
Coalition agreement and party mandate: How coalition agreements constrain the ministers

Party Politics

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Abstract

In coalition government, the relationship between parties and ministers is one of double delegation: from the party to the minister and from the coalition of parties to the individual minister. On the basis of principal–agent theory, I argue that a coalition agreement is a tool used by coalition parties to reduce agency loss when delegating to ministers. In six governments in Belgium, Italy and The Netherlands, I show that: a majority of the pledges were transferred into cabinet decision, a majority of cabinet decisions were effectively constrained by the coalition agreement and that one third of cabinet decisions had been precisely defined beforehand in the document. Interestingly, the length of the coalition agreement, the entry of party leaders to government and the number of ministers participating in the negotiations do not seem to have had a significant influence on the above two measurements.

Keywords

coalition agreement, coalition government, party government, principal–agent theory

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Introduction

Coalition governments are also party governments. Hence, the relationship between parties and ministers in coalition governments could be considered as involving double delegation: from the party organization to its own ministers and from the coalition of parties to individual ministers. Understanding these delegation processes is at the heart of politics: How do ministers behave in multiparty governments? What motivates their actions? How much leeway do coalition parties give their delegates?

Early research on coalition governments simply assumed that ministers were, on the one hand, perfect agents of their own party organization and, on the other, ‘policy dictators’ in their spheres of power vis-à-vis other coalition parties.¹ Since then, these questions have been the object of more elaborate theoretical consideration, but still little empirical research has been carried out. It is surprising that while party bureaucracy, organization, goals and behaviour have been subjected to extensive analysis, the specific behaviour of ministers – those individuals who are the link between the parties and the bureaucracy – has received little attention.

In order to gain a partial understanding of this double process of delegation, I propose here to consider the coalition agreement as a tool that is used efficiently by coalition parties to reduce agency loss when delegating to ministers. Coalition agreements are present in most coalition governments (Müller and Strøm, 2008: 171). They are usually negotiated by the various party leaders before the government formally comes into force and, in most cases, are ratified by the party organization: they could therefore be considered as a register of policies that coalition parties wish ministers to implement.

This article is organized as follows. I first discuss the principal–agent literature applied to coalition government and then proceed to specify, operationalize and answer research questions derived from my argument.

Principal–agent theory and coalition governments

Coalition governments are also party governments, and hence imply double delegation from the coalition parties: delegation to ministers who belong to another party, but also delegation to ministers of their own party. While the latter type of delegation has received extensive theoretical attention in the specific field of coalitions, this has been much less so in the case of the former. However, it is important to look at both delegation processes to provide a complete framework of analysis. In this section, I discuss delegation to ministers, agency losses and mechanisms to contain these losses, each time taking the two delegation processes into account.

Delegation to ministers

Party government may be conceptualized as a process of delegation from the party (principal) to the minister (agent). Delegation to governments from parliamentary parties occurs because governments are presumed to have more resources and skills to draft legislative policy initiatives than parliamentary parties do (Strøm, 2000). Müller (2000) also correctly points out that, parallel to the delegation from MPs to the government, there is

delegation *between* the party in government and the party organization, as the delegation between MPs and ministers is structured by the interaction of extra-parliamentary parties.

In coalitions, delegation from the party to the minister is more complicated because a collection of principals (the coalition parties) with diverging preferences must delegate power to an individual agent (minister) who belongs to a particular party. This agent will have access to resources and expertise (civil servants with technical knowledge, a direct relationship with outside experts) that other ministers will not have. As Martin and Vanberg put it, ministers enjoy an ‘informational advantage’ in their jurisdiction: they are thus in a privileged position in the policy area in question (Martin and Vanberg, 2004: 15).

Agency losses

The well-known problem of delegation is referred to as ‘agency loss’ – in this case the situation in which ministers focus on their own priorities rather than defending the best interests of their own, or other, coalition parties.

This possible agency loss may operate first at the level of delegation from the party to the minister, because the preferences of ministers and party officials may differ. This was first established by Blondel and Cotta (1996, 2000), who argued convincingly that the three components of the party (the party organization, parliamentary party and party in government) have many points in common (name, symbols, traditions, personal links, etc.), but have somewhat diverse interests, resources and constraints. The authors showed that the supporting parties, which encompass broad ideological positions and, in their turn, are supported by activists and the electorate, are less likely than ministers to initiate policy initiatives and encourage change. Innovation, on the other hand, is more often promoted by ministers, who have ‘the institutional obligation’ to solve problems arising during their mandates and are under pressure from bureaucracies, interest groups, international obligations, etc.² Timmermans and Moury (2006), too, show that ministers are oriented towards problem-solving, as inter-party conflicts tend to be initiated outside cabinet (by the party organization or the parliamentary party) and to be solved within it. Finally, Andeweg (2000) points out that ministers might go ‘native’ and defend their departmental interests rather than those of their party.

The risk of agency loss is even more acute when we consider delegation from coalition parties to individual ministers. As noted by Strøm and Müller (1999), political parties’ preferences are likely to differ on a broad range of policies and, clearly, these cannot be carried out simultaneously. By delegating to a particular minister, coalition parties run the risk of ministers attempting to adopt policies that are favoured by their own party but detrimental to the interests of the other coalition members. Moreover, even when ministers do not expect to see their bills passed by Parliament, they may still want to introduce them in order to ‘take a stand’ that provides an electoral advantage to their party while damaging others (Martin and Vanberg, 2005: 94).

