ROBERT L. PETERSON
University of Tennessee at Knoxville
MARTINE M. DE RIDDER
University of Oklahoma

Government Formation As a Policy-Making Arena

The formation of governing coalitions in certain western European parliamentary democracies is also a process of formulating policy. Governments are formed in a distinguishable arena in which differences over certain kinds of policy questions are for a time resolved when a coalition of parties is based on an issue-specific consensus. This essay, based on a study of the formation of Belgian governments between 1965 and 1981, presents an approach to government formation as a policy arena. The essay discusses the assumptions about coalition formation and policy making that underlie such an approach, the characteristics of the arena in which governments form, and the problem of generalizing from the Belgian case.

In a number of western European parliamentary democracies, the formation of governing coalitions is also a process of formulating policy. Government formation in such countries can be seen as part of a continuing process of policy making, occurring in an arena distinct from other policy-making arenas. From this point of view, government formation is not a hiatus, a disruption, or a manifestation of instability; it is not simply the allocation of portfolios or the redistribution of formal power among parties. It is an instrument whereby differences over certain kinds of policy questions can for a time be resolved, as a coalition of parties results from an issue-specific consensus. Governments are formed in an arena distinct from but linked to formal institutional arenas for policy making. Certain kinds of issues are transferred from legislative and administrative policy-making arenas to the government formation arena; there a degree of agreement is established, and the issues are then returned to legislative and administrative arenas for further specification, ratification, and/or implementation.

This paper outlines an approach to government formation as occurring in a policy arena. It is based on a study of the formation of Belgian governments between 1965 and 1981. The paper consists of three

parts: (1) an outline of assumptions about coalition formation and policy making that underlie the idea of the government formation arena as a policy arena, (2) a discussion of the characteristics of the government formation arena and of how these characteristics apply to the problem of formulating policy on issues of a particular kind, and (3) a concluding discussion of how general this process is which is derived from observing Belgian politics.

Coalition Formation and Policy-Making Assumptions

To examine government formation as policy formulation is to work in an area which falls between two sets of theoretical concerns. Large and diverse bodies of literature exist concerning both coalition formation and policy making. Scholars have developed our knowledge of both of these areas substantially, but in neither area have they focused directly on government formation as an instrument of policy formulation. Recent studies of coalitions have paid increasing attention to bargaining and to policy preferences; these studies are, however, much more concerned with the distribution of portfolios in the coalition and are most interested in the size and general ideological orientation of coalitions (Browne and Dreijmanis, 1982). Important segments of the policy literature refer to policy as consensus, but without looking systematically at government formation as leading to specific kinds of consensus.

Coalition Formation Assumptions

Our general perception is that the policy process and the coalition process merge during government formation. Government formation may be considered a process of discovering, mapping, and creating a consensus on certain issues. The literature on coalition theory, with its emphasis on elegance, coalition size, and the ideological orientations of coalitions, is not designed to examine this link between coalition formation and policy formulation. We make three assumptions which differ from those frequently found in coalition theory: (1) that the actors in government formations are not monolithic or unitary, (2) that the actors are not engaged in simple value maximization or optimization but in

developing positions on multidimensional issues characterized by value complexity, and (3) that the government formation process is iterative.[1]

The first assumption, that actors are not monolithic, acknowledges the fact that government formations are negotiated within a complex web of relationships in which intraparty bargaining may be as important as interparty bargaining.[2] Even individuals are subject to the effects of multiple roles and crosspressures. The individual has his own self-concept and ambitions to provide a basis for action, plus his roles as party leader, faction leader, interest group representative, regional representative, elected official, etc. A party leader trying to form a government coalition must balance his desires to become prime minister, to hold his party factions together, to satisfy various sets of voters, and to attain certain policy goals.

Once one assumes that the actors are not monolithic, then one is also led to assume that the actors are not engaged in simple value maximization.[3] A massive literature from psychology, public administration, and foreign policy has established that people have a limited ability to optimize values. Moreover, the assumption that actors are not monolithic means that they deal with a variety of cost/benefit standards permitting multiple trade-offs and complex balances.[4] The concept of "value complexity" is defined by Alexander George as "the presence of multiple, competing values and interests that are imbedded in a single issue," which make it "difficult, if not impossible, for the decision maker to formulate a single yardstick that encompasses and aggregates all the competing values and interests" (1980, p. 26). In Belgium, when actors negotiate the agreement on which a coalition is based, they deal not with a single issue but with a package of positions on a variety of issues—a package put together in a dynamic process in which positions and perceptions evolve.

