Small Parties: From Party Pledges to Government Policy

NICOLE BOLLEYER

When estimating a party’s capacity for goal co-ordination, scholars need not only consider contextual constraints but also the party’s properties, since these directly affect its strategic choices. For small parties which are crucial in virtually all multi-party systems the co-ordination of votes, office and policy is much more difficult than for numerically strong actors. Since the conceptual tools to assess the weight of small coalition partners – weight defined as the capacity to defend and realise core policy commitments – and to systematise intra-coalitional processes in general are absent, this article proposes a typology to account for small parties’ weight. This typology is defined by the two criteria of ‘qualified pivotality’ and ‘centrality’, each of which is assumed to create a particular set of strategic advantages. Based on the latter, the approach allows small parties’ impact to be compared, first, with reference to their positions within the respective parliamentary party system, and, second, with reference to the type of coalition that is likely to be formed. Based on the separate but parallel assessment of ‘formation weight’ and ‘coalition weight’, the typology reveals under which conditions the same properties of a small party may be advantageous during the coalition formation process, but disadvantageous during the subsequent period of coalition government.

For a long time, scholars in comparative politics have engaged in the conceptualisation of different types of party systems. Over recent decades, however, a split within the literature has emerged between empirically-oriented research on parties and party systems on the one hand and deductively-developed, formal models on the other. The more traditional entity of analysis was the ‘system’ (Duverger 1967; Mair 1997; Sartori 1976; Smith 1979); newer works are more focused on the ‘parts’ (Laver and Schofield 1986; Riker 1962; Roozenaald 1990, 1992), the ability of single parliamentary parties to pursue goals in their respective environment, understood either as their embedding in the parliamentary party system – size and ideological location – or the institutional mechanisms organising the relationship between executive and legislature, such as the investiture rule (see for overviews Laver 1998; Martin and Stevenson 2001).
This article proposes a typology on small parties’ weight which represents a conceptual bridge by drawing on the traditional work on party systems and coalition formation as well as on the concepts ‘pivotality’ and ‘centrality’ common to formal coalition theory. It allows for the analysis of the distinct impact of the party system and the coalition on parties’ strategic capacities, and therefore brings in the traditional ‘systemic’ perspective which is only implicitly present in many of the formal models. Relations between the parties are not only the most appropriate object of party system analysis (Mair 1997), they also reveal crucial insights about the strategic capacities of the single ‘parts’ in our case, of small parties.

Based on a typology systematising the numerical and ideological status of a small party, two sets of features will allow for an estimation of its relative weight in different formation and coalition contexts. In the formation phase, a small party’s capacity to maximise concessions results from four aspects: the number of coalition alternatives, the security to enter government, the visibility of each participant’s bargaining power and the predictability of the formation process. In the coalition phase, parties’ individual weights are shaped by the costs of break-out depending on the presence of alternative coalitions, the concessions received during coalition formation and the internal interaction mode (bargaining or hierarchy) supported by the number and relative sizes of coalition partners.

In operational terms, a party’s relative weight is defined as the capacity of a party to defend and realise policy commitments constitutive for its programmatic profile and whose violation risks voter alienation (Sened 1996: 351; Warwick 2005: 384, 2001). In order to realise preferred policy goals, a small party needs to overcome two obstacles. First, these policies need to be part of the concessions which the party receives during coalition formation and, second, the party needs to insist on them irrespective of the coalition partner’s preferences during the coalition’s lifetime. Accordingly, the weight of a party becomes visible, first, in the degree to which its programmatic commitments become part of the coalition agreement and, second, in the degree to which a party can transfer its pledges fixed in the coalition agreement into legislation after having entered government. Both cannot be taken for granted simply because different parties – also when entering the same coalition – still tend to hold different policy goals.

For two reasons the conceptualisation of the role of small parties is crucial for theoretical and empirical research on political parties and coalition government. First, small parties are crucial actors in nearly all party systems, since predominant or pure two-party systems represent only a minority (Toole 2000: 443; Siaroff 2003). Most of the time, single larger parties are neither able to govern alone nor do they prefer an equally strong party as a coalition partner over a small one. Due to this relevance, one can already find rich empirical works on small parties in specific political systems (Font 2001; Müller-Rommel and Pridham 1991; Padgett and Burkett 1986) or on particular types of parties which tend to be small, such
as parties of the New Left (Kitschelt 1988) or new parties in general (Lucardie 2000). However, despite this richness, what small size itself implies for these parties’ capacity to pursue their own policy goals compared to bigger actors has not been systematically hypothesised. While it is a commonplace that in the long term democratic competition induces parties to reconcile potentially conflicting goals, namely participation in office, policy and vote-seeking (Strom and Müller 1999a: 1), this challenge does not affect parties of different sizes to the same extent. The property of small size generates actor-specific difficulties which lead to particular strategies to compensate for these and justify the conceptualisation of small parties as a particular type of actor (Bolleyer 2004).

