

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Government Life Cycle



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### Introduction

THE MEDIA COMMONLY speak of the “death” of a government. Political scientists often refer to the “life cycle” of a government. We believe these are fitting analogies because every government in some sense is “born” and in the same sense “dies.” While every life cycle is unique, there are some commonalities. Accordingly, in this chapter we identify four stages of the government life cycle and highlight how these stages differ between countries. We then identify which types of government are likely to live longer and which are likely to die sooner, as demonstrated through an analysis of some 36 democratic countries.

Opponents of PR often point to Italy and argue that PR would result in instability, frequent elections, and chaos. We ascertain the validity of that claim. We examine how electoral systems, together with other institutional rules, affect how governments are formed and defeated. Electoral systems have a proximate effect on the number of parties that run in elections and enter the legislature (Cox 1997). But it is equally important to look at the more distant consequences of electoral systems on the life cycle of governments. This analysis adds to the discussion in the previous two chapters considering the relationship between electoral systems and voter satisfaction, party systems, proportionality, voter turnout, and government formation.

## The Four Stages

Most governments pass through four stages. In the first stage, a government is “born” and recognized. In the second stage (which not every government will experience), a government loses a legislative vote, which may or may not represent a major challenge. Third, governments face confidence votes. Fourth, the results of a confidence vote may result in an election.

### *Stage One: The Birth of Governments*

Two factors must be considered with respect to the creation of a government. The first concerns the role of the head of state and *formateurs* or *informateurs* in the formation of the government. The second consideration is whether a formal investiture vote is required.

As has been noted elsewhere (Blais and Carty 1987), coalition governments are more common in systems of proportional representation. In such systems, where a single party rarely wins a majority of seats, parties often have to negotiate a coalition government that can win the support of the majority of the legislature. To ease this process, some countries afford a formal role to the head of state, who helps steer the negotiations.

Table 5.1 indicates which countries assign a formal role to their head of state. In some countries, such as France and Finland, the head of state is a directly elected president, whereas in others, such as the Netherlands and Spain, the head of state is a monarch. More often than direct involvement by the head of state, however, is the appointment of a *formateur* or *informateur*. This person, appointed by the head of state, is responsible for steering negotiations between coalition members. In the Dutch case, for example, the Queen designates a tentative *formateur*, usually the leader of the largest party and the putative prime minister. Should this candidate receive the support of the majority of parliament, she is designated *formateur* and begins negotiation on the formation of a government. Should she fail, the Queen then designates an *informateur* who then leads bargaining among the parties on who should be the *formateur*.

Other states, by contrast, simply leave it to the party (or parties) that emerged from the election in positions of strength to compete for the support of the legislature in a more “free-wheeling” manner (Laver and Schofield 1990, 63). The Canadian experience is largely the latter, as the party with the most seats following an election is presumed to be the party of government, on its own if it has a majority of the seats in parliament, or with the support of other parties if it is in a minority position. The prospect of electoral reform in Canada need not change this custom.

**Table 5.1: Summary of conventions by country**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Does the head of state play an active role in formation?</b>	<b>Is a formal investiture vote needed?</b>	<b>Must government resign if it loses confidence vote?</b>
Austria	N	N	Y
Belgium	N	Y	Y
Britain	N	N	N
Denmark	N	N	Y
Finland	Y	N	N <sup>a</sup>
France	Y	N	Y <sup>b</sup>
Germany	N	N	Y <sup>c</sup>
Greece	N	Y	Y
Iceland	N	N	Y
Ireland	N	Y	Y
Israel	Y	Y	Y
Italy	Y	Y	Y
Luxembourg	N	N	Y
Malta	N	N	Y
Netherlands	Y	N	Y
New Zealand <sup>e</sup>	N	N	N
Norway	N	N	Y
Portugal	Y	Y	Y
Spain	Y	Y	Y <sup>d</sup>
Sweden	N	Y	Y <sup>b</sup>
Switzerland	N	Y	N
New Brunswick <sup>e</sup>	N	N	N

a) President “may” accept resignation in the event of a non-confidence vote.

b) A majority of the entire legislature (not only those voting) required to pass non-confidence vote.

c) Non-confidence vote must designate new federal chancellor.

d) Motion of non-confidence must specify successor.

e) Both New Zealand and New Brunswick have been added to Laver and Schofield’s original table.