The last of the assumptions listed above is that the government formation process is iterative.[5] To be more precise, it is iterative within the context of other legislative and administrative decision-making processes.[6] We have already suggested that government formation is not a hiatus in the policy process, but part of that process. Government formation transfers the treatment of certain issues from legislative and administrative decision-making arenas to an extrainstitutional arena. When issues have proven insoluable within the government, within the parliament, or through interaction between them so that the incumbent coalition collapses, those issues are the subject of bargaining in the formation of a new coalition. Once the new coalition forms on the basis of agreements about these (and other) issues, they are returned to administrative and parliamentary arenas for further action, and the process continues.

Policy-making Assumptions

Our assumptions about the policy-making process relate in important ways to the assumptions discussed above. A substantial segment of the policy-making literature involves unitary actor and value maximization assumptions similar to those that we find inapplicable in the coalition literature. The assumptions we use come closer to those of other policy analysts, such as Bauer (1968), and Zeckhauser and Schafer (1968), who suggest that "decision making" is "an inappropriate concept for characterizing policy formation" and "that there is no determinate best solution to a policy problem," who question the assumption of "a single decision-making unit with a single set of utility preferences," and who see self-interest as "an uninformative tautology" (Bauer, 1968, pp. 11-15). In this context, policy formation becomes a kind of coalition building, in the broadest sense of the term. For example, Ashford (1982, p. 54) refers to the "task of constructing a democratic consensus," Richardson and Jordon (1973, pp. 44-48) discuss processes of "consensus and consultation," and Bauer (1968, p. 16) refers to "the definition and redefinition of the issue" and leadership skill in "formulating policy so that a winning coalition can be mobilized behind." As one last example, Brownstein (1976, p. 32) states that "policy making involves the aggregation of competing notions of social values; it is imbedded in ongoing social and political contexts." Negotiation, coalition, consensus, and policy all merge in this view.

To be more specific, we have already implied our first assumption: that policy making is not simple choice from among predetermined alternatives. Formulating, selecting, ratifying, and implementing policy may be conceptually distinct and, especially in the case of ratifying, may involve different legal competences, but few would deny that these functions interrelate in reality. A series of approximations and adjustments occur in the process of negotiating agreement on policy. The kind of process we have in mind is suggested by George (1980, pp. 180-182) when he discusses the interaction between search, analysis, and choice and by Allison (1971, pp. 170-173) when he refers to policy as a resultant. The second assumption is really another way of stating the first from a different perspective: policy making is cumulative and iterative. Bringing together the pieces of what is eventually identifiable as policy may involve discernable steps, but steps taken in repetitive processes. Perceptions are modified, value and outcome preferences are defined and modified in concrete terms, and positions are adjusted as the processes go on. The way the policy issue is defined affects the kinds of alternatives considered, and the articulation of alternatives is part of the definition of

the issue; the kinds of alternatives considered obviously affect the wording of legislation or regulations, and the process of writing legislation is a process of specifying alternatives.

Finally, we assume that policy making takes place in overlapping arenas. The concept of arena will be discussed at a later point in this paper. It implies that sets of actors interact in identifiable patterns according to general rules and procedures within boundaries which do not necessarily coincide with those of formal institutions. Different arenas are constituted by the mobilization of differing sets of actors, although the same individuals may operate in several arenas. Different arenas allow the use of different resources and make use of different rules of the game. In addition, Lowi (1964, pp. 677-715) and Smith (1975) suggest that different arenas are used to deal with qualitatively different issues. We add, because we assume that policy making is cumulative and iterative, that arenas do not function in isolation. Within each, outcomes develop that are part of a larger process. Arenas overlap, and issues may be dealt with in more than one arena with cumulative effects as the policy process goes on.

Clearly the assumptions about coalition formation and policy making complement each other, as one would expect given our premise that coalition formation has policy implications. By working in an area which falls between coalition studies and policy studies, we are examining government formation as a particular kind of policy arena, where particular issues can be treated in a broader policy-making context. Issues are transferred to this arena when actors can not agree on policy in other arenas and institutional contexts; after an issue-specific consensus is formed, the issues are again transferred to those other arenas.