Small parties tend to specialise in clearly restricted policy fields that are neglected by other parties, rather than to broaden their profiles to attract parts of the entire electorate (Kirchheimer 1965). For them, there is a greater need to maintain their seat share since they are much more threatened by the initial parliamentary thresholds. Most importantly, small parties need to make their impact on policy visible for their respective electorates. This is difficult, particularly for the weaker partner in a coalition that does not receive as much media attention. Specialisation is the most reasonable strategy: in the context of collective cabinet responsibility, it is easier to claim credit for achievements in specific areas as a party, not as a coalition, when these areas are not a main concern for the stronger counterpart.

Second, the separate assessment of small parties’ weight during formation bargaining and the actual lifetime of a coalition presupposes the conceptualisation of intra-coalitional interaction which – depending on the given party constellation – can increase or decrease a small party’s strategic resources gained during the formation phase. Like the consequences of a party’s small size in its efforts to achieve a balanced goal co-ordination, internal coalition processes are considerably under-theorised and are usually treated as adjuncts to formation (Budge and Keman 1990: 180). For instance, regarding cabinet dissolution, intra-coalitional interaction is often considered as an accelerator of cabinet decline (Lupia and Strom 1995; Strom and Swindle 2002). What has not attracted much attention is the pattern of daily interaction and the ongoing struggle for compromise typical of any supposedly ‘stable’ coalition.

Accordingly, the major strands of coalition theory pay little attention to the actual working of coalitions. While office-based approaches usually stop at the point where spoils have been distributed among government parties (Gamson 1961; Riker 1962), policy-based approaches assume parties will avoid intra-coalitional conflict ex ante by minimising ideological diversity in the formation phase (Budge and Laver 1993). Although ‘thicker’ analyses of coalition behaviour have started to look at the post-formation phase (Lee 1998, 2001; Müller and Strom 2003; Timmermans 2003), there is still the need to develop and theorise our understanding of the
post-formation phase on the basis of the knowledge already accumulated. This article starts from there to capture the role of small parties more adequately.

The concepts, the hypotheses and the final classification presented here aim first of all at providing structured expectations on the capacity of small parties’ to realise policy commitments within different contexts by treating the formation and the coalition phase as two arenas of interaction. Second, the framework can guide the systematic selection of cases for comparative analyses. Third, it helps to systematise and to evaluate the mainly empirical literature on the nature of coalition agreements and on the modes of portfolio allocation by which complex patterns of intra-coalition cooperation can be secured (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993; Budge and Keman 1990; Müller and Strom 2003; Strom and Müller 1999b). Finally, the following reasoning adds to the debate on how parties get from individual party pledge to government policy, a question that lies at the heart of representative democracy and that constitutes a particular challenge for small parties.

The Weight of Small Parties: Outside and Inside Government

Dynamic Formation, Yet Static Coalition? Two Conceptions of Weight

It is a commonplace that the small size of a party may not be equated with its irrelevance when it comes to assessing the status of the single ‘parts’ constituting a party system (Sartori 1976). In processes of coalition formation, small parties can – under certain conditions – gain weight or power disproportionate to the number of parliamentary seats they occupy (among others Laver and Schofield 1986; Rémy 1975; Riker 1962; Siaroff 2003). Although early game-theoretical models made some allowance for the post-formation game (Axelrod 1970), the following question has not been theorized upon: what does the situation for a small coalition partner look like within a coalition that has been already formed?

In order to assess small parties’ weight in an adequate way, one needs to clearly distinguish between the arena of coalition formation and the final coalition as two spheres of interaction. Neither the distinction itself, nor the conceptualisation of the coalition as an arena of interaction is common within coalition theory. Figure 1 sketches some pieces of the coalition-theoretical literature which take ‘size’ as the prior determinant for a party’s weight. Systematising these pieces according to two criteria reveals the mentioned lacunae. The first distinction refers to the underlying conception of weight as ‘dynamic’ or ‘static’. Dynamic implies that the use of resources during negotiations has an impact on the single parties’ final shares of assets, while a static conception assumes that each actor receives a share of payoff (portfolios) proportional to its share of material resources (parliamentary seats) without bargaining processes playing a role. The second criterion
refers to the respective arena which an approach considers – either the parliamentary party system or the coalition.