Containing agency losses

In order to face potential agency problems, parties have several mechanisms at their disposal to make sure that ministers respect party preferences. One of these is the ability of

the party to reward/sanction ministers if they act according to/against party preferences. Ministers may refrain from deviating too much from the party's preferences if they want to maintain a career in the party. The same applies to party leaders who have entered government: they tend not to deviate significantly from the party line, knowing that re-election ultimately depends on the party. As noted by Müller (2000), this may be less the case for ministers who have reached the end of their careers. Another mechanism consists of establishing procedures that require ministers to report the relevant information and action they have taken. Examples of this are intra-party meetings, where ministers meet up with their party leaders (Müller, 2000).

Laver and Shepsle (1996) assume that, in coalitions, ministers are 'policy dictators' in their spheres of power, i.e. each party will have the greatest authority in the policy areas within the jurisdiction of the ministries it controls. In other words, they assume that party leaders have decided to ignore the agency loss implied by delegation. This assumption has been refuted by recent empirical results showing that coalition parties have various tools with which to monitor the action of potentially hostile ministers: they may assign a junior minister from their ranks to a minister designated by another party (Thies, 2001), distribute committee chair-positions to members belonging to another party than the one holding the relevant ministry (Kim and Loewenberg, 2005) or substantially amend, in Parliament, the ministerial bill that is dividing the coalition (Martin and Vanberg, 2005).

Another tool at the disposal of coalition parties is a written contract with ministers, where the legitimate expectations of the principals/coalition parties vis-à-vis the agent/minister are specified. The coalition agreement could serve such a purpose, thus being a device that assures both intra-party and inter-party commitment. As Müller and Strøm have recently argued:

Coalition agreements are primarily designed to govern the relationship *between* governing parties but may also be intended for use *within* each party (. . .) Coalition agreements are a pre-commitments, by which the negotiating parties 'bind themselves to the mast' in such a way that when they go through unpleasant situations, party leaders have a mechanism by which they can resist temptation or intra-party pressure to renege on their commitments. Such pre-commitments reflect the fact that it is often easier to get party regulars to approve concessions to coalition partners when they are included in a package deal (. . .). (2008: 165)

This view is shared by various scholars (Browne and Drejmanis, 1982; Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 1993: 9; Budge and Keman, 1990: 47; De Winter, 2001; Peterson et al., 1983; Weller, 1997), but has been opposed by several others (Klingemann et al., 1994: 33; Laver and Schofield, 1990: 1991–2; Laver and Shepsle, 1996; Luebbert, 1986). For example, Luebbert considers the drafting of the coalition agreement to be a ritual dance during which party leaders are reluctant to make substantial deals to avoid creating disunity around those deals.

Recent empirical evidence supports the first group of scholars: coalition agreements, far from being short and vague (Müller and Strøm, 2000, 2008), deal with potential policy conflicts (Timmermans, 2003), commit parties (Moury and Timmermans, 2008), play a role in maintaining the stability of a government (Timmermans and Moury, 2006) and are good indicators of the legislative attention an issue will receive during the

government's term of office (Walgrave et al., 2006). In the light of this evidence, I argue that coalition agreements may serve as an effective tool for coalition parties to reduce agency loss when delegating to their ministers.

This argument – according to which cabinet decision-making is determined by a document written by the coalition parties – does not necessarily mean that ministers are constrained by a text imposed ‘from above’ that they had no chance of influencing. Andeweg (2000) has argued that when ministers have drafted the coalition agreement they might promote the government's obligations rather than those of the party, but this statement has to be tested. We still do not know to what extent ministers who negotiate are aware of their future participation in government or the portfolios they will get. Even if they are fully conscious, we ignore the extent to which they are constrained by their party organization or parliamentary party when negotiating on their behalf. My partial empirical evidence (interviews with ministers or former ministers from Belgium or Luxembourg in 2005) indicates that negotiators do not know for sure whether they will be part of the government or which portfolios they will be assigned if they are. Also, as reported by a former party president and minister, negotiators have to report constantly to their party bureau to check if it is in agreement with the commitments they are in the process of making during the negotiations: ‘Ministers will look for the consent of their party and their parliamentary group. (...) Negotiators are fully aware of the border lines that will not be crossed by their party.’³

However, negotiators may anticipate (or at least hope for) a ministerial position or specific portfolio and, accordingly, defend positions that are more favourable to themselves or their department than their party or the coalition. This may be especially true for negotiators who are expecting to be given second terms as ministers. Party leaders, who select ministers, are obviously well aware of this state of affairs and, within bounds, certainly welcome it. If they nominate ministers from the negotiating team, it is probably because they know that ministers are more likely to honour an agreement that they have negotiated themselves. Party leaders also know that some of the promises made by the party can never be adopted, and that the parties will need to be pragmatic once in government. As a party leader stated: ‘In our manifestoes we sometimes include demands that we know will never be enforced (...). It is a question of a balance between reality and identity.’⁴ This balance between ‘reality and identity’, our interviewee continues, may put party leaders in a difficult position: ‘The risk is that a party in government loses members and voters who do not recognise themselves in the actions of the party. (...) It is a very subtle game the party should not be presenting itself at the following elections as the betrayer of the party spirit.’ This is even more complex for ex-opposition parties that have ‘radicalized’ in the preceding years. These affirmations indicate that the drafting of the coalition agreement is not only an opportunity for party leaders to gain command over their ministers, but also an occasion for party leaders, as (and with) future ministers, to establish a government plan that reconciles government and party priorities. Also, if party leaders negotiate the coalition agreement and become ministers, they may be able to control and use the party's resources to support ministerial purposes – thus changing, to a certain extent, the direction of the delegation (Müller, 2000).

