Revisiting the left cabinet share: How to measure the partisan profile of governments in welfare state research[*]

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Abstract

Measuring the power of the political left with the 'share of social democratic cabinet seats' is the gold standard in the literature on partisan effects. We argue that this measure of left power suffers from conceptual ambiguity and propose an alternative approach to measure the ideological orientation of governments based on their power in cabinets and data on party positions. We see several shortcomings of the traditional measure: the social democratic cabinet share neglects that parties' ideological profiles differ across countries and have significantly changed over recent decades. Also, specific policy measures of party preferences are often more appropriate to gauge the government's position than relying on highly aggregated left/right measures. In addition, the social democratic cabinet share does not take into account the impact of coalition partners, cabinet decision making and the possibility of minority governments relying on parliamentary support outside the cabinet on the ability of parties to implement the social policies. After discussing the reasons for the conceptual ambiguity of existing indicators for the power of the left, we present alternative measures for the ideological orientation of the government based on the composition of cabinets and different information about party positions. We demonstrate how these measures can be combined to a single indicator that takes into account both the ideological position of governing parties in a particular policy domain and their power to impact cabinet decisions. We critically discuss the availability and merits of data on party positions and cabinet compositions and provide recommendations for constructing measures in welfare state research.

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Introduction

The idea that left and right parties pursue different distributive policies when holding government is one of the most influential ideas in the literature of comparative welfare state research and political economy. Indeed, there is a general consensus that the partisanship of the government has influenced both design and outcome of welfare states in the golden age of welfare state expansion. The relevance of the left-right orientation is more disputed, however, when it comes to the retrenchment of the welfare state. Besides a consensus about the importance of social democratic parties for the expansion of the welfare state, a similar consensus regarding the measurement of the power of the political left has emerged in the literature of comparative welfare state research: usually, the strength of the political left has been measured by the share of cabinet seats held by social democratic parties, either as the annual cabinet share or the cumulative cabinet share.[1]

Despite its wide use in comparative welfare state research and comparative political economy, we argue that the existing measure of the power of the political left lacks conceptual clarity and propose an alternative approach. As an exemplary case of our more general critique, we use in the article the example of social democratic cabinet share – from a slightly different theoretical angle – as a measure of left dominance over a cabinet. We discuss two reasons why it is unclear what we measure by including the social democratic cabinet share in our analysis: first, the ideological orientation of social democratic parties varies over time and between countries and second, we need to take into account coalition effects. Hence, we argue that while the measure of social democratic cabinet share has its merits for its availability across time and countries, we should complement this indicator with a measure that includes party positions on the policy dimension of interest. For a long time, limited comparative data have made the social democratic cabinet share the gold standard to measure the ideological orientation of governments. Luckily, new data on party positions derived from party manifestos, expert - and mass surveys have made the inclusion of positional information possible, even in a comparative and longitudinal setting and for more nuanced policy dimensions than only left and right. If we are interested in the effects of government composition on specific issues, such as labour market dualization or

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[1] Note that our article focuses on the cabinet share of social democratic parties in contrast to the combined cabinet share of all left parties (social democrats, communists and green parties). However, our argument is also valid for the cabinet share of all left parties. Empirically, the two measures of left political power are essentially equal (r = .98) and often used synonymously (see for example Huber and Stephens 2001).

investment in education, it is of little use to employ a broad indicator of the government's ideology. The aim of our article is to present an approach to construct an indicator of the 'weighted position of the government' depending on the respective research question students of the welfare state have in mind.

By linking insights from the literature on political representation and party politics on the one hand to comparative welfare state research and political economy on the other hand, we recommend scholars to construct their own indicator for the ideological orientation of the government, i.e. an indicator of the weighted position of the government on particular policy dimensions. Such an indicator combines information about all parties in government, models cabinet decision making and includes measures of party positions regarding the policy dimension of interest. To stay with the example mentioned above, if one is interested in the effect of social democratic governments on active labour market policies, one should first include a measure of the position of social democratic parties on active labour market policies and, second, take government composition into account. The first part provides a precise measure of what social democratic parties want while the latter indicates what parties are able to do. Hence, our goal is to provide a manual how researchers can construct their own indicators of the ideological orientations of governments adapted to their particular research question.

In the following section, we will briefly review the most important arguments why partisanship of government is expected to matter for the design of welfare states and policy outcomes. We then outline our main criticisms regarding the measurement of the strength of the political left by the social democratic cabinet share. Our discussion serves as a basis to present an alternative approach to measure government preferences in later parts of the article. The critique focuses on two aspects: longitudinal and cross-country variation in the ideological profile of social democratic parties and institutional dynamics of coalitions as well as minority governments. We present three different measures on how to locate parties in the political space, explore the usefulness of these measures for different policy dimensions and discuss three models of cabinet decision making with their respective measures. As a last step, we provide two empirical examples of how to construct such an indicator based on Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) and ParlGov data and apply our examples in a replication of Allan and Scruggs' study on welfare generosity (2004).

How the ideology of the government matters in welfare state research

The idea that governmental partisanship matters for the design and size of the welfare state is one of the most influential ideas of welfare state research, in particular when examining the golden age of welfare state expansion. The main reason behind this idea follows the party-matters theory and, more specifically, power resources theory. These scholars argue that left parties use issues around social security and the welfare state to mobilize the lower strata, i.e. lower wage earners, the working class and lower white collar workers (Esping-Andersen 1999). Given their weaker position in the labour market, these classes demand redistribution and social insurance programs to protect them from social risks and to compensate for their low resource endowment (Korpi 1978, Stephens 1979, Iversen and Soskice 2001). Hence, by pursuing a redistributive and egalitarian political agenda, social democratic parties tie these voter segments to their party and create an alignment between the working class and the lower middle class on the one hand and the social democratic party on the other hand. Although later contributions (for instance by van Kersbergen and Manow 2009) have shown that lower income strata support not only left parties but also Christian democratic parties, politics is seen as a power game in which voters and interest groups convey their preferences and demands to their leaders who implement them once in office. Right wing parties in contrast represent the net payers to the welfare state and are therefore inclined to implement welfare state retrenchment (Allan and Scruggs 2004, Huber and Stephens 2001). To borrow two famous terms: welfare state politics are seen as an expression of the 'democratic class struggle' (Korpi 1983) or 'electoral socialism' (Przeworski and Sprague 1986).

