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Termination of parliamentary governments: revised definitions and implications

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ABSTRACT

The literature on government coalitions uses a common definition of when governments terminate and new ones form. This terminology is convenient and has served empirical coalitions studies quite well. This article challenges this terminology on the ground that it risks inflating the number of governments and, at least in some countries, severely distorts scholarly understanding of government duration and durability. Specifically, this article criticises the definitional condition that any partisan change in the composition of a government signifies its termination. The article demonstrates how using more precise definitions affects government duration considerably in a number of countries. In some cases, countries experience short-lived governments because minor partisan changes take place within a surplus coalition. Given these observations, the article re-visits the finding that minimum winning governments survive longer than oversized governments. When applying the modified definitions, differences in duration between these two types of majority coalitions almost disappear.

KEYWORDS Government termination; government duration; coalitions; governments; durability

A substantial and growing part of the vast literature on government coalitions is devoted to coalition duration and durability (for example, Fortunato and Loftis 2018; Greene 2017; Krauss 2018; Krauss and Kroeber 2021; Saalfeld 2008 to mention a few of the most recent ones). Durable governments have been regarded as one of the pre-conditions of effective policymaking (Sartori 1994), while short-lived governments are seen as ineffective ‘because they lack time to develop and implement coherent political programs’ (Lijphart 1984: 165).

Scholars have examined a wide range of political and economic factors that potentially affect the survival and duration of governments, focussing

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on attributes (Cheibub and Rasch 2021; Chiru 2015; Dodd 1976; Lento and Hazan 2021; Saalfeld 2008; Van Roozendaal 1997; Warwick 1979, 1994), critical events (Browne *et al.* 1984; Hellström and Walther 2019; Robertson 1983; Saalfeld 2008; Warwick 1994), and game theoretic explanations (Laver and Shepsle 1998).

Studies concerning government duration rest upon the decision of how we define a government. It is clear, that when scholars study government duration and government durability they must first define what constitutes a government. In other words, it is essential to determine when a government begins and when it terminates. This may sound trivial, but it is not; the definition itself may be consequential (Conrad and Golder 2010; Damgaard 1994), especially when one studies government durability or regards duration as an independent variable.

There are two major approaches to the decision what constitutes a new government. Woldendorp *et al.* (2000, 2011) decision rules rest upon the choice that a new government begins the day after a previous government ends. Thus, there are no lags between one government to the other. A second approach is advanced by Conrad and Golder (2010) as well as Strøm *et al.* (2008). They argue that the end time of a government does not necessarily indicate the beginning of a new government the day after, since caretaker government periods should be appropriately accounted for.

Despite this on-going debate in the literature, some empirical scholars utilise Woldendorp *et al.*'s (2000, 2011) definitions for example the ParlGov dataset (Döring and Manow 2016).^{1, 2} Consequently, our definitional critique is targeted at, and our empirical analysis utilises, Woldendorp *et al.* (2000, 2011).

Indeed, the widespread approach in the vast empirical literature on coalition formation and duration in parliamentary systems is to apply three criteria, each of which is a sufficient condition for change of government. A new government is formed—and the previous one terminated—if a new Prime Minister (PM) is appointed, if a new legislative election takes place, or if the partisan composition of the government changes (see, e.g. Browne *et al.* 1984; Strøm 1990; Woldendorp *et al.* 2000, 2011). The last two criteria assure that every government has a unique backing in parliament, making it possible to label it as a minority government, a minimal winning coalition (MWC), or an oversized coalition (a surplus majority government that includes one or more parties that are not crucial to its majority status).

We challenge this definition used by voluminous empirical studies on government duration, and argue that it might be misleading, depending on one's research question. If our goal is to observe a government

duration, then regarding any partisan change in the composition of the government as indicating governmental termination might be fine. But if we wish to understand what the impacts of government duration are, or if we wish to understand durability, that is politicians' and citizens' expectations about duration, then one cannot regard any change in government as having identical impact. Indeed, Harmel and Robertson (1986) argue similarly, and consequently they create a hierarchy of events of changes that are meaningful in impacting citizen's democratic regime support. Harmel and Robertson rank-ordered the events according to their visibility and the 'anxiety' they produce. The occurrence of general elections and the replacement in the Prime Minister, which leads to different parties in government are the first and second most visible change. The third category is the exit of a party or an addition of a party to the government, which changes the coalition's majority status. The fourth category is a change in the coalition status, while the fifth and least visible change is personal reshuffles or an addition of a party to the coalition without altering its majority status. In a similar vein, Hurwitz (1971: 43) argued that not any incident of change in government should be equated with its instability. Indeed, some changes in government do not risk the persistence of the government, and therefore should not be regarded as signs of instability. Thus when a party is added to the coalition while the PM remains the same it is a sign of persistence of the government (Hurwitz 1971: 44).

Mershon (1996, 2001) also argues that not any change to the partisan composition of a coalition bears the same weight. Mershon was puzzled, mainly, by the Italian case, which exhibits government stability and instability concurrently. While they were frequent governmental changes due to (sometimes minor) changes to the partisan composition of the government, in all governments from 1946–1992 the Christian Democratic Party held power. Indeed, often times changes in the partisan composition of the Italian government were inconsequential for their majority status. Mershon explains this puzzle by arguing that when breaking a government is relatively cheap, as is in the Italian and also the Israeli cases, coalition partners may choose to bring the government down. If breaking the government causes little damage and comes at a low cost then coalitions seem to be short lived.

We follow Mershon's logic and argue, similar to Harmel and Robertson (1986) and Hurwitz (1971) that not every change to the partisan composition of the government is consequential enough. We demonstrate that the standard definition tends to inflate the number of governments, at least for some countries, and thus, makes some governments appear less durable than they actually are. Specifically, we contend that not any

change in the partisan composition of a government implies its termination, leading to the formation of a new government.

If several ministers leave a government and new ones enter, but the government continues with the same Prime Minister and the same parties, the conventional approach in the scholarly literature is not to regard the change as one that leads to a new government. In a sense, the change due to the reshuffle is too insignificant (Harmel and Robertson 1986). We similarly claim that some movements of parties in and out of coalitions may be as unimportant if the government just continues with the same Prime Minister heading the same type of government. This is especially relevant if one wants to study government durability or examine the impact of government duration on representative democracy. In these cases, we should not regard the partisan change as one that leads to formation of new governments. Typically, minor partisan changes of coalitions do not generate a real formation process as long as no government actually terminated and no vote of investiture takes place in parliament.

