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## Party Behavior and the Formation of Minority Governments – Experiences in Denmark

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**PARTY BEHAVIOR AND THE FORMATION  
OF MINORITY GOVERNMENTS –  
EXPERIENCES IN DENMARK**

***Abstract:***

In many modern democracies, the leaders who make important influential political decisions are highly likely to be party politicians or indeed party leaders. Very often they cannot prepare an adequate strategy for their political parties because it is usually impossible to find out all necessary elements for projecting the goals. It is not surprising that political parties are the most important organizations in modern politics and in the contemporary world, only a few states do without them. The reason that political parties are well-nigh ubiquitous is that they perform functions that are valuable to many political actors. Political parties play a major role in the recruitment of top politicians, on whom the momentous and painful political decisions often fall. With very few exceptions, political chief executives are elected on the slate of some established political party, and very often the head of government continues to serve as the head of the political party that propelled him or her into office. Democracy may be conceived as a process by which voters delegate policy-making authority to a set of representatives, and political parties are the main organizational vehicle by which such delegation takes place. The main aim of this article is focus on the minority government, which are especially common in the Scandinavian countries. They can be more easily formed and maintained where the party system makes it difficult to secure support for an alternative majority coalition to be formed, a vote of investiture is not required, and a government can stay in office unless there is an absolute majority against it. In the article will be emphasized some case studies of Denmark minority government formation and durability. General findings will be confronted with empirical data, which will allow to formulate conclusions about the specific of minority cabinet in Denmark.

***Key words:***

party leaders, minority government, coalition, Nordic States, Denmark, party behavior, elections, majority, parliamentary members

## *Introduction*

In many modern democracies, the leaders who make important influential political decisions are highly likely to be party politicians or indeed party leaders. Very often they cannot prepare an adequate strategy for their political parties because it is usually impossible to find out all necessary elements for projecting the goals. It is not surprising that political parties are the most important organizations in modern politics and in the contemporary world, only a few states do without them. The reason that political parties are well-nigh ubiquitous is that they perform functions that are valuable to many political actors. Political parties play a major role in the recruitment of top politicians, on whom the momentous and painful political decisions often fall. With very few exceptions, political chief executives are elected on the slate of some established political party, and very often the head of government continues to serve as the head of the political party that propelled him or her into office. Democracy may be conceived as a process by which voters delegate policy-making authority to a set of representatives, and political parties are the main organizational vehicle by which such delegation takes place [Strøm, Müller 1999: 1]

The great significance of parties in modern democracies is such that observers in many countries have spoken of partocracy, or even party government. Some of experienced scientists define party government as involving the following conditions [Katz 1986: 31-71]:

- (1) Government decisions are made by elected party officials or by those under their control.
- (2) Government policy is decided within political parties.
- (3) These parties then act cohesively to enact and implement this policy.
- (4) Public officials are recruited through political parties.
- (5) Public officials are held accountable through political parties.

After analyzing such conditions we can understand that under party government, parties serve to organize policy making in government (points 1, 2, and 3), they function as devices through which voters can make their voices heard (point 5), and they control the recruitment of political personnel (point 4). It also can be defined differently by explaining the role of party in government, party in the electorate and party organization.

The consequence of such division of aims may help us to clarify three main fundamental democratic processes mentioned by John H. Aldrich [1995]: the selection of candidates, the mobilization of voters, and the achievement of relatively stable legislative majorities. Because parties still perform important political functions, one of the crucial questions to be asked is about the role of parties in representative democracy? What conditions do parties have to meet to

serve as useful vehicles of representation? According to the anti-elitist theories of democracy, true representative democracy requires, at the very least, internally democratic political parties.

Party leaders must be accountable to their rank and file and serve as their delegates rather than as trustees. That is to say, they should regard themselves as speaking for their constituents and voting as their constituents would have wanted. It is well known that democracy requires that citizens remain sovereign and capable of instructing their elected officials. In the view of some anti-elitists, true democracy may even require the absence of leadership and hierarchy. As Robert Michels [1962: 364] puts it, “every system of leadership is incompatible with the most essential postulates of democracy”. Representative democracy, then, is attainable only if “the iron law of oligarchy” within parties can be counteracted or at least contained. The classical formulation prepared by Joseph Schumpeter, defines democracy as the “competitive struggle for the people’s vote”. The role of the people is simply to “produce a government” [Schumpeter 1943: 269], and Schumpeter shows no concern with the internal democracy of the organizations that guarantee popular rule. In Giovanni Sartori’s interpretation, the Schumpeterian model implies that “large-scale democracy is not an enlargement or a sheer adding up of many ‘little democracies’” [Sartori 1987: 152]. William Riker, who essentially stands in the same tradition, argues that “the function of voting is to control officials, and no more” [Riker 1982: 9].