In contrast to the power-resources theory, comparative political economy scholars often take a different view on the importance of partisanship for policy outcomes. For example, the 'median-voter-theorem', anticipates a convergence of party positions towards the position of the median voter. Hence, according to the median-voter-theorem we should expect only minimal partisan effects on policy outcomes (see Downs 1957, Iversen 2006). For example, the Meltzer and Richard (1981) model predicts the level of redistribution to depend on the level of income inequality and the number of poor people in a society but not on the partisan composition of the government.

Yet, empirical studies have gathered compelling evidence of the effect of partisanship on the design and size of the welfare state: social democratic governments tend to promote large and universal welfare states which are not necessarily more generous than Christian democratic welfare states, but certainly more service-based (Esping-Andersen 1990, van Kersbergen 1995) and more redistributive (Bradley et al. 2003, Iversen and Cusack 2006). These welfare states, often called social democratic welfare states for the main political power behind or Nordic welfare states for their geographical situation, are characterized by high degrees of economic and gender equality and encompassing social rights (Esping-Andersen 1990, Orloff 1996, Huber and Stephens 2001). Further studies show that governments dominated by social democratic parties are associated with higher levels of social spending (Castles 2004), lower poverty rates among old and new social risks groups (Bradley et al. 2003, Huber and Stephens 2006), higher participation of women in the labour market and in politics, as well as a more women friendly welfare state (Orloff 1996, Huber et al. 2009).

In these studies, the power of the political left in governments is measured as the cabinet seat share held by social democratic or left parties, either as a year-by-year variable or as cumulative share of left cabinets, based on party family classifications. The first measure is based on the assumption that parties act quickly and independently from the institutional and political context. A particular social policy or policy change is explained by the parties in government at this point in time or in the previous year. A second line of arguments focuses on the long-term effect of power of the left, emphasizing that the effect of partisanship accumulates over time, essentially through the mechanisms of the ratchet-effect, regime legacy, structural limitations and ideological hegemony (see Huber and Stephens 2001: 28-31). The cumulative share of the left cabinet share is used to take these effects into account. By contrast, comparative political economists have often used a measure of partisanship that includes not only the cabinet share of social democratic parties but also some sort of positional data (see the index proposed by Cusack 1999).

As clear as the findings are with regard to the expansion of welfare states, the role of partisanship is more contested when it comes to a possible welfare state retrenchment over the last decades. The 'new politics of the welfare state' approach posits an end of the partisanship thesis when analysing welfare states changes. They explain the reduced differences in

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the political agendas of political parties with the electoral costs of retrenchment and the fact that retrenchment is rather an exercise in 'blame avoidance' than 'credit claiming' (Pierson 1996, 2001). Hence, social democratic governments are being prevented from pursuing welfare state expansion and right-wing governments from cutting welfare state expenditure (Huber and Stephens 2001). The political economy literature advances another argument for a limited partisan influence in recent times by arguing that the constraints of a globalized world decrease governments' room of manoeuvre for economic policies (Garrett 1998, Kitschelt et al. 1999, Garrett 2000). Yet, others renounce the end of the partisanship thesis and find that the power of the political left works as a bulwark against retrenchment both with regard to social rights (Korpi and Palme 2003) and the generosity of social programs (Allan and Scruggs 2004). However, it is not clear that a) parties still uphold the same ideology as in the golden age nor b) that they are able to implement their ideology as we will argue below (see Finseraas and Vernby 2011 for a similar argument about the difference between parties preferences and their ability to implement preferred policies). Overcoming the assumption of an automatic link between left parties and specific politics (see Korpi 1989 himself for a critical review of the over-simplified partisan-theory) rather shows the need for more elaborate measures of governments' preferences as we put forward. In the article, we will demonstrate how to integrate the actual ideology of parties and their weight in the government through an indicator of the 'weighted position of the government'.

The shortcomings of a popular measure: The left cabinet share as a measure of the power of the political left

Despite its wide use in the welfare state research and the comparative political economy literature, we doubt that it is really clear what the social democratic cabinet share actually measures for two reasons: first, the social democratic cabinet share neglects that parties' ideological profiles differ across countries and have significantly changed over recent decades. Second, the measure does not take into account the potential impact of coalition partners, different models of cabinet decision making and the possibility of minority governments relying on parliamentary support outside the cabinet. We will elaborate these shortcomings in turn.

Variation in the ideological profiles of social democratic governments

There are reasons to assume that the *ideological* profiles of social democratic parties, i.e. what parties want to do, differ both over time and between countries. The first reason for variation in the ideological profile of left parties lies in the increasingly heterogeneous preferences of its electorate. Social democratic parties were always obliged to forge cross-class alliances because the working class could never hope to constitute a parliamentary majority (Przeworski and Sprague 1986, Esping-Andersen 1990). In the post-industrial era, the middle class constituency weighs ever more strongly, since the working class has become smaller in size due to de-industrialization and – as all other voter groups – more volatile in its voting preferences. While both, the middle and working class segments of the social democratic electorate, support the welfare state in general, their economic preferences differ nevertheless: the middle class is less inclined to redistribution and more favourable towards a social investment orientation of the welfare state than the working class (Geering and Häusermann 2013). Another source of preference heterogeneity within the social democratic electorate is the divide of the working force in labour market insiders and outsiders having divergent economic preferences (Rueda 2007, Schwander and Häusermann 2013). Hence, a government dominated by a social democratic party might pursue different policies in the, say, 2000s than in the 1970s because its constituency has changed.

Second, the ideology of social democratic parties has undergone several waves of modernization since the golden age of welfare state expansion, leading to higher ideological variation both within the social democratic party family and over time. In the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of 'New Left' parties resulted in a first transformation of the social democratic ideology, incorporating the new issues to larger or smaller extents (Kriesi 1991, Kitschelt 1994). Since the 1990s, we observe another transformation of Social Democracy, this time mostly in the economic dimension. In many European countries, social democratic parties returned to power in the 1990s after a lengthy period in opposition and ideological transformation into 'Third Way' parties. The Third Way – as difficult as it is to define (see Merkel 2001, Powell 2004) – advocates reconciliation between Social Democracy and globalization, between market and state, between equality and efficiency and between rights and responsibilities (Giddens 1998, Powell 2004). Again, social democratic parties differ in their adaption of the Third Way rhetoric, values, policy mechanisms and goals

(Volkens 2004, Merkel et al. 2006). Hence, we should expect different policy preferences between these Third Way social democratic parties and more traditional social democratic parties. We fail to discern these differences if we include the share of left cabinet seats in our analysis only.

