

# Party system change and parliamentary government in Scandinavia

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**Abstract:** The paper investigates party system change in the three Scandinavian countries, but, as opposed to the large majority of the literature, party system change will be used not as a “dependent”, but as an “independent” variable in order to account for changing patterns of parliamentary government, more precisely, government formation and stability, and executive-legislative power-relations. It is argued that first the “defreezing” of the “five-party-systems” largely contributed to increased government instability and legislative strength, whereas since the end of the 1980s we can observe a general reverse tendency. While typical institutional characteristics, such as negative parliamentarism, still prevail, majority governments have once again appeared, also signalling increasing government stability. Besides fragmentation, a number of other factors related to changes in the party system are considered. The strength and strategies of the once pre-dominant social democrats, the rise and institutionalisation of new radical parties, and increased complexity of the cleavage structure and voter alignments are therefore discussed.

## Introduction

This paper investigates party system change in the three Scandinavian countries, but, as opposed to the large majority of the literature, party system change will be used not as a “dependent”, but as an “independent” variable in order to account for changing patterns of parliamentary government. Since the role of political parties in explaining government formation, coalition building, legislative bargaining and the like can hardly be overemphasised (cf. Müller and Strøm 2003, Damgaard 1994), I argue that the changes that have taken place in relation to government stability and executive-legislative power-relations (the cornerstones of parliamentary government) are to a great extent a result of party systemic changes. Therefore, though summarising the most important factors that have contributed to the changes in the party system (as documented in the vast body of literature on the topic), I will look at the respective party systems from the perspective of government formation and parliamentary government.

There is a consensus among scholars that the so-called five-party-model, developed in the seminal work of Berglund and Lindström (1978) is no longer applicable in its original and archetypical form, though some of its main characteristics still prevail. Therefore, it will be discussed, whether and how the patterns of party government are conditioned by the “post-five-party-system” structure. What implications do these tendencies have on legislative-

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executive relations, in particular on the stability of minority governments? This to me is an intriguing question, as this form of government is still prevalent in the three countries, but I will propose a possible inverse direction of causality to the one assumed in the literature dealing with minority governments. Namely, legislative strength, rather than being an “exogenous”, constitutionally rooted, institutional *cause* of minority governments, is here discussed as a *result* thereof, and thus indirectly of party systemic changes. It is argued that, despite national variations, a broad tendency in all three countries can be observed: in the wake of voter dealignment and the transformation of the “five-party-systems” increased government instability and legislative strength characterised these polities, whereas since the end of the 1980s, due to several factors brought about by the consolidated “post-five-party-model”, we can observe a general reverse tendency. In the last section, conclusions are drawn and further normative questions arising as a consequence of the above changes are briefly discussed.

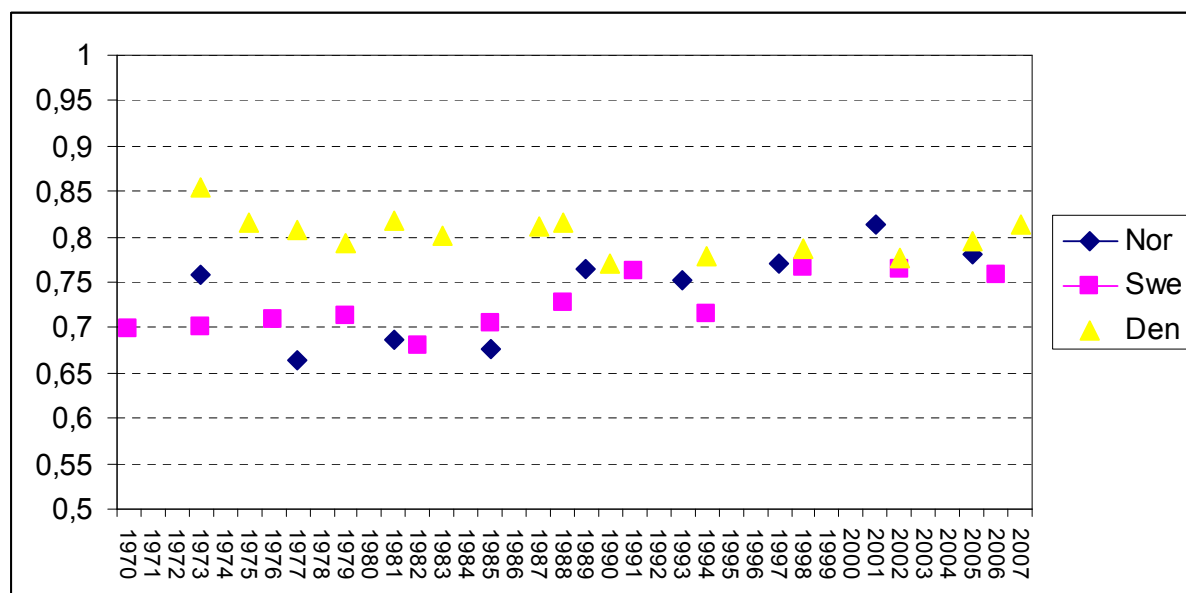
### **The Scandinavian “post-five-party-systems”**

Traditionally, all three countries have relatively fragmented party systems, with parties represented in parliament ranging between five and eleven. Actually, Sweden was the arch-type of Berglund and Lindström’s (1978) classic Scandinavian five-party model: the very same five parties had been represented from the 1920’s until 1988. However, the thrust of the five-party-model was not simply the number of parties: rather, the structure of the system was characterised by a *large (pre-dominant) Social Democratic Party* and a moderately influential radical Left/Communist party forming the “Left bloc”, while a more divided “Right bloc” comprised the Liberals (Peoples’ Party), the Agrarians (later Centre Party) and the Conservatives (Moderates). The system was furthermore structured by *one dominant overarching Left-Right socio-economic dimension*, along which both the parties and the voters could meaningfully place themselves. This entailed a relatively simple party competition, and rendered government formation a more or less straightforward process. Among the main cleavages, as identified by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), the labour/capital cleavage was clearly the dominant one, with voters developing party loyalties along class dimensions. This characteristic, probably more than anything else, has proved to be the crucial factor behind the “frozen” Swedish five-party-system from about the 1930’s until the 1980’s.