Thus, the focus in this article is the partisan criterion of when governments terminate and new ones take office.³ We analyse the consequences of altering the partisan criterion, and compare our new definitions with the Woldendorp *et al.* (2000, 2011) approach. Applying minor changes to the definition alters some countries' number of governments and their durations considerably. In the next section we use Israel as a particularly troublesome case regarding measuring government duration and inferring about durability. The third section spells out the various definitions in greater detail and analyzes the consequences of altering the partisan criterion in the standard definition of when governments terminate and change. We use data for 894 governments, following the standard definition (or 16% fewer governments, according to our preferred measure), in 32 parliamentary countries after 1945 (or after democratization). In the fourth section, we investigate and discuss the extent to which the new definitions alter one of the central tenets in the literature on government durability; i.e. the well-established finding that oversized coalitions are less durable than minimal winning coalitions. When applying our modified definitions, differences in duration for the two types of majority coalitions almost disappear. The fifth section concludes the article.

Government duration and the case of Israel

A prolific strand of literature on the causes and consequences of government duration has emerged over the years. A substantial portion of the empirical literature uses 'off the shelf' datasets such as ParlGov,

which records a new government whenever there is a new Prime Minister, a new election, or an altered partisan composition of the coalition in power. Obviously, it makes it easier to discuss and compare findings when they all lean on the same definition of when governments terminate and begin. However, if this definition has certain weaknesses or limitations, it might bias the set of findings in the literature or make them less robust than we tend to believe.

To illustrate the type of challenges we encounter in defining and counting governments, Israel is a useful case.⁴ Israel has a fragmented party system, and all governments have been coalitions of various types. Israel is characterised in the literature as having one of the least durable and most short-lived governments of all the countries analysed in the ParlGov dataset. Furthermore, every new government in Israel needs the approval of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) for an investiture vote. Israel's Basic Law: The Government states in Article 13(d):

When a Government has been formed, it shall present itself to the Knesset, shall announce the basic lines of its policy, its composition and the distribution of functions among the Ministers, and shall ask for an expression of confidence. The Government is constituted when the Knesset has expressed confidence in it, and the Ministers shall thereupon assume office.

Up until 2015, inclusive, Israel had 34 governments according to the country-specific tally.⁵ Yet, ParlGov counts 70 Israeli governments during the same time period. What accounts for the big discrepancy? While we do not argue, as Sanders and Herman (1977) did, that one should adopt country-specific rules to count governments, because it will hamper our ability to compare across cases (Laver 2003: 25), we argue that the hyper-inflated number of governments in Israel is the result of the partisan criterion for counting a government. Specifically, by regarding every partisan change in the coalition as signifying the end of a government and the beginning of a new one, the counting rule fails to differentiate between consequential and non-consequential partisan alterations. If, as Mershon (1996, 2001) argued the cost of leaving a coalition is low, parties may decide to exit, without having any significant impact on the coalition's majority status, the identity of the PM or the largest party in the government.

Table 1 presents the 70 governments ParlGov defined for Israel between 1949–2015.⁶ It lists the majority size of each coalition, and the reason(s) for its termination: the appointment of a new PM, the occurrence of elections or a partisan change. We further list in the table whether the partisan change criterion was the result of parties leaving or entering government and their number. It is evident, that many instances of a

Table 1. 70 governments in Israel.

| Government | I | II | III |
|--|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| OS = Oversized coalition | | | Partisan Change (minus |
| MWC = Minimal winning coalition | | Election | if party leaving; plus if |
| MIN = Minority government | New PM | | party entering) |
| Ben-Gurion 1949 (OS) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Ben-Gurion 1950 (OS) | | | 2(+) |
| Ben-Gurion 1951 (OS) Caretaker | | | |
| Ben-Gurion 1951 (OS) | | 1 | 1(-) |
| Ben-Gurion 1952 (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Ben-Gurion 1952 (OS) | | | 2(+), 1(-) |
| Sharet 1954 (OS) | 1 | | |
| Sharet 1955 (OS) | | | 1(-) |
| Sharet 1955 (OS) Caretaker | | | 1(-), 1(+) |
| Ben-Gurion 1955 (OS) | 1 | 1 | |
| Ben-Gurion 1958 (OS) | | | 1(-) |
| Ben-Gurion 1958 (MWC) | | | 1(-) |
| Ben-Gurion 1959 (MWC) Caretaker | | | |
| Ben-Gurion 1959 (OS) | | 1 | |
| Ben-Gurion 1961 (OS) Caretaker | | | 1(-), 1(+) |
| Ben-Gurion 1961 (OS) Caretaker | | | 2(-), 1(+) |
| Ben-Gurion 1961 (OS) | | 1 | |
| Levi Eshkol 1963 (OS) | 1 | | |
| Levi Eshkol 1964 (OS) | | | |
| Levi Eshkol 1966 (OS) | | 1 | |
| Levi Eshkol 1967 (OS) | | | 2(+) |
| Golda Meir 1969 March (OS) | 1 | | |
| Golda Meir 1969 December (OS) | | 1 | |
| Golda Meir 1970 (OS) | | | 1(-) |
| Golda Meir 1974 (MWC) | | 1 | |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1974 June (MWC) | 1 | | 1(-) |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1974 October (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1976 (Min) Caretaker | | | 1(-) |
| Menachem Begin 1977 June (MWC) | 1 | 1 | |
| Menachem Begin 1977 October (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Menachem Begin 1981 (MWC) | | 1 | |
| Menachem Begin 26.7.1982 (MWC) | | | 2(+) |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1983 (MWC) | 1 | | |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1984 (Min) | | | 1(-) |
| Shimon Peres 1984 (OS) | 1 | 1 | |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1986 (OS) | 1 | | 1(-) |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1987 (OS) | | | 1(-) |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1988 (OS) | | 1 | |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1990 March (Min) | | | 1(-) |
| Caretaker | | | |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1990 June (Min) | | | 2(+), 4(-) |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1991 (MWC) | | | 1(+) |
| Yitzhak Shamir 1992 (MIN) | | | 3(-) |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1992 (MWC) | 1 | 1 | |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1993 (MIN) | | | 1(-) |
| Yitzhak Rabin 1995 (Min) | | | 1(+) |
| Shimon Peres 1995 (MWC) | 1 | | |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 1996 (MWC) | 1 | 1 | |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 1998 (MIN) | | | 1(-) |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 1998 (Min) | | | |
| Ehud Barak 1999 (OS) | 1 | 1 | |
| Ehud Barak 2000 (MIN) | | | 4(-) |
| Ehud Barak 2000 (MIN) Caretaker | | | |
| Ariel Sharon 2001 March (OS) | 1 | 1 | |