In addition, institutions account for cross-national differences between social democratic parties' ideological profiles. One of the crucial variables in the literature is the competitive constellation within the party system (Pontusson and Rueda 2010, Arndt 2013). Another institutional variable that accounts for cross-national differences is coalition options. In most proportional electoral systems, government coalitions are the norm and as the main party of the left, office-seeking is a realistic and attractive strategy for social democratic parties. The option of participation in the government alters the policy stances of social democrats depending on the coalition partner, a point we elaborate further below.

Finally, the meaning of 'left' turns out to be even more blurred if we leave the narrow distributive dimension of political competition. Despite an overall positive effect of left power on women's labour market participation and the women friendliness of welfare states (Huber and Stephens 2001, Huber et al. 2009, Morgan 2013), women's issues are not promoted with the same verve by all social democratic parties. Social democratic parties in Continental and Southern Europe for example have been rather shy in promoting such issues until recently. In addition, some left parties have adapted quite ecological positions (as for example the Swiss social democratic party) while others remain more agnostic or even sceptical towards these issues (as the Swedish social democrats and the French 'Parti Socialist'). Hence, instead of relying on a general idea what left ideology means and how it translates into cabinet preferences, we propose to employ parties' positions on the policy dimensions that are of interest.

Differences in the composition of governments
Our second main point of criticism relates to the nature of the governments and most of all to the type of coalition partner, which affects the leverage social democratic parties have for implementing their preferred policies. In democracies with proportional electoral systems, coalition governments are the norm and coalition partners have a strong impact on the agenda of the government (Müller and Strøm 2000). Without majority control in par-

liament, a social democratic party can form a left government through a coalition with communist and green parties or a centre-left cabinet in coalition with a moderate right party. Hence, almost all social democratic parties in government are constrained by coalition partners that may either be fully supportive or rather doubtful regarding the policy agenda of their social democratic coalition partner. For coalition cabinets and minority governments the 'left cabinet share' does not measure the degree of social democratic dominance in a cabinet correctly because the type of the coalition partner or the distribution of ministerial portfolios affect the policies that the government is able to implement. French governments are a good illustration of this point. For French socialist cabinets in the 1980s we find left coalition cabinets with the French communists and centre-left coalitions with the Union for French Democracy ('Union pour la démocratie francaise') as coalition partners. We would assume the first type of government to pursue a more egalitarian political agenda than the second type, even though the share of social democratic cabinet seats might be identical. Consequently, a measure of the political power of the left should distinguish the types of coalition partners by integrating their positions into the measurement.

A similar argument can be applied to minority cabinets. Among Nordic welfare states, we find a high number of cabinets without majority support in parliament that rely on legislative support from outside the cabinet. Over most of the post-war period, minority cabinets lead by Sweden's social democrats relied on the legislative support of the communist party. Danish social democratic minority cabinets, by contrast, relied on legislative coalitions from more moderate, sometimes centre-right, parties (cf. Skjæveland 2003). Hence, despite similar cabinet shares, the Swedish and Danish social democrats operated in different legislative configurations and had to make concessions to partners with different policy profiles.

While coalition partners have always influenced the political agenda of the government, taking into account their ideological orientation has become more urgent due to the decline of social democratic vote shares over the last decades and the higher variation of possible coalition partners due to the rise of green and new left parties. This results in a higher number of social democratic parties entering coalition governments or forming minority governments in agreement with one or several partners. As an illustration, Figure 1 presents vote shares for the three main party families of the political left for two Nordic

(Denmark and Sweden) and two Continental welfare states (Germany and the Netherlands). In all countries, the social democratic vote share is declining and it is only in Sweden where a communist party succeeded in winning a stable vote share over the entire post-war period. In the other three countries, the traditional communist parties dissolved and new socialist parties and left-liberal parties (Greens) have emerged. As expected, the nature of coalition partners has changed: relying on the tacit support of communist parties is less of an option for social democratic parties whereas new left parties present alternative coalition options. This has led to very different configurations of parties in coalition cabinets enabling or restraining the potential for pursuing a social democratic agenda. As it is unlikely that Social Democracy will ever regain its post-war strength, we need to take into account the preferences of coalition partners more seriously.

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Based on the arguments outlined above, we argue that one should complement the social democratic cabinet share with measures of parties' positions on the relevant dimensions. As mentioned previously, one example of such an indicator is already in use by scholars of comparative political economy. The 'centre of gravity' index accounts for a party's cabinet weight and its left-right position (Cusack 1999). Such a measure is a clear improvement compared to the social democratic cabinet share measure. However, the downsides of this measure are that it is time-invariant as it is based on a one-time expert survey by Castles and Mair (1984) from the 1980s, that it is tied to a general left-right scale only and ignores alternative models of cabinet decision making or ministerial autonomy. A further drawback is the exclusion of Eastern and Central European parties. In the next section, we discuss three different measures on how to locate parties in the political space and explore the usefulness of these measures for different policy dimensions, availability over time and their potential for studies of social policy making.

Locating parties in the political space
To determine the welfare state preferences of cabinets in modern democracies we need information about the partisan composition of governments and the political preferences of parties therein. Although other institutional features such as second chambers, constitu-

tional courts or types of electoral systems may also be relevant for the ability of parties to implement welfare state legislation (Lijphart 1999), we focus on the partisan profile of governments and its appropriate measure in welfare state research.

Over the last two decades there have been significant advances in mapping policy preferences of political parties and a wide set of new measures has been established, followed by an on-going debate about the merits and shortcomings of these measures. Three methods figure prominently in the literature: party expert surveys, positions derived from political documents (esp. party manifestos and media coverage of electoral campaigns) and mass level (voter) surveys. Each approach allows deriving party positions for different policy dimensions as well as for a more general left/right scale. However, these approaches differ with respect to their suggestions on how to locate parties as well as to the countries and time periods covered. For example, for the last two decades, information about most policy dimensions and all major democracies can be used, but data for the earlier post-war period is only available for some of the measures. Since an extensive literature is concerned with cross-validating measures from these three methods and discusses their shortcomings (Keman 2007, Marks 2007, Helbling and Tresch 2011), we will only briefly present each measure with a particular focus on their merits for welfare state research.

