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Full-Power Cabinets and Caretaker Administrations in Parliamentary Democracies, 1945-2024*

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Abstract

We draw a conceptual and empirical distinction between "full-power" cabinets and "caretaker" periods and introduce a new dataset of parliamentary events capable of taking into consideration a regimes institutional heterogeneity consistently yet flexibly. As well as recording events related to government formation and termination, the dataset includes a classification of full-power cabinets and caretaker periods. The data covers 36 countries between 1945 and 2024. We use the dataset to present an analysis of caretaker periods and show that these periods have gotten longer, on average, since the end of the Cold War. Caretaker periods represent a non-trivial amount of time in a country's life, during which decisions must be made and actions taken. More studies of what actually happens during these times are, therefore, needed. This article contributes to the literature on parliamentary governments by providing a framework (and dataset) for systematically identifying full-power cabinets and caretaker periods.

Keywords: Parliamentarism; Full-power governments; Caretaker periods; Parliamentary dissolutions; Resignations

Short Title: Full-Power Cabinets and Caretaker Administrations

*Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse (https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the JOP replication analyst. Our dataset and documentation, including primary sources, are available at: https://github.com/bromofra/Parliamentary-Events-Dataset.git.

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1 Introduction

In parliamentary democracies, cabinets formally end because the constitutional term of the assembly is completed, the assembly is dissolved before the end of its constitutional term, or because the prime minister resigns (voluntarily or after losing parliamentary confidence). When a parliamentary government ends, parties engage in bargaining to form a viable government, and while they do so, the country is ruled by what is usually referred to as a "caretaker" government. Such governments are supposed to do no more than keep the status quo, making sure that routine governmental activities continue but introducing no policy changes. The policy status quo is expected to remain frozen until political parties agree on a course of action for the country (e.g., Delpérée 2000). Once such an agreement is reached, normal life resumes until a new agreement needs to be negotiated.

In recent years, government formations in many parliamentary democracies seem to have become more complicated and, as a consequence, are lasting longer than they used to. In addition to highly salient and notorious cases such as Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands, and Spain, there is evidence that, on average, in Western European democracies, government formation is now taking longer. In a study of 17 democracies, Bergman, Bäck and Hellström (2021) report that the average government formation in the 1950s lasted 25-30 days, that it increased to 40 days by the 1970s, and that it started to increase again in the 1990s, reaching 55 days by 2019 (pp. 692-693).

The time it takes for a government to be formed in parliamentary democracies naturally raises the question of what *actually* happens when caretaker governments are in power. Is it the case that little of political and substantive significance happens during this time? Do caretaker governments abide by the expectation that they should not change the status quo in any significant way? Is parliament able to hold caretaker governments accountable? We believe these to be important questions that should be addressed in a systematic way. After all, life goes on even when parties are negotiating a new government and, at the very least, whoever is in power must deal with new challenges and unexpected situations that require immediate decisions, as was the case,

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for instance, for the Irish caretaker government dealing with the COVID-19 emergency between February and June 2020. Moreover, given that those in charge of caretaker governments are not apolitical automatons devoid of any partisan proclivities, policy, or time preferences, it makes sense to ask whether their actions have short and long-term political consequences. Finally, executives today can deploy several instruments to influence policy, whether they have the support of a legislative majority or not. For these reasons, studying the actions of caretaker governments becomes increasingly relevant; it is important to ask what caretaker governments do and what consequences their actions have, rather than simply assume that they do no more than what is expected of them: keep the status quo. If it is indeed the case that formations are getting longer, with countries ruled by governments operating in caretaker capacity for longer periods, these questions become even more pressing.

The first step in the direction of answering these questions is, of course, to clearly identify when a caretaker government is in office. To our surprise, however, doing so proved to be harder than anticipated. In spite of an abundance of datasets that identify parliamentary cabinets, we could not find one that was suitable for our purposes. The reasons will be discussed in section 2. For now, it is sufficient to say that, before we could address what caretaker governments actually do, we needed to unambiguously identify caretaker periods. This is what we do in this paper.

Here we present a new dataset of parliamentary events, which, on the basis of a clear-cut and theoretically relevant definition of "government" in parliamentary democracies, allow us to produce a consistent list of full-power governments and caretaker administrations.[1] In particular, our definition allows us to conceive of caretaker administrations independently of what they are supposed to do, or not do, when in office. For us, a full-power government is one that is at least tolerated by a parliamentary majority. By contrast, caretaker administrations exist whenever there is no full-power

[1] Conrad and Golder (2010) also call attention to the importance of distinguishing full-power and caretaker periods; We are aware that the term "administration" is often used to refer to national executives in presidential and not parliamentary democracies. We chose to adopt this term to refer to the periods between full-power governments since it captures the spirit of what those occupying executive positions are supposed to be doing: to administer the status quo.

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government in place. In this paper, we develop this concept of caretaker administrators and propose a way to measure it using the Parliamentary Events Dataset (PED), which covers 36 parliamentary democracies between 1945 and 2024.

Parliamentary governments exist as long as they are at least "tolerated" by a legislative majority (Strøm 2000: p. 265). This is our starting point. But how do we know when a legislative majority *begins* and *ceases* tolerating a government? Existing datasets typically answer this question by enumerating a general list of events, which then guides the coding of cabinets in each country. Yet, the constitutional rules and practices by which parliamentary systems function are notoriously heterogeneous and, at times, vague. No one set of pre-specified events (at least not always occurring in the same sequence) can cover how governments are formed and dissolved in *all* parliamentary democracies or even *within* the same country. It follows that the adoption of a best practice when it comes to measurement—the formulation of pre-defined, general, and observable rules for the coding of particular cases—has generally failed to produce satisfactory results. And, while it might be true that different datasets were created for different purposes, the fact is that they do not agree as to the date governments were formed or ended and, consequently, as to the length of the caretaker period, the lifespan of individual cabinets, and the number of cabinets a country has experienced between some specific times.

The disparities across datasets cast a shadow of uncertainty over the accumulated findings of the large body of empirical research on government formation, survival, and termination in parliamentary democracies. It is unlikely that these disparities are the sole, or even the primary, reason for conflicting results in tests of crucial theoretical propositions about governments under parliamentarism. Regardless, there is no justification for persisting in the use of datasets that disagree over large and momentous events such as the beginning and the end of a national government. Or, at the very least, one should be mindful of these disparities. Our ultimate goal is not to discredit or replace the existing datasets of parliamentary cabinets, but to provide a framework (and dataset) that systematically and consistently identifies *full-power* governments and

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allows us to observe *caretaker* periods independently of what they do when in office.

Existing datasets are usually committed to a specific operational definition of "government." Given the institutional heterogeneity of parliamentary democracies, they are, thus, not necessarily able to properly accommodate the country-specific variation in constitutional rules and practices. The dataset we introduce with this article starts by conceptualizing parliamentary governments and then establishing a set of events that may be related to government formation and termination under parliamentarism. These events are then placed on a timeline for *each* country, in chronological order, according to the country's specific rules for forming and ending a government. The events recorded, therefore, vary, and the timeline on which they are placed can be partitioned into discrete segments according to the country's rules and the needs of specific research projects. In so doing, there is no need to commit the dataset to any general *operational* definition of parliamentary government.

One of the advantages of our dataset is that it generates unambiguous dates for the beginning and end of full-power governments and caretaker administrations, in spite of the fact that the rules for defining both vary across countries and sometimes within the same country. We can, thus, provide a list of parliamentary governments that is consistent across countries but also accommodates the wide institutional variation in how full-power and inter-government (or caretaker) periods are defined under parliamentarism. We generate complete chronologies of governments for 36 parliamentary democracies since the end of World War II (or the time of transition to democracy), providing a complete list of full-power governments and caretaker administrations that incorporates the variation in the rules for government formation adopted in each country. Our dataset allows researchers to make cross-national comparisons of parliamentary governments, defined in a way that is conceptually and theoretically meaningful but at the same time respectful of country-specific rules and practices.

The article is organized as follows. In section 2, we explain why we believe, given so many different datasets of parliamentary governments, an additional one is needed. In section 3, we present the set of events that we consider for identifying when full-power

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governments and caretaker administrations begin and end (3.1) and discuss why we do not include the partisan composition of the government in the dataset (3.2). Section 4 presents the trends in the duration of full-power governments and caretaker administrations since 1945. Section 5 closes the paper with a discussion of the relevance of our findings and avenues for future research. The paper also comes with *Online Supporting Materials* [OSM], which contain further analyses and relevant information for those interested in learning more about or using the dataset.

2 Existing Datasets

Political scientists working on government formation and termination in parliamentary democracies should feel fortunate about the abundance of data at their disposal. From the pioneering work by Paloheimo (1984) and von Beyme (1985), through the several updates of the dataset produced by the Budge-Keman-Woldendorp team (Budge and Keman 1990; Woldendorp, Keman and Budge 1993; 1998; 2000; 2011), from the data in Warwick (1994) and Warwick and Druckman (2006), through the widely used PARLGOV (Döring and Manow 2024) and REPDEM/PAGED (Hellström et al. 2024, which supersedes the ERD dataset by Andersson et al. 2020), to the more recently released *Political Parties, Presidents, Elections, and Governments* (PPEG) dataset (Krause, Stelzle and WZB Berlin 2024) and *Party Systems & Governments Observatory* (PSGO) (Casal Bértoa and Enyedi 2022), the number of datasets with information on governments in parliamentary systems is large.

Although these datasets were not necessarily created to answer the same questions, the cabinet is (one of) the unit(s) of analysis in all of them. With a few exceptions, coverage starts after WWII and extends to years close to when the data was collected. Most of them include primarily parliamentary democracies in Europe (including those that are considered "semi-presidential"), but some also include Japan and the wealthy ex-colonies of Great Britain (Australia, Canada, and New Zealand), non-European developing countries, and/or sometimes presidential countries.

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Table 1: Dissimilarity Index (%) in the Count of Full-Power Governments and Caretaker Administrations Between Two Datasets

	PARLGOV	REPDEM	PPEG	PED
PARGOV		**34**	**33**	**43**
REPDEM	*32*		**32**	**46**
PPEG	*33*	*28*		**42**
PED	*99*	*100*	*100*	

Note: *Legend*: PARLGOV (Döring and Manow 2024); REPDEM (Hellström et al. 2024); PPEG (Krause, Stelzle and WZB Berlin 2024); PED (Parliamentary Events Dataset, this article). The dissimilarity index expresses the percentage of comparable decades for all countries in which the count of full-power governments and caretaker administrations differs between any two datasets. Numbers in bold, above the diagonal, refer to full-power governments. Numbers in italics, below the diagonal, refer to caretaker administrations.