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

| Government | I | II | III |
|---|---------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| OS = Oversized coalition | | | Partisan Change (minus |
| MWC = Minimal winning coalition | | | if party leaving; plus if |
| MIN = Minority government | New PM | Election | party entering) |
| Ariel Sharon 2001 August (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Ariel Sharon 2002 April (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Ariel Sharon 2002 June (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Ariel Sharon 2003 (MWC) | | 1 | |
| Ariel Sharon 2004 (MWC) | | | 1(-) |
| Ariel Sharon 2005 (Min) | | | 1(+) |
| Ariel Sharon 2006 (MIN) | | | 1(-), 1(+) |
| Ehud Olmert 2006 May (MWC) | 1 | 1 | |
| Ehud Olmert 2006 October (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Ehud Olmert 2008 (MWC) | | | 1(-) |
| Ehud Olmert 2008 (MWC) Caretaker | | | |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2009 (OS) | 1 | 1 | |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2011 (MWC) | | | 1(-), 1(+) |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2012 (OS) | | | 1(+) |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2013 (OS) | | 1 | |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2014 (OS) Caretaker | | | 2(-) |
| Benjamin Netanyahu 2015 (MWC) | | 1 | |

new government are the result of an entrance of a new party to an already oversized coalition, for example, Rabin's government in 1974 or Olmert's October 2006 government. At other times, a new government is counted because a minor party left an oversized coalition without affecting its overall majority status or the identity of the PM. For example, in 1986 an oversized national unity coalition is investitured. By May 26th, 1987 Shinui—a three-member liberal party—leaves the coalition leaving its overall majority status intact.

Table 1 clearly indicates that the inflation in the number of Israeli governments in ParlGov dataset occurs because of the rule that regards any change to the partisan composition of the government as a cause for its termination. Yet, many of these changes consist of parties leaving or entering existing coalitions without affecting their majority status. The same Prime Minister continues, and typically, the status of the coalition (usually as an oversized coalition) is preserved.

For example, the 32nd Israeli government was approved via an investiture vote on March 31st, 2009 and lasted until March 18th, 2013—the day of the elections to the 19th Knesset. Benjamin Netanyahu headed it during the entire period. When the government was sworn in, six parties with 74 out of the 120 Members of Knesset (MKs) supported it. It was inaugurated as a surplus coalition. By January 17th, 2011, a group from the Labour Party decided to leave the coalition, while another faction chose to remain and changed its name to Ha'Atzma'ut (Independence). This partisan change to the composition of the government left it with the support of 66 MKs, and it maintained its surplus status. By May 9th,

2012, the Kadima party joined this surplus coalition, increasing its size to 94 MKs. Using the common definition in the literature for the termination and establishment of a government, each of these instances is counted as a new government, thus inflating the number of governments Israel has had and deflating their durability. To put it in Hurwitz' (1971) terms, these changes bare no effect on the government persistence.

The example above is by no means an isolated one. Indeed, Israel's governmental history is characterised by many instances in which the entering or exiting of parties to and from the coalition leaves its majority status intact. Of course, there have been a few examples of a party leaving a minimum winning coalition, thereby turning it into a minority cabinet. These governments should be considered new, although the Prime Minister continued and the government did not face an investiture vote in parliament. Yet, we argue that not every partisan change to the coalitions' composition should signify its termination.

A new measure for government duration

In order to measure government duration and durability, scholars need to determine when a government begins and when it terminates. To this end, one of the most common definitions in the literature regards the occurrence of elections, the appointment of a new Prime Minister, and any partisan change to the composition of the government as indicating its termination. In analysing government duration and durability, we argue that depending on the research question, the last criterion might be too strong. Specifically, we do not believe that any change to a government's partisan composition or a government's legislative support base should necessarily indicate a new government. Above, we illustrated the deficiency using Israeli data that revealed that the standard definition inflated the number of governments Israel had, and consequently made government durability artificially low.

Rather than regarding any partisan change as indication of the government's termination, we propose that only changes in government composition that alter the government's majority status should be counted as indications of a new government. Specifically, we create two alternative definitions or counting rules. While we adopt the first and second criteria—i.e. new PM and new elections as indicating the beginning of a new government, we modify the third, partisan condition.

If we split the partisan criterion, we can formulate five definitional elements for counting governments as new:

1. New Prime Minister

2. New election
3. Crucial partisan shrinking (one or more parties leave the coalition and alter its the majority status)
4. Crucial partisan broadening (one or more parties enter the coalition and alter its majority status)
5. Any change in the party composition of a coalition

Crucial partisan shrinking has to do with parties leaving a coalition. According to this criterion, we consider it a new government only if the coalition moves from oversized to minimal winning or minority, or from minimal winning to minority status. These changes are crucial in that they change the bargaining environment within government, by either causing the government to lose its majority legislative support (a movement to a minority government), or by allowing at least some coalition partners to become veto-players (Tsebelis 2002).

Crucial partisan additions refer to parties that enter a coalition, thereby expanding its parliamentary basis and bargaining position. Additions are crucial to the extent that the coalition moves from minority to minimal-winning or oversized status, or from minimal-winning to oversized status.

As we have mentioned several times, one of the most prevalent definition in the literature combines criteria 1, 2, and 5. We propose a Definition 1 (Def 1) based on criteria 1, 2, and 3. This means that only partisan departures that change the type of government count as generating new governments. For example, if a party leaves a coalition between elections, and the coalition remains oversized (and headed by the same Prime Minister), we do not regard it as a new government according to Def 1. Similarly, the fact that a party enters an existing coalition does not terminate it. This is true even if the majority status of the government changes. If we are interested in government durability, these forms of strengthening of existing coalitions do not hamper their survival or cut their lifespan short.

We also created a Definition 2 (Def 2), which combines criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4. Consequently, this definition takes both crucial shrinking and crucial broadening of the governing coalition into account. In other words, we record all of the most significant partisan changes of the government. The difference between ParlGov's definition and Def 2 is that the former one lets many unimportant partisan changes generate new governments. Notably, we use the term 'unimportant' here in the sense that the majority status of the coalition is completely unaffected by the partisan change. Clearly, Def 2 enables the conclusion that a government was terminated also in instances in which the number of

coalition parties increases, but only in cases where such a change alters the majority status of the government.