Characteristics of the Government Formation Arena

Presumably issues are dealt with in the government formation arena because there is some impediment to treating them in normal institutional arenas. They tend to be issues that generate intense disagreement. In the Belgian government formations on which this paper is based, almost all of the issues discussed in government formations fell into more than one of three general categories.[7] First, most issues involved in the status of political actors, their sense of identity, or their recognition by other political actors. For example, this was manifested in the more symbolic aspects of cultural autonomy, regionalization, and religious education. Second were proposals to modify political institutions or patterns of political interaction, as in the case of the creation of

cultural councils or regional executives. And third were issues that threatened deprivation for specific political actors, such as action to change levels of social payments or to redefine the welfare state. Put another way, these issues concern political attainment of goals in an institutional or structural context which interferes with goal attainment because (a) actors' sense of appropriate status or self-definitions are not accepted, (b) the political structure does not permit sufficient access to or control over important decisions, or (c) the normal functioning of structures threatens to deprive actors of something central to their identity or way of life. Therefore, actors feel the need to break out of normal institutional processes because these processes do not fully reflect political realities or because basic societal problems can be dealt with only if there is some adjustment in patterns of political interaction. The tensions are not great enough to induce revolution or a general breakdown of society, and the government formation process provides an extrainstitutional means for dealing with them. In a paradoxical way, the government formation process is an institutionalized extrainstitutional process. Normal institutional processes involving legislative and administrative interaction require acceptance of structures and procedures which the government formation arena does not. Operating in a normal institutional mode requires agreement upon a range of action within which legislative decisions will be made; it requires decisions based upon a majority of votes; and it requires a high degree of internal party agreement and discipline. In contrast, the government formation arena is less highly structured, is more flexible, and permits the use of the whole range of resources available to actors in their attempt to determine the outcome of decisions. In this sense, government formation makes possible efforts by new actors to be recognized, efforts to modify structures, and efforts to defend against deprivation as elites develop an issue-specific consensus.

To develop the argument outlined above, we will first describe what we see as the three successive stages of government formation and the policy effects related to these stages. We will then discuss how the characteristics of the process relate to the issue categories we have already described.

Stages and Policy Effects of Government Formation

An examination of the government formation process in Belgium leads one to view the process as consisting of three distinct elements which can be conceived of as three successive stages.[8] Conceptually, the boundaries of these stages are clear, but in practice they may blur

into each other, and a breakdown in the process at one stage may result in a regression to a previous stage. In the first stage, actors are selected who will participate directly in the formation of a government. These actors include both the parties and the individuals who will take part in the negotiations, and the stage corresponds roughly to the period when the *informateur* is making his assessment of the situation. The participants largely select themselves and each other through their decisions about the potential benefits of participation in the government, about the possibility of successful negotiations, and about acceptable partners in the government. During this stage, there may be public discussions about the general orientation of the future government.

In the second stage, the actors actually begin to negotiate about the substance of policy. The agreement to govern is hammered out as negotiators discuss key policies to be pursued by the new government. Issues may be dealt with sequentially or simultaneously; technical and general political aspects of policies may be dealt with separately or at the same time; and different sets of negotiators may deal with different aspects of issues. Discussions take place not only among parties but within parties and between parties and other types of organizations. These discussions may also anticipate decisions to be made during the third stage, when governmental seats are distributed among the governing parties and individuals are assigned to these seats.

Pre- and post-formation stages, the boundaries of which cannot be precisely defined, precede and follow these three stages. The preformation stage consists of the circumstances immediately leading to the fall of the government. The postformation stage covers the consequences of the government formation and the implementation or lack of implementation of agreements. When there are frequent changes of government, the postformation stage of one government merges into the preformation stage of another government as the iterative process continues.

The theoretical importance of these three stages should be emphasized. The formation of a coalition is not a simple and discrete act, but rather a series of decisions. The payoffs and perceptions of payoffs can change with each stage. Further, each stage has different implications for policy formation as agendas are established, terms of reference are articulated, alternatives are outlined, and general responsibilities of further legislative and administrative action are assigned.

It is admittedly difficult to establish the exact policy implications of these three stages, but general types of effects can be outlined. The effects are cumulative over the period of a government formation. As we have argued, the government formation process involves the transfer of issues from one arena to another. Thus, the preformation stage in

activating this new arena has three kinds of effects: (1) it sets the general agenda for government formation negotiations as the issues central to the fall of the government become issues to be dealt with through government formation; (2) it mobilizes actors, including parties, interest groups, and individuals; and (3) it orients actors toward issues and each other, establishing degrees of trust, expectations about what is feasible, etc.

