

Standing apart and sitting together: Enforcing coalition agreements in multiparty systems

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Abstract. One of the most obvious questions to be asked about coalition governments is what these governments do, but this question has received little systematic attention from coalition researchers. A key element of coalition governance that may inform our empirical knowledge of the actions of government – their origin, organization and results – is coalition agreements. Party leaders negotiating a new government invest time in writing coalition agreements, and they do this because they expect beneficial effects: more efficiency in coalition policy making, and more peace in the government. Written coalition agreements are considered to reduce uncertainty and mistrust, and this is why they have become institutionalized in countries with coalition governments. This article presents an approach to the comparative study of coalition conflicts as they emerge during government formation, the management of this conflict through drafting coalition agreements and the effects of this during coalition life. The article sets out a number of expectations about the effects of types of deals that parties make; and asks what types of conflict management are most effective and what are the conditions for enforcement – structural and strategic? In recent comparative work, the features of coalition agreements and mechanisms of coalition governance in Western Europe have received attention. This article sets out, with empirical material, how further comparative research on coalition governance may be developed.

Introduction

The promises that new governments make often invite scepticism. Coalition governments above all are believed to use policy declarations made during government formation for symbolic purposes. Divisive issues are considered to be relevant to the composition of coalitions, and less to the policy packages of these coalitions. Attention in government formation allegedly is focused on matters upon which parties have compatible views. This image of coalition formation long has prevailed in the literature (Luebbert 1986; Laver & Schofield 1990; Laver & Shepsle 1996). Yet beyond the rhetoric and symbolic intentions in government formation, parties do deal with issues that divide them. This is the central point of departure in this article, which presents an approach to the comparative study of policy conflicts in coalition government

formation and the ways in which these conflicts are managed during the life of the government.

The formulation of a coalition agreement containing controversial issues is an expression of the fundamental tension between standing apart and sitting together. By drafting an agreement, parties in government try to reduce mistrust and uncertainty. However, inter-party deals do not remove the tension. Enforcement mechanisms are necessary to prevent opportunistic behaviour. The approach in this article includes expectations about effects of types of deals and explores conditions for enforcement of these deals. By analyzing such expectations, it is possible to make better-informed judgements about the functions of coalition agreements in systems with multiparty governments.

The empirical material derives from case studies of coalition cabinets in Belgium and the Netherlands. In these two countries, coalition agreements have tended since the 1970s to be long and comprehensive documents (Müller & Strøm 2000: 576). These agreements generally are believed to be important for coalition governance – a point that is stressed by politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups and the attention devoted to them by the media. Yet this point has received hardly any systematic attention from political scientists. The cases included in this study are the Leburton (1973–1974) and Tindemans V (1977–1978) governments in Belgium, and the Van Agt II (1981–1982), Lubbers I (1982–1986) and Kok I (1994–1998) governments in the Netherlands (for more detailed case studies, see Timmermans 2003). This case selection from two countries obviously implies a limited generalizability of findings. However, this analysis is primarily designed to indicate the possible range of variation in input and output of coalition agreements, albeit with a focus on Belgium and the Netherlands. The five cases were taken with an eye on variation in average duration of governments in Belgium and the Netherlands in the relevant period. Another criterion for case selection was variation in government composition.

The article begins by illustrating the policy conflicts involved in coalition formation. Next, the effects of deals on these conflicts are examined. Do deals on controversial matters streamline policy making within the cabinet – thus reducing ex post political transaction costs? Or do they have unintended or even perverse effects on coalition life? This analysis is followed by a consideration of favourable and unfavourable conditions for enforcing deals. These conditions are important as unlike real contracts, agreements cannot be enforced by an independent judge. ‘Courts of Appeal’ in coalition politics are themselves part of the coalition machinery. The final section contains a conclusion and points the way forward for this field of coalition research.

Policy conflicts and deals in coalition agreements

The scope of bargaining between parties in government is influenced by coalition agreements. In recent comparative work (Müller & Strøm 2000; Strøm et al., forthcoming), general features of coalition agreements in Western European countries received attention. Coalition agreements are found mostly when majority coalition governments are built. Policy statements are the largest part of agreements, but there is variation within and across countries in the number of words needed for such statements (Müller & Strøm 2000: 574–578). Beyond these quantitative features of agreements, Müller and Strøm indicate that it is useful to focus attention on the effects of agreements as a mechanism of coalition governance.