According to above mentioned traditions a representational role of democratic political parties may be described in two ways. In the first tradition, called by Riker “populist”, parties should faithfully represent the policy preferences of their members and followers. In the second model, named “liberal”, parties should maximize their opportunities to gain office, whether or not the positions they take correspond to the policy preferences of their members. Under specific circumstances, that might mean maximizing their expected number of votes. For many observers of political life it is extremely interesting how party leaders choose between different objectives and how such decisions are constrained [Strøm, Müller 1999: 4].

To sum up, a great number of researchers agrees that among models of competitive party behaviors we can see that parties have a small and well-defined set of objectives, classified into: office-seeking (1), policy-seeking (2) and vote-seeking model.

In this context it is obvious that party leaders rarely have the opportunity to realize all of their goals simultaneously. Sometimes one chosen behavior that maximizes one of their objectives may not lead to the best possible outcome with respect to the others. In some other cases, policy pursuit may conflict with a party’s ability to capture office. When parties bargain over participation

in a new government coalition, for example, they may often be asked to resign from their policy preferences in order to gain seats at the cabinet table. In order to find coalition partners, party leaders may need to dilute their policy commitments and thus potentially antagonize their own activists. During the lifetime of a coalition in which parties have had to make such compromises, policy conflicts may emerge time and again – for example, at the time of national party conferences, when delegates may seek to pressure party leaders into a renegotiation of coalition policies. In other cases, the profits of participating in a cabinet coalition may be likely to carry a price in future elections, so that the trade-off is between office and future electoral performance and is minimized even by intraparty exchanges. Examples may be seen where party leaders conclude that the electoral losses they have suffered are too heavy to justify continued government participation. There is also a situation that insisting on particular policy preferences implies an electoral liability. This is often a trade-off party leaders face when they are drafting their electoral platform or manifesto. If this platform contains everything that the hard-core activists want, then it will probably cause the party to fare poorly among the regular voters. On the other hand, an electorally optimal platform may imply policy sacrifices that are hard for the party faithful to swallow [Strøm, Müller 1999: 9-10].

Every conflict between the goals must be seen in the context of time horizons of party leaders. For example electoral costs and benefits, typically are not realized immediately, so it is not surprising that party leaders concern themselves with elections that lie a few months to a few years ahead. They seldom actively look beyond the next election in which they will be involved. Nevertheless, the time horizons of politicians is dependent on the specific type of party and may deeply affect the trade-offs and compromises they are willing to make.

As many people believe the crucial moment of conversion of votes into office and policy benefits depends on control of elected office. Formal theories of party behavior typically assume that government incumbency is at least a necessary, and possibly a sufficient, condition for both policy and office payoffs. However, this assumption clearly oversimplifies reality, because we can prove that parties not represented in government often have a significant impact on policy and may even share in office payoffs [Laver and Budge 1992; Strøm 1984]. In spite of this still controlling the executive branch is the most important factor in this case and governing parties have greater access to policy influence and office benefits than the opposition. But the degree to which institutions favor incumbents varies.

These differentials depend partly on the particular government and partly on the political system as a whole. Under otherwise identical circumstances, a minority government likely would have to share policy influence (and perhaps

