of the level of government turnover: overview of the coefficient of association derived by the explanatory model



Notes: the figures are regression coefficients reported in Table 12.5, Models 7 and 8. The coefficient for the dummy control variable (‘election time’) not shown.

Third, elections *per se*, especially when they come along with specific coordination strategies of the parties (e.g., pre-electoral agreements), turn out to be a powerful driver of change in the partisan

composition of the cabinet. This explains why, in many situations, parties prefer to define their status within or outside the cabinet when they are still relatively far from election day.

Fourth, together with the structural determinants of government turnover, it is important to take into account also the behaviour of the voters. As we have seen above, the ability of the electorate to change its mind, and especially to cross the dividing line between government and opposition, is an important variable in the explanation of the variance in the level of government turnover. The higher the propensity of voters to switch from government to opposition, the higher the chance of observing a sizeable reshuffle in the composition of the cabinet.

Thus far, we have adopted a synchronic perspective, trying to establish which factors better predict the cross-country variance in the level of government turnover. Moving to a more dynamic approach, it would be possible to assess whether and to what extent the impact of specific factors has increased or decreased over time. For doing so, Table 12.6 splits the universe of cases into two temporal halves (before and after 1980) and tests the explanatory model in both of them.

Tab. 12.6. Determinants of the level of government turnover before and after 1980

Dependent variable Specification Period	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
	Level of government turnover (%)			
	Pcse (Ar1) Pre-1980	Pcse (Ar1) Post-1980	Pcse (Ar1) Pre-1980	Pcse (Ar1) Post-1980
N. relevant parties	-8.016*** (2.233)	-1.344 (1.236)	-7.121*** (2.256)	-1.090 (1.264)
Bipolarism	0.722*** (0.204)	0.971*** (0.160)	0.723*** (0.203)	1.017*** (0.147)
Cabinet size	-0.426** (0.171)	-0.231 (0.157)	-0.438** (0.171)	-0.243* (0.146)
Anti-system parties (%)	-1.188*** (0.285)	-0.0816 (0.237)		
Ideological anti-system parties (%)			-0.999*** (0.283)	-0.337 (0.240)
Non-ideological anti-system parties (%)			-2.159** (0.959)	0.619 (0.409)
Pivotal party (%)	0.545** (0.233)	0.250 (0.202)	0.517** (0.221)	0.437* (0.225)
Disproportionality index	-0.249 (0.785)	-0.371 (0.668)	-0.0579 (0.795)	-0.245 (0.670)
Total volatility	0.802* (0.470)	1.100*** (0.346)	1.100** (0.486)	0.980*** (0.342)
Electoral competitiveness	0.199 (0.202)	0.434*** (0.162)	0.186 (0.198)	0.463*** (0.151)
Election time	20.14*** (5.403)	33.98*** (5.983)	20.74*** (5.427)	32.55*** (5.996)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N. observations	126	139	125	139
R-squared	0.781	0.847	0.782	0.854
N. countries	14	17	14	17

Notes: All estimates are unstandardised regression coefficients with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

The comparison between Models 13 and 14 offers interesting results. To begin with, the effect of the number of relevant parties is strong and significant in the first phase but then becomes weak and statistically

irrelevant after the 1980. In other words, the number of parties was a good predictor for the level of government turnover only in the first thirty years following the end of WWII, when bipolarism was not yet sufficiently established and capable of mitigating the impact of party-system fragmentation. In fact, not by chance in the second period (see column two in Table 12.6) the effect of bipolarism on the level of turnover becomes stronger and achieves statistical significance.

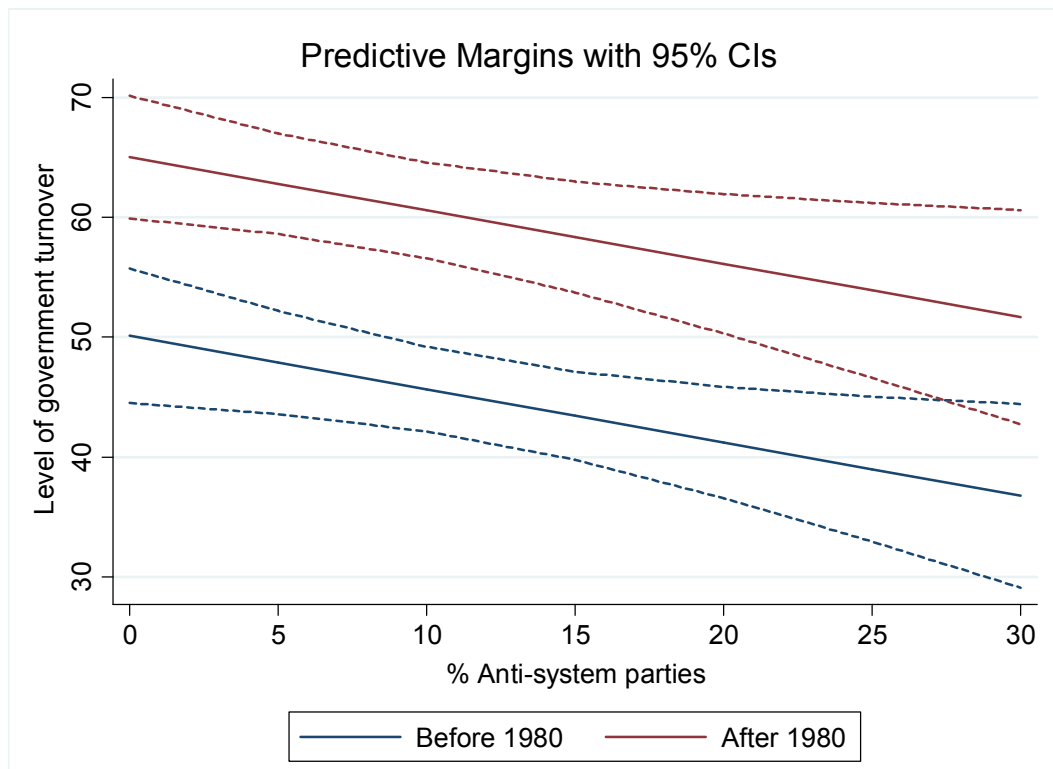
With regard to the seat-share controlled by the cabinet parties, its negative effect on turnover has decreased in the last thirty years. This trend can be partially explained by the reduction in the frequency of minority cabinets, in particular in the Nordic countries, where the practice of forming pre-electoral agreements has slowly cleared the way for minimal-winning coalitions. In any case, the engine of government turnover has been progressively transferred from the legislative arena (with the formation of 'undersized' cabinets) to the electoral (or even pre-electoral) arena, in which the voters can choose between two blocs of governing-oriented parties.

Similarly, the pivotal party has lost the opportunity to play their strategic role within the party system. As long as the pivotal party was the dominant actor in the legislature, it was able to avoid any significant turnover at the governmental level. Instead, alongside its progressive weakening in many West European party systems, the impact of the pivotal party for the dynamics of the government formation and termination has largely decreased. From this viewpoint, the rising trend in government turnover that we have witnessed since the 1980s seems to be linked, *inter alia*, to the enfeeblement of those parties that, in the past, were capable of acting as the pivot in parliament.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that, while some structural attributes lose their explanatory power, other short-terms factors, such as the electoral volatility or the closeness of the race, get stronger. Bluntly put, if the pivotal party is waning and all parties are acquiring *coalitionability* (as I will discuss below), which means that the electoral market is less limited and constrained by endogenous factors, then the fate of the cabinet parties is decided more and more frequently by the popular majority. Hence, the trend toward a widespread bipolarism on the one hand, and the rising volatility of the electorate seems to be the magic formula behind the explosion of alternation in Western Europe. However, the description of this causal mechanism would be incomplete if it did not consider what may be called – paraphrasing Kirrheimer (19??) – the waning of classic anti-system parties. In this sense, it is extremely revealing that, in the second phase of our analysis, the impact of the anti-system forces on the level of government turnover turns out to be negligible and statistically insignificant. In other words, the existence of anti-system actors in the system is no longer capable of explaining the variance in the pattern of turnover at the governmental level. As I have pointed out in Chapter 9, this trend, which gets further confirmation in a multivariate setting, is in all likelihood due to the transformation experienced by those parties that, as their main *raison d'être*, fight in opposition to the 'the system'. The emergence of non-ideological anti-system actors, namely parties with a less pronounced ideological baggage, has facilitated their more or less covert integration in the party system. The higher degree of coalitionability of this type of anti-system party has often allowed either their inclusion in specific cabinet coalitions or their external/informal support for 'acceptable' cabinets. Unlike the classic, ideological anti-system parties, the functional anti-system actors do not contribute to raise the threshold of executive power and, consequently, the room of manoeuvre for the governing-oriented parties remains rather large.

The varying impact of the anti-system parties can be easily visualised in Figure 12.4, which plots the predicted marginal effects of the anti-system actors on the level of government turnover. As is clear from the graph, the association between anti-systemness and government turnover is still negative, but the impact of the anti-system parties, all else being equal, is 15 percentage-points lower in the second period under examination here. Which means that, in the last thirty years, the effect of the strength of the anti-system parties on the pattern of government turnover has progressively decreased over time

Fig. 12.4. Marginal effects of anti-system parties on the predicted level of government turnover



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.6, Models 13 and 14. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals that indicate when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

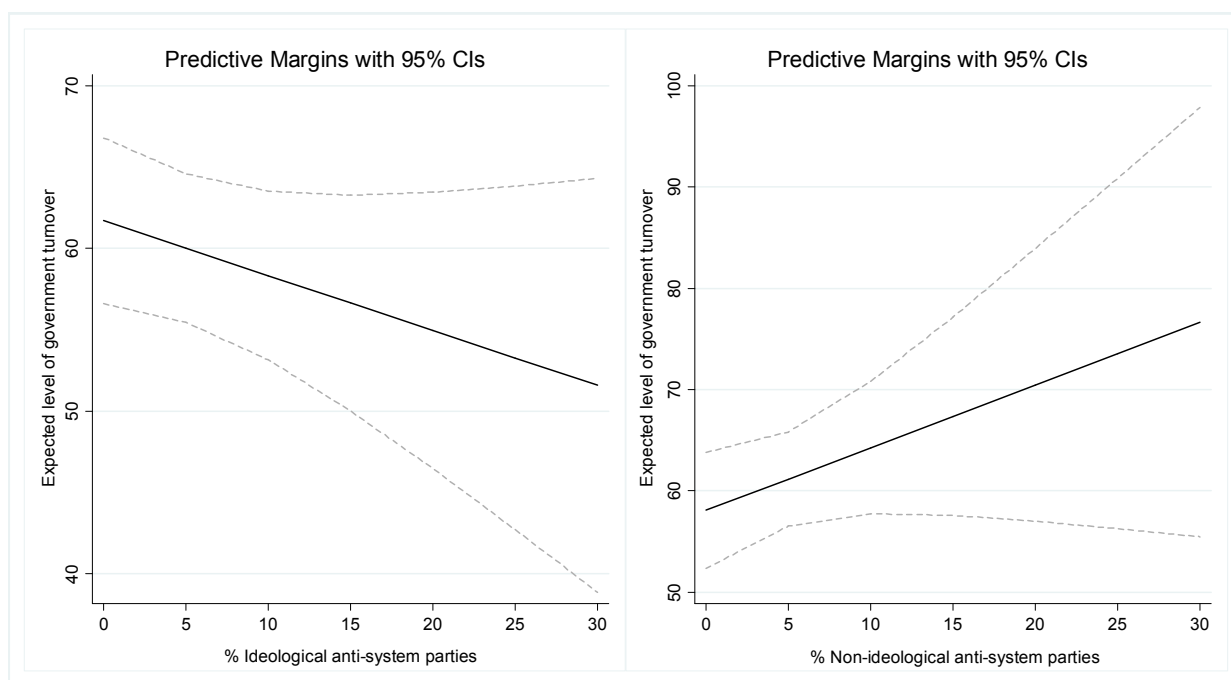
However, to gain a better grasp of the transformation under way, it is useful to compare the impact that different types of anti-system parties may have on the way parties rotate and replace themselves each other into office. For this purpose, Models 15 and 16 in Table 12.6 replace the overall measure of parliamentary strength of anti-system parties with two more specific variables, that is, the share of seats controlled, respectively, by ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties. In doing so, it is possible to compare their possible different effect on government turnover, in the by now conventional two periods of time, before (Model 15) and after (Model 16) 1980. It is evident that in the first phase, both types of anti-system actor had a strong and significant influence on the level of rotation in the executive office. Interestingly enough, non-ideological anti-system parties had even a stronger impact than those with a clear ideological trait. A result that can be explained, in part, by the existence of a strong non-ideological anti-system actor in France until the late 1950s, which makes alternation in power virtually impossible. Nevertheless, both types of parties throughout Western Europe had the same (negative) effect on the level of government turnover.

In contrast, the picture utterly changes for the last period under investigation here. As shown in Model 16, the relationship between ideological anti-system parties is still negative but does not achieve the conventional level of statistical significance, meaning that also these actors have lost their constraining effect on the party system. But, most interestingly, the relationship between non-ideological anti-system parties and level of government turnover turns out to be positive, although statistically not significant. In brief, it is not just a matter of time (or period) that explains the diversified impact of anti-system parties on the longitudinal variance in government turnover. It is also, and to some extent surprisingly, a matter of the type of parties that decide to fight against the system made up of traditional, mainstream, established, often 'cartelized' political parties. In such a context, only those parties that maintain a strong ideological orientation, or inspiration, have an impact on the mechanics of party system, whereas all other types of anti-

system parties, thanks to or because of their more accommodating strategies and flexible programmatic stances, do not significantly alter the pattern of government turnover.

This differentiated pattern of association between types of anti-system parties and level of turnover in power during the last thirty years can be clearly visualised in Figure 12.5, which reports the expected level of change in the cabinet composition associated with the seat-share of the respective parties. Although below the threshold of statistical significance, ideological anti-system parties reveal a negative association with the level of government turnover in Western Europe since 1980. By contrast, the association turns out to be positive, albeit again not statistically significant, in relation to the strength of non-ideological anti-system actors, which seems to be inconsequential, to say the least, for the dynamics of rotation into power.

Fig. 12.5 – *Marginal effects of ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties on the predicted level of government turnover*



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.6, Models 15 and 16. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Summing up, the level of government turnover has steadily increased over time in Western Europe, with only a few and marginal exceptions. How can this trend be explained? Or, better, what are the driving forces behind this growth? The findings reported and discussed in this section have shown that there exists no single factor capable of explaining in full that trend. The rise in government turnovers is – as we have seen in-depth above – the result of a constellation of factors, whose effect can be investigated only through a time-series-cross-section design. Especially in the last thirty years or so, the change in the partisan composition of cabinet has become larger (in size) and more frequent (in time) – a trend explained by the transformation witnessed in some structural attributes of the party system, in particular in terms of bipolarism, and the higher propensity of voters to change their party preferences, once strongly encapsulated and ‘frozen’. This change in West European party systems was made possible also by the transformation or, in some cases, waning of the ideological anti-system parties, whose centrifugal pull on the party system brought about the formation of governments located at the centre with no feasible, or acceptable, alternatives. The disappearance of this type of anti-system party has ultimately paved the way for the creation of an electoral market in which voters have, at least formally, a higher degree of decidability between alternative coalitions of would-be rulers, making governments more and more vulnerable. If one

adds the rising 'availability' of the electorate to this picture, the result would be precisely what we have investigated here – an increase in the level of government turnover.

12.5. In search of the causes of alternation

Regression via ordinary least squares (OLS) or its derivatives is a commonly applied statistical technique (mostly) when the dependent variable is continuous. However, when the *explanandum* assumes a dichotomous, or binary, nature, OLS should be ruled out (Nagler 1994) and other tools must be applied. Since the scope of this section is the analysis of the determinants of government alternation – a strictly binary variable, it is necessary to resort to those statistical techniques which transform the basic linear regression into a method that evaluates the impact of the various predictors on the probability of the binary dependent variable of being 0 or 1. As a consequence of this transformation, the association between variables is assumed to be non-linear and the estimated probability is bounded between 0 (no risk) and 1 (maximum risk).

Having specified that, it is possible to move to the empirical analysis of the probability of alternation, which I have defined as the likelihood that a given change in government takes place through a wholesale replacement of the cabinet parties. In line with what I have done in section 12.4, I will present, as robustness check for our hypotheses, different specifications of the same explanatory model. To begin with, Table 12.7 reports four models, both static (1-3) and dynamic (2-4), including the 8 standard predictors. To estimate Models 1 and 2, I use logistic regression with robust standard errors clustered by country (Model 1) and time-period (Model 2), to control for possible problems of heteroscedasticity. By contrast, Models 3 and 4 are longitudinal logistic regressions with, respectively, a random intercept model and Newey-West (1987) standard errors, which are robust to both autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity. On the whole, the four models do not present relevant differences, meaning that the results are sufficiently robust under different model specifications. Looking more closely at the odds ratio and their respective level of significance, it is clear that the number of parties is not significantly associated with the probability of government alternation. As expected, the relationship has the negative sign, but it does not achieve the conventional level of significance. Hence, the finding presented in the previous section concerning the association between the number of parties and the level of government turnover finds further confirmation when the probability of alternation is analysed. In short, contrary to most of the theoretical discussion that exists in the literature, the number of relevant parties is not a good predictor for the occurrence of alternation.

Instead, the strength of the bipolar format in the party system appears to be positively and significantly associated with alternation. More precisely, for each increase of one percentage-point in bipolarism, there is approximately a 6% increase in the odds of alteration in government. This is in line with the assumption of Duverger (1954), whereby alternation presupposes dualism, that is, a structure of inter-party competition based on the whole reshuffle in the cabinet membership.