Looking at Figure 1, each type of approach – the one referring to the parliamentary party system, the other to coalitions – tends to use one particular conception of weight, while neglecting the other. Approaches that refer to the parliamentary party system use a dynamic weight conception, since the formation process is perceived as a genuine bargaining situation (3). As a consequence, box (1) will stay empty. Pivotality is the property which allows for an actor to receive more weight than its relative seat share would predict in proportional terms. Usually, an actor is considered pivotal when it is numerically necessary for the formation of a majority coalition, hence makes a winning coalition. The more majorities an actor can complete, the stronger it is (Laver and Schofield 1986; Shapley and Shubik 1954).8

The other way around, it is hard to find a theoretical approach that explicitly conceptualises the coalition as an arena of bargaining (4). Power relations are examined under a static, resource-focused perspective, mostly assuming a proportional allocation of ministries (2). The question is how ministerial posts are numerically distributed according to the given relative seat share – in a few cases also considering the quality of the ministries (Browne and Feste 1975; Budge and Keman 1990; Druckman and Warwick 2005; Warwick and Druckman 2001; Warwick 2001). Budge and Keman (1990: 155, 158), for instance, argue that parties are policy-oriented and strive for specific portfolios. Although a seat-proportional allocation prevails, when focusing on the substantive dimension of portfolio distribution, the situation of small parties looks even worse than such a proportional distribution implies. For all small parties, the authors conclude the following, irrespective of their profile or their position in the party system: they only get their favoured ministries when the stronger partner allows it.9

![FIGURE 1 THE SOURCES AND DIFFERENT CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF SMALL PARTIES’ WEIGHT](image)
Most importantly, the actors’ capacity to use the ministerial posts effectively within intra-coalitional interaction and, by doing so, to change the weight distribution defined exclusively by the portfolio allocation is not considered. The same is true with regard to the interaction pattern typical of the given party configuration. Once allocation questions are settled, each partner is expected to share the desire to use ministries to advance its own policy purposes and to agree fairly easily on giving each other a free hand in this (Budge and Keman 1990: 154). Yet the empirical problem with ‘ministerial government’ is that, according to experts, such division of labour can be found with regard to routine decisions but barely exists on major policy issues (Strøm and Müller 1999b: 274–5). This touches a major yet often underrated challenge for small parties, their capacity to defend core policy commitments within government, when compromises made in packages during formation can easily be contested when dealt with separately.

To tackle these shortcomings in conceptual terms, I will formulate hypotheses referring to the numerical and ideological status of a small party which systematically affect its weight within the respective arenas of the parliamentary party system and the coalition. Despite their interdependency – they have to be treated as separate phases since the same party feature has different consequences for the party’s strategic potential in each context.

The Distinction between Formation and Coalition Weight

A high share of ministries and formally fixed policy concessions are clearly valuable resources for small parties. Yet the way in which coalition partners interact within the government is an important aspect that should not be underestimated: Small partners are necessarily concerned about the possibility of being dominated within a coalition, something that a big actor normally does not need to fear. Their internal positions heavily affect their chances of realising own policies, especially when there is intra-coalitional disagreement over crucial issues. In particular, the mode of interaction and the relative size of partners can be expected to affect the chances of goal realisation.

Accordingly, the central questions of this section are: how far are small parties able a) to maximise their formation weight due to their position in the parliamentary party system and b) to transfer the weight share they possess in the formation phase into intra-coalitional weight? Put in operational terms, how far are small parties able a) to achieve the inclusion of programmatic policy commitments in the coalition agreement and b) to transfer commitments in the coalition agreement into legislation? To address these issues, it is necessary to distinguish analytically between ‘formation weight’ and ‘coalition weight’, two phenomena which differ with regard to their substance, but also with regard to the relevant entities of analysis they
refer to. Hence, one central conceptual function of the distinction is to avoid unconscious shifts from one level of analysis to the other – shifts that can occur fairly easily during the analysis of parties which interact both within the parliamentary arena and within coalition governments.

Formation weight is defined as the impact that a party is able to exert during coalition formation. In this phase, government participation is the dominant goal. At the same time, actors try to maximise concessions from future partners in terms of portfolios and policy. The central challenge in this period is the co-ordination of policy demands and office participation. Moreover, actors try to anticipate possible future electoral losses resulting from their participation in government (Strøm and Müller 1999a: 9). The relevant entity of analysis to assess formation weight is the parliamentary party system. One possibility to operationalise a party’s formation weight is to assess the percentage of the party’s policy goals listed in the party programme which enter the final coalition agreement and have not been supported by its partner(s).