spoils) with the opposition to a greater extent than would a majority administration. There are also systematic cross-national differences in the distribution of these benefits. Some institutional arrangements favor governing parties more than others in the opposition. Let us think of each polity as having a modal distribution of office and policy influence between government and opposition. Thus, we can speak of systemic office benefit differentials and policy influence differentials between governing and opposition parties. Office benefit differentials refer to the typical distribution of such goods (the perquisites of office) between government and opposition. In some democracies (e.g., Westminster systems), the governing parties essentially monopolize such payoffs, whereas in others (e.g., consociational ones), even parties that are formally in opposition may be cut in on many of these deals. The same holds with respect to policy benefit distributions. The office and policy benefit differentials, respectively, refer to the *ex ante* expectations among party leaders concerning the allocation of these goods. These two types of benefits may vary independently of each other, and both may effectively be constant-sum in the short term. The greater the differential is with respect to each good, the greater the incentive for party leaders to pursue that objective. Thus, office pursuit should covary positively with office benefit differentials and policy pursuit correlate similarly with policy influence differentials. In sum, institutions (or rather, party leaders' expectations concerning their effects) are likely to influence party behavior in a variety of ways. The more predictably votes translate into intrinsically valued goods such as policy influence or office, the more slavishly party leaders will follow their electoral incentives. As we have seen, this conversion depends on many political rules or institutions. And the relative availability of policy influence versus office benefits at the margin will determine the trade-offs party leaders make between these goods [Strøm, Müller 1999: 23-24].

### ***Minority Governments' Origin in Denmark and Other Nordic States***

A parliamentary system is a system of government in which the members of a legislative body determine the formation of the cabinet (the executive) and in which any majority of the legislature at almost any time may vote the cabinet out of office. Thus, in any parliamentary system, legislative majorities have instruments at their disposal (such as no-confidence votes and investiture votes) they may use to control the composition of the government and government policy. Still, majority governments are not always formed. In proportional parliamentary democracies, single parties only rarely win majorities, and coalition formation becomes necessary [Laverand, Schofield 1990]. The number of democracies in the world today is higher than in any other time. The majority

of these democracies adopt a constitution that is based on assembly confidence. Assembly confidence regimes are those in which governments, in order to come to and stay in power, must be at least tolerated by a legislative majority. In some cases, the government is assumed to have the confidence of the parliament as long as no majority expresses itself against it; in other cases, confidence exists only if a majority explicitly expresses its support for the government through voting. The former are cases usually referred to as negative parliamentarism; the latter, as positive parliamentarism.

No region has experienced minority governments more frequently than Scandinavia. In sharp contrast with Finland and Iceland, the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Sweden and Norway have had minority governments for more than two-thirds of the post-World War II period. Single-party parliamentary majorities have not existed in Denmark almost since the beginning of twentieth century. Because making decisions in legislative and governmental affairs is obviously required in every political system, some kind of inter-party cooperation was created. When we look closely on Denmark policy after the II World War we can notice that majority coalition governments have been the exception rather than rule, as most governments have been of minority type [Thomas 1982]. In the decade of 1980s these minority governments has been supported by coalitions and it was a visible change with the comparison to previous decade when a single-party government dominated [Damgaard 1992].

After analyzing most of European states it is clear that Denmark holds the post-war record in parliamentary democracies concerning minority governments [Mukherjee, Leblang 2006: 452; Courtenay, Golder 2010: 119-150; Armingeon, Weisstanner, Engler, Potolidis, Gerber, Leimgruber 2011]. Such cabinets are facilitated by the negative formation rule practiced from the beginning of twentieth century. As it was mentioned previously negative parliamentarism means that a government does not need a positive vote of confidence (investiture). On the one hand this model seems to be simple, but on the other hand Danish government is obliged to resign or call elections if parliament adopts a motion of no confidence. This mechanism imply that some parties may prefer minority than majority governments, as they can retain considerable political impact on a government and avoid potential cost of formal participation in government. Generally, minority governments have to rely on 'support' parties to create a legislative majorities. Such external support for cabinet may be provided either *ad hoc* or on more permanent basis when government and its party may actually function together as a kind of quasi-majority coalition government [Damgaard 2006: 231].



During two decades – 1970s and 1980s – all Danish governments were minority governments. According to statistic data seven out of thirteen minority cabinets in the period from October 1971 to January 1993 consisted of one party only, while six were minority coalition governments. If we try to count the months these governments were in office, we get an almost balanced picture: 47 per cent of the months saw a single-party minority government and 53 per cent a minority coalition government. That is why Denmark could be seen as a polity where both kinds of minority governments did occur to almost the same degree, the single-party variant being dominant during the 1970s and minority coalitions during the 1980s. The four-party majority coalition installed in January 1993 commanded only 50.3 per cent of the seats in parliament, and this only was a temporary deviation from the dominant pattern [Elklit 1999: 63].

