Pre-electoral coalitions in parliamentary democracies: a new dataset

Abstract

Keywords

# Introduction

# Defining and measuring pre-electoral coalitions

We define a pre-electoral coalition as two or more parties that before an election - reciprocally and publicly voice their willingness to form a government coalition after the election (see also Golder 2006). A pre-electoral coalition may – or may not – involve specific policy agreements, or some kind of coordination of candidate lists or nominations. We consider the latter not as minimum requirements but code them as features of the PEC. This way, our data can be adapted for different purposes and research questions.

For example, researchers interested in certain hypotheses about the formation of pre-electoral coalitions might want to exclude coalitions purely based on public statements (see e.g. Ibenskas 2006, p. 752). This could easily be done using our “type” variable, which codes if the PEC is based solely on public statements or, on top of that, some kind of candidate coordination. Contingent on the commitment of coalition partners and the electoral system, the PEC might involve list coordination, nomination agreements, dual-ballot instructions or vote-transfer instructions (Golder Verweisxxx).

Collecting our data, it became obvious that even though empirically important examples of PECs were based on nothing more than public statements, such reciprocal statements are relatively common amongst parties that are part of well working incumbent government coalitions. Because incentives for incumbents are high to present their incumbency as successful, statements about the need to “continue to work together” could be purely strategic and commitment to work together after the coming elections could be systematically overrated. We include a dummy variable that identifies those PECs that comprise incumbent government coalitions. We encourage researchers to check the robustness of their results once incumbent PECs that are solely based on public statements are excluded.

Third, we include a dummy variable that indicates if the PEC involved some kind of written agreement, including but not restricted to joint, written electoral pledges. Written agreements can underscore the commitment of the PEC. Again, this variable can help researchers adjust our data to the needs of their particular research question.

In a few cases we coded nested PECs, that is, Party A has a PEC with Party B involving a joint policy program. Both parties commit to a PEC with party C (but without a program). In this case we code two different PECs (AB and ABC) but the first being nested.

There are cases where two parties build long-lasting alliances that grow so close that parts of the literature treat them as if the two parties are actually one. We include those alliances as PECs in our dataset, most notably that of the CDU and CSU in Germany and that of the Liberals and Nationals (formerly Country Party) and its substate allies in Australia. Researchers that opt to treat those parties as single parties may easily exclude those PECs from the dataset.

Our data comes in a party based format, including party codings of the Parlgov database (Parlgov stable 15). This way it is easy to import data on the size (vote or seat) or ideological heterogeneity of the PEC. Other formats used in the literature (e.g. dyads or a format where every PEC is a case) can be easily derived using do-files we attach to the dataset.

Sample

Overall, we collected data for 35 established parliamentary or semi-presidential democracies which are covered by the Parlgov Stable 15 dataset.[[1]](#footnote-1)

We used numerous sources to collect our data. Important sources include the European Journal of Political Research Yearbooks, election reports in scientific journals such as *Electoral Studies*, *West-European Politics*, *Parliamentary Affairs*, *South European Society and Politics* and in databases such as IPU Parline. Moreover we used country specific literature on party competition and coalition building. In some instances we used the Proquest Historical Newspaper Database. A number of student research assistants helped researching, reading and analyzing these documents. All coding decisions were made in collaboration of student assistants and researchers. Because the coding of cases is complex, from the very beginning on we put our focus on meticulously documenting our sources and coding decision. Each case of a *presumed* PEC is discussed in a 350 page documentation that we publish alongside the dataset. The documentation helps understand our coding decision for *each PEC in the dataset*. This way our data is not only intersubjectively verifiable, but open to revision and expansion.