A point of departure for assessing effects of coalition agreements is the issues on which parties were in conflict during government formation. This set of issues may not exhaust the agenda, but it is important because it is identified at an early stage and thus needs some form of conflict management by the coalition leadership. Issues on which parties have divergent views attract attention because party leaders use government formation to reduce mistrust and uncertainty – between parties but also within parties because followers are keen on knowing the extent of concessions made in government participation. Other reasons why parties focus on points that divide them during government formation are the time constraints and the nature of government formation as an ‘institutionalized extrainstitutional arena’ (Peterson et al. 1983). The government formation arena is relatively unexposed to the public, and it enables party leaders to link diverse issues and establish a broad policy equilibrium. This balance, however, is vulnerable; the agreed policy package usually contains a mix of clear and less clear commitments. Building on a distinction by Luebbert (1986), coalition agreements contain clear-cut explicit compromises, more general or vague implicit compromises, or procedures for dealing with issues. This variation in types of commitments underlines the point that coalition agreements are incomplete political contracts.

Agenda setting in government formation: Cases

The variation in types of deals in agreements is illustrated by an analysis of disputed issues in five government formations in Belgium and the Netherlands. The issues debated during government formation included some conflicts inherited from the previous government, but most were ‘new’ conflicts surrounding policy positions raised during the election campaign. In the two Belgian cases, a ‘surplus majority’ coalition was formed to set the process of federalization (with regionalization as a first stage) in motion, and this forced

attention on deals in this field.¹ In the Dutch cases, government formation was used primarily for pre-settling problems of budgetary and socio-economic policy on which a sense of urgency existed, but also divergent viewpoints. Other prominent matters were education, media policy and morality policy – subjects in which the old religious cleavage resurfaced in both countries.

Table 1 shows the policy fields and the types of deals. Socio-economic and budgetary policy issues were the most commonly debated. These issues were urgent for the governments facing economic hardship, and the institutional rules of the budgetary cycle forced attention on differences in viewpoints before substantive government proposals could be drafted. However, the table shows also that not all differences were ironed out; nearly half of the deals were general and sometimes ambiguous implicit compromises in need of further elaboration. For example, in the formation of the Lubbers I government in 1982, Liberals and Christian Democrats remained in disagreement over the principle for taxing families. The Liberals advocated individual taxing; the Christian Democrats insisted on the family as a tax unit. Education also attracted attention from religious and secular parties. Divergent party principles can be seen in the deals struck: more often than not, the parties were unable to compromise explicitly. The outstanding central agenda point in government formation in Belgium was regionalization – the main reason for building supermajority coalitions. The prevalence of explicit compromises

Table 1. Types of deals in policy fields (absolute figures)

Policy field	Type of arrangement				Where?
	Explicit	Procedural	Implicit	All	
Language	2	–	–	2	Leburton
Regionalization	18	3	1	22	Tindemans, Leburton
Morality	1	–	3	4	Leburton, Lubbers
Socio-economic	15	–	14	29	All
Education	4	2	5	11	Leburton, Lubbers, Van Agt, Kok
Budget	10	–	7	17	Lubbers, Van Agt, Kok
Nuclear power	–	4	1	5	Van Agt, Lubbers
Media	1	–	2	3	Lubbers
Infrastructure	–	1	1	2	Kok
Institutional reform	–	–	2	2	Kok
Environment	–	1	–	1	Kok
Total	51	11	36	98	

shows that party leaders made considerable efforts to negotiate clear commitments. These, however, entailed costs that not all parties were prepared to bear for the entire government term.

A point of variation between the coalitions is the policy scope of inter-party bargaining. The parties building the Tindemans V coalition in 1977 constructed a critical agenda of three policy fields, whereas the agenda in the formations of Lubbers I (1982) and Kok I (1994) contained conflictual issues from six different fields. Tindemans V was a five-party coalition, and the Dutch coalitions consisted of two and three parties, respectively. Though multiparty coalitions would seem to imply more diverse conflict points and require a broad scope of policy bargaining, this is not apparent in the cases examined here. There may be a limit to the conflict management capacity of coalitions during government formation and, for coalition formation to be successful – and not endless – an increase in the number of parties may require that the scope of bargaining is narrowed. This is a point worth further investigation.

Overall, explicit compromises were the most frequently used type of deal. Explicit compromises were common in the field of regionalization, the institutional project for which the governments were built in Belgium. Explicit compromises prevailed also in the Kok I coalition agreement in 1994, which was made by Liberals and Social Democrats, parties in office together for the first time in more than forty years. Most of the explicit deals in this coalition were on socio-economic policy, a field in which the two main parties always diverged. This focus on one policy field is consistent with the point above that coalitions limit the scope of policy bargaining and bridge differences on the most contested issues. Not all coalitions, however, made sets of explicit deals. Table 2 shows that in two of the three Dutch coalition formations (Van Agt II, 1981 and Lubbers I, 1982), policy disputes were settled mostly by implicit compromises. The Van Agt II coalition agreement, for example, was called a ‘plate of spaghetti’ because so many deals had loose ends. Procedures for

Table 2. Types of deals in coalition agreements (percentages)

	Explicit	Procedural	Implicit	Number
Leburton	58	17	25	24
Tindemans V	80	0	20	15
Van Agt II	33	20	47	15
Lubbers I	36	9	55	22
Kok I	55	9	36	22
Average	52	11	37	98

handling issues when in office were rarer. Agreements to disagree were not the first option for parties facing policy conflict.