Coalition weight refers to the influence that an actor possesses when intra-coalitional conflicts emerge. To isolate coalition from formation weight is crucial since an even transfer of formation into coalition weight cannot be taken for granted from a small party’s perspective; there is always the risk of being dominated within the coalition and thus losing profile. Therefore a small party is dependent on the potential to win a fight from time to time and to preserve at least partially different views from those of the coalition partner. The capacity to ‘strike back’ contributes to the implementation of its own policy preferences, which again heavily affects future electoral fortunes (Warwick 2000, 2005). Conceptually, coalition weight refers to the capacity of an actor to use government participation as a resource to realise current and long-term goals. To operationalise the coalition weight of a government party, it is necessary to assess the percentage of the commitments in the coalition agreement clearly associated with this party – and not supported by its partner(s) – which are finally transferred into legislation.

Most crucially, an actor’s ability to realise its own interests within a coalition may not be equated with the same actor’s impact during coalition formation. Identical properties – like centrality – affect the weight of actors in different ways, depending on the arena in which they are embedded. Moreover, in different phases, parties try to gain a maximum share by using different resources to achieve different sets of goals: they utilise their proportion of seats and – where given – their ideological compatibility with different partners. Later, within the coalition, the initial goals change. In this arena, the gains received within the formation phase – portfolios and policy concessions that are now former goals – turn into the resources that an actor uses in order to exercise coalition power within intra-coalitional processes.

To assume that actors are dominated by one goal (such as office participation) ignores the step-by-step nature of the process and the
potential for goal change when moving between arenas. In order to account for conflicts between short- and long-term interests, Warwick has developed the concept of ‘policy horizons’. These horizons are assumed to specify the point at which a party prefers opposition status to government participation because the concessions necessary for entry are too high. Otherwise, voters would withdraw their support because the party abandons core policies (Warwick 2000: 38–9; 2005). If government participation is the only way to have an impact on the formulation of policy because the opposition is structurally very weak, the two-step logic described above becomes the most pronounced. In this case, office has to be achieved to affect policy. Consequently, a small party is willing to lower its expectations regarding its prospective coalition power and, on a more fundamental level, regarding the stability of the coalition ex ante. Hence, due to very powerful executives, scholars can very easily assume an intrinsic dominant office-orientation on the side of the parties, even though their behaviour is simply a function of contextual factors.

The two arenas – parliamentary party system and coalition – also need to be distinguished because different time horizons affect the effective use of actors’ centrality as a resource. In general, a central party has a good chance of participating in a government, as it can align with both left- and right-wing parties. During coalition bargaining, a central party can threaten a potential partner with forming a coalition with the opposite wing in order to extract more concessions. This threat is credible and very likely to be effective. However, the situation changes after a coalition has been formed: The threat to leave the coalition loses effect if a party has realised it either too often or too rarely – and, in the first case, a party will find it increasingly difficult to achieve participation in the long run since it is considered completely unreliable.14 This is even more the case if a coalition faces upcoming elections. Although the threat to leave the coalition is more credible at the end of the term, since the threatening party could already profit considerably from government participation and exit losses are limited, it is also less effective because the same is true for the other coalition partner(s): the coalition has decreased in value and the latter will not invest very much in order to prevent a partner from leaving government. Hence, parties break governments in order to initiate new elections when they expect maximal electoral gains and, at the same time, have only limited payoff from the portfolios they possess within the current coalition (Lupia and Strøm 1995: 655–6). To phrase it in the terminology presented above, parties trade off their current ‘coalition weight’ against the increased ‘formation weight’ that they expect from the electoral gains produced by early elections.

Furthermore, the distinction between formation and coalition weight is justified because the modes of interaction within the two arenas are not identical. When forming a coalition, actors co-operate. Yet parties do not per se strive for co-operation in the form of a coalition. A party is likely to choose this option only if it maximises its individual interest. In contrast,
within the coalition, the character of the interaction mode is highly ambivalent. Who is the interest-maximising actor – the coalition or the single participant? Even if the government receives maximal benefits, it does not automatically follow that each participant maximises its benefits as well. That is, each single party is forced to balance out an efficient internal cooperation regarding the government as one collective actor and the efforts made to sufficiently discriminate between the single participants, who have to compete against each other at the following elections. Too many internal quarrels weaken the government’s capacity to formulate and implement policies, or, even worse, may lead to its dissolution. However, on the other hand, if parties adapt too much to their partner’s positions, their electorates have fewer reasons to vote for them in upcoming elections. As a consequence, intra-coalitional interaction cannot be unambiguously qualified as co-operative or competitive. In a nutshell, in order to specify an actors’ weight adequately, it is crucially important to distinguish between its individual payoff-maximisation during formation bargaining, which determines the resources that this actor can refer to within the final coalition, and the ambivalence of intra-coalitional interaction between coalition partners, in which coalition weight is exercised.