Party expert surveys determine party positions by asking political scientists or other experts to locate parties on a set of scales that are relevant for party competition in a country. Party expert surveys provide valid and reliable measures of party positions at a particular point in time. The first expert surveys (Castles and Mair 1984, Huber and Inglehart 1995) simply located parties along a generic left/right dimension. More recent surveys include a broader set of policy dimensions and measure the salience of these dimensions as well (Benoit and Laver 2006, Bakker et al. 2012). As of today, the survey by Benoit and Laver (2006) covers the highest number of countries and policy domains, including economic (e.g. public spending, privatisation) as well as cultural (e.g. immigration, globalisation) issues of party contestation. By contrast, it is more difficult to derive time-variant information from expert surveys. For such information, we either have to combine several expert surveys that were conducted with a different methodological design or use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Series that has various waves but is focused on EU countries and European integration mainly (Bakker et al. 2012). As another disadvantage, the surveys do not

cover information about more nuanced policy issues beyond the major dimensions of political contestation. For example, none of the existing expert surveys allows to position parties with regard to passive protection and active investment. For welfare state research, party expert surveys may be most fruitfully used for studies that focus on short time periods and broad policy fields.

A second method uses *political documents* such as party manifestos, political speeches or electoral campaigns (e.g. as portrayed in newspapers) to position parties. The widely known CMP collects policy preferences of parties for each election in modern democracies over the entire post-war period. Party preferences are recorded as hand coded classification of manifesto (quasi) sentences into particular policy domains (Budge et al. 2001, Klingemann et al. 2006, Volkens et al. 2013). The CMP data provides robust measures on the salience of these particular policies but has also been used to derive political positions. However, using positional information based on an indicator that was originally constructed to measure the salience of issues remains controversial (Marks 2007). Particularly the left/right measure ('rile') provided by the CMP project has been critically assessed and several alternatives have been proposed (see Gemenis 2013). More recently, efforts have started to establish positions from political documents through quantitative textual analysis. Hakhverdian (2010), for example, uses budget speeches by the UK chancellor of the exchequer to measure government positions for the entire post-war period with the help of Wordscores (Laver et al. 2003). Deriving positions from political documents such as speeches and the media with quantitative textual analysis is very promising and may allow to establish time-series policy measures across countries in the future. Today, party positions from political texts are particularly suited for studies that cover long time periods (particularly CMP data), are interested in inter-election dynamics of party positions or focus on particular policy fields.

Finally, *mass level surveys* provide information about political parties by relying on the evaluation of voters. Most surveys ask respondents to position themselves on a left/right scale or ask more specifically about welfare state preferences such as preferences for the orientation of the welfare state towards redistribution or social insurance, specific policies to reconcile work and family life or active labour market policies. Since most surveys also inquire about the respondent's party choice and closeness to a party, these information can

be used to determine a party's position from the self-placement of their voters and supporters. Such information is available from the Eurobarometer since the mid-1970s, whereas all other cross-country studies (e.g. European Election Study and European Social Survey) where only established later. Some surveys also ask respondents to locate the parties on a political scale. We can use these information to construct party positions based on voter perception. Yet, this way of measuring party positions makes the strong assumption that party positions depend entirely on the preferences of their voters. It is more plausible that party positions represent a mix of preferences of their core constituency and strategic considerations (Meyer 2013) but government ideology remains significant even if we control for voter preferences (Pettersson-Lidbom 2008). Depending on the questions at stake, voter preferences based on mass level surveys might be the only possibility to approximate party positions despite these notes of caution. We think here of parties' stances towards activation or passive protection which is – to our knowledge – not available in any comparative expert survey or text based database.

In summary, students of the welfare state can draw on three major sources to assess party positions: CMP measures based on political texts provide information about relative issue salience and general left/right positions for the entire post-war period. Party expert surveys give more fine-grained information about the positions and importance of particular policy fields but are less well suited to measure change over time. Mass level surveys allow integrating preferences and perceptions of voters into measures of party positions for the last two to three decades. On the downside, all three sources leave a significant number of parties uncovered and linking these sources is sometimes challenging. Some parties did simply not exist when an expert survey or mass level survey was conducted or are not included in a particular survey. Other parties (e.g. communist parties in first post-war elections) had no electoral documents to be used for the coding of their position. However, the ordinal ranking of the mean values of parties in a particular party family is equivalent across most established democracies and may hence be used to impute the position of parties along the major left/right as well as a secondary cultural dimension. In addition, none of the sources includes systematic information about the party composition of cabinets and the distribution of portfolios within cabinets to which we turn now.

Concept and measures of power in cabinets

We have emphasized the constraints that coalition partners may put on social democratic parties in government. Our argument is that we have to take into account the partisan composition of cabinets and need to draw on measures that are explicit about the distribution of power and decision making therein. Conflicts between coalition partners can be resolved by three mechanisms: a) relative strength b) ministerial control c) veto-players. Each of the three mechanisms highlights a particular mode of intra-cabinet conflict resolution and weighs the impact of coalition partners differently. The applicability of each model depends on the salience of an issue, institutional rules and data availability. In the following, we discuss all three models and their implication for social democratic parties in government.

The first model of conflict resolution uses the relative strength of cabinet parties to determine their leeway on the positions of the entire cabinet. There is robust empirical evidence that coalition parties distribute the number of ministerial portfolios proportional to their seat strength in parliament (Warwick and Druckman 2001). It is assumed that this pattern of portfolio distribution reflects the fundamental mechanism of power division within a cabinet and that parties in coalition cabinets also impact public policies according to their relative weight within the government. Empirically, the seat weighted mean (or median) position of the cabinet parties in a particular policy dimension is used to apply this model of cabinet decision making (Cusack 1999, Kim and Fording 2002).

A second argument focuses on the role of individual ministers. According to these models, each minister enjoys, as a policy dictator, exclusive control over his or her ministerial portfolio (Laver and Shepsle 1996). Hence, a particular policy is solely determined by the political preferences of an individual minister responsible for preparing the legislation. To study the partisan impact on a particular policy, we need to identify the respective minister responsible for preparing the legislation within the cabinet and his or her policy preferences. Some authors extend the model and take into account also the partisan profile of the prime minister and/or the minister of finance, arguing that these two key cabinet members constrain ministerial autonomy (Becher 2010).