There are thus two strategies in government formation in situations of mistrust, uncertainty and policy conflict. One is to make commitments as detailed as possible; the other strategy is to forego clear commitments and keep policy options open. This second strategy involves a higher discount rate and lower costs of making deals, but it may be expected that such deals are more difficult to implement without new conflict. The types of commitments made entailed gains and losses for all parties, and a balance – at least a temporary one – was established by putting together all the deals in the coalition agreement. The distribution of policy gains and losses made in the agreement also contained variation in the degree of commitment, which shows that the two strategies of conflict management were both used.

Effects of deals in coalition agreements

What are the effects of the different strategies of conflict management in government formation? Expectations on effects can be informed by transaction costs economics, which argues that explicit compromises made before the government takes office reduce the costs of implementation (Williamson 1985). Costs are defined here as the collective efforts (and time) in policy making and settling disputes. Conversely, substantive implicit compromises may be cheap deals reached easily, but their implementation is more difficult because the conflict is not really resolved. Implementation is defined as political ratification – adoption of policy proposals within government institutions, most importantly the national parliament. Procedural arrangements, the third type of deal, are silent about policy content, but specify how the issue should be handled – for example, by transferring the matter to an external committee or by shelving the issue until after the next elections. Non-decisions may save a cabinet, but they imply that the policy ambitions of parties are suppressed. We may expect explicit compromises to be implemented by the government without new conflict – and thus to be most conducive to policy production. We may expect implicit compromises to lead to recurring conflict over the issue, and thus imply a more troubled route to policy decisions. And we may expect procedural deals to be implemented without new conflict, but with a non-decision as the result.

Tables 3, 4 and 5 give the effects of the three types of deals. Note that conflict prevention and political implementation are the two effect dimensions, and these effects need not occur together. Though the effects of types of deals varied between the coalitions, comparison of the tables reveals a pattern: in all

coalitions, explicit compromises were much more effective in preventing conflict than implicit compromises. The rate of implementation, however, did not differ much – about half of the deals were transformed into policy decisions adopted in government. In fact, implicit compromises were implemented more

Table 3. Effects of explicit compromises (percentages)

	Conflict prevented	Implemented	Implemented without conflict	Number
Leburton	43	50	29	14
Tindemans V	50	8	8	12
Van Agt II	60	20	20	5
Lubbers I	38	63	25	8
Kok I	67	83	58	12
Average	51	47	29	51

Table 4. Effects of procedural deals (percentages)

	Conflict prevented	Implemented	Implemented without conflict	Total
Leburton	50	75	50	4
Tindemans V	–	–	–	0
Van Agt II	100	67	67	3
Lubbers I	50	100	50	2
Kok I	–	100	–	2
Average	55	82	45	11

Table 5. Effects of implicit compromises (percentages)

	Conflict prevented	Implemented	Implemented without conflict	Total
Leburton	–	33	–	6
Tindemans V	–	100	–	3
Van Agt II	29	–	–	7
Lubbers I	8	58	8	12
Kok I	38	88	38	8
Average	17	53	11	36

often than explicit compromises. The following more detailed analysis of effects of deals will show that this is less contradictory to our expectations than it may seem.

Explicit compromises and policy streamlining

The time and energy devoted to making explicit compromises in government formation has not made implementation costless. In fact, more than half the explicit deals were not implemented – at least not as specified in the coalition agreement. On average, 29 per cent of the compromises were implemented without renewed conflict. Coalition parties thus were faithful to the agreement only to an extent, and also deviated from the agreement or aborted its implementation. This happened most dramatically in governments that ended prematurely. Conflict remained absent in just over half the cases (51 per cent), and this meant either that parties did not get into trouble during implementation, or that the matter was shelved because the government ended, as in the two Belgian coalitions and the Van Agt II coalition. The coalition agreement of Tindemans V had a large proportion of explicit compromises on regionalization policy, and the early collapse of the government over this issue meant failure in this field. The other two coalitions also ended after political conflict, but explicit compromises were not the immediate cause.

By contrast, during the Kok I government, the three-party coalition implemented the vast majority of explicit compromises, mostly without fresh conflict. The Lubbers I coalition had to deal with recurring conflict much more often, but nevertheless also implemented the majority of explicit compromises. The effects of explicit compromises are less positive than expected, but it is important to appreciate that implementation of political deals takes place in a dynamic environment. Moreover, explicit compromises nearly always are incomplete. For deals made up to four years previously, it is quite an achievement that parties remain committed in almost half the cases, as is implement without making new trouble in almost a third (29 per cent).