In the rest of this section, we present analyses of government duration in 32 parliamentary countries under the newly proposed definitions, and contrast them with the usual operationalisation. As will become evident, for some countries, rather large differences emerge. We will also address concerns about caretaker governments, and whether properly accounting for caretaker governments might account for much of the difference between our ParlGov's and our revised definition.

We argue that using the permissive ParlGov definition for government might have introduced bias into previous analyses on government durability and may hamper our understanding about the consequences of government duration.

Table 2 presents, for each of the 32 countries in the ParlGov dataset, the number of governments if we use the traditional definition of ParlGov and our proposed modified Def 1,⁷ as well as the average government duration (measured by the number of days in power) under each of the definitions.⁸ The table also presents the difference in average duration between the ParlGov's definition and the new definition. Figure 1 makes it easier to compare the duration measures. We order the countries from lowest to highest duration according to ParlGov's measure (see the bars). The line shows average duration measured by applying Def 1, and the dotted line shows Def 2. Table 2 also presents the above mentioned calculations based on a dataset in which new caretaker governments were not included. After we discuss the calculated differences between ParlGov and our definition based on the entire dataset we will turn our attention to discussing the issue of caretaker governments.

Evidently, some countries witness a major change in the number of governments, and consequently in their governments' longevity when we use our revised measures. For instance, Belgium presents a decrease in the number of governments from 46 under ParlGov's definition to 37 under our modified Def 1, a change that increases the average government duration by about 24 percent. Austria undergoes an increase of government duration of about 30 percent from an average of 764 days under the ParlGov's count, to an average of 986 days under Def 1. Likewise, Romania presents an increase of more than 60 percent in its governments' duration, as the average number of days a government survived increased from 412 days to about 666 days. While for some countries, using the modified definition yields major changes in the number of governments and their durations, for others it does not. Thus, the number of Bulgarian and British governments and their durations remains the same, regardless of the definition used.



Table 2. Number of governments and average government duration (in days) according to the ParlGov definition and Def1 with and without caretaker governments.

| Country | No.Govs.parl | | Mean.Dur. Parl | | No.Govs.parl | | Mean.Dur. Def1 | | No.Govs.def1 | | Mean.Dur.def1 | | %Diff.Parl. | | %Diff.Parl.Def1 | |
|---------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------|
| | No. | no.caretaker | Parl | no.caretaker | No. | no.caretaker | Def1 | no.caretaker | No. | no.caretaker | no.caretaker | no.caretaker | Def1 | no.caretaker | no.caretaker | no.caretaker |
| 1 AUS | 38 | 35 | 668 | 705 | 37 | 686 | 34 | 726 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 2 AUT | 33 | 28 | 764 | 876 | 25 | 986 | 22 | 1024 | 22 | 29 | 29 | 17 | 29 | 17 | 29 | 17 |
| 3 BEL | 46 | 39 | 524 | 587 | 37 | 652 | 31 | 720 | 31 | 22 | 22 | 23 | 22 | 23 | 22 | 23 |
| 4 BGR | 12 | 8 | 677 | 978 | 12 | 677 | 8 | 978 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5 CZE | 16 | 11 | 645 | 671 | 13 | 698 | 9 | 841 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 25 | 8 | 25 | 8 | 25 |
| 6 DEU | 25 | 25 | 909 | 909 | 24 | 947 | 24 | 947 | 24 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| 7 DNK | 37 | 37 | 675 | 675 | 34 | 735 | 34 | 735 | 34 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 | 9 |
| 8 ESP | 12 | 12 | 1107 | 1107 | 12 | 1107 | 12 | 1107 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 EST | 15 | 14 | 545 | 576 | 12 | 682 | 11 | 733 | 11 | 25 | 25 | 27 | 25 | 27 | 25 | 27 |
| 10 FIN | 55 | 47 | 442 | 496 | 48 | 506 | 40 | 583 | 40 | 13 | 13 | 17 | 13 | 17 | 13 | 17 |
| 11 FRA | 62 | 57 | 420 | 445 | 53 | 481 | 48 | 517 | 48 | 15 | 15 | 16 | 15 | 16 | 15 | 16 |
| 12 GBR | 24 | 24 | 1048 | 1048 | 24 | 1048 | 24 | 1048 | 24 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 13 GRC | 23 | 17 | 714 | 935 | 21 | 715 | 15 | 965 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| 14 HRV | 9 | 9 | 606 | 606 | 6 | 909 | 6 | 909 | 6 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 |
| 15 HUN | 11 | 11 | 794 | 794 | 10 | 874 | 10 | 874 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| 16 IRL | 26 | 26 | 975 | 975 | 26 | 975 | 26 | 975 | 26 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 17 ISL | 34 | 29 | 756 | 848 | 33 | 779 | 28 | 879 | 28 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 4 |
| 18 ISR | 70 | 59 | 343 | 381 | 36 | 668 | 27 | 709 | 27 | 79 | 79 | 86 | 79 | 86 | 79 | 86 |
| 19 ITA | 65 | 57 | 384 | 414 | 46 | 512 | 39 | 525 | 39 | 28 | 28 | 27 | 28 | 27 | 28 | 27 |
| 20 LTU | 18 | 13 | 534 | 656 | 17 | 566 | 12 | 710 | 12 | 6 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 8 |
| 21 LUX | 21 | 19 | 1180 | 1272 | 20 | 1239 | 18 | 1256 | 18 | 5 | 5 | -1 | 5 | -1 | 5 | -1 |
| 22 LVA | 23 | 22 | 370 | 333 | 21 | 406 | 20 | 367 | 20 | 9 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| 23 MLT | 15 | 15 | 1285 | 1285 | 14 | 1377 | 14 | 1377 | 14 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| 24 NLD | 32 | 23 | 731 | 963 | 26 | 900 | 17 | 1102 | 17 | 23 | 23 | 14 | 23 | 14 | 23 | 14 |
| 25 NOR | 31 | 31 | 802 | 802 | 30 | 829 | 30 | 829 | 30 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| 26 POL | 20 | 16 | 438 | 492 | 17 | 515 | 13 | 583 | 13 | 15 | 15 | 19 | 15 | 19 | 15 | 19 |
| 27 PRT | 22 | 17 | 624 | 760 | 19 | 723 | 14 | 868 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 14 |
| 28 ROU | 21 | 21 | 412 | 412 | 13 | 666 | 13 | 666 | 13 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 62 | 62 |
| 29 SVK | 14 | 10 | 697 | 760 | 10 | 976 | 7 | 1058 | 7 | 33 | 33 | 39 | 33 | 39 | 33 | 39 |
| 30 SVN | 16 | 15 | 544 | 533 | 14 | 621 | 13 | 615 | 13 | 14 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 15 |
| 31 SWE | 30 | 30 | 836 | 836 | 27 | 929 | 27 | 929 | 27 | 6 | 6 | 11 | 6 | 11 | 6 | 11 |
| 32 TUR | 18 | 16 | 630 | 692 | 16 | 709 | 14 | 730 | 14 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| | $\Sigma = 894$ | | $X = 690$ | $X = 744$ | $\Sigma = 793$ | $X = 774$ | $\Sigma = 753$ | $X = 830$ | $\Sigma = 660$ | | | | | | | |