The first stage leads to an agreement among parties to engage in negotiations about specific policy questions and about the distribution of seats in the government. This agreement has a number of policy effects: (1) it further specifies the substantive agenda which was partially established in the preformation stage; (2) it limits the range of policy alternatives to be considered in the next stage, as a set of parties with particular orientations participates in the formation and commits themselves to approach specific issues in a given way; and (3) it may also establish procedures or deadlines for the negotiations that take place in the second stage.

If the second stage negotiations are successful, they lead to an agreement to govern, which establishes an area of consensus among parties, within parties, and between parties and associated groups. This consensus may be more or less clear and more or less firm. The policy implications of the agreement to govern may vary substantially. First and most generally, the agreement constitutes a reference document for further action on issues. It sets an agenda for future governmental and legislative action, defines issues, and sets the terms of further debate and action. More specifically, the agreement may indicate alternative courses of action to be considered or specify a preferred alternative, specify a framework to be filled in by the government at a later date, indicate other procedures for reaching further agreement, or develop specific legislative proposals to be presented for parliamentary ratification.

The third stage completes the process with the allocation of portfolios, the installation of a government, and the transfer of policy issues to administrative and parliamentary arenas. The government then consists of a set of individuals who at least nominally share the consensus expressed in the agreement to govern and who are at least nominally supported by party institutions and other actors.

Arena Characteristics

The problem at this point is to indicate in more general terms the characteristics of government formation as an arena. The concept of an arena, whether so labeled or not, is widely used. One almost auto-

matically associates the term with Lasswell (1963) and McDougal and Associates (1960). It also appears in an important part of the policy analysis literature, exemplified by Lowi and those who have built upon his work. And it is used or, more frequently, implied in a number of other contexts. Recent attempts in the study of international relations to develop an issue-oriented, transnational paradigm imply something like the notion of arena when they suggest that patterns of interaction, actors and resources can vary depending upon the issue being contested (Mansbach and Vasquez, 1981; Keohane and Nye, 1977). And in the study of foreign policy, both Westerfield (1966, pp. 737-753) and Allison (1971) imply a concern with arenas: Westerfield referring to efforts to shift the context in which a decision is made so as to control policy outcomes and Allison referring to overlapping games, players, rules of the game, etc.

The concept of arena implies that the policy process is in some degree differentiated into segments or structures. In very rough terms, one may distinguish between those, like Lowi or the issue paradigm advocates in international relations, who distinguish arenas in terms of issue characteristics and those, like Lasswell and McDougal and by implication Allison, who distinguish among arenas in terms of characteristics of the process. (Actually Lasswell and McDougal differentiate along three dimensions: function, value, and territory.) Following Lasswell (1963), arenas may be said to vary in terms of participants, perspectives (value demands, group identifications, and expectations), resources, strategies, and outcomes. It is interesting to note the general similarity between this characterization of arenas and characterizations of international systems. For example, Holsti (1977) suggests that systems can be compared in terms of boundaries, characteristics of political units, structure (including the distribution of resources), forms of interactions and explicit or implicit rules or customs. In effect, what we see are different ways of posing primordial questions about who is involved, what they want, etc. The distinctions we want to make concerning government formation as an arena can be expressed by referring to boundaries, actors, actor perceptions, procedures and practices, and outcomes.

Boundaries. Institutional arenas, like the legislature or the cabinet, can be said to have relatively distinct and narrow boundaries. It is easy to distinguish between the arena and its environment, between the process in the arena and attempts to influence this process from without. The boundaries are maintained by a variety of rules and procedures which determine what kinds of actors can participate and in what way. Government formation as an arena has broader and more permeable

boundaries. It is difficult to distinguish between the arena and its environment because negotiations about the government agreement and the distribution of portfolios grade off into a much broader socio-political context.