Procedural deals and risk avoidance

The cost of making procedural solutions is that substantive policy decisions are postponed, possibly even beyond the next election. This may not be a cost for all, but there is always at least one party that prefers a substantive change to the status quo. Procedures thus entail concessions, and this means that enforcement is not automatic. The findings illustrate this: less than half the procedures were implemented without conflict. For the generally successful Kok I government, procedures appeared not to be functional for conflict prevention, but for

the short-lived Van Agt II government, procedural deals contained at least some of the many conflicts. In conclusion, procedural deals mostly freeze policy making in the way agreed during government formation, but the desired peace mostly needs to be renegotiated.

Implicit compromises and boomeranging conflict

As expected, implicit compromises led to recurring conflict far more often than the other deals. Three out of five coalitions were unable to implement general or vague deals without renewed inter-party conflict. The participants in the Kok I government were most inclined to interpret and elaborate deals peacefully, but still this happened less often than when explicit compromises were made. A less expected finding is that, on average, implicit compromises were implemented more often than explicit compromises. A closer inspection of Tables 3, 4 and 5 shows an extreme difference in effects during the Tindemans V government, which failed dramatically to implement its explicit deals on regionalization but fleshed out the general deals on budgetary and socio-economic policy. The Lubbers I and Kok I governments developed most of the implicit parts of the coalition agreement. Of course, the general and sometimes vague nature of commitments implied a greater leeway for parties – almost any decision building on this type of compromise was implementation. However, the costs of reaching these decisions were high because they involved conflict. Of the three governments ending prematurely, two (Leburton and Van Agt II) did this after escalation of conflict over implicit compromises.

Discount rates and political costs of deals

Parties involved in negotiations on a coalition agreement thus may use high discount rates, minimize costs and make cheap deals. Yet the patterns found in the effects of different deals suggest that lower costs of making coalition policy deals often lead to higher costs of implementation. Conflict was far more frequent when parties made general or vague implicit compromises than when explicit compromises ensued in government formation. Procedures containing postponements were a useful mechanism for political risk avoidance, but they also precluded substantive decisions for some time. Explicit compromises are investments on which the returns become visible during the lifetime of the coalition, mainly by reducing conflict potential during decision making. Yet the findings also show that specific deals on policy are vulnerable. In a world that is changing continuously, intentions declared sacrosanct may become obstacles. For this reason, it is not so surprising that explicit compromises were

often revisited and modified, or even replaced by alternative policies. They did not always prevent deadlock, as in the case of Tindemans V falling apart over regionalization policy.

The enforcement problem: Institutions and strategy

The vulnerability of policy deals underlines the fact that coalition agreements are not self-policing. Deals are frequently investments inducing parties to remain loyal because they know how troublesome renegotiation is. Yet in the real world of coalition politics, the costs and benefits can change. Economic developments and international crises occur, and parties make their own social constructions of such trends and events. Thus economic indicators may be used as ammunition by parties challenging deals that seemed tight when the government took office. Such changing schemes of costs and benefits make enforcement of coalition agreements more complex than monitoring a single deal. The estimation of benefits of continued cooperation in implementing a deal often depends on estimations of benefits from implementing *other* deals. A coalition partner may need payoffs from other deals to remain faithful. If few possibilities for this exist because the policy scope of the coalition agreement is limited, then the explicitness of a compromise even may become counterproductive because the losses are so visible to parties that made important concessions.

The principle of *pacta sunt servanda* (agreements must be observed) is noble, but it needs reciprocal control among coalition parties. This is the mechanism of evolving cooperation (Axelrod 1984). As Hardin (1990) notes, the build up of a degree of trust among political players can be seen as 'encapsulated interest'. Those breaking a deal may win today, but lose tomorrow because their reputation is damaged (North 1990). The mechanism of reciprocal control, however, is not an invisible hand; it requires busy inter-party traffic and a fair amount of traffic control by the coalition police.

The types of conditions for enforcement that emerged from coalition theory since Riker (1962) are coalition size and ideological diversity. Ideological diversity and size may be seen to drive the formulation of coalition agreements in the first place, though Strøm and Müller's (2001) quantitative analysis shows no clear relationship between these coalition properties and the incidence and comprehensiveness of agreements. On enforcement, the assumption that can be derived from 'classical' coalition theory is that larger and more ideologically diverse coalitions are less capable of enforcing agreements – just as such coalitions are expected to survive less long. This article cannot fully assess this assumption, but the case material does not suggest such a pattern. The most successful (Kok I, 1994–1998) and the least successful coalitions (Van

Agt II, 1981–1982) both contained three parties. The Kok I government in the Netherlands was even considered to be ‘impossible’ ideologically – it excluded the Christian Democrats as the central party dominating all postwar governments. Thus ideological diversity in coalition composition may have made the parties more alert, but it did not as such lead to failure in enforcing the coalition agreement.