However, as Müller correctly points out, leadership selection remains a party choice (leaders are elected by the party rank and file) and party leaders who have joined the

government are ultimately the agents of extra-parliamentary party organizations. In a similar vein, it is the party that decides on the ratification of the governmental programme and takes the decision as whether to govern or not. Hence, conceptually, a coalition agreement finally serves as a contract in which the principals, i.e. the coalition parties, determine what the agents, i.e. the ministers, should do once decision-making powers are delegated to them.

2. Elaboration of research questions

If it is the case that coalition agreements effectively constrain ministers, it is the latter who transfer the coalition agreements into decisions. However, a full confirmation of our argument requires that we examine matters the ‘other way round’ and measure to what extent cabinet decisions are determined by pre-negotiated deals. To test the strength of our argument, we posit the two following research questions:

Q1. To what extent is the coalition agreement translated into decisions?

Q2. To what extent do cabinet decisions originate in the coalition agreement?

As Andeweg has argued, a coalition agreement must be sufficiently detailed to constrain ministers effectively (2000: 286). Obviously, the more precisely policies are defined, the less room there is for manoeuvre on the part of ministers. Hence, we will find additional support for my argument if we ascertain that an important number of cabinet decisions have been precisely defined beforehand in the coalition agreement. On this basis, I put forward my third research question:

Q3: To what extent have cabinet decisions been precisely defined beforehand in the coalition agreement?

The small number of cases in this study, combined with the large number of potentially explanatory variables, does not allow us to test hypotheses about what could explain the degree of ministerial constraint vis-à-vis the coalition agreement. In this research, I content myself with measuring this constraint while proposing some preliminary explanations for the observed variation.

3. Selection of case studies

I have chosen cases relating to the governments in Belgium, The Netherlands and Italy (Second Republic) in the 1990s. These countries were chosen because all three are parliamentary democracies in Western Europe, where no single party managed to get a majority in Parliament in the period under study. Furthermore, this choice of countries allows a possible variation in the result, as it contrasts two countries (Belgium and The Netherlands) where a coalition agreement is traditionally drafted (always after the elections), and another (Italy) where there is no culture of drafting a coalition agreement, though it has occasionally been done before the elections (for Prodi I, Berlusconi II and Prodi II),⁵ with the result that the coalition agreement also serves as a pre-electoral manifesto. The intention is that this approach will also repair an important bias in empirical studies on coalition, which often ignore pre-coalition agreements (see Nadenichek Golder (2006) for a notable exception).

I did not choose cabinets where a particularly extraordinary event occurred during the legislature, which would have obliged the government to wholly reconsider its previous programme. That is not to say that these cases are not interesting, but they are less representative, and it was safer to exclude them from a piece of research that is explanatory. For example, my analysis excludes the Dehaene II government in Belgium (1995–9), which had to draft a new government programme after the unprecedented civil reaction that followed the murder of a number of young girls in the country ('La Marche Blanche').

For the cases to be comparable, the Dutch and Belgian governments are chosen from the same two decades as the two Italian governments, already out of office, which had previously drafted a coalition agreement – Prodi I and Berlusconi II.⁶ The choice of Prodi I allows us to check whether a minority government is different in respect to ministerial freedom vis-à-vis the coalition agreement.⁷ Indeed, departures from the coalition agreement should be especially common for minority coalitions whose legislative success (and survival) depends on opposition parties – which are in a particularly favourable position to influence legislation (Strøm, 1984, Artés and Bustos, 2008).

4. Operationalization of hypotheses and main findings

To recapitulate, I am concerned with testing the principal–agent theory as applied to coalition government, which implies that the coalition agreement serves to limit agency losses occurring in the two-fold process of delegation from the coalition parties to the ministers. I calculate the extent to which the coalition agreement has been transferred into decisions and then the proportion of cabinet decisions which originate from the common document.

Proportion of the coalition agreement transferred into government decisions

The method I employ to calculate the extent to which the coalition agreement has been translated into decisions was developed from the one used by Royed (1996) and subsequently by several other scholars (Artés and Bustos, 2008; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Thomson, 1999) to calculate the proportion of electoral pledges fulfilled. Their technique has proved very reliable and consists of identifying pledges in the electoral programme (for us, the coalition agreement) and checking up on their fulfilment.

As the authors cited above did for the manifestos studied, I first codified all pledges included in the coalition agreement, distinguishing between pledges about *outcomes* (such as to 'reduce unemployment', 'reduce public deficit', 'increase safety') – compliance with which not only depends on Cabinet decisions but also on external factors – and pledges about *actions*⁸ (such as to 'provide subsidies to companies for hiring the unemployed', 'decrease spending for the disabled', 'increase the number of policemen on the streets') – compliance with which only depends on the Cabinet. In order to capture the extent to which coalition agreements constrain ministers, I only considered pledges about *actions*.

I then proceeded to distinguish, among the pledges about actions, three types of pledge: (1) non-testable pledges, the fulfilment of which is practically impossible to

assess, e.g. 'to restructure army'; (2) imprecise pledges, the implementation of which is testable but allows the minister a certain amount of discretion, e.g. 'to reduce taxes'; and (3) precise pledges,⁹ the implementation of which is precisely defined, leaving the minister no room for discretion at all, e.g. 'to cut income tax by 3% for all employees in the private sector'. The selection of testable pledges is a key point in the analysis, as it is crucial to get objective measurements of fulfilment.