Until the early 1970’s, the five-party model was more or less valid for Norway and Denmark, too, not only (and not primarily) based on the number of parties, but also on the structure of

the party system, strongly related to the frozen party systems thesis and the cleavage concept of Lipset and Rokkan (1967). Despite the fact that a number of smaller parties were represented from time to time in both the Danish Folketing (e.g. the Justice Party) and the Norwegian Storting (most notably the traditionally significant Christian Peoples' Party) and the relevance of cross-cutting dimensions structuring the party systems (most importantly the strong centre-periphery and the religions axes in Norway), party competition and government formation patterns, structured mainly around the competition of the pre-dominant Social Democratic Left-bloc and the divided Right, by and large resembled the Swedish archetypical model. Even after the “earthquake” elections of 1972 in Denmark and 1973 in Norway, Berglund and Lindström observed a “normalisation” by the next elections. This is indeed apparent in the Tables and the Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Fractionalisation index of Scandinavian legislatures (1970-2007)**



*Source: Calculation by the author based on publicly available data on mandate distributions*

**Table 1: Distribution of seats in the Norwegian Storting**

Election	Total	Progress P.	Labour P.	Conservatives	Centre P.	Liberal P.	Christian PP.	Soc. Left	Other
1973	155	4	62	29	21	2	20	16	1
1977	155	0	76	41	12	2	22	2	0
1981	155	4	66	53	11	2	15	4	0
1985	157	2	71	50	12	0	16	6	0
1989	165	22	63	37	11	0	14	17	1
1993	165	10	67	28	32	1	13	13	1
1997	165	25	65	23	11	6	25	9	1
2001	165	26	43	38	10	2	22	23	1
2005	169	38	61	23	11	10	11	15	0

**Table 2: Distribution of seats in the Swedish Riksdag**

Election	Total	Left/Comm.	Green P.	Christian P.	Liberals	Centre P.	Conservatives	New Dem.	Social Dem.
1970	350	17	-	0	58	71	41	-	163
1973	350	19	-	0	34	90	51	-	156
1976	349	17	-	0	39	86	55	-	152
1979	349	20	-	0	38	64	73	-	154
1982	349	20	0	0	21	56	86	-	166
1985	349	19	0	1	51	43	76	-	159
1988	349	21	20	0	44	42	66	-	156
1991	349	16	0	26	33	31	80	25	138
1994	349	22	18	15	26	27	80	0	161
1998	349	43	16	42	17	18	82	-	131
2002	349	30	17	33	48	22	55	-	144
2006	349	22	19	24	28	29	97	-	130

**Table 3: Distribution of seats in the Danish Folketing**

Election	Total	Left Soc./ United List	Soc. PP	Soc. Dem.	Centre Dem.	Rad.	Soc. Lib.	Christ. PP	Liberals	Conserv.	Progress P/ Danish PP	Others
1973	175	0	11	46	14	5	20	7	22	16	28	6
1975	175	4	9	53	4	0	13	9	42	10	24	7
1977	175	5	7	65	11	6	6	6	21	15	26	7
1979	175	6	11	68	6	5	10	5	22	22	20	0
1981	175	5	21	59	15	0	9	4	20	26	16	0
1984	175	5	21	56	8	0	10	5	22	42	6	0
1987	175	0	27	54	9	0	11	4	19	38	9	4
1988	175	0	24	55	9	10	10	4	22	35	6	0
1990	175	0	15	69	9	0	7	4	29	30	12	0
1994	175	6	13	62	5	0	8	0	42	27	11	1
1998	175	5	13	63	8	0	7	4	42	16	4	13
2002	175	4	12	52	0	0	9	4	56	16	22	0
2005	175	6	11	47	0	0	17	0	52	18	24	0
2007	175	4	23	45	0	0	9		46	18	25	5

As the arguments throughout this paper are more directly related to the power relations in the legislature, rather than the electoral strength of the parties *per se*, I have presented seat distributions instead of received votes, and used the Rae parliamentary fractionalisation instead of the Laakso-Taagepera index (effective number of parties). However, since the degree of proportionality in these electoral systems is quite high (cf. Rasch 2004b), this does not make a noteworthy difference.

Despite the observed “normalisation”, the Norwegian, and even more so the Danish party systems clearly started to “melt” after 1972-73, and thus deviate from the five-party model. As the above figure shows, the Swedish system was relatively stable until the end of the 1980s (with no new party entering the Riksdag until 1988), since when fragmentation has at all elections been above the level experienced earlier. In Norway, the 1977 elections brought about a re-stabilisation following the 1973 “*earthquake elections*”, but fragmentation jumped to new heights also at the end of the 1980s, more precisely at the 1989 elections, when both

the radical left (the Socialist Left Party) and the radical right (the Progress Party) achieved historic results. Since then, fragmentation remained high, with the maximum reached in 2001, when, once again, the radical parties gained record-high support, while the performance of the Social Democrats was the worst since the 1920s. The Danish party system has practically all along been the most fragmented of the three since (and before) 1972. Here, fragmentation has not been as high in the 1990s as in the preceding two decades, but has none the less been a slightly increasing one.

In order to explain changing patterns in parliamentary government and executive-legislative legislations that have taken place (see next section), the above discussed degree of party system fragmentation *per se* is clearly insufficient. What, then, are the most visible and from our perspective relevant symptoms of party system change in these countries? Obviously, most of these trends have to do with voter behaviour, strongly related to the complex socio-economic transformations that have taken place over the last decades in the advanced Western democracies. (cf. Franklin *et al.* 1992; Dalton *et al.* 1984; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) Parties have had to cope with these challenges, and even though the party decline thesis is borne out by a wide range of empirical evidence (see below), political parties have managed to resist these in other areas, thus still representing functions that render them indispensable institutions of representative democracy (see, e.g. Lipset 2000, Strøm and Svåsand eds. 1997, Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

In the case of Scandinavian countries, the following main trends can be observed with major implications for the party systems:

- Though *class-based voting* still has some explanatory power, its significance has declined markedly and the Social Democrats are no more the exclusive representatives of blue-collar workers. The Alford index, a crude measure of class-based voting shows that it has dropped from above 50 percent in Denmark and Sweden, and above 40 percent in Norway (with its more complex cleavage structure) in the 1950s to below 10 in Denmark and Norway by the early 2000s. With its Alford-index of 26 in 2002, Sweden is still the country with the most uni-dimensional political landscape and with highest explanatory power of the class-cleavage. (Knutsen 2004: 72) It needs to be added, however, that even the concept of “working class” has lost much of its content, in line with the transformation of the economic structures in the advanced Western countries. In line with Kitschelt’s (1994) observations, Social Democrats have gained

votes among the higher skilled and educated non-manual workers, e.g. public employees, civil servants<sup>2</sup>. Albeit indirectly, and in the long run, these non-negligible trends can contribute to downplaying the importance of this division between the blocs, and even coalition preferences. As a telling example, the radical right-wing Progress Party in Norway received around half as many blue-collar votes (25% vs 50%) as the Labour Party in 2001, which accounted for a mere 60% of even the organised workers. (Berglund 2004).