The exploratory cases contain additional qualitative material that tells us something about the possible impact of institutional and strategic conditions. The analysis of these enforcement conditions is informed by the institutional literature that focuses attention on actor strategies and tactics (Baumgartner & Jones 2002; Scharpf 1997). Coalition governance arenas taking the policy making process into the sphere of ‘invisible politics’ (Sartori 1976) may play a part in enforcing coalition agreements. So too can the extent to which party spokespersons during government formation entered the cabinet since this is a way of reducing the difference between the government formation arena and the cabinet. A further institutional condition is party discipline, which in coalitions is a mechanism that may be assumed to lead to stronger central control – to the extent that the lines of hierarchy are in the hands of the coalition leadership. Furthermore, a key strategic point is agenda management, for which the prime minister is first responsible beginning on the day of appointment as government *formateur*.

Institutions: Coalition machinery and machine workers

Institutional conditions may be inherited from previous coalitions, or be designed or redesigned by the new coalition to smooth the implementation of deals. The institutional coalition machinery needs coalition ‘machine workers’ – disciplined party agents acting upon leadership instructions.

The official central coalition machine is the cabinet, entrusted with implementing the coalition agreement. The findings show that agreements themselves are not a perfect mechanism of cabinet conflict avoidance; often they boomeranged conflict back and forth between the parties, and even led to government breakdown. This illustrates that the cabinet is an arena of conflict as much as it is the body responsible for government policy making (Andeweg & Timmermans, forthcoming). A condition that may influence the cabinet’s capacity to enforce deals is the extent to which negotiators in government formation take a cabinet seat. In this way, commitments made during government formation may be internalized in the cabinet. For vague or ambiguous deals, former negotiators are the most qualified exegetes because they may be able to read between the lines. Conversely, outsiders may see pre-made deals as *faits accomplis* infringing upon their ministerial autonomy. Thus, the more

coalition formation negotiators enter the cabinet, the greater its enforcement capacity is likely to be.

The case studies contain evidence for this, though ministerial background is unlikely to be the single determinant of success or failure. In the Belgian governments, few negotiators on regionalization were present and failure was the main result in this field. In following government formations, this lesson was drawn and negotiators were given a cabinet seat (De Ridder 1989). In the Leburton government, negotiators on education policy deals became ministers and the deals were implemented relatively smoothly. The Lubbers I and Kok I governments in the Netherlands show a similar pattern. Where compromises were implemented (budgetary and socio-economic policy), supervision within the cabinet was done by former negotiators. Where success was limited or absent, cabinet ministers had been involved less in government formation. The exception is the Van Agt II government in which the party leaders that made vague deals with incompatible intentions continued to contradict each other as ministers and pushed decision making to the collective level – with cabinet collapse as the result.

This last case shows that enforcement of agreements taking place exclusively in the collective cabinet arena involves a risk of stagnation. This risk can be reduced only in part by promoting coalition negotiators to the office of cabinet minister. For one thing, media attention is focused on the cabinet and parliament as formal decision-making arenas, and exposure to the broader public lifts the stakes for players in these arenas. In the five governments, informal arenas of coalition governance containing spokespersons from different party branches were used or created, and enforcement of the coalition agreement often was transferred to such arenas before policy decisions were taken. In these arenas of coalition governance, attempts were made to confirm commitments made earlier or to settle arising disputes. Coalition governance arenas are thus sites for monitoring political implementation.

The types and properties of informal arenas outside the official meetings of parliament and the full cabinet vary between the two countries and between the coalitions. In the Netherlands, internal and informal cabinet arenas were important, as well as 'Turret-consultations' taking place in a mixed arena of ministers and parliamentary leaders (Timmermans & Andeweg 2000). Since the early 1980s, this last arena is a site where serious conflicts are managed (Andeweg & Timmermans, forthcoming). In Belgium, arenas within the government were less central in the process of enforcement, and they seem to have been most important for budgetary and socio-economic policy. The locus of management of dangerous conflicts in Belgium is the arena external to the cabinet (Timmermans 1994; Andeweg & Timmermans, forthcoming), and external arenas also were important for enforcement of the coalition agreement.

Thus coalition governance arenas outside the formal setting of official cabinet and parliamentary meetings were used extensively for containing conflict and implementing deals, but they were not always effective. The locus of high politics shifted back to formal arenas at critical stages of conflict, and the result was coalition collapse in the cases of Leburton (1974), Tindemans V (1978) and Van Agt II (1982). In the 'invisible' trajectory of enforcement of political deals, the coalition machinery produced substantive results in the fields of budgetary and socio-economic policy, and was less functional with respect to 'conscience' issues. On such issues (contraception, abortion, euthanasia), the parliamentary arena was more important, but control in this arena was more difficult. Particularly in the parliamentary arena, media attention further pushes up the costs of concessions to be made on matters of principle.