Although formation and coalition weight are analytically distinct, their empirical linkage is more than obvious. Parties begin to strive for the future maximisation of coalition weight already during coalition bargaining. More concretely, the single actor tries to achieve as much control as possible with regard to the future coalition by demanding mechanisms to protect its status within the coalition, such as portfolios, formally fixed policy concessions, specific control mechanisms or decision-making rules for conflict resolution (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993; Strøm and Müller 1999b). This is particularly crucial since entering an agreement including many vague compromises easily provokes conflict later in the coalition (Timmermans 2003: 154). But even based on very specific provisions, pre-emptive action has a limited effect since a change of the context embedding the interaction considerably affects the weight distribution among the partners.

Finally, the necessity to distinguish between formation and coalition weight is also visible in conceptual approaches attempting to capture parties’ strategic potentials. Rémy (1975: 293–5) defines pivotality as the capacity of an actor to change the existing parliamentary majority by leaving one coalition and joining another. The two relevant determinants of this capacity are a party’s relative size and its ideological flexibility within the respective party system. Central actors have the advantage that they can not only leave but also join a new coalition. The less the old and the new coalition overlap (minority governments are excluded), the more pivotal and the more powerful is such an actor. This means that the smaller a central party is, the higher is its weight. Of course, the more fundamental the change in participating parties and their sizes are, the more substantive is the effect of government alternation. Still, when it comes to the weight resulting from
a small actor’s pivotality, the question remains ‘weight in which context’? A higher seat share within an alternative coalition is certainly better for a party’s intra-coalitional capacity to fight for policies, and not a lower one as Rémy’s argument implies. In short, the approach suffers from the missing differentiation between formation and coalition weight which is necessary to arrive at a conception of pivotality that not only captures particular systemic dynamics – which is a merit in itself – but also actor-specific advantages.

Qualified Pivotality and Centrality

A small party’s capacity to efficiently maximise formation as well as coalition weight varies crucially according to pivotality and its centrality. Generally speaking, although these two concepts are well established in the literature, they tend to be defined in conflicting ways and they are often treated as if they overlap. In this article, I seek to disentangle them and then to combine them as separate components within one model. To look at the impacts of both in one model can be useful since it builds a bridge between the game-theoretic and office-seeking approaches from which the concept of pivotality originated and the policy-seeking-approaches that emphasise the role of centrality (Keman 1994; Shapley and Shubik 1954). Accordingly, I deduce a set of hypotheses of how these distinct properties – combined and in isolation – affect the weight that an actor possesses within the parliamentary party system and the coalition. The particular aim is to specify the diverging strategic consequences of the same actor characteristics within the formation phase and the final coalition.

Qualified Pivotality as a Function of the Party System

The definition of pivotality that is used here is intended to capture a party’s numerically-based strategic advantage which is a) clearly separable from a party’s centrality, b) broad enough to be applied cross-nationally to different types of party systems and coalitions and c) sufficiently differentiated to correctly assign strategic advantages which small parties receive in a given party configuration. To do so, the concept of ‘qualified pivotality’ is introduced which, in principle, is applicable to actors of any size. A small party’s ‘qualified pivotality’ indicates a situation in which a small party possesses strategic advantages because it is visibly the most preferred coalition partner for a bigger party and cannot be substituted by an ‘equivalent option’. This presupposes a particular numerical status commonly referred to as pivotality but also a special position in relation to the other small parties in the system. In short, a small party possesses the status of qualified pivotality when, first, it can numerically complete a majority by joining a big partner or a clearly coherent, distinct bloc, and, second, there is no numerically and ideologically equivalent
actor in the system. On this basis a small actor is able to demand high concessions.

But which strategic advantages does ‘qualified pivotality’ capture which the conventional notion of pivotality cannot? Looking at the first part of the definition, one core feature is indeed numerical pivotality defined in game-theoretical terms: An actor is pivotal if, with its support, another party or a set of parties can complete a majority coalition (i.e. Laver and Schofield 1986; Shapley and Shubik 1954). Big parties usually prefer small coalition partners to numerically stronger ones since they are likely to have much more influence within a coalition: clearly, they dominate their partner in terms of seats and this increases their coalition weight. This criterion can be specified referring to Laver and Schofield’s (1990: 172) suggestion that a big party tends to represent the main weight of a future coalition to which a small party is ‘added’.16 Expressed differently, in concentrated party systems ‘junior’ parties are usually invited to join a coalition (Lees 2001: 127). Pivotality also provides strategic advantages when it goes hand in hand with a bargaining situation of fairly low complexity, ideal-typically a bilateral exchange between the two future coalition partners. These advantages flow from the numerical, not the ideological position of the respective party. The bargaining situation can be easily exploited in terms of policy and portfolios, because coalition participation is virtually secure.17 The second part of the definition centres around the concept of ‘equivalence’ which alters the weight of a party considerably and qualifies the conventional pivotality definition further. When a big party can choose between two small and, in its view, equivalent partners,18 it can considerably lower the concessions towards these potential partners since it can threaten each one with its rival. The advantage of each small actor in the system thereby vanishes.