- *Voter volatility* was traditionally low in all three countries prior to the 70s – not surprisingly, considering the validity of the “frozen party systems” thesis. In Denmark and Norway, abrupt changes took place at the “earthquake elections” in 1972 and 73, and in spite of some stabilisation afterwards, net volatility has remained high ever since. As Pedersen (1979) calculates, net volatility in these two countries jumped from below 9 (Denmark) and 6 (Norway) percent in the post-war period, to an average of almost 20 in the 1970s. Based on my own calculations, net volatility stabilised somewhat at around 10 percent in the 1980s, while since the 1990s we can see a new increasing trend. Clearly related to what Pedersen (1979) calls format effect, these countries have volatility levels above the European average, with the Norwegian figures lately being the highest (an average of around 17 since the 1990s). On the other hand, volatility between blocs, though also increasing, has only been around 4 percent even in the 1990s, which is a clear sign of prevailing bloc-politics. Given the relatively balanced power relations between the two blocs (see e.g. Borre 1992), a minor shift in either direction could trigger a change in government, especially in Norway (as has indeed happened most recently in 2005). This implies, however, that voter volatility and the discussed fragmentation of the party system has taken place primarily *within* the two blocs. Norwegian figures indicate that gross (or individual-level) volatility reached record levels in 2001, when almost 40 percent of voters voted for a different party than in 1997, and the Labour Party could only retain 56% of its voters from the preceding elections. (Aardal *et al.* 2002). Sweden was the most stable of the three, with the level of net volatility only increasing significantly in the 1985-1991 period, mostly as the consequence of what Pedersen (1979) calls the “format change effect”, namely the emergence of new parties: the Greens, the Christian Democrats and the ephemeral New Democracy.
- Space limitations prevent a thorough discussion at this point as to *whether* “*new politics*” led to the emergence of new “*full-cleavages*” (which Deegan-Krause [2006]

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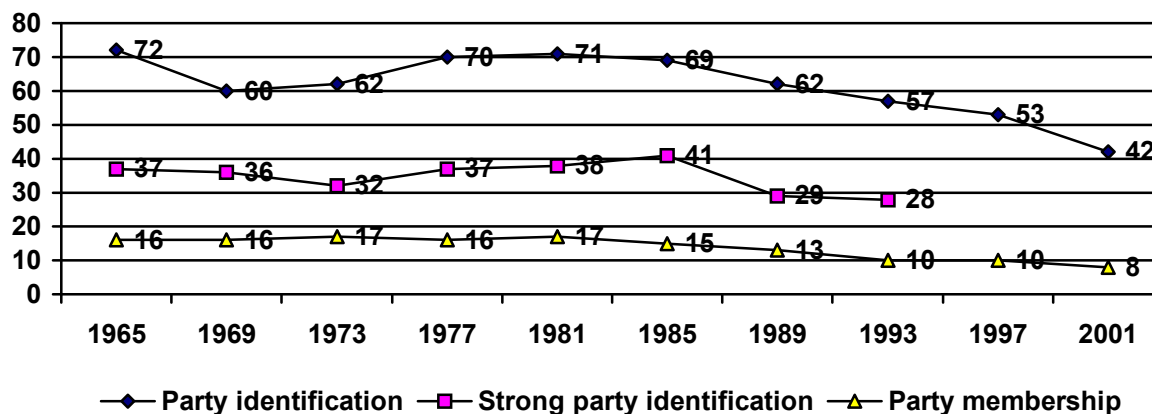
<sup>2</sup> For changing voter profiles in the Scandinavian countries, see also Knutsen 2001.

maintains should be reserved for the all-encompassing, rigorously defined phenomenon, entailing what Bartolini and Mair [1990] refer to as “social closure”), or merely empirically very relevant categories, namely “differences” (entailing only one of the structural, attitudinal or institutional aspects of full cleavage) or “divides” (entailing a combination of two); nonetheless, it is apparent that new conflicts, or issues (environmental, European integration, immigration, morality-related issues, post-materialism) have from time to time played decisive roles in a number of electoral results. Knutsen (2004: 79) concludes that “new politics” (e.g. value orientations, or even what he refers to as “value-based cleavages”) have come to play an even more important role in Denmark than traditional cleavages. Therefore, traditional and new parties alike have deliberately sought new strategies, embracing several of these issues in order to gain or stabilise electoral support (Knutsen 1990; 2004). It shows the resilience of political parties, and their ability to cope with the challenges of the post-modern society that, apart from a few minor exceptions, the traditional parties succeeded in incorporating these new features in their ideology and official platforms. The increasing green-profile of the Norwegian Liberals, or the clear post-materialist ideology of the Danish Social Liberals are cases in point. On the other hand, incorporating new ideological foundations and social groups, parties are, almost by necessity, loosening the ties with their traditional electoral base. Therefore, despite the outlined changes, these party systems have not at all collapsed: on the contrary, they have proved resilient and enjoy a relatively high level of public approval and legitimacy. (Bergman and Strøm 2004)

- Strongly related to the decline of traditional class loyalties and the emergence of new “cleavages” and issue-voting, both *party membership and party identification has declined markedly*. (Though I do not have fully comparable longitudinal data for Denmark and Sweden, the data presented in Dalton [2000] supports my argument for these two countries.) This partly contradicts the point raised above, but to my mind is insufficient to accept the “party decline” thesis. As noted above, I would argue that parties have dealt with the challenges by strengthening their roles in certain areas, while “giving up” some others. Though parties have kept their dominance in terms of candidate selection and nominating cabinet members (recruitment function – see Strøm 2000), as well as structuring policy alternatives and defining the policy agenda, and Scandinavian electorates continue to have higher trust in political parties than the voters of most other advanced democracies (not to mention transition countries), they are clearly less important than before in terms of mass participation and mobilisation,

indicated by the sharp decline of party membership and party identification (Dalton 2000, Strøm and Svåsand eds. 1997).