The number of cabinets for each country across datasets varies considerably. This is not only due to the obvious fact that they cover different countries and time periods. The number of governments in each country varies *even if we compare them only for the time period in which they do overlap*. Table 1 displays a matrix in which the cells contain a simple index of dissimilarity in the number of cabinets by decade between any two of the four datasets. In addition to the one we are presenting here, the Parliamentary Events Dataset (PED), we chose the three with the widest coverage, both in terms of years and countries: PARLGOV, REPDEM, and PPEG. The cells above the diagonal show the dissimilarity index in the count of full-power governments in each country for comparable decades, and the cells below the diagonal show the same for the count of caretaker administrations. For example, PARLGOV and REPDEM allow us to count the number of full-power governments and caretaker administrations in 166 comparable decades (those for which they count the same number of countries for the same years). In 56 of these 166 decades, the number of full-power cabinets and caretaker administrations counted by the two datasets is different. For instance, while PARLGOV counts seven full-power governments and one caretaker administration in Italy during the 2010s, REPDEM counts eleven full-power governments and no caretaker administrations.

The table indicates that no two datasets completely agree on the number of full-

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power governments and caretaker administrations for the periods they both cover. When it comes to full-power governments, the disparities range from a low of about one-third to to a high close to 50% of the possible comparisons. When it comes to caretaker administrations, the differences tend to be close to 30% of the decades. The exception is the comparison with our own dataset, which indicates an invariably high dissimilarity count of caretaker administrations. The reasons will be discussed in section 4.

This simple comparison, in fact, underestimates the differences among these datasets. Even when two datasets generate an equal number of governments, the temporal boundaries of the governments they count may (and indeed often do) differ. This is particularly true with respect to our dataset. In existing datasets, full-power governments may follow one another with no caretaking periods ever being recorded. In ours, this is not possible since full-power governments are *always* preceded and followed by a caretaker period, as short as it may be.

Why so much variation in counting something so fundamental and salient as a country's national executive? The reason, we believe, is that the ex-ante rules that virtually all datasets formulate to identify cabinets are not always capable of accommodating the institutional heterogeneity of parliamentary democracies. For this reason, ad-hoc country and dataset-specific adjustments need to be made as these rules are implemented, leading to inconsistencies across the different datasets.

Most datasets and papers refer to three events as markers of a new parliamentary government: (1) the occurrence of an election; (2) the change in the identity of the prime minister; (3) changes in the party composition of the governing coalition.

Although seemingly straightforward, these events fail to unambiguously identify full-power governments in many countries. For example, in some countries, elections occur with the incumbent government still in office for several days after the parliament has been formally dissolved. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the government remains in office when new elections are announced (and parliament is dissolved) through the moment a new government is formed after the general election. While the

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individuals are the same, their ability to act during the formation spell is conventionally constrained. The character of the government changes once a parliamentary dissolution is formalized by the monarch and the parties enter election campaigning mode (the so-called "purdah" period), once the government loses any kind of confidence vote, or when the government resigns voluntarily. In these cases, the government is generally considered to function in caretaker capacity.[2] Due to the nature of the UKs party system, governments tend to form quickly after an election, and, for this reason, the date of the election could be more or less reasonably used as the marker that a new cabinet was formed, even if the prime minister remained the same.

This, however, is not true for many, perhaps most, parliamentary systems. Sometimes, prime ministers formally resign prior to an election (even if they stay in office as the head of a caretaker administration), and/or the formation of a new government after the election takes weeks or even months, as some recent formations in Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands, and Spain illustrate. Using the election as the beginning of the caretaker period would be misleading since, from the period between the dissolution of parliament and the formation of the new government after the election, the incumbent cabinet would be expected to behave differently from the one that preceded and followed it, even if no change of personnel or parties occurred.[3]

Second, in many countries, the formation of a government involves an explicit vote of investiture in parliament. In some cases, this vote is *ex-post* (e.g., Italy), that is,

[2]As stated in the British Cabinet Manual, governments [operating as caretakers] are expected by convention to observe discretion in initiating any new action of a continuing or long-term character (paragraph 2.27, p. 17, The Cabinet Manual: A guide to laws, conventions and rules on the operation of government, October 2011, last accessed: 5-May-2025; See also Menzies and Tiernan (2015).

[3]Belgium provides an example that is extreme but not uncommon. According to PARLGOV and PPEG, the last government headed by Yves Leterme ended when the government headed by Elio Di Rupo was appointed on 6-Dec-2011. Yet, Leterme formally resigned on 26-Apr-2010, parliament was dissolved on 7-May-2010, elections took place on 13-Jun-2010, and the new parliament convened on 6-Jun-2010. The Di Rupo government was a post-election government in the sense that it was the first to take office under the new parliament. While we are in agreement that 6-Dec-2011 is the date the Di Rupo government was appointed (though it was invested four days later), the rule that the two datasets invoked to arrive at this date must have been the one about the change in the identity of the prime minister. Note, however, that this coding is not consistent with the rule that a new government starts when there is a new election. Moreover, the two datasets fail to flag the 593 days between Leterme's resignation and Di Rupo's successful investiture as being different from the period that preceded and followed it. This, of course, was a caretaker period, during which, it is commonly assumed, all the government does is to "keep the lights of the bureaucracy on."

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it occurs at the end of the formation process after bargaining has already taken place and a government is fully formed and officially appointed (Rasch, Martin and Cheibub 2015*a*). In these cases, the prime minister and the government are already in office, but they can only remain in office if they win a constitutionally mandated investiture vote. Consider, then, an election that takes place in a country with an ex-post investiture rule. After having formally resigned before the election, the incumbent wins, the prime minister is re-appointed by the head of state some time after the election, and the government succeeds in the investiture vote. In this case, of the three events listed above that should mark the beginning of a new government, only the election qualifies. Yet, using it to identify the new government is incorrect because, although appointed, the process of government formation had not ended yet; it only ended when the government succeeded in the investiture vote. Had it not received the necessary support from parliament, the government would have had to resign, and the process of forming a government that could be successfully invested would have continued. The incumbent cabinet served as a caretaker administration from the day it resigned before the election through the day it succeeded in obtaining the required majority in the investiture vote. From a constitutional point of view, the incumbent was not in a position to make decisions that needed political support until the successful investiture.

Not all cabinets that face an ex-post investiture vote win. We identified at least 13 cases of failed ex-post investitures between 1945 and 2024. The two most recent examples recorded in our dataset are Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland in 2023 and Andrej Babi in Czechia in 2018. Consider the following sequence of events in a country with this kind of investiture: there is a prime minister in office during the election (almost certainly serving in a caretaker capacity). After the election, this prime minister resigns, and a new one is appointed. A few days later, the prime minister submits the government program for a vote of confidence in parliament (i.e., the cabinet faces the constitutionally required vote of investiture), but the government program does not obtain the required legislative majority, and the prime minister resigns. A new prime

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minister is then appointed and succeeds in the vote of investiture.[4]

Is the government that failed the investiture vote to be counted as a full-power government? In line with the criteria above, any change in the identity of the prime minister marks a new government. Yet, this government never obtained the necessary expression of parliamentary support before it could start governing. Although headed by a different prime minister, the status of the countrys government remained the same from the resignation of the prime minister before the election, through the appointment and parliamentary defeat of the first government, to the appointment of the second government, which was successfully invested. In some datasets, the cabinet that lost the ex-post investiture vote is considered to be full-power, even if it must resign because it did not receive the required support from parliament to remain in office. Others, including ours, consider this an extension of the caretaker period.[5]

If investiture is *ex-ante*, meaning that a prime minister is selected by the legislature before a cabinet is fully formed (e.g., Germany), no government is formed when a PM fails to win an investiture vote, and the process moves to the next step: either another individual is nominated or the constitution enables or mandates that the head of state dissolve parliament. It is clear that the period should be considered caretaker until a new person is invested with the task of forming a government and that government is appointed.[6]

Finally, in almost all datasets, any change in the partisan composition of the cabinet is treated as a change of government. The justification for this rule is that a new partisan composition reflects a new coalition, the outcome of a process of bargaining that led to

[4]An example is what transpired in Portugal in 1978. The government headed by Mário Soares was dismissed by the head of state in July. A new cabinet headed by Alfredo Nobre da Costa was appointed the following month. This new cabinet, however, failed the ex-post investiture vote on 14-Sep-1978. The formation triggered by the dismissal of Soares ended when a new government headed by Carlos Alberto da Mota Pinto was successfully invested on 12-Dec-1978.

[5]To see how this matters, consider that several studies (King et al. 1990; Warwick 1994; van Roozendaal 1997; Diermeier and Stevenson 1999; Diermeier, Eraslan and Merlo 2002; Saalfeld 2008) have found that countries requiring a parliamentary investiture have cabinets with shorter duration than those without investiture requirements. However, by counting those that were appointed but failed to survive an investiture vote as a full-power government, the number of "short-duration" governments in countries with ex-post investiture requirements is erroneously inflated.

[6]Although the current version of our dataset does not systematically track instances of failed ex-ante investiture votes, this is not an uncommon occurrence. A recent example is the failed ex-ante investiture of Alberto Núñez Feijóo in Spain on 29-Sep-2023.

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the exclusion (inclusion) of parties that were (not) part of the previous coalition. We discuss this issue in more detail in section 3.2.