The third structural attribute that the explanatory model takes into account is cabinet size. In this case, the sign of the association is, as predicted, negative: the lower the share of seats controlled by the cabinet, the higher the chance of ejecting the government en bloc. In substantive terms, the effect of a one-unit decrease in the share of seats controlled by the cabinet is associated with a 7.5% increase in the risk of government alternation.

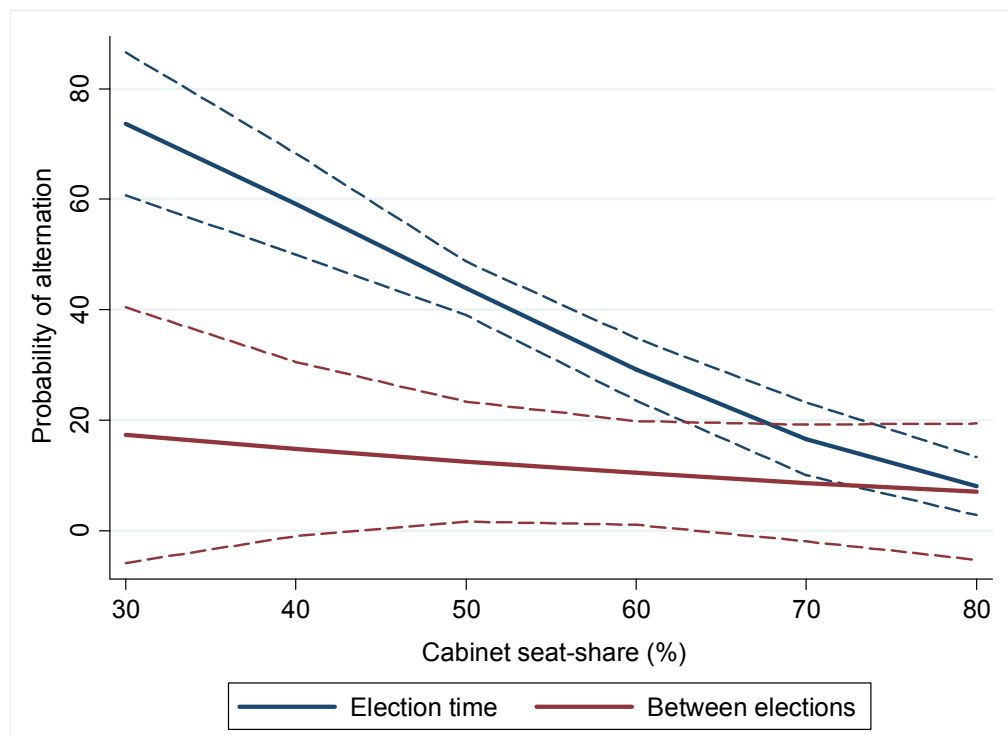
Tab. 12.7. Determinants of the probability of alternation: logistic regressions (odds ratio)

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Probability of alternation (%)			
	Static model		Dynamic model	
Specification	Logit VCE	Logit VCE <i>time</i>	Random-effects	Newey-West
N. relevant parties	0.915 (0.126)	0.855 (0.111)	0.910 (0.135)	1.018 (0.229)
Bipolarism (%)	1.061*** (0.0135)	1.063*** (0.0155)	1.082*** (0.0205)	1.068** (0.0317)
Cabinet size (%)	0.924*** (0.0194)	0.919*** (0.0214)	0.927*** (0.0188)	0.950*** (0.0180)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.950** (0.0234)	0.945** (0.0225)	0.957** (0.0221)	0.920*** (0.0262)
Pivotal party (%)	1.069** (0.0360)	1.075** (0.0364)	1.023 (0.0377)	1.048 (0.0431)
Disproportionality index	1.009 (0.0370)	0.997 (0.0381)	0.995 (0.0524)	0.957 (0.0686)
Electoral competitiveness	1.003 (0.0389)	1.012 (0.0378)	1.010* (0.0184)	1.005 (0.0361)
Total volatility	1.110*** (0.0288)	1.097*** (0.0305)	1.124*** (0.0428)	1.145*** (0.0482)
Constant	0.595 (2.196)	3.842 (14.77)	1.190 (2.449)	0.172 (0.596)
Country dummy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Decade dummy	No	Yes	No	No
% Correctly predicted	83.4	84.9	73.7	75.7
Observations	271	271	265	265
N. countries	17	17	17	17

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country (Models 1-2); with random effect standard errors in Model 3; and robust (Newey-West) errors clustered by country in Model 4. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

The impact of cabinet size on the probability of alternation can be readily visualised in Figure 12.6, which reports the marginal effects of the predictors under examination on the expected probability of alternation. It also presents a distinction between post-election cabinets, namely those formed immediately after a general election, and inter-electoral cabinets, that is, those formed during the parliamentary term. As is evident, the negative association between the seat-share of the cabinet and the probability of alternation is strong and robust at election time, whereas it becomes more ambiguous, or almost inexistent, in other (non-electoral) circumstances. Focusing on the former aspect, it is possible to see that the probability of alternation is much higher for minority cabinets than for those controlling more than 60% of seats in the legislature. In other words, if the incoming cabinet has a seat-share lower than 50 percent, the probability of alternation has, on average, a value of 60%, meaning that there is one possibility out of two that an alternation concretely occurs. By contrast, when cabinet parties control more than 60 per cent of seats, the probability of producing alternation plunges at about 20%. Hence, the parliamentary strength of the incoming cabinet has a powerful impact on the pattern of rotation in power, especially when the new government is the product of the election rather than the result of inter-electoral party leaders' agreements.

Fig. 12.6. Marginal effects of cabinet size on the expected probability of alternation



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.7, Model 1. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

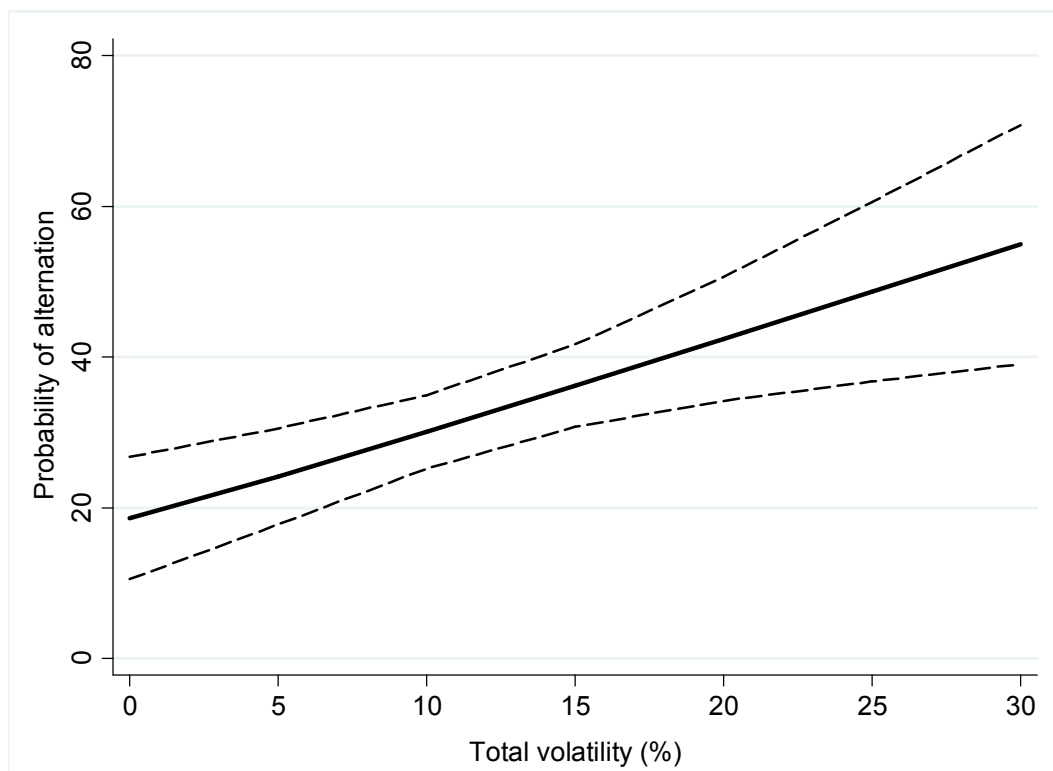
Moving to the two preferences (independent) variables, it is interesting to note that the strength of anti-system parties indeed has a negative influence on the probability of alternation. In terms of substantive magnitude, the odds ratios goes from 0.920 (Model 4) to 0.957 (Model 3), meaning that for each increase of one percentage-point in the share of seats controlled by anti-system parties, the odds of alternation are reduced, on average, by 6%.

With regard to the pivotal party, the results provided by the four models are more ambiguous and surprising. First, the impact of the pivotal party does not achieve the conventional levels of significance in Models 3 and 4. Second, the sign of the relationship is positive, and this result goes against our expectation. In fact, according to Models 1 and 2, there is a 7% risk of alternation for each unit increase in the seat-share of the pivotal party. Hence, the existence of this type of party does not automatically reduce the chance of alternation in government. Other factors that can somehow absorb or cancel out the impact of the pivotal party seem to be more unambiguously effective in producing a wholesale turnover in the executive arena. In other words, when the effects of other structural features of the party system are controlled for, the influence of the pivotal party on the pattern of rotation in power is not as strong as one would have expected.

That said, the results are absolutely unambiguous and straightforward when we consider the effect of the electoral system or, more precisely, the degree of disproportionality in the translation of votes into seats. Similar to the results discussed in section 12.4, the effects of the electoral system in terms of probability of alternation are statistically modest, not say irrelevant. This is one of the most interesting findings emerging from this research, in particular because it fundamentally contradicts the results of all those studies that assume a sort of equivalence relation between the disproportionality of the electoral system on the one hand, and the likelihood of alternation on the other. Not only should the two concepts be kept separated, but between them there exists only a weak, often unpredictable, association. Bluntly put, if one looks at the electoral system in order to explain the variance in the probability of alternation across countries or through time, the resulting picture would be imprecise and misleading. The road towards alternation does not pass through the type of electoral system.

In a similar vein, the oft-proclaimed association between electoral competitiveness and alternation in government seems to be inexistent. Indeed, in all models but one the coefficients of association do not achieve the standard levels of significance but, much more importantly, the sign is negative, which means that lower levels of electoral competitiveness are associated with higher values in the probability of alternation. Hence, not only is the closeness of the election not a good predictor for the level of government turnover, but it also fails to explain the variance in the likelihood of alternation. Perhaps, from a purely theoretical point of view, electoral competitiveness and the prospect of alternation can be coupled. But within the empirical analysis developed here, electoral competitiveness and alternation appear to be two parallel lines that are only rarely fated to meet each other.

Fig. 12.7. *Marginal effects of total volatility on the expected probability of alternation*



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.7, Model 1. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Finally, the relationship between total volatility and the probability of alternation is in line with our working hypotheses – the higher the propensity of the voters to change their party preferences from one election to the next, the more likely the occurrence of government alternation. In substantive terms, it is possible to see that a one-unit increase in total volatility brings about more than a 10% increase in the odds of alternation. This relationship can be better analysed by plotting the so-called predictive margins in the probability of alternation over different values in total volatility. As Figure 12.7 clearly shows, the prospect for alternation grows as the level of electoral mobility increases. More precisely, when total volatility is lower than 5 per cent, the expected probability of alternation is about 20 per cent, whereas in those situations in which volatility goes between 10 and 20, the likelihood of a wholesale turnover goes up by nearly 30 percentage-points. Summing up, voters’ mobility can be interpreted as a precondition for a sizeable reshuffle in the partisan composition of the cabinets and, in some cases, also for an alternation. However, what actually matters in this relationship, as I will discuss below, is the specific *location* of those voters that are available to change their minds and votes.

As shown above, the baseline explanatory model is capable of predicting correctly more than 80 per cent of the cases of government alternation in Western Europe. Now, in Table 12.8 I discuss different specifications of the model and, in particular, introduce two control variables: election time (as a dummy variable) and the number of years elapsed since the end of WWII. Moreover, alternative independent variables are included in the model as both a robustness check and a control on the effect of specific factors. All models are tested through logistic regression with robust standard errors clustered by country. To begin with, it is worth noting that the introduction of the control variables (Model 5) does not change the main findings discussed above. Indeed, this model strengthens the initial results, in that both structural attributes (bipolarism and cabinet size), preferences attributes (anti-system parties) and short-term factors (volatility) hold their expected sign and statistical significance. This is tantamount to saying that all these factors exert their effect on the probability of alternation both at the time of the election and in the period between elections. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that post-election cabinets show, as expected, a much higher probability of producing an alternation. To put it differently, the odds of alternation are about 7 times greater at election time than during inter-electoral periods. Thus, elections are confirmed as a more risky option for party leaders than coalition agreements stipulated in a period relatively far from the election day.

In Model 6, the number of relevant parties is replaced by the effective number of legislative parties, but the results look very similar. However we measure party-system fragmentation, its impact on the likelihood of a wholesale turnover in government remains extremely weak and statistically irrelevant. Accordingly, the probability of alternation does not reveal any significant linkage with the fragmentation existing in the legislature. In some circumstances a limited number of parties may foster the emergence of a pattern of alternation but, overall, party-system fragmentation *per se* is not an obstacle for the complete ejection of the governing parties – a result that is well documented by the recent experience of Italy, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries, compared with the trajectory of a classic two-party system like the United Kingdom.

Tab. 12.8. Determinants of the probability of alternation: logistic regressions (odds ratio)

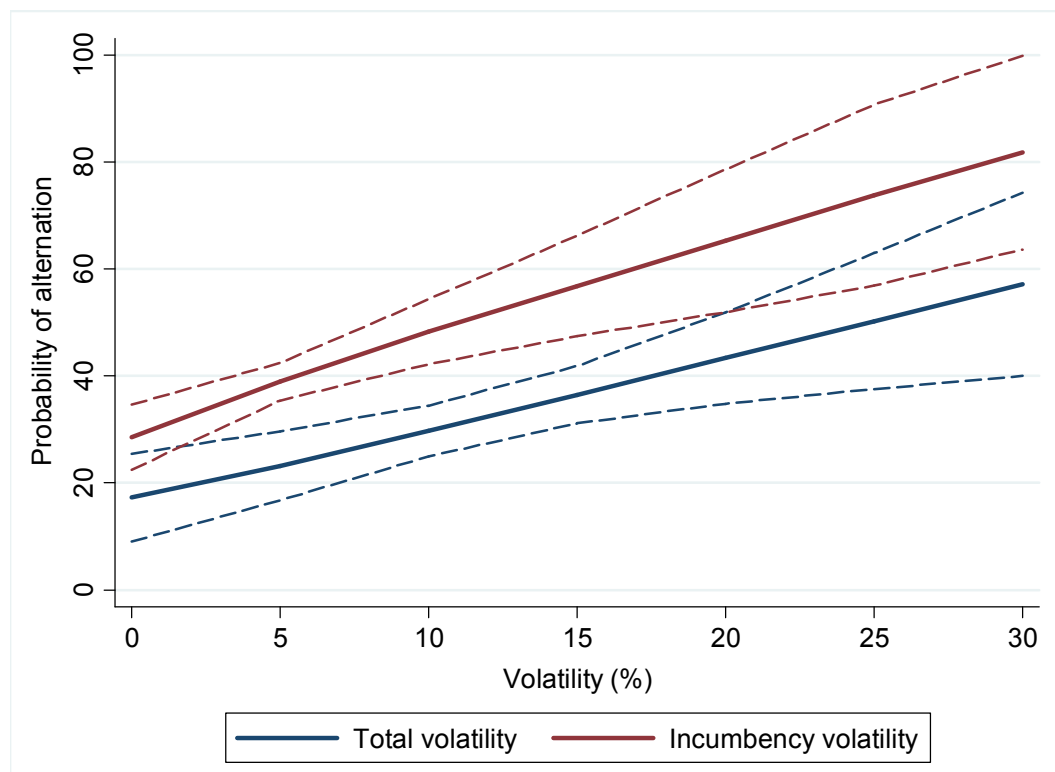
Dependent variable Specification	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
	Probability of alternation (%)					
	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce
N. relevant parties	0.997 (0.149)					
Effective n. of parties		0.707 (0.208)	0.786 (0.315)	0.824 (0.176)	0.832 (0.218)	0.591* (0.160)
Bipolarism (%)	1.071*** (0.0202)	1.057*** (0.0223)	1.079** (0.0360)	1.061*** (0.0205)	1.035 (0.0250)	1.035 (0.0245)
Cabinet size (%)	0.913*** (0.0147)	0.909*** (0.0158)	0.852*** (0.0296)	0.923*** (0.0244)	0.922*** (0.0151)	0.908*** (0.0171)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.952** (0.0209)	0.955* (0.0265)	0.916* (0.0446)	0.952* (0.0258)	0.954* (0.0254)	0.952* (0.0259)
Pivotal party (%)	1.087* (0.0478)	1.060 (0.0485)	1.108 (0.0827)	1.079* (0.0449)	1.043 (0.0575)	1.025 (0.0543)
Disproportionality index	1.020 (0.0367)	1.006 (0.0380)	1.120* (0.0677)	1.051 (0.0538)		
Electoral competitiveness	1.023 (0.0234)	1.020 (0.0256)	1.026 (0.0268)	1.022 (0.0261)	1.023 (0.0253)	1020 (0.0270)
Total volatility	1.099** (0.0416)	1.109*** (0.0445)				
Incumbency volatility			1.222*** (0.0832)			
Elec. cabinet performance				1.024 (0.0273)		
Pre-election identifiability					6.118*** (3.320)	
Pre-election coalition						6.207*** (4.025)
Election time	7.687** (6.713)	6.631** (5.735)			6.626** (5.984)	4.043* (3.184)
Years since 1945	1.004 (0.0118)	1.006 (0.0121)	1.012 (0.0183)	1.017 (0.0151)	1.023** (0.0105)	1.021 (0.0132)
Constant	0.0955 (0.366)	0.598 (2.002)	8.532 (38.10)	10.12 (32.21)	0.357 (0.907)	17.91 (68.52)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	271	271	184	247	274	273
% Correctly predicted	84.5	84.5	87.0	85.4	87.6	86.8

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Model 7 replaces total volatility with the more precise measure of incumbency volatility, in order to test whether the location of the ‘floating voters’ is decisive in making alternation in government more or less likely. As the result makes clear, the association between this type of electoral volatility and the probability of alternation is positive and statistically significant. In terms of substantive magnitude, a one-unit increase in incumbency volatility is associated with a 22% increase in the odds of alternation. Recall that the odds ratio for total volatility (Model 1) was 1.110, whereas it goes up to 1.222 when incumbency volatility is considered. This difference can be observed in Figure 12.8, which plots the marginal effects on the expected probability of alternation for each increase in volatility, both total and that occurring across the incumbency divide. Although they are both negatively associated with the occurrence of alternation, the impact of the latter

looks stronger at all levels of volatility, especially when there is a large pool of ‘available’ voters. In sum, total volatility fosters alternation, but when the mobility takes place mostly along the government-opposition divide then the odds of a complete turnover rises significantly.