**Figure 2: Party identification and party membership in Norway (%)**



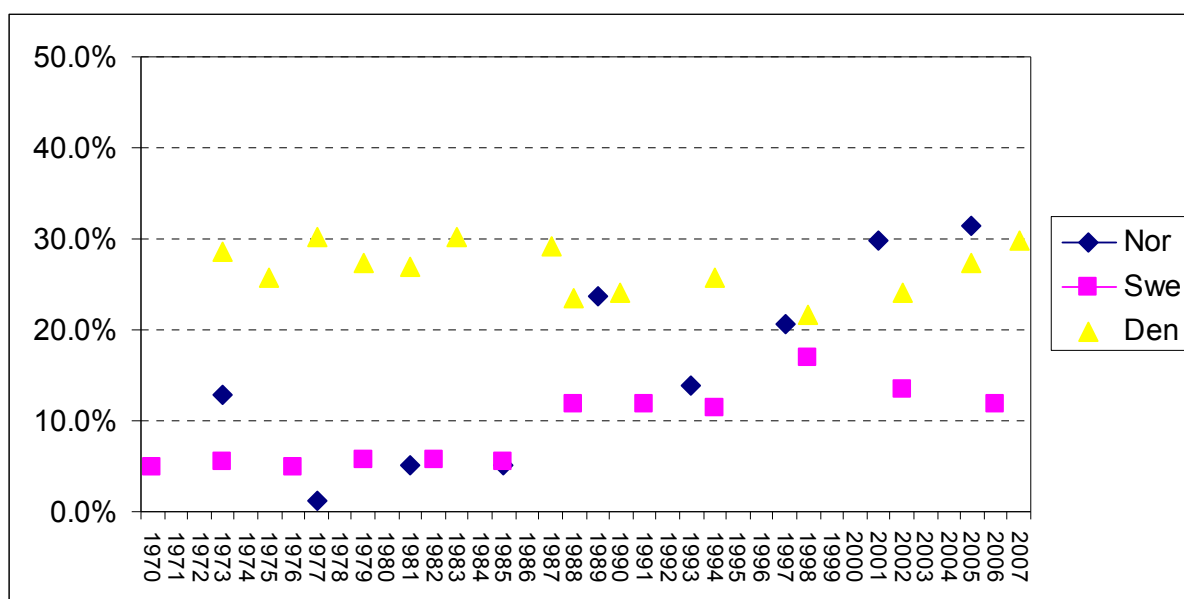
Source: Berglund (2004: 149)

- In terms of performance of the individual established parties, the following trends need to be highlighted. Firstly, *Social Democrats*, with fluctuations, *are weakening over the long run*. In Denmark they have even lost their position as the largest party to the Liberals (Venstre), but have also fallen to around or occasionally even below 30 percent in Norway. In Sweden the Social Democrats still receive around 35-40 percent of votes, but are nowhere near the majority position they once held. The larger of the two Liberal parties in Denmark (Venstre – “Agrarian” Liberals) have become the strongest party in Denmark, with the Conservatives being the junior coalition partners, whereas it is the other way around in Sweden. Liberals in Norway split following the 1972 EU referendum, and even dropped out of the Storting in 1985. After reunification, they regained representation in 1993, but the party is struggling at every election to surpass the 4% threshold. Conservatives in Norway (as in Denmark) have had their most successful period in the 1980s, riding the waves of the neo-conservative turn in the Western world, but have been declining ever since. Currently they have less seats than the radical right-wing Progress Party. Christian Democrats have traditionally been the strongest in Norway, and still are, despite heavy losses since 2001. Christian parties have appeared much later in both Sweden and Denmark, but despite being coalition members on some instances they have failed to play important roles. Though the agrarian-based Centre Parties in Sweden and Norway have traditionally been parts of the non-socialist (or bourgeois) bloc, just as the Danish Liberals (with their agrarian roots), the Norwegian Centre Party (and to some degree

the Swedish sister-party) has over the last decade distanced itself from the Conservatives, and following a centre-based coalition, shifted coalition partners and is currently part of the historic red-green government. Both they and their Swedish sister-party are permanently below 10 percent, although the strong anti-EU stance of the Norwegians temporarily tripled the party's electoral support in the early 1990s.

- As Figure 3 indicates, since the 1970s, “radical” parties at both ends of the spectrum have generally gained strength, with the exception of Sweden, where the radical right has failed to establish itself (Rydgren 2002). Radical parties are not anti-system parties in these countries (even the ex-communist parties have adopted more moderate platforms in recent years), but as anti-establishment parties, they have until very recently been unacceptable as formal coalition partners for any of the established parties in Parliament (see next section).

**Figure 3: Share of “radical” parties’ legislative seats**



Source: Calculation by the author based on publicly available data on mandate distributions

More specifically, the radical left has been present in all three countries for a longer time (the Communists were actually included in the original five-party model in the case of Sweden, whereas the – non-communist – radical Left emerged on an anti-NATO and anti-EEC stance in the 1960s in Norway and Denmark). They have started to gain growing (though oscillating) support on post-materialist platforms since the 1970s. However, the radical Right is a relatively new phenomenon in all three countries, and cannot be detached from concepts such as “new politics” (Knutsen

1990; 2004), “dealignment”, and the “decline of parties” thesis. (Dalton *et al.* 1984; Franklin *et al.* 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000) Progress parties in Denmark and Norway were clearly anti-establishment (according to some scholars: anti-system), anti-tax (single issue) parties representing not only a new form of politics (being “anti-party” parties), but also new content (Bjørklund 2003). One clear example was that the original founders of these parties were clearly against the original concept of parties as mass, hierarchical organisations. (*ibid.*). As they have become increasingly “institutionalised” within the party systems, they have adopted new strategies in this regard, too: for example, the Norwegian Progress Party is arguably the most centralised party organisation, and has become at least as organised nationally and locally as the historical parties in the country. (*ibid.*). Interestingly enough, the radical Right in Sweden (the so-called New Democracy) turned out to be a brief episode, as it was only represented in the Riksdag between 1991-94 (holding the balance between the two blocs), only to completely fall apart after 1994 (Rydgren 2002). On the other hand, not only the ex-communist Left Party, but the first new party to break the dominance of the “five parties” in Sweden, the Green Party is primarily regarded as an informal, but stable supporter of the left-of-centre bloc, i.e. minority Social Democrat governments.

Following this brief account of the Scandinavian “post-five-party-model”, I now turn to the traditional characteristics of parliamentary government in these countries, followed by a discussion as to whether and how the changes in the party system, i.e. the consolidation of the “post-five-party-system” has exerted an influence on the dynamics of these characteristics.

## **Patterns of Scandinavian parliamentary government**

The Scandinavian polities have long been prime examples of parliamentary government (Damgaard 1992), though this had for a long time been a practice not grounded in the respective constitutions (as is still the case in Norway). As Strøm (2003) has outlined, parliamentary government is a regime type with a singular chain of command or delegation. The cited paper also shows that there are good theoretical reasons to expect that parliamentary democracy is better equipped than its main competitor, presidentialism, to deal with problems of adverse selection and efficiency. It is almost impossible to imagine the parliamentary chain of delegation without parties, since it is not empirically relevant to assume a direct linkage

between voters and MPs, even in SMDs. In the case of Scandinavia, with its highly proportional PR systems, traditionally cohesive and influential parties, the significance of political parties cannot be overemphasised, despite the controversial thesis of party decline (Svåsand and Strøm eds. 1997, Dalton and Wattenberg eds. 2000).