It is clear from these examples that the three criteria almost universally used by existing datasets to identify the beginning and the end of parliamentary governments are not sufficient to cover all the institutional heterogeneity of parliamentary democracies. Additional criteria are invoked, specific rules are left unclear, or new rules are created.[7]

Since existing datasets do not identify "governments" consistently, they also fail to identify "caretaker" periods consistently. Conceptually, all datasets agree that caretaker governments are those whose mandate is to pay the bills and keep the bureaucracy's lights on. Yet, as they cannot always agree on when a full-power government is in place, they cannot agree when it comes to identifying when the government *is not* full-power. Moreover, some datasets identify as "caretaker" governments that are, in fact, full-power. For instance, for PARLGOV, a government described as "non-partisan" or "technocratic" might be considered to be a caretaker, even though these governments are not necessarily lacking in political support or have a limited legislative mandate. One clear example is the cabinet led by Mario Monti in Italy between 2011 and 2013. Although technocratic in nature, this government faced (and won) an investiture vote, then passed bills, issued decrees, called several confidence votes, etc. (Bromo, Gambacciani and Improta 2023). In other words, it did everything full-power governments do. Based on our framework, a caretaker period would only span the period between Monti's resignation on 21-Dec-2012 and the investiture of its successor on 29-Apr-2013, not the 13 months Monti ruled with the explicit support of a legislative majority[8]

As a matter of fact, many of the existing datasets use Woldendorp, Keman and Budge's (2000) definition of caretaker: these are cabinets in which "the government formed is not *intended* to undertake any kind of serious policy-making, but is only

[7]For instance, in PARLGOV (Döring and Manow 2024), a new cabinet is also identified by "any meaningful investiture" or "any meaningful resignation;" Seki and Williams (2014) note that the definitions of governments in Müller and Strøm (2000) and Strøm, Bergman and Müller (2003), which provided the theoretical foundation and first used the ERD, are ambiguous as to "whether resignation qualifies as a new cabinet if the prime minister and same composition of parties occupy the new cabinet" (p. 273). An examination of the data suggests that it does. However, one would not be able to anticipate that this is the rule on the basis of the definitions they provided.

[8]On this point, see also McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014).

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minding the shop temporarily" (p. 18, emphasis added). Yet, as we saw in Table 1, even datasets ostensibly using the same definition of caretaker governments have different counts for several countries.

In conclusion, the three basic events that are universally taken to define new cabinets in parliamentary democracies cannot accommodate the variation in the rules for government formation and termination. These limitations become most egregious in their inability to consistently identify caretaker administrations. The solution is not to formulate additional rules. Given the institutional heterogeneity of parliamentary democracies, efforts in this direction would be doomed: there would be too many exceptions, and ad hoc rules would serve only to accommodate idiosyncratic cases.

3 Institutional Heterogeneity and Government Formation

3.1 Parliamentary Events

The set of events that mark the steps in the process of government formation in any parliamentary government is finite. The institutional heterogeneity we find across countries stems from the fact that the same events are not present in all countries, and the events that are present do not always happen in the same order.

With this in mind, our dataset starts from an uncontroversial definition of parliamentarism: a system in which governments must be at least "tolerated" by a parliamentary majority (Strøm 2000: p. 265). A government that is tolerated by a parliamentary majority is a *full-power* government. A government that is in office but which is not or cannot be at least tolerated by a parliamentary majority is a *caretaker administration*. To put it differently, a caretaker period can be succinctly defined as a period during which the incumbent administration *cannot be subjected to the test of confidence*. A full-power government, hence, is one in which there is both a set of individuals who occupy the national top executive positions and are empowered to act in the name of the country, that is, they have not resigned and enjoy (explicitly or implicitly) the

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confidence of parliament*and* an assembled parliament that could, if it so wished, use pre-specified procedures to remove those individuals from office, i.e., withdraw parliamentary confidence. The lack of one of these conditions means that the government *is not* a full-power government. Thus, the absence of one of these conditions places the country under a caretaker administration.

When is a government not tolerated by a majority? The answer to this question sets the boundaries of full-power governments and, by extension, of caretaker administrations. At one level, finding such boundaries should be trivial: the government begins when an individual is appointed to the highest political office in the country and ends when that individual resigns. Although ultimately this is how we identify governments, there are three situations that need clarification: (1) What is the status of a government that loses a confidence vote and resigns as prescribed by the constitution (or convention) or of a prime minister (and her cabinet) who resigns voluntarily, but the individuals who just resigned remain in office until a new government is formed? Has the government ended at the moment of resignation or just before a new prime minister came into office, or the same prime minister is re-appointed? (2) How should we treat cases in which a prime minister is appointed to office but the government is not fully formed until it succeeds in a constitutionally required vote of confidence (investiture) by parliament? Does the government in these countries begin at the moment prime ministers are appointed or the moment they secure parliamentary confidence? How should prime ministers who had been appointed but were defeated in the investiture vote be treated? (3) Finally, what is the status of a government that remains in office between the time a parliament is declared dissolved and a new parliament convenes when general elections take place?

Different countries have different ways of answering these questions, which considerably complicates the task of formulating general rules for identifying the beginning and the end of parliamentary governments. But all answers invoke the same limited number of events, and what varies is the set of events specific to each country and how they are chronologically ordered. By recording these events in a country-specific

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timeline, we can distinguish periods during which the country is led by a full-power government from those in which it is led by a caretaker administration while respecting the country's institutional specificity.

What are the events that trigger the beginning and the end of a caretaker period? Caretaker periods begin when a prime minister resigns (which, by the principle of collective responsibility, entails the resignation of the entire government) (**RESIGNATION**), when the sitting parliament is dissolved (**DISSOLUTION**), or legislative elections take place (**LEG_ELEC**). Caretaker periods end, in turn, with the occurrence of one of the following events: a prime minister (and/or a cabinet) is appointed into office (**APPOINTMENT**), a government successfully wins a vote of investiture (**INVESTITURE**), or a newly elected parliament convenes (**PARL_CONVENES**). Each country's constitutional arrangements decide which of these events formally ends the caretaker period.

Together, these events exhaust the ways full-power governments and, by extension, caretaker administrations, begin and end in contemporary parliamentary democracies. While their chronological order varies across countries, or even within the same country, the observation of their chronological occurrence allows us to differentiate the times when there is a government in office *and* a standing (i.e., non-dissolved) parliament from those in which at least one of these conditions is absent.

In essence, therefore, our dataset consists of a series of chronologically ordered events that affect the life and death of parliamentary governments. We define a full-power government as one in which there is both a cabinet in place and a standing parliament. It is the chronological ordering that allows us to incorporate the institutional variation in the way parliamentary systems form their governments. Everything else falls under the label of caretaker administration. We avoid the phrase "caretaker governments" for these cases and use, instead, caretaker administration, leadership, periods, and the like, expressions that indicate discrete periods during which the country is not under a full-power government.

The dataset covers 36 parliamentary democracies, observed from the first full-power government after the end of World War II (for which we use the conventional date of 2-

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Sep-1945) or the beginning of democracy (see OSM, Table A1). In the remainder of this section, we address some of the complexities associated with the six aforementioned events on which the variables of interest are derived.

3.1.1 Resignation

(Formal) resignations are the clearest and least ambiguous events to trigger a government formation process in parliamentary systems. They can be caused by different events: the loss of a constitutionally required investiture vote, the loss of a no-confidence or government-initiated confidence vote, or the PM's decision to step down, which can itself result from pressures stemming from other government members, the head of state, a political party, or voters. These are reasons for resignation, which, at least at this point, are not part of the dataset. At this point, we only record that a resignation occurred.

Because all the countries in the dataset are parliamentary democracies and, hence, are based on collective responsibility, the prime minister's resignation implies that of the ministers who compose the cabinet. We, thus, use the resignation of the prime minister, the government, or the cabinet interchangeably. Death also implies the prime minister's "resignation." We do not record instances in which the prime minister threatens to resign, including the cases in which the prime minister declares that he or she is resigning but the resignation is not accepted by the head of state. Given the current state of evidence, this situation is indistinguishable from a simple public threat.

Because prime ministers (and their ministers) are often asked, sometimes required by the constitution, to stay in office in a caretaker capacity after they resign, resignation is not always immediately followed by a new full-power government. The cabinet that remains in office after resignation is often referred to as a "continuation" caretaker government (see Conrad and Golder 2010).

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3.1.2 Parliamentary Dissolution

Parliamentary dissolution also marks the beginning of a caretaker administration. The event of interest here occurs when the parliament is formally dissolved by whoever has the power to dissolve it, which can be the head of state unilaterally (e.g., Italy), the prime minister (e.g., Denmark), parliament itself (e.g., Czechia), or even voters through a popular referendum (e.g., Latvia).

In some countries, the parliament is not always formally dissolved before an election. For example, in France, a presidential decree announcing the dissolution of parliament (and the occurrence of an election) is only issued if the election is to take place before the end of the parliamentary term. Thus, President Macron issued a decree on 9-Jun-2024 dissolving the National Assembly three years before its constitutional expiry, but no decree was issued dissolving parliament prior to the election of 12-Jun-2022, since, in this case, parliament was serving its full constitutional term. While in 2022 the caretaker period lasted for 24 days between the election and the appointment of Élisabeth Borne on 4-Jul-2022, in 2024, the caretaker period started with the dissolution in June and lasted for 68 days until the appointment of Michel Barnier on 5-Sep-2024.[9]

One matter of great relevance is whether dissolution happens prior to the scheduled expiration of the parliament's constitutional term. Although in some countries, a "dis-

[9] As will become clear in Table 2, in some cases our counting of caretaker periods will yield much longer durations than what is considered usual for country specialists. This is particularly true for the two countries in our dataset where parliament serves fixed terms (Norway) or where the constitution allows for early parliamentary dissolution, even though the incentives are stacked against it ever occurring (Sweden, e.g., Lindvall et al. 2020). Like in several other countries, parliament in Norway and Sweden goes into summer recess every year, and the period between this recess and the election is not normally counted as a caretaker period by country specialists for two reasons. First, since it happens every year, consistency would require counting the summer recess as caretaker periods every year. Second, it is argued that the period of summer recess is not a "real" caretaker period since much happens in terms of legislative activity (see *Hvor uvanlig er ekstraordinære møter i Stortinget?*, last accessed: 5-May-2025). The first argument is incorrect since in non-election years, the existing parliament reconvenes at the end of the summer recess with the same composition as when it adjourned. In election years, however, this is not the case. Because parliaments serve a fixed or quasi-fixed term, everybody knows that elections will happen at the end of the summer. The second argument speaks to the reason why we embarked on the construction of our dataset in the first place. In order to be able to investigate what happens during caretaker periods, we must define these periods without any reference to what happens in them. Regardless, users of our dataset are not bound by our choices, as it is easy for them to exclude the dissolution event we consider for Norway and Sweden and start counting the caretaker period from the election. We thank Bjørn Erik Rasch for forcing us to clarify this point.

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solved" parliament might remain active until the first sitting of the newly elected one, there is much variation as to what parliaments can and cannot do between dissolution and the convening of the new parliament. This issue is further complicated by the fact that parliamentary dissolutions can be challenged in court and are occasionally even reversed (see Bromo 2025*a*).