# Illustration of the data

Extant data on pre-electoral coalitions differ tremendously on temporal, spatial, and even political coverage. Sona Golder’s (2006, 15) seminal study covered 364 legislative elections in 23 parliamentary democracies. For the period from 1946 to 2002 Golder codes 240 pre-electoral coalitions. Related efforts by Bräuninger, Debus, and others [SOURCES], analyze up to 79 German state-level elections between 1990 and up to 2009, paying systematic attention to the influence of pre-electoral statements of coalition on government formation. More recently, Ibenskas (2015) examined the formation of joint candidate lists in 11 Central and Eastern European countries (CEE). His data include 117 such pre-electoral coalitions in 48 parliamentary elections between 1990 and 2012. Asking why political parties would support candidates from another party, Kellam (2015) studies pre-electoral coalitions in Latin-American presidential elections between 1963 and 2009. Tillman (2015) takes a stronger interest in the effects of PECs and relates them to turnout in 223 legislative elections held between 1970 and 2011 in 19 democracies. Finally, following empirical evidence that highlights the importance of opposition coordination for democratization processes (Howard und Roessler 2006), even scholars of electoral authoritarianism have taken interest in pre-electoral coalitions (Wahman 2011; Gandhi und Reuter 2013).

We build on those prior efforts and increase both the coverage and granularity of data on pre-electoral coalitions in parliamentary democracies. More precisely, our data cover 562 parliamentary elections across 35 EU and OECD democracies between 1945 and 2015. They identify 493 pre-electoral coalitions and additionally provide information on participating parties, the type of PEC formed, the existence of a joint program, and the PEC’s incumbency status.[[2]](#footnote-2) Whereas extant empirical research was primarily concerned with the emergence of pre-electoral coalitions in different political contexts, our data raise additional questions: “When do incumbent governments form pre-electoral coalitions?”; “Why do pre-electoral coalitions put forward joint programs and, if so, to what effect?”; or “Do all parties benefit equally from membership in pre-electoral coalitions?”.

-- Table 1 about here --

Countries in our data differ markedly on their experience with pre-electoral coaltions, as can be seen from Table 1. In some instances, e.g., Australia, Germany, and France, the number of PECs outranks the number of elections held since 1945. Pre-electoral coalitions competed in all post-1945 German and Australian parliamentary elections and on average they accounted for 48 to 64 percent of the vote. In contrast, pre-electoral coalitions never formed in Canada, Malta or Switzerland. Pre-electoral coalitions in Central and Eastern Europe rank anywhere in between these extremes. PECs formed in 80 percent of all Bulgarian elections and accounted for 54 percent of the popular vote on average. In the Czech Republic, in contrast, these figures drop to 38 respectively 10 percent. Moreover, our data show considerable variation in both, the probability to which incumbent governments form pre-electoral coalitions and the likelihood of joint programs. On these accounts, the Romanian experience contrasts markedly with the Danish case. In both countries, pre-electoral coalitions competed in about 80 percent of all legislative elections. Remarkably, Romanian governments rarely formed PECs, but 92 percent of all Romanian PECs agreed on a shared platform. In contrast, about one-third of Danish governments formed a pre-electoral coalition, but PECs rarely invest in building a common electoral platform.

-- Figure 1 about here –

Moving on to more dynamic aspects of our data, Figure 1 plots the absolute frequencies of coalition type, incumbency, and joint program over time singling out CEE countries.[[3]](#footnote-3) Several patterns stand out from the graph. First, as can be seen from the left column, pre-electoral coalitions have become more frequent in parliamentary democracies outside the CEE region. Starting from 2 PECs in 1945 their number hits an all-time high at 15 coalitions in 2013. CEE countries, in contrast, exhibit the opposite development. When they were still very young, pre-electoral coalitions frequently formed in these democracies meeting an all-time high at 13 PECs in 1992. As the CEE democracies and their party systems, consolidated, however, PECs lost their attractiveness and largely disappeared until 2015 (see Ibenskas 2015). Second, incumbent governments rarely form pre-electoral coalitions regardless of geographical region. The numbers oscillate around 2 incumbent PECs each year. Third, PECs outside of Central and Eastern Europe tend to agree more frequently on joint programs in later observation years, but PECs inside this region demonstrate the opposite development. Finally, parties in CEE countries almost exclusively form joint lists whereas PECs outside of this region take every possible type at any given time.