After identifying the pledges, I then checked fulfilment by looking at each pledge and ascertaining whether we could find a government decision that was congruent with the proposal in the pledge. For example, if I wanted to check the transfer into a government decision of the pledge 'proposing a bill on equal opportunities at work', I would first read analyses of the parliamentary term made by journalists and political scientists. If no information was found in the reports of such experts and journalists, I would then search in the databases provided by each country (collecting all ministerial decisions of that particular parliament), using key words (in our example, 'equal opportunities', 'gender', 'female', 'work', etc.).¹⁰ If, in the database, I found a bill on equal opportunities at work, the pledge was then considered as fulfilled. If, after inputting several key words, I did not, then the pledge was considered unfulfilled. For budgetary pledges, I relied more on summaries of financial bills, as presented by the Council of Ministers to the press in order to see whether the budgetary pledges were congruent with government decisions.

I decided to consider that a pledge had been transferred into a government decision when it was either 'fully fulfilled' or 'partially fulfilled', so as to have a reliable coding. As I saw, too, during the research, Thomson found that the two-category distinction between 'fully fulfilled or partially fulfilled' and 'not fulfilled' was more reliable than the three-category distinction between 'not fulfilled', 'partially fulfilled' and 'fully fulfilled'.¹¹ For imprecise pledges, specifically, it is difficult to state whether a pledge is 'partially' or 'fully fulfilled'. Such a choice makes sense given my research question, i.e. to measure the extent to which ministers are constrained by the coalition agreement and not the extent to which parties are accountable to the voters. In the first case, what matters is that the bill fulfilling the coalition agreement is presented by ministers, in the second it is that the bill really provides the desired outcome.

For the same reason, I did not carry out a qualitative assessment of each government decision. In the above example, if the coalition agreement mentioned a bill on equal opportunities at work, and the government subsequently presented such a bill, the pledge was considered as fulfilled, without considering whether the bill was really efficient in increasing equal opportunities at work or not. Following similar reasoning, I did not consider whether the bill was implemented or not, and I stopped my analysis at the presentation by the government of a bill without following its outcome in Parliament. A very large majority of the bills were passed into law for the governments that completed their term and, conversely, fewer were passed for governments that fell during their mandate, above all the Prodi government.¹² A study of the positive votes (or amendments) for bills in Parliament and the implementation of bills, of course, provides interesting information, but it falls outside the scope of this article and should be developed at length in future research. To sum up: I am 'generous' with governments. I consider a pledge transferred into a government decision when a decision has been made by the government in

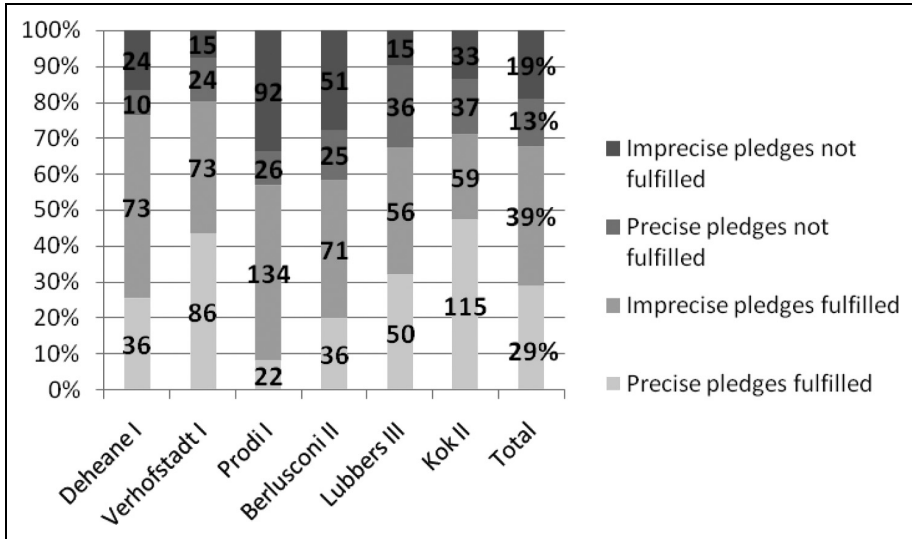


Figure 1. Pledges transferred into ministerial decisions (N = 1199)

the direction indicated by the pledge without controlling whether the desired outcome has been reached or not.

Among the plausible criticisms of this method, the main one is that it does not attribute any index of importance to the pledges. This failing, however, is much less important than it seems, because, generally speaking, the more pledges there are on an issue, the more the issue can be considered as significant for parties.¹³ There are some exceptions, however, as it may happen that very sensitive policies are not described at length in the coalition agreement, e.g. the ‘devolution reform’ (further federalization) in Berlusconi’s coalition agreement (only 3 pledges out of 183), the reform of health insurance in the case of Lubbers III (only one pledge out of 157), and the reform of work disability measures in the case of Kok II (4 pledges out of 244). I even argue that this is not a problem at all, because what we are seeking to calculate is the extent to which ministers are constrained by the coalition agreement. If an important reform is promised in the coalition agreement, but there are no concrete plans on how to implement this reform, then the ministers are less constrained by the programme than when all details of implementation are described.