The dominance of parties in policy-making, recruitment and nomination to government positions is also well documented (see, e.g. Strøm 2000, Blondel and Cotta eds. 2000). Scandinavian parties have traditionally been effective vehicles of mass representation and mobilisation, and parliamentary groups of parties have been cohesive and thus capable of strategic behaviour. (cf. Müller and Strøm 2003) This is an important factor behind the feasibility of minority governments (see below), as relatively autonomous parliamentary leaders are able to strike enforceable ad hoc or longer term deals with opposition parties in exchange for tolerating the incumbent government.

In the Scandinavian case, however, the most important factor influencing the patterns of parliamentary government is the *prevalence of minority governments*. The relatively scarce literature on minority governments, accounting for the phenomenon on rigorous rational choice foundations (e.g. Strøm 1990, Rasch 2004a; 2004b) apparently imply that the chain of causality runs from the legal-institutional framework (which condition and constrain the set of feasible choices) toward the emergence of minority governments. In more operational terms, the theory suggests that minority governments are rendered feasible by a set of institutional characteristics, such as “strong” legislatures (“strong” oppositions in particular) and *negative parliamentarism* (see below). To the contrary, I argue below that the changing strength of the legislature vis-à-vis the executive, especially if we make a helpful distinction between legislative “capacity” and “performance” and concentrate on the latter (cf. Arter 2006a), cannot be explained exclusively by constitutional-legal rules (the polity aspect), but also the political process itself (the politics aspect) needs to be considered, and the prevalence of minority governments can be regarded as a non-negligible candidate. There is no obvious and readily available empirical evidence at hand to do justice to this question, but we can safely conclude that two variables are so tightly interrelated that there may not be a straightforward causal relationship between them, but they may rather be rooted in common factors, which is probably a mixture of legal-institutional, political cultural and, most importantly from this study’s point of view, party systemic features. This aspect is therefore addressed below.

Minority governments have become the totally dominant state of affairs in all three countries over the last decades. Again, Denmark “led the way”, which was above all due to the fact that the *Social Democrats have never held an absolute majority of seats in the Folketing*, whereas the Norwegian Labour Party did so between 1945 and 1961, and the Swedish Social Democratic Workers’ Party (the most successful of any Scandinavian parties), even if not always controlling the majority of seats in the lower house, were helped by the indirectly elected “First Chamber” until 1970. (Heidar and Berntzen 1998) Furthermore, Swedish and Norwegian Social Democratic parties have never entered formal coalitions (except the interim red-green coalition in Sweden 1951-57 and following the 2005 elections in Norway, see below). In these two countries, basically two types of government became dominant (with but a few exceptions): *single-party*, *Social Democratic minority cabinets* (most of the time backed in an informal legislative coalition by the “radical” parties of the Left, but occasionally by some of the centrist parties) and *a coalition of centre-right, bourgeois parties*, which tended to be majority ones until the emergence of the new radical right-wing parties (Progress Parties), which were not feasible coalition partners. As noted in earlier sections, these patterns can be regarded as systemic features of the classical “five-party-model”. In Denmark, the country deviating most visibly from the model, Social Democrats have often engaged in coalitional co-operation with the Social Liberals and other centrist parties, but even with the right-wing Liberals, albeit for a short period (see Table 4). In sum, only one majority government was in office between 1971 and 2005 in Norway, during the whole period in Denmark and only two (or practically the same one with a short interval) between 1970 and 2006 in Sweden. Table 4 below clearly shows the overwhelming occurrence of minority governments in all three countries.

It is apparent that governments in the Scandinavian countries are prepared to concede votes in parliament from time to time, although on various occasions, the fate of the cabinet is tied to an essential issue (e.g. the gas power plants issue in 2000 which led to the resignation of the first Bondevik cabinet in Norway). Further, somewhat different patterns emerge in the three countries under scrutiny. The most turbulent among them is, again, probably Denmark, where cabinets from both blocs most of the time relied on short-term, shifting and *ad hoc legislative coalitions*, often based on package deals (*forlig*) and aiming for a supermajority for important pieces of legislation, even if this was not a formal requirement (Arter 1999: 216). Norwegian governments pursued similar practices, although the combination of parties within the *ad hoc* legislative coalitions was not as diverse, mainly due to the less fragmented party system. Swedish governments, on the other hand, have relied on relatively stable legislative

majorities: the pre-dominant Social Democrats, in office for most of the period, could generally count on the support of the two radical parties on the Left, the ex-communist Left Party and the Green Party after 1988 – often, but not necessarily secured by a detailed and formal “contract” (Arter 2006: 469). As will be shown below, the emergence and the consolidation of the “post-five-party-system” structure, following a turbulent period in the two decades after the “defreezing” of voter alignments and the party system, has from the 1990s once again created favourable conditions for the stabilisation of the two blocs and also for more stable governments (even “majoritarian” tendencies).

**Table 4: Composition and status of governments in the Scandinavian countries after 1970**

	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Denmark</b>
1970		Palme SD	
1971	Bratteli SD		Krag SD
1972	Korvald CPP-L-Cen		Jørgensen SD
1973	Bratteli SD		Hartling L
1974			
1975			Jørgensen SD
1976	Nordli SD	<b>Fälldin Cen-L-C</b>	
1977			
1978		Ullsten L	Jørgensen SD-L
1979		<b>Fälldin Cen-L-C</b>	Jørgensen SD
1980	Brundtland SD		
1981	Willoch C	Fälldin Cen-L	
1982		Palme SD	Schlüter C-L-CPP-Cen
1983	<b>Willoch C-CPP-Cen</b>		
1984			
1985	Willoch C-CPP-Cen		
1986	Brundtland SD	Carlsson SD	
1987			
1988			Schlüter C-SL-Cen
1989	Syse C-CPP-Cen		
1990	Brundtland SD		Schlüter C-L
1991		Bildt C-L-Cen-CD	
1992			
1993			<b>Nyroup Rasmussen SD-SL-CPP-Cen</b>
1994		Carlsson SD	Nyroup Rasmussen SD-SL
1995			
1996	Jagland SD	Persson SD	
1997	Bondevik CPP-L-Cen		
1998			Nyroup Rasmussen SD-SL
1999			
2000	Stoltenberg SD		
2001	Bondevik CPP-C-L		
2002			Fogh Rasmussen L-C
2003			
2004			
2005	<b>Stoltenberg SD-Cen-Soc</b>		
2006		<b>Reinfeldt C-L-CD-Cen</b>	