The assumption that political parties are unitary actors becomes more difficult to maintain as the government starts work. Parliamentary backbenchers may not always be willing to act as disciplined agents, and internal party bosses may experience tensions and rivalry. As Strøm and Müller (2001) note, divisions and party revolts out of the control of the leadership weaken the centralization of authority in government coalitions. Party leaders are responsible for maintaining internal party loyalty, accommodating voice and preventing exit – a decline in enforcement (Hirschman 1970). Internally divided parties are more vulnerable to attempts by external parties to form legislative coalitions, even if the coalition agreement prohibits this. Thus, during the political implementation of deals, disunity among party machine workers can lead to stagnation in the coalition machinery.

The case studies indicate that the degree of internal party unity makes a difference to the enforcement of coalition agreements. The rules of party discipline, of which coalition discipline itself is a function, do not hold up in all situations. In Belgium, the traditional parties were divided internally over *La Question Communautaire*, and in both coalitions, prominent politicians who were least supportive of the coalition's plans took a cabinet seat. Moreover, rivalry for the party leadership existed – most openly within the Flemish Christian Democratic party between Leo Tindemans and Wilfried Martens (who became prime minister a few years later). In the Netherlands, internal party divisions seem to have been controlled relatively well within internal cabinet arenas, but less in parliament. Elaboration of implicit compromises on conscience issues (euthanasia, equal treatment) in the Lubbers I coalition agreement foundered in part because the parliamentary group of the prime minister's party only half-heartedly supported the coalition intentions. On these matters, fleshing out the implicit compromises involved high political costs, and the time perspective increasingly extended to beyond the next parliamentary elections. This tactic used by the prime minister was successful

because the other coalition party's sense of urgency of morality policy decisions had weakened; it anticipated continuing in office and considered the next government formation to be a better venue for making more explicit deals.

Strategy: Agenda management for the benefit of all

The institutional arrangements of coalitions are relevant conditions for enforcing agreements, but the setting of coalition governance alone does not produce reciprocal control. The other key question, therefore, is how the coalition keeps the process of enforcement going – in the cabinet, in parliament and in less formal arenas of coalition governance. Again, the enforcement problem arises because compromises put into packages often become more difficult to accept when dealt with serially and thus separate from other compromises.

Parties invest in a coalition because they expect policy payoffs they value intrinsically or with electoral considerations in mind. For institutional reasons, cabinets and parliaments cannot consider an infinite number of subjects at the same time; the capacity of such bodies is limited. However, delays in processing matters of high politics may make parties impatient. Single deals often contain less balanced payoffs than broader packages of deals. Single deals even may contain concessions that one party was willing to make only because it was compensated on another issue. If no policy payoffs are within sight, the discount rate for a party goes down, and this may lead to a decline in enforcement and destabilize the coalition. In short, the opportunistic calculus is a serious threat for coalition governments.

The cases show this. Opportunism was strong in the Dutch Van Agt II government and in the Leburton and Tindemans governments in Belgium. Van Agt II presents a worst case scenario as enforcement of the agreement never really began. Most of the short life of this government consisted of attempts to specify the coalition agreement in what appeared to be a continuous flow of conflicts, ending in deadlock. In the Leburton coalition, the Christian Democrats benefited from the prompt implementation of deals entailing financial support for religious schools, on which the secular coalition partners had made concessions. The Socialists were pressing for implementation of deals on financial support for troubled industries in the south of the country, but the third party (the Liberals) called their commitment to these deals into question. There was a struggle over what issues should be first on the agenda, and after one year in office the Socialists led by Prime Minister Leburton reached their limit of tolerance and withdrew from the government. Negative policy prospects were also a reason for collapse of the Tindemans V government. In this case, the decision to end cooperation was taken by the party that benefited most from implementation of the coalition agreement. The Flemish Christian

Democrats, the prime minister's party, made gains in the field of socio-economic policy. The more ambitious part of the deal on regionalization was the most controversial. Tindemans did not want to receive the blame for a policy 'selling out' the interests of the Flemish-speaking part of the country, and dissolved the government. However, Tindemans also lost the ensuing battle over the party leadership. Enforcement of the Lubbers I agreement was undermined less by an opportunistic calculus, and the Kok I government even quite successfully implemented the deals made during government formation. In these two cases, the prime minister had been involved directly in writing the agreement and unilateral opportunism was suppressed in most, but not all, cases. The fact that these two governments lasted to full term enhanced the rate of implementation, but this longevity itself was a result of the way in which reciprocal control over the coalition agreement was maintained.