Actors. Lasswell (1963, p. 53) asserts that "political science is concerned with the original constitution of an arena and with subsequent admissions, exclusions, consolidations and separations." The inclusiveness and permeability of the boundaries of the government formation arena tend to maximize the number and diversity of actors in the arena. The primary actors are the parties, in that the coalition agreement is among parties. They become actors, as was indicated in the discussion of the first stage, through mutual self-selection. But parties are not monoliths. The arena enables various levels of direct and indirect participation by individual party leaders, party factions, and ad hoc groups within parties, party decision-making bodies, party study bureaus, and party bureaucrats. In addition to party-related actors, there are shifting roles for various economic and social groups. Not only are the actors diverse, but their roles are diverse and overlapping. In effect, participation, and thus the structure of the arena, is the result of actors deciding to opt in or out of the process and possessing sufficient resources to command attention within, among, or relative to parties. The relatively large numbers of diverse actors makes the arena necessarily multipolar—even if only two parties are negotiating—and the bargaining multidimensional.

Actor perceptions. In any policy arena, actors develop and respond to perceptions of themselves, other actors, and the issues. They attempt to assess the costs and benefits of courses of action for themselves and other actors, and they evaluate the relevance of their resources relative to those of other actors. In the government formation arena, cost/benefit considerations and perceptions of resources change frequently. Because diverse actors must continually respond to each other, perceptions evolve and change. Actors may modify cost/benefit calculations as issues are defined and redefined and as their allies and opponents act. As parties negotiate to arrive at coalition agreements, individual party leaders and components within parties also negotiate. This dynamism is a key characteristic of the arena. Actors do not operate on an imposed or institutionally-defined agenda; they have considerable latitude in defining and evaluating alternatives. Because of this arena's more permeable boundaries, diverse actors, and fluctuating perceptions, the perceptual field that constitutes the arena evolves as the government formation proceeds.

Procedures and practices. Procedurally, the government formation arena is very loosely structured. There are very few formal, legally

required procedures, and political practices can vary. The designation of an *informateur* and *formateur* determines that certain actors will participate at the most visible level of negotiations. But in Belgian government formations, several *informateurs* and *formateurs* may be designated before a government coalition is produced. The use of *informateurs* and *formateurs* imposes a certain level of consultation among parties and within parties, but the actors involved in these consultations may vary. Political practice also usually leads to face-to-face bargaining among party delegations, but again the form of and participants in this bargaining can vary. Further, this bargaining among party delegations takes place in the context of the other formal and informal contacts we have previously mentioned. The existence of such a minimal level of established procedures and practices permits enormous flexibility, particularly if one compares it to the formalities of legislative procedures. The forms of consultation, the format of texts, the agenda are all essentially open and can be changed depending upon who the actors are and what their perceptions and resources are.

Outcomes. We have already noted that the outcomes of government formation are cumulative and variable. The particularly important point here is that they can influence the functioning of other arenas. All of the outcomes previously discussed—agenda setting, creation of a reference document, etc.—establish the terms under which central institutions will operate with regard to policy. Smith (1969, p. 500) has suggested that an arena "might be defined as a stabilized conflict pattern in which outcomes will be determined within certain bounds." What we are arguing here is that the outcomes of the government formation arena establish the bounds of policy outcomes in other arenas, specifically arenas related to the legislature and the executive.

In sum, the government formation arena is characterized by permeable boundaries, diversity of actors, shifting perceptions of costs and benefits, diversity of relevant resources, procedural flexibility, and outcomes that establish limits and expectations for other arenas. These characteristics interrelate and reinforce each other. The permeability of boundaries contributes to the diversity of relevant resources. And the first five characteristics together take policy making out of the politics of continuity into a sphere that makes it possible to create limits and expectations for normally functioning institutions.

Arena Implications

The next step is to consider how these characteristics of the government formation arena relate to characteristics of the issues that

have been treated in Belgian government formations. We have argued that virtually all of these issues show some combination of concern with status/identity/actor recognition, with modifications to political structures, and with reaction against threatened deprivation. It may not be possible to establish empirically the links between these sets of issue and arena characteristics, but a number of plausible and interesting arguments can be raised. First, because its boundaries are permeable, its actors' variable, and their perceptions changing, this arena is more likely to deal with actor recognition issues. The nature of the arena multiplies the points of access in a context of changing perceptions. Second, because of its loose structure, its flexible procedures, and the effect its outcomes have on other arenas, this arena is more likely to handle demands for structural change. An arena in which a wide range of alternatives can be considered and which creates limits and expectations for other arenas is a natural venue for attempts to change those other arenas. There are generally greater restraints on attempts to change structures from within. Third, because this arena has diverse resources and flexible procedures, it may have greater means available for defending against deprivation. The resources to defend against the outputs of institutional arenas may be more readily found outside those arenas. Where actors' identities are at stake, where they seek structural changes, or where they risk deprivation, they may benefit by shifting to an arena with fewer limits.