Finally, there are approaches that combine partisan and institutional determinants of legislative decision making. Most prominently, veto player theory draws on information about the number and the ideological composition of institutional veto points to model legislative politics (Tsebelis 2002). In addition to cabinets and their legislative majorities, the partisan make-up of second chambers and presidents with veto power are also taken into account. Yet, information about the composition of other institutional actors is included only if it differs from the partisan make-up of veto players in the first chamber. Empirically, the two most extreme partisan veto players are identified and either a measure of the status quo position or the distance between these two players is taken into account. Jahn (2010) provides a detailed discussion of such a measurement approach.

Gathering data about the composition of cabinets is relatively easy by now, as projects such as ERDDA.se (Andersson et al. 2012) and ParlGov.org (Döring and Manow 2013) provide this information and allow to linking it with information about party positions. In contrast to data on government composition, data on legislative support of minority governments is less well established.[2] A data handbook by Woldendorp et al. (2000) gives/ supplies information about the portfolio distribution of cabinets in advanced democracies over the entire post-war period. This source has recently been transformed into a dataset and was updated by Seki and Williams (2013).[3] Hence, data on the partisan composition of cabinets and the distribution of ministries is now widely available and can be applied to operationalize different models of cabinet decision making. Significant improvements in respect to data availability have been made over the last decade but some problems in linking the different sources may remain.

Empirical examples of left/right position of the government
To conclude, we present empirical examples on how to construct an indicator that combines information on the governing parties' position and their relative strength. Firstly, we show empirically how to construct an indicator of the 'weighted position of the government' based on information about the position of parties and the partisan composition of

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[2] As an alternative, Carey and Hix (2011) propose to locate minority cabinets at the position of the median parliamentary party. In our view, this assessment is somewhat too strong and we propose to locate minority cabinets at the middle between the cabinet and the parliamentary position.

[3] A note of caution may be appropriate: although Woldendorp et al. (2000) and Seki and Williams (2013) provide information on all main ministers, it may still be difficult to identify the minister responsible for a particular social policy. Therefore, a substantial amount of background information on the portfolio distribution within the government and data transformation may be necessary.

governments. We compare the indicator to the traditional measure of left power (social democratic cabinet share) and discuss changes between regions and over time. Secondly, we present a replication of a major study on changes in social policy with two alternative indicators of left power and discuss the implications of our results.

To compare the traditional measure to the 'weighted position of the government', Table 1 presents different cabinet measures: information about the strength of social democratic parties in parliaments and cabinets as well as information about the mean number of parties in cabinets and the share of years, countries were governed by minority cabinets. With regard to cabinets, we show values for the traditional measure (social democratic cabinet share) and an exemplary indicator constructed based on information from ParlGov: the weighted policy position of cabinet parties, in this case the seats weighted mean left/right position of cabinet parties.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Table 1 displays how the traditional measure compares to the 'weighted position of the government'. Established Western democracies are divided into an immediate post-war period until 1975 and the period thereafter. Data for Southern Europe and Central European countries refer to the second election after the transition to democracy. The first columns of the table supplement well known facts from the literature on welfare states: social democratic parties had their heyday in the first three decades after the Second World War and in particular in the Nordic countries, whereas social democratic parties were underrepresented in liberal countries in that period.

Colum 4 presents our composite measure of the ideological orientation of governments. The 'weighted position of the government' indicates the average position of parties in cabinets on a left/right scale, weighted by their seat strength. Hence, it takes into account the ideological profile of all governing parties and adjusts the positions of minority cabinets (midway position between cabinet and parliament, see footnote 2). Values below five on the mean left/right dimension highlight periods of left party dominance whereas values above five point to right party dominance. In addition, the measure can be used to determine a dominance of centre cabinets or countries with regular alternation in office between

right and left (values close to five). In our example, the measure refers to the average position of the governments in a respective country in the golden age until 1975 and the age of post-industrialisation thereafter. However, it can easily be transformed into country-year format by taking into account the duration of cabinets in each year. We find these cabinet types (values close to five) particularly in the continental welfare states, but also in Finland. In the last columns, we give information about the structure of coalition cabinets by presenting the average number of parties in cabinet (column 5) and the share of time a country was governed by minority cabinets (column 6). Coalition governments are the norm in Continental and Nordic welfare states but minority cabinets are prevalent in the Scandinavian countries mainly.

Looking at changes over time, we find that social democratic dominance in the Nordic countries has been somewhat in decline, while the share of social democratic cabinet parties has remained the same in Continental Europe. However, the number of cabinet parties has increased in the post-industrial era corroborating our argument that social democratic parties have to reconcile their policy agenda with a wider range of coalition partners than before. Finally, we find that new democracies from Central and Eastern Europe have a lower share of social democratic cabinets. Only Hungary has been governed by social democratic and right parties for approximately similar amounts of time as Western European countries.

As a last step, we apply two indicators derived from our approach to measure the 'weighted position of the government' to Allan and Scruggs' (2004) well-known study of partisanship and welfare state generosity. Their study confirms the expectations of power-resource theory that leftist governments expand the welfare state more strongly than other governments in the era of welfare state expansion until the early 1970s. They also reject the 'end of partisanship' thesis for the post-industrial era and find that the partisan composition of the government continues to play an important role, as right governments reduce welfare state generosity much stronger than other governments. In their study, power of the left is operationalized as the annual (lagged) cabinet seat share of left parties. To replicate the study of changes in unemployment replacement rates by Allan and Scruggs (2004, 506 [Table 2]), we use two alternative indicators of partisanship: first, we calculate the seats weighted mean left/right cabinet position with expert survey data from ParlGov and trans-

form this information into country-year data. Second, we draw on a CMP based left/right indicator of the median cabinet position, developed by Kim and Fording (2002).[4] While the ParlGov measures includes time-invariant party positions based on expert surveys, Kim and Fording make use of time-varying party positions based on party manifestos.

The detailed results of the replication of Allan and Scruggs' study can be found in Appendix 1. We want to highlight three findings: first, we were unable to replicate Allan and Scruggs' findings with our indicators. Their findings are thus not robust to alternative specifications of the political power of the left. The ideological orientation of governments does not impact welfare state generosity in the era of expansion until the early 1970s using our two alternative indicators. Yet, according to our indicators and in contrast to Allan and Scruggs, the ideology of the government does have a positive effect on the welfare generosity in the era of retrenchment from the 1970s onwards. It seems – and this is our second finding – that while the partisan composition of the government, measured by the strength of different party families, has lost its importance in the era of retrenchment, the actual position of the government on the left/right dimension still matters for its social policy agenda. This confirms directly our argument that the meaning of 'left' ideology has become more blurred due to large cross-country and longitudinal variation in the ideological orientation of left parties. Our last important point refers to the implications of the different conceptualisations of government position for model specifications and interpretations. One of the advantages of the indicators derived from our approach is that we can analyse the effect of left and right governments in one single indicator. This continuous scale provides an additional advantage compared to the left/ right cabinet share, which is essentially quasi-binary. Figure 2 illustrates this point. It presents two scatterplots of the traditional cabinet measure used by Allan and Scruggs (left cabinet share, x-axis) and the weighted position of governments derived from ParlGov and Kim and Fording (y-axis).