Fig. 12.8. Marginal effects of total volatility and incumbency volatility on the expected probability of alternation



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.8, Models 6 and 7. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Finally, Models 9 and 10 include two factors from the cluster of the institutional variables: the index of pre-election identifiability and the existence of a government formed in the wake of pre-electoral agreements. As for the level of government turnover, both variables obtain conventional levels of significance and reveal a strong association with the probability of alternation. In this sense, the easier it is for the voters to identify before election the alternative teams of would-be rulers, the greater the probability to observe a complete rejection of the incumbent parties. With regard to the existence of a pre-election agreement between the cabinet parties, it is possible to conclude that the odds of alternation are 6 times greater when this type of coordination strategy occurs than when parties run alone without any form of electoral alliance.

Up to now, we have analysed which factors explain the cross-country variance in the probability of alternation. Yet, we still lack an analysis accounting for the rise in the occurrence of complete turnover experienced throughout Western Europe in the last thirty years. What are the factors that explain this trend? In order to investigate this aspect in-depth, I will rely on the two periods of time (before and after 1980) that have been identified above. In other words, I will test the explanatory model on the cases that occurred in the two phases and then I will compare the strength of the relationships for each predictor.

To begin, Table 12.9 shows that in all models, that is, before and after 1980, the number of relevant parties does not have a significant effect on the probability of alternation. In other words, its null effect has remained constant over time. Instead, the positive effect of bipolarism has increased in the last thirty years and, more precisely, it achieved the conventional levels of significance only after 1980. Accordingly, one of the factors that accounts for the increasing occurrence of alternation in Western Europe is the strength of a

dualist structure in the legislature, whose growth in the last decades has fostered a pattern of rotation in office based on an all-or-nothing logic of government change. What is more, this trend has also been accompanied by the introduction of specific pre-election coordination strategies between parties that have reinforced, indirectly or not, bipolarism in the legislative arena.

The trend that I have just outlined goes hand in hand with that witnessed by the pivotal party. Put another way, the effect of the pivotal actor on the probability of alternation was negligible in the first period under examination, namely, when other more important factors prevail, but it has turned out to be strong and significant after 1980. The Benelux countries reflect perfectly this trajectory because the persistence of relatively strong pivotal parties, in conjunction with a long and firmly established tradition of consociational strategies among party elites, serve to explain the rarity of alternation. Hence, as long as the pivotal party has a strong grip on these party systems, the possibility of witnessing a complete rejection of the ruling parties is close to zero.

Overall, the comparison between Model 11 and Model 12 shows that elections have become more *decisive* after 1980, meaning that the probability of alternation associated with a post-election cabinet has significantly increased over the last three decades or so. In parallel with this, the effect of total volatility has achieved conventional levels of significance only in the section period, in conjunction with the de-freezing of the XX century-old political cleavages and, in particular, the slow waning of ideological anti-system parties. More precisely, anti-system parties have a significant effect on the probability of alternation only until 1980 and afterwards lose both strength and statistical significance. To better elucidate this trend, models 13 and 14 have included the distinction between ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties. By comparing the two models, it clearly emerges that the former have a significant effect on the probability of alternation in both periods of time, whereas the latter have a negative and statistically significant effect only for the first period. In fact, since 1980 the impact of non-ideological anti-system parties becomes positive but does not reach the standard levels of significance.

Tab. 12.9. Determinants of the probability of alternation before and after 1980: logistic regressions (odds ratio)

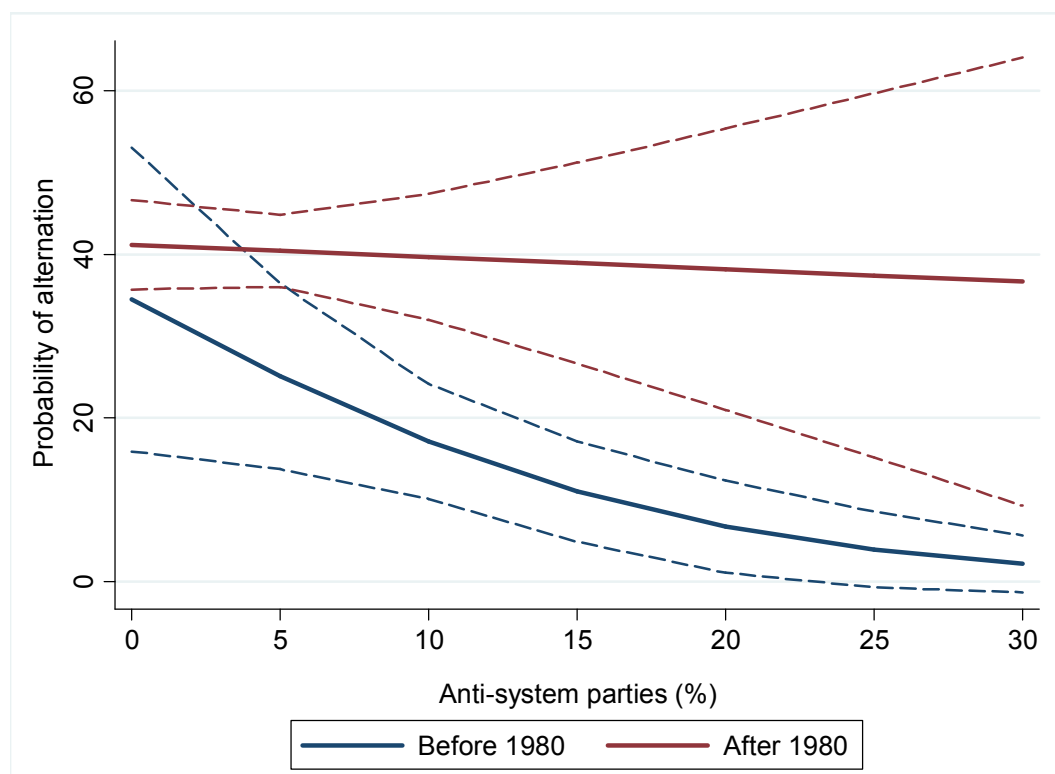
Dependent variable	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
	Pre 1980	Post 1980	Pre 1980	Post 1980
Specification	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce	Logit vce
N. relevant parties	1.217 (0.554)	1.016 (0.140)	1.238 (0.583)	0.924 (0.124)
Bipolarism (%)	1.053** (0.0266)	1.063*** (0.0224)	1.053** (0.0264)	1.067*** (0.0251)
Cabinet size (%)	0.890*** (0.0370)	0.913*** (0.0258)	0.891*** (0.0370)	0.905*** (0.0276)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.859*** (0.0481)	0.988 (0.0424)		
Ideological anti-system parties (%)			0.849** (0.0548)	0.893*** (0.0257)
Non-ideological anti-system parties (%)			0.876* (0.0620)	1.053 (0.0569)
Pivotal party (%)	1.058 (0.0516)	0.565*** (0.0642)	1.057 (0.0513)	0.572*** (0.0750)
Disproportionality index	0.956 (0.134)	1.068 (0.0469)	0.955 (0.131)	1.086* (0.0539)
Total volatility	1.086 (0.0678)	1.086* (0.0535)	1.075 (0.0762)	1.077 (0.0609)
Electoral competitiveness	1.068	0.960	1.071	0.946

	(0.0502)	(0.0552)	(0.0511)	(0.0625)
Election time	6.014*	10.95**	6.100	12.67**
	(6.414)	(11.94)	(6.721)	(14.69)
Constant	0.00131	1.779	0.00112	9.266
	(0.00718)	(8.354)	(0.00623)	(46.43)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	131	139	131	139
% Correctly predicted	89.4	84.9	89.4	84.9

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Summing up, the impact of anti-system parties has significantly changed through time, as shown in Figure 12.9, which reports the estimated marginal effects on the probability of alternation for the two periods of time. As expected, in the first three decades the growth in anti-systemness is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of alternation. Yet this pattern of association almost disappears after 1980, when 'traditional' anti-system parties lose their electoral strength and new extremist actors take the stage. Before 1980, the expected probability of alternation associated with a strong anti-system party (controlling more than 20% of seats) is virtually nil, while for a similar level of anti-systemness after 1980 the expected probability is four times greater.

Fig. 12.9. Marginal effects of anti-system parties on the expected probability of alternation before and after 1980

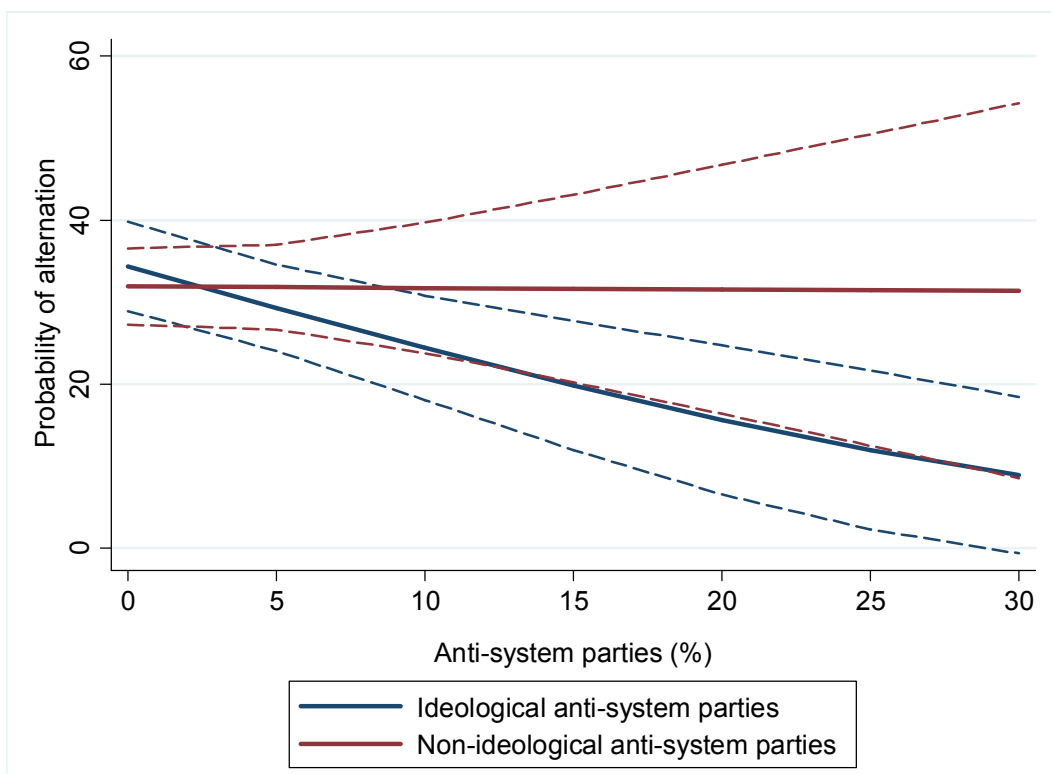


Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.9, Models 11 and 12. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

As I have shown in section 12.4, such a trend in the effect of anti-system parties is, to a large extent, linked with the transformation of this type of political party. Having lost their ideological baggage, the new, or deeply renewed, anti-system parties have assumed, formally or not, a different position, more versatile and flexible, within the legislature and vis-à-vis the other pro-system parties. The assumptions behind the isolationist strategy adopted by the ideological anti-system actors have been largely relaxed and now the

majority of non-ideological anti-system parties are eager to play the coalition game, covertly or not. The effect of this transformation on the pattern of government alternation is shown in Figure 12.10, which plots the marginal effects of the different types of anti-system party on the probability of alternation. As is evident, anti-system parties without a clear ideological trait have substantially no effect on the likelihood of alternation. In fact, despite their parliamentary strength, their impact on the occurrence of wholesale turnover in government remains stable. By contrast, for ideological anti-system parties the prediction is that an increase in their controlled share of seats will reduce the probability of alternation. Moreover, the graph shows these marginal effects are significant over much of their range, meaning that this association holds true for all levels of (ideological) anti-systemness.

Fig. 12.10. Marginal effects of ideological and non-ideological anti-system parties on the expected probability of alternation



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.9, Models 11 and 12. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

In this section we have seen that different factors explain the cross-country and across-time variance in the concrete occurrence of alternation. Among the structural attributes, the strength of bipolarism as well as the seat-share of the cabinet parties are the most important predictors. Instead, the number of parties, however measured and conceived, does not reveal any significant pattern of association with a specific pattern of government change. Within the cluster of preferences attributes, the existence of anti-system parties in parliament appears to be the most relevant in terms of alternation in government. An all-or-nothing style of government change is associated with situations in which parties that oppose the system are weak or electorally irrelevant. In particular, this relationship is confirmed for those anti-system parties that maintain an ideological (op)position, while it is largely disconfirmed for non-ideological actors.

As far as the institutional cluster of variables are concerned, the conclusion that can be drawn is straightforward. The differences in the electoral system make no difference to the probability of alternation. In spite of their diversified effects on the vote-seat translation, the existence of a pattern of government turnover based on the complete reshuffle in the cabinet composition is not linked with the working of the

electoral system. Nevertheless, other institutional factors, such as the formation of pre-election coalitions, seem to be morerelevant for the way parties rotate into office.

Finally, taking into consideration the three variables considered as short-term factors (i.e., total volatility, cabinet electoral performance and electoral competitiveness), it is possible to argue that only the propensity of voters to change their party preferences between elections has a significant impact on the likelihood of alternation. And this is even truer when a more specific concept of electoral mobility, that is, the government-opposition volatility, is considered. Strikingly, the level of electoral competitiveness – which most scholars have described as a sort functional or even conceptual equivalent of alternation – does not reveal any meaningful connection with government substitution.

All in all, elections in Western Europe have progressively become more *decisive* in terms of cabinet composition. The trend towards stronger bipolarism, on the one hand, and the slow waning of ideological anti-system parties, on the other, has created the conditions for a greater role of the voters in the decision regarding the partisan composition of the cabinet. In a context marked by the de-freezing of the political cleavages, higher levels of “coalitionability” between parties within the legislative arena and the possibility of choosing between two alternative parties or coalitions have paved the way, in the last thirty years, to a steady increase in the occurrence of government alternation.

12.6. At the origins of the possibility of alternation

Before analysing the conditions that make alternation a concrete possibility, it is useful to recall that by ‘possibility of alternation’ I mean a situation in which the outgoing government does not control a majority of seats in the legislature. As specified in Chapter 2, this is not a measure of the *ex ante* uncertainty that exists in the electoral arena. More simply, here the possibility of alternation is conceived of as an arithmetical opportunity for the incoming cabinet to replace the ruling parties.

That said, it is possible to proceed towards the last stage in our analysis of the determinants of government alternation. Table 12.10 reports different specifications of the explanatory model of the possibility of a wholesale government turnover. More accurately, Models 1 and 2 use static logistic regression (with robust errors clustered by country to control for panel autocorrelation) to estimate the variance on the possibility of alternation, while Models 3 and 4 adopt a dynamic logistic regression with, respectively, random effects and Newey-West (1987) standard errors, robust to both autocorrelation and heteroscedasticity. With only very few exceptions, that I will discuss below, all models yield similar results, confirming the robustness of the findings.

To begin at the beginning, the number of relevant parties confirms its irrelevance for the pattern of government change. The results emerging from the analysis show that the possibility of alternation, as well as its probability, has nothing to do with the fragmentation within the party system. Indeed, the analysis reveals a positive and weak association between the number of relevant parties and the dependent variable of interest here, but it does not achieve the conventional levels of significance. Therefore, what makes alternation possible is neither the number of relevant parties nor the effective number of legislative parties¹². However party-system fragmentation is measured, its impact on the possibility of a complete reshuffle in the cabinet composition is not significant.

By contrast, the measure of bipolarism appears to be positively associated with the *explanandum*, obtaining the standard levels of significance in all models but one (Models 4). In terms of substantive magnitude, for each increase of one percentage-point in bipolarism, the odds ratio of a possible alternation increases by 2.5%. Differently put, the stronger the dualist structure in the party system, the greater the possibility of alternation.

¹² The effect of the effective number of legislative parties on the possibility of alternation is tested in Tab. 12.11 (Model 5).

However, among the structural attributes included in the explanatory model, the variable with the strongest impact on the possibility of a wholesale turnover is the cabinet size. Minority governments and minimal-winning coalitions are more likely to create conditions according to which the outgoing cabinet can be replaced en bloc by an alternative coalition of parties. To be more precise, as the cabinet seat-share decreases by one-percentage point, the odds ratio associated with the possibility of alternation increases by roughly 8%. In this sense, what makes a wholesale turnover possible is the existence in parliament of a set of parties which is large enough to replace the rulers, but not so large as to include more parties than is needed for reaching the majority threshold. This is tantamount to saying that surplus or grand coalition cabinets are ‘enemies’ of governmental alternation.