What we describe here can be understood in part as a combination of agenda politics and negotiated order (cf. Richardson and Jordan, 1979, pp. 101-103). Government formation, because of the characteristics we have been describing, is a means of defining issues and forcing issues onto the agenda of formal decision-making bodies. In this way, it is an instrument for dealing with issues about identity and structure, which are essentially agenda politics issues. For example, the government formation arena has a great potential for increasing the influence of factions, interest groups, and other party allies. In this arena, party decision-making processes are not as insulated by party discipline, parliamentary procedure, and collegial cabinet responsibility as they are in the more formal institutional arenas. Thus, these other actors not only have greater potential access but may also be able to make use of resources, such as simple refusal to cooperate, that would otherwise have less effect if the party were not negotiating an agreement to govern. The arena allows actors to force consideration of potentially divisive and disruptive issues, yet it still provides structure and maintains a negotiated order. The arena has a looser structure and fewer rules, but it has a structure and rules. It permits negotiation that can change the operation of

the system or the actors involved or that can defend against change or the products of the system without radically disrupting the functioning of the system. In this arena, government formation is a process of transforming positions on issues of great intensity and with great potential for disruption of the social order into at least temporarily agreed limits on governmental operation and into the specifics of policy.

Generalizing from the Belgian Case

The thrust of this essay is that the process of forming government coalitions is an important part of the process of making policy and that government formation provides an extrainstitutional arena for dealing with certain issues. The discussion is based on the study of a particular case: Belgium from 1965 to 1981. The Belgian case has features peculiar to it, but it also has more general features. Some of the particularly Belgian features relate to the issue environment and to the distribution of resources among institutions and actors. These features may affect the frequency with which the government formation arena is used in Belgium. We shall outline these more Belgian features and then look at the problem of generalization.

Certain divisive elements in the issue structure are older than the Belgian state itself and have been a continuous source of political crises. In fact, the region that became Belgium in 1830 has a history of cultural, regional, religions, and class divisions expressed over and over in various forms since the Middle Ages. There was no process of growth of a central state like that in the United Kingdom or, in a somewhat different manner, in France, and there was no violent resolution of differences through civil war as in Switzerland. The state itself resulted from a temporary convergence of internal factions in response to external pressures and threats. The events of 1830-1831 and the following decade and a half of "unionism" established a constitutional structure but not a social and cultural consensus about what the state would do. The convergence that created the state was not sufficient to bring about a process of nation building and an attendant agreement on legitimacy, institutional roles, or the limits of policy. It is an exaggeration, but not a misleading one, to say that subsequent Belgian history through World War II was characterized by recurring policy and party shifts in which basic issues were reworked with swings of the pendulum. (One might take as an example the history of education policy from the time of Frere-Orban in the late 1870s, or earlier, to the school pact under the Eyskens government in 1958.)

In this general context, the disruption caused by World War II and the economic, social, and demographic changes that followed it

created the issues dominant during the period under consideration here. We need to note only briefly such factors as the "royal question" and the succession from Leopold III to Baudouin immediately after the war, which placed the very structure of the state in question, the growing strength of Flanders, the shift of the economic center of the country, the decline of traditional industries, the emergence of linguistic parties, the school conflict, the quasi-federalizing process of regionalization, the economic crises of the 1970s, and the resurgence of ethical issues. In this environment, there was a lack of consensus about the functioning of institutions and the limits of policy; there were questions about the structure of the state itself, about the identity and relationships among political actors, and about the distribution of basic political resources.

This issue environment is combined with a political system in which major political resources are located outside the institutional structure. With great frequency in recent years, Belgium has been characterized in the press and in political debate as partycracy—government by party. One may argue the accuracy of this characterization, but it does point to relevant facts. The Belgian parliament as an institution is, like many European parliaments, extremely limited in its information and staff resources. The parties themselves, on the other hand, have both research centers and substantial bureaucracies that serve as sources of information and policy proposals as well as instruments to conduct party business. Such arrangements are common in Europe, but they are of particular importance in Belgium. These party organs exist in conjunction with internal party factions and study groups and, more importantly, in conjunction with an extensive array of social and economic groups. Organizations of this kind are linked in complex ways with parties in relationships of support and competition. Thus, institutional resources are limited, the parties are part of an extended external network, and substantial political resources are dispersed throughout the political system. What can be done in institutional arenas is limited by the resources of and the degree of consensus among extrainstitutional bodies. Given the coexistence of the Belgian issue environment and the Belgian political system, it is hardly surprising that we see the extensive use of the government formation arena as a policy arena.