In one of the most important monographs Kaare Strøm [1990: 89] presents some interesting conclusions concerned minority governments mechanisms. He claims that associating minority cabinets with political instability, fractionalization, polarization and difficult formation processes is not true. It is even completely opposite situation and minority governments should be treated as consequences of rational party behavior under conditions of competition rather than conflict. Strøm's studies covers fifteen Western parliamentary democracies between the end of World War II and 1987 and minority governments account for 35 per cent of all cabinets formed. Denmark is looked upon as the extreme case, since only three of the twenty-five governments during this period were not minority cabinets [Strøm 1990: 59]. Since 1987, Denmark has had four more minority cabinets (and one majority cabinet), changing the number to four of thirty cabinets during the period 1945-97. The minority government proportion is thus an impressive 87 per cent.

Among the researchers there is no general agreement on why minority governments form, and why they clearly are viable and stable cabinet solutions in some political systems. It is quite complicated task to explain why minority governments have been dominant in Scandinavia, while majority governments prevail in Finland and Iceland. It is even more interesting because, the polities of the Nordic countries are similar, and some of the differences clearly have no influence on government formation. Also it is worth noting that constitutional frameworks have been relatively stable over time in all Nordic countries, so it is difficult to trace the occurrence of minority governments back to differences in constitutional details. The explanation for the Nordic patterns of government formation is rather connected with the nature of party systems in the region.

Theoretically, minority governments have been explained as the result of party fragmentation and polarisation. Some experts claimed that the first reason for this model was a gradual development of multiparty legislatures and the



reluctance to enter formal coalitions. Others stress that minority cabinets tend to be formed in unstable and highly conflictual political systems, emerging when everything else has failed. These arguments were not confirmed and other research was continued. Two British scholars [Herman, Pope 1973] in a well known article demonstrated that minority governments were more common than previously assumed (constituting 36 percent of governments in their cross-national data set). They also suggested five main reasons for this phenomenon. First, a substantial proportion of the minority governments they studied were caretaker administrations, which typically came to power as a result of some sort of crisis and were deliberately established for only a short period of time. Second, sometimes minority governments took office because one or more coalition partners withdrew from majority coalitions. Third, a few minority governments came to office because elections that usually provided one party with a legislative majority surprisingly ended with no party winning a majority of seats and, typically, a new election was soon announced. Fourth, minority cabinets arose because extreme parties on either side of the political spectrum were not credible, reliable, formal coalition partners for parties closer to the center. Fifth, and probably the most interesting in this context, some minority cabinets were formed in situations in which one of the parties fell only a few seats short of a legislative majority. Often in such cases, the dominant party formed a one-party minority government and usually did so with the formal support of one of the smaller parties.

Strøm argues that the study of government coalition formation would benefit considerably if the stress on structural factors that has dominated for many years is complemented by an analysis of behavioral factors, which were underdeveloped in the analysis. Minority government formation cannot be explained unless political parties are understood as something other than pure short-term office seekers. It is also true that one set of assumptions does not fit all parties, because some of them are more office oriented, others more concerned about the pursuit of votes or policy. Minority governments are the most probably to be formed where parties value votes and policy highly compared to office. Only by taking into account the intraparty organizational explanations of differences in party objectives and party behavior – aptly summarized under the headings of office-seeking, vote-seeking, and policy-seeking – will it be possible to reach a comprehensive understanding of government formation processes [Strøm 1990: 242-43].

In the post-war period till the 1973, the Danish party system was a traditional unidimensional Scandinavian party system with a large Social Democratic Party, one or two small Communist or Socialist parties to the left of it, and three centre-right parties to the right of it. After December 1973 elections

this stable system was changed seriously by adding entirely new elements to the party system, by changing its overall configuration, and by gradually letting the parties – new and old – find their places in either the central or peripheral parts of the party system [Bille 1997: 382, 387].