As we can see from Figure 1, an important number of pledges are transferred into government decisions in all the cases considered, a fact that supports our argument that coalition agreements constrain ministers. Indeed, at least 57 percent, and an average of 68 percent, of pledges were transferred into government decisions in all cases, including those of governments that did not complete their mandate (Prodi I and Dehaene I). This proportion varies across and within countries, with the Belgians transferring most of their pledges into government decisions (more than 75 percent in both cases), followed by the Dutch (more than 67 percent) and the Italians (more than 57 percent). We do not

have enough cases to ascertain whether the underperformance of the Italians is due to the pre-electoral character of the coalition agreement, but we can observe that the Berlusconi I government, which disposed of a large parliamentary majority and lasted four years, did not outperform the minority Prodi I government, which lasted only two years.¹⁴

Proportion of decisions originating in the coalition agreement

In order to calculate the proportion of ministerial decisions originating in the coalition agreement, it makes sense to look only at the *important* decisions presented by a minister that were adopted in cabinet. I define a ministerial decision as ‘any decision adopted by the Council of Ministers which significantly changes the status quo’. In order to identify these decisions, I relied on different sources, including a number of experts’ descriptions of political events and press reports in weekly newspapers.¹⁵ On the assumption that specialists and the weekly press only report important, and not routine, decisions, I codified any cabinet decision reported by those sources.

In the second step, I considered the minutes of the Council of Ministers (i.e. the Cabinet) to have the exact description of a decision. A decision is not equivalent to a ministerial bill, as it often happens that a single bill includes several important decisions. A financial law is a clear example of a ‘mega-law’, where different decisions of considerable importance are involved. In such cases, I divided the bill into its main parts, each of which is considered to be a decision. In order to identify the main elements of the bill, I relied on the summaries provided in the official reports of the Councils of Ministers, which divide the major bills into their main points. All such decisions are available from the weekly reports of the Councils of Ministers, which list all bills passed by the government and provide a summary of each.

Following identification of the decisions to be analysed, I then compared the government decisions with the coalition agreement. In order to capture the extent to which coalition agreements *effectively* constrain ministers, I compared each important cabinet decision with the list of *testable* pledges about *actions* (as defined above).¹⁶ If the coalition agreement failed to mention the policy field of the decision in any way (for example, if a bill regulated the circulation of aeroplanes and the coalition agreement did not mention air traffic regulation) then the decision is considered as not being based on the coalition agreement. When a decision completely fulfilled a precise pledge (e.g. when the coalition agreement mentioned the creation of a centre to promote the fight against Aids and such a centre was created), then undoubtedly the decision can be considered as having originated in the coalition agreement. These first two very clear-cut selections involved approximately two-thirds of the government decisions studied. The most delicate categorization task, covering the remaining third of the decisions, was to determine whether a government decision had its origin in the coalition agreement when the decision fulfilled imprecise, but testable, pledges. For these decisions it was sometimes necessary to read the law, or experts’ comments on the law, in order to judge, in the light of all this information, whether the decisions made were based on imprecise pledges of the coalition agreement or not. Of course, if a decision concerned a policy field mentioned in the coalition agreement, but contradicted what was written, I would not consider it to have been based on the coalition agreement. In contrast, a decision that partially implemented a pledge in the coalition agreement, one that went further than what was written in the coalition agreement, or

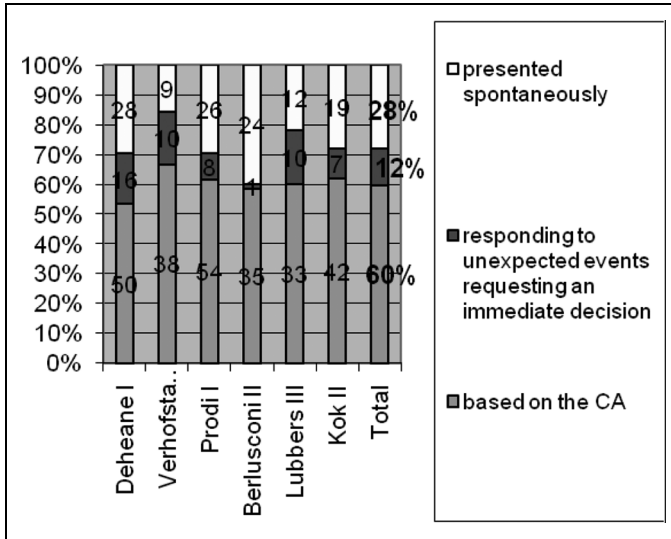


Figure 2. Important decisions adopted by ministers (N = 422)

where precise action was taken to fulfil imprecise pledges were considered to be decisions originating in the coalition agreement.

Finally, I distinguished between decisions originating in the coalition agreement, those taken ‘spontaneously’ and those adopted in response to an event which could not have been anticipated during the negotiations and required an immediate decision (such as a NATO resolution, a natural disaster, etc.).

Figure 2 shows the proportion of important cabinet decisions which originated in the document out of a total of 422. In Figure 1, we can see that for each of the governments involved more than half of their important decisions originated in the coalition agreement. Taking all the cabinet decisions of all governments into account, we observe that 60 percent originated in the coalition agreement.

This finding, together with the observation that 68 percent of the pledges are at least partially fulfilled, strongly supports our argument that coalition parties use the coalition agreement as a tool to limit agency loss when delegating to individual ministers. In other words, coalition agreements effectively constrain ministers. It is striking that the two Italian governments are no different in this respect, even though coalition agreements have been used only recently and are written before the elections.¹⁷ In particular, we do not see the minority Prodi I government adopting more ‘spontaneous’ decisions than the majority governments analysed.