Whether parliamentary dissolution also triggers a process of government formation is a matter for debate (Diermeier and van Roozendaal 1998; Martin and Vanberg 2003), although we believe that parties go into elections with expectations about outcomes and sometimes define their electoral strategies in light of possible scenarios for government formation (Golder 2006). Expectations of dissolution are important, and they matter both when a dissolution does not occur when most thought it would, as well as when it does occur when most thought it would not (Smith 2004). We take as the dissolution date the moment when it is reasonable to assume that, from that date on, most actors operate with the knowledge that parliament is dissolved and/or an election was called. This can take the form of a decree or proclamation issued by the head of state (e.g., Portugal), an announcement by the prime minister (e.g., Denmark), or a vote taken by legislators (e.g., Austria) (see OSM, Table A2). The date of dissolution is important because a formally or informally dissolved parliament is in no position to express its confidence in (or withdraw confidence from) the government. To the extent that there is no parliament to which the prime minister can be responsible, the government cannot be considered to be in command of its full power. In this sense, a parliamentary dissolution can be a mark of the beginning of a caretaker period. Sometimes, prime ministers might threaten to dissolve parliament to achieve political goals (e.g., Becher and Christiansen 2015). Like for resignations, we do not record these instances as they are also indistinguishable from a simple public threat.

3.1.3 Legislative Elections

As discussed above, several existing datasets incorrectly take the occurrence of an election as the beginning of a new government. In some cases, the time elapsed between

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the election and the formation of a new government is quite short. Additionally, the appointment of a new government immediately following an election does not necessarily imply the end of the caretaker period.

It is possible that an election takes place in the middle of a caretaker period, as this period may have started with the PM's resignation or the announcement that parliament is dissolved. But as the election resolves the uncertainty about parties' bargaining strengths, the election undoubtedly brings to the fore what before the election might have been in the background.

In some cases, we observe the occurrence of an election without the prior resignation of the government or dissolution of the parliament. In these cases, it is the election itself, which indicates that a new distribution of parliamentary seats is being generated, that marks the end of the government. Even though all cases of caretaker periods triggered by elections are also cases in which the parliament completed its constitutionally mandated term, not all cases of full-term parliaments end with a legislative election. In the majority of cases, a dissolution decree is issued at the end of a full term, or the PM resigns before the election occurs. What matters here is that in a few cases, a legislative election is the first event marking the beginning of a caretaker government.

3.1.4 Appointment

While the occurrence of any of the events that trigger the end of a government is sufficient to mark the beginning of a caretaker administration, the beginning of a full power government depends on the occurrence of all events that must occur according to the country's constitution. The variation emerges from the fact that not all constitutions required the three events, and when they do, they do not always occur in the same order.

In almost all parliamentary democracies, the prime minister is formally appointed by the head of state.[10] In many of them, this marks the beginning of a new government and, therefore, the end of the caretaker period initiated with the resignation of

[10] In Sweden since 1974 and in the Netherlands since 2012, the head of state plays no role in the government formation process.

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the prime minister, the dissolution of parliament, or the holding of elections. Appointment, however, is not always the beginning of a new full-power government since, in some countries, the newly appointed prime minister still must succeed in a constitutionally mandated confidence vote before the formation process is completed. We also note that there are cases where the constitution prescribes the appointment of a placeholder (usually non-partisan) administration while a new full-power government is being formed. However, these placeholders skip the investiture step and cannot be considered full-power governments.[11]

Moreover, in some countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom), the PM is usually formally appointed before a new parliament convenes in the aftermath of general elections. Since no full-power government can exist without a parliament able to express its (lack of) confidence in the government, the full-power government will not start with the appointment of its head. In other words, when a prime minister is appointed (or re-appointed) before the convening of a new parliament and under the *assumption* that he or she commands the confidence of parliament (i.e., in the absence of investiture requirements), we count the day the new parliament convenes as the beginning of a full-power spell as it can be more or less reasonably taken as the first viable time for MPs to potentially oust the new government, that is, the first viable time for a test of confidence.[12]

[11] In Greece, for example, if no government can secure the required parliamentary majority upon appointment, constitutional protocol requires that the head of state dissolve parliament and "entrust the President of the Supreme Administrative Court or of the Supreme Civil and Criminal Court or of the Court of Audit to form a cabinet as widely accepted as possible to carry out elections" (Art. 37). These "cabinets" (as the English translation of the Greek Constitution calls them) do not face a vote of investiture and we count their time in office as part of a caretaker period. We identify five cases of such administrations between 1974 and 2024: 1981, 1989, 2012, 2015, and 2023. In 2015, for example, Supreme Civil and Criminal Court President Vassiliki Thanou-Christophilou was appointed as PM (28-Aug-2015) until the investiture of a full-power government led by Alexis Tsipras (7-Oct-2015). Similarly, the Bulgarian Constitution establishes that "Should no agreement on the formation of a government be reached, the President shall appoint a caretaker government, dissolve the National Assembly and schedule new elections" (Art. 99). Like in Greece, the administrations appointed under these circumstances skip the otherwise mandatory vote of investiture. The constitution of Croatia also prescribes that if a full-power government cannot be formed, "the President of the Republic shall appoint temporary non-party government and simultaneously call early elections for the Croatian Parliament." (Art. 109b). We did not identify any instances of this kind.

[12] While it has been suggested that the vote on the King/Queen's speech in the UK represents a de facto investiture (Kelso 2015), we do not count it as such because government formation is not conditional on the outcome of the vote. Similar considerations apply to the vote on the motion relating to the prime minister's statement that takes place in New Zealand on the first sitting day of each year (Standing

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In some countries, the process of government formation is led by an *(in)formateur* who is in charge of identifying potential coalitions (e.g., Greece). Sometimes, that person fails to produce a government, and a new *formateur* is designated. The prime minister is formally appointed to the office only after the *formateur* announces that a government can be formed. In these countries, this is the date we record for the appointment of the prime minister. Yet, many attempts to form a government fail, and it is common that it will be followed by another attempt before elections are eventually called again. Unless a formal PM appointment took place, we do not record these "failed formation attempts," in line with existing datasets of parliamentary governments.[13] In this respect, we incrementally improve over existing datasets of government formation by recording failed ex-post investiture votes. As anticipated, we do not record failed ex-ante investitures.[14] Hence, our and all other existing datasets artificially smooth out a process that can be quite convoluted and complex.

3.1.5 Investiture

As Rasch, Martin and Cheibub (2015*b*) showed, investiture votes can be taken *ex-ante* or *ex-post*. Ex-ante votes, like in Germany, Hungary, Japan, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden, happen when parliament votes to empower an individual to form a government. Following a successful vote on the prime minister, there is no further formal parliamentary participation in government formation: the government remains in office until the end of the legislative term unless it loses parliamentary confidence or resigns voluntarily. In these cases, investiture and the appointment of the prime minister occur

Orders of the House of Representatives, 2023, last accessed: 5-May-2025).

[13] As far as we know, there is one comparative dataset that contains data on formation attempts as opposed to only successful formations: Ecker and Meyer (2020). This dataset contains information on 303 formation attempts in 19 European countries between 1980 and 2014; of these, 30% ended without a government being formed. As the authors stressed, "The data are [...] collected by country experts on coalition politics on the basis of extensive content analyses of national media reportsmostly daily and weekly newspapers-concerned with coalition negotiations and government formation" (p. 268). There was no elaboration of the coding process in any of these publications, making it difficult to replicate the dataset or even extend it. Yet, it represents a valuable source that is likely to boost efforts to expand and update what is now available.

[14] For instance, according to Giles (1991), the investiture of Joseph Laniel as prime minister of France in June 1953 was preceded by failed investitures of Paul Reynaud, Pierre Mèndes-France, Georges Bidault, and André Marie. Since we could not find specific information about all of these votes, we did not include them in the dataset.

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simultaneously. Ex-post investiture votes, like in Belgium, Czechia, Greece, Italy, and Portugal, happen *after* a prime minister has been formally appointed to office. Once appointed, the prime minister has a pre-specified and relatively short window during which parliament must express its confidence in the government that was just formed. If the government fails that vote, it is constitutionally required to resign, and the process of forming a government starts anew.[15] In the cases of ex-post investiture, we record the date when the parliament votes on the prime minister, the individual ministers, the governments program, or a combination of them. In these cases, a government is not considered to have full power until it wins an investiture vote. To the extent possible, we record votes that did not lead to a successful investiture, of which we identified 13, including the unsuccessful investitures of Giulio Andreotti in Italy in 1972, of Lucian Croitoru in Romania in 2009, and of Pedro Passos Coelho in Portugal in 2015. In Ireland (as well as France before 1958 and Poland before 1997), there are (were) double investiture requirements, i.e., both ex-ante and ex-post, in which case we record the ex-ante vote date.[16]

3.1.6 Parliament Convenes

The date a newly elected parliament comes together and formally convenes is a mark that the caretaker period initiated with dissolution may have come to an end. It does not necessarily mark the end since there may be, and often there is, a lag between the convening of parliament after an election and the formation of a new government. In some cases, such as Israel between 2019 and 2020, three new parliaments convened before a full-power government could form.

[15] This vote, although referred to as a confidence vote, is qualitatively different from the confidence votes prime ministers can request in the process of governing. While the confidence vote associated with investiture is required by the constitution, the regular vote of confidence is freely requested by the government as a result of strategic considerations (e.g., Huber 1996; Bromo 2025*b*).

[16] We identified no cases of failed ex-post investiture after a successful ex-ante investiture in Ireland. We identified one instance in France (Queuille in 1950) and one in Poland (Pawlak in 1992).

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3.1.7 Other Events

In addition to these six government-delimiting events, the dataset also includes information about presidential elections (**PRES_ELEC**) and the ascension of heads of state, both elected and hereditary, into office (**HOS_OFFICE**). Twelve countries in the dataset are monarchies, and the remaining 24 are republics, with presidents as their heads of state.[17] We record the dates on which presidents were elected, whether directly by voters (e.g., Bulgaria and Iceland) or indirectly by legislators or electors (e.g., Germany and Estonia). In some cases, just like with direct presidential elections, indirect ones sometimes require multiple votes as the threshold for victory was not initially met.[18] In the cases of indirect elections, we record the date of the first round in the process of electing the president. Information about failed indirect elections is more sparse, although we are in the process of collecting it. Since it does not impact government formation directly in parliamentary democracies, the absence of this information does not impact this article's goals. For direct elections, we record all first-round instances. Finally, one country in our dataset, Israel, held three popular elections for the prime minister (in 1996, 1999, and 2001), which we record as a separate event (**PM_ELEC**).