--- Figure 2 about here ---

Figure 2 shows that the measures are highly related. It also demonstrates that the left cabinet share clusters at both ends of the scale, indicating that a high number of cabinets in-

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[4] We would have liked to include a measure of ministerial responsibility as well to take into account a different mode of cabinet decision making. However and as previously discussed (see footnote 3), it is difficult to extract the minister responsible for unemployment insurance from existing (electronic) sources.

clude only left parties or none at all. By contrast, both party position based measures are more evenly distributed with the Kim and Fording measure, demonstrating a higher variance than the ParlGov based measure. While it is methodologically correct to interpret a 10 percentage increase of left cabinet share to be associated with an 0.3 percentage increase of unemployment generosity (see Appendix 1), we raise the question about the substantial gain of such an interpretation as this is rarely observed in reality. The continuous measures of government positions enable us to interpret results in a more meaningful way. The findings of our replication also demonstrate that alternative measures of left power offer a critical benchmark for the robustness of established findings in welfare state research and allow us to take into account alternative theoretical approaches on how parties matter.

Conclusion

The power of the political left in governments is one of the most important explanatory factors in the literature on comparative welfare state research and political economy. In most studies, the power of the political left is expressed by the share of social democratic (or left) cabinet seats, either as annual or cumulative share. In this contribution, we challenge the use of the social democratic (left) cabinet share as a measure for the power of the political left and propose a modified approach that takes into account the positions of the governing parties on the relevant policy dimensions and the time period. We call this measure the 'weighted position of the government'. Despite its merits for its wide availability over time and across countries, we argue that the traditional measure of the power of the political left is flawed because it is unclear what we actually measure by using the social democratic cabinet share. Our criticism is based on two points which we have discussed extensively throughout the article: first, the distributive profile of social democratic parties varies over time and across countries due to changes and differences in left ideology. This leads to a conceptual ambiguity with regard to the ideological orientation of Social Democracy. For example, a measure purely based on the social democratic cabinet share does not account for the transformation to Third Way parties in some Western European countries. The meaning of Social Democracy is even more blurred if one moves beyond the traditional welfare state countries and analyses developments in Central Europe or Latin America. Second, even if the generic ideology of social democratic parties would be identical across time and countries, the implementation of their political agenda depends

on institutions and coalition partners. Here, our discussion focuses on the type of government, models of cabinet decision making and on the type of majority support in parliament, i.e. with whom social democrats enter government or who provides support for minority cabinets. We argue that it matters greatly for the implementation of their political agenda whether a social democratic dominated government is supported by a left-libertarian, socialist or a moderate right party.

Against this background, we suggest to complement the existing measure with data on the positions of the governing parties in the policy dimension of research interest. Recent progress in the collection of positional data by comparative party research facilitate such a task. Today, we have information about parties' positions over a larger and more precise set of policy dimensions than only left/right ideology. If we are, for example, interested in the effects of partisanship on educational spending or spending for active labour market policies, we can use data on the actual stances of parties towards these issues instead of relying on the vague information that the label 'party family' conveys. We present and discuss three major sources that provide information about party positions and show how to combine them with models of cabinet decision making into a single indicator which we call 'weighted position of the government'.

This article is supposed to serve as a starting point for a reflection on how to integrate party positions in the measurement of the partisan composition of governments. Although we have focused on social democratic parties or left parties throughout the article due to their prominent place in the literature on welfare states, similar indicators can be constructed for questions concerning the effect of right-wing governments. We would like to invite scholars in the fields of comparative welfare state research and comparative political economy to construct their own indicator of the weighted position of governments in the policy dimensions that are tailored to their research question. We have presented three general methods to derive the positions of political parties (indicators based on political texts, party expert surveys and mass level surveys) and three measures of power distribution within coalitions. Employing a measure of government composition that combines positional data and takes into account the preferences of the coalition partners (or ministers) as well, should help us to understand what we actually measure when studying the left and their potential to implement social policies.

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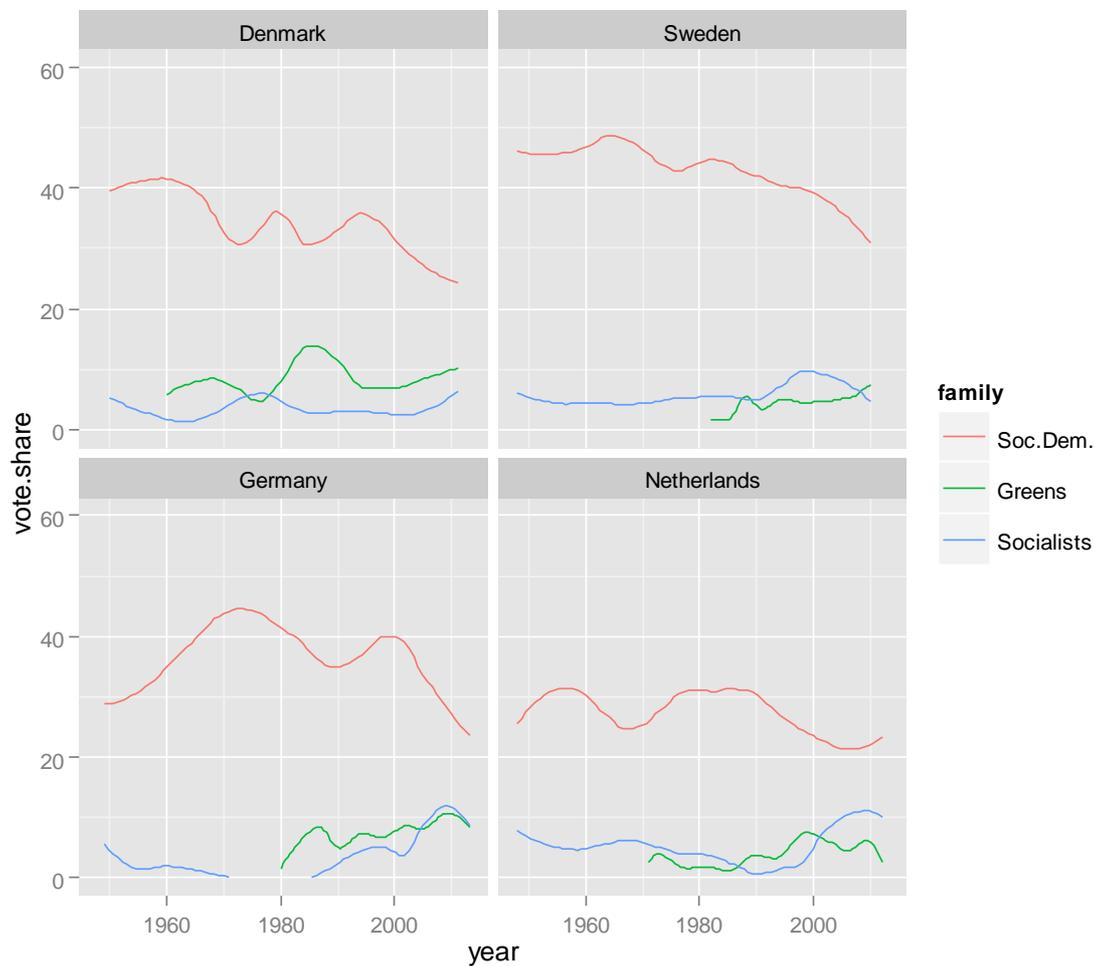
Appendix 1 – Replication of Allan and Scruggs (2004) study of changes in unemployment replacement rates