Source: Laver and Schofield 1990, 64

Second, and more consequential, is a formal vote of investiture. As discussed in Chapter 4, in some countries, to ensure the support of the majority of the legislature, a government must survive an investiture vote *before* it can begin the work of governing. Typically, this vote of investiture resembles a confidence vote, in which a proposed government is accepted or rejected by a majority of the legislature. This is in contrast to other systems, such as Canada, where a government can begin governing without having to endure a formal investiture vote, as long as it has the consent of the majority in the legislature and the recognition of the head of state. Importantly, as the second column of Table

5.1 shows, there is not a clear association between investiture votes and any particular electoral system. Put differently, a jurisdiction that did not previously rely on investiture votes need not adopt them when moving to a new electoral system. This was the case with New Zealand, which in 1996 moved from a plurality system to a mixed-member proportional system, but did not adopt investiture votes. However, there is no hard and fast rule barring a jurisdiction from adopting confidence votes in the course of electoral reform.

What are the relative merits and demerits of investiture votes? An investiture vote requires that a putative prime minister be able to command the support of the majority of the house before she begins governing. This may potentially delay the governing process, as the government is more likely to be forced to strike formal bargains with potential partners, rather than beginning a process of governing in which deals are made on a vote-by-vote basis. Accordingly, government formation may involve more uncertainty and occur under more rounds in a system requiring an investiture vote. Indeed, it may even precipitate more elections. These are obvious drawbacks. There exist, however, distinct benefits. Specifically, a possible government that is forced to clarify support prior to governing is more likely to strike formal agreements, and these may prolong government length. Furthermore, the need for investiture votes may force parties to identify possible coalition partners prior to an election. From a normative perspective, voters may be better served when they have a clearer picture of likely governments prior to casting a ballot. Third, the need for an investiture vote can more quickly identify unworkable governing coalitions by registering a lack of support before cabinet offices are assumed, rather than after. Finally, a government that passes an investiture vote is likely to possess more legitimacy than one governing vote by vote. We have, then, good reasons both for and against investiture votes. However, we side with investiture votes, feeling they both prolong government length and increase legitimacy.

### ***Stage Two: Legislative Defeats***

Legislative defeats constitute important events in the life of a government. They may signal that the life of the government is coming to an end. Yet, contrary to conventional wisdom, legislative losses do not by themselves defeat governments. As Laver and Schofield observe, the loss of legislative bills is no doubt a serious matter for governments, but it is not “automatically fatal.” A defeat on a bill is often followed immediately by a confidence vote, or by the resignation of a government in anticipation of defeat in a confidence vote. But it does sometimes occur that a government survives a confidence vote after losing a major legislative vote (Laver and Schofield 1990, 65). Moreover, there are instances in which a legislative defeat does not lead to a confidence

motion, as in Britain where the government can lose any vote, except those explicitly conducted under a three-line whip, without the introduction of a confidence motion.

We may thus distinguish two possibilities. In some countries, a confidence vote necessarily follows a legislative defeat, which the government may or may not win. In other countries, a legislative defeat does not always lead to a confidence vote. The last option provides for more stability, assuming that governments typically lose confidence votes after legislative defeats. The Canadian experience is that legislative defeats are immediately followed by confidence votes, and that the government loses these confidence votes. Our next section sheds some light on the pertinent factors in understanding what types of governments are more likely to survive or prevent legislative defeats.

