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# The Duration of Caretaker Periods and the Formation of Parliamentary Governments

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, I focus on an understudied aspect of the cabinet formation process in parliamentary democracies: the caretaker periods associated with it. Building on the existing literature on government formation, I discuss conceptualization and measurement of caretaker periods, defined as periods during which a government is no longer or cannot be tolerated by a majority in the legislature, and encompassing the process of formation of a new government that is and can be tolerated by the same or a different majority. I leverage a dataset of parliamentary events that, on the basis of this conceptualization, allows me to separate full-power cabinets from caretaker periods rigorously and systematically according to a country's specific constitutional arrangements. Using survival analysis, I examine over 900 caretaker spells across 34 countries between 1945 and 2020. My goal is to assess how institutional and contextual differences account for variation in the duration of caretaker periods, as well as the government formation processes taking place during these periods, across countries and over time. The evidence helps paint a more refined picture of how new cabinets emerge and the occurrence of delays under different sets of conditions in the context of caretaker periods.

## 1 | Introduction

2021 in Bulgaria was dubbed “the year of three parliaments” (Spirova 2022, 47). A regularly scheduled parliamentary election took place at the beginning of April. Failing to enter a coalition agreement, the plurality party (GERB) gave up efforts to form a government later that month. Following two further unsuccessful formation attempts, in compliance with constitutional requirements, President Radev dissolved the National Assembly. The country went to the polls again in July, and a new plurality party (ITN) was entrusted with proposing a cabinet. Sensing a lack of support, however, the proposal was withdrawn ahead of the scheduled investiture debate. Upon the failure of two additional attempts at forming a new government, the head of state followed constitutional protocol and dissolved the National Assembly one more time. Finally, a snap election

held in November produced a coalition cabinet led by PM Kiril Petkov (PP). The nine-month crisis thus ended with a successful vote of investiture in December.<sup>1</sup>

In this example from Bulgaria, it took three elections, 254 days, to form a government that satisfies the minimal definition of “parliamentary government,” namely, one that is at least “tolerated” by a majority of elected representatives (Strøm 2000, 265). As it turns out, this amount of time to install a cabinet that is (and can be) tolerated by a majority in the legislature is somewhat unusual. The process of government formation takes place during “caretaker periods,” time intervals during which the incumbent is assumed to tend to nothing beyond “ordinary business.” Between 1945 and 2020, these periods lasted 60 days on average (see Figure 2). Yet, the 2021 Bulgarian case is not an isolated one. In the last decade,

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the number of “unusually long” caretaker spells has been increasing, most evidently in Belgium in the early 2010s, but also, for instance, in the Netherlands and Spain. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. The average duration of government formation and the related caretaker periods has fluctuated considerably throughout the postwar years (see Figure 3; see also Bergman et al. 2021; Bromo and Cheibub 2025). In addition to so much *over-time* variation, parliamentary democracies exhibit a substantial degree of *cross-sectional* variation in how long it takes on average to conclude a formation process (and caretaker period). While in some countries, such as those mentioned above, it can take up to *several months* to put in place a full-power cabinet, there are also countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, where the formation process is usually completed relatively quickly.

Many comparativists have concerned themselves with the life cycle of parliamentary governments: how they emerge, how long they survive in office, and how they die. Of particular interest to us is the initial stage of the cycle. A handful of empirical studies have ventured into dissecting the duration of the cabinet formation phase in different settings (Diermeier and van Roozendaal 1998; Martin and Vanberg 2003; De Winter and Dumont 2008; Golder 2010; Savage 2013; Ecker and Meyer 2015, 2020; Blockmans et al. 2016; Curini and Pinto 2016; Giannetti et al. 2020; Morini and Cilento 2020; Aaskoven and Martin 2024; Bäck, Debus, and Imre 2024; Bäck, Hellström, et al. 2024; Praprotnik et al. 2025). This research offers valuable insights into some of the factors that affect this process, particularly the conditions that favor the occurrence of delays in the context of coalition bargaining. In this article, I build on this literature to emphasize an understudied aspect of government formation in parliamentary systems: the *caretaker periods* associated with it. I discuss conceptualization and measurement of caretaker periods, defined as periods during which a government is no longer or cannot be tolerated by a majority in the legislature, and encompassing the process of formation of a new government that is and can be tolerated by the same or a different majority. Importantly, this definition (and operationalization) does not rely on assumptions about what caretaker administrations are assumed to do (or not to do), which is how previous literature has typically conceived of caretakers. I leverage a dataset of parliamentary events that, on the basis of this conceptualization, allows me to separate full-power governments from caretaker periods more rigorously and systematically according to a country's specific constitutional arrangements. The data covers over 900 caretaker spells across 34 parliamentary democracies from the end of WWII to 2020 (Bromo and Cheibub 2025). My goal is to assess how institutional and contextual differences account for variation in the length of caretaker periods, as well as the government formation processes taking place during these periods, across countries and over time.

I use random-effects survival analysis to investigate the factors behind deviations from the average amount of time it takes to install a full-power cabinet and the duration of a caretaker period. The model features determinants that the existing research found to matter with respect to government formation (e.g., the presence of a majority party), but it also incorporates previously overlooked nuances and features of

the formation process itself and caretaker periods (e.g., the triggering event). While previous empirical literature has considered formation processes (e.g., Golder 2010) or individual formation attempts (Ecker and Meyer 2020) as the unit of analysis, the novelty of this study lies in considering caretaker periods (and the formation processes embedded within them) as the unit of analysis. Another advantage of this study is that it verifies whether well-established results can stand the test of data that allows for flexibility and consistency in partitioning time intervals. The statistical approach and the nature of the data likewise allow us to account for the heterogeneity in institutions and practices that is inherent to parliamentarism. Finally, beyond the theoretical and empirical additions vis-à-vis caretaker periods, this article contributes to the existing research on cabinet formation by examining over 70 years' worth of data spanning 34 countries across the globe, making this one of the largest studies of its kind to date.

The evidence helps paint a more refined picture of how new cabinets emerge and the occurrence of delays under different sets of conditions in the context of caretaker periods. Specifically, I find that the event that triggered a caretaker spell, the effective number of legislative parties, ideological polarization, different types of investiture requirements, and the presence of constitutional provisions mandating the dissolution of parliament to break a formation impasse can explain a great deal of the variation that we observe in the duration of caretaker periods. Understanding these dynamics is important because of the consequences government formation outcomes and prolonged spells without a full-power government can have for different aspects of the political and economic life of democracies, from policymaking (e.g., Van Aelst and Louwerse 2014; Brans et al. 2016) to the volatility of exchange rates (e.g., Bernhard and Leblang 2002; Moore and Mukherjee 2006) and potentially other economic outcomes. For example, Alexiadou et al. (2022) find that investors reduce a country's borrowing costs when technocratic ministers are appointed during financial crises. In the same vein, Leblang and Mukherjee (2005) and Leblang and Bernhard (2006) show that expectations about election results and the ability to predict the outcome of cabinet formations affect the markets in both presidential and parliamentary systems. Finally, Bawn and Rosenbluth (2006) highlight how the type of government that emerges after a formation process impacts the size of the public sector. It is, therefore, plausible to think that prolonged caretaker spells, particularly in the case of “unusually long” spells, might affect investors' expectations and confidence due to the uncertainty about the composition, ideology, and policy aspirations of the full-power government that will emerge at the end. It is likewise plausible to think that the public sector might play a role in facilitating (or hampering) the government formation process and thus the duration of caretaker spells.

The article proceeds as follows: In Section 2, I discuss conceptualization and measurement of caretaker periods in which the formation process is embedded (in contrast to periods of full-power government). In Section 3, I review the results most widely reported by previous studies on government formation and highlight some underexplored elements. In Section 4, I discuss the data and research design. In Sections 5 and 6, I present my findings and discuss some implications and avenues for future research.