3.2 Partisan Composition and Full-Power Governments

As mentioned above, our dataset does not include changes in the partisan composition of parliamentary governments not accompanied by a formal resignation as a marker of a new government. This decision does not reflect a belief that the partisan composition of governments is irrelevant for understanding parliamentary democracies. Rather, it simply reflects the idea that governments and the coalition of parties that control ministerial positions are not the same thing. A government may be composed of multiple coalitions, and the same coalition may exist across multiple governments. Conflating

[17] For the former British colonies, we consider the Governor-General as the head of state.

[18] Multiple rounds of balloting for indirect presidential elections are not uncommon. For example, in 1953, it took 13 rounds for the French Parliament to elect a new president. The winner was René Coty of the National Center of Independents and Peasants (CNIP), who had entered the race only in the 11th round. In 2016, it took six rounds to elect the President of Estonia. We do not enter the scheduled dates of uncontested presidential elections (e.g., Ireland in 2004).

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the two leads to conceptual confusion and limits inquiry about parliamentary democracies.

Scholars of parliamentary democracies have already raised some of the difficulties associated with taking any change of parties in a coalition as a marker of a parliamentary government. Shomer, Rasch and Akirav (2022), for instance, propose separating partisan changes into two distinct cases: (1) when a party enters/leaves the coalition but the majority status of the government is not affected, and (2) when a party enters/leaves the coalition *and* the coalition's majority status changes. For them, only the second case should mark the beginning or end of a government.

We go further and argue that the partisan composition of the government, whether it changed the nature of the coalition or not, should not be used as a criterion for identifying the beginning and end of governments. Doing so conflates two things that should remain separate: the existence of a full-power government and the set of parties that share portfolio positions in a given government. The former is institutional; it refers to the set of people who remain in power until the constitutional term ends, until they lose the confidence of a parliamentary majority, or until they otherwise voluntarily resign. The latter is political: it refers to the forces (parties, individuals) that sustain the government in power.

One of the most interesting questions about parliamentarism has to do with the relationship between its political and institutional aspects: how do governments that need to be implicitly or explicitly tolerated by a parliamentary majority survive in office? One answer, of course, is through ministerial reshuffles, that is, through changes in the identity of the individual in charge of specific portfolios (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008; Fleming 2023). To our knowledge, no research has addressed the impact of coalition reshuffles on the survival of individual prime ministers or their parties in office. Part of the reason for this lacuna, we believe, is the way governments have been conceptualized. As long as they are conceived as the specific coalition of parties that share portfolio positions, this question cannot even be posed.

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4 Full-Power Governments and Caretaker Administrations

Our dataset and documentation, including primary sources, are available at: https://github.com/bromofra/Parliamentary-Events-Dataset.git. All variables are defined in the codebook, together with the list of country-specific sources. Table 2 summarizes the number of full-power governments and caretaker administrations for each of the 36 countries in our dataset, as well as the time spent (in days) under each of these. The average country spent almost 9% of its time under a caretaker administration, ranging from less than 4% in France and Hungary to more than 15% in Israel and Serbia. In themselves, these quantities are not very informative. Strictly speaking, a caretaker period per se is not necessarily "bad" or "good." Sometimes it is reflective of difficulties and delays in forming a full-power government, sometimes it is simply the product of the timeline of events and the parliamentary calendar in a given country. These quantities acquire meaning when compared with the information available in other datasets.

In order to assess how different our dataset is from existing ones, we refer back to Table 1 in section 2. The last column in that table contains the dissimilarity index between the count of full-power governments in our dataset (PED) and that count in three other widely used datasets. To recall, the dissimilarity index indicates for any two datasets the proportion of comparable decades with a different count of full-power governments and caretaker administrations for all countries that are common to both datasets. As can be seen, the difference between the count of full-power governments in the PED and the other datasets is well above 40% of the comparable decades. The difference with respect to the count of caretaker periods is even more glaring: there are almost no decades for which our dataset counts the same number of caretaker periods as the other datasets. Since caretaker periods bracket full-power governments, this result implies that the temporal boundaries of full-time governments in the PED and in the other datasets are certain to differ. Thus, even when existing datasets and the PED agree on the count of full-power governments in a decade, the dates for their beginning

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Table 2: Caretaker Days by Country, 1945-2024

	Total Days Observed	Days w/out Full-Power Government	% Days w/out Full-Power	Days w/out Sitting Parliament	% Days w/out Parliament
Australia	28,550	2,911	10.20	2,911	10.20
Austria	28,866	3,073	10.65	1,988	6.89
Belgium	28,765	3,780	13.14	1,294	4.50
Bulgaria	12,542	1,782	14.21	689	5.49
Canada	27,581	2,923	10.60	2,914	10.57
Croatia	12,634	776	6.14	703	5.56
Czechia	11,870	1,553	13.08	387	3.26
Denmark	28,909	1,297	4.49	1,168	4.04
Estonia	11,759	497	4.23	0	0
Finland	27,914	1,726	6.18	409	1.47
France	28,903	1,014	3.51	320	1.11
Germany	27,501	1,173	4.27	257	0.93
Greece	18,303	898	4.91	525	2.87
Hungary	12,641	475	3.76	0	0
Iceland	28,674	3,346	11.67	2,942	10.26
India	26,530	1,318	4.97	1,008	3.80
Ireland	28,076	1,130	4.02	818	2.91
Israel	27,690	4,654	16.81	2,290	8.27
Italy	28,661	3,576	12.48	1,544	5.39
Japan	28,347	1,539	5.43	1,155	4.07
Latvia	12,657	1,023	8.08	86	0.68
Lithuania	12,708	711	5.59	0	0
Luxembourg	28,902	2,745	9.50	588	2.03
Malta	22,947	1,204	5.25	1,202	5.24
Netherlands	28,671	3,924	13.69	116	0.40
New Zealand	28,501	3,535	12.40	3,281	11.51
Norway	28,911	3,777	13.06	2,279	7.88
Poland	12,079	681	5.64	194	1.61
Portugal	18,043	1,829	10.14	926	5.13
Romania	12,599	522	4.14	0	0
Serbia	6,440	1,046	16.24	522	8.11
Slovakia	11,878	1,090	9.18	441	3.71
Slovenia	12,648	857	6.78	190	1.50
Spain	17,364	1,841	10.60	1,189	6.85
Sweden	27,801	2,809	10.10	2,515	9.05
United Kingdom	27,340	1,462	5.35	713	2.61
Total	784,205	68,497	8.73	37,564	4.79

Source: Parliamentary Events Dataset, 1945-2024.

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and end are likely to be different.

4.1 Has the Duration of Caretaker Periods Increased?

What about the duration of full-power governments and caretaker administrations? Have the economic, social, and political transformations of the 21st century led the former to become shorter on average and the latter longer? The answer to these questions has been almost universally positive, with these changes invoked as evidence that parliamentary democracies face unprecedented challenges that translate into a highly fragmented and polarized parliament. As a result, government formation in parliamentary democracies has become longer, and governments, once formed, harder to sustain. This would be due to the difficulties of negotiating viable coalitions in a context of party fragmentation, increasing electoral volatility, and political extremism (or "frustration," as characterized by Fontan and Altafini 2021). The evidence, however, is mostly country-specific, focusing on a handful of cases that have recently experienced spectacularly long government formations (Van Aelst and Louwerse 2014; Brans, Pattyn and Bouckaert 2016; Dandoy and Terrière 2021; Otjes and Voerman 2022). The one exception is Bergman, Bäck and Hellström (2021), who show a monotonically increasing duration of government formations for 17 Western European Countries between 1945 and 2019.

Our findings are slightly different; they confirm that caretaker periods have become longer in the past two decades, but also show that this increase has not been monotonic since the end of WWII. Figure 1 presents for the 1945-2024 period the yearly duration of full-power governments and caretaker administrations averaged over the number of such governments/administrations that emerged in each year. For instance, in 2019, we observed 17 full-power governments and 16 caretaker administrations for 12,259 and 1,775 total days, respectively. This means that full power governments formed in 2019 lasted 721 days on average, while caretaker administrations that started in the same year lasted an average of 111 days. There is no right-censoring in the figure: all governments and formations included in the picture started and ended before 31-Dec-

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2024.

As can be seen in Panel A, the trend in the second half of the 20th century was for full-power governments to last longer. There were temporary and relatively small declines in the early 1970s and 1990s, but the trend was clearly in the direction of longer-lasting governments. By the year 2000, the average full-power government lasted about 35 months. From the beginning of the 21st century, however, full-power governments have lasted shorter periods; by 2024, they were lasting as long as the average government formed in the late 1950s.

Our data confirm the general impression that the periods between full-power governments have increased considerably since the beginning of the 2000s, as can be seen in Panel B of Figure 1. There are no signs that this trend is about to be reversed. Yet, contrary to what Bergman, Bäck and Hellström (2021) show, the duration of caretaker periods has not steadily increased over the entire post-WWII period. In our 36 democracies, in the course of the 1950s, caretaker administrations tended to last almost twice as long as they had at the end of the 1940s. Another, smaller increase in the duration of caretaker administrations took place in the 1970s, after which it declined again in the 1980s, only to increase in duration ever since.