Enforcement of deals requires that perceptions of payoff distributions remain stable over time, and in turn this requires agenda management. Effective agenda management is thus a condition for enforcement. Agenda management is a strategic process involving a degree of hierarchy in which the prime minister is on top. Prime ministers of coalition governments, however, do not usually profile themselves as authoritarian, and the more subtle roles as *primus inter pares* they are expected to play for the benefit of all are that of policy coordinator and arbitrator in cases of conflict (Blondel 1988; Timmermans & Andeweg 2003: 512–513). These roles include guidance in enforcement of the coalition agreement.

A first element of agenda management is the scope of the agreement. This point is relevant beginning at the stage of coalition building, when the prime minister is a *formateur*. In the worst case scenario, illustrated by the story of Van Agt II, enforcement can hardly begin because the scope of the coalition agreement is limited and deals are opaque or even contradictory. With such a weak basis, the allocation of substantive payoffs is practically impossible; the creation of value for parties is thus frustrated from the start. If parties are to be kept on the track only by creating side-payments, it cannot be a surprise that one of them soon prefers a more rigorous renegotiation on key issues – with a different partner.

Even a broader policy scope built into the coalition agreement at the stage of government formation is no guarantee of success, as the two Belgian cases may illustrate. In these cases, the coalition agreement contained packages of deals in different and unrelated policy fields. Prime ministerial management of the cabinet agenda, however, involved a strategic miscalculation because it lacked attention to symmetry in payoffs between parties. The strong focus on a long-term serial treatment of issues and the growing impatience resulting from it appeared to be self-destructive. The negotiated policy scope of other

and more successful coalitions was broadest, and this property of the coalition agreement was used by the prime minister to make strategic sequences and link issues, exploiting the full policy-making capacity of the cabinet. The crucial difference between a 'time blind' serial treatment of issues and strategic sequencing is acknowledgement of the need for a balanced payoff distribution (Lax & Sebenius 1986, 1991).

Extending the policy scope and issue linkage (forms of what Riker (1986) called 'heresthetics') are not the only elements of effective agenda management. Despite the limited powers vested in the office of prime minister in Belgium and the Netherlands, the policy coordination and conflict arbitration roles involve prime ministerial tactics. For one thing, the cases indicate that prime ministers actively taking sides or endorsing opportunism may win the struggle, but lose the coalition and also the party leadership. Deals in coalition agreements are in large part contingent, and prime ministers thus not only need to manage the scope and quantity of policy deals, but also their quality – the management of expectations, interpretations and perceptions of political gains and losses.

This qualitative agenda management involves an array of tactics. An example used by Lubbers is the 'confession procedure' in which individual ministers are taken apart by the prime minister – when necessary for an exegesis of the contested verses in the agreement as the coalition bible. In this way, the perceptions of ministers were influenced and forgiveness possible. Sometimes even explicit compromises were stretched in order to create value for all (Timmermans 2003: 107). These tactics were used in the margin of existing arenas for coalition governance and contributed to the prevention of opportunism and defection on key issues. The two Belgian cases do not reveal much of this kind of tactics and, in the case of Leburton, the possibilities for this were limited because the prime minister was practically a monolingual French speaker. The later prime ministers Martens (1980s) and Dehaene (1990s) were more active and understandable in political messages and this seems to have lifted the degree of faithfulness (Timmermans 1994: 116–117; Dewinter et al. 2000).

Another tactic is automating policy decisions (Weaver 1988; Weimer 1992). The Kok I case contains two examples. The first is the prime minister committed the cabinet to a rule of budgetary discipline, stating that extra expenses be compensated by cuts in other parts of the departmental budget. This rule was monitored by the minister of finance and the prime minister acting in tandem. The other example is an agreed mid-term review of the attainment of policy goals on social security reform, on the basis of which the cabinet could decide to follow a different scenario mentioned in the coalition agreement.

Finally, even without much explicit emphasis on hierarchy, the prime minister can use sanctions, and most effective are graduated sanctions (Ayres & Braithwaite 1992; Pettit 1996). Beyond informal sanctions used with discretion within the arenas of coalition governance or in a secret confession procedure, prime ministers call on the public reputation of their colleagues as a reliable coalition member. Yet not all prime ministers are credible in this respect, and where this soft sanction appeared to be largely ineffective, even confrontation with the 'big gun' – the threat to bring down the government – did not tighten commitment to the coalition agreement. In fact, the cases illustrate that this ultimate threat is not a centralized control instrument, and this is certainly true when a prime minister puts party interests before coalition interests.

Agenda management with its different aspects thus is a key element in enforcing coalition agreements because it limits or extends the possibilities for reciprocal control among coalition partners. Agenda management is a process of strategic construction that requires a degree of centralization and involves prime ministerial tactics for steering the coalition members. Important venues for such prime ministerial steering are arenas for coalition governance to which issues formally on the agenda of the cabinet and parliament are transferred whenever coalition traffic becomes stressful. Coalition governance arenas also are a central but discrete meeting point where party leaders are held accountable for the 'voice' of their parties, and for keeping the party rank-and-file on track. This is particularly important when parties are internally divided, and when cabinet ministers tend to go astray during the political implementation of deals.