## 2 | Conceptualizing and Measuring Caretaker Periods

Conrad and Golder (2010) observe that many studies on parliamentary governments simply assume that cabinets leave office on the day prior to the new one taking office, altogether disregarding the caretaker portion of time spent in office by the incumbent. This leaves us with little theoretical and empirical understanding of how to define and measure caretaker spells appropriately. Previous literature has generally provided relatively hazy and ambiguous definitions of “caretaker governments” or “caretaker cabinets,” mainly relying on assumptions about what these are (or are not) supposed to do while in office, with little clarity as to how they are coded in relation to non-caretakers. For example, Browne et al. (1986) describe them as “cabinets that exist *for some reason other than governing*” (pp. 640–641). King et al. (1990) characterize them as “governments that hold office during government formation crises *in order to keep the essential functions of the state going*” (p. 859), etc. This is perhaps unsurprising given that even national constitutions are vague or altogether silent when it comes to caretakers.

Building on Bromo and Cheibub (2025), I depart from this status quo. First, I conceive of caretakers as “periods,” rather than standalone cabinets. Second, I consider a country’s specific constitutional arrangements to identify the boundaries of these periods, rather than formulating assumptions about the actions of governments during these periods. Starting from Strøm’s (2000) unequivocal definition of “parliamentary government,” I define “full-power government” as a time interval during which a government is in office that *is* and *can be* tolerated by a majority in the legislature. The “is” refers to the idea that a majority has not shot down the government in a test of confidence. The “can be” refers to the idea that a full-power government can only be tolerated by a (non-dissolved) parliament that has the constitutional ability to subject the government to the test of confidence. By contrast, “caretaker periods” are those in-between two full-power governments, that is, periods during which a government *is no longer* or *cannot be* tolerated by a legislative majority and cannot be, therefore, subjected to the test of confidence. This conceptualization, as I will now illustrate, is reflected in the data structure, allowing for a theory-driven and rigorous measurement of the duration of caretaker spells and the formation processes that take place during these spells, without relying on untested assumptions, subjective judgment, and inflexible coding rules.

The process of government formation takes place during caretaker periods. This is here defined as the process that produces

a new government that is and can be tolerated by the same or a different majority in parliament. As I discuss later, the formation process can span one (successful) or more formation *attempts*. Formation (bargaining) “delays” thus result in *longer-than-average caretaker periods*. The question then becomes: What are the events that define when a majority begins or ceases to tolerate the incumbent? The answer is not straightforward because, as I anticipated in the introduction, parliamentary democracies are characterized by an incredibly diverse spectrum of institutional rules and practices. Consequently, the same sequence of events cannot universally demarcate the beginning and end of all caretaker periods across different countries and even *within* the same country.

Consider the following set of events: The formal appointment of a cabinet, the vote of investiture (if required), the formal resignation tendered by the prime minister, the formal dissolution of parliament, the occurrence of legislative elections, and the convening of a new parliament at the beginning of an electoral term. We can rearrange these events to measure the duration of caretaker periods in such a way that is consistent for each case. In other words, by rearranging the sequence of events on a case-by-case basis, we can reliably determine when a parliamentary majority begins or ceases to tolerate a government. I illustrate this process in Figure 1.

From left to right, let us assume we have a non-dissolved and active parliament. We are in the final steps of finalizing a government formation process. Where required, a PM is designated by a parliamentary majority before her formal appointment can be finalized by whoever has the authority to do so, typically the head of state (“ex-ante investiture,” e.g., Germany). Where this step is not required, new cabinets are appointed by whoever has the authority to appoint them without a prior vote. If the newly appointed government does not need an explicit expression of confidence after the formal appointment to become fully operational (e.g., Denmark), the appointment concludes the formation process and the caretaker spell associated with it, and a period of full-power government begins. Where an explicit expression of confidence after the formal appointment is required (“ex-post investiture,” e.g., Italy), the vote of investiture (if successful) concludes the formation process and caretaker spell, and a period of full-power government begins, that is, a period during which the incumbent is and can be tolerated by a majority of elected representatives.

A majority ceases to tolerate the incumbent as soon as one of three things happens: (1) The prime minister tenders a formal resignation (either voluntarily or due to confidence withdrawal),

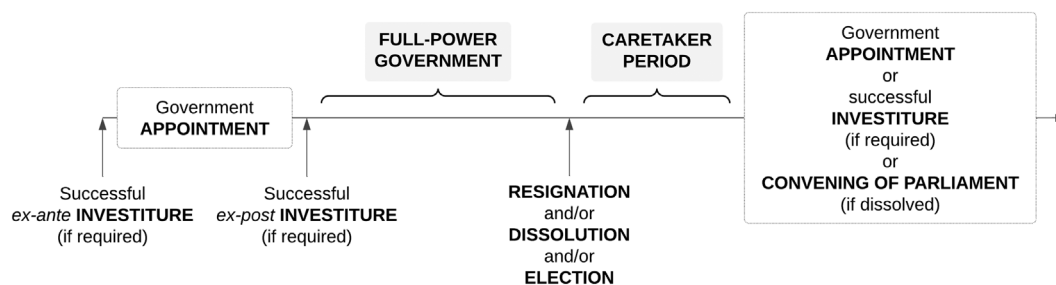
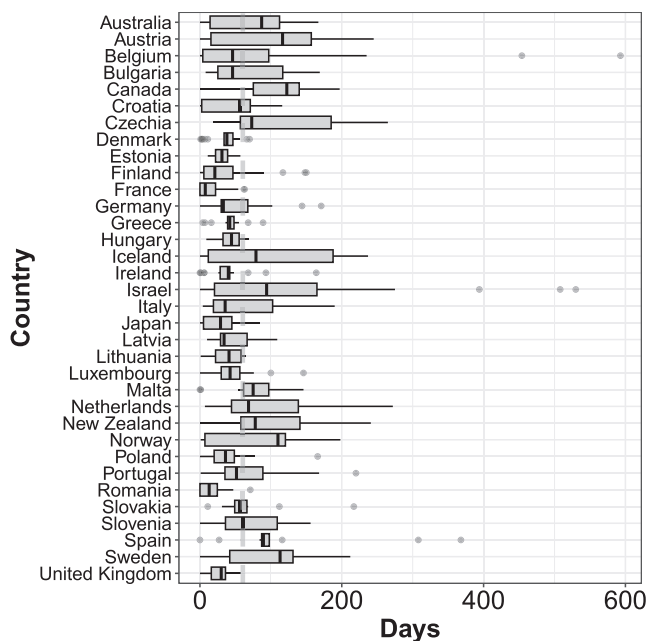


FIGURE 1 | Full-power governments and caretaker periods. Source: Bromo and Cheibub (2025).

(2) parliament is formally dissolved by the head of state (either based on discretion or constitutional requirements), or (3) a legislative election takes place.<sup>2</sup> Whichever event comes first demarcates the beginning of a caretaker period and the formation of a new cabinet. This is because, regardless of the case-specific trigger, it will always be true that, after one of these events, the legislature will be in a situation where MPs no longer tolerate or no longer have the constitutional ability to test confidence in the incumbent. As I mentioned earlier, it is often assumed that, during this time, the outgoing administration only takes care of essential or ordinary political business. This is mostly by convention rather than a rule enshrined in legal statutes: as I anticipated, national constitutions are generally vague or completely silent on how leaders should behave during a caretaker period.<sup>3</sup> We can now go back to where we started: The caretaker spell ends as soon as we have the conditions for full-power government. If an investiture is required, parliament will have convened before the ex-ante investiture or by the time an ex-post investiture debate is scheduled. If an investiture is not required, and the head of state appoints a new government *before* the new parliament convenes after an election (usually the standard in countries like Australia and New Zealand), the formation process will be over as soon as the newly elected representatives assemble, namely, as soon as legislators are constitutionally empowered to table a no-confidence motion.