### *Stage Three: Confidence Votes*

Aside from constitutionally mandated investiture votes, confidence votes have two sources: from the government or from the legislature. Governments generally invoke a confidence measure for two reasons. First, they wish to demonstrate that they have the confidence of the legislature. Second, they are forced to call a confidence vote because they have incurred a legislative defeat. Opposition parties can invoke confidence measures to test the government. Various countries impose certain restrictions on opposition confidence motions. For example, in Germany the opposition must present a “constructive” motion of non-confidence, meaning that the motion must designate a new federal chancellor. The requirement is much the same in Spain. This requirement obviously increases the difficulty of passing a non-confidence motion, as opposition parties must agree not only on the need to replace the government, but also on its replacement. In other countries, namely France and Sweden, opposition confidence motions must receive a majority of the whole legislature, rather than a majority of those voting. Such measures increase the difficulty of passing non-confidence motions, and thus tend to foster governmental stability. The Canadian practice is among the least restrictive. In Canadian legislatures, opposition parties proposing non-confidence motions need only a majority of voting legislators, and they have no obligation to identify a successor government.

We do not have the data to test whether confidence motions are more frequent under some rules than others. However, it is clear that, holding all else constant, the stricter the rules surrounding non-confidence motions, the less likely governments are to fall. Moreover, even in systems where confidence motions are easily proposed, such as Canada, they are infrequent.

***Stage Four: Does Loss of Confidence Lead to an Election?***

If opposition parties can overcome the barriers outlined above and defeat a government on a motion of confidence, then all systems must face the final question of whether or not an election must be called.

As noted in Table 5.1, not all governments must resign after losing a confidence vote. Indeed, in Finland the president need not even accept the resignation of the government, precluding the question of whether there is an election or the formation of a new government. In other systems, notably Ireland and Iceland, it is the convention (though it is not constitutionally mandated) that the defeat of a government leads to an election. This is generally the case in Austria, Luxembourg, and Sweden, though these countries have experienced exceptions to this rule. At the other end of the spectrum, it is quite normal in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Israel to experience as many as three governments between elections—governments, it should be noted, with sometimes very different party compositions (Laver and Schofield 1990, 220).

The Canadian context provides examples of government defeats that have led to elections, such as when John Hamm's Conservative opposition defeated the Nova Scotia Liberals in 1999, causing an election. Contrary examples also exist, as in Ontario in 1985 when the Conservative minority government of Frank Miller lost a vote of confidence, and was then replaced immediately by David Peterson's Liberals, who had struck an agreement with the New Democrats for their support for a period of two years in exchange for the passing of certain policies.

Which system is likely to lead to more stability: that in which an election automatically follows a loss of confidence, or that in which a new government can be formed without an election? It depends very much on the strength of the opposition parties.

We may distinguish three scenarios. In the first, suppose opposition parties feel that their popularity is on the upswing, but they do not have enough seats in the current legislature to form a government should the incumbent fall. In this case, they are more likely to force a non-confidence motion if they know an election will follow. In the second scenario, suppose an opposition party is on the upswing but that it also has the potential to form a governing coalition within the current legislature. In this case, it does not matter much whether an election will immediately follow or not. In the final case, suppose opposition parties are not on the upswing. In this case, they are unlikely to force a confidence motion regardless of its outcome. Accordingly, it is only in the first scenario, when opposition parties are relatively weak in the legislature but strong in the polls, that it makes a difference whether an election necessarily

follows after a loss of confidence, and in those circumstances a system that does *not* require an election after a loss of confidence seems more stable than one that does.

The functioning of legislatures varies, often greatly, from country to country. Indeed, even when two countries operate under highly similar constitutions, tradition and precedent can result in very different practical realities. However, we can understand the differences in legislative systems by examining what happens at each stage of a government's life. Because of the strong influence of precedence and tradition in determining practices, often countries that change their electoral system will retain a legislative system with similar rules at each stage of the government life cycle. But it is possible to design institutions and rules that make it easier or more difficult for a government to survive.