How general then is the process we are talking about? Belgium is not unique in displaying this general pattern. This argument is supported by three sets of considerations of increasing abstraction. First, there is some evidence that other parliamentary regimes whose political systems and issue environments are similar to those of Belgium make similar use of government formation for similar reasons. Israel and the Netherlands are examples, and others could be found (see for example Peterson, De

Ridder, Hobbs, and McClellan, 1983; Andeweg, Dittrich, and vander Tak, 1977; Hobbs, 1980).

Second, the argument presented here draws on Ashford's discussion (1982) of institutional uncertainty in France and of the use of the politics of policy making to build institutions. Ashford does not refer to government formation as such, but he does begin to show the interrelationship between policy, institutions, and the presence or absence of shared understandings about collective authority. The problems produced by the Belgian policy environment are similar to what Ashford describes in France. Given the differences between the French and Belgian political systems, their responses to these problems are different, but there is a similarity of function that can be explored.

Third, we have described a shift from largely institutional arenas to an extrainstitutional arena where the parameters for action are set. Similarly, Mansbach and Vasquez (1981, pp. 207-88) distinguish between "interaction games," which allocate political stakes in the context of "clusters of specific techniques employed in predictable sequences," and formal or ad hoc "rule making games," which consist of "a search for new rules or an effort to clarify those that exist." Interaction games are characterized by "institutionalization, hierarchy, and legitimacy" (p. 290). Rule-making games result when "the cognitive map governed by existing systemic rules fails to facilitate the resolution of an issue, or does so in a sorely disappointing manner, thereby producing mutual dissonance" (p. 301). Mansbach and Vasquez are, of course, trying to develop theory for the understanding of international politics, and it would be imprudent to apply their concepts directly to government formation. However, their work suggests that government formation may fit into a more general category of political phenomena.

The three considerations outlined here point the way for additional efforts. It need hardly be said that the examination of other cases would be valuable. Such an examination would be strengthened by a categorization of political systems built upon notions of institutional uncertainty like those used by Ashford and by a categorization of government formations themselves. The categorization of government formations could use distinctions like that suggested by Mansbach and Vasquez and would recognize that not all government formations necessarily serve the same functions. A combination of the issue categories and arena characteristics discussed in the present study with a categorization of systems and government formations could provide the basis for a more integrated theoretical approach.

Robert L. Peterson is Associate Professor of Political Science, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996. Martine M. De Ridder is Adjunct Professor of Government, Notre Dame University, Notre Dame, Indiana 46556.

NOTES

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1. For a more extended development of this argument, see Peterson, De Ridder, Hobbs, and McClellan (1983, pp. 49-82).

2. For a clear statement of the assumption that actors are monolithic see Budge and Herman, 1978, pp. 459-460.

3. For a discussion of the value maximization position see Browne, 1973, pp. 73-77; and Groennings, Kelley, and Leiserson, eds., 1979, p. 271. For a clear statement of this position in terms of the game theory that commonly underlies coalition theory, see Rapoport, 1969, p. 17.

4. For a survey of the literature on the limits on value maximization see Janis and Mann, 1977.

5. Cf. Laver, 1981, pp. 151-152. Note that in this context Laver appears to use the terms "policy" and "ideology" interchangeably.

6. It should be noted that semiformal bargaining outside governmental institutions has been used to deal with a variety of major issues in Belgium. See Maynaud, Ladriere, and Perin, 1968, part II, ch. 2; and Luykx, 1968, pp. 435-441.

7. The issues negotiated in the Belgian government formations between 1965 and 1981 and the problem of categorizing these issues are discussed in an earlier version of this paper presented at the 25th Annual International Studies Convention, Washington, DC, March 5-9, 1985.

8. For a more detailed discussion of these stages see Peterson et al., 1983. See also Dewachter and Clijsters, 1981; Molitor, 1979, pp. 26-45; and Ceuleers, 1978, pp. 231-271.

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