Bromo and Cheibub (2025) produced a dataset of parliamentary events based on this framework, which we can use to compute the duration of caretaker periods. Figure 2 maps the

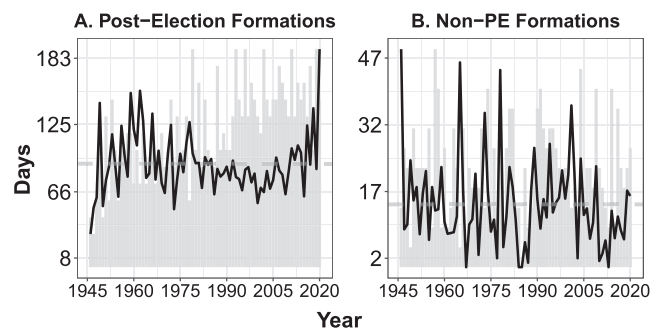


**FIGURE 2** | Duration of caretaker periods in 34 parliamentary democracies. The box plot shows the distribution of the duration of caretaker spells (measured in days) by country. The band inside each box corresponds to the median. The lower and upper hinges correspond to the first and third quartiles (the 25th and 75th percentiles, respectively). The lower and upper whiskers extend from the hinge to the largest value no further than  $1.5 \times \text{IQR}$  from the hinge, where IQR is the interquartile range. Observations beyond the whiskers (outliers) are plotted individually. The dashed line represents the sample average (60 days).

cross-sectional variation in duration. As the box plots illustrate, there is a great deal of variation in terms of the average duration of caretaker spells across parliamentary democracies. These can last as little as 0–1 days, when, for example, the prime minister is re-appointed immediately after resigning, to 593 days, the longest formation recorded between 1945 and 2020, which took place in Belgium between 2010 and 2011. Outliers can be seen in both directions, with extremely short formations in Denmark, Ireland, and Malta, and extremely long ones in Belgium, Israel, and Spain. In Figure 3, I make use of the same data to show that, in addition to the heterogeneity *between* countries, the average duration of caretaker periods has fluctuated significantly throughout the post-WWII years.<sup>4</sup> I divide all caretaker spells within this time frame based on whether they encompass a formation involving a legislative election (panel A) or not (panel B).

Figure 3 shows two things. First, as I anticipated, there is clearly a lot of over-time variation in the average duration of caretaker spells and the related cabinet formation phase. In other words, there are countries where the duration of these spells is fairly constant, but also countries where the duration varies substantially from spell to spell. We can quantify the spread between observations for each country by computing the variance. This exercise confirms what was already evident from Figure 2: Israel, Belgium, Spain, and Czechia are (in descending order) the four countries with the highest variance, whereas Estonia, the United Kingdom, France, and Romania are (in ascending order) the four countries with the lowest variance. Second, the average duration of caretaker periods is considerably (and unsurprisingly) higher in the post-election case (91 days) as opposed to formations that do not involve an election (14 days). This is in line with the existing literature's undisputed finding that it takes longer to form a government after a legislative election in comparison to one that is formed in the course of an electoral term, which I will discuss in the next section.

With the distinction between periods of full-power government and caretaker administrations in mind, we can make another crucial distinction: that between a formation *attempt* and a formation *process*. A formation process corresponds to the time period during which a new full-power government is being formed, potentially requiring intra-party bargaining (in the case of single-party majority cabinets) or inter-party



**FIGURE 3** | Average duration of caretaker periods, 1945–2020. The solid lines indicate the average duration of caretaker spells in the case of post-election formations (panel A) and non-post-election formations (panel B) by year. The dashed lines indicate the sample average (91 and 14 days, respectively). The gray bars indicate the (scaled) number of post-election formations and non-PE formations by year.

bargaining (in the case of majority coalitions, minority coalitions, or minority single-party cabinets). The formation process (and bargaining that goes with it) is *entirely encompassed* by the corresponding caretaker period, which, depending on the specific situation and whether political actors start the formation talks right away or not, might or might not be longer than the actual bargaining stage. The caretaker period, again, begins when the incumbent is no longer or cannot be tolerated by a legislative majority and ends when a cabinet is installed that is and can be tolerated by the same or a different majority of legislators, and the formation process and bargaining take place *during* this period. A formation attempt, on the other hand, can correspond to the entire formation process *if only one successful proposal is made*. Strictly speaking, all formations are “attempts” until they are not. This is because even in the “safest” scenarios, such as when one party emerges after an election that controls a sizable majority of seats in parliament, there is still the *potential* for a negative majority of MPs to emerge against the government upon appointment. Unlikely, but possible in principle. However, it is sometimes the case, especially in the context of coalition bargaining, that multiple attempts are made before a fully operational government can be put in place. In this scenario, *multiple attempts* will be nested within the *same* formation process.<sup>5</sup>

The multiple attempts can vary in degree of (in)formality, where political actors can call off negotiations before a cabinet is even officially proposed, an ex-ante vote of investiture (where required) can fail in selecting a prime minister to form a new government, or, in countries with ex-post investiture requirements, a cabinet can be rejected from the legislature in the mandatory vote of confidence. Consider the following examples from Spain and Portugal. After the Spanish legislative elections of July 2023, the head of state designated Alberto Núñez Feijóo as a candidate to be confirmed by parliament to form a new government in August. Feijóo failed to secure the required majority in two investiture attempts in September. It will not be until mid-November that a different candidate (Pedro Sánchez) will be elected by an absolute majority of MPs to form a cabinet. This concluded a caretaker period that lasted 170 days in total, from the parliamentary dissolution to Sánchez’s formal appointment, but comprises one formation process made up of at least two failed and one successful attempt. Similarly, in July 1978, Portuguese PM Mário Soares resigned due to a breakdown in the governing coalition. Shortly after his resignation, a new cabinet led by Alfredo Nobre da Costa was formally appointed by the head of state but failed the mandatory vote of investiture (September), never gaining full-power status. Finally, a government was formed, headed by Carlos Alberto da Mota Pinto, that secured the confidence of parliament in December. The caretaker spell lasted a total of 137 days, from Soares’s resignation to Mota Pinto’s successful investiture. This comprises a formation process including two separate attempts: the failed Nobre da Costa attempt and the successful Mota Pinto attempt.<sup>6</sup>

As I anticipated, I break from the extant studies on the duration of formation spells that include an explicit indicator for “caretaker cabinets,” one for “continuation rules,” or both.<sup>7</sup> This is because, while *formateur*-related rules and practices vary from country to country, *the incumbent stays in office* in caretaker capacity—by law or convention—in all but a few rare cases where

an ad-hoc administration is appointed by the head of state without undergoing the otherwise mandatory test of confidence (e.g., Greece).<sup>8</sup> Hence, there would be close to no variation in the continuation indicator. Moreover, in the context of my framework, classifying any government as a *standalone* caretaker (as in Diermeier and van Roozendaal 1998) would imply that such a government is a successful formation *in itself*, but this would not be true if what we are interested in is the formation of a cabinet that is and can be tolerated by parliament and is the product of bargaining among political parties. Such is the unit of analysis in this paper, a caretaker spell encompassing a formation process that leads to the emergence of a full-power government, comprising however many attempts were necessary to produce a cabinet that is and can be tolerated by a legislative majority.

Finally, what about “technocratic” governments? Parliamentary cabinets are occasionally led by technocratic prime ministers and/or include technocratic ministers. These are individuals who have never held public office in affiliation with a political party, are not formal members of any party, and are recognized for their expertise in relation to the position they hold within the executive (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). Technocrats and caretakers are sometimes conflated. For example, the ParlGov dataset codes the Monti (2011–2013, <https://www.parl.gov.org/>) and Draghi (2021–2022) cabinets in Italy as “caretakers” (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/2VZ5ZC>; 2024 release). It is, nevertheless, unclear why they would be, given that both did everything full-power governments normally do, including issuing decree-laws and calling votes of confidence (Bromo et al. 2023). Based on the framework adopted in this paper, the incumbent administration would not be constitutionally empowered to question parliamentary confidence during a caretaker spell. Therefore, on the basis of my definition of caretaker periods (time intervals during which a government is in office that is no longer or cannot be tolerated by a legislative majority), the technocratic status does not automatically imply caretaker status. The politics of technocratic cabinets might be qualitatively different from that of non-technocratic cabinets, but, as long as these cabinets are and can be tolerated by parliament, their tenure is not counted as part of a caretaker spell.<sup>9</sup> I count the tenure of technocratic cabinets as part of a caretaker period only if and when such cabinets lack the conditions for full-power government (one that is and can be tolerated by a majority in the legislature). As long as a government can be subjected to the test of confidence, it is not a caretaker, regardless of its technocratic status.