Note: Majority cabinets are denoted by bold fonts

Abbreviations: SD (Social Democrats) C (Conservatives) L (Liberals) CPP/CD (Christian Democrats, Christian Peoples' Party) Cen (Centre Party, Centrum Democrats) SL (Social Liberals: Radical Liberals in Denmark) Soc (Socialist Left Party)

*Negative parliamentarism* is formally, but not exclusively, related to the legal procedures for the formation/dissolution of governments and basically means that the cabinet need not be actively backed by a legislative majority, but can enter and stay in office as long as it is tolerated (i.e. not explicitly rejected) by it. Furthermore, two or more separate motions of no-confidence against the incumbent government, even if together they represent a legislative majority, are not sufficient to bring down the cabinet. These conditions not only provide fertile soil for the dominance of minority cabinets (Rasch 2004a), but creates favourable conditions for shifting legislative coalitions. Damgaard even speaks of an “alternative majority”, where “a grouping of opposition parties commanding a majority can in effect ‘govern’, while the government in effect is in ‘opposition’ to the non-governmental parties.” (Damgaard 2004: 118).

According to Damgaard’s (ibid.) observations, this mode of “*alternative government*”, clearly signalling an increased legislative strength, was most prevalent during the 1980s in Denmark, when government stability was lowest, and the successive Schlüter governments had to concede a large number of legislative defeats, as well as see a larger share of individual MP and opposition proposals approved by the legislature than had previously been the case (Damgaard and Jensen 2006: 428). Especially with bills related to foreign affairs were the minority coalitions especially susceptible to “opposition governing”. Such conflicts were either resolved by the government conceding the vote in order to stay in office (and concentrate on more important, internal/economic policies), resign and/or initiate extraordinary elections, or, paradoxically, turn to the voters for support against the opposition by holding a referendum. (Heidar and Berntzen 1998: 82-85) A further important feature of the Danish party system is the existence of a par excellence centrist party in the sense of being truly feasible coalition partner for both blocs. Even when outside the formal coalition, the Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre), controlling for most of the period the “median legislator” (cf. Laver and Budge 1992), had the highest success rate of any party in approving bills in the legislature despite their modest size (Damgaard 1992).

As for Norway, the strengthening of the legislature – signalled also by an enhanced scrutiny function in the form of committee hearings, questions, but also by the growing policy-making activity of the legislature - in the same period was all the more noteworthy, as the Storting was deemed to be “in exile” at the time of Social Democratic predominance (i.e. until 1965), and parliamentary control of the executive had effectively been displaced from the floor of parliament to the internal organs of the Labour Party (Strøm and Narud 2005: 183). With the

exception of the 1983-85 period, representing the only majority government between 1961 and 2005, government instability and the need for forging ad hoc policy coalitions with either the centrist parties, or the increasingly influential radical parties became the order of the day in the 1970s and 80s. It has to be kept in mind that this was the period when, in wake of the “conservative wave”, the previously overwhelming welfare consensus started to be seriously challenged, which strengthened both the established Conservative Party and the radical Progress Party, but also brought about a general climate of less consensual and more adversarial style of politics. (Heidar and Berntzen 1998: 60).

Finally, as Arter (1999: 217) points out, Swedish politics also became increasingly conflictual during the 1980s, indicated, *inter alia*, by the fact that the proportion of Riksdag standing committee reports on government bills unanimously accepted by the major party groups was halved between the early 1970 and the late 1980s (from above 55 to about 30 percent). This was also the period of increasing government instability (the Social Democrats in opposition for the first time since 1932; dissolving and re-forming bourgeois coalitions between 1976 and 1982), the emergence of new parties for the first time in six decades, and the tendency for the Left Communist Party’s support of Social Democratic governments and policies to become increasingly conditional (as opposed to “automatic”).

The phenomenon of “*alternative majorities*”, referred to above, needs to be qualified, however. It is telling that these legislative majorities very rarely proved fateful for the incumbent cabinet, in other words, even if they had the intention, they very rarely achieved the resignation of the government. Quite the contrary: partly as a consequence of negative parliamentarism, but also due to political processes and rational behaviour of the key players, the dissolution of governments was only in exceptional cases achieved by formal votes of no confidence, even though the government only commanded a minority of seats. Tellingly, Norwegian governments faced no fewer than 60 votes of no confidence since 1945 (Brundtland’s minority governments alone survived sixteen), but only one was successful, in 1963 (Narud and Strøm 2004: 182). Similarly, divided oppositions have from time to time initiated votes of no-confidence in Denmark and Sweden, too, but as discussed, negative parliamentarism in this regard functions almost like the German-type “constructive no-confidence” vote, effectively protecting the incumbent against a fragmented opposition. Thus, it was in the vast majority of cases internal dissent (most notably the EU in Norway, nuclear energy in Sweden or tax policy in Denmark and Sweden) that prompted the resignation of the cabinet (cf. Narud 1995). The difference in Denmark can be partly accounted for by the

possibility of premature dissolution of the legislature, which the PM is entitled to more or less without limitations. Therefore, elections were held every two years, on average. Again, due to negative parliamentary practises, and to the complex structure of the fragmented party system, changes in government, until recently, rarely coincided with elections, and thus the voters had very limited (if any) direct influence on the composition of the government. Strøm (1990), in his seminal work on minority governments discusses this feature as one conducive to minority cabinets. (Its possible normative implications are highlighted in the concluding section.)

### **The implications of the consolidated “post-five-party-systems” for parliamentary government**

Among the characteristics of the “post-five-party-model”, discussed in the first section, three crucial and strongly inter-related ones have major repercussions on the patterns of parliamentary government: *the Decline of the Social Democrats, the rise of newly established radical parties, and the diminishing significance of the class cleavage.*

As pointed out, the original five-party-model by Berglund and Lindström (1978) maintained that two relatively stable blocs were the fundamentals of both party competition and government formation. Namely, the Social Democrats (clearly pre-dominant parties – cf. Sartori 1976) typically faced a fragmented bourgeois or centre-right bloc. The main reason for the prevalence of minority governments was the preference of the Social Democrats (especially in Sweden and Norway) to avoid formal coalitions (let alone across the blocs). As these parties have lost legislative majorities (or have, in the case of Denmark, never held it), and have weakened gradually, considering also the emergence of radical parties on both ends of the spectrum, the party with the median legislator was in the driver’s seat in terms of government formation. As we have seen, this resulted not only in minority, but also in increasingly unstable governments. Therefore, “policy blind” theories of coalition formation (with a majority rule) are completely useless in these cases, whereas even “radical” versions of “policy-driven” theories provide a much better fit. (cf. Müller and Strøm 2003: 8)