Looking at the second cluster of independent variables, which consider the preferences of the political actors, the result is clear and straightforward. Granted that we are dealing with a purely arithmetical, policy-blind conceptualisation of the possibility of alternation, it is not surprising that the strength of both anti-system and pivotal parties have no bearing on the pattern of government change. In other words, in a policy-blind scenario, where the only factors that matter are the distribution of seats in the legislature and the cabinet size, the existence of anti-system parties, which can alter the mechanics of the system, is to a large extent irrelevant. According to the ‘basic arithmetic of legislative decisions’ (Laver and Benoit 2014), no matter where parties are located along one or more policy dimensions or whether some actors are treated as pariahs, alternation remains a concrete possibility that parties can ‘exploit’ or not, as long as the outgoing cabinet no longer controls a majority of seats in parliament. All other arguments and factors that take into consideration the goals and preferences of the voters make alternation more or less likely, but not possible or impossible.

As far as the disproportionality of the electoral system is concerned, the results reported in Table 12.10 are consistent in showing that its impact in terms of possibility of alternation is not significant. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the association has the unexpected sign (negative), which means that situations of possible alternation tend to be more frequent as the disproportionality of the electoral system decreases. In a similar vein, electoral competitiveness, that is, the closeness of the election, turns out to be totally inconsequential for the possibility of a wholesale replacement of the ruling parties. In other words, not even the loose definition of alternation as the expectation that a government turnover might occur (Sartori 1976: 165) can be confused with the notion of electoral competitiveness. In this sense, these concepts prove to be two strange bedfellows – theoretically interrelated but empirically disjointed.

With regard to the measure of total volatility, it is worth noticing the positive and statistically significant association with the possibility of alternation. In substantial terms, for each one-unit increase in volatility, the odds ratio of a possible alternation in parliament goes up by 8-10%. If the possibility of alternation is, as seen above, mostly a function of the distribution of seats in the legislature, electoral volatility plays a major role in that it may change the balance of power between parties. Accordingly, as voters become more fickle and volatile, the magnitude of change produced in parliament affects the possibility of a wholesale turnover in office.

From this vantage point, it is possible to conclude that the possibility of alternation is the product of two, strictly interwoven, factors. On the one hand, the propensity of the voters to change their party preferences is a precondition for changing the balance of power in parliament. In fact, a different distribution of seats can be the result of either switching/floating voters or changing party strategies. On the other hand, cabinet size allows parties in the opposition to mount a credible parliamentary threat to the rulers. In other words, the possibility of alternation requires the presence of both structural attributes, in particular a dualist structure in the party system that permits the formation of minority or minimal-winning cabinets, and short-term factors that can significantly alter voters’ behaviour. In brief, the interplay of these two variables – structural and behavioural – explains the cross-country variance in the possibility of alternation.

Tab. 12.0. Determinants of the possibility of alternation: logistic regression (odds ratios)

Dependent variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Possibility of alteration (%)			
	Static model		Dynamic model	
Specification	Logit vce	Logit vce time	Random effects	Newey-West
N. relevant parties	1.296 (0.223)	1.242 (0.196)	1.198 (0.150)	1.174 (0.202)
Bipolarism (%)	1.025** (0.0115)	1.026** (0.0121)	1.028* (0.0166)	1.022 (0.0218)
Cabinet size (%)	0.919*** (0.0280)	0.915*** (0.0264)	0.946*** (0.0150)	0.961** (0.0177)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.977 (0.0172)	0.975 (0.0168)	0.976 (0.0192)	0.969 (0.0206)
Pivotal party (%)	0.991 (0.0325)	0.998 (0.0325)	1.014 (0.0252)	1.031 (0.0337)
Disproportionality index	0.947 (0.0331)	0.933* (0.0382)	0.956 (0.0434)	0.955 (0.0460)
Total volatility	1.080*** (0.0321)	1.060* (0.0333)	1.114*** (0.0300)	1.129*** (0.0304)
Electoral competitiveness	0.987 (0.0281)	0.990 (0.0296)	0.986 (0.0221)	0.984 (0.0254)
Election time	3.552*** (1.429)	3.369*** (1.379)	4.063*** (1.260)	4.283*** (1.299)
Constant	0.701 (2.991)	0.424 (2.014)	0.112 (0.172)	0.0100 (0.0286)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Decade dummies	No	Yes	No	No
Observations	465	465	455	455
Number of countries	17	17	17	17
% Correctly predicted	81.1	81.5	69.0	69,3

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country (Models 1-2); with random effect standard errors in Model 3; and robust (Newey-West) standard errors clustered by country in Model 4. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

To get a better grasp of the conditions that makes alternation possible, Table 12.11 presents different specifications of the baseline explanatory model. The first column (Model 5) replaces the number of relevant parties with the effective number of legislative parties, but the results do not change: party-system fragmentation and the possibility of alternation are simply two worlds apart. There is no need to linger further on this aspect and we can move to Model 6, which introduces incumbency volatility in place of the more general category of total volatility. The evidence clearly shows that the effect of this type of volatility occurring along the government-opposition divide has the expected sign (positive) and achieves the conventional levels of statistical significance. What is more, the impact of incumbency volatility on the possibility of alternation is stronger than that of total volatility. This means that what really matters for the pattern of government substitution is not only the existence of an available electorate but, in particular, its specific location within the main dimension of competition in the party system.

This finding receives further confirmation in Model 7, which takes into consideration the electoral performance of the cabinet. According to the result of the logistic regression, a one percentage-point decrease in the share of votes got by the cabinet parties leads to an increase by nearly 4% in the odds ratio of possible alternation. *Inter alia*, this explains why, especially in the last two decades that have witnessed a steady increase in the electoral incumbency losses, situations of possible alternation have become more

common throughout Western Europe. The poorer the electoral performance of the ruling parties, the higher the chance for the opposition parties to replace the incumbents.

Finally, Model 8 tests the hypothesis whereby the formation of a pre-electoral coalition between the cabinet parties is conducive to more frequent situations of possible alternation. Contrary to our expectations, the existence of cabinets formed in the wake of pre-election agreement does not contribute to making alternation a concrete possibility. The direction of the relationship, albeit extremely weak, is positive (as predicted) but it does not obtain the standard level of significance. However, it must be pointed out that the introduction of this variable in the right-side of the equation has the consequence of absorbing, or neutralising, the positive impact of bipolarism on the possibility of alternation.

Tab. 12.11. Determinant of the possibility of alternation: logistic regression (odds ratios)

Dependent variable Specification	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Logit vce	Possibility of alternation (%) Logit vce		Logit vce
Effective n. of parties	1.056 (0.236)	1.266 (0.382)	1.286 (0.266)	1.050 (0.265)
Bipolarism (%)	1.021* (0.0123)	1.029* (0.0154)	1.022* (0.0127)	1.021 (0.0134)
Cabinet size (%)	0.914*** (0.0296)	0.927** (0.0317)	0.912*** (0.0278)	0.914*** (0.0306)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.985 (0.0209)	1.000 (0.0236)	0.996 (0.0202)	0.984 (0.0228)
Pivotal party (%)	0.988 (0.0287)	0.995 (0.0269)	0.982 (0.0286)	0.988 (0.0297)
Index of disproportionality	0.939 (0.0385)	0.997 (0.0428)	0.973 (0.0364)	0.942 (0.0395)
Total volatility	1.091*** (0.0340)			1.092*** (0.0353)
Electoral competitiveness	0.989 (0.0285)	0.982 (0.0253)	0.987 (0.0232)	0.988 (0.0285)
Incumbency volatility		1.104** (0.0448)		
Cabinet elec. performance (%)			0.965** (0.0158)	
Pre-election coalition				1.005 (0.531)
Election time	3.119*** (1.188)		2.755*** (1.012)	3.067*** (1.140)
Constant	1.835 (8.067)	0.417 (1.646)	2.216 (10.31)	1.795 (8.073)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	465	297	429	464
N. of countries	17	17	17	17
% Correctly predicted	80.4	76.1	78.8	80.6

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Thus far, this section has focused on the analysis of the cross-country variance in the possibility of alternation. For understanding its historical trajectory, the explanatory model is tested in two distinct period of times, that is, before and after 1980. As shown in Table 12.12, in the first model (9) only two structural

variables reach statistical significance: bipolarism and cabinet size. Thus, until 1980 the presence of a dualist structure of inter-party competition and cabinet size were able to explain the variance in the possibility of alternation.

The picture changes quite a lot in the subsequent period, namely, in the last thirty-five years. Looking at the results of Model 10, four aspects are worthy of comment. First, bipolarism maintains its positive impact on alternation but does not achieve the usual level of significance. In other words, bipolarism is no longer a good predictor for the situations of possible alternation, whose rising trend cannot be explained by making reference to the strength of the dualist structure in parliament. Second, cabinet size confirms and strengthens the negative impact on the dependent variable. As minimal-winning cabinets have become more frequent in the last decades, the arithmetic of legislative politics has offered more opportunities to completely replace the ruling parties. Third, the pivotal party, which showed virtually no effect before 1980, has become significant in the subsequent phase. This may be due to the resistance of the pivotal party especially in the Benelux countries, where these dominant actors maintain a strong hold on the party system. Fourth, total volatility achieves conventional levels of significance only in the second phase under investigation here. In other words, the rise in voters' mobility witnessed in Western Europe since the 1980s has produced significant, in some cases seismic, changes in the balance of power within party systems, which in turn has made elections more uncertain and, above all, alternation more likely.

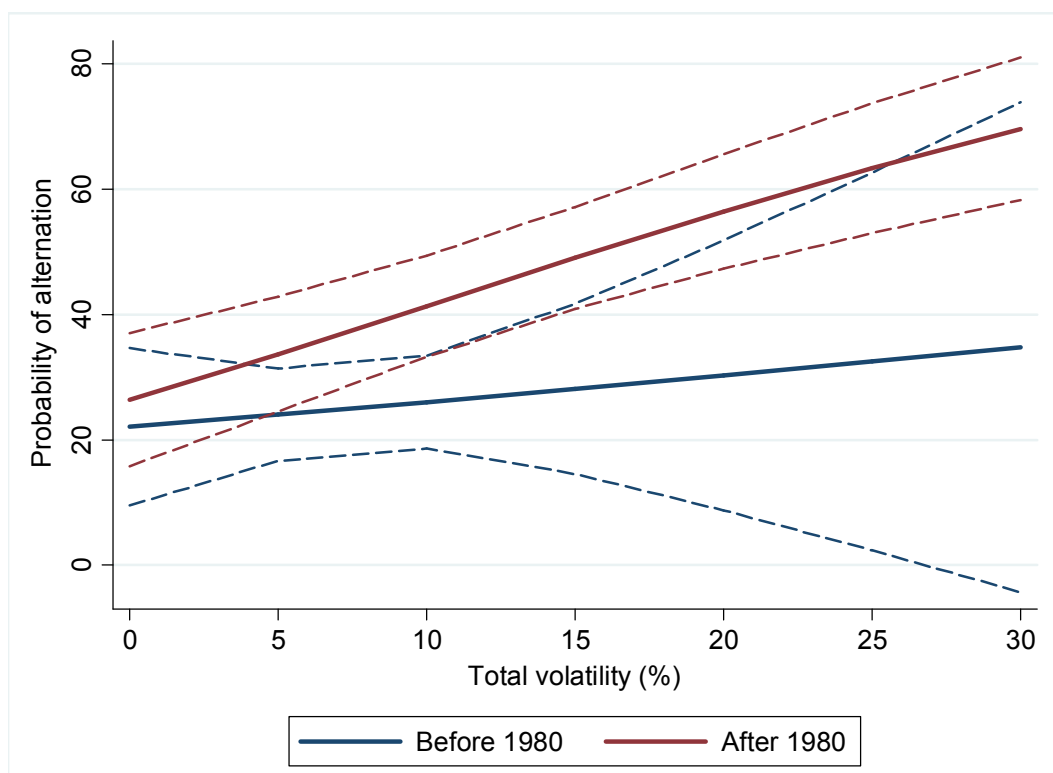
Tab. 12.12. Determinants of the possibility of alternation before and after 1980: logistic regression (odds ratios)

Dependent variable	(9)	(10)
	Possibility of alternation (%)	
Period	Pre 1980	Post 1980
Specification	logit vce-9	logit vce-10
Effective n. of legislative parties	1.409 (0.507)	0.917 (0.165)
Bipolarism (%)	1.028* (0.0155)	1.014 (0.0148)
Cabinet size (%)	0.921* (0.0415)	0.903*** (0.0341)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.976 (0.0313)	0.989 (0.0247)
Pivotal party (%)	1.026 (0.0266)	0.933** (0.0328)
Disproportionality index	0.893 (0.0776)	0.952 (0.0630)
Total volatility	1.031 (0.0640)	1.106*** (0.0294)
Electoral competitiveness	1.040 (0.0467)	0.984 (0.0474)
Election time	2.164** (0.771)	4.115*** (2.237)
Constant	4.382 (23.27)	0.507 (2.692)
Country dummies	Yes	Yes
Observations	231	234
N. countries	17	17
% Correctly predicted	81.4	78.6

Notes: All estimates are odds ratio with robust standard errors in parentheses clustered by country. *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

The relationship between volatility and possibility of alternation in the two periods of time is very clear from Figure 12.11, which reports the marginal effects on the expected possibility of a wholesale government turnover over a range of values in the measure of electoral mobility. As it is evident, the impact of total volatility is rather weak and statistically insignificant before 1980, especially for higher values in the scale of electoral mobility. By way of contrast, the marginal effects for the subsequent period is much stronger and statistically significant all over the range of total volatility. In sum, one of the main driving forces explaining the increase in the possibility of alternation can be identified with the propensity of voters to change their party preferences. The progressive de-freezing of the classic political cleavages experienced in West European party systems since the 1980s has profoundly changed the electoral landscape, making the fate of the cabinet more uncertain and making it easier for the opposition parties to present a credible threat to the rulers.

Fig. 12.11. Marginal effects of total volatility on the expected probability of alternation



Notes: Results are derived from Tab. 12.13, Models 9 and 10. The continuous line represents the marginal effects of the independent variable on the explanandum. The dotted lines represent the confidence intervals indicating when the marginal effect is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

To summarise, the determinants of the possibility of alternation can be found in the interplay between structural and behavioural attributes. In this respect, it is worth noting that the preferences of the parties, in particular the location along one or more salient policy dimensions in the system, have a limited or very marginal impact on the possibility for the opposition to replace the incumbent. Since, as I have stressed above, the possibility of alternation is considered as a mere result of the basic arithmetic of legislative politics, the policy position of the parties, as well as their greater or lesser degree of coalitionability, will not and cannot explain the variance in the feasibility of a complete reshuffle in the partisan composition of the cabinet.

What appears to be main engine of the possibility of alternation, and in particular for its progressive growth in Western Europe, is the behavioural factors associated with the mobility of the voters within the menu of

party options. The increase in the electoral volatility has set in motion important changes in the distribution of seats that, in many circumstances, have offered the opposition the opportunity to remove the government from office. In extreme summary, electoral mobility makes alternation possible, cabinet size makes it real.

12.7. Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have quantitatively tested the hypotheses or, in some cases, the theoretical expectations that are present in the literature and that I have further developed in Part II of this dissertation about the relationship between the multi-faceted phenomenon of alternation in government and a vast array of independent variables. I did so by adopting a time-series-cross-section design, which is able to accommodate and explain variance both across nations and through time. In particular, I have assessed the internal validity of the explanatory model of government alternation, taking into account factors that are idiosyncratic to each country and controlling for other time-variant elements that account for the growth in government turnover witnessed throughout Western Europe since the 1980s.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis has tested the validity of many theoretical arguments that can be found in the literature devoted to the study of alternation in power. As I have repeatedly specified, the discussion on the determinants of alternation has often developed exclusively at the theoretical level, with no test of these propositions or generalisations at the empirical level. In many cases, these theoretical arguments have been used to justify not only the juxtaposition but even the overlapping of concepts that, *a priori*, were supposed to be linked by a cause-effect relationship. To illustrate, suffice it to discuss the relationship between alternation and, on the one hand, the number of relevant parties and, on the other, the electoral competitiveness. There are plenty of articles and studies using the number of parties as a proxy for the probability of alternation, without having proved empirically the validity of this association. However, according to the evidence collected in this chapter, the relationship between party-system fragmentation is spurious, weak, rarely statistically significant and, in many circumstances, conditional on the existence of other pre-existing factors. In other words, using the number of parties to predict the likelihood of a wholesale turnover in government is, in a way, like predicting the weather by looking at the number of stars in the sky. As to the association with electoral competitiveness, the finding is even more striking. From a purely theoretical perspective, alternation has often proceeded in tandem with the closeness of the electoral race. They both describe a scenario of pre-election uncertainty, that is, *ex ante facto*. Yet if one analyses the empirical relationship between the expectation of alternation and the margin of victory, the results are definitely less straightforward. To put it another way, it is still possible to see the closeness of the electoral contest as an indicator of the expectation of alternation, but it would be wrong to use the electoral competitiveness to predict real, existing cases of alternation.

A similar argument holds also for the effect of the electoral system, whose relationship with the occurrence of alternation has turned out to be absolutely weak and statistically insignificant. All this means that other, more important, factors should be taken into consideration for the analysis of the determinants of the patterns of government turnover. However, as I have pointed out above, there is no single chain of causation that is constant across nations and through time. What is more, different dimensions of the concept of alternation seem to be associated with specific configurations of explanatory factors. To wrap up the main findings, it is possible to reconstruct the general chain of causation that, according to the results obtained from the statistical analyses carried out in this chapter, links the possibility of alternation to the level of government turnover. The chain of causation of alternation is reported in Figure 12.12. As far as the explanation of the possibility of alternation is concerned, two factors emerge as the most relevant. On the one hand, cabinet size, both of the outgoing and the incoming cabinet, is crucial in that it allows the opposition to behave as a sort of alternative-government-in-waiting. As the share of seats of the cabinet gets closer to the majority threshold, the opportunity for the opposition parties to remove all ruling parties gets larger.