Having discussed conceptualization and measurement of caretaker periods, we can turn to reviewing what we know about the duration of government formation in parliamentary systems and highlighting some underexplored aspects.

### 3 | The Duration of Government Formation

As I mentioned above, previous empirical literature has considered formation processes or individual formation attempts as the unit of analysis. This research offers valuable insights into cabinet formation and the occurrence of bargaining delays. The goal of this section is to identify the key variables that scholars have found to affect government formation, as well as underexplored variables, extending the discussion to caretaker

periods. I mainly reference seven studies: Diermeier and van Roozendaal (1998), Martin and Vanberg (2003), Golder (2010), Ecker and Meyer (2015), Giannetti et al. (2020), Aaskoven and Martin (2024), Bäck, Hellström, et al. (2024) as mostly seminal, comparative, quantitative studies of the formation *process* that assess the effect of multiple variables.<sup>10</sup>

The factors that influence how long it takes to install a full-power government and the potential occurrence of delays can be grouped into two broad categories: Institutional and contextual. The former includes the set of formal and informal rules and institutions that constrain the formation process (e.g., investiture requirements). By nature, these are relatively persistent over time, as constitutional norms and practices—at least those pertaining to government formation—hardly ever change. The latter includes context-dependent factors that change from election to election (e.g., the effective number of parties in parliament) or formation to formation (e.g., whether a formation is post-election or not). Although institutional and contextual factors inevitably go hand in hand, I will focus on the institutional determinants first and the contextual determinants later. There are several studies on the *type* of cabinet that emerges once a new formation is triggered, that is, the end product of a formation process (e.g., single-party vs. coalition; see, for instance, Martin and Stevenson 2001). But, to reiterate, the focal point of this section (and the empirical analysis presented later in the paper) is the *duration* of caretaker spells and the related formation processes and the relevant studies where the *time* it takes to put in place a fully operational government is the dependent variable, as opposed to the *attributes* of the newly formed government.

As noted by Strøm et al. (1994), when it comes to cabinet formation, we cannot treat political parties “as if they were unconstrained players in an institution-free world” (p. 303). Formal and informal institutions constrain government formation by reducing the range of coalition options and redistributing bargaining power among parties (Budge and Laver 1992; Strøm et al. 1994). The existing research on the duration of the formation process does not deny this. Nonetheless, there is a general tendency to pay more attention to contextual factors. One of the motivations behind the analysis recently carried out by Aaskoven and Martin (2024) is exactly to stress the importance of institutions that impact the duration of the formation phase (in their case, committee powers and parliament’s budgetary powers).

While Giannetti et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of bicameralism, they are—strictly speaking—primarily concerned with a contextual aspect of this feature (the levels of partisan incongruence between the lower and upper chamber, conditional on the ability of second chambers to influence policy), rather than the existence of two parliamentary chambers per se. Going beyond contextual factors such as partisan incongruence, Eppner and Ganghof (2015, 2017) show that the *formal* powers of upper chambers have no effect on government formation. Plausibly, political actors will take into account levels of legislative support in the upper chamber during the bargaining phase. However, it is very rare that a second chamber can actively impact the formation process itself. Only in a handful of countries does (or did) the upper chamber have no-confidence prerogatives (e.g., Sweden before 1970;

see Diermeier et al. 2007). The cases where the upper chamber holds a vote of investiture are even fewer (e.g., Romania; see Rasch et al. 2015).<sup>11</sup> As such, any differences we might observe between these countries and countries with an upper chamber that lack confidence prerogatives or unicameral legislatures (e.g., Ireland and Portugal) are likely not driven by the formal powers of the upper chamber.

Moving on to another institutional feature, four studies explicitly test whether the presence of investiture requirements affects the duration of cabinet formation. Diermeier and van Roozendaal (1998) argue that, because investiture rules are “common knowledge” (p. 622) and thus internalized by negotiators, they should have no impact on the duration of the government formation process. The scholars find a null effect, as they expected. Aaskoven and Martin (2024) also include an indicator for investiture requirements, contending that “if a formal investiture vote is needed to form a government, there should be a greater need for formal agreement among parties in government, including non-coalition support parties, which should increase the time to form a cabinet” (p. 12), but they find no statistically significant effect. Golder (2010) draws a distinction between “positive” and “negative” parliamentarism. In the “positive” case, a cabinet is required to secure the support of a majority through a vote in parliament to be able to govern. In the “negative” case, for a cabinet to be able to govern, it is sufficient that an absolute majority does not vote against it (see Bergman 1995). She expects that the task of forming a government should be more complex under positive parliamentarism, which could be especially true for the formation of minority governments (De Winter 1995). Her results are mixed, but no statistically significant effect is detected in the model specification with all the formations and no interactions. Finally, although Giannetti et al. (2020) make no argument with respect to the direction of the relationship between positive parliamentarism and the duration of cabinet formation, they find that this variable has a statistically significant delaying effect.

Overall, the evidence on investiture requirements is inconclusive. In terms of caretaker spells, investiture represents—strictly speaking—an *extra step* that is required to transition to full-power government, but this does not mean that caretaker periods including an investiture event are automatically longer on average. Moreover, in all four of the studies discussed above, investiture requirements are treated as a binary condition, that is, the prime minister or government is either required to overcome this constitutional hurdle or not. Yet, as highlighted in the previous section, there are two different kinds of investiture requirements: Ex-ante and ex-post. Some countries, such as France before 1958, have (or had) double requirements, that is, *both* ex-ante and ex-post. Treating these requirements as dichotomous is not necessarily reasonable because it implicitly assumes that the potential impact investiture might have on the formation process is the same, regardless of what kind of investiture is mandated by the constitution. While I take both the null effect perspective and the delaying effect perspective as credible, I do not make such an assumption in my models, and I categorize the different investiture requirements. To preview my results, I do not find a statistically significant effect for ex-ante investiture, but I do find a statistically significant *delaying* effect for ex-post requirements and double investiture requirements (compared

to countries that have no investiture requirements at all) across multiple specifications.

Investiture rules are effectively the only institutional feature that the literature on the duration of cabinet formation considers as a potential hindrance to cabinet formation. Still, there are at least two other institutions that potentially have a direct impact on how long it takes to complete a formation process: the head of state and other relevant constitutional provisions that regulate government formation besides the investiture. With respect to the former, Neto and Strøm (2006) show that in “semi-presidential” countries, cabinet composition is more heavily influenced by the popularly elected head of state and that this influence is greater where presidents enjoy extensive legislative prerogatives. Savage (2018) hypothesizes that the semi-presidential form of government will result in shorter formations as the constitutional powers of the head of state increase. This is because “the government that forms must be one that is more likely to be stable and able to implement [the president’s] legislative agenda. This limits the range of acceptable governments to those that the president will not seek to prevent forming in the first place, or to directly destabilise, and those whose legislative agenda the president will not try to impede” (p. 313).<sup>12</sup> The author also presents empirical evidence that the cabinet formation process is indeed likely to end earlier in semi-presidential systems. Of the seven studies mentioned above, only Aaskoven and Martin (2024) control for this institutional feature.<sup>13</sup> Ecker and Meyer (2020) also account for semi-presidentialism in their analysis of bargaining rounds. Their estimates are, however, consistent with the proposition that it takes *longer* on average to install a full-power government in semi-presidential systems. I follow Neto and Strøm (2006) in classifying semi-presidential regimes as those with a popularly elected president and a cabinet accountable to parliament.<sup>14</sup> I include this variable in my models of caretaker periods to examine the extent to which the presence of a directly elected president affects their duration.