It is also necessary to notice that Danish model of party organization has traditionally been membership-oriented. The goal of creating and maintaining membership structures was to establish stable means by which voters could announce their interests and viewpoints to party representatives in national, regional and local governments, to mobilize and encapsulate the voters and to create a stable source of party income. During the first half of the twentieth century, parties' legitimacy and representativeness came to rest more and more upon their ability to form – and maintain – strong membership organizations. The four old parties – the Social Democratic Party (1871), the Social Liberal Party (1905), the Liberal Party (1870) and the Conservative People's Party (gradually developed since the mid-1870s, renamed in 1915) – perceived themselves as the prime representative organizations of the people. The same strategy was used by newly established parties – the Socialist People's Party (1959), the Christian People's Party (1970), the Progress Party (1972), the Centre Democrats (1973), the Red–Green Alliance (1990) and the Danish People's Party (1995) – which dominated the party system in Denmark. Typical habit which can be noticed among all Danish parties whether old or young, left or right, secular or Christian, large or small is that they make a formal distinction between the parliamentary party and the membership party. The latter is made up of local branches, constituency organizations, regional organizations, a national conference and national executives organized along mainly hierarchical lines. They also perceive themselves as representative parties, and all attach a great deal of importance to having the individual party members represented in the leading party bodies. These activities result in a relatively high degree of organizational stability, which is unfortunately not seen in the number of party members. On the basis of collected data it is known that the individual membership of the Danish political parties has decreased from a total of about 615,000 in 1960 to about 180,000 in 2000 or from around 22 percent of the electorate in 1960 to less than 5 percent in 2000 [Pedersen, Bille, Buch, Elklit, Hansen, Nielsen 2004: 367-368]

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## *Rules on the Formation and Termination of Governments in Denmark*

The Danish Constitution does not say much on the government formation in a positive way. We can only read that the monarch formally appoints the prime minister and other ministers. It is formally the king or queen, which in practice means the prime minister, to determine the number of ministers and their portfolios. But the constitution clearly explains that no minister can remain in office if he or she has received a motion of no confidence passed by Folketing (parliament) – see Section 15 (2). If this kind of no confidence motion concerns the prime minister, the government must resign or call elections. A government that has received such a motion or has submitted a resignation request for other reasons, functions as caretaker cabinet until a new government has been formed. There is also one important additional habit that was developed during many years of constitutional practice – although the constitution is silent on this matter – government interpreted a rejection of its budget proposal as a vote of no confidence [Damgaard 2006: 237].

In Denmark if election results do not make the choice of new government obvious, the monarch meets with leaders of all parties to get their advice, and can appoint an *informateur* to negotiate with parties and report back within a set time frame. An *informateur* is usually a seasoned politician with credibility and standing who is not a prospective Prime Minister. They meet with all parties, facilitate preparation of a coalition agreement, report regularly to the media, and recommend to the Queen on either the best *formateur* or that there should be another *informateur* round. Once the *formateur* is identified he or she is responsible for the more detailed negotiations required to form a government.

The constitutional mechanism of government creation is generally considered instrumental in securing minority government formation and survival, because on the one hand it “allows governments to seek their support from different quarters for different issues” [Pesonen, Thomas 1983: 83] and on the other it does not require the government or the premier-designate at any point in time to command a positive majority in parliament – as long as a majority against the government (or the premier-designate) has not been registered. In a fragmented parliament (Folketing is just a good example especially since the early 1970s) this leaves ample room for manipulating, and there is no doubt that this constitutional arrangement contributes substantially to the ability of Danish minority governments to survive and also to build legislative majority coalitions [Elklit 1999: 66].

Crucial element of the political system in Denmark is the gradual development of a set of informal rules, which has coped with the vacuum left by the Constitution. The presented below set of informal rules has been summarized

by Erik Damgaard on the basis of Tage Kaarsted's work [Damgaard 1992; Kaarsted 1988: 12ff., 91]. Six such rules which can also make the government formation process rather complicated are the following:

- (1) If uncertainty about the appointment of a new government arises, each party will have to give its advice to the crown.
- (2) If the advice of the parties unambiguously points towards a majority government – or a minority government supported by a majority – the crown has to follow this advice.
- (3) If no majority can be found, the most viable minority must be found.
- (4) The interpretation of the advice of the parties is the responsibility of the acting prime minister, not the crown.
- (5) During the opening phases of the process, a royal informateur may be appointed.
- (6) The advice given by the parties is not subject to specific rules or norms in regard to its framing or wording.

When parties in the system start the play according to the mentioned rules, the game can become quite complicated. But the rules nevertheless constrain the behavior of parties in the government formation process, which is not a freestyle bargaining exercise. It is clear that such rules establish a procedure that allows and requires all parties, at one or several stages, to announce their government preferences to the public at a formal visit to the monarch. As it was also stated before the prime minister is described in the constitution as a subject that has a prerogative to dissolve the Folketing at almost any time, which of course has a great impact on coalition bargaining. There is only one exception when an incoming government is forbidden to call elections before it has appeared before the Folketing. To sum up two main institutional rules with respect to government formation and termination are the following: (1) the right of a parliamentary majority to censure the government and (2) the right of the prime minister to dissolve parliament. Both of them are used in Denmark and their importance is greater than can be deduced from the frequency of their application in the real political life [Damgaard 2006: 238].