In Figure 3, from the complete set of decisions, we subtract those adopted in response to an unexpected event that required an immediate decision, and distinguish between ministerial decisions based on precise and imprecise pledges. We can see that at least 60 percent, and on average 68 percent, of the cabinet decisions not responding to an unexpected event originated in the coalition agreement. More precisely: 64 percent in the case of Dehaene I, 81 percent Verhofstadt I, 68 percent Prodi I, 59 percent Berlusconi II,

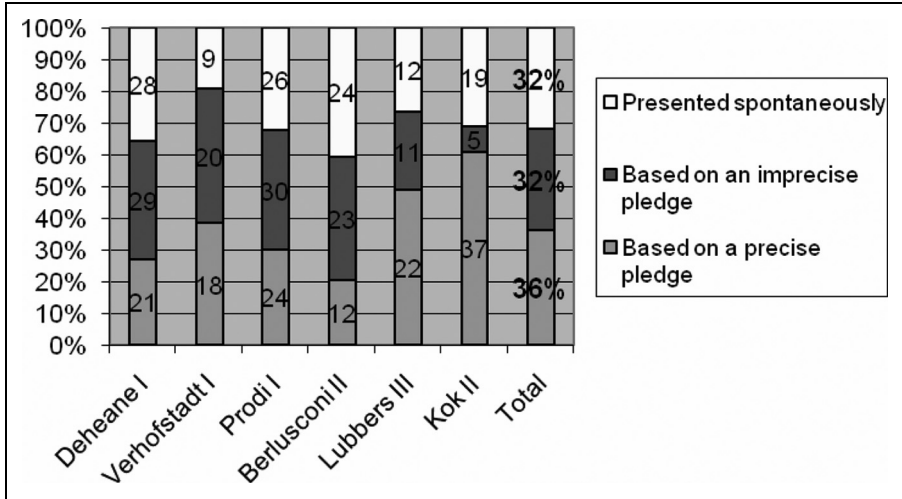


Figure 3. Important decisions adopted by cabinet, not including those adopted in response to unexpected events requiring an immediate decision (N = 370)

73 percent Lubbers III and 69 percent Kok II. In other words, more than two-thirds of important cabinet decisions not responding to an unexpected event were determined by a coalition agreement. Again, the minority government did not depart from the coalition agreement more than the other governments.

As stated above, we would find support for a stronger version of our argument if we observed that a significant number of cabinet decisions had been *precisely* defined beforehand in the coalition agreement. We observe that, on average, one-third of important cabinet decisions were previously defined in precise terms in the coalition agreement. While this finding lends support to our argument, it also shows that in two-thirds of cases ministers may use a certain amount of discretion in adopting decisions.

Preliminary attempts to explain variation

As stated, we do not have enough cases to fully test hypotheses about what might explain variation in the degree of ministerial constraint among cases. We can, however, discuss preliminary observations. In Table 4, we present the number of words in each coalition agreement, because, for coalitions that drafted a short agreement, we might expect a lower percentage of decisions originating in the coalition agreement. We observe that the two governments which wrote the shortest coalition agreements (Dehaene I and Berlusconi II) adopted slightly fewer agreement-based decisions than the average, but the difference is not proportionate to the difference in length between coalition agreements, and most of the decisions adopted by ministers still originated in the document. Moreover, the Verhofstadt I coalition agreement was relatively short, too, but still 81 percent of its decisions originated in the document. This means that the silence of the

Table 1. Cases selected

Cabinets	Parties	No. of seats held by the governing parties in the chamber
Dehaene I (1992–95)	PS, PSC, SP, CVP	120/150 (80%)
Verhofstadt I (1999–2003)	PS, PRL-FDF-MCC, Ecolo, SP, VLD, Agalev	94/150 (63%)
Prodi I (1996–98)	DS, PPI, RI, UD, Verdi, PS, SI	290/630 (46%)
Berlusconi II (2001–2006 ¹)	FI, AN, LN, CDU-UDC, NPSI, PRI	366/630 (58%)
Lubbers III (1989–1994)	PvdA, CDA	103/150 (69%)
Kok II (1998–2002)	PvdA, D66, VVD	97/150 (65%)

PS Parti Socialiste (French-speaking Socialist Party), PSC Party Social Chrétien (French-speaking Christian Democratic Party), SP Socialistische Partij (Flemish Socialist Party), CVP Christelijke Volkspartij (Flemish Christian Democratic Party), PRL-FDF-MCC Parti Républicain Libéral – Front Démocratique des Francophones – Mouvement des citoyens pour le changement (French-speaking alliance of Liberal parties), Ecolo (French-speaking Green Party), VLD Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (Flemish Liberal Party), Agalev (Flemish Green Party).

PvdA Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party), CDA Christen Democratisch Appel (Christian Democratic Party), VVD Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (Liberal Conservative Party), D66 Democrats 1966 (Progressive Liberal Democrats).

DS Democratici di Sinistra (Democratic Left), PPI Parti Popolare Italiano (Italian People's Party), RI Rinnovamento Italiano (Italian Renewal), UD Unione Democratica (Democratic Union), PS (Patto Segni), SI Socialisti Italiani (Italian Socialists), FI Forza Italia, AN Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), LN Lega Norte (Northern League), CDU-UDC Cristiani Democratici Uniti – Unione Christiana Democratica (Christian Democrats), NPSI Novo Partito Socialisti Italiani (New Italian Socialist Party), PRI Partito Repubblicano Italiano (Italian Republican Party).

coalition agreement on several issues prevented ministers from adopting decisions on these subjects and, thus, the coalition agreement meaningfully constrained ministers, serving as both a positive and negative agenda (on negative and positive agendas, see also Cox and McCubbins, 2005).