Note that our definition of caretaker administrations includes the period between a parliamentary dissolution and the election. This is so because we define caretaker administrations or periods negatively, that is, as the periods in which a full-power government is not in place. In this respect, our dataset departs from existing ones as we do not define caretaker periods by what they are supposed to *not* do, which almost no constitution or legislation mentions or defines and is primarily based on convention, but by the fact that the individuals occupying executive positions are not "at least tolerated by a legislative majority," Given this definition of caretaker periods, it is possible that what appears as fluctuations in their duration before the turn of the century is, to some extent, simply the result of changing rules related to parliamentary sessions in combination with rules requiring elections to occur at specific points in the calendar year. In other words, the fluctuations in the duration of caretaker periods in the 1950s

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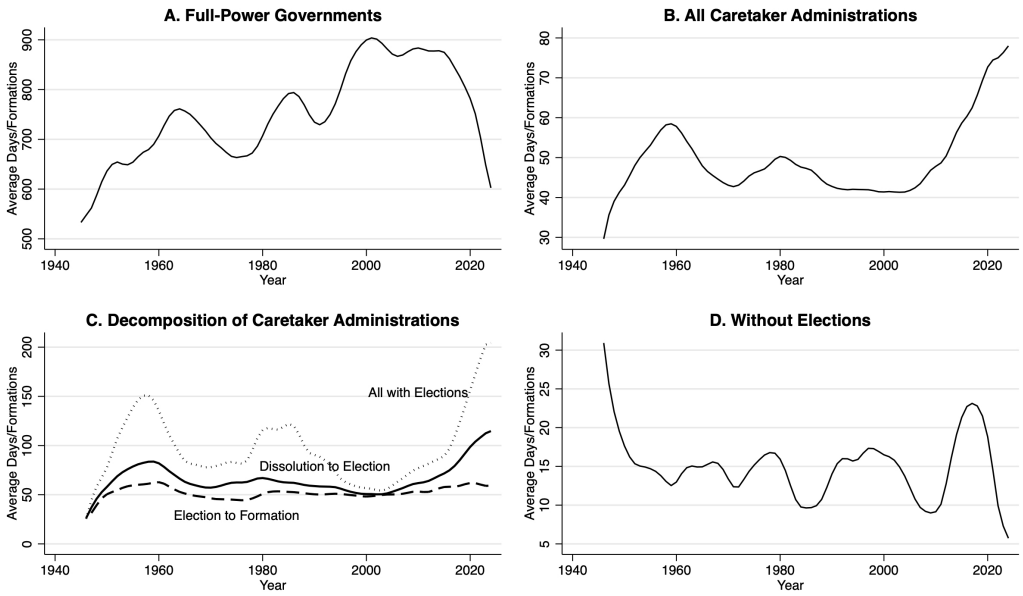
Figure 1: Average Duration of Full-Power Governments and Caretaker Administrations, 1945-2024



Note: The figure shows locally weighted smooth scatterplots (LOWESS) of the total duration (days) of full-power governments (panel A) and caretaker administrations (panels B-D) in a given year, divided by the number of governments/administrations that emerged in the same year.

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and 1970s could be due to an increase in the time elapsed between parliamentary dissolution and elections, and not in the time from the occurrence of the election and the formation of a full-power government.

In order to investigate this possibility, we decompose caretaker administrations, first, into those that begin and end in the middle of a legislative term (and thus do not involve any election) and those that involve an election. The latter we decompose further into the period going from parliamentary dissolution to the election (the new component in our dataset) and the period going from the election to the formation of a full-power government.

The decomposition of caretaker periods that involve elections is presented in Panel C of Figure 1. As can be seen, the pre-electoral period, the days between dissolution and the election, has remained stable since 1945 through 2024. This should not be surprising since, in virtually all countries, there is a constitutional limit to the number of days before an election must take place after dissolution. The increase in duration of caretaker administrations experienced in the 1950s and 1980s, therefore, is mainly due to the time that it takes for parties to negotiate a new government once they know their legislative strength. Hence, although the average duration of post-electoral negotiations to form a government in the first two decades of this century has increased to a length not seen before, it is important to keep in mind that average durations in the past have declined after a significant increase. Whether the duration these democracies face today portends an unprecedented crisis remains to be seen.

Finally, Panel D of Figure 1 shows the duration over time of caretaker periods that start and end in the middle of a parliamentary term. They have a much shorter duration than those that involve elections, which corroborates the finding of the literature that studies the determinants of the duration of government formation processes (Diermeier and van Roozendaal 1998; Martin and Vanberg 2003; Golder 2010; Conrad and Golder 2010; Ecker and Meyer 2015 2020). The pattern observed after 2000 is not dissimilar to the one observed in the previous decades, namely, an increase in duration followed by a decline. The difference is that the magnitude of the upward and downward movements

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after 2000 has been larger than before. The period ends with the shortest average inter-election caretaker periods. To recall, this is not due to right-censoring.

Note that the increased duration of caretaker administrations noted in Figure 1 does not result from the entry of Eastern European democracies in the sample. In the OSM (section 4), we estimate generalized additive models for the whole sample, for established democracies, and for Eastern European democracies only, controlling for variables found relevant in studies of government formation (Table A4). Figure A1 was produced on the basis of these estimates. It is clear that all three samples display a very similar pattern after 1990.[19]

We find, thus, that the time spent under caretaker administrations has become longer in the recent past than in the "golden age" of parliamentarism that followed the end of WWII. Yet, the time spent between full-power governments in these democracies has fluctuated over the decades, and increases in its length have been observed in the 1950s and 1970s. To us, these findings suggest not so much that parliamentary democracies are facing a systemic crisis expressed in their inability to efficiently form full-power governments but rather that we should take these periods seriously and study what actually goes on when they emerge. Parliamentary democracies, now as before, spend a sufficiently long period of time under caretaker administrations (almost 9% of the total observed days) for it to be accounted for by the formula that, during these periods, governments do nothing but "keep the lights on." By defining caretaker periods without any reference to what they are supposed to do, we hope our dataset will, first, help resolve the disparity of information about the temporal contours of parliamentary governments and, second, inspire systematic studies of politics when national leaders allegedly should not change the status quo.

[19] In the OSM, section 5, Table A5 presents estimates from Cox and Weibull survival models including country-fixed effects. We find similar results.

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5 Conclusion

In this paper, we introduced a new dataset of parliamentary events that provides a flexible and conceptually informed solution to the problem of identifying the beginning and the end of governments in parliamentary democracies. With this dataset, we are able to precisely count full-power parliamentary governments while, at the same time, respecting the institutional heterogeneity that characterizes this type of democracy. One implication of so doing is that we are able to determine the periods during which countries governed by parliamentary institutions spend under what we call caretaker administrations, that is, those periods in which there is no standing parliament capable of manifesting confidence in the government, no government tolerated by a parliamentary majority, or both. We then address the question of whether the time parliamentary democracies spend under caretaker administrations has become longer in the recent past. It has. Yet, the length of these periods has also fluctuated in previous decades. For us, these findings suggest, first, the need to further study why caretaker periods vary across countries and, perhaps more interestingly, within countries over time. Second, it also suggests that we should take these periods more seriously and refrain from assuming that these are times in which little of significant political relevance is done. Although caretaker administrations are presumed to simply "pay the bills" or "keep the lights on," we have every reason to believe that much more than this actually happens. We suspect that famous episodes such as the caretaker drafting the budget in Belgium in the 2010s might just be the tip of the iceberg. By providing a definition and measurement of caretaker administrations independent of what they are supposed to do, our dataset makes the empirical verification of this issue possible.

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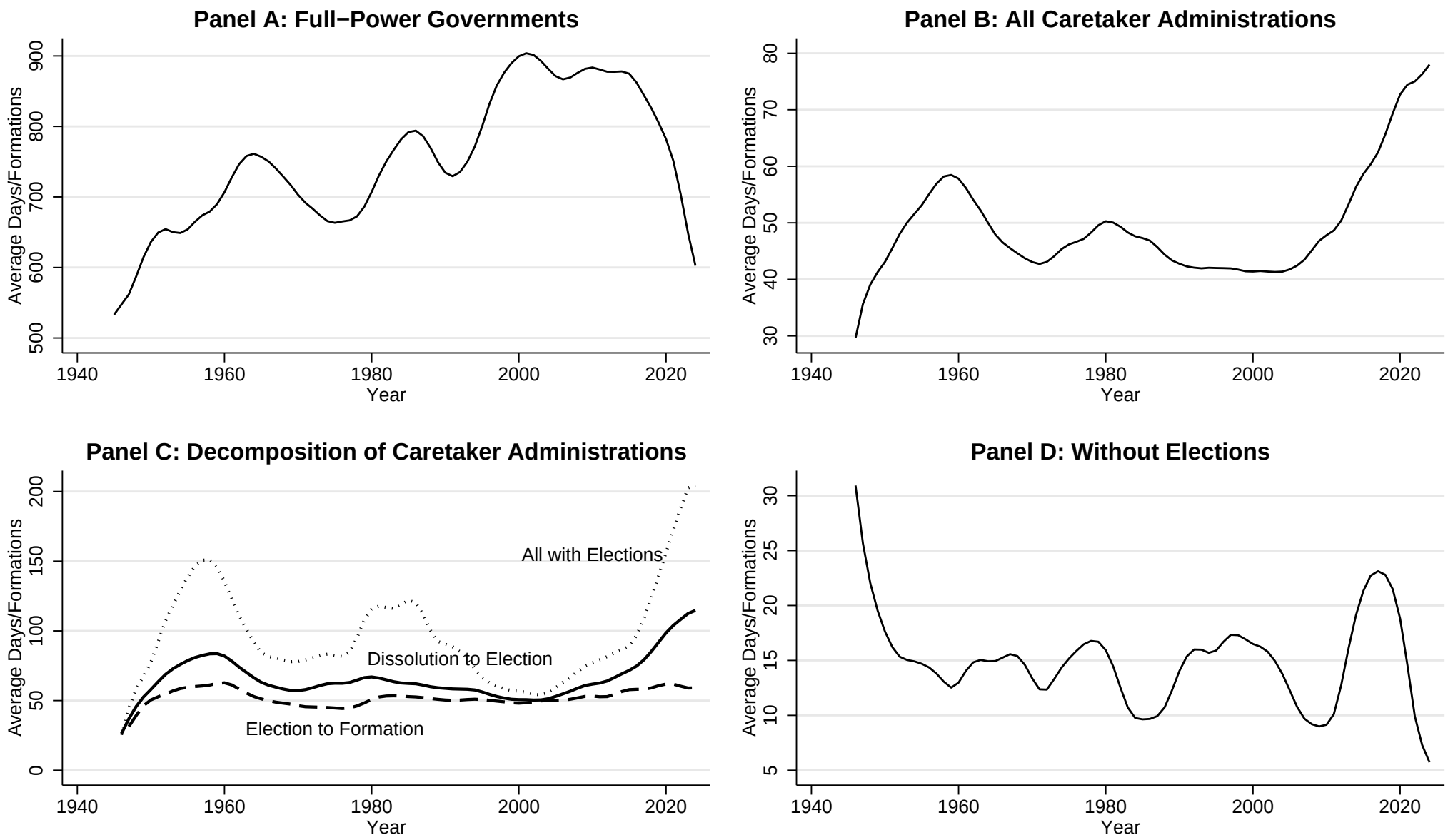

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ONLINE SUPPORTING MATERIALS

Full-Power Cabinets and Caretaker Administrations in Parliamentary Democracies, 1945-2024

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September 18, 2025

The dataset and documentation, including primary sources, are available at:
https://github.com/bromofra/Parliamentary-Events-Dataset.git

Replication files are available at:
https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FYGFLS

For questions or comments about the dataset, or to report any potential errors or inaccuracies, please contact Francesco Bromo (francesco.bromo@bsg.ox.ac.uk) or José A. Cheibub (cheibub@pitt.edu).