### ***Government Formation in Denmark – the Case Studies***

Processes of government formation in minority situations may be quite complex. Several parties interact, and each tries to attain the best possible outcome given other players' preferences and actions. Party leaders and their more-or-less fractionalised party groups may be motivated by short-term as well as long-term goals. Governmental office sometimes is an end in itself, but most politicians seek office as a means to affect policy decisions and legislation or to

influence their electoral fortunes. Evidently, entering government and obtaining government portfolios is the fundamental way to satisfy office-seeking motivations. However, policy-seeking and vote-seeking parties under some circumstances may find that they can achieve as much in opposition as in government. In general, parties will be more inclined to seek office if the net benefits of governing outweigh the net benefits of being in opposition. Government participation almost always increases the policy influence of a party, but the extra influence normally comes with an electoral cost. According to analysis it is clear that forming governments in Denmark in the postwar period was not a light procedure. Of the thirty-one cabinets formed only six were really majority coalitions, so it means that participating parties were controlling an absolute majority of seats in the Folketing (years of formation 1957, 1960, 1968, 1993), whereas a further eleven cabinets were minority coalitions. Quite intriguing was the situation in 1960, 1962, 1978 when minority coalitions were extremely close to having majority status and actually functioned as majority governments in many respects. The rest fourteen cabinets were of the single-party minority type, but lots of them (especially formed in 1945, 1953, 1955, 1966 and 1971) was very stable with support from opposition parties in legislative majority building, at least for a two-years period. It must be also noted that ten of the seventeen coalition cabinets were built by parties located closely to each other on the left-right scale. There was only one exception when Social Democratic – Liberal coalition of 1978-1979 was formed to create working majority in order to cope with the economic problems of the country. Next four coalitions in 1980s do not quite conform to the party locations on the scale and it was caused by the Centre Democrats were considered more ‘leftist’ than the Radical Liberals (1982, 1984, 1987). There also can be observed another rule in the cabinet formation connected with small parties. It occurred that small centre parties have usually been able to choose coalition partners to their left (Social Democrats) and to their right (Conservatives and Liberals) as they thought expedient. They were a great example of relevant parties [Damgaard 2006: 239].

In the Table no. 1 it is presented the complicated process of government formation, which parties were involved in it, how long the process lasted. There is also presented the duration of the cabinet and its strength in the Danish parliament.

Table 1. Government formation, duration and strength in Denmark 1945-2015

Government	Number of parties in parliament	Number of previous bargaining rules	Parties involved in previous bargaining rounds	Number of days required in government formation	Duration of government (in days)	Government strength	Total number of seats
Lib 1945	7	1	SD, RL, Lib, Con	8	720	38	149
SD 1947	6	2	(1)SD, RL, Lib, Con (2)Lib	16	1027	58	150
SD 1950	6	1	SD, RL, JP	11	40	60	151
Lib-Con 1950	6	0		4	904	60	151
Lib-Con 1953	6	0		0	154	60	151
SD 1953	7	0		8	486	75	179
SD-RL-JP 1957	7	1	SD, RL, JP, Lib, Con	14	997	94	179
SD-RL 1960	7	0		3	654	88	179
SD 1964	6	1	SD, RL, Lib, Con	4	787	77	179
SD 1966	6	0		0	427	70	179
RL-Lib-Con 1968	6	0		10	1327	98	179
SD 1971	5	1	SD, RL, Lib, Con	20	360	71	179
Lib 1973	10	1	all parties	15	386	22	179
SD 1975	10	3	(1) All parties except Con, LS (2) SD, RL, CD, CPP, Con (3) Con, Lib, CD, CPP, PP	35	733	54	179
SD 1977	11	0		0	561	66	179
SD-Lib 1978	11	0		26	419	88	179
SD 1979	10	0		3	774	69	179
SD 1981	9	1	all parties	22	247	60	179
Con-Lib-CD-CPP 1982	9	1	all parties	7	487	66	179
Con-Lib-CD-CPP 1984	9	0		0	1337	78	179
Con-Lib-CD-CPP 1987	8	0		2	243	70	179
Con-Lib-RL 1988	8	2	all parties SD, RL, Lib, Con	24	922	68	179
Con-Lib 1990	8	0		6	759	60	179
SD-RL-CD-CPP 1993	8	0		10	604	91	179
SD-RL-CD 1994	8	0		6	825	76	179
SD-RL 1996	8	0		0	436	71	179
SD-RL 1998	10	0		0	1312	71	179
Lib-Con 2001	12	0		6	1208	72	179
Lib-Con 2005	11	0		5	985	70	179
Lib-Con 2007	12	0		7	469	64	179
Lib-Con 2009	12	0		0	905	64	179
SD-RL-SPP 2011	12	0		15	854	77	179
SD-RL 2014	12	0		0	511	61	179
Lib 2015	13	0		8	from 28.06.2015	34	179