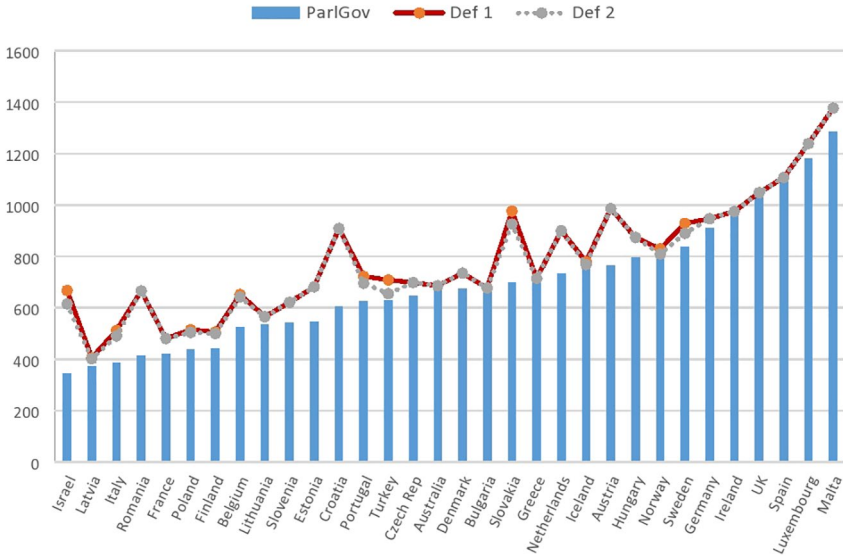


Figure 1. Government duration ordered according to ParlGov's definition (about here).

In [Figure 1](#), countries are ordered according to the ParlGov's definition. The two other definitions would change the ordering. Rank order correlations (tau b) between the ParlGov's and Def 1 and Def 2, using country averages for duration, are 0.75 and 0.78, respectively. In practice, our new definitions give similar orders, with Def 2 a little bit closer to the traditional approach. All this means that crucial partisan broadening of coalitions (i.e. the entering of parties that changes the majority status of the coalition) hardly takes place. Crucial partisan shrinking is what matters in practice as the main form of partisan change. Indeed, [Figure 1](#) demonstrates that the differences between using Def 1 and using Def 2 are marginal: only 12 countries exhibit differences in average governmental duration across the two revised definitions, ranging from as little as a difference of three days, on average, to a difference of about 50 days. Hence, for the rest of the article in the sequel, we mainly contrast Def 1 with ParlGov definition.

[Figure 2](#) presents boxplots of government durations (measured in days) for each of the 32 countries in the ParlGov dataset. The order of the countries is the same as in [Figure 1](#), beginning with the one with lowest average duration according to the traditional measure. The boxplots show the variation in government duration within each country, based on two of the definitions.

Evidently, for some countries utilising the modified measurement yields little to no change in government longevity (e.g. Ireland), while for other

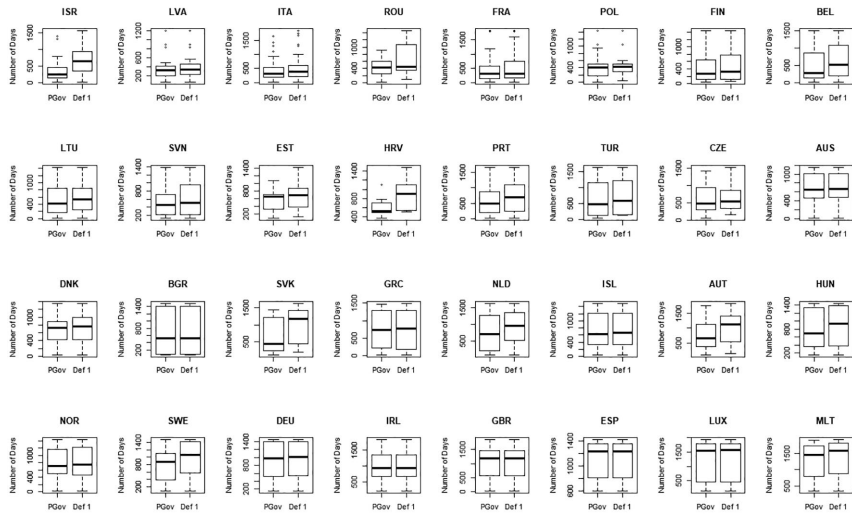


Figure 2. Boxplots of governments' duration according to ParlGov's definitions and Def 1 (about here).

countries the change is profound (e.g. Israel). Moreover, it is clear that the change in government longevity is not distributed randomly or equally across countries. In most of the countries that were characterised by long-term governments according to the ParlGov's definition, the median and interquartile ranges of government duration do not differ between our modified definition and ParlGov's. Nine of the sixteen countries at the bottom half of [Figure 2](#) (countries with the most durable governments according to the traditional definition) exhibit a similar distribution of duration regardless of the measure used to define a government. Thus, in these countries, insignificant partisan changes hardly occur at all. Out of the sixteen countries with the shortest-lived governments (the top two rows of [Figure 2](#)), only two countries exhibit similar patterns of government duration, regardless of definition. This difference implies that the ParlGov measure of duration is 'polluted' – and perhaps biased – by numerous, insignificant partisan changes.

Indeed, only three of the sixteen most stable countries exhibit a change in their governments' average duration larger than 20 percent, whereas six of the sixteen countries with the shortest-lived governments demonstrate such increased longevity. Likewise, the average increase in government duration (between ParlGov's definition and Def 1) for the sixteen countries with the longest-serving governments (according to the ParlGov's definition) is nine percent, whereas this increase in government duration for the sixteen least stable countries is 25 percent. This non-random effect may indicate a systematic bias in our current understandings of

the determinants and consequences of government termination, establishment, and duration, all of which rest on the traditional definition.