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1 Short Codebook

order: Observation number.

country_number: Sequential numbering of countries. See Table A1.

country: Country name (English). See Table A1.

country_code: Three letter country code. See Table A1.

event_id: Unique event identifier.

event: Parliamentary event (listed below in alphabetical order).

1 APPOINTMENT: Formal appointment of the prime minister (or the cabinet) by whoever has the power of appointment.

2 DISSOLUTION: Formal parliamentary dissolution (lower chamber). See Table A2.

3 HOS_OFFICE: Entry of head of state in office (including acting and regents).

4 INVESTITURE: Prime minister (or cabinet) vote of investiture in the lower chamber. When both an ex-ante and an ex-post vote are required (e.g., Ireland), we record the date of the ex-ante vote.

5 LEG_ELEC: First or only round of elections for the lower chamber of parliament. When applicable, we also record repeat elections of the lower chamber (e.g., Austria 4-Oct-1970).

6 PARL_CONVENES: First meeting of parliament following a legislative election (lower chamber). We add a "PARL_CONVENES_DISS" event for the first meeting of formally dissolved parliaments. We do not record convening after recesses or prorogation between elections.

7 PRES_ELEC: First or only round of direct or indirect presidential election. We add a "PM_ELEC" event in Israel to record the three direct elections of the prime minister in 1996, 1999, and 2001.

8 RESIGNATION: Prime minister resignation. Given that all countries in the dataset operate on the basis of collective responsibility, the resignation of the prime minister is equivalent to the resignation of the cabinet as a whole. We consider the death of an incumbent prime minister as a resignation (e.g., Francisco Sá Carneiro in Portugal 4-Dec-1980).

formation_spell: Sequential numbering of government formation spells by country. Starts with the event that indicates the beginning of a caretaker period and ends with the event that indicates the end of the caretaker period.

flag_form_trigger: Flag for a parliamentary event that triggered the corresponding formation spell.

form_trigger_type: Type of event that triggered a formation spell (listed below).

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1 PM resignation (RESIGNATION).

2 Formal parliamentary dissolution (DISSOLUTION).

3 Legislative elections (LEG_ELEC).

flag_form_conclusion: Flag for a parliamentary event that marked the end of the corresponding formation spell and the beginning of a full-power government.

form_conclusion_type: Type of event that marked the end of a formation spell (listed below).

1 PM appointment (APPOINTMENT).

2 Vote of investiture (INVESTITURE).

3 First meeting of a new parliament (PARL_CONVENES or PARL_CONVENES_DISS).

formation_spell_days: Sequential numbering for days without a full-power government (i.e., caretaker period). Used to compute the number of days under a caretaker administration. For this reason, it excludes the event indicating the termination of the caretaker period. This is so because the last event is associated with the days that follow it.

fullpower_flag: Flag for days with a full-power government.

fullpower_spell: Sequential numbering for days with a full-power government.

form_multipleevents: Flag for formations that include multiple events that trigger or mark the end of a caretaker period (e.g., failed investiture)

change_pm: Type of PM appointment (listed below).

1 New prime minister appointed to lead a full-power government or caretaker administration.

2 Incumbent prime minister re-appointed to lead a full-power government or caretaker administration.

form_censored: Flag for right-censored formations.

fullpower_censored: Flag for right-censored periods with a full-power government.

date: Date of corresponding parliamentary event (DD-MM-YYYY).

date_lead: Date of subsequent parliamentary event (DD-MM-YYYY).

days: Difference in days between **date_lead** and **date**. Note that the days refer to the time spent under the state created by the date. Thus, for example, if a caretaker period is triggered by a DISSOLUTION event, the days associated with it actually took place under a full-power government. For this reason, we distinguish between formation_spell and formation_spell_days.

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pm: Last name of PM in office when the corresponding parliamentary event occurred. For events APPOINTMENT and INVESTITURE, we enter the name of the individual who came into office as a result of the event.

hos: Last name of the head of state in office when the corresponding parliamentary event occurred. For HOS_OFFICE, we enter the name of the individual who came into office. For Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, we record the last name of the Governor-General. Starting from 1971, we also record the name of the speaker of the unicameral *Riksdag* in Sweden (e.g., Carl XVI Gustaf/Allard).

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Table A1: Country Number, Name, Code, and First Event Recorded

Country Number	Country Name	Country Code	First Full-Power APPOINTMENT After
1	Australia	AUS	September 2, 1945
2	Austria	AUT	September 2, 1945
3	Belgium	BEL	September 2, 1945
4	Bulgaria	BGR	Constituent assembly elections, 1990
5	Canada	CAN	September 2, 1945
6	Croatia	HRV	Legislative elections, 1990
7	Czechia	CZE	Legislative elections, 1992
8	Denmark	DNK	September 2, 1945
9	Estonia	EST	Legislative elections, 1992
10	Finland	FIN	September 2, 1945
11	France	FRA	September 2, 1945
12	Germany	DEU	Legislative elections, 1949
13	Greece	GRC	Legislative elections, 1974
14	Hungary	HUN	Legislative elections, 1990
15	Iceland	ISL	September 2, 1945
16	India	IND	Legislative elections, 1951
17	Ireland	IRL	September 2, 1945
18	Israel	ISR	Constituent assembly elections, 1949
19	Italy	ITA	Constituent assembly elections, 1946
20	Japan	JPN	September 2, 1945
21	Latvia	LVA	Legislative elections, 1990
22	Lithuania	LTU	Legislative elections, 1990
23	Luxembourg	LUX	September 2, 1945
24	Malta	MLT	Legislative elections, 1962
25	Netherlands	NLD	September 2, 1945
26	New Zealand	NZL	September 2, 1945
27	Norway	NOR	September 2, 1945
28	Poland	POL	Legislative elections, 1991
29	Portugal	PRT	Constituent assembly elections, 1975
30	Romania	ROU	Legislative elections, 1990
31	Serbia	SRB	Legislative elections, 2007
32	Slovakia	SVK	Legislative elections, 1992
33	Slovenia	SVN	Legislative elections, 1990
34	Spain	ESP	Legislative elections, 1977
35	Sweden	SWE	September 2, 1945
36	United Kingdom	GBR	September 2, 1945

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Table A2: Elections for Which a Formal Parliamentary Dissolution Took Place

Country	Elections with a Formal Dissolution	Document/Event	Notes
Australia	All	Proclamation by Governor-General	
Austria	1949, 1952, 1956, 1959, 1962, 1965, 1971, 1979, 1983, 1986, 1990, 1995, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2017, 2019	Early self-dissolution bill	Art. 29 prerogative
Belgium	All	Royal decree or parliament vote	
Bulgaria	1994, 1997, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021 (May), 2021 (Sep), 2022, 2023	Presidential decree	Art. 99 application
Canada	All	Proclamation by Governor-General	
Croatia	All	Pres. of parliament notification or parliament vote	Art. 77 prerogative (excluding 1992, 1999)
Czechia	1998, 2009, 2013	Early self-dissolution bill	2009 dissolution annulled by constitutional court
Denmark	All	Official letter (*Kongelig åbent brev*)	
Estonia	N/A	N/A	No early dissolutions recorded
Finland	1953, 1961, 1971, 1975	Presidential decree	
France	1955, 1962, 1968, 1981, 1988, 1997, 2024	Presidential decree	Art. 51 prerogative (IV) Art. 12 prerogative (V)
Germany	1972, 1983, 2005, 2024	Presidential decree	Art. 68 application
Greece	All	Presidential decree	
Hungary	N/A	N/A	No early dissolutions recorded
Iceland	All	Presidential decree or parliament vote	
India	All	Presidential decree	
Ireland	All	Presidential decree	
Israel	1951, 1961, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2019 (May), 2019 (Dec), 2020, 2022	Early self-dissolution bill; PM order (2002, 2005); Const. requirement application (2008, 2020)	

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Italy	All	Presidential decree	
Japan	All	Royal decree	
Latvia	2011	Popular referendum	Art. 48 prerogative
Lithuania	N/A	N/A	No early dissolutions recorded
Luxembourg	1958, 1968, 1989, 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2013	Royal decree	
Malta	All	Presidential decree	
Netherlands	All	Royal decree	
New Zealand	All	Proclamation by Governor-General	
Norway	All	Solemn dissolution (*Oppløsning*) (until 1990); Official closing (*Avslutning*) (after 1990)	Early dissolution not contemplated
Poland	1993, 2007	Presidential decree or parliament vote	Art. 66 application (1993); Art. 98 prerogative (2007)
Portugal	1976, 1979, 1983, 1985, 1987, 2002, 2004, 2011, 2021, 2024	Presidential decree	
Romania	N/A	N/A	No early dissolutions recorded
Serbia	2008, 2014, 2016, 2022, 2023	Presidential decree	Art. 109 prerogative
Slovakia	2011	Early self-dissolution bill	
Slovenia	2011, 2014, 2018	Presidential decree	Art. 111 application
Spain	All	Royal decree	
Sweden	All	Official closing (*Avslutning*)	
UK	All	Proclamation by monarch	

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2 Country-Specific Sources

See full codebook (https://github.com/bromofra/Parliamentary-Events-Dataset.git).

Tables A3-A6 cover all countries included in our dataset between 1945 and 2020, except for India and Serbia.

3 Summary Statistics

Table A3: Summary Statistics

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Caretaker Duration (Days)	917	60.47	66.35	0	593
Investiture	917	0.53	0.50	0	1
Post-Election	917	0.59	0.49	0	1
ENPP	917	3.81	1.40	1.81	10.80
Ideological Polarization	883	19.75	8.57	0.29	55.59

4 Generalized Additive Models

Following the existing literature on government formation (e.g., Golder 2010), we estimate the following model:

$$\text{Formation Duration}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1\text{Investiture}_{it} + \beta_2\text{Post-Election}_{it} + \beta_3\text{ENPP}_{it} + \beta_4\text{Ideological Polarization}_{it} + \beta_5\text{ENPP} \times \text{Post-Election}_{it} + \beta_6\text{Ideological Polarization} \times \text{Post-Election}_{it} + \text{s(Time)}_{it} + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where the dependent variable is the duration of a caretaker administration that emerged in country i, year t, measured in days; α is a constant; *Investiture* is a binary indicator for countries with investiture requirements; *Post-Election* is a binary indicator for caretaker administrations that include a legislative election; *ENPP* is the effective number of parties in parliament based on Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) formula; and *Ideological Polarization*, based on the Manifesto Project's "RILE" index, is the standard deviation of left-right positions of all the parties with at least one parliamentary seat during a given formation (Manifesto Project Database, last accessed: 5-May-2025). For formations involving multiple elections, we take the average of the effective number of parties and ideological range of all the elections occurring within the same formation spell; *Time* identifies the year in which a caretaker administration emerged, ranging from 1 (1946) to 75 (2020), featuring as a cubic regression spline; and ϵ is the error term. We start the analysis with the first complete formation after WWII and end with the last complete formation before 31-Dec-2020.