**Abbreviations:**

**LS**–Left Socialist; **SPP**–Socialist People’s Party; **SD**–Social Democrats; **CD**–Centre Democrats; **RL**–Radical Liberals; **CPP**–Christian People’s Party; **JP**–Justice Party; **Con**–Conservatives; **Lib**–Liberals; **PP**–Progress Party.

Source: *Own study based on information from Folketing* [<http://www.thedanishparliament.dk>] and [Damgaard 2006: 234-235, 240, 242].



Whenever a government has resigned for whatever reason, the formation attempts start to form a new one. ‘Private’ inter-party discussions and negotiations are not officially presented to public opinion and such bargaining or talks are very often conducted in addition to and frequently simultaneously with the official rounds of cabinet formation bargaining. Sometimes the change of government is fast and can be rather named as ‘technical’. In the table no. 1 there are some examples confirming cabinets were formed within zero days. We can also see that the average time required for formation can be classified in three types: short-time (5 days) or medium-time (13 days) and long-time (25 days) [Damgaard 2006: 241, 243].

For researchers analyzing minority governments one factor is very interesting too – it is durability of such cabinets. For Danish case it is worth noting that durability of such cabinets does not differ extremely to majority governments. Obviously, it is visible that relatively short duration of these governments reflects the vulnerability of minority cabinets without stable support, on the one hand, and the prerogative of the cabinet to dissolve parliament, on the other. There is also a difference between one-party minority governments and those formed by coalitions. On average, one-party governments sit for two-and-a-half years.

### ***Elections 2015 and the Weakest Government in Denmark?***

According to the Danish Constitution, the election was planned no later than 15 September 2015, since the last election was held on 15 September 2011. The Prime Minister was able to call the election at any date, provided it is no later than four years from the previous election. Although the Social Democrats increased their share of the vote and won more seats, the “Blue” opposition bloc led by Venstre’s Rasmussen (Venstre, Danish People’s Party, Liberal Alliance, Conservative People’s Party, and Christian Democrats) gained a parliamentary majority over the “Red” Social Democrat-led bloc (Social Democrats, Red-Green Alliance, The Alternative, Social Liberals, and Socialist People’s Party). Within an hour of the election result being declared, prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt announced her government would step down on 19 June 2015. After 18 June 2015 elections Denmark faced its weakest government in four decades after talks to form a rightwing coalition finally collapsed and the Liberals pledged to govern alone, even though they took less than 20% at last week’s general election. The failure of the right to reach agreement presents the Liberals with a stark choice: to rely on the centre-left Social Democrats, the biggest party in parliament, to push through legislation or, more likely, to lean on the anti-immigrant Danish People’s party, the country’s second largest force, which has succeeded in the past 15 years in shifting Danish politics markedly