This latter pattern hints to the influence of electoral systems as anticipated by Golder (2006, 17) and Ibenskas (2015, 747). Accordingly, political parties tailor their pre-electoral coalitions to fit their institutional environment. Our data allow easy follow up of this intuition: Table 2 reports the marginal distributions of PEC type, incumbency status, and the existence of a joint program together with elementary information on the electoral system. The medians of district magnitude (DM), disproportionality (Disprop.), and effective number of electoral parties (Parties) are reported for each variant of pre-electoral coalition. As implied by the table, highly proportional electoral systems give political parties little incentive to increase their coordination efforts beyond public announcements. As the proportionality of the electoral system decreases, however, PECs take the form of either joint lists and dual-ballot instructions or nomination agreements and vote transfer instructions. Interestingly though, the more political aspects to electoral coordination within pre-electoral coalitions, incumbents and PECs with joint programs, do note visibly respond to the electoral system. The medians of district magnitude, disproportionality, and of the effective number of electoral parties is roughly identical across all groups, begging the question of what explains those coordination forms.

-- Table 2 about here --

# Conclusion and implications

Table 1: Descriptive data about pre-electoral coalitions (PECs) by country

| Country | First | Last | # Elections | # PECs | % Elections w/i PECs | PEC ave. vote share | Modal PEC typeb | # Incumbent PECs | # Joint programs | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Australia | 1946 | 2013 | 27 | 49 | 1.00 | 0.48 | 1 | 16 | 0 | |
| Germany | 1949 | 2013 | 18 | 36 | 1.00 | 0.64 | 1 | 13 | 19 | |
| Francea | 1945 | 2012 | 19 | 35 | 0.68 | 0.55 | - | 0 | 0 | |
| Denmark | 1945 | 2015 | 27 | 32 | 0.81 | 0.43 | 5 | 8 | 2 | |
| Bulgaria | 1991 | 2014 | 8 | 25 | 0.88 | 0.54 | 2 | 4 | 18 | |
| Israel | 1949 | 2015 | 20 | 21 | 0.65 | 0.21 | 2 | 0 | 9 | |
| Belgium | 1946 | 2014 | 22 | 20 | 0.59 | 0.09 | 6 | 1 | 5 | |
| Latvia | 1990 | 2014 | 9 | 20 | 0.78 | 0.30 | 2 | 3 | 18 | |
| Italy | 1946 | 2013 | 18 | 19 | 0.44 | 0.32 | 5 | 2 | 13 | |
| Portugal | 1975 | 2015 | 15 | 18 | 0.80 | 0.21 | 2 | 1 | 9 | |
| Estonia | 1992 | 2015 | 7 | 16 | 0.43 | 0.27 | 2 | 0 | 11 | |
| Norway | 1945 | 2013 | 18 | 16 | 0.67 | 0.32 | 5 | 5 | 5 | |
| Poland | 1989 | 2015 | 9 | 16 | 0.78 | 0.32 | 2 | 1 | 9 | |
| Sweden | 1948 | 2014 | 21 | 15 | 0.62 | 0.27 | 5 | 4 | 8 | |
| Romania | 1990 | 2012 | 7 | 13 | 0.86 | 0.41 | 2 | 3 | 12 | |
| Spain | 1977 | 2015 | 12 | 13 | 0.83 | 0.15 | 2 | 0 | 12 | |
| Croatia | 2000 | 2015 | 5 | 12 | 0.80 | 0.35 | 2 | 2 | 5 | |
| United Kingdom | 1945 | 2015 | 19 | 11 | 0.58 | 0.19 | 1 | 3 | 9 | |
| Hungary | 1990 | 2014 | 7 | 10 | 0.71 | 0.38 | 2 | 3 | 4 | |
| Lithuania | 1990 | 2012 | 7 | 10 | 0.57 | 0.21 | 2 | 1 | 3 | |
| Austria | 1945 | 2013 | 21 | 9 | 0.43 | 0.31 | 5 | 7 | 1 | |
| Greecea | 1974 | 2015 | 17 | 9 | 0.41 | 0.12 | - | 0 | 0 | |
| Iceland | 1946 | 2013 | 21 | 9 | 0.33 | 0.10 | 2 | 1 | 7 | |
| Japan | 1946 | 2014 | 26 | 9 | 0.27 | 0.14 | 1 | 4 | 0 | |
| Netherlands | 1946 | 2012 | 21 | 9 | 0.33 | 0.16 | 5 | 3 | 6 | |
| Ireland | 1948 | 2011 | 19 | 8 | 0.37 | 0.18 | 5 | 5 | 3 | |
| New Zealand | 1946 | 2014 | 24 | 8 | 0.25 | 0.08 | 2 | 1 | 3 | |
| Slovenia | 1990 | 2014 | 8 | 7 | 0.63 | 0.28 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| Slovakia | 1990 | 2012 | 8 | 6 | 0.38 | 0.09 | 2 | 1 | 3 | |
| Finland | 1945 | 2015 | 20 | 5 | 0.20 | 0.06 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| Czech Republic | 1990 | 2013 | 8 | 4 | 0.38 | 0.10 | 2 | 0 | 1 | |
| Luxembourg | 1945 | 2013 | 16 | 3 | 0.19 | 0.05 | - | 1 | 0 | |
| Canada | 1945 | 2015 | 23 | 0 |  |  |  |  |  | |
| Malta | 1947 | 2013 | 17 | 0 |  |  |  |  |  | |
| Switzerland | 1947 | 2015 | 18 | 0 |  |  |  |  |  | |
| Notes: a Type information unavailable; b Codes: 1 Nomination agreement2, Joint list, 3 Dual-ballot instructions, 4 Vote transfer instructions, 5 Public commitment, 6 individual | | | | | | | | | |