Not only have the declining Social Democrats (with the partial exception of Denmark) traditionally been trying to avoid formal coalition cabinets, the radical parties were, in turn, deemed unfeasible coalition partners for a long time, the parliamentary basis of both Social

Democratic one-party cabinets and centre-right coalitions became increasingly feeble especially in the 1980s, resulting in strengthening legislatures (and oppositions), “alternative majorities” and government instability. Again, Denmark is somewhat of an outlier in both respects, due to the fact that the Social Democrats had always been (relatively speaking) weakest here, and radical parties had become significant much earlier (from the 1960s and especially after 1972) than in the two other countries. In any case, anti-establishment parties (on either side) more and more often took control of pivotal legislative seats, holding the balance between the two blocs. The most extreme case was the Norwegian Progress Party which, from 1985 to 1989 held the balance with its mere 2 seats and even contributed to bringing down the centre-right coalition in 1986. (Polgár 2007: 77)

Furthermore, prior to the emergence of “new politics”, issue-voting and other phenomena emerging primarily after 1970, all three party systems were uni-dimensional, structured basically around the traditional economic left-right dimension (in other words the worker-employer, or class cleavage). Although Norway has always been the most deviant case in this respect (with its strong centre-periphery dimension and its moderately strong religious cleavage), class-voting (crudely measured by the Alford-index) was the most precise predictor of party vote – and the most important reason for the discussed two-bloc competition. Furthermore, a vast body of literature suggests that the Left-Right dimension makes sense even to Norwegian voters (e.g. they are able to place themselves and the parties in the scale in a consequential way, see Aardal and Valen 1995; Narud 1999), and the same conclusion can be drawn by analysing the content of party manifestos, too. (see, e.g. Strøm and Leiphart 1989, Budge *et al.* 2001). The apparent loosening of class ties and the explanatory power of traditional cleavages since the 1970 (see Franklin *et al.* 1992), has contributed to the increasingly conflictual nature of parliamentary politics, the decreasing stability of cabinets. On the other hand it has created favourable conditions for ad hoc coalitions: with the emergence of cross-cutting conflict dimensions, minority governments were given the opportunity to strike deals with different opposition parties in different policy areas. Still, the Left-Right dimension remained the crucial one for voters (shifting parties within the respective blocs) and for parties (rarely entering cross-bloc coalitions) alike.

Following the unprecedented turbulence in party system development in the 1970s and 80s, which had major repercussions on government stability, and resulted in a number of distinct Scandinavian patterns, such as “alternative majorities”, and ad hoc legislative coalitions, since the end of the 1980s, governments have become more stable. Currently both Sweden and

Norway are governed by majority coalitions, while the Liberal-Conservative minority coalition in Denmark has continuously been able to count on the support of the radical Danish Peoples' Party since 2002, and functions as a quasi majority cabinet. As already this example illustrates, one of the key factors behind this stabilisation is the reassertion of the blocs. Somewhat paradoxically, this has to do with the stabilisation and the *institutionalisation of the new and/or radical parties*.

From the point of view of government formation, the most important change in this regard is that the strategies of the non-established parties, emerging after the 1970s have undergone a considerable transformation. For a long time, they were not only unacceptable formal coalition partners for the established parties, but have not aimed at government participation themselves. In other words, they were clearly “policy-oriented”, or even “anti-party” parties. More recently, however, most of them have more or less openly started to adopt more office-seeking strategies (Strøm 1990b) – entailing a moderation of party platform/ideology. The first one to enter a coalition government<sup>3</sup> was the Norwegian Socialist Left Party, which, as a result of the 2005 elections contributed to an historic step in Norwegian parliamentary government. Namely, the so-called “red-green” coalition is the first coalition the Social Democrats have entered (with the exception of the wartime crisis grand-coalition), the first to include a non-traditional party, and the first non-bourgeois coalition embracing the agrarian-based Centre Party. As a general tendency, however, we can observe that radical parties in all three countries on both the Left and the Right have over time become ever more “institutionalised” (Svåsand 2003; Bjørklund 2004; Burchell 2000), most notably in the sense that they not only possess a large degree of “blackmail potential” (holding the balance as pivotal parties, backed by a generally growing electoral support – cf. Sartori 1976), but they must (and can) be increasingly reckoned with on a regular basis for informal, legislative, as well as possibly formal coalition co-operation. In other words, they have increasingly become predictable supporters (or even formal coalition partners) of the respective blocs.

As Arter (1999: 240) observes, coalitions across the blocs had been exceptional in Denmark (although the Social Liberals were in a pivotal position and took part in alternative coalitions from time to time) and Sweden, and had never appeared in Norway. Thus, the current red-green coalition, as discussed above, represents a break with these trends, and it is becoming more widespread to believe that the distance between the traditionally centre-right Centre

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<sup>3</sup> There have been several examples in all three countries for formal co-operation on local/regional levels (see, e.g. Burchell 2000).

Party and the Conservatives has become so large since the beginning of the 1990s (in large part due to the controversial EU-question), that the Centre Party will possibly remain a stable force in the left-of-centre bloc. This is indeed one of the most significant developments of the last fifteen years not only from the point of view of the party system *per se*, but exerting a noticeable influence on party government and government stability, too. Furthermore, the fact that the radical parties are increasingly considered as feasible coalition partners has apparently contributed to a moderation of the conflictual nature of parliamentary politics which became the normal state of affairs by the late 1980s. These developments have major repercussions on the logic of coalition formation and for the alternatives for forging legislative majorities for stand-alone government policies, or even longer term government programmes.

Norway has produced another new model of governance, which is the prime example of a fragile, but workable alternative, with shifting legislative coalitions. Namely, Bondevik's first cabinet between 1997 and 2000 comprised only the three centre parties (the Christian Peoples' Party, the Liberals and the Centre Party), but not the Conservatives. With its less than 30 percent parliamentary base, it seemed extremely feeble from the outset, but still proved to be "policy viable" (cf. Laver and Budge 1992) for more than two years due to its central location (i.e. controlling the median legislator and lack of incentives for the two large opposition parties to bring down the coalition) and the changing legislative support of the two large parties on a single issue basis. This model is still believed to be viable by some commentators. Similar attempts in Denmark and Sweden have appeared in the 1970s, but under extraordinary circumstances and proved to be even more short-lived experiments.