The last institutional factor I consider is one pertaining to the constitutional rules of the formation process itself. The opening example from Bulgaria highlights how the head of state was *constitutionally required* to dissolve the legislature after two failed formation attempts, and he did so twice (in May and again in September 2021). This feature, which I refer to as a “statutory dissolution,” forces the president to resolve a cabinet formation impasse through parliamentary dissolution after a pre-specified number of failed formation attempts, usually two or three. Several national constitutions prescribe the statutory dissolution.<sup>15</sup> No existing study on the duration of the government formation process has tested the effect of this provision. Plausibly, the statutory dissolution would slow down cabinet formation, resulting in longer caretaker spells, for two reasons. First, in very practical terms, statutory dissolutions prolong caretaker periods due to the extra time that is necessary for the sitting parliament to be formally dissolved, an election to be held, the new parliament to convene, and a vote of investiture to be scheduled (where required). Second, holding a new election arguably adds uncertainty to the formation process embedded in a caretaker period, which, as we shall see imminently, is at the root of bargaining delays, together with complexity.

I conclude this discussion on institutional factors with a brief comment on one institution that directly pertains to government formation that I have not referenced so far: the constructive vote of no-confidence. Constructive no-confidence is a two-step procedure that allows representatives to oust the incumbent and simultaneously nominate an individual to form a new government. I do not explicitly account for this feature in my model because its effect would be indistinguishable from that of investiture requirements, given that the “constructive” nature of this vote *de facto* amounts to an *ex ante* investiture.<sup>16</sup> Having reviewed some of the formal institutions that directly constrain or shape the actions of political actors during caretaker spells and the related formation processes, we can turn to contextual factors, namely, factors that change from election to election or formation to formation.

The scholarly debate on cabinet formation and the occurrence of bargaining delays in parliamentary systems has been mainly centered around the “uncertainty” and “complexity” that characterize this event as opposed to the formal rules that govern it. While there are a number of formal and informal institutional constraints on government formation that are *known* to political actors, negotiators operate on the basis of incomplete information about other players’ payoffs or feasible strategy sets. In Strøm’s (1994) words, “the players in parliamentary bargaining are more likely to be uninformed about each other’s options and objectives than about agreements and bids that already exist” (p. 113). Incomplete information creates uncertainty, which is recognized by the literature as one of the major predictors of the duration of formation spells. The universal argument about uncertainty is that a partisan solution to the government formation problem is harder to reach when parties have little knowledge about mutual policy preferences and office payoffs.

When uncertainty is high, repeated interactions and proposals might be necessary for political actors to gather information about each other’s preferences and get down to a viable compromise. As a result of these considerations, six of the seven studies on the duration of the cabinet formation process referenced above (all but Aaskoven and Martin 2024) formulate a hypothesis or account for the “post-election” status of a given formation. When a government is formed immediately after a legislative election, the bargaining parties cannot unequivocally rely on information accumulated during the previous electoral term because new parties might have entered the political arena, or the electoral strategies and policy positions of the existing parties might have shifted. Across the board, the empirical evidence conclusively indicates that post-election formations are significantly longer than formation processes that take place in the middle of the electoral term (as was already clear from Figure 3). I follow the literature in testing the effect of uncertainty by distinguishing between post-election and non-post-election formations; however, I propose a refinement of the binary indicator for post-election status that is employed in the studies reviewed in this paper, which more adequately reflects the wider context of caretaker periods.

While the obstacle of incomplete information might be especially relevant in all cases of governments formed immediately after an election (as opposed to those formed in the course of an electoral term), there are some important differences within

the category of post-election formations that can also affect the duration of a caretaker spell. These differences are related to the *triggering event*. Consider once again the timeline of events presented in Figure 1. As already stated, one of three events can trigger a caretaker period: a formal resignation tendered by the prime minister, the formal dissolution of parliament on the part of the head of state, or the occurrence of a legislative election. Early elections are typically accompanied by a formal parliamentary dissolution; therefore, the third event (legislative elections) applies to the case of regular elections, except for countries where regular elections are also preceded (or followed) by a formal dissolution.

In the case of post-election formations, we can have three scenarios. First, a PM resigns, parliament is subsequently dissolved, and an election is held. In the data used here, there are 59 spells conforming to this scenario. This is—by far—the scenario where installing a full-power cabinet takes the longest, 153 days on average. The reason is not only that the occurrence of an election increases uncertainty, which is true of all post-election formations, but also that this particular sequence of events (resignation, dissolution, and election) simply requires more time on average than a sequence with fewer events, resulting in longer caretaker spells. The average amount of time it takes to complete a formation triggered by a dissolution without prior resignation is 98 days. In this case, the sequence of events is just dissolution plus election. There are 341 spells conforming to this other scenario. This means that the resignation in the previous scenario is adding, on average, 55 days. Several reasons might be behind this additional time. It can be that, between the resignation and dissolution, (unsuccessful) attempts were made to form an alternative government without going to the polls. It can be that more time is required purely for procedural reasons. Finally, it can be due to the triggering resignation being a symptom of something else, such as a breakdown in the governing coalition or intra-party divisions, which might complicate negotiations among potential partners or even preclude future partnerships after the election or cause holdups in party leadership contests.

The second scenario (dissolution plus election without prior resignation) captures primarily two cases: Regular elections in the case of countries where a formal dissolution is always required, such as Italy, and early elections both in countries where a formal dissolution is always required and in countries where formal dissolution is required only when the electoral term comes to an end prematurely, such as France. This second scenario is less likely to stem from a political crisis, as it includes, for the most part, dissolutions that occurred because the legislature's electoral term expired naturally. Alternatively, it includes the relatively rarer cases of early parliamentary dissolutions in countries where the incumbent can easily influence election timing (e.g., Canada), in which case this prerogative might even be used strategically to improve the incumbent's position in the bargaining environment (e.g., Smith 2004; Schleiter and Tavits 2016). Another theoretically possible case that would conform to this scenario is one where the head of state dissolves parliament of her own accord (as opposed to a dissolution solicited by the PM or cabinet as a whole), without prior resignation of the office-holding government or formal confidence withdrawal. In practice, while this would have been much more common when monarchs played

an active role in the political process, it is almost non-existent as a case in the post-WWII decades, with very few exceptions, such as the Australian constitutional crisis of 1975.

The last post-election scenario is the one where a caretaker period is triggered by the occurrence of a (regular) election without prior resignation or formal parliamentary dissolution, lasting an average of 54 days. 147 spells in the data used here conform to this scenario. This would almost exclusively include elections that take place due to the natural expiration of a legislature's electoral term, as early elections typically require a formal dissolution (second scenario). One notable—and rather unique—exception would be the case of Sweden, where extraordinary elections can take place without truncating the ongoing electoral term and, therefore, without the need to formally dissolve parliament first. Since 1945, this has only happened once, in 1958. This scenario most clearly allows us to gauge how much uncertainty contributes to prolonging caretaker spells, compared to non-post-election formations. The simplest trigger—a (regular) election without prior dissolution and resignation—corresponds to caretaker periods that come to an end in 54 days on average. Arguably, even disregarding the time that is required to count ballots and variation in other contextual factors, this figure still appears to be in stark contrast with the average of just 15 days for caretaker periods triggered by a resignation without a subsequent election (374 spells in total).

The focus so far has been on the obstacle of incomplete information faced by negotiators, which is heightened in the case of post-election formations and might result in delays. But uncertainty is not the only problem party leaders will deal with when trying to form a full-power government. Scholars have, in fact, placed a lot of emphasis on how the *complexity* of the political environment can likewise affect the duration of the cabinet formation process. The argument is quite straightforward: The higher the number of parties and potential coalition partners who have a hand in the negotiations and the higher the degree of ideological polarization in the legislature, the harder it will be to successfully reach an inter-party agreement. This is because, on the one hand, a higher number of parties involved in formation talks could make a satisfactory compromise vis-à-vis portfolio allocation harder to reach. On the other hand, with higher ideological heterogeneity, it becomes more difficult to incorporate the policy preferences of the parties involved in the formation talks and translate these into a joint policy platform. It follows that higher levels of complexity will likely result in longer formations and thus longer caretaker periods. A situation in which there are fewer negotiators who are closer in terms of ideological proximity and policy preferences should, instead, make it easier to reach an agreement and form a new cabinet relatively more quickly. All seven government formation studies mentioned above account (in different ways) for the number of parties in parliament and their ideological diversity. The evidence unanimously suggests that a more complex bargaining environment leads to longer formation processes.