One may wonder whether much of the difference we discover between ParlGov's definition and our modified Def 1 is the result of ParlGov's not accounting for caretaker governments and prolonged delays in government formation processes. In order to address this concern we have re-analysed ParlGov's data while discarding all new caretaker governments from the analysis (see Conrad and Golder (2010) for a distinction between new and continuation caretaker governments). Columns 4 and 5 of Table 2 present the number of governments per country and their average duration, when we discard these caretaker governments.

Since these caretaker governments are mostly short-lived relative to other governments, removing them increases most countries' average governmental duration. Yet even with this 'corrected' ParlGov measure, which produces higher levels of government duration, applying our modified definition matters. The last column of Table 2 presents the percentage difference of duration measured under the 'corrected' ParlGov measure and our Def 1 (also calculated on a dataset that does not include new caretaker governments). It is evident that not considering any change to the government's partisan composition as indication of a new government increases average government duration, even when we discard caretaker governments. For most of the countries (17) discarding caretaker governments from the analysis only intensifies the affect Def 1 has on duration in comparison to ParlGov's. For example, in Estonia Def 1 increases duration by 25% compared to the traditional definition when we use the entire dataset, and it increases duration by 27% when we remove caretaker governments. Likewise, in Sweden using Def 1 exhibits higher duration levels by 6% over ParlGov's definition when we analyse the entire dataset, but when we remove caretaker governments this increase rises to 11%. Similarly, the rise in Israeli governments' duration when one uses our modified Def 1 on the entire dataset—79%—is further increased to 86% when we get rid of new caretaker governments.

Yet, ParlGov does not identify all caretaker governments. ParlGov as well as Müller-Rommel, Fettelschoss and Hartfst's (2004) Central-East European dataset (hereafter MRFH), often includes new caretaker governments (which we were able to exclude in the analysis presented above) but continuation caretaker governments 'are typically ignored altogether' (Conrad and Golder 2010: 124). Conrad and Golder argue that continuation caretaker governments are the outgoing governments that have lost their mandate either due to new elections, or because the government resigned, and these are not coded as new governments, accounted properly as caretaker governments by neither ParlGov nor MRFH.

Can the differences we discover between ParlGov's definition and our modified Def 1 be the result of ParlGov's not accounting for continuation caretaker government? We argue the answer is no. Conrad and Golder (2010) research on Central-East European governments indicates that duration in days is shorter when one accounts for both new as well as continuation caretaker governments (see for example Conrad and Golder 2010: 131, Table 3). We cannot account for continuation caretaker government for the entire ParlGov dataset (with more than 750 governments across 32 countries). Yet if we mimic Conrad and Golder's results, then if we were to contrast the average duration of governments in ParlGov with a hypothetical dataset, in which we would have accounted for continuation caretaker governments—then the mean duration in the hypothetical dataset would have been shorter than the average duration in ParlGov. ParlGov would have shown more stability than really exists, since as Conrad and Golder argue, 'governments that are stable and governments that only appear stable because replacement governments take a long time to form are observationally equivalent' (Conrad and Golder 2010: 119). Thus, ParlGov shows more stability than truly exists, and we still manage, using our modified Def 1, to increase this stability even further. If Def 1 increases the stability compared to ParlGov, it would have surely increased the stability if we were to use the

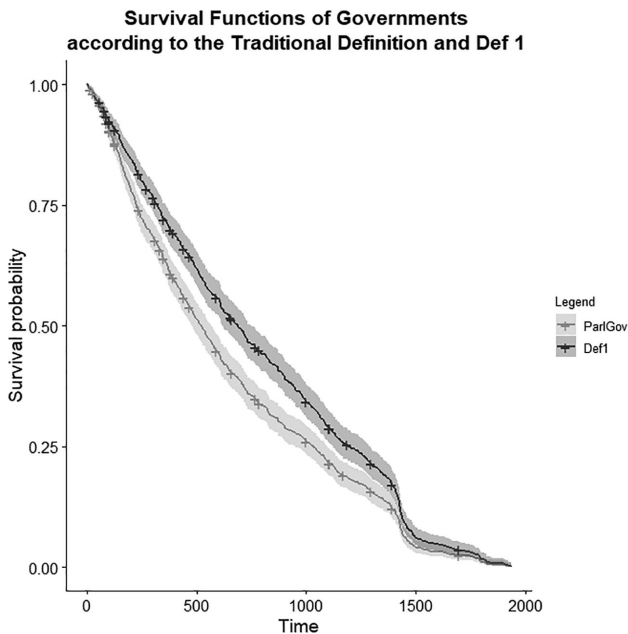


Figure 3. Survival functions.

hypothetical dataset, with its shorter-lived governments. Applying Def 1 on ParlGov's dataset is in a sense a more difficult test for our measure, and it yields a more conservative bias, compared to what we would have found had we accounted correctly for continuation caretaker governments.

In order to further illustrate how our modified Def 1 yield higher levels of duration and affect government stability, at least for some countries we present [Figure 3](#), which demonstrates the difference between the ParlGov's measure and our Def 1 by calculating Kaplan-Meier non-parametric survivor functions. Evidently, the decision to operationalise and measure of government duration by using either ParlGov's definition or our modified Def 1 is consequential. The survival function of our modified measure indicates that in comparison to ParlGov's definition governments survive longer, and the difference between the two survival functions is statistically significant, as the 95% confidence intervals do not overlap for the majority of the time periods examined. Indeed, the probability that a government lasts longer than the median duration according to ParlGov's definition (=502 days) is 0.50 under the traditional definition and 0.62 under Def 1. Likewise, the probability that a government defined using ParlGov's definition lasts longer than the median of government duration under Def 1 (=672 days) is 0.40.

Using a non-inflated measure for counting governments yields different inferences concerning the levels of governmental instability in various countries and may significantly alter our current insights about government duration. In the next section, we demonstrate the impact of using our modified measure for government longevity on the debate concerning MWCs and oversized coalitions' stability.

Are minimal winning coalitions (MWC) more durable than oversized majority coalitions?