Denmark, on the other hand, stands out as the only country with a genuine centrist (in the sense of "pivotal") party, the Social Liberals (called Radical Liberals), who have been feasible coalition partners for both blocs, although most of the time backing Social Democratic governments. This, and the fact that Social Democrats have regularly entered coalitions, even across the main blocs, has meant that Denmark is the country where coalition alternatives have, by far, been the most numerous (and thus most unpredictable). It is somewhat surprising, then, that it is also in Denmark that majority governments have practically been non-existent and government stability has been lowest of all three countries. This complexity can again be accounted for by the fragmented party system, as well as the relative importance of "new politics" or non-traditional cleavages, which not only structure voter alignments, but also coalition formation. But even in Denmark, government stability has clearly increased over the past ten years. The three major factors would be the fact that the Liberals are by now

permanently as strong or even stronger than the Social Democrats, that the Social Liberals have been solidly backing the centre-left bloc, and, most importantly, that the somewhat moderated radical-right-wing Danish Peoples' Party (formerly Progress Party) has clearly become a strong and more or less predictable external supporter of the Fogh Rasmussen Liberal-Conservative coalitions since 2002. *Thus, currently all three countries experience pure or quasi majority governments, which was definitely not the case in the 1970s and 80s.*

## **Conclusion and points for further discussion**

Though the Scandinavian party systems are clearly not frozen anymore, and the five-party model no longer applies in its original form, many of the features that had characterised these systems before the 1970s are still unmistakably present. The most notable changes that have taken place are related to “new politics”, dealignment, declining party identifications and membership, issue voting – phenomena that have emerged in advanced Western democracies since the 1970s. Nonetheless, parties are still indispensable institutions for the functioning of representative parliamentary democracy, and even if they play a less significant role in mass mobilisation and participation, they are still key vehicles of recruitment for political office, the structuring of policy alternatives, and, most importantly from the point of view of this inquiry: as strategic actors engaging in government (coalition) formation and policy-making in the parliamentary arena.

From this perspective, two trends have been of primary importance. Firstly, the permanent weakening of the once pre-dominant Social Democrats, and perhaps even more importantly, the emergence, stabilisation and later institutionalisation of new/radical parties at both ends of the political spectrum. Not only have they started to pursue more office-seeking strategies, become more like the established parties (in terms of organisation, or with the moderation of their ideologies/platforms), but it has also become increasingly unfeasible for the traditional parties to disregard the newcomers.

I have argued that the prevalent patterns of parliamentary government in Scandinavia are not only and perhaps not primarily determined by legal-institutional factors (which have not changed much since 1970), but to a great extent by the dynamics of the party system. Its discussed transformation towards what I have labelled “consolidated post-five-party-system” has thus contributed significantly to the following new patterns of parliamentary government.

The “melting” post-five-party-system in the 1970s and the 1980s brought about a turbulent period with government instability, ad hoc coalition bargaining and the total domination of minority government. In this period, all three polities moved away from stable (majority), mostly Social Democratic governments and a relatively clear competition of the two blocs along the major left-right dimension, and showed signs of increased government instability, the prevalence of minority governments and a reassertion of legislatures often in the form of “alternative” legislative majorities. In more recent years, however, conscious efforts and developments within the party system have created more favourable conditions for stable, even majority governments. Thus, I argue, it may be possible to do away with the instability of the 1980s without explicit legal-constitutional reforms, which would strengthen the view that the observed patterns are far from being mechanical consequences of the legal-institutional set-up, but are clearly conditioned by the strategies of the relevant actors, most notably political parties.

For further research and discussion, normative aspects can be raised as to the desirability of “strong parliaments” as they characterised the Scandinavian polities primarily in the 1980s. Although it seems tempting to accept a benign view of the discussed phenomena as beneficial for the functioning of democracy, and particularly for accountability via a definite chain of delegation of parliamentary government, from the voters, all the way to the executive branch and the civil servants (cf. Bergman and Strøm 2004; Narud and Strøm 2004), this model is not without its drawbacks. Namely, there is a clear trade-off between the increased activism and strength of the legislature in the policy-making process, and decision-making capacity and effectiveness facilitated by the relative weakness of the (minority) governments. Interestingly, Kaare Strøm, who, in his seminal study (Strøm 1990a) on the nature and implications of minority governments very convincingly argued that minority governments, under certain conditions, can perform equally well in terms of governing capacity as can majority cabinets, argues just as convincingly (Strøm *et al.* 2005) that the increasingly fragile Norwegian cabinets (especially between 1985-90 and 1997-2001) have raised a number of serious concerns as to the democratic chain of delegation in Norway, but apparently also in the other two countries. As discussed also in the present study, one of the main concerns can be that voters (i.e. the principals) are not able to influence government formation directly (through defining legislative power-relations and thus government composition), and therefore they are deprived of *ex ante* and *ex post* control of their agents, who are as a consequence unaccountable in this sense (cf. mandate and accountability theories elaborated in Przeworski

*et al.* eds. 1999). Voters are not able to identify clear policy alternatives, and relate these to the competing parties, which would be the appropriate vehicles for structuring political competition. (Strøm *et al.* 2005)

Some scholars have actually deemed these tendencies so worrisome that research has been explicitly focusing on the possibilities of “regulating away” unstable minority governments by introducing new institutional/constitutional constraints, such as formal votes of investiture, less proportional electoral systems (e.g. higher threshold) or premature dissolution of parliament in order to move into a more positive or even majoritarian type of parliamentary government (Rasch 2000; 2004a). Also Damgaard (2004) notes that this issue was put on the agenda without too much success in Denmark.

What we have seen over the last 15-20 years, the success of which is hopefully apparent from the present study, is that there have been attempts by political actors to overcome the above-mentioned challenges. The most explicit of these efforts is undoubtedly the Norwegian case, where the newly formed “red-green” coalition built up a strategy and deliberately campaigned on the issue of clear coalition preferences (which had not always been the case in the past) and, more importantly, on the necessity of majority government. The new slogan of the Labour Party was “New majority”, carrying a meaning often emphasised by the PM candidate, Jens Stoltenberg, that Norway is in great need of a stable, predictable majority government following decades of government instability. But also in Denmark, following periods of shifting coalition alliances, a more stable pattern emerges with the Left and the Right blocs structuring party competition and legislative coalitions. Even though the radical Danish Peoples’ Party is permanently excluded from government office, the right-of-centre coalition of the Liberals and the Conservative Peoples’ Party is able to rely on a more or less stable legislative majority on most issues. Finally, in Sweden, the Green Party and the Left Party are considered to be fairly stable external supporters of Social Democratic minority governments, while the four centre-right parties form a natural alliance, unthreatened by the radical right, which proved to be a very short episode between 1991 and 1994. Indeed, the bourgeois electoral alliance managed to form a majority government following the 2006 elections, which has not happened anywhere in Scandinavia since the early 1980s.

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