We also identify whether party leaders joined the government¹⁸ and how many ministers participated in the negotiations, with the idea that departures from the coalition agreement might be more common when party leaders enter the government (because the sense of the delegation somehow changes) and when few ministers have been negotiators¹⁹ (and those who have not will be reluctant to implement policy deals they do not know or appreciate). We do not observe any strongly independent effect of these variables. The only clear result is that Italian governments perform less notably on the fulfilment dimension, but so many variables could explain this²⁰ (fragmentation of the party system, pre-electoral status of the common programme, etc.) that we cannot be conclusive on this point. Most importantly, these results show, despite many differences between the cases, that ministers are consistently and extensively constrained by the coalition agreement, and this supports our original argument.

Table 2. Examples of pledges included in the coalition agreement and of their transfer into government decisions

Government	Pledge	Type of pledge	Fulfilment
Dehaene I, 1992	'Federalization of Belgian state via a community to community dialogue'	Imprecise	Yes
Verhofstadt I, 1999	Enlargement of popular consultation	Precise	No
Prodi I, 1996	Establishment of a parliamentary commission when demanded by one quarter of the members of each chamber	Precise	No
Berlusconi II, 2001	Creation of more online services for citizens	Precise	Yes
Lubbers III, 1989	Law on equal opportunities	Precise	Yes
Lubbers III, 1989	No new taxes	Precise	No
Kok II, 1994	Same-sex marriage allowed	Precise	Yes

Table 3. Examples of decisions and their origin

Government	Government decision	Origin
Verhofstadt I	Onkelinx's Rosetta Plan, encouraging, with a tax deduction, recruitment of school leavers by companies.	Imprecise in the coalition agreement: helping young people without significant education find a job.
Verhofstadt I	Regulation of noise around Zaventem airport.	Not originating from the coalition agreement (no mention of the decision in the coalition agreement).
Prodi I	Agreement to enlarge NATO.	Precise in the coalition agreement: agreement to enlarge NATO.
Prodi I	Measure to avoid prison escapes.	Not originating from the coalition agreement (no mention of the decision in the coalition agreement).
Berlusconi II	Bill on 'devolution'.	Bill divided into 6 main decisions, half of which originated from imprecise pledges in the coalition agreement.
Berlusconi II	Law on legitimate suspicion.	Not originating from the coalition agreement (no mention of the decision in the coalition agreement).
Lubbers III	Reform of work incapacity benefit.	Not originating from the coalition agreement (no mention of the decision in the coalition agreement).
Kok II	Adoption allowed for gay couples.	Precise in the coalition agreement (adoption allowed for gay couples).
Kok II	Limitation of family reunion or asylum seekers.	Not originating from the coalition agreement (opposed to what was written in the coalition agreement).

Table 4. Dependent variables and potentially explanatory variables for the transfer of a high proportion of pledges into government decisions

Cabinet	Dependent variables		Potential explanatory variables				
	Transfer of the CA into government decisions	Proportion of decisions originating from the CA (not counting spontaneous decisions)	No. of words in the coalition agreement	Proportion of party leaders who entered the government	Participation of ministers in the negotiations	Participation of the most important ministers in the negotiations	
Dehaene I (1992–95)	76%	64%	7,500	0/4 0%	9/15 60%	4/5 80%	
Verhofstadt I (1999–2003)	80%	81%	14,800	3/6 50%	7/15 47%	5/6 83%	
Prodi I (1996–98)	58%	68%	41,500	2/7 29%	7/17 41%	3/3 100%	
Berlusconi (2001–2006 ²)	59%	60%	9,600	3/6 50%	3/17 18%	2/3 67%	
Lubbers III (1989–1994)	68%	73%	28,500	2/2 100%	3/14 21%	2/2 100%	
Kok II (1998–2002)	71%	69%	36,000	1/3 33%	5/15 33%	4/4 100%	
Average	68%	68%	23,000	43%	37%	88%	

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that a coalition agreement can serve as a tool limiting the potential agency losses induced by the two-fold delegation from coalition parties to ministers. My results support the argument, and I have shown that a significant majority (68 percent) of pledges included in the coalition agreement are translated into government decisions and that a similarly large majority of important cabinet decisions, not counting those responding to an unexpected event, originate in the coalition agreement (in testable pledges about actions). Remarkably, one-third of these decisions have even been precisely defined in the document. It is worth noting that the Italian governments, though underperforming regarding the fulfilment dimension, show a similar proportion of cabinet decisions based on the coalition agreement, despite the fact that they drafted coalition agreements before the elections and include a minority government.

The very small number of cases studied did not allow for the hypothesis-testing of the variables that could explain the variation in the extent to which ministers are constrained by the coalition agreement, but it is interesting to note that the length of the coalition agreement, the entry of party leaders to government, and the number of ministers participating in the negotiations do not seem to have any significant influence on the two measurements made above.