The immediate question is then whether an actor can gain such a pivotal status within party systems with a high number of parties. One could, for instance, argue that in each formation process the last actor joining a coalition and completing the majority possesses the status of qualified pivotality. In contrast, the proposed definition suggests that small actors are not in a good position to extract high concessions in a very complex bargaining configuration. Given high fragmentation, actors often do not have either much security in advance about whether they can participate in government at all, or about which kind of other parties will join. Hence an actor’s bargaining weight – as opposed to mere size – can be expected to lose importance with increasing complexity of the configuration (Carroll et al. 2004: 12). Most importantly, parties have to formulate their demands right at the beginning of the formation process in order to work out which coalitions are feasible and acceptable in terms of payoff distribution. When a small actor realises that it ‘completes’ a majority only at the very end of coalition bargaining, it cannot simply change its original demands, since these demands represented the basis for the offer to join in the first place.19
And since parties anticipate the necessity to shift from competitive formation bargaining to a comparatively more co-operative mode within the coalition, already during the formation phase they need to present themselves as reliable.

Consequently, pivotal actors are more likely within systems with low fragmentation and, in addition, when coalition bargaining is clearly directed towards forming a majority government since the format of the party system and the government format tend to be related. Surplus coalitions provide a comfort zone for the senior partner who does not depend on each single partner to pass legislation. In particular, given segmentation on the society level, simple majority support is usually a minimum, not the endpoint, of coalition formation (Luther and Deschouwer 1999). Clearly, this considerably weakens the small participants since they become substitutable. Also when minority governments represent the dominant cabinet type in a system, qualified pivotality is certainly possible, but rare, especially when the minority government is located in the middle of the ideological spectrum. Despite the striking differences of these two configurations, both share a tendency towards multilateral, inclusive bargaining, be it during coalition formation or when forming legislative majorities on an ad hoc basis.

In sum, the status of qualified pivotality implies the following strategic advantages during the formation phase: high security for entrance, a clear power-distribution and high process predictability. Although these aspects seem to support each other, only the latter two are directly linked to the party system in place. It will be shown later that also in a bargaining situation of low complexity a party can be unsure whether it will be able to enter government, while it can be fairly sure of this in a complex configuration, as is often the case for central parties which are dealt with in the following section.

Centrality as Political Space

In contrast to the definition of ‘qualified pivotality’, centrality is easier to grasp. There are two prominent possibilities to conceptualise this property (Daalder 1983) – either as a space (Hazan 1997; Keman 1994) or alternatively as a point, more concretely the inclusion of the median MP on the left–right continuum (Roozendaal 1990, 1992). The strategic advantage of occupying a central position is obviously the leeway to coalesce with parties on the left and on the right. Looking at concrete party systems, several parties frequently possess this freedom, not only the one positioned at the median (Hazan 1997; Keman 1994; Krouwel 2005). Although centrality can gain importance the more the non-central and central parties are distanced from each other, polarisation is not introduced as an additional variable. Overall, increasing fragmentation of the party system (referred to indirectly when assessing the pivotal status of actors) and increasing distances of the poles from the middle point of the system tend to
be related. Also, cross-national differences in terms of polarisation tend to be rather moderate (Hazan 1997: 42).

In sum, during formation centrality generates two strategic advantages independent of the given bargaining context: first, due to its ideological profile a small central party has more than one government option, and, second, it is likely to secure entry into government.\(^{21}\)

A Typology on Small Parties’ Weight Share

Having defined the two constitutive factors, Figure 2 summarises the hypotheses about small parties’ relative weight, comparing parties with different properties and the respective party’s status within the party system and the coalition.

In the formation phase, a small party’s capacity to maximise concessions results from the number of coalition alternatives, the security to enter government and two features that are directly linked to the complexity of the bargaining system: the clear assignment of bargaining power to each party in the system and the predictability of the formation process. In the coalition phase, parties’ weights are shaped by the presence of alternative coalition partners in the party system affecting the costs of break-out, the concessions received during coalition formation and the internal interaction mode (bargaining or hierarchy).