### Government Duration

We have established that governments pass through many critical junctures, and that the rules at each juncture exercise some influence over whether the government will pass through intact or fall. However, we have not yet demonstrated whether governments last longer under some electoral systems than others. Thus, we now examine specifically whether governments last longer in plurality systems than in PR systems. We then examine whether elections occur more frequently in PR systems than in plurality systems.

We utilize a dataset compiled by Ricard (2004), which examines government duration in 36 countries that have been continuously regarded as democratic (that is, the country got a score of 1 or 2 on political rights from Freedom House, a lower score denoting more political rights) since 1972 (the date at which Freedom House began its rankings) or, if later, from the point of democratization.<sup>1</sup> The analysis ends on 30 June 2004. Ricard compares countries with single-member plurality systems with those using PR, including mixed corrective systems, such as the German system. Countries with majority systems or mixed non-corrective systems are excluded, as are countries with presidential systems.

Among the countries examined, 12 are considered plurality and 23 proportional. New Zealand, which switched from plurality to proportional in 1996, is counted among plurality systems before that date and proportional systems afterwards. In addition to a variety of electoral systems, an examination of our countries suggests that we also have a good cross-section of cultures and religions, levels of wealth, and geographic location. Accordingly, this analysis should help us uncover broad, generalizable patterns and conclusions about government duration.

A government is defined as coming to an end with a change in the composition of the parties present in a cabinet, a change in the first minister (i.e., prime minister), or a general election. Importantly, the first two types of governmental change can happen without an election. In the first case, a government can witness wholesale change when one cabinet is replaced by another composed of entirely different parties. This was the case, for example, in Denmark in 1993 when a minority coalition of Conservatives and Liberals lost the confidence of the legislature and was replaced by a majority coalition of Social Democrats, Radical Liberals, Centre Democrats, and the Christian People's Party. Denmark experienced a similar change in 1982 when a single-party Social Democratic minority government was replaced by a minority coalition of Conservatives, Centre Democrats, Radical Liberals, and the Christian People's Party. But change in government through changes in party can also be caused by less dramatic changes, as in the case of the exit of one coalition partner and the entrance of another. For example, Israel registered five changes in government between 11 June 1990 and 21 January 1992, but the prime minister never changed, the five major parties in the coalition persisted, and only in the last incarnation was the government in a minority. In sum, a change in government can signal a large change or a marginal change.

In the second case, a change in government could be recorded following the replacement of a party's leader, such as when Brian Mulroney resigned as prime minister of Canada in 1993 and was replaced by Kim Campbell, a fellow member of the Progressive Conservative Party.

The analysis considers 379 governments. Ricard presents three analyses, considering first simple differences in the length of governments under first-past-the-post plurality systems and proportional representation systems. He then introduces controls for the maximum length of a government's term, the size of the population, and the level of democracy in the country, as judged by Freedom House. Finally, he considers different cabinet types, whether majority or minority and coalition or single-party. In the second and third cases he performs ordinary least squares multivariate analysis, regressing the observed length of government on a number of independent or causal variables. This allows him to sort out the individual influence of the competing variables.

We should expect plurality systems to produce longer governments than proportional systems. After all, plurality systems are more likely to produce one-party government. When the government is composed of one party rather than two or more it is likely to last longer for at least three reasons. First, it does not have to engage in legislative bargaining between governing parties, as there is only one. Second, because there is only one "leader" in the government, rather than a prime minister and the leaders of the other governing parties,



**Table 5.2: Average length of government by system**

<b>Electoral system</b>	<b>Mean length (days)</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
Proportional representation	672.4	270	515.7
Plurality	1115.4	109	636.9
Total	799.9	379	587.7

authority is more clearly defined, and thus decisions are made more easily, and enforcement of those decisions is both easier and more efficient. Finally, in a government composed of several parties it is easier for one or more parties to defect and form a new government with opposition parties. When only one party is in government, recalcitrant members of the governing party who may threaten defection to another party for the purpose of forming a new government will face more substantial coordination challenges. Plurality systems are also more likely to produce longer governments because they are more likely to experience single-party majority governments, which are inherently more stable than minority configurations. After all, majority governments do not have to bid for support from outside of their party to pass each legislative proposal.