Six studies (all but Diermeier and van Roozendaal 1998) explicitly include, one way or another, an indicator for the majority/minority situation. The argument here is again straightforward: A party that controls a majority of seats in parliament will (almost inevitably) have the upper hand in the negotiation phase.

This should expedite the formation process because a majority party will need to make little to no concessions to other parties if it decides to opt for joining a coalition rather than forming a single-party cabinet, thus reducing complexity and shortening the overall duration of caretaker spells. I follow Golder (2010) and Ecker and Meyer (2015) in measuring this factor with a binary indicator for whether a party exists in the legislature that controls an absolute majority of seats (i.e., 50% of all seats plus one). As it turns out, a majority party is not the norm: Of 917 spells in the sample, 180 feature a party that controlled an absolute majority in parliament. The remaining cases are majority coalitions, minority governments (in which case the negotiations take place between the governing party and the parties that support the incumbent externally), or (more rarely) minority coalitions.

Finally, I follow Golder (2010) and Ecker and Meyer (2015) in testing the *conditional* effect of uncertainty on complexity in the form of interactions between the caretaker period triggering event and the presence of a majority party, the trigger and the effective number of parliamentary parties, and the trigger and the ideological range of parties in the legislature. Golder states that: “It should take longer for political actors engaged in the government formation process to obtain the information that they are uncertain about when the bargaining environment is complex than when it is not” (p. 12). Consequently, complexity should amplify uncertainty. In other words, the delaying effect of complexity should be higher in post-election formations, compared with cases where uncertainty is lower, prolonging the duration of a caretaker spell. In the next section, I discuss the data and statistical approach.

#### 4 | Data and Statistical Approach

The unit of analysis in my empirical study is *caretaker periods* (encompassing a process of government formation). To measure this, I leverage a dataset in which events that are relevant to the life cycle of parliamentary governments are recorded and placed on a timeline for each country (Bromo and Cheibub 2025).<sup>17</sup> The dataset covers 34 parliamentary systems starting from the first full-power government after WWII (or the year of democratization) to the end of 2020. This yields a total of 917 caretaker spells, making this one of the largest studies of its kind to date and providing a unique opportunity to test the existing theories of cabinet formation with a sample covering Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and other major parliamentary democracies over 75 years (see Tables A1 and A3 in the Appendix S1). My dependent variable is the duration of caretaker spells in days, constructed as described in Section 2 (*Caretaker Days*).

With respect to the institutional determinants, I created a categorical variable taking value 0 for countries without investiture requirements, 1 for countries with ex-ante investiture requirements, 2 for countries with ex-post investiture requirements, and 3 for countries with double investiture requirements (both ex-ante and ex-post) to investigate the impact of investiture on caretaker periods (*Investiture*). The coding is based on investiture-related constitutional provisions and the volume on investitures edited by Rasch, Martin and Cheibub (2015). For

the two remaining institutional factors (statutory parliamentary dissolution and direct election of the head of state), I created one binary indicator recording whether the national constitution prescribes the statutory dissolution to break a formation impasse (*Statutory Dissolution*) and one recording whether the head of state is directly elected, including presidents elected through an ad-hoc electoral college, such as in Finland before 1994 (*Directly Elected Head of State*).

As for the contextual factors, I created a categorical variable taking value 1 for caretaker periods triggered by a PM resignation that does not involve an election, 2 for periods triggered by a PM resignation followed by a parliamentary dissolution, 3 for periods triggered by a parliamentary dissolution without prior formal resignation of the incumbent, and 4 for periods triggered by a legislative election without formal dissolution or resignation to assess the impact of uncertainty on the overall duration of caretaker spells (*Trigger*). The coding is based on Bromo and Cheibub (2025). With respect to complexity, I created a binary indicator recording whether, for a given spell, a party existed in the legislature that controlled an absolute majority of seats based on ParlGov data (<https://www.parlgov.org/>) (*Majority Party*). I also relied on ParlGov data (<https://www.parlgov.org/>) to compute the effective number of parties in parliament for a given spell based on Laakso and Taagepera’s (1979) formula (*ENPP*). In terms of ideology, I used the Manifesto Project “RILE” index (<https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>) to quantify the ideological polarization of all the parties with at least one seat in the legislature during a given caretaker period by calculating the standard deviation of left–right positions (*Ideological Range*).<sup>18</sup> To normalize this predictor, I take its natural logarithm. Table A4 in the Appendix S1 presents some summary statistics and sources of the variables listed above.

Given that my dependent variable measures the duration of caretaker periods in days, I estimate a Weibull accelerated time failure (AFT) model. This approach allows me to flexibly model the duration of caretaker spells as a function of different covariates while being mindful of the data structure (country-spell). In the AFT world, considering population  $P$  and  $Q$ , we can express their relationship as:

$$S_P(t) = S_Q \left[ \frac{t}{\lambda(x)} \right], \text{ where } \lambda(x) = \exp \left( \alpha + \sum_{i=1}^n \beta_i x_i \right)$$

where  $P$  and  $Q$  are related by  $\lambda$ , an acceleration factor that can be, in turn, modeled as a function of my explanatory variables.

The estimates I report in Table 1 are time ratios, which are to be interpreted as “slowing down” a caretaker spell if the coefficient is greater than 1 or “accelerating” the transition to full-power government if the coefficient is smaller than 1. In all four model specifications in Table 1, I allow the intercepts to vary by country to capture unit-specific differences in the outcome. In this case, fixed effects are not warranted because of the near lack of over-time variation in the institutional determinants. The near lack of over-time institutional variation is due to the fact that government formation rules are typically adopted when a (new) constitution is being written and are hardly ever amended once

**TABLE 1** | Survival analysis of caretaker periods.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Trigger:Resignation (NE)	—	—	—	—
Trigger:Resignation (E)	6.31*** (1.02)	6.38*** (1.06)	2.99*** (1.14)	3.97*** (2.06)
Trigger:Dissolution	4.93*** (0.81)	4.96*** (0.69)	3.45*** (1.46)	4.31** (2.67)
Trigger:Election	2.22*** (0.29)	2.31*** (0.30)	0.97 (0.31)	0.76 (0.41)
Majority Party	1.04 (0.13)	1.16 (0.53)	1.05 (0.12)	1.04 (0.13)
Majority Party×Resignation (E)		0.91 (0.44)		
Majority Party×Dissolution		0.94 (0.46)		
Majority Party×Election		0.59 (0.27)		
ENPP	1.10** (0.04)	1.10** (0.04)	1.01 (0.06)	1.10*** (0.04)
ENPP×Resignation (E)			1.19** (0.10)	
ENPP×Dissolution			1.09 (0.09)	
ENPP×Election			1.21*** (0.08)	
Ideological Range	1.15* (0.09)	1.16* (0.09)	1.15* (0.09)	1.05 (0.20)
Ideological Range×Resignation (E)				1.17 (0.22)
Ideological Range×Dissolution				1.05 (0.20)
Ideological Range×Election				1.45** (0.26)
Investiture:Not Required	—	—	—	—
Investiture:Ex-ante	0.89 (0.13)	0.89 (0.14)	0.86 (0.15)	0.89 (0.12)
Investiture:Ex-post	1.47*** (0.19)	1.49*** (0.19)	1.48*** (0.19)	1.49*** (0.18)
Investiture:Both	1.63** (0.37)	1.60** (0.36)	1.73*** (0.37)	1.69** (0.40)

(Continues)

**TABLE 1** | (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Statutory Dissolution	1.28* (0.19)	1.29* (0.19)	1.30* (0.20)	1.31* (0.20)
Directly Elected Head of State	0.86 (0.14)	0.86 (0.13)	0.85 (0.15)	0.84 (0.14)
Constant	8.57*** (2.63)	8.37*** (2.48)	12.50*** (4.66)	11.13*** (6.26)
Country RE	✓	✓	✓	✓
Log pseudolikelihood	-3779.10	-3776.60	-3770.16	-3774.68
Observations	799	799	799	799

Note: Weibull accelerated failure time (AFT) estimates transformed to time ratios; Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Abbreviation: RE = random intercepts.