However, cabinet size is a necessary but not sufficient condition in the explanation of the possibility of alternation. On the other hand, the second necessary condition is the existence of a large portion of the electorate that is 'available' in the electoral market and, in particular, can shift its vote from government to opposition, or vice versa. Only when this second condition is met does the possibility of alternation become real, in the sense that electoral volatility triggers changes in the distribution of seats that, in turn, make the incumbent parties arithmetically removable. Therefore, the possibility of alternation stems from the interplay of these two factors, which are associated with both a structural factor of the party system and a behavioural attitude of the voters.

Moving to the determinants of the probability of alternation, the most important aspect that must be underlined is that the preferences (i.e., the goals and the strategies) of the party actors take the field at this stage in the chain of causation. Put another way, when alternation is considered exclusively as a matter of arithmetic, making it possible or impossible to remove the incumbent, the preferences of the parties play a very marginal, perhaps indirect, role. Instead, moving from a situation of arithmetic possibility to a scenario of political probability, or feasibility, then the preferences of the party actors turn out to be crucial. In particular, the existence of large anti-system parties in the legislature is a condition that, so to speak, makes impossible the possible. In fact, when a sizeable portion of the legislature is controlled by one or more anti-system actors, the threshold of executive power is significantly raised and, consequently, the chance of a wholesale turnover gets smaller. Unless these parties have the potential to form a coalition or lose their pariah status, the pattern of government change is likely to rely on more or less small replacements in the partisan composition of the cabinet (i.e., through micro-substitution or semi-rotation).

In a similar vein, the other constraining factor associated with the probability of alternation is the existence of a pivotal party in parliament, which is capable of conditioning the way parties rotate, or do not rotate, into office. A dominant actor located at the centre of the party system, even though it has no effect in terms of possible alternation, has a strong negative impact on the likelihood for the opposition to replace the ruling parties en bloc. What is more, the presence of such an actor in the party system prevents or slows down the formation of a bipolar structure of inter-party competition. In fact, pivotality and bipolarism are not two faces of the same coin. On the contrary, they are two aspects that characterise two completely different styles of party confrontation. On the one hand, pivotal party systems are based on the existence of a dominant party that, by either leaning to its right or to its left, acts as *primum movens* (i.e., unmoved mover) of the entire system. On the other hand, alternational party systems rely on a dualist structure of inter-party competition, according to which the opposition parties coordinate their strategies in order to replace, sooner or later, the incumbent parties.

Therefore, the sheer existence of a pivotal party turns a possible alternation into an unlikely scenario. By contrast, a bipolar party system enhances the probability of alternation, no matter how bipolarism is built up. In other words, dualism can stem 'naturally' from the electoral arena, when the competition takes place between two large parties/coalitions, or, alternatively, it can be an artefact of specific institutions (e.g., pre-electoral agreements) that create a sort of bipolarism in disguise. Either way, these dynamics of inter-party competition facilitate the emergence of a pattern of government change based on an all-or-nothing logic.

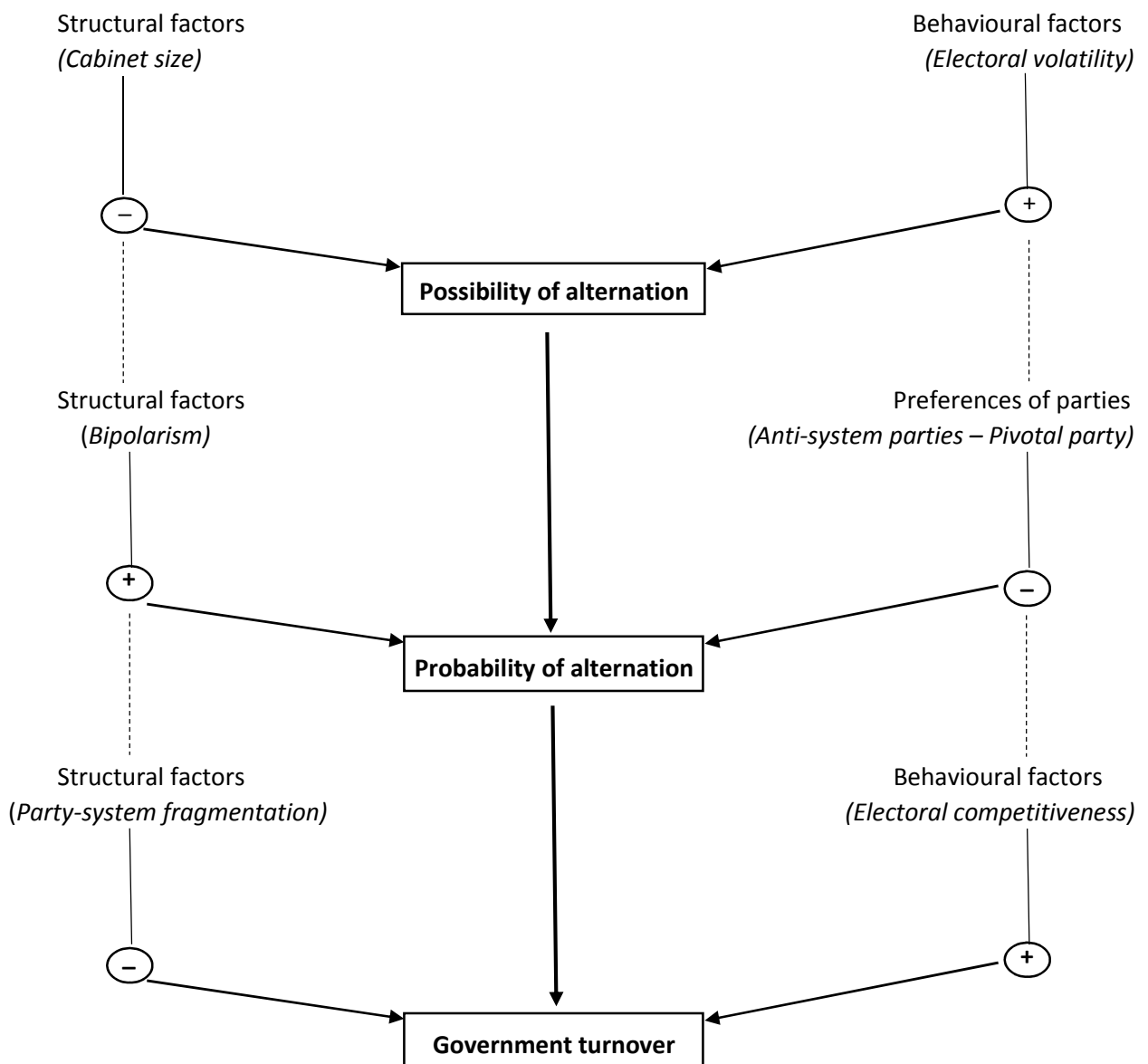
In the last stage along the chain of causation that links the possibility of alternation to the level of government turnover, it is possible to observe the effect of two other factors, which have no part in the explanation of the mechanics of alternation. First, electoral competitiveness is an accelerator or, better, a multiplier of the turnover taking place within the cabinet. As the margin of victory between two parties or coalitions gets smaller, the level of government turnover tends systematically to increase. This effect is weak and statistically insignificant in terms of alternation but becomes robust when government turnover is considered.

On the other hand, there is the role played by the number of parties or, more accurately, the party-system fragmentation. The effect that this factor exerts on the probability, as well as on the possibility, of alternation is, to a large extent, negligible. In the best scenario, party-system fragmentation has a marginal

and conditional influence on the occurrence of government alternation. Nevertheless, when the analysis rests on the level of government turnover, the impact of the number of parties turns out to be sufficiently strong and significant to explain the variance in the patterns of government change, both within and across countries.

That said, the chain of causation depicted in Figure 12.12 does not tell the whole story of alteration. As I have pointed out at the outset of this dissertation, by the 1980s Western Europe had witnessed a steady increase in the occurrence of alternation. So, what drives this trend? Where are the roots of this phenomenon?

Fig. 12.12. Chain of causation: from the possibility of alternation to the level of government turnover



In the light of the analysis carried out in this chapter, this question has (at least) two sufficiently grounded answers. The first is associated with the possibility of alternation and points to the increased volatility observed in the electoral arena in the last three decades or so. As the late Peter Mair pointed out (2013: 42), West European electorates ‘are becoming progressively destructured’ and this, in turn, implies ‘a form of voting behaviour that is increasingly contingent, and a type of voter whose choices appear

increasingly accidental or even random'. The de-freezing of the old political cleavages, which were in a way the distinguishing mark of the 'century of mass politics', has opened up Pandora's box of electoral volatility. Voters are no longer, or at least not with the same intensity, encapsulated within specific, historically- and, sometimes, also geographically-rooted political subcultures.

This condition, which some scholars connect to the more general process of political dealignment, has triggered significant transformations both within and between political parties. As far as government alternation is concerned, the increase in electoral volatility has seriously jeopardised any form of 'situation rent' for the parties, derived by their monopolistic control of a more or less large portion of the electorate. As the volatility grows, parties can no longer take a single vote for granted. Consequently, electoral results become more unpredictable and the distribution of seats less stable. Such a new scenario has paved the way to the possibility of alternation, that is, a situation in which it is arithmetically possible, in the legislature, to completely replace the ruling parties.

The second factor that accounts for the rise of alternation in Western Europe concerns the waning or, better, the transformation of anti-system parties. If the increase in the level of electoral volatility explains the temporal variance in the possibility of alternation, the transformation of anti-system actors seems to account for the variance in the probability of alternation. As all parties become (more) coalitionable and anti-system parties lose their ideological baggage, coalition-making has become easier – as has the opportunity for the temporary opposition parties to replace the incumbent government. The breakthrough of non-ideological anti-system parties has stretched the classic left-right political continuum, but it has not created breaking points between parties. Although coalition-making remains cumbersome, these parties are usually considered as acceptable partners and useful allies for mounting a credible challenge to the government.

Summing up, the interaction between these two factors – increase in electoral volatility and waning of ideological anti-party systems – lies at the heart of the rise of alternation that Western Europe has witnessed since the 1980s. On the one hand, the transformation within the European electorate and, on the other, the disappearance of the 'traditional' anti-system parties have contributed to making alternation a more likely and frequent event. This is tantamount to saying that the (changing) attitudes of the voters and the (changing) preferences of the parties explain the temporal variance in the occurrence of government alternation. Yet this does not mean that other structural variables – such as bipolarism or cabinet size – are not associated with the rising trend of alternation.

To some extent, Duverger (1954) was right in saying that 'alternation presupposes dualism'. Namely, that alternation is possible when two teams of would-be rulers confront each other and rotate into power. But the question is: what presupposes dualism? What are the conditions fostering bipolarism? As we have seen in this chapter, the creation of a dualist structure of inter-party competition is feasible when all or the vast majority of parties are governing-oriented, that is, they accept the cost of governing and do not rule out the possibility to do so in coalition with other parties. If a significant portion of the party system is 'out of competition', because of the presence of actors that do not accept, and indeed fight, the legitimacy of the political system, then the room for manoeuvre for the emergence of bipolarism is extremely limited.

Similarly, the sheer existence of a dualist structure does not explain in full the occurrence of alternation. In a nutshell, dualism does not presuppose alternation, because a bipolar mechanics of inter-party competition can coexist with situations in which wholesale turnover in office are very remote events. This implies that the occurrence of alternation requires the propensity of the voters to change their party preferences, in particular along the dimension of competition that separates government from opposition. If and when voters are sufficiently mobile and volatile, alternation becomes a likely event; by contrast, when the electorate is frozen or immobile and the political supply is fixed, the prospect for a complete turnover is absolutely remote. Therefore, in partial accordance with Duverger, I argue that alternation presupposes dualism only when specific facilitating conditions are met. Whether they are related to the preferences of the parties or to the attitudes of the voters, there is no doubt that an available electorate as well as an open and competitive electoral market are prerequisites for the occurrence of alternation in government.

Chapter 13

Conclusion. From the past to the future of alternation

13.1. Looking backward: the past of alternation

At first sight, government alternation might seem to be a straightforward phenomenon. Quite simply: the Ins are out and the Outs are in. However, as I have endeavoured to show throughout this thesis, this is not the case. Indeed, alternation is a complex concept that can be studied and analysed at different levels of generality, with specific methodological tools, taking into consideration its multifaceted nature. Undoubtedly, alternation implies the complete substitution of the ruling parties with those that were seated on the benches of the opposition. An all-or-nothing, black-or-white, in-or-out logic prevails when it comes to the process of government change. However, despite this binary idea of government change, alternation in government is the product of many different factors that change through time and across nations. There is no single or failproof recipe for creating, in the lab, a wholesale turnover.

Nevertheless, as the evidence collected in the previous chapters has shown, there exist some factors that facilitate or, on the contrary, prevent the occurrence of alternation in government. Especially in Chapter 12, we have seen that a cluster of five factors can explain, with reasonable certainty, both the possibility and probability of alternation. These facilitating/constraining conditions are the following: a) bipolarism; b) cabinet size; c) volatility; d) anti-system parties; and d) pivotal party. It goes without saying that the specific combination of these five factors explains the variance in the occurrence of alternation and, to some extent, can be used to predict it. In other words, when all conditions, both facilitating and constraining, are met, then the chance for an alternation in government is extremely limited.

To illustrate, it would be possible to construct an *Alternation Risk index* (ARI) which is able to estimate the likelihood of a given change to occur through a wholesale turnover, *under specific conditions*. The single components of the index are reported in Table 13.1. As is evident, all factors are subdivided in four categories (0-3) in terms of their increasing impact on the occurrence of alternation in government. In other words, a score of '0' for the variable 'bipolarism' means that the strength of the bipolar structure in the party system, in a given election, is nil. By contrast, a score of '3' for the variable concerning the seat-share of anti-system parties implies that its (negative) impact is very low or negligible. Theoretically, by adopting an additive approach, the range of the *Alternation Risk index* goes from 0 (minimum risk of alternation) to 15 (maximum risk of alternation). It is worth noting that the score attributed to each ordered category for each factor follows an ascending order, in the sense that they are arranged from the most to the least effective in terms of their impact on the probability of alternation.

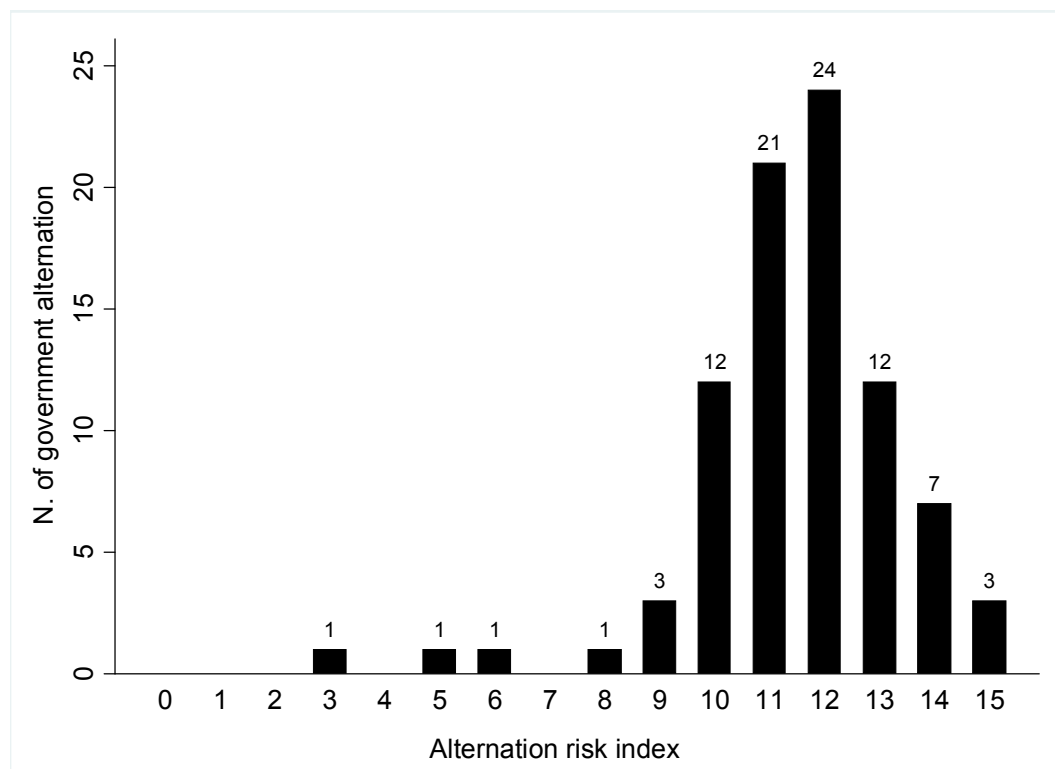
Tab. 13.1. Components of the Alternation Risk index

<i>Type of factor</i>	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Score</i>
Facilitating factors	Bipolarism	Lower than 50%	0
		Between 50 and 60%	1
		Between 60 and 70%	2
		Higher than 80%	3
	Cabinet size	Higher than 60%	0
		Between 55% and 60%	1
		Between 50% and 55%	2
		Lower than 50%	3

Volatility	Lower than 8%	0
	Between 8% and 12%	1
	Between 12 and 15%	2
	Higher than 15%	3
Constraining factors	Higher than 15%	0
	Between 10% and 15%	1
	Between 5% and 10%	2
	Lower than 5%	3
Pivotal party	Higher than 40%	0
	Between 30% and 40%	1
	Between 1% and 30%	2
	0 (not present)	3

Before analysing in-depth the temporal and spatial distribution of the *Alternation Risk index* in Western Europe, it is useful to assess its validity in relation to real-existing cases of alternation that have occurred so far. More precisely, I will investigate whether and to what extent the concrete cases of wholesale turnover have taken place in those circumstances in which the risk of alternation is greater. As shown in Figure 13.1, the vast majority of alternations (N=86) occurred when the index has a value higher than 10. Put another way, more than nine alternations in ten taking place in Western Europe since the end of WWII happened in risk-prone contexts, that is, in party systems where the facilitating conditions were strong and the constraining factors were weak.