We also expect the maximum length of a government's term to increase the length of governments on average. The logic supporting this is simple. Governments, especially those with stable configurations, will last longer in systems where mandated elections are less frequent, as they will be able to govern longer before being forced to call an election. We also expect the average life of governments to be shorter in larger countries. Larger populations mean larger legislatures, and larger legislatures mean larger cabinets and more members to appease. In other words, they mean more bargaining. This is likely to lead to more scenarios in which a government will be defeated. Furthermore, single-party majority governments are more likely to occur in smaller legislatures.

The duration of a government also depends on the type of cabinet. Ricard considers four types of cabinets, listed from the longest expected life-span to the shortest: single-party majority cabinets, coalition majority cabinets, single-party minority cabinets, and coalition minority cabinets. As outlined above, the need to constantly bargain that accompanies minority and coalition governments should reduce their average duration.

Table 5.2 shows the simple difference between the average length of governments in plurality and proportional systems. Clearly, electoral system matters: governments typically last 37 months in plurality systems and 22 months in PR systems, a difference of 15 months.

**Table 5.3 Determinants of government duration**

	<b>Column 1 Exogenous factors</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Column 2 Exogenous and endogenous factors</b>	<b>SE</b>
Electoral system	219.0*	(124.2)	-72.3	(134.4)
Mandate (log)	576.6	(442.0)	577.1	(421.5)
Population (log)	-77.8***	(28.1)	-81.8***	(26.3)
Strength of democracy	185.3***	(66.3)	222.7***	(66.5)
Majority coalition			-359.2***	(97.2)
Single-party minority			-362.0***	(108.8)
Minority coalition			-637.6***	(120.7)
Constant	-109.7	(636.5)	230.12	(599.0)
N	379		379	
Adj R2	0.1808		0.2571	

\* p&gt;.90

\*\* p&gt;.95

\*\*\* p&gt;.99

**Dependent variable:**

Duration of government in days.

**Independent variables:**

- i) Electoral system: 1 plurality, 0 proportional
- ii) Mandate: logged length of maximum number of years allowed between elections.
- iii) Population: log of population at start of cabinet
- iv) Strength of Democracy: 1 if a country scored the highest rank of 1 on Freedom House rankings of political freedom, 0 if they scored 2.
- v) Majority Coalition: 1 coalition with majority of seats, 0 otherwise
- vi) Minority Coalition: 1 coalition with minority of seats, 0 otherwise
- vii) Single-Party Minority: 1 minority of seats and no coalition, 0 otherwise.

However, we must consider that this result may be caused by factors other than those measured. Countries with plurality systems may tend to be smaller, to have longer mandates, or to be more democratic (that is, to have a score of 1 rather than 2 on the Freedom House rating). To this end, Ricard proceeds to a multivariate analysis that allows him to ascertain the specific effect of the electoral system, controlling for these other factors.

Column 1 of Table 5.3 shows the results of this analysis. They confirm that governments last longer in more democratic and smaller countries. Indeed, moving one Freedom House ranking extends the expected length of a government by nearly six months. The length of the mandate also appears to have an influence, though it does not quite reach statistical significance. But more

importantly, the results indicate that when these exogenous factors are controlled for, governments last only seven months (not 15) less in PR than in plurality systems.

The final stage of the analysis consists in specifying why governments are shorter in PR systems. The basic hypothesis is that they are shorter lasting because PR is less likely to produce single-party governments that are in full control of the legislature. That hypothesis is confirmed in the second column of Table 5.3, in which dummy variables corresponding to the presence of a majority coalition, a minority coalition, or a single-party minority government (rather than a single-party majority, the reference category) are introduced.