The interaction mode is crucially shaped by the number and the relative sizes of coalition partners. The more coalition partners there are, the smaller the relative size differences between them and the less likely hierarchical interaction between weak and strong partners tends to be. This mechanism is closely linked to the findings on coalition governance pointing at the crucial difference between collegial versus hierarchical cabinets (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993; Müller and Strøm 2003; Woldendorp et al. 2000). The fact that meetings between ministers belonging to the same parties take place frequently in most political systems (Andeweg 1993: 33) points to the connection between the party constellation and the type of government. Correspondingly, Frognier (1993: 51) points out that hierarchical arrangements are less likely to prevail the more numerous the coalition parties are. Finally, prime ministers are more prepared to seek consensus when the number of government parties increases and when facing minority status in parliament (Frognier 1993: 61–2). While the interaction mode indicated by the presence or absence of qualified pivotality does not fully capture the ‘institutional dimension’ of cabinet governance, the close connection between intra-coalitional dynamics and its implications for a more or less collegial type of government allows for the restriction of the typology to the two core criteria.\(^{22}\)

In Figure 2, each advantage is counted the same way (indicated by either + in the case of its presence or – in the case of its absence). The only exception is made regarding the relative strength of the concessions
received during formation bargaining. Based on the assessment of the four constellations in the formation phase, I distinguish between high concessions (++++), considerable (++--), medium (+--), and low concessions (---) that a party can exploit within government. This allows for a more precise distinction between constellations in the coalition phase and for a more adequate consideration of the relevance of the formation outcome in the post-formation phase. Results are summed up in an overall characterisation of each party type’s strategic potential ranging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formation weight</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pivotal/central party</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Pivotal/central party</td>
<td>Non-pivotal/central party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple options +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple options +</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High security for entrance +</td>
<td></td>
<td>High security for entrance +</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear power-distribution +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear power-distribution –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High process-predictability +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low process predictability –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High weight 100</td>
<td>Medium weight 50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formation weight</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pivotal/non-central party</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pivotal/non-central party</td>
<td>Non-pivotal/non-central party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One option -</td>
<td></td>
<td>One option –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High security for entrance +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low security for entrance –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear power-distribution +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unclear power-distribution –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High process-predictability +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Low process predictability –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerable weight 75</td>
<td>Low weight 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition weight</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pivotal/central party</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Pivotal/central party</td>
<td>Non-pivotal/central party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives +</td>
<td></td>
<td>Alternatives +</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong formation concessions +++</td>
<td></td>
<td>Medium formation concessions + –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal hierarchy –</td>
<td></td>
<td>Internal bargaining +</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High weight 80</td>
<td>Considerable weight 60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition weight</th>
<th>Centrality</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pivotal/non-central party</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Pivotal/non-central party</td>
<td>Non-pivotal/non-central party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No alternatives -</td>
<td></td>
<td>No alternative -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considerable formation Concessions ++ –</td>
<td></td>
<td>Weak formation concessions – –</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal hierarchy –</td>
<td></td>
<td>Internal bargaining +</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium weight 40</td>
<td>Low weight 20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weight categories – high, considerable, medium, low – to compare across party types. Percentages of given advantages – 0 – 100 – to compare each party type across the two phases.

FIGURE 2
A TYPOLOGY ON SMALL PARTIES’ FORMATION AND COALITION WEIGHT

134 N. Bolleyer
from high to low weight. In order to compare each configuration’s weight across the formation and coalition phases (instead of comparing across party configurations), the capacity to defend own policy preferences is indicated by the percentage of possible advantages which this type of small party is able to exploit in each phase.

Before discussing each configuration one by one, two core insights revealed by Figure 2 can be summed up: comparing across party types, the overall weight estimates show that pivotal/central actors are likely to be in the most advantageous position (high weight) and non-pivotal/non-central actors in the most disadvantageous position (low weight) during both phases. In contrast, the mixed types – pivotal/non-central and non-pivotal/central parties – switch relative positions across the two phases. Without centrality, qualified pivotality is expected to lead to a comparably stronger position during coalition formation – the weight estimate indicates ‘considerable weight’ in the formation phase, while only ‘medium weight’ in the coalition phase. Centrality without qualified pivotality leads to a ‘medium formation weight’, but at the same time to a ‘considerable coalition weight’.

Comparing across phases instead of party types, the figures capturing the percentages of potential advantages a party is able to exploit indicate that despite occupying the strongest position, pivotal/central parties lose weight from the formation to the coalition phase (from 100 to 80) as a consequence of intra-coalitional dynamics. Due to the same factor, non-pivotal/non-central parties slightly improve their situation from formation to post-formation (from 0 to 20). In operational terms this leads to the following expectations: Comparing the percentage of a party’s policy goals in the programme which find their way into a coalition agreement (as the output of the formation phase) with the percentage of policies in the agreement which is transferred into legislation (as the output of the coalition phase), regarding the pivotal/central case, the percentage of ‘surviving policies’ should be higher in the formation than in the coalition phase, while in the non-pivotal/non-central case it should be the other way around. The same situation shows in the comparison of the shifts within the pivotal/non-central and the non-pivotal/central category. Also here the capacity to defend own policies should decrease in the former and increase in the latter case when leaving the formation and entering the coalition phase.