Fig. 13.1. Number of government alternations in Western Europe by level in the *Alternation Risk index*



Only in three cases has alternation occurred in risk-averse circumstances. The first is associated with the formation of an exceptional and inter-electoral minority cabinet in Finland, led by the Prime Minister Urho Kekkonen, which lasted less than one year (March 1950 – January 1951). The other two cases happened

in Belgium, from 1954 to 1958, when the party system featured, for a short period of time, ‘polarization with alternation between socialist and Christian democratic led governmental alternatives, with either one or the other on the Opposition benches’ (De Winter and Rezsöhazy 2012: 197). This majoritarian-style pattern of party competition halted in the 1960s, when the Christian party, thanks to its pivotal role in a multi-dimensional space, established its political hegemony within the party system.

In any case, with only these three exceptions just mentioned, all cases of alternations that have occurred in Western Europe in the last seventy years can be explained by the constellation of factors included in the ARI. This means that, given a certain level of bipolarism, pivotality, cabinet size, anti-systemness and volatility, alternation in government can be expected with reasonable certainty.

Having proved the internal validity of the index, it is now possible to use it to analyse its distribution across West European party systems and through time. To begin with, Table 13.2 reports the overall ranking of the 17 countries here under examination on the basis of their mean values in the index. As the figures shows, at the top of the table there are Ireland, Norway and Sweden, namely, three countries with a strong bipolar structure of party competition, a tradition of minority cabinets and a weak anti-system threat. On the contrary, at the bottom of the ranking there are countries characterised by either a strong pivotal party (Luxembourg and Belgium) or strong anti-system actors (Finland and Italy until the 1980s). It is also worth noticing that the value of standard deviation is greater in the cases of France and Italy. This is not surprising because, as we will see below, these two countries witnessed, in different periods of time, a transition from a risk-averse to a risk-prone political regime. Furthermore, it must be stressed that the United Kingdom, the motherland of the so-called majoritarian democracy, is not the queen of the ranking due, among other elements, to the overall level of electoral volatility and cabinet size (usually most of the time, single-party government with the exception of the coalition cabinet led by David Cameron from 2010 to 2015).

Finally, it is important to note that the three ‘third-wave’ countries (e.g., Greece, Portugal and Spain) show a relatively high value in the ARI. Obviously, these figures do not take into account (or do so only very marginally) the effect of the Great Recession on the transformation of these party systems, especially in Greece and Spain. For instance, since the dataset includes all cabinets formed until 2015, it is not possible to evaluate the expected risk of alternation associated with the repeatedly indecisive elections held in Spain in December 2015 and June 2016. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that, up to now, the government of the three West European late democracies have been usually exposed to alternation risk.

Tab. 13.2. Alternation Risk index in seventeen West European countries (mean values for whole period)

	Mean	Standard deviation
Ireland	11.8	1.5
Norway	11.6	1.6
Sweden	11.5	0.9
Spain	10.9	2.4
United Kingdom	10.8	1.2
Greece	10.5	1.2
Denmark	10.2	1.2
Germany	9.9	1.0
Iceland	9.9	1.5
Portugal	9.7	2.2
France	7.4	4.5
Austria	6.4	3.0
Netherlands	5.9	3.2
Italy	5.1	4.4
Finland	4.8	2.1
Belgium	4.6	1.5
Luxembourg	3.9	1.2
<i>Mean</i>	<i>8.1</i>	<i>3.8</i>

If we now analyse the variation over time of the mean values in the *Alternation Risk index* (see Table 13.3), the first important aspect to be pointed out is the rising trend in the risk of alternation until the 1990s, when the index shows its record-high (9.7). In the subsequent decades, the ARI witnesses a slowdown, especially in the last period, that is, from 2010 to 2015. We do not know yet whether this is a temporary stop or the first sign of a counter-trend in the growth of government alternation in Western Europe. In Chapter 3 I discussed in-depth the frequency of alternation in the last period of the dataset, especially during the years characterised by the advent of the economic crisis. It has been shown that some of the main effects of the Great Recession were the (re)emergence of anti-system parties, the weakening of the traditional, mainstream parties (Martin 2015) and the collapse of the bipolar structure in many party systems. All these factors, as known, have reduced the room of manoeuvre for alternative coalitions, because of the formation, in many circumstances, of surplus or *Grosse Koalition* cabinets as a blame-avoidance strategy for those parties that accepted the cost of governing in hard times.

In general, the historical trend in the risk of alternation looks like a parabolic curve with an upside down U-shape: with a long first wave of growth that lasted until the 1990s and then the sign of a short (so far) reverse wave that peaks in the last five years (2010-2015). The vertex of the parabola is located at the turn of 21st century, when the *Alternation Risk Index* has a mean value oscillating between 9.7 and 9.6. However, despite this general trend, across individual countries the distribution of values appears to be less straightforward. Indeed, in eleven countries, the peak in the risk of alternation occurs in the last four decades, while Austria, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands peak in the 1970s. Moreover, Denmark and Iceland show their record-high, respectively, in the 1950s and the mid-1940s. In other words, there is a bit of noise in these figures and the evidence of a trend towards a growing risk of alternation is far from homogenous.

To further elucidate this aspect, it is possible to observe, on the one hand, the trajectory of France and Italy. In both party systems, the risk of alternation was extremely low: 1.5 in France (mid-1940s) and 1.8 in Italy (1980s). Afterwards, with the collapse of their party systems, respectively in the late 1950s and the early 1990s, alternation became a likely and frequent event. In France the peak occurs in the mid-2010s, with the government change set in motion by the victory of the Socialist Party; the Italian experience is even more telling, since the peak observed in the 2000s described a situation in which all three general elections held in that decade (2001, 2006 and 2008) brought about a wholesale turnover in government between a centre-left and a centre-right coalition. A similar trend, albeit less straightforward, can be observed in Belgium, Luxembourg and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands, which show high values of the index in the last decades. This tendency is interesting because it reveals that the conditions constraining the occurrence of alternation in the Benelux countries are progressively losing their hold in the party system.

On the other hand, there are countries in which the rise in the *Alternation Risk index* halted at the dawn of the 21st century. For instance, Ireland, Iceland, Germany, Greece and Norway peak before the 2000s, showing a trajectory that mostly overlaps the general trend. In these cases, one can observe a weakening of the constraining factors that accompanied the rise of alternation in Western Europe, starting with the erosion of bipolarism and the growing frequency of surplus coalitions.

Tab. 13.3. Alternation Risk index in seventeen West European countries (mean values by decade)

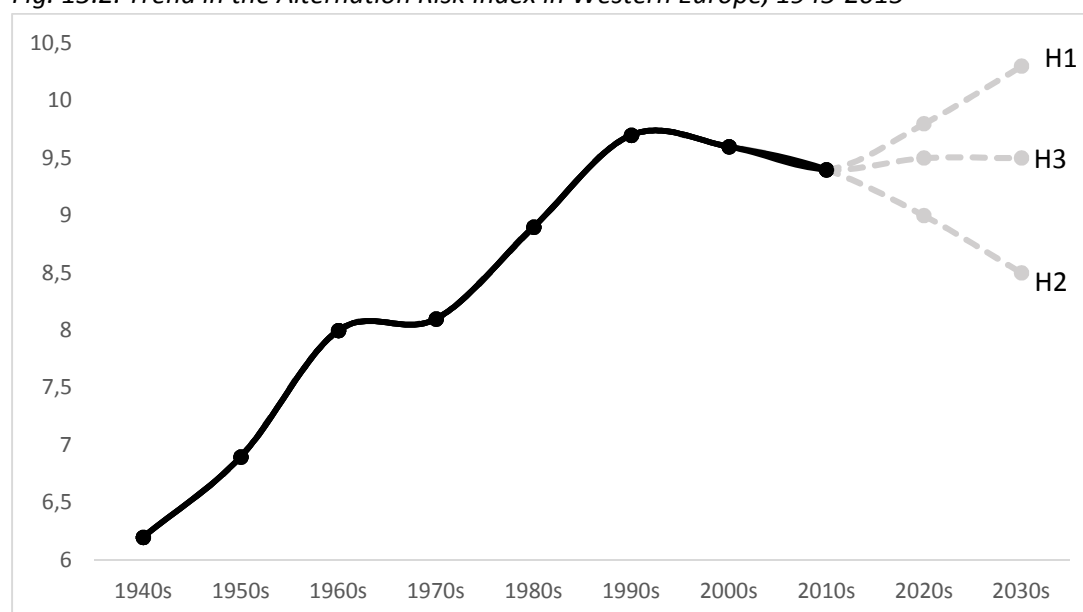
	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
Austria	5.3	2.0	3.5	10.3	10.0	6.0	7.3	8.0
Belgium	4.4	5.5	5.5	4.4	6.2	6.0	5.3	8.0
Denmark	10.0	11.2	11.0	9.7	9.8	10.4	9.3	10.0
Finland	5.7	4.8	5.2	4.7	6.3	6.8	5.7	6.0
France	1.5	4.4	9.5	9.0	12.5	12.6	12.0	14.0
Germany	10.2	10.4	9.7	10.6	9.8	9.3	9.0	9.0
Greece				10.0	10.6	11.3	11.0	9.4
Iceland	11.3	9.0	9.0	9.5	10.0	10.3	10.8	8.0
Ireland	12.0	12.5	12.0	10.3	12.4	12.3	11.0	10.0

Italy	5.0	3.9	2.2	2.0	1.8	9.9	12.6	8.7
Luxembourg	5.0	4.0	4.0	5.5	5.6	3.3	2.5	6.0
Netherlands	3.7	4.0	4.5	10.0	7.0	8.5	8.3	9.5
Norway	10.0	10.8	11.6	13.6	12.3	12.0	10.0	10.0
Portugal				7.0	8.6	11.0	11.0	11.5
Spain				8.3	11.5	11.5	12.3	14.0
Sweden	11.7	11.0	11.5	11.4	11.4	12.3	13.0	10.5
United Kingdom	11.9	10.8	10.3	11.8	9.5	10.7	9.7	12.0
<i>Mean</i>	6.2	6.9	8.0	8.1	8.9	9.7	9.6	9.4

Notes: bold = peak.

In the light of the above, one can put forward three main hypotheses on the future development of alternation in government. As shown in Figure 13.2, according to the first hypothesis (H1), the next decades will witness a recovery in the risk of alternation, in the sense that, in conjunction with the foreseeable end of the economic downturn, the conditions that have slowed down the occurrence of alternation will progressively lose their strength. In a certain way, this hypothesis predicts a sort of getting back to the standard conditions once the storm has passed. Put differently, as the Great Recession comes to an end, anti-system forces will be re-absorbed, or integrated, within the system, mainstream parties will re-gain their dominant position in the legislature and alternate in power as mutually exclusive coalitions. From this perspective, the economic downturn was just a parenthesis, a bump in the road leading towards the general rise of alternation.

Fig. 13.2. Trend in the Alternation Risk Index in Western Europe, 1945-2015



Notes: the dots indicate the mean values in the Alternation risk index aggregated by decade. The first (1940s) and the last (2010s) time-period report the values for the mid-decade. Each data point reflects the mean value for the period beginning in the respective year (e.g. for "1950", the range goes from 1950 to 1959). The grey dotted lines indicate the three hypothesized developments in the risk of alternation.

According to the second hypothesis (H2), the horizon of alternation looks dark. Its growth has hit the ceiling; its maximum development in Western Europe happened approximately at the dawn of the 21st century and now all the facilitating conditions that made alternation possible and likely are structurally losing their strength. There will be no recovery for the traditional, or mainstream, political parties, whose crisis is longstanding and ongoing. Party-system fragmentation is bound to grow and the straitjacket of a dualist structure of party competition is no longer capable of exerting its constraining, or reducing, effect. For a

variety of reasons that I will specify below, bipolarism or, more precisely, the Westminster pattern of democracy, is more and more under pressure in Western Europe, in particular for the Member States of the European Union (EU). Moreover, the radical transformation of mass-based parties into, initially, catch-all organisations (Kirchheimer 1966) and, successively, cartel parties (Katz and Mair 1995) has affected also the mechanics of the system. Mainstream parties not only ‘increasingly resemble each other’ (Katz and Mair 2009: 758), but they have also moulded ‘a cartel-like pattern of constrained competition’ that tends to exclude outsider, unacceptable, anti-system or anti-cartel parties. This pattern of inter-party competition is not homogeneously widespread in Western Europe (Beramendi et al. 2015), but in many circumstances, especially in periods of economic recession, has severely reduced the occasions of government turnover. Therefore, the development of alternation has entered a downward trend, a sort of reverse wave after the first long wave of alternation that had characterised Western European politics until the turn of the new century.

Finally, the third hypothesis (H3) concerning the fate of alternation in Europe is located at midway between the other two hypotheses but it is not a mere mixture of the two. More exactly, it is the combination of two distinct processes that affect specific party systems. On the one hand, there are countries in which, as I have pointed out above, the weakening of the bipolar structure and the erosion of the electoral support for the traditional, or established, parties has progressively lessened the impact of the facilitating factors on the prospect of alternation. In the last decades in Western Europe, there are many signs of this trend in the classic bipolar party systems. To mention just a few instances, the 2010 general election in the United Kingdom produced a hung parliament that eventually brought about the formation of the first coalition cabinet since the end of the Second World War. Greece, another clear example of two-partism, has experienced a turbulent phase of electoral dealignment and party-system change that may lead towards the waning of alternation. Similarly and more recently, Spain has witnessed the crisis of bipolarism and the breakthrough of new (non-ideological) anti-system parties that have profoundly altered the dynamics of inter-party competition. Similar trends can be also pointed out in Ireland and other Nordic countries. Hence, in bipolar party systems the weakening of the conditions that, in the past, have accompanied the development of alternation may eventually cause its, more or less temporary, slowdown.

However, this downward trend can be balanced out by the transformation that occurred within the so-called pivotal party systems. As we have seen above, in the Benelux countries as well as in Finland the recent transformations in the electoral landscape have weakened the dominant position of the traditional parties, including the pivot actor. This trend towards higher levels of alternation risk may result in a more open and competitive electoral market, with a growing possibility of wholesale turnover in government. Whether these situations of possible alternation will be exploited or not will depend, on the one hand, on the behaviour of the elite and, on the other, on the will of the parties to adopt a more adversarial style of competition. In any case, it is possible to foresee an increase in the level of government turnover in pivotal party systems. Accordingly, as a result of these two counteracting processes – the weakening of bipolarism in bipolar party systems and the decline of traditional parties in pivotal systems – the risk of alternation in Europe may remain stable, more or less at the same level it is at today. Certainly, it is still too early to prove the validity of these three hypotheses, but there is no doubt that the future of alternation depends on the fate of those parties that have hitherto structured electoral politics in Western Europe.

13.2. Looking at the present of alternation

As we have seen above, West European party systems show different levels of alternation risk that change through time. To illustrate these transformations, Figure 13.3 plots a map of the European countries according to three levels in the *Alternation risk index*. More precisely, I have broken down the index in three mutually exclusive categories: low (from 0 to 5); medium (from 5 to 10); and high (from 10-15). As the figures make clear, until the 1980s the risk of alternation was, so to speak, a privilege of Northern Europe, with very

few exceptions (such as Iceland and Finland). All other countries (Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom) showed high levels in the *Alternation risk index* and also, as shown in the previous chapter, frequent instances of government turnover. In Continental Europe the picture was mixed. On the one hand, there were the classic cases of pivotal party systems, in which alternation was simply a mirage. In Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy and the Netherlands the dominant role played by the pivotal Christian democrats, in tandem with a longstanding tradition of elite accommodation, meant that the probability for a wholesale turnover in government was close to zero. On the other hand, Germany and Austria showed a medium level of alternation risk, describing a situation in which alternation was possible but unlikely, given the coalescent behaviour adopted by the largest parties. Finally, the case of France can be located in the middle between the two categories, because it showed a very low value in the ARI until the late 1950s and then, with the collapse of the IV Republic, the prospect for alternation gets larger.

Therefore, until the 1980s Western Europe was subdivided into three groups. The first group included those countries in which alternation was theoretically possible and probable in practice. Most Northern countries fell in this cluster. The second group encompassed the classic pivotal party systems, where alternation in government was virtually impossible and unlikely. The Benelux countries, Italy and, for a while, also Finland and France were included in this second category. Lastly, the third group contains those countries in which the possibility of alternation was present but not concretely exploited by the party actors. The cases of Austria, Germany, Iceland and, later on, Finland and France (until the late 1970s) describe finely such a scenario.

Fig. 13.3. *Alternation Risk index in Western Europe, 1945-1980*



The picture changes quite a lot in the subsequent period, that is, after 1980. As Figure 13.4 reveals, the alternation risk has remarkably spread all over Europe, especially in the Southern countries. All three ‘third wave’ democracies show a high value in the *Alternation Risk index* and, consequently, the North-South divide that existed in the previous phase has completely collapsed. By the 1990s, Italy, too, has ultimately joined this group of countries, turning Europe into a land where the risk of alternation is a very widespread phenomenon. The only party systems that maintain their position as risk-averse countries, in terms of alternation, are Belgium and Luxembourg, while in Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland and the Netherlands the prospect for a sizeable turnover in government is very real. It is worth noting that the only country witnessing a decrease, in terms of alternation risk, is Denmark, which is now included in the group of politics featuring a medium level of risk. This is due, in part, to the transformation that occurred in the Danish party system in the 1970s, when party-system fragmentation increased and the competition based on rival blocs progressively fell apart. In fact, it is not by chance that some scholars (Aylott 2011) describe the party system in Denmark as ‘hybrid’, that is, a political configuration that falls in between the pivotal pattern, on the one hand, and the bipolar format, on the other.