Table 2: PEC Properties and Median Electoral System Features

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | Frequency | |  | Median |  |
|  |  | Abs. | Rel. | DM | Disprop.a | Partiesb |
|  | Public Commitment | 119 | 0.27 | 12.50 | 2.62 | 4.52 |
|  | Joint List | 204 | 0.47 | 9.76 | 5.29 | 4.54 |
|  | Dual-Ballot Instructionsc | 1 | 0.00 | 9.20 | 4.61 | 6.05 |
|  | Other | 16 | 0.04 | 7.07 | 2.79 | 7.48 |
|  | Nomination Agreement | 72 | 0.17 | 1.00 | 8.66 | 3.36 |
|  | Vote Transfer Instructions | 24 | 0.06 | 1.00 | 8.45 | 2.80 |
| Joint | No | 233 | 0.54 | 10.00 | 4.71 | 4.43 |
| program? | Yes | 197 | 0.46 | 8.90 | 4.32 | 3.63 |
| Incumbent | No | 337 | 0.77 | 9.65 | 4.51 | 4.03 |
| coalition? | Yes | 99 | 0.23 | 10.00 | 4.71 | 4.36 |
| Notes: a Gallagher Index; b Eff. number of electoral parties; c Romania 1996. | | | | | | |

Figure 1 Annual frequency of PECs

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

1. Due to data availability our current version does not include Cyprus. Of the remaining 36 non-presidential democracies covered by parlgov, only two experienced periods of democracies scores lower than 8 (polity IV) in the 15 years before 2000. While Israels score has been 6 since the 1980s, Turkeys polity score was 3 after 2013 and -4 after 2015. We include Israel in our sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We code pre-electoral coalitions as incumbent if all members of the coalition enjoyed cabinet rank in the government immediately preceding the elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. By CEE countries we refer to Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)