As claimed in the Introduction, my study only partially analyses the process of delegation from the party to ministers. As said, my analysis stops after the presentation of a bill by a minister – though the amendments made by parliamentary parties to an act of parliament could serve as an ‘ex-post’ party control of ministerial decisions. Hence, studying these amendments is crucial, as Martin and Vanberg (2005) have shown. Also, an important number of ministers (37 percent) participated in the negotiations on the coalition agreements and hence were able to influence this document. The extent of this influence, however, is still unclear and it would be interesting to investigate how often (and when) future ministers inject their own preferences into the coalition agreement, to what degree those preferences are different from those of their party,²¹ and what the role (and composition) of the different party branches is during the negotiations. Further research should also examine the cases, not considered here, where no coalition agreement has been drafted beforehand.

With greater knowledge of ministerial and party preferences, we would be able to check whether or not, besides being a party tool to constrain ministers, coalition agreements serve as an opportunity for parties to reconcile government and party priorities. In this regard, it is worth recalling Luebbert’s work suggesting that party leaders fear party members’ dissatisfaction with their choices and are, thus, disinclined to make concrete commitments (1986: 42–56). If Luebbert’s assumption is true, it should produce a paradox: in coalition government, no policies would ever be decided and this would surely contradict party interests in the long term. Contrary to Luebbert’s expectations, an answer to this paradox may, in fact, be the actual drafting of a coalition agreement – a moment during which party leaders have the opportunity to make policy while avoiding disunity. The fact that party leaders may become ministers and that other negotiators are theoretically eligible for ministerial posts, the absence of an audience during the negotiations, the pressure of

time, and the possibility of package deals are all factors enabling party leaders to make deals that are more easily accepted by their supporting base.²²

In sum, the drafting of a coalition agreement is a constraint on, and a resource for, ministers. It is a constraint because ministers are constrained to a large extent by the document. It can also be a resource, because if ministers have participated in the negotiations they may be able to insert some of their preferences into the coalition agreement and in that way ensure they will be able to adopt policies pursuing these preferences.

Notes

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful suggestions.

1. See, for example, Laver and Shepsle (1996).
2. In that vein, some recent research has addressed the question of the impact of government on parties and has found that government indeed has an impact on the organizational structure of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995; Rüdig and Rihoux, 2006).
3. Interview with a former Belgian party president and minister on 15 June 2005.
4. Interview with a Luxembourg party president on 22 May 2005.
5. Before the pre-electoral coalition agreement written by Prodi I (1996), another agreement (on 'national solidarity') was drafted in 1978 between the party present in government (DC) and all other parliamentary parties.
6. The formation of the governments which followed Prodi I (D'Alema I, D'Alema II and Amato II) was not preceded by an election or by the negotiation of a coalition agreement.
7. The Prodi I government did not win a majority of seats in Parliament and needed the support of the Communist Party in Parliament for its investiture.
8. This codification was introduced earlier by Royed (1996).
9. This codification is developed from Royed (1996), who uses the terms 'rhetorical', 'difficult definite' and 'definite' pledges.
10. This type of database is available on the Internet for the most recent parliaments, on CD ROM (for the Dutch and Italian cases) and in the official government gazette *Faits/Feiten* (for the Dehaene I government).
11. The use of two-category fulfilment was identified as highly reliable, while that of three-category fulfilment was identified as only satisfactory.
12. More than 95 percent of bills were passed by Parliament for the Belgian and Dutch cases that completed their mandates, while 85 percent of the Dehaene I's bills were passed by Parliament, 75 percent for Berlusconi and 45 percent for Prodi I (Moury, 2005).
13. For example, the important reform of the public administration promised in Verhofstadt I's coalition agreement involved 17 pledges (out of 200); for Dehaene the reduction in the deficit involved 19 pledges (out of 143); for Berlusconi's government the tax reforms involved 25 out of 183 pledges.
14. The main difference between these two is the rate of government bills that were passed by Parliament. For more details, see Moury and Timmermans (2008) and Moury (forthcoming).
15. For The Netherlands, we used the *Jaarboek Documentatiecentrum Politieke Partijen* (DNPP Groningen), *Vrij Nederlands* and *De Groene Amsterdammer*. For Belgium, we used the annual *Overzicht van het Belgische politieke gebeuren* (Res Publica), *De Knack* and *Le Vif/L'Express*. For Italy, we used *Politica in Italia* (Il Mulino), *Panorama* and *Espresso*.

16. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
17. The coalition agreement for the Prodi I government was written 6 months before the elections.
18. I am relying on Müller's definition of party leaders, i.e. 'those who internalise the collective interest of the party and monitor the party's other office holders' (2000: 317).
19. By 'negotiators', I mean individuals who participated in the negotiations during the entire drafting of the coalition agreement, as members of their party's main delegation, and thus I exclude those who were invited to participate in roundtables preparing the negotiations. These figures were obtained by reading press and specialist reports on the negotiations. I compared this list with the list of ministers with portfolios who made up the government. When a minister was replaced by another, both are taken into consideration. As I agree with Blondel (1993) that prime ministers, deputy prime ministers and finance ministers are key players on the government stage, I also identify the participation of these most important ministers (Moury, 2004).
20. For more details on the Italian particularities, see Moury (forthcoming).
21. A good line of research would be to consider individual bills as a particular case study. This research should identify (1) what minister initiated a particular decision, (2) whether this minister was a negotiator, (3) whether the individual bill was based on the coalition agreement and/or on the party manifesto – and, whether not, (4) what could have convinced the ministers to take such a decision. It is something we could not undertake in this article, given the large number of decisions to be analysed and the difficulty in identifying the particular minister who drafted a bill, as bills are often signed by several ministers or by the cabinet as a whole.
22. The latter three conditions were identified by Peterson et al. in 1983 to help explain intra-party decision-making.

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