Fig. 13.4. *Alternation Risk index in Western Europe, 1980-2015*



On the basis of these data, it can be argued that Western Europe, in the last decades, has observed a significant rise in the level of government turnover as well as on the occurrence of alternation. Similarly, it is possible to see that many party systems are now assuming a Westminster-like character. In Kaare Strøm’s (2003: 76) words, the majority of West European party systems can be described as *alternational*, in that ‘two blocs of parties (internally cemented, perhaps, by effective agreements) compete for the voters’ favour

and alternate in power much in the way that individual parties do in classical two-party systems'. In the crude classification suggested by Strøm, alternational party systems are compared and contrasted with what he calls *pivotal party systems* in which 'there is a strong, or occasionally a strong a bloc of smaller parties, that forms of the core of the governing coalition, often because it controls the median legislator on the dominant policy dimension' (Strøm 2003: 76).

The problems with this classification are manifold, and are both conceptual and methodological. Yet the most serious and pressing problem is that it conflates structural attributes with mechanical predispositions. One does not know whether the *fundamentum divisionis* between alternational and pivotal party systems is the existence of a pivotal party in the system (a structural feature) or the possibility of alternation (a mechanical inclination). Nor it is clarified whether the class of the alternational party systems is based on the sheer possibility that parties alternate in power or, by contrast, on the concrete occurrence of wholesale turnover in office. To avoid this conundrum, it is possible to suggest a different, or at least adjusted, typology of party systems, based to a certain degree on the concept of alternation. Such a typology can be visualised in Figure 13.5. The basic division is between pivotal and bipolar party systems: on the one hand, there are those polities featuring a pivotal actor capable of determining the composition of the cabinet, whereas, on the other hand, there is a residual category that includes all those situations in which a pivotal party is absent. Hence, at this stage of the typology, the division is based on a rather simple structural attribute – whether or not a pivotal party exists in the system.

At the second stage, a numerical criterion is introduced. To be more precise, within the class of the pivotal systems, it is possible to distinguish between *party-pivotal* systems, in which a single dominant party masterminds the entire coalition game, and *coalition-pivotal* systems, where 'a strong bloc of smaller parties forms of the core of the governing coalition'. The former type of party system included countries such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Italy (until the 1990s), the Netherlands and, at specific points in time, also Finland. Instead, the latter type fits perfectly into the characteristics of the Fourth French Republic, in which a bloc of small centre parties makes alternation in power virtually impossible.

On the right-side of the typology, it is possible to identify four types of bipolar system on the basis of the *format* of government alternation or, for one type, the frequency of wholesale turnovers. More accurately, *non-alternation party systems* include those polities (e.g., Austria, Germany, Iceland and, to a certain degree, Finland) where, despite the existence of a bipolar structure of inter-party competition, government change does not usually take place through frequent alternations in power. In these polities, the most frequent type of government change is semi-rotation, that is, a sizeable but not complete reshuffle in the partisan composition of the cabinet.

As said, the other types of bipolar system are distinguished by the *format* of alternation in government. More precisely, *party-alternational* systems concern those countries in which alternation takes place mostly through single-party cabinets. Greece, Spain and the United Kingdom, at least until the most recent elections, fall within this box. By contrast, *coalition-alternational* systems refer to those countries where alternation in government involves alternative coalitions of parties, whether pre-electoral or not. As Aylott et al. (2013: 206) correctly pointed out, one 'of the more intriguing developments in Nordic party systems in recent years has been their increasing bipolarisation with the main parties clustering in two blocs, on the right and the left'. Accordingly, the Scandinavian countries, with the exception of Finland and the borderline case of Denmark, are the best exemplars of this type of party system. For the same reasons, the cases of the Fifth French Republic and Italy (since 1994) are perfect instances of coalition-alternational systems, given the formation of pre-electoral alliances that alternate in power.

Finally, the type labelled *mixed-alternational* is a residual category, including those countries in which alternation involves simultaneously one party and a coalition. In other words, mixed alternations refer to those situations in which a single-party government is replaced by an alternative coalition of parties, or vice versa. To a large extent, this description fits pretty well into the pattern of government change that has hitherto characterised the Portuguese and Irish party systems. In both cases, alternation occurred mainly

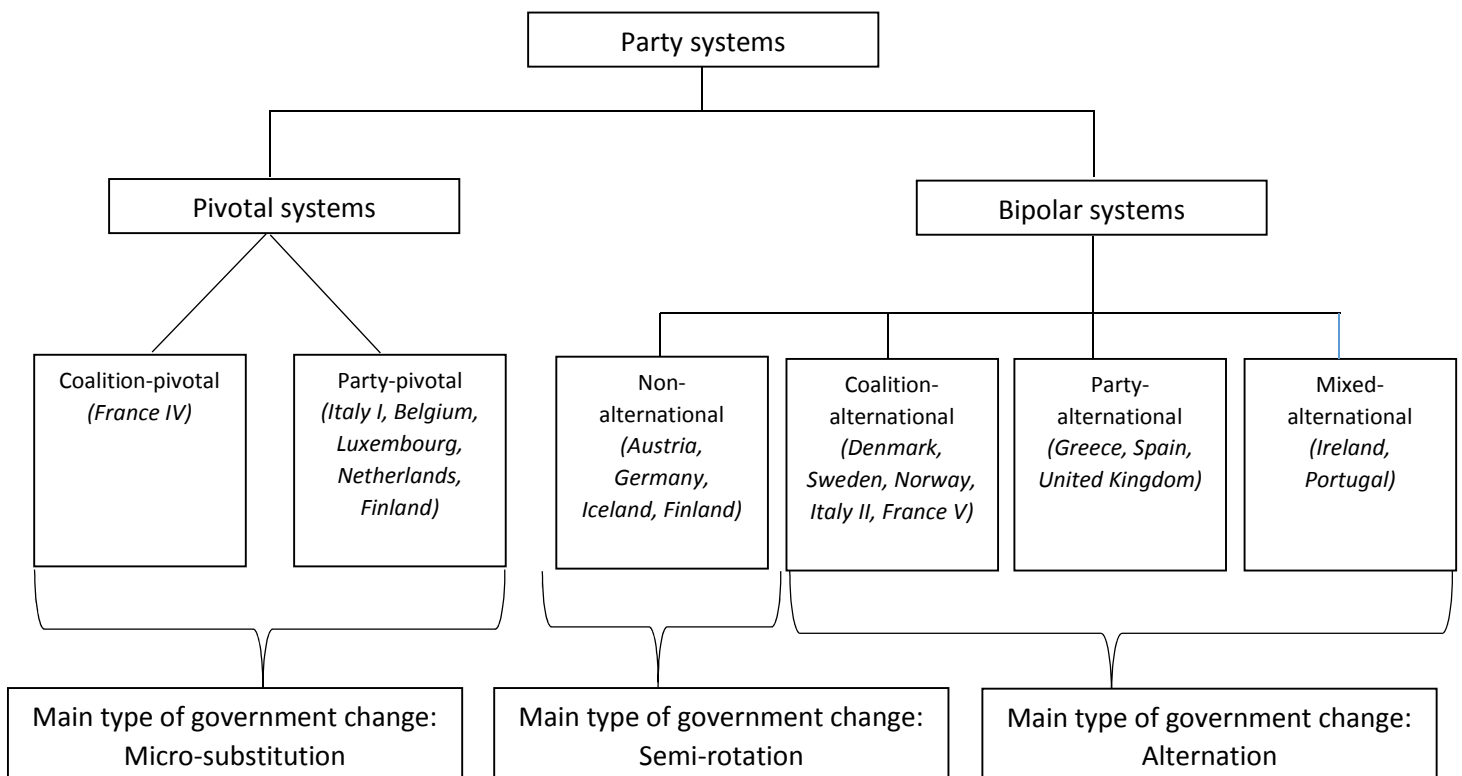
between a single-party cabinet (formed by the Socialist Party in Portugal and Fianna Fáil in Ireland) and an alliance of parties.

As just shown, the suggested typology of party systems is capable of accommodating all seventeen West European countries under examination. What is more, the adoption of this typology allows us to single out the cases of party-system change that have occurred so far in Europe. For instance, it would be possible to detect the transformation of the classic two-party systems (Greece, the United Kingdom and, possibly, Spain) from a party-alternational to coalition-alternational system. In a similar vein, one can easily track the trajectory followed by the Scandinavian countries, in particular Denmark, Sweden and Norway, which have passed from a mixed-alternational system, where the social-democrats played a major role, to a coalition-alternational system, based on the confrontation between two rival blocs of parties.

This typology of party systems allows also to solve the problem that Mair detected in the seminal Sartorian typology, given the ‘potential overcrowding in the “moderate pluralism” category and a virtual emptying of the alternative types’ (Mair 1997: 204). According to the approach adopted here, the class of moderate party systems can be subdivided into four specific types on the basis, on the one hand, of the occurrence of alternation in government and, on the other, the *format* of the government change. This strategy provides a solution to the overcrowding of the category of moderate pluralism and, at the same time, allows the identifying and explaining of the intra-class movement of different party systems.

Furthermore, the suggested typology, based on both structural and mechanical attributes, makes it possible to single out major party-system change, from one class to another. For instance, in Sartori’s (1976) typology, it is difficult to describe the change that occurred in Italy in the early 1990s, that is, from a prototypical polarised pluralism to a system combining simultaneously alternation in government, extreme fragmentation in the legislature and a modicum of polarisation. A similar argument holds for Greece, too, where a two-party system (with frequent alternations) goes or, better, went hand in hand with a certain amount of polarisation (Pappas 2014). Conversely, the typology reported in Figure 13.4 suggests that Italy has moved from a party-pivotal system to a bipolar system featuring alternation between coalitions. In the same way, Greece is abandoning its two-partism and is moving into a coalition-alternational system.

Fig. 13.4. A typology of party systems



By way of conclusion, it is important to stress that this typology of party systems should not be conceived as a substitute for the existing typologies. Indeed, it can be readily integrated within the Sartorian framework, as well as within other alternative classifications (Wolintetz 2006; Nwokora and Pelizzo 2014; Mair 1997). In fact, the first generation of typologies, especially those adopting a 'morphological' approach (Bartolini 1998: 37), aimed at explaining the (democratic) stability of the overall political system. By contrast, the new typologies try to account for the differences, in terms of democratic performances, between different patterns of party system. This is not the place to evaluate the internal consistency or the explanatory power of the suggested typology. Nonetheless, it may offer a set of testable hypotheses on the working of West European party systems in terms of democratic stability, effectiveness and accountability.

13.3. Looking forward: the future of alternation

When Giovanni Sartori built his typology of party systems, he made clear that the 'argument that the number of parties affects the mechanics of the party system assumes an endogenous game of politics, that is, a sufficient degree of international autonomy in internal affairs' (1976: 160). Much time has passed and many aspects have changed since the 1970s. For the analysis of party systems, the most relevant transformation is that, forty years later, the assumption behind Sartori's analytical framework is essentially untenable. Especially in the context of Western Europe, it is no longer possible to assume an endogenous game of politics. In this regard, the concept of *multi-level politics* grasps sufficiently well this transformation, as the product of both societal, institutional and economical changes. To this picture, one must add what Bartolini (2005) defined as the sixth critical juncture in the history of Western Europe, that is, the ongoing process of European integration, to be conceived as a process of nation-state boundaries transcendence through the introduction of new vertical levels and multiple horizontal sites of decision-making.

In brief, national politics cannot be explained by making exclusive reference to endogenous actors, institutions and strategies. The degree of international autonomy in domestic affairs has progressively decreased over time and it would be impossible to explain the transformations occurring at the national level without taking into consideration the impact of supra-national actors. The functioning of West European party systems is more and more the product of the interplay between endogenous and exogenous factors: a phenomenon that explains why the existing typologies of party system – moulded and forged within the analytical framework provided by the nation-state – have difficulty in dealing with the recent developments. The study of government alternation in Western Europe, especially for what concerns its future development, cannot avoid taking into consideration the new political landscape that has been forming in Europe in the last three decades or so. Thus far, the discussion about the causes as well as the consequences of alternation took place within a national perspective or, more precisely, within the framework provided by a single-layer (i.e., national) system. Nevertheless, the process of European integration, in tandem with other similar processes of international integration, may substantially change the role and the impact of government alternation in West European systems. From a purely theoretical perspective, it is possible to single out three main consequences of the manifold processes of supra-national integration for the future of alternation in Europe.

The first consequence is what Richard Rose (2014: 264) called a 'shortfall in electoral accountability'. Provided that '[t]ransnational influences are making it more difficult for governing parties to be effectively as well as formally responsible for policy outcomes', it follows that in the short term, 'the opposition may benefit from government failure by winning office, but it then becomes vulnerable to the same constraints of interdependence' (Rose 2014: 263). This condition of repeated failures for the established parties paves the way to a situation in which 'the rotation of parties in office risks becoming the recycling of failures' (Rose 2014: 264). At the same time, alternation in office undergoes a sort of gene mutation. Indeed, if in the past it was an instrument of democratic accountability, now alternation is turning into a sign of democratic malaise or, better, the alarm that there is something wrong in the chain of electoral accountability.

The second consequence of the multi-level politics for the dynamics of alternation is the introduction of new dimensions of electoral competition (in particular, pro- and anti-EU) and thus the growing division within the two classic blocs (centre-right and centre-left) in European politics. As Aylott et al. (2013: 131) has convincingly shown, in the context of the Nordic countries, for instance, the 'problems caused within the two blocs by division over the EU issue are thus apparent. Indeed, Europe [UE] seems to have revitalised two somewhat dormant and overlapping political cleavages: those between centre and periphery and between urban and rural'. In other words, the growing salience of EU issues has progressively eroded the cohesion within the two blocs that in many countries represented the engine of alternation. Moreover, Europeanization, globalisation (similarly, conceived as a process of global boundary transcendence) and the combination of the two have contributed to the further fragmentation of the party systems, the erosion of the electoral support for the traditional parties and, accordingly, to the higher degree of political promiscuity in coalition cabinets. Eventually, these transformations are likely to make coalition-making more difficult to attain, given the increasing divisions within the blocs that are supposed to alternate in government, and the prospect for turnover will become far more remote.

The third consequence is a follow-up of the previous ones. To the extent that coalition-making has become more cumbersome and the risk of failure once in office more real, established parties face growing incentives to coalesce and (try to) protect themselves from both outsider actors and the ebb and flow of an unpredictable electoral market. This situation may lead to a decline in policy competition among parties and the formation of a 'collusive democracy' (Bartolini 1999; 2000a), in which the vulnerability of the governments is neutralised and the possibility of alternation reduced to a minimum. Above, I have already discussed the creation of cartel-like arrangements as a blame-avoidance strategy adopted by several European governments, especially in (recent) dire straits. Yet the trend towards collusive democracy (in its different nuances and manifestations) is not a contingent or temporary phenomenon, associated exclusively with the advent of the economic recession. The roots of such a trend are more profound and are unavoidably interwoven with the process of European integration, which progressively 'limits the capacities of national governments, and hence also the capacities of the parties in those governments, by reducing the range of *policy instruments* at their disposal' (Mair 2013: 155). If the basic idea (and ideal) of alternation was the possibility to choose between governments with different views, policies and platforms, the narrowing of the viable policy space in a multi-level setting must be seen as a deadly poison. To put it another way, alternation between distinct, or clearly distinguishable, governments makes sense as long as those alternative governments have the capacity and the policy instruments to follow their favourite course of actions. Though, if elections are not decisive and the set of viable policies is established and constrained *ex ante*, then alternation between seemingly different or distant governments is pointless.

Summing up, in this new multi-layered political context, alternation may easily turn out to be neither an effective instrument of electoral accountability nor a sign of democratic malaise (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2015). More precisely, it can be interpreted as a catalyst for public distrust and dissatisfaction. The recycling of failures is not a zero-sum game, especially in the medium or long run: failure after failure, that is, alternation after alternation, the support for the mainstream parties is bound to decrease in favour of challenger, outsider, or populist forces.

Notwithstanding this transformation, it is crucial not to confuse the symptom with the cause. If alternation is considered as the trigger of the crisis of democracy in Europe, as some scholars tend to argue (Manin 2014; Mastropaolo 2014), then we would have a mistaken diagnosis and probably an ineffective prognosis. The challenge for the next years is to build up a multi-level political system in which alternation and democracy are not in contrast to each other but can instead – as they did in the past – reinforce each other. As I specified at the beginning of this thesis, I do not agree with those who simply liken democracy to alternation, and vice versa. But when their respective trajectories are fated to be permanently in contrast, I confess I start to worry.

Appendix A. How to calculate government turnover and alternation

How to calculate the indexes of Government turnover, Potential turnover, Rate of exploited turnover, Wasted turnover, and Possibility of alternation.

	Political parties					
<i>t-1</i>	A	B	C	D	E	F
Seat share	15	20	35	15	10	5
<i>t</i>						
Seat share	10	25	30	20	5	10
<i>t+1</i>						
Seat share	15	30	20	15	10	10

Legend: grey shaded area = governing parties; black-and-white dashed area = potential turnover.