to the right. After a meeting of the four rightwing party bosses on 26 June 2015, Liberal leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen told journalists that it was his assessment after the evening's discussion that it would be possible to form a Liberal government under his leadership, which would enjoy support in parliament. Rasmussen, a former prime minister, had only 34 seats out of 179 in Denmark's parliament, so would depend on winning the support of at least 56 other MPs in order to pass any legislation. Through public speeches Rasmussen demonstrated his great awareness because a pure Liberal government was not just a minority government, but a very small minority government. A long history of minority coalition governments shows that the defeated centre-left administration of prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt depended frequently on Liberal support over the past four years. However, it was more than four decades since a cabinet had fewer seats: Liberal leader Poul Hartling held office from 1973-1975 with only 22 but his administration lasted just 14 months. However Thorning-Schmidt's Social Democrats won elections and took 47 seats on a higher proportion of the vote, but her coalition partners suffered badly and she quit as party leader on election night. The main election winner was the populist DPP (Danish People's Party), which became Denmark's second largest party with more than 21% of the vote. The DPP set out four conditions for their involvement in a coalition: a Eurosceptic approach to the EU, the re-introduction of border controls, further restrictions on immigration and asylum policy, and 0.8% growth in public spending. But despite attempts by the Liberals to coax him into a coalition, DPP leader Kristian Thulesen Dahl has opted to wield the party's influence from the sidelines and prop up the Liberals on a vote-by-vote basis. Even with the support of almost all the rightwing parties (the Conservative People's Party indicated they would rather stay out of a government coalition), the Liberals will have the slimmest of majorities in parliament – just one vote – at a time when Denmark's economic recovery is still tentative. The currency has come under pressure and the central bank has embarked on a radical experiment with negative interest rates. Some political analyst from Denmark's political scene claims that the DPP in many cases will seek cooperation with the Social Democrats and perhaps even the left, because as Dahl declared he considers himself to be half red and half blue and it can make life difficult for Rasmussen as prime minister, but not necessarily impossible. While the DPP has pushed to the reintroduction of strict border controls to prevent movement of migrants, Rasmussen promised to maintain Denmark's status as a member of the Schengen group of nations which has no internal borders [Crouch 2015].

The fundamental question is does the Rasmussen cabinet manage to maintain for a long period of time and does the duration of it will get an average for this kind of governments? Finding an answer to this question is now

impossible, but the situation is quite extraordinary. The weakest government from four decades is now the great object to be observed and analysed and the main aim of researchers is now to collect arguments confirming old theories about minority cabinets formation in the context of party behavior.

## *Conclusions*

The discussion of the behavior of Danish political parties and its influence on cabinet formation and durability led us into the following conclusions. The large number of parties in the Danish multi-party system order themselves rather nicely on a basic socio-economic left-right scale. All of them prefer having policy influence and obtaining cabinet positions. The inter-party game on government formation is conducted according to formal and informal rules. The bargaining among parties on the formation of governments has been completed comparatively swiftly, with the small centre parties playing crucial role in the party system. In the huge majority of cases, the result has been minority governments which mainly have been formed by coalitions of parties rather than by separate single party.

Denmark has strong parliaments, which mean that parties in opposition have considerable decision making clout. Participation in government is not necessary to gain influence, and, as a result, minority governments become more likely. Another significant feature of the party system which also influence government formation is the structure of party system. Minority governments are more likely in systems with one centrally-located, relatively large party. Such a pattern has been visible in many Scandinavian countries for decades but is currently eroding at least in Denmark.

Government coalition parties in Denmark have not developed the model of signing formal, public agreements to any noticeable extend. They rather prefer making deals in more subtle way which cover the real internal negotiations among politicians. There are also weakly visible stable norms on coalition governance that developed over many years and detecting these rules is something difficult for observers.

In the models of competitive party behavior of the rational choice tradition vote-seeking at future elections has been an important objective for some parties on some occasions in Denmark. The instrumental character of vote maximization (or satisficing) for either policy pursuit or office-seeking (or both) has been manifested. Office-seeking has been an essential, evident, and frequent party objective.

However the termination of governments was not analyzed in the article, but it is caused on the one hand by technical reasons, and on the other by individual strategy of the party. Danish cabinets sometimes decide to call early

elections three to six months before the end of the term without any serious reasons like e.g. developing conflict on the political scene. If potential conflict starts to grow, termination either happen because minority governments are defeated in parliament or because they try to improve their bargaining position through earlier elections [Damgaard 2006: 260-261].

To sum up the Danish parliamentary system is far from formalities, flexible and innovative with respect to coalition governance. There is a noticeable habit that when a formal majority coalitions is unwilling among the parties, then a minority cabinet is appointed instead with an obligation to perform extremely complex majority structure for decision making [Damgaard, Svensson 1989].

The last government founded in June 2015 is now one of the weakest minority cabinets in Denmark. Will it confirm the tendencies described above or will be an example of new processes, it is hard to predict now. One thing is sure the stable model of government formation and party behavior has been maintained in Denmark and is a good example for other democratic states seeking an effective model of governing .

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