In this section, we demonstrate the extent to which one of the well-established findings in the coalition duration literature is robust against changes in the definition of when governments terminate and begin. Numerous studies find differences in government duration due to type of government. Using formal game theory, Riker (1962) in his classical contribution to coalition theory, argued that only MWCs should be expected to form. Dodd (1974, 1976) found that MWCs are the most durable type of government, while larger and smaller coalitions are less stable. This is because in the MWC, each coalition partner is a veto player and each player understands the crucial role it has in maintaining the survivability of the coalition. Consequently, partners refrain from challenging the coalition's existence. The vulnerability of oversized

coalitions is greater, since parties can improve their share of portfolios and perhaps their policy impact by losing parties as long as the majority status is preserved (Laver and Schofield 1998: 150). In general, the level of transaction costs in policymaking should be lower in MWCs than in both surplus coalitions and minority governments (Diermeier and Merlo 2000: 63). This dynamic contributes to making majority coalitions without superfluous parties more durable. All in all, 'minimal winning status reduces the general risk of discretionary terminations' (Saalfeld 2008: 346). Lijphart (1999: 137) shows that between 1945 and 1996, oversized coalitions survived shorter periods than MWCs but were more stable than minority coalitions. The same pattern can be found in several empirical studies (e.g. among others, Taylor and Herman 1971; Saalfeld 2008).

Not only did scholars argue that MW governments are durable, but they also theorised that oversized governments are not. And while some scholars follow Riker's argument that including more parties than is necessary to control a parliamentary majority is a waste (Serritzlew *et al.* 2008) it is an empirical fact that oversized coalitions exist (Bassi 2017; Mitchell and Nyblade 2008). They are formed when coalition negotiation processes are hard (Baron and Diermeier 2001; Carrubba and Volden 2000; Crombez 1996), and are therefore hypothesised to be less durable. Indeed, Crombez (1996) found that as the largest party becomes larger and more central, oversized coalitions transform to become MWCs and MWCs change into minority governments. This finding further supports the assertion that oversized coalitions are a sign of the largest party's weakness and should consequently be short-lived.

Furthermore, oversized governments, and especially oversized coalitions, are usually characterised by greater ideological polarisation. A coalition's ideological diversity might hamper its ability to exercise negative agenda control and prevent divisive issues from reaching the parliament's floor, and these internal divisions may expedite the coalition's demise. The more ideologically diverse a coalition is, the shorter it survives (Schofield 1987).

Thus, most of the (both theoretical and empirical) literature argues that MW governments are more stable and last longer than oversized governments. However, to date, most (if not all) of the empirical analyses that ascertain that MWCs are more stable than oversized coalitions have used the measure of governments that yield the highest number of governments.

Therefore, we examined whether using our modified measurement for governments as is defined by Def 1 changes our understanding of whether and to what extent MWCs last longer than oversized coalitions. Figure 4 presents the Kaplan-Meier survivor functions of MWCs and surplus

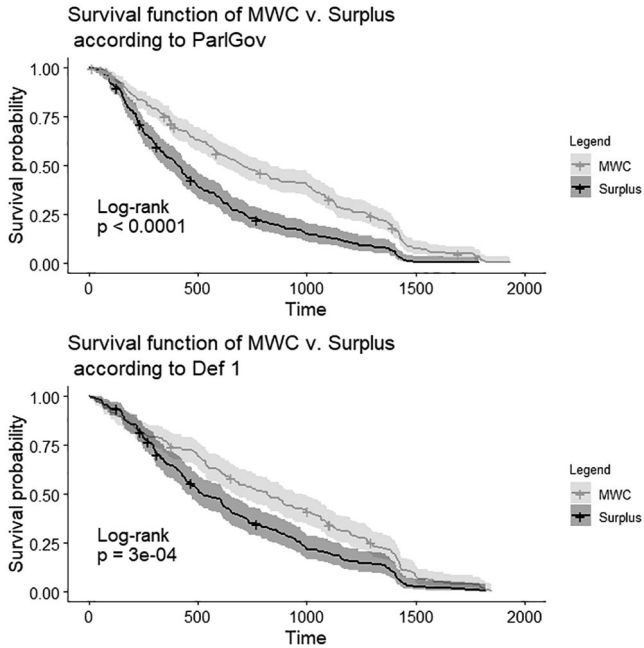


Figure 4. Kaplan-Meier survivor functions of MW and oversized coalitions using ParlGov's definition and Def 1.

coalitions according to ParlGov's definition (top panel), and according to our modified Def 1 measurement (lower panel).

The top panel of Figure 4 corroborates the arguments and findings in previous literature: MWCs survive longer than oversized governments, and the differences in the nonparametric survival-function between MW and surplus coalitions are statistically significant, as the 95% confidence intervals do not overlap. When we use our modified definition for governments—one that does not equate any partisan change as an instance of a new government—we find that MWCs live longer than oversized coalitions only during the second and third years of their existence. During the first 400 days, the durability of MWCs and surplus coalitions is identical, as is evident from the overlapping survival curves and confidence intervals during this period. Likewise, the survivability for coalitions that lasted longer than three years is identical, regardless of whether they are an oversized or a minimum winning coalition.

Evidently, upon further investigation, the majority of the change between the top panel of Figure 4 (analysis using ParlGov's definition) and the bottom panel of the figure (analysis using Def 1) is the result of oversized coalitions becoming more durable under our modified definition. And indeed, some scholars advocate that theoretically, surplus

coalitions are stable. To begin with, oversized governments can afford defections that would not prevent the approval of the government's agenda and would not threaten its survivability (Meireles 2016). In oversized coalitions, not all (and perhaps none) of the coalition parties are veto players. Consequently, the ability of each party to credibly threaten the survival of the government decreases. Scholars have argued that without this credible threat, the coalition partners are weaker compared to the PM, so the coalition is more durable.

In our analysis using Def 1, differences in durability between oversized and minimum winning coalitions almost disappear. This means that most of the well-established findings on the durability of oversized versus minimum winning coalitions reported in the literature rest on non-crucial partisan changes of oversized coalitions. Recall that in Def 1, partisan changes only lead to the termination of an existing cabinet if the majority status shrinks. Furthermore, if we only consider a government to be new if an existing oversized coalition lost its majority status entirely (and became a minority government), there would certainly be no durability difference between governments that were oversized or minimum winning coalitions when they first started out. On the contrary, a Prime Minister of an oversized coalition can afford to lose coalition members and still hold a majority; a PM of a minimum winning coalition in this sense has less manoeuvrability.