\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

\*\* $p \leq 0.05$ .

\*\*\* $p \leq 0.01$ .

the constitution is in force. Rare examples of relevant institutional changes include the introduction of investiture requirements in Belgium in the early 1960s and the transition to direct election of the president in Slovakia in the late 1990s.

In column 1 below, I report the estimates of a model specification without conditional effects. In columns 2–4, I include interactions between the trigger and the majority party indicator, the trigger and the effective number of parties in parliament, and the trigger and the ideological range variable, respectively. The inclusion of these interactions allows us to test the conditional effect of uncertainty on complexity, as per Golder (2010) and Ecker and Meyer (2015).

## 5 | Results and Discussion

Survival analysis of caretaker periods produces the estimates shown in Table 1. As I anticipated, coefficients greater than 1 indicate that a one-unit increase in a given factor “slows down” the formation process and prolongs the caretaker period. Conversely, coefficients smaller than 1 indicate that a one-unit increase “accelerates” the formation process, meaning that a full-power government is installed more quickly, shortening the overall duration of a caretaker period. These estimates are useful for assessing the direction and statistical significance of the effects; however, their magnitude cannot be straightforwardly interpreted in a substantive way or readily compared. To this end, I also present some quantities of interest in Table 2.

Let us start by focusing on the unconditional effects in column 1. Like the existing literature on the duration of cabinet formation, I find strong evidence that higher uncertainty is associated with longer-than-average caretaker spells. This is true in all three cases of post-election formations (caretaker period triggered by a resignation, by a dissolution, or by an election). The reference category is caretaker periods not involving an election, where the formation process is taking place in the course of an electoral term (lower uncertainty). We also learn that—as

expected—the delaying effect of uncertainty is strongest in the case of caretaker spells triggered by a resignation followed by a parliamentary dissolution. The effect is not as strong in the case of those triggered by a dissolution, and even weaker in the case of those triggered by a legislative election. Looking at the quantities reported in Table 2, substantively, caretaker periods triggered by a resignation followed by a dissolution/election are 47.35 percentage points more likely “to survive,” meaning that it takes longer to put in place a full-power government, on average, compared to periods triggered by a resignation that do not involve an election. Spells triggered by a dissolution without prior resignation are 40.93 percentage points more likely to survive on average than those encompassing non-post-election formations. By contrast, spells triggered by a legislative election are 18.81 percentage points more likely to survive than those where uncertainty is arguably lower (no election). This suggests that, while uncertainty delays the transition to full-power government anytime an election takes place, there are important differences within the realm of post-election formations related to the triggering event that affect the extent to which uncertainty impacts the overall duration of caretaker periods.

Moving on to the presence of a majority party, I find no statistically significant effect (consistent with Ecker and Meyer 2015) but, unlike Golder (2010) and Ecker and Meyer (2015), the coefficient is greater than 1, which would suggest that, on average, the presence of a party controlling an absolute majority of seats would prolong caretaker periods. The model specification in column 2 helps shed some light on this result. When the majority party variable interacted with the trigger variable, we can see that the coefficients, while not statistically significant at the conventional levels, are smaller than 1 for all post-election cases and greater than 1 for the non-post-election case. Substantively, that would imply that (predictably) the presence of a majority party speeds up bargaining in situations of high uncertainty, resulting in shorter caretaker spells. In the election trigger case, the presence of a majority party reduces the probability of delays by 9.68 percentage points, compared to scenarios where no party controls an absolute majority of seats. Conversely, the presence

**TABLE 2** | Quantities of interest.

	<b>Change</b>	<b>dy/dx</b>	<b>Specification Table 1</b>
Trigger	Resignation (NE) → Resignation (E)	+47.35*** (0.03)	(1)
	Resignation (NE) → Dissolution	+40.93*** (0.03)	
	Resignation (NE) → Election	+18.81*** (0.03)	
ENPP	+1 SD	+4.73** (0.02)	(1)
Ideological Range	+1 SD	+2.36* (0.01)	(1)
Investiture	No investiture → Ex-ante	-4.15 (0.05)	(1)
	No investiture → Ex-post	+13.58*** (0.04)	
	No investiture → Both	+17.09** (0.07)	
Directly Elected Head of State	No directly elected HoS → Directly elected HoS	-5.35 (0.06)	(1)
Statutory Dissolution	Not required → Required	+8.60* (0.05)	(1)
Majority Party	No majority party → Majority party (Election)	-9.68*** (0.02)	(2)

Note: dy/dx is the change in predicted probability of survival of caretaker periods; Delta-method standard errors in parentheses.

\*p ≤ 0.01.

\*\*p ≤ 0.05.

\*\*\*p ≤ 0.01.

of a majority party would delay the transition to full-power government when the caretaker spell does not involve an election. Plausibly, this happens because the resignation of an incumbent prime minister who controls an absolute majority in parliament is likely due to intra-party disagreement. If the outgoing government does not opt for an election (or is not constitutionally empowered to dissolve the legislature), internal divisions will have to be reconciled before a new (full-power) cabinet can be appointed that is tolerated by the different factions within the party.

With respect to the effective number of parties in parliament, which can be thought of, alternatively, as fragmentation in the legislature, I find a statistically significant delaying effect, in line with the extant studies. Specifically, the results indicate that an increase of one standard deviation above the mean is associated with an average 4.73 percentage point increase in the probability of survival of a caretaker spell. Similarly, I find a statistically significant delaying effect of ideological polarization. In this case, increasing the ideological range variable by one standard deviation above the mean increases the probability of survival of a caretaker spell by 2.36 percentage points on average. Given that the quantities of interest have been computed by standardizing the variables in both cases, we can compare the magnitude of these effects. The comparison suggests that the effect of fragmentation in parliament (ENPP) is more than twice as strong as that of ideological polarization when it comes to the overall duration of caretaker periods. This makes sense because, although polarization might make it harder to coordinate the policy preferences of negotiators, a smaller number of parties that are similar in size implies that fewer concessions will have to be made, and parties will not have to compromise as much. As for the conditional effects, the evidence is mixed; however, it does point to the fact that the effect of complexity is stronger in post-election cases, that is, when uncertainty is higher (columns 3 and 4).

When we look at investiture requirements, two findings emerge. The reference category here is no requirement to face a vote of

investiture of any kind. First, we can see that, although the coefficient for ex-ante requirements is not statistically significant at the conventional levels, it is smaller than 1. This is an interesting result because, substantively, it would suggest that delegating the selection of a prime minister tasked with forming a new government to the legislature would result in shorter caretaker spells (4.15 percentage-point decrease in survival probability on average). Indeed, by simply comparing averages, we can see that the average duration of caretaker spells in countries with no investiture requirements is 63 days, whereas the average for countries with ex-ante requirements is 51 days. Conversely, the coefficients for ex-post and double requirements are both greater than 1 and statistically significant. These requirements increase the probability of survival of a caretaker period by, respectively, 13.58 and 17.09 percentage points. The results, therefore, indicate that only ex-post requirements appear to significantly prolong caretaker periods, compared to countries that have no such requirements.