From *t-1* to *t*:

Government turnover

- (1) Seat share of the parties in government *t-1* (B-C-D): $20 + 35 + 15 = 70$
- (2) Cabinet *t-1* seat share: (B) 28.6 + (C) 50 + (D) 21.4
- (3) Seat share of the parties in government *t* (C-D-E): $30 + 20 + 5 = 55$
- (4) Cabinet *t* seat share: (C) 54.5 + (D) 36.4 + (E) 9.1
- (5) Cabinet seat share volatility: $(|28.6 - 0| + |50 - 54.5| + |21.4 - 36.4| + |0 - 9.1|)/2 = 33.1$

Potential turnover

- (1) Seat share of the *t-1* cabinet parties at *t*: B (25) + C (30) + D (20) = 75
- (2) $100 -$ seat share of the *t-1* cabinet parties at *t* = **25** (percentage of potential turnover at *t*)

Rate of Exploited turnover

- (1) Seat share of the party/ies *not* in the cabinet at *t-1* but included in the new cabinet at *t*: E = 5 (exploited turnover)
- (2) (Seat share of 'new' cabinet party/Potential turnover)*100 = $(5/25)*100 = 20$

Wasted turnover

- (1) Potential turnover – Exploited turnover: $25 - 5 = 20$

Possibility of Alternation

- (1) If the seat share of the *t-1* cabinet parties at *t* is > 50 , then alternation is not possible
- (2) B-C-D at *t*: $(25+30+20) = 75 (> 50) \rightarrow$ alternation **is not** possible

From t to $t+1$:

Government turnover

- (1) Seat share of the parties in government t (C-D-E): $30 + 20 + 5 = 55$
- (2) Cabinet t seat share: (C) 54.5 + (D) 36.4 + (E) 9.1
- (3) Seat share of the parties in government $t+1$ (A-B-F): $15 + 30 + 10 = 55$
- (4) Cabinet $t+1$ seat share: (A) 27.3 + (B) 54.5 + (F) 18.2
- (5) Cabinet seat share volatility: $(|54.5 - 0| + |36.4 - 0| + |9.1 - 0| + |0 - 27.3| + |0 - 54.5| + |0 - 18.2|)/2 = 100$

Potential turnover

- (1) Seat share of the t cabinet parties at $t+1$: C (20) + D (15) + E (10) = 45
- (2) 100 - seat share of the $t-1$ cabinet parties at $t = 55$ (percentage of potential turnover at t)

Rate of Exploited turnover

- (1) Seat share of the party/ies *not* in the cabinet at t *but* included in the new cabinet at $t+1$: A (15) + B (30) + F (10) = 55 (exploited turnover)
- (2) (Seat share of 'new' cabinet party/Potential turnover)*100 = $(55/55)*100 = 100$

Wasted turnover

- (1) Potential turnover – Exploited turnover: $55 - 55 = 0$

Possibility of Alternation

- (1) If the seat share of the t cabinet parties at $t+1$ is > 50 , then alternation is not possible
- (2) C-D-E at t : $(20+15+10) = 45 (< 50) \rightarrow$ alternation is possible

How to calculate the indexes of Government turnover, Potential turnover, Rate of exploited turnover, Wasted turnover, and Possibility of alternation in Germany (2005-2013)

	Political parties				
	Die Linke	Grüne	SPD	FDP	CDU/CSU
2005					
Seat share	8.8	8.3	36.2	9.9	36.8
2009					
Seat share	12.2	10.9	23.5	15	38.4
2013					
Seat share	10.1	10	30.6	0	49.3

Legend: grey shaded area = cabinet parties; black-and-white dashed area = potential turnover.

From 2005 to 2009:

Government turnover

- (1) Seat share of the parties in 2005 government (SPD+CDU/CSU): $36.2 + 36.8 = 73$
- (2) 2005 cabinet seat share: (SPD) 49.6 + (CDU/CSU) 50.4
- (3) Seat share of the parties in the 2009 government (CDU/CSU+FDP): $38.4 + 15 = 53.4$
- (4) 2009 cabinet seat share: (CDU/CSU) 72 + (FDP) 28
- (5) Cabinet seat share volatility: $(|49.6 - 0| + |50.4 - 72| + |0 - 28|)/2 = 49.6$

Potential turnover

- (1) Seat share of the 2005 cabinet parties as of 2009: SPD (23.5) + CDU/CSU (38.4) = 61.9
- (2) $100 - \text{seat share of the 2005 cabinet parties in 2009} = 38.1$ (percentage of potential turnover in 2009)

Rate of Exploited turnover

- (1) Seat share of the party *not* in the 2005 cabinet *but* included in the new 2009 cabinet: FDP = 15 (exploited turnover)
- (2) $(\text{Seat share of 'new' cabinet party}/\text{Potential turnover}) * 100 = (15/38.1) * 100 = 39.4$

Wasted turnover

- (1) Potential turnover – Exploited turnover: $38.1 - 15 = 23.1$

Possibility of Alternation

- (1) If the seat share of the 2005 cabinet parties in 2009 is > 50 , then alternation is not possible
- (2) SPD+CDU/CSU in 2009: $(23.5+38.4) = 61.9 (> 50) \rightarrow$ alternation **is not** possible

From 2009 to 2013:

Government turnover

- (1) Seat share of the parties in 2009 government (CDU/CSU+FDP): $38.4 + 15 = 53.4$
- (2) 2009 cabinet seat share: (CDU/CSU) 72 + (FDP) 28
- (3) Seat share of the parties in the 2013 government (CDU/CSU+SDP): $49.3 + 30.6 = 79.9$
- (4) 2013 cabinet seat share: (CDU/CSU) 61.7 + (SPD) 38.3
- (5) Cabinet seat share volatility: $(|72 - 61.7| + |28 - 0| + |0 - 38.3|)/2 = \mathbf{38.3}$

Potential turnover

- (1) Seat share of the 2009 cabinet parties in 2013: CDU/CSU (49.3) + FDP (0) = 49.3
- (2) $100 -$ seat share of the 2009 cabinet parties in 2013 = **50.7** (percentage of potential turnover in 2013)

Rate of Exploited turnover

- (1) Seat share of the party *not* in the 2009 cabinet *but* included in the new 2013 cabinet: SDP (30.6) = 30.6 (exploited turnover)
- (2) (Seat share of 'new' cabinet party/Potential turnover)*100 = $(30.6/50.7)*100 = \mathbf{60.4}$

Wasted turnover

- (1) Potential turnover – Exploited turnover: $50.7 - 30.6 = \mathbf{20.1}$

Possibility of Alternation

- (1) If the seat share of the 2009 cabinet parties in 2013 is > 50 , then alternation is not possible
- (2) CDU/CSU+FDP in 2013: $(49.3 + 0) = 49.3 (< 50) \rightarrow$ alternation is possible

Appendix B. Placement of relevant political parties in Western Europe (1945-2015)

Matching and cross-referencing of three distinct sources: Klaus Armingeon Dataset, Duane Swank Dataset, Josep Colomer's *Comparative European Politics*, Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair's *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability*.

Austria

- Left: Socialist Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, SPÖ);
- Centre: People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP); Liberal Forum (LIF); The New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS);
- Right: Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ).

Belgium

- Left: Social Progressive Alternative/SPIRIT (Sociaal Progressief Alternatief, SP.a/SPIRIT) (until 2001: Flemish Socialist Party), Francophone Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS), AGALEV, ECOLO;
- Centre: Christian Democrat & Flemish (Christen-democratisch & Vlaams, CD & V) (until 2001: Christian People's Party (CVP)), Democrat Humanist Centre (Centre Démocrate Humaniste, CDH) (until 2002: Christian Social Party (PSC)), Francophone Democratic Front (FDF), New Flemish Alliance (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, N-VA) (former: Flemish/People's Union (VU)); Walloon Rally, RW, Reform Movement (Mouvement Réformateur, MR).
- Right: Open Flemish Liberals & Democrats (Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten, Open VLD), (former Francophone Liberal Reform Party (PRL)), Movement of Citizens for Change (Mouvement des citoyens pour le changement, MCC).

Denmark

- Left: Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet, SD), Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti, SF);
- Centre: Centre Democrats (Centrum Demokraterne, CD), Christian People's Party (Kristendemokraterne, KRF); Justice League (DR), The Independents (DU), Radical Party (Social Liberal Party) (Det Radikale Venstre, RV);
- Right: Liberals (Venstre), Conservative People's Party (Det Konservative Folkeparti, KF),

Finland

- Left: Social Democrats (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue, SDP), Left-Wing Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto, VAS), Green League (Vihreä Liitto, VIHR);
- Centre: Centre Party (Keskusta, KESK), Christian Democrats (Kristillisdemokraatit, KD) (former Christian League, SKL), Finnish Rural Party (Suomen Maaseudun Puolue, SMP), Swedish People's Party (Svenska Folkepartiet i Finland, SFP/RKP), Liberal People's Party (LIB, KEP, SKP, LKP);
- Right: National Coalition (Kansallinen Kokoomus, KOK), True Finns (Perussuomalaiset, PS).

France

- Left: Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste, PS), Communist Party (Parti Communiste Français, PCF), Greens (Les Verts), Movement for Citizens (Mouvement des Citoyens, MDC), Generation Ecology (Génération Écologie, GE), Left Radicals (Parti Radical de Gauche, former: Mouvement des radicaux de gauche, MRG and Parti Radical Socialiste, PRS);

- Centre: Centre of Social Democrats (CDS), Democratic Force (Force Démocrate, FD), Union for French Democracy (Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF), Moderates- National Centre of Independents and Peasants (M-CNIP), Republican Party (Parti Républicain, PR), New Centre – Nouveau centre, Democratic Centre (CD);

- Right: Gaullists, Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la République, RPR) (in 2002: Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP)), Radical Party (Parti Radical).

Germany

- Left: Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen;

- Centre: Free Democrats (Freie demokratische Partei, FDP);

- Right: Christian Democratic Union (Christlich-demokratische Union, CDU+CSU);

Greece

- Left: Pan-Hellenic Social Movement (Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima, PASOK), Communist Party (Kommunistiko Komma Elladas, KKE);

- Centre: Union of the Democratic Centre (EDIK);

- Right: New Democracy (Nea Dhimokratia, ND).

Iceland

- Left: Social Democratic Party, SDP (Althýduflokkur), People's Alliance, PA (Althýdubandalag), Social Democratic Alliance, SDA (Samfylkingin), Left-Greens, LG (Vinstri græn);

- Centre: Progressive Party, PP (Framsóknarflokkur);

- Right: Independence Party, IP (Sjálfstaedisflokkur), Citizens' Party, CP (Borgaraflokkur).

Ireland

- Left: Labour Party, LAB, Democratic Left, DL, Green Party, GP, Socialist Party, SP, People Before Profit Alliance, PBP;

- Centre: ;

- Right: Fine Gael (FG), Republican Party (Fianna Fail, FF), Progressive Democrats (PD).

Italy

- Left: Communist Party (Partito dei Comunisti Italiani, PDCI), Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI), Social Democratic Party (Socialisti Democratici Italiani, PSDI), Rainbow Left (Sinistra Arcobalena, SA), Left Ecology and Freedom (Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà, SEL), Greens (Verdi), Party of the Democratic Left (Democratici di Sinistra, PDS), (in 2006, the DS ran together with Daisy (Margherita) in the Olive Tree Coalition (Ulivo)), Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD), The Democrats (I Democratici, DEM), Di Pietro List /

Italy of Values (Lista di Pietro/Italia dei Valori, IdV); Rose in the First (Rosa nel Pugno, RnP), known as "Socialists and Radicals" since December 2007;

- Centre: Christian Democratic Party (Democrazia Cristiana, DC), Republican Party (Partito Repubblicano Italiano, PRI), Italian Popular Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, PPI), Union of the Centre (Unione Democratici di Centro, UDC), Dini List (Rinnovamento Italiano, RI), Democratic Union (Unione Democratica, UD), Union of Republican Democrats (Unione dei Democratici per la Repubblica, UDR), known as Union of Democrats for Europe (Unione dei Democratici per l'Europa, UDEUR) since 1999 Christian Democratic Centre, United Christian Democrats (Centro Cristiano Democratico, CCD, Cristiani Democratici Uniti, CDU-UCD), Christian Democracy for the Autonomies (Democrazia Cristiana per le Autonomie, DCpA), Civic Choice (Scelta Civica, SC);

- Right: Liberal Party (Partito Liberale Italiano, PLI), Forza Italia, FI, Lombard League, Northern League (Lega Lombarda, Lega Norte, LN), National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), People of Freedom (Il Popolo della Libertà, PdL), Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia).

Luxembourg

- Left: Socialist Workers' Party (Parti Ouvrier socialiste luxembourgeois/Letzemburger Sozialistisch Arbechterpartei, POSL/LSAP);

- Centre: Christian Social Party (Parti Crétien Social/Chrestlech Sozial Vollekspartei, PCS/CSV);

- Right: Democratic Party (Parti Démocratique/Demokratesch Partei, PD/DP).

The Netherlands

- Left: Labour Party (Partij van der Arbeid, PvdA), Democrats '70 (Democraten '70, D'70);

- Centre: Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen Democratisch Appel, CDA), Democrats '66 (Democraten '66, D'66), Christian Union (Christen Unie);

- Right: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD), List Pim Fortuyn, LPF.

Norway

- Left: Labour Party (Det Norske Arbeiderparti DNA, AP), Socialist Left Party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti, SV);

- Centre: Centre Party (Senterpartiet, SP), former Farmers' Party, Christian People's Party (Kristelig Folkeparti, KRF), New People's Party (DNF: 1973);

- Right: Liberals (Venstre);Conservatives (Hoyre).

Portugal

- Left: Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Português, PSP);

- Centre: ;

- Right: Social Democrats, Popular Democrats (Partido Social Democrata, PSD, Partido Popular Democrático, PPD), Centre Social Democrats, Popular Party (Partido do Centro Democrático Social, Partido Popular, CDS/PP).

Spain

- Left: Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), Izquierda Unida (IU), Podemos;

- Centre: ;

- Right: Popular Alliance, Popular Party (Alianza Popular/Partido Popular, AP/PP).

Sweden

- Left: Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna, S);

- Centre: Center Party (Centerpartiet, C); Christian Democratic Union (Kristen Demokratisk Samling, KDS);

- Right: Conservatives, Moderate Unity Party (Moderate Samlingspartiet, M); People's Party (The Liberals) (Folkpartiet, FP, Sweden Democrats (SD),

United Kingdom

- Left: Labour Party, LAB;

- Centre: Liberal Democrats;

- Right: Conservative Party, CON, UKIP.

Appendix C. List of relevant anti-system parties in Western Europe (1945-2015)

Relevant relational anti-system parties (Capoccia 2002)		
	Functional anti-system parties (Mair 1997)	Ideological anti-system parties (Sartori 1976)
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria (1971-1979, 1987-1999, 2006-2013); The Greens (1987-2013); Frank (2013-)	Austrian Communist Party (1945-1956); Freedom Party of Austria (1949-1966).
Belgium	Flemish Interest (1991-)	Communist Party of Belgium (1946-1949)
Denmark	Progress Party (1973-1994); Danish People's Party (1995-)	Communist Party of Denmark (1945-1957; 1973-1979).
Finland	The Finns (2007-2014)	Finnish People's Democratic League (1945-1995)
France	Gaullists (1946-1957); Front National (1986; 2012); Front National (1986; 2012)	French Communist Party (1946-1980)
Germany	The Left Party/Party of Democratic Socialism (1990-2013);	German Communist Party (1949);
Greece	Panhellenic Socialist Movement (1977); Coalition of the Radical Left (1989-1990, 2012-).	Communist Party of Greece (1977; 2012); National Alignment (1977); Golden Dawn (2012-)
Iceland	Bright Future (2013-)	
Ireland	Green Party (2002-2007) Sinn Féin (2002-)	
Italy	Five-Star Movement (2013-); Fronte Uomo Qualunque (1946).	Italian Communist Party (1948-1992); Italian Social Movement (1946-1992); Italian Socialist Party (1948-1963); Partito Nazionale Monarchico (1946-1958)
Luxembourg	Alternative Democratic Reform Party (1989-2013)	Communist Party of Luxembourg (1945-1974);
Netherlands	Freedom Party (2004-);	Communist Party of the Netherlands (1946-1972)
Norway	Progress Party (1989-2011)	Norwegian Communist Party (1945)
Portugal	Left Bloc (2005)	Portuguese Communist Party (1975-2011)
Spain	United Left (1977-2011)	
Sweden	Sweden Democrats (2010-) Left Party (1988-1994) New Democracy (1991)	Left Party Communists (1970-1988);
United Kingdom		United Kingdom Independence Party (2015-)

Appendix D. *Determinants of the length of time without alternation in government: Semi-parametric duration models/Cox models*

Dependent variable	Cumulative number of years without alternation				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
N. relevant parties	-0.183*** (0.0360)	-0.183*** (0.0360)		-0.151*** (0.0320)	-0.168*** (0.0340)
Effective n. of parties			-0.234*** (0.0575)		
Bipolarism (%)	1.321 (0.898)	1.321 (0.898)	1.271 (1.080)	3.519*** (0.926)	0.635 (0.394)
Cabinet size (%)	-0.00492 (0.00449)	-0.00492 (0.00449)	0.00805 (0.00579)	0.00312 (0.00466)	0.00319 (0.00468)
Anti-system parties (%)	0.0173*** (0.00575)	0.0173*** (0.00575)	-0.00768 (0.00704)	-0.00458 (0.00510)	-0.00472 (0.00531)
Pivotal party (%)	-0.0126 (0.00853)	-0.0126 (0.00853)	0.00467 (0.0106)	0.0373*** (0.0119)	0.0345*** (0.0117)
Disproportionality index	-0.0250** (0.0116)	-0.0250** (0.0116)	-0.0597*** (0.0168)	-0.0503*** (0.0124)	-0.0527*** (0.0135)
Electoral competitiveness	-0.0252*** (0.00924)	-0.0252*** (0.00924)	-0.0163 (0.0108)	-0.0301*** (0.00894)	
Total volatility	-0.0435*** (0.00992)	-0.0435*** (0.00992)			
Incumbency volatility			-0.0414*** (0.0127)		
Elec. cabinet performance				0.0440*** (0.00706)	0.0432*** (0.00698)
Election time					-0.269** (0.111)
Log Likelihood	-2,374.1	-2,374.1	-1,379.6	-2,133.8	-2,141.7
Observations	470	470	299	432	433

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. All coefficients are expressed as proportional hazard estimates.

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