Conclusion and outlook

The ways in which parties deal with controversial issues when forming a coalition government have consequences for coalition life. Negotiated deals on controversial issues may not exhaust all possible sources of conflict and coalition agreements may not entail predestination, but they are an important point of departure for coalition governments in Belgium and the Netherlands. Controversial issues can be placed on the agenda and policy decisions even may be precooked, but the scope of government action also can be limited by making procedures that postpone policy decisions. The rationale for parties making such efforts is that they see coalition agreements as a mechanism for conflict prevention and for increasing the efficiency of coalition policy making.

The analyzed coalition agreements of the Belgian and Dutch governments were relevant, but certainly not always as envisioned by optimists during government formation. First, coalition agreements have an agenda function;

they formed a major part of the coalition agenda in all cases. The agenda set in government formation contained issues on which substantive deals were made, but only half of the deals were explicit compromises containing clear commitments, prefabricated policy decisions. Most of the other deals were implicit and contained general, ambiguous or even contradictory intentions. These were formulated to conceal persisting disagreement. The costs of making this type of deal may have been lower, but the gains also were much harder to accomplish because conflict mostly boomeranged back into the coalition. With respect to this element of conflict, limitation of the scope of action of the government through procedural arrangements was found to be most effective. Survival is an important concern of coalition governments, but these governments also are supposed to take substantive decisions. This is why procedures putting matters on a shelf are less common. Making explicit compromises may involve higher transaction costs, but the costs of implementation are lower than for implicit compromises.

Making political deals in a few of weeks or months of government formation is one thing, but enforcement of these deals takes years – at the outset, a full term in office. The risks of this ‘morning after’ problem become visible soon after the cabinet is inaugurated. Parties need to be patient, but their discount rate may go down dramatically if implementation of single deals does not bring them the rewards they expected. Reciprocal control is the mechanism that should prevent opportunism. It is an enforcement mechanism endogenous to the coalition. The conditions for reciprocal control to work well are institutional and strategic, and the prime minister in his roles of policy coordinator and arbitrator is primarily responsible. These prime ministerial roles involve agenda management, for which the scope of the coalition agreement may be a more or less favourable point of departure. Prime ministers are expected to create value for all, but a weak policy platform that is not genuinely sustained by the coalition partners renders this virtually impossible. This happened during the Van Agt II government in the Netherlands. With a good start, however, there still is much the coalition leadership can do, or fail to do, in order to secure enforcement of deals over time, as the other cases have illustrated.

This article has explored the ways in which types of deals in coalition agreements influence political dynamics, and how enforcement of deals in coalition agreements is organized, through institutional arrangements and tactics of agenda management. The empirical focus was on coalition governments in Belgium and the Netherlands, but the concepts and lines of argument need not be confined to these cases and countries. Other cases from these or other countries may show patterns of effects of coalition agreements that differ from the ones considered here, but these patterns are likely to be some

combination of the types of effects and conditions indicated in this article. The questions considered here are about the essence of coalition governance – policy production and government survival in a context in which parties sit together, but have incentives to stand apart. These points pertain not only to the agenda constructed during government formation. Coalition governance mechanisms such as arenas for conflict resolution have been institutionalized in most countries with a record of coalition government, and the issues dealt with in these arenas are not always anticipated during government formation (Andeweg & Timmermans, forthcoming). Further, the responsibilities and challenges to the coalition leadership in enforcing deals also are points bearing more general relevance.

The analysis in this article shows that policy conflict management beginning at government formation can be a useful point of departure for the analysis of coalition governance. Broader comparative analysis with this focus is an avenue of further research, including the institutional and strategic conditions for enforcement explored here. Examination of these points redirects attention to a number of subjects that were identified earlier, but have been left understudied in theory-oriented coalition research. These points include conflict types, ministerial background, role types of prime ministers, and modes of coordination and their effects on government life (Blondel 1988; Blondel & Müller-Rommel 1993). Types of policy have received broad attention in policy analysis, but less in coalition research and Lowi's (1972) assertion that regulatory issues generate other kinds of decision-making processes than redistributive policies is a point worth considering. Furthermore, institutional variables of coalition governance are beginning to be studied comparatively (Müller & Strøm 2000; Strøm et al. 2003; forthcoming). These variables make up the structural and procedural settings of coalition governance, and they can and should be related to agenda management as a variable – itself constructed of elements such as tactics by the coalition leadership – that can shed more light on the dynamics within government coalitions. The formation and termination of government coalitions across countries have been theorized and analyzed extensively. The key research subject ahead is what happens between. This article presents a possible way forward.

Note

1. Actually, these coalitions were not 'surplus' majorities because they needed a two-thirds legislative majority for bills on regionalization. This was why government coalitions of this size were formed.

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