In line with Savage's (2018) proposition about the influence of a directly elected head of state on government formation, the direct presidential election coefficient suggests that caretaker spells in countries with a directly elected (and in many cases partisan) head of state are shorter than those in countries where the head of state is either elected indirectly or the position is hereditary (5.35 percentage-point average reduction in the probability of survival). In the case of statutory dissolution, the estimates are greater than 1 (as expected) and significant. Substantively, this means that the constitutional requirement to dissolve parliament after a series of failed formation attempts prolongs caretaker periods, compared to countries with no statutory dissolution. Specifically, this rule increases the probability of survival of a caretaker spell by 8.60 percentage points on average.

In Table A5 in the Appendix S1, I replicate column 1 (Table 1) with the addition of year fixed effects. The results are consistent. I also present OLS estimates in Table A6 in the Appendix S1, where the duration of caretaker spells in days is the dependent variable.

## 6 | Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the duration of caretaker periods, an understudied aspect of cabinet formation in parliamentary democracies. I discuss conceptualization and measurement of these periods and leveraged a dataset of parliamentary events to examine over 900 caretaker spells across 34 countries between 1945 and 2020 using survival analysis. My goal was to assess how institutional and contextual differences account for variation in the duration of caretaker periods, as well as the government formation processes taking place during these periods, across countries and over time. The evidence helps paint a more nuanced picture of how new cabinets emerge and the occurrence of delays under different sets of conditions in the context of caretaker spells. In particular, I show that the event that triggered a caretaker period, the effective number of legislative parties, ideological polarization, different types of investiture requirements, and statutory dissolution can explain much of the variation that we observe in the duration of caretaker spells. The discussion and results presented in this paper contribute to our understanding of the extent to which institutional and contextual factors affect how long it takes to install a full-power government successfully.

Several questions remain with respect to caretaker periods. As mentioned in the introduction, it is plausible to think that the caretaker status and duration of caretaker spells might impact different economic outcomes, particularly when it comes to investors' expectations and the markets. It is also plausible to think that the public sector might affect the length of caretaker periods. More research is, therefore, needed to study the economic consequences of prolonged caretaker spells. Anecdotal evidence likewise suggests that systematic data collection is needed about the legislative activity of incumbents operating in a caretaker capacity. The typical assumption about caretaker periods is that the office-holder takes care of ordinary business, namely, the routine business that is necessary to keep the country going while a formation process is taking place. This implies that no new major piece of legislation is expected to be introduced once a government is no longer or cannot be tolerated by a majority in parliament. Yet, we know that major legislative proposals have at times been presented during these periods, recently in cases like Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2024 and March 2025, two constitutional amendments were voted on and passed during a caretaker spell in Germany.<sup>19</sup> These observations and the fact that the powers of caretakers are almost never explicitly regulated, resting, as a result, on informal norms and self-restraint by constitutional convention, suggest that caretaker periods are not necessarily devoid of strategic and partisan behavior on the part of the caretaker administration. More data and research are needed to assess systematically whether expectations about the conduct of political business during these periods hold on average and how the caretaker status potentially impacts legislative outcomes.

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### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Bulgaria’s GERB party (<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2CA0W0/>) fails to form a government, new polls loom” (*Reuters*, 23 April 2021); Decree No. 130 (10 May 2021, <https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?idMat=158175>); “Bulgaria’s Parliament to proceed with vote on cabinet scuppered by Trifonov” (<https://sofiaglobe.com/2021/08/11/bulgarias-parliament-to-proceed-with-vote-on-cabinet-scuppered-by-trifonov/>) (*The Sofia Globe*, 11 August 2021); Decree No. 245 (<https://dv.parliament.bg/DVWeb/showMaterialDV.jsp?sessionId=29C1A611DB42FFDFCD317E489331134C?idMat=162190>) (14 September 2021); “Bulgarian parliament backs Kiril Petkov as PM” (*POLITICO*, 13 December 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-parliament-kiril-petkov-prime-minister/>). Last accessed: 27 August 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> In some countries, both early and regular elections are preceded (or followed) by a parliamentary dissolution (e.g., Westminster systems). In other countries, a formal dissolution (usually via presidential decree) is only executed in the case of early elections (e.g., France and Germany).
- <sup>3</sup> For instance, Article 186 of the Portuguese Constitution states that, during caretaker periods, “the Government shall limit itself to undertaking *such acts as are strictly necessary in order to ensure the management of public affairs*”; for an in-depth discussion on constitutional conventions related to ordinary political business, see Delpérée (2000); Hungary and Slovakia are two cases where the powers of caretakers are legally restricted; Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have recently published informal documents containing a series of guidelines known as the “Caretaker Conventions.” For an example, see the Canadian Convention (<https://www.canada.ca/en/privy-council/services/publications/guidelines-conduct-ministers-state-exempt-staff-public-services-election.html>). Last accessed: 27 August 2025.
- <sup>4</sup> In considering government formation in Western Europe, Bergman et al. (2021) show a consistent pattern.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Diermeier and van Roozendaal (1998) on the distinction between formation processes and formation attempts.
- <sup>6</sup> While previous empirical literature largely focused on formation processes (as opposed to attempts), Ecker and Meyer (2020) introduced new data on individual bargaining rounds in 19 European democracies and analyzed their duration.
- <sup>7</sup> See Table A2 in the Appendix S1, where I review seven quantitative studies of government formation in greater detail.
- <sup>8</sup> Examples include the administration led by Supreme Civil and Criminal Court President Thanou-Christophilou in Greece in 2015 or the administration led by Professor Gerdzhikov in Bulgaria in 2017, both appointed by constitutional requirement to oversee a parliamentary dissolution, without facing the vote of investiture that is normally required for full-power governments in both countries.
- <sup>9</sup> According to McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014), technocrats are not caretakers when they have a mandate that allows them to change the status quo. Conversely, technocrats who cannot change the status quo are considered “non-partisan caretakers” (p. 664). Strictly speaking, again, the powers of caretakers are seldom formally restricted in legal statutes. Besides, we currently lack systematic evidence on what incumbents actually do during caretaker periods, and we instead assume that these do not change the status quo.
- <sup>10</sup> In Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix S1, I review some of the empirical specifics of these studies.
- <sup>11</sup> In the countries and time frame covered in this article, there are three episodes in which an upper chamber actively delayed the formation process. In Italy, a government led by Giulio Andreotti was denied

confidence in a vote of investiture in the Senate (the Italian upper chamber) in 1972 and again in 1979. In Romania, a government led by Lucian Croitoru was denied confidence in a vote of investiture in a joint parliamentary session in 2009.

- <sup>12</sup> Additionally, Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2018) show that partisan presidents use their powers to influence election calling and shape the electoral success of incumbents, which might also result in a less complex bargaining environment and thus shorter formation processes.
- <sup>13</sup> Their data is based on the Comparative Political Data Set (<https://cpds-data.org/data/>), which distinguishes between “semi-presidential dominated by parliament,” “hybrid system,” and “semi-presidential dominated by president.”
- <sup>14</sup> This is the simplest and least controversial definition of semi-presidentialism as it relies solely on two criteria (see Elgie 1999). It is still not without problems as it equates, for example, a country like Ireland, where the directly elected head of state has virtually no influence over the government formation process, to the French V Republic, where the president is heavily involved in the formation process.
- <sup>15</sup> These are Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. It is also worth noting that parliamentary dissolution rules are not always unequivocal and, even after execution, dissolutions are not always definitive (see Bromo 2025).
- <sup>16</sup> Seven countries have this institution (e.g., Israel after 2001), and its use is quite rare (eight episodes since 1949, of which four were successful, as reported by Hazan 2015).
- <sup>17</sup> The events are (1) formal PM appointment, (2) formal parliamentary dissolution, (3) entry of head of state in office, (4) vote of investiture, (5) legislative election, (6) the convening of a new parliament, (7) presidential election, and (8) PM resignation.
- <sup>18</sup> For formations involving multiple elections, as in the opening example from Bulgaria, I record the presence of a majority party in the most recent election and I compute the average of the effective number of parties and ideological range across all the elections occurring within the same caretaker spell.
- <sup>19</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this example to my attention; see also Menéndez (2024).

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### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1:** lsq70045-sup-0001-AppendixS1.docx.