Moreover, Groseclose and Snyder (1996) argued that oversized coalitions are ideal because of the stability they benefit from, in that they prevent other parties from making counter-offers. Grotz and Weber (2012) examined government longevity in Central and Eastern Europe and found that surplus coalitions with one or two dispensable parties do not significantly affect the hazard. Only surplus coalitions with more than three dispensable parties increase the hazard and are not expected to last as long. Notably, Axelrod (1970) argued that oversized coalitions occur when the inclusion of an additional party makes the coalition more ideologically cohesive. If this argument is correct then consequently, these more ideologically cohesive surplus coalitions can be predicted to last longer. It is not surprising, thus, that using our modified measurement for governments reveals that surplus governments are actually more stable than previous research has shown them to be.

Conclusions

Government duration and government durability are important phenomena that have been studied extensively from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Often, both scholars and politicians equate frequently

changing and short-lived governments with general instability of the political system. In this article, we argue that one of the prevalent definitions of a government used in the literature tends to inflate the number of governments and, consequently, decreases their overall duration and deflates perceived levels of their durability. This effect is stronger in some countries than in others. Of course, for scholars to measure the duration of government, they must first define what constitutes a government, in other words, they need to decide what events cause the existing government to terminate and a new one to emerge. The common definition relies on one of three criteria, each of which is a sufficient condition for the establishment of a new government. New governments emerge if: (1) elections occur; (2) the Prime Minister changes; or (3) one or more parties enter or leave the governing coalition.

We argue that the third criterion may be problematic, particularly in studies that examine consequences of cabinet duration and those focussing on government durability. This criterion artificially inflates the number of governments, as not every change in the partisan composition of coalitions is sufficiently important to account for the establishment of a new government. A surplus coalition, which loses one of its partners while maintaining its oversized status under the same PM, generates no real government instability, as it does not alter actors' expectation concerning the government's duration, and hardly changes the bargaining environment of the government. Consequently, it should not be counted as two governments. Moreover, adding coalition partners, especially in times of crisis (like war or economic hardship) can hardly be regarded as a sign of instability, and should not indicate the termination of the previous government and the establishment of a new one.

Therefore, we advocate a more realistic approach to counting governments. Our newly constructed measures accept the first and second criteria mentioned above, but we suggest altering the partisan criterion. Under Def 1, a new government forms if the partisan composition of the coalition changes in a way such that it alters its majority status from a MWC to a minority government or from a surplus government to either a MWC or a minority government. Thus, only crucial partisan shrinking of the coalition, which either leads a government to lose its majority legislative or allows at least one coalition partners to become a veto-player, counts. Under Def 2, we additionally include crucial broadening of coalitions; i.e. we take into account any partisan change that alters the majority status of the coalition. Consequently, we delineate a government as new if the coalition moves from one type (oversized, minimum winning, minority) to another because parties leave or enter the coalition. According to Def 1, the mere addition of new parties never

generates new governments in itself; but it could generate a new government when considering Def 2, as long as additions alter the majority status of the coalition.

In the empirical part of the article, we show that the choice of definition has dramatic effects in a handful of countries (most notably Israel, which was our motivating case; as well as Italy, Romania, Croatia, Slovakia and Austria). Similarly, in a few countries the number of governments and their duration are identical, or almost identical, regardless of definition (e.g. the UK, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Bulgaria and Australia). In the set of countries included in this study, there are 141 more governments according to ParlGov's definition in the literature than there are under Def 1 (753 governments under Def 1 and 894 under the traditional definition). None of these 141 'additional' governments are new or separate governments in a meaningful sense. Rather, they are all governments that continued under the same Prime Minister without crucial altering of their parliamentary support. They are more like restructured governments resulting from active coalition management by the Prime Minister and other coalition leaders, not very different from major reshuffles of minister posts.

The analysis demonstrated that the changes in government duration due to use of our modified measures are not randomly distributed across the countries. This non-random effect may point to a systematic bias in our current understanding of the consequences of government duration, and the determinants of government durability. We demonstrated this possibility by examining how using our modified measure for governments alters our insights about the degree to which MWCs are more durable than surplus coalitions. Our analysis showed that using our modified measure erases significant portion of the differences in durability between oversized and minimum winning coalitions.

Our new measure, therefore, can affect previous and future research on government instability and political instability more generally. Specifically, new research into the consequences of government duration should use our revised measure of governments, and previous empirical findings on governments' formation, termination and durability that used the traditional measure should be re-examined in light of the new measures hereby proposed, to see whether their conclusions still hold.

Notes

1. The 2016 Döring and Manow update of the ParlGov dataset is cited 419 times according to Google Scholar as of December 24th, 2020.
2. Government duration scholars also use the ERDDA dataset (<https://erdda.org/erd/data-archive/>), as well as the Golder and Conrad (2010) data on Central and Eastern European countries (<https://sonagolder.com/research>).

3. This manuscript is a part of a larger project in which we define government stability and duration according to both their, and personnel persistence i.e. looking at longevity of PM continuous tenure and ministers' continuous tenure (Laver and Shepsle 1996). We intent to test which combination of the three measures mentioned above yield the most stability in terms of policy in future research.
4. Mershon (1996, 2001) also motivates her critique of the traditional measure of ParlGov with two of the most unstable countries: Italy and Israel. We, in a sense, follow in her footsteps.
5. Israel's thirty-fifth government was investitures on May 17th, 2020.
6. Akirav (2020) indicated that three datasets list a different number of Israeli governments; Döring and Manow (2016) counted 73 governments while Seki and Williams (2014) counted 67 governments (until 2012), and Woldendorp et al. (2000, 2011) counted 60 governments until 2006.
7. There are numerous examples to illustrate that our modification eliminated 'the right' cabinets from the list of ParlGov's cabinets i.e. those that witnessed partisan changes that were not crucial partisan shrinkage. For example, following the 2000 elections in Croatia Račan became the prime minister and he formed a 6-party center-left surplus coalition (SDP, HSL, HSS, LS, HNS, IDS). On June 2001, the Istrian Democratic Assembly (IDS) left the government reducing its majority to 117 MPs (out of a total of 151). While this partisan change formed a new government in ParlGov's dataset, it did not under ours. Likewise where the 'new' February 13th, 1997 Latvian government headed by the same PM as the previous government (PM Šķēle), and enjoying the same majority status as the previous government (70 MPs v. 73 MPs, out of a 100) is counted as a new government in ParlGov's data, it was not considered a new one under our modified counting rules. Similarly, the formation of the Israeli national unity government prior to the Six Day War (1967), which increased the coalition's legislative support base from 75 to 111 (out of a total of 120) is not considered a new government under our modified definition, while is counted as one of Israel's 70 governments in ParlGov.
8. The results for Def 2 are similar to the ones presented with Def 1. They can be obtained from the authors.

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