Table A4 presents the results of the three generalized additive models (Hastie and Tibshirani 1990) we estimated, one for all countries in our data (except for Serbia and India), one for established democracies, and one for Eastern European democracies. In all models, we include country-fixed effects. The country dummy estimates are available in Table A5.

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Table A4: GAMs of Duration of Caretaker Periods

	(1) Whole Sample	(2) Established Democracies	(3) Eastern Europe
Intercept	1.27	36.47**	16.07
	(18.17)	(14.72)	(23.30)
Investiture	3.10	5.25	15.93
	(8.10)	(9.14)	(18.47)
Post-Election	16.46	24.89*	44.85*
	(12.22)	(13.96)	(23.05)
ENPP	4.57**	3.41	3.52
	(4.57)	(2.80)	(3.47)
Ideological Polarization	-0.70**	-0.03	-0.91
	(0.36)	(0.41)	(0.84)
ENPP×Post-Election	9.15***	13.21***	0.52
	(2.43)	(2.79)	(4.67)
Polarization×Post-Election	1.19**	0.45	-0.47
	(0.39)	(0.45)	(1.12)
s(Time)	4.30***	4.61***	2.08**
Country Dummies	✓	✓	✓
Observations	883	724	159
Adjusted R-Squared	0.51	0.54	0.44

Note: Standard errors in parentheses; Effective degrees of freedom reported for smooth terms; ***p≤0.01, **p≤0.05, *p≤0.10.

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Table A5: Country Dummies (Table A4)

	Coefficient	Std. Err.
Slovenia	-	-
Australia	24.38	16.87
Austria	48.28***	17.27
Belgium	8.18	15.27
Bulgaria	21.95	19.26
Canada	54.55***	17.77
Croatia	0.44	18.15
Czechia	64.69***	19.45
Denmark	-43.57**	17.19
Estonia	-16.84	18.16
Finland	-13.40	16.15
France	-15.87	15.31
Germany	-15.37	16.96
Greece	-10.37	18.06
Hungary	-0.72	20.38
Iceland	40.86**	17.10
Ireland	-16.85	16.49
Israel	57.93***	16.27
Italy	22.53	14.73
Japan	-4.38	15.79
Latvia	-5.23	16.76
Lithuania	-7.36	18.18
Luxembourg	-13.55	18.48
Malta	41.57	36.88
Netherlands	23.25	17.70
New Zealand	46.92***	17.24
Norway	26.97	17.15
Poland	-2.78	17.97
Portugal	23.40	17.04
Romania	-13.60	16.22
Slovakia	1.37	20.42
Spain	60.31***	18.71
Sweden	31.12*	16.41
United Kingdom	-16.34	17.64

Note: GAM estimates from Table A4, column (1); ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.10; The reference country is Slovenia, the most "average" case in terms of the ratio of total caretaker days to number of caretaker formations. In Slovenia, a caretaker administration lasts, on average, 63.5 days. The sample average (34 countries, 1945-2020) is 63.4.

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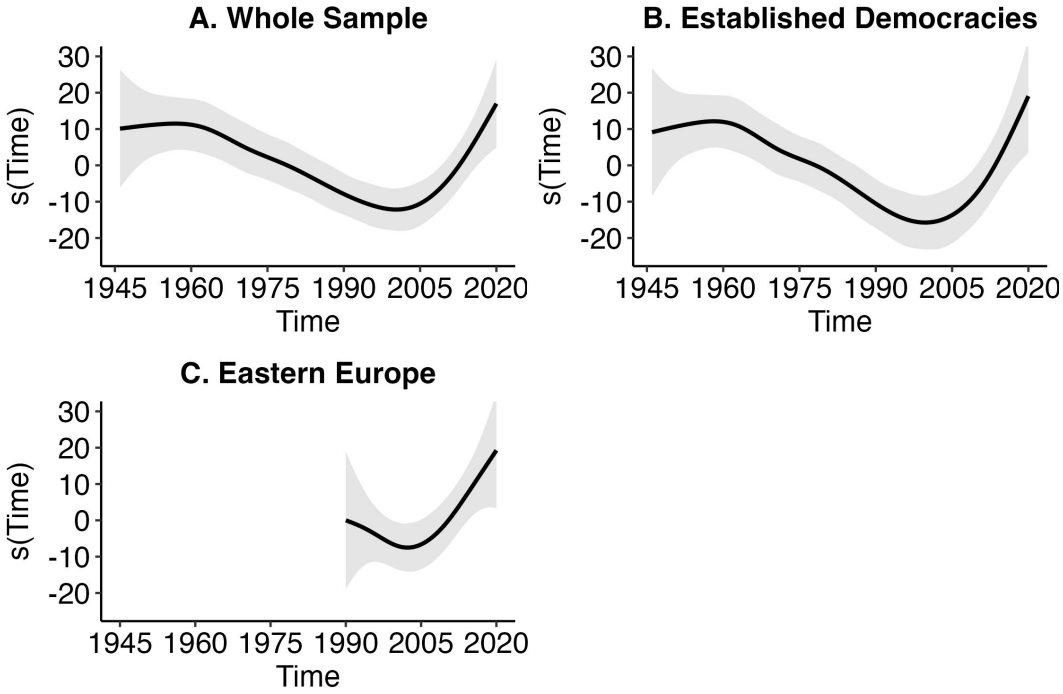
Figure A1: Effect of Time on the Duration of Caretaker Periods, 1945-2020



Note: Partial effects (time/duration of caretaker periods) based on Table A4, column (1) (panel A), column (2) (panel B), and column (3) (panel C). The gray areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

5 Survival Analysis

As a robustness check, we use survival analysis (Cox proportional and Weibull) to replicate our models, with results generally similar to what we report in Table A4.

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Table A6: Survival Analysis of Caretaker Periods

	Cox Proportional			Weibull AFT		
	(1) Whole Sample	(2) Established Democracies	(3) Eastern Europe	(4) Whole Sample	(5) Established Democracies	(6) Eastern Europe
Intercept				9.47***	10.97***	0.00
				(3.08)	(3.09)	(0.00)
Investiture	0.61***	0.59**	0.48	1.71***	1.76***	1.53
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.30)	(0.23)	(0.26)	(0.62)
Post-Election	0.14***	0.07***	0.23**	5.35***	9.55***	2.86**
	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.16)	(1.18)	(2.36)	(1.36)
ENPP	0.84***	0.83***	0.96	1.19***	1.22***	1.03
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.10)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.07)
Ideological Polarization	1.00	0.98**	1.01	1.00	1.01*	1.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)
ENPP×Post-Election	0.96	0.91	0.97	0.94	0.96	0.99
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.13)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.09)
Polarization×Post-Election	0.98*	1.01	1.02	1.01**	0.99	0.99
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Spline 1	1.01	1.01	0.12	0.98*	0.98**	5.17
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.39)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(10.88)
Spline 2	0.99	0.98	24.06	1.04	1.04	0.08
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(111.18)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.26)
Spline 3	1.11	1.18	0.00	0.83	0.81*	65.97
	(0.19)	(0.21)	(0.03)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(335.01)
Spline 4	0.61	0.48**	1	1.67**	1.91***	1
	(0.19)	(0.17)		(0.38)	(0.47)	
Country Dummies	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	883	724	159	883	724	159
Log-likelihood	-4660.65	-3638.27	-598.05	-4084.27	-3323.31	-730.09

Note: In columns (1)-(3), we report Cox regression estimates (hazard ratios) (Breslow method for ties). In columns (4)-(6), we report Weibull accelerated failure time regression estimates (time ratios); Standard errors in parentheses; ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.10.

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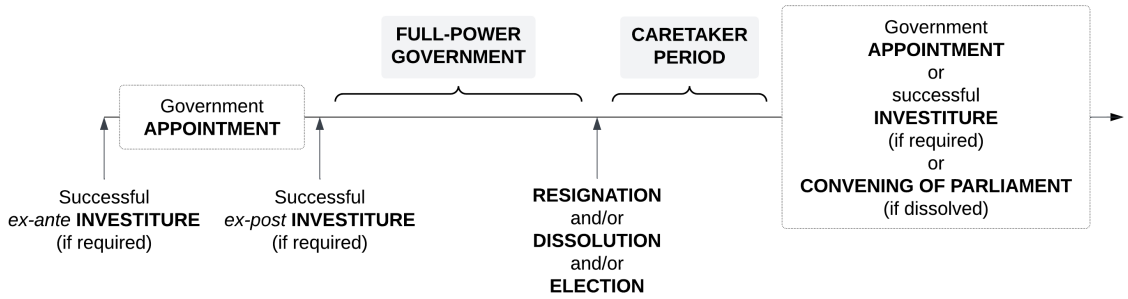
6 Caretaker Periods: Event Sequence

Figure A2: Full-Power Governments and Caretaker Periods - Events



Note: Timeline of parliamentary events that determine the boundaries of full-power government and caretaker periods.

Table A7: Beginning and End of Caretaker Periods

Triggering Event	Concluding Event	Sequence Type
RESIGNATION	APPOINTMENT	1
RESIGNATION	INVESTITURE	2
RESIGNATION	PARL_CONVENES	3
DISSOLUTION	APPOINTMENT	4
DISSOLUTION	INVESTITURE	5
DISSOLUTION	PARL_CONVENES	6
LEG_ELEC	APPOINTMENT	7
LEG_ELEC	INVESTITURE	8
LEG_ELEC	PARL_CONVENES	9

Note: The date of the "triggering event" demarcates the end of a full-power government and the beginning of a caretaker period. The date of the "concluding event" demarcates the end of a caretaker period and the beginning of a full-power government. The difference between the date of the concluding event and the date of the triggering event in days represents the duration of the caretaker period. Depending on the specific formation, other events can take place between the triggering event and the concluding event, which do not affect the caretaker status of the government.

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