Independent Variables	Left Cabinet		Right Cabinet		Static left/right [ParlGov]		Time variant left/right [CMP]	
	Pre-break Model 1	Post-break Model 2	Pre-break Model 3	Post-break Model 4	Pre-break Model 5	Post-break Model 6	Pre-break Model 7	Post-break Model 8
Replacement Rate$_{t-1}$	.17***	-.24***	-0.17***	-.23***	-.16***	-.23***	-.16***	-.23***
	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)	.04	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)	(.04)
Right Cabinet Share$_{t-1}$			.18	-1.51***				
			(.83)	(.52)				
Left Cabinet Share$_{t-1}$	2.95***	.84						
	(.83)	(.64)						
Static left/right [ParlGov]$_{t-1}$					.65	3.47*		
					(2.14)	(1.82)		
Time variant left/right [CMP]$_{t-1}$							2.43	2.49
							(1.81)	(1.52)
Trade Openness$_{t-1}$	-.77	-5.22*	.73	-4.6*	-.40	-4.95*	-.90	-4.58
	(4.74)	(2.77)	(4.9)	(2.7)	(4.85)	(2.72)	(4.82)	(2.80)
Financial Openness$_{t-1}$	-.32	.02	-.41	-.11	-.41	-.05	-.37	-.03
	(.25)	(.19)	(.26)	(.19)	(.25)	(.19)	(.25)	(.19)
Unemployment Rate$_{t-1}$	-.27	.03	-.26	.04	-.26	.02	-.29	.03
	(.23)	(.12)	(.23)	(.12)	(.23)	(.12)	(.24)	(.13)
GDP Growth$_{t-1}$	-.09	-.03	-.06	-.02	-.06	-.02	-.05	-.03
	(.11)	(.10)	(.11)	(.10)	(.11)	(.10)	(.11)	(.10)
Veto Points	.74	.12	.47	-.09	.66	.08	.79	.28
	(.73)	(.66)	(.71)	(.63)	(.71)	(.63)	(.62)	(.53)
Corporatism	1.97	3.62***	2.53**	3.60**	2.61**	3.76**	2.43*	3.67**
	(1.29)	(1.12)	(1.26)	(1.12)	(1.27)	(1.12)	(1.28)	(1.14)
Deficits	-.16*	-.05	-.10	-.05	-.12	-.06	-.16*	-.06
	(.09)	(5.85)	(.09)	(.08)	(.09)	(.08)	(.09)	(.07)
Constant	2.73	2.98	3.05	4.35	2.06	.90	.83	1.04
	(5.66)	(5.85)	(5.89)	(5.88)	(5.50)	(5.62)	(5.44)	(5.76)
R^2	.21		.20		.19		.197	
Observations	450		450		450		448	

Models 1-4 are full replications of Allan und Scruggs (2004, 506 [Table 2]) with a script provided by the authors. Models 5-8 replace the partisanship variable with cabinet left/right positions (rescaled to 0-1 interval) from ParlGov and CMP. CMP based cabinet positions are taken from Kim and Fording (2002)

Tables and Figures

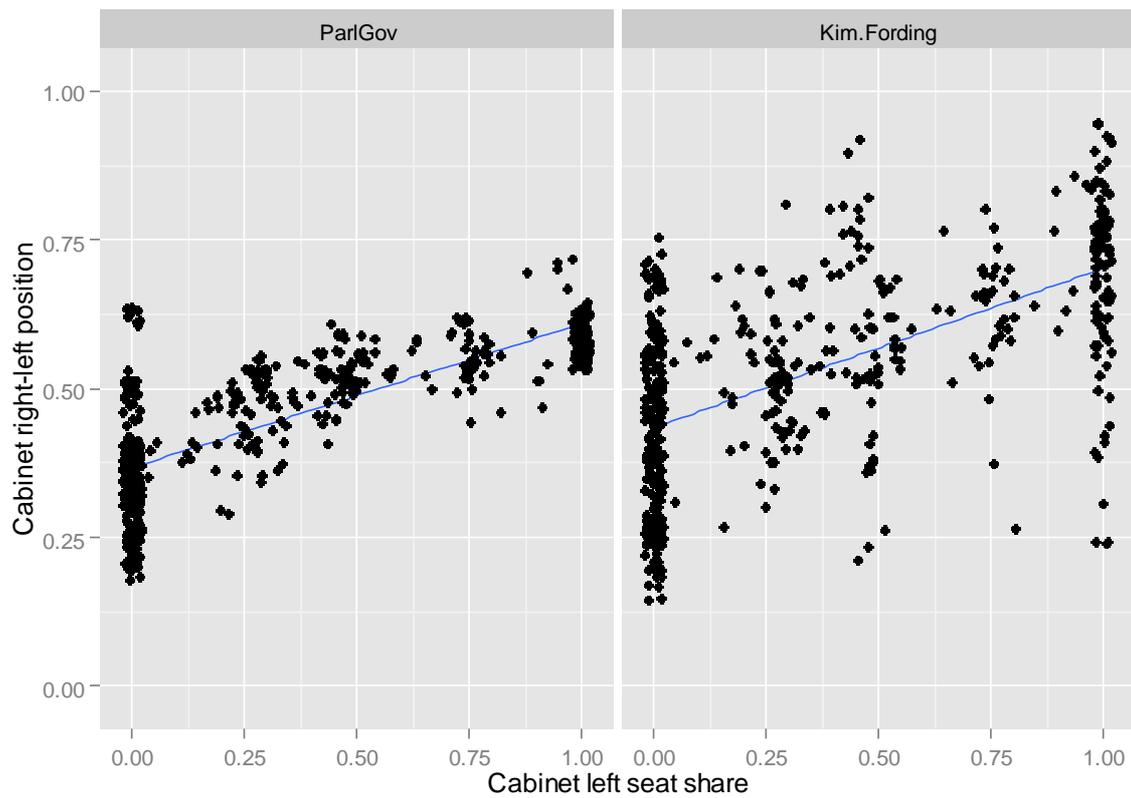*Figure 1 – Left parties' vote share since 1945 in four countries*

SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES (SOC.DEM.) *Denmark:* Social Democrats (Sd)); *Sweden:* Social Democrats (SAP); *Germany:* Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); *Netherlands:* Labour (PvdA),

GREEN PARTIES *Denmark:* Socialist Peoples Party (SF, since 1960); *Sweden:* Greens (MP, since 1982); *Germany:* Alliance 90 / Greens (B90/Gru, since 1980); *Netherlands:* GreenLeft (GL, since 1989), Radical Political Party (PPR, 1971 to 1986)

SOCIALIST PARTIES *Denmark:* Communist Party of Denmark (DKP, 1945 to 1981), Left Socialists (VS, 1968 to 1987), Red-Green Alliance (En/O, since 1990); *Sweden:* Left Party (V); *Germany:* Communist Party of Germany (KPD, 1949 to 1953), Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS, 1990 to 2002), The Left (Linke, since 2005); *Netherlands:* Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN, 1946 to 1986), Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP, 1959 to 1968), Socialist Party (SP, since 1982)

Note: Only parties with at least 2.5% vote share presented in list of parties; (Source: ParlGov database).

Figure 2 – Left cabinet share vs. left/right cabinet positions

DESCRIPTION: Comparison of traditional year based left cabinet share measure (Allan/Scruggs) and cabinet left/right positions (seats weighted) in ParlGov and Kim/Fording for Western OECD countries (1975-1999). ParlGov and Kim/Fording measures are rescaled to a 0-1 (right-left) interval. Observations are jittered to prevent overplotting. (Sources: Allan and Scruggs 2004, Kim and Fording 2002, ParlGov database).

Table 1: Partisan and cabinet measures for OECD countries

	First year	Social democrats seats share	Social democrats cabinet share	Left/right cabinet position (0-10)	Cabinet parties	Minority cabinets share
Australia	1945	46	24.2	6.6	1.8	0
	1975	46.1	49.7	5.7	1.5	8
Canada	1948	6.9	0	5.4	1	28
	1979	18.9	0	6.3	1	22
Ireland	1951	12	7.1	6	1.4	25
	1977	12.6	9.4	5.9	2	31
New Zealand	1949	46.2	23.1	6.2	1	0
	1975	44	40.2	5.8	1.3	42
United Kingdom	1950	47.5	36.1	6.3	1	16
	1976	47.3	42.9	6.1	1.1	0
Denmark	1947	39.2	66.6	4.8	1.8	74
	1975	35	44.3	5.6	2.4	100
Finland	1946	26.2	30.8	4.9	3.3	31
	1975	26.3	31.6	5.1	4.2	3
Iceland	1947	13.1	16.5	6	2.2	4
	1978	22.1	17.4	5.7	2.3	4
Norway	1949	49.7	75.2	4	1.7	34
	1976	39.4	62.3	4.5	2	73
Sweden	1946	48.2	96.2	3.5	1.2	66
	1976	41.6	56.7	4.9	2	80
Austria	1947	45.9	51.5	5.1	1.7	6
	1975	41.8	56.7	5	1.8	5
Belgium	1946	34.5	31.5	4.9	2.4	2
	1977	28.2	34.8	5	4.6	5
France	1946	14.5	7.7	7.1	3.3	14
	1976	35.9	36.1	5.5	2.5	12
Germany	1953	39	32.3	5.4	2.2	0
	1976	37.9	34.6	5.2	2	0
Italy	1947	16.5	11.1	5.5	2.7	33
	1976	24.2	23	5.5	4	29
Japan	1947	27.5	2.3	7.7	1.2	10
	1976	15.1	2.3	7.6	1.9	15
Luxembourg	1947	39.5	25.6	5.7	2	0
	1979	26.8	29.3	5.5	2	0
Netherlands	1948	29.5	22.8	5.5	4.1	4
	1977	29.5	22.5	5.7	2.5	12
Switzerland	1951	31.2	24.6	4.9	3.8	0
	1975	26.4	29.7	4.8	4.1	0
Greece	1977	46.2	57.6	5.4	1.1	4
Portugal	1978	39.9	42.4	5.4	1.4	28
Spain	1979	45	61.1	5.2	1	53
Czech Republic	1992	29.1	29	5.7	2.7	37
Estonia	1994	35.8	16.8	7.1	2.4	28
Hungary	1993	39.8	52.5	4.6	2.2	10

Poland	1991	29.1	25.6	5.1	2.6	20
Slovakia	1991	17.2	20.6	5.4	3.2	10
Slovenia	1992	40.5	37.8	4.8	3.5	10

All OECD countries included in ParlGov presented. Observations are weighted by cabinet (parliament) duration to account for different number of cabinets.

First year: First election included – two periods for older democracies (golden age and post-industrial age)

Left/right cabinet position: Weighted mean left/right position of parties in government. Left/right measure based on aggregated party expert surveys (see ParlGov documentation)

Cabinet parties: Average absolute number of parties in government

Minority cabinets share: Share (duration) of minority cabinets

(Source: ParlGov database)