The results confirm the hypothesis. They indicate that majority coalitions and single-party minority governments typically last a full year less than single-party majorities. As for minority coalitions, which are quite infrequent, they last some 21 months less. And, importantly, when we take into account the type of cabinet that is formed, there is no difference left between PR and plurality systems, which means that the longer duration of governments in the latter is entirely accounted for by the types of cabinet that are found in the two systems. It is only because single-party majority governments are less frequent that governments have shorter lives in PR systems.

In short, Ricard's data show that governments have slightly shorter lives under PR than under plurality rule. The overall difference, everything else equal, is seven months. The data also show that this difference is entirely due to the lesser frequency of single-party majority governments in PR systems. For those considering electoral reform this is extremely important. Indeed, a frequent criticism or caricature of proportional systems is that they are highly unstable, with governments changing at a much faster pace than in plurality systems. However, when we take a closer look at the different systems, we find that it is not proportionality as such that causes shorter life cycles. Instead, it is the tendency of coalition governments to more frequently result in these systems. In sum, while there is a small difference between PR and plurality systems in terms of duration, it is only because one-party majority governments are less frequent in PR systems.

Does the relatively larger frequency of changes in government in PR systems mean that they hold more elections, more frequently? Surprisingly, this is not clearly the case. Because changes in government can occur through changes in leadership, or in the composition of the cabinet, shorter government life cycles do not necessarily indicate more frequent elections. To test for this possibility, we determined the average number of elections per year in plurality and proportional representation systems. We considered all of Ricard's 36 countries, and divided the number of elections by the number of years

**Table 5.4: Causes of changes in government**

	<b>Proportional</b>	<b>Plurality</b>
Change of parties	33.0 % (89)	11.0% (12)
Change of prime minister	11.1% (30)	16.5% (18)
Election	55.9% (151)	72.5% (79)

Percentages report the share of termination types within each system type. Bracketed numbers indicate the number of terminations.

between their first and most recent election. Measured this way, the average number of elections per year is .33 in plurality systems and .37 in proportional representation systems. In other words, in both systems elections are held on average about every three years. Thus, while governments are more likely to change in PR systems, elections do not occur much more frequently.

Table 5.4 specifies the sources of government change in proportional and plurality systems. In both systems, the most frequent scenario is the one under which the termination of a government entails an election (though this is measurably more common in plurality systems). But in PR systems, one-third of the governments that come to an end are replaced by another government with a different party composition, sometimes a completely new set of parties, but often only marginally changed. By comparison, in plurality systems only about one in ten governments comes to an end through a change in the party composition of government. Finally, we should note that changes of prime minister terminating government are marginally more common in plurality systems.

## Conclusion

Four sets of questions help us distinguish the differences in government life cycles between countries. First, does the formation of a government involve the participation of the head of state, and does it entail a formal vote of investiture? Second, what is the consequence if a government faces a legislative defeat? Third, what is the nature of a confidence vote? Fourth, if a government loses a confidence motion is an election necessary, or can another party or group of parties form a new government?

The international experience shows that there exists a wide variety of practices on each of these issues. There are many different ways in which a government can be created, there are many ways in which it can be defeated,

and there are many ways in which it can be maintained, brought to an end, and replaced by another government. And it is possible to design rules that facilitate or hinder government stability. Thus, those designing a new electoral system face a basic choice between a system in which governments live longer or a system in which new governments are born more frequently. Our analysis suggests that fundamental to this choice—more fundamental than the mix of conventions and rules chosen over the four stages of a government life cycle—are the types of governments to which a system is likely to give birth.

## Note

1. The countries included are Austria, Bahamas, Barbados, Belgium, Belize, Botswana, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominica, Finland, Germany, Greece, Grenada, Guyana, Hungary, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Luxembourg, Mauritius, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

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