Discussing the advantages and disadvantages related to the different configurations, we start with the small parties that are assigned a high weight, those which combine qualified pivotality and centrality. These actors are likely to be indispensable for the formation of two coalitions and can press effectively for high concessions. Since qualified pivotality normally occurs in only weakly fragmented systems, this implies a clearly restricted number of feasible coalitions, hence, the power distribution is clear and process predictability is high. Such a context provides good opportunities for a small actor to maximise its payoff because coalition participation is
already quite secure; hence, it can focus on the conditions under which it is willing to participate and push concessions to a maximum without risking government participation itself. Such concessions can, concretely, mean structures to reduce the dominance that results from the partner’s numerically superior status, e.g. clear provisions within the coalition treaty trying to assure that core policies of the small partner’s programme will be realised or procedural mechanisms for conflict resolution.

Although a pivotal/central actor can achieve quite an extensive payoff due to its high formation power, its weight decreases within the coalition (100 to 80). Since the number of coalition partners is limited, fluid internal bargaining is less likely than within complex coalitions. Instead, a hierarchical relation between partners due to the considerable differences in their seat shares can be expected in contrast to multi-party coalitions in which the seat distribution is more even. Hence, although formation power is extensive, a pivotal/central actor has to anticipate that its intra-coalitional position will not be as strong. Of course, it can still use the threat to change the coalition but, as mentioned before, this tool is difficult to use effectively. In addition, it is not clear whether a break-out will really pay off. The German Liberals (FDP), for instance, tends to suffer at the polls when it defects from an established coalition (Lees 2001: 131).23

The weakest actors are naturally non-pivotal/non-central small parties. Their government participation is unclear. Usually they have only limited coalition potential since they are located on the left or the right side of the ideological spectrum, which decreases their formation power during government negotiations. For instance, strong central parties with a bilateral opposition can deliberately choose the coalition partners demanding the fewest concessions. The capacity to affect the final outcome is assumed to decrease with the increasing fragmentation and the increasing fluidity of the bargaining situation, which renders each party’s bargaining power unclear. Moreover, the coalition power of these parties is limited. Since they gained little during formation, they possess only few resources in terms of portfolios and substantial concessions.

Simultaneously, the advantage of such a configuration is that, given a multi-party coalition as a result of the formation phase, the threat of dominion is reduced. A hierarchical internal mode is thus less likely and the opportunities to affect other parties’ behaviour via argumentation are higher. While they do not possess strategic advantages during formation, they increase weight if they enter government (0 to 20). Compared to non-pivotal/central actors they suffer from one crucial disadvantage: They are much more dependent on the given configuration because it is less likely that they will achieve participation again in the next bargaining round, and face higher pressure to adapt to more moderate positions in order to achieve internal agreement. The strong dependence on the coalition can easily lead to a loss of profile, a low capacity to realise own policies and, consequently, to vote losses at the next elections.
The assessment of weight is more complex for those actors that possess one of the two advantageous properties, because each possesses advantages (or disadvantages) with regard to only one arena. First, the pivotal/non-central parties: As with the situation of a pivotal/central actor, in weakly fragmented party systems the bargaining situation is not very complex (the power distribution is clear and process predictability is high) and a merely pivotal party is likely to be successful in demanding concessions, despite its lack of a central position. Over-proportional payments are crucially important for it because the party’s intra-coalitional position is less advantageous. The typology indicates a weight decrease (75 to 40). The origin of its low coalition power is that its only chance to gain office is when neighbouring parties win. One can expect a hierarchical intra-coalitional mode due to high discrepancies in terms of seats; hence, formation power cannot be transferred proportionally into coalition power. However, this discrepancy is stronger than in the case of a pivotal and also central actor. Due to lacking coalition alternatives, the pressure given to moderate positions in order to ensure internal agreement is considerable. Accordingly, the risk of losing profile and facing electoral punishment is more pronounced. Leaving the coalition to recover in electoral terms is only a short-term solution, since it is very probable that the same coalition will be formed again in the future and the same conflicts will re-occur. The high dependency also implies that it is difficult for the party to make a credible and effective threat to leave the coalition in order to improve its internal position. This necessarily feeds back to a party’s intra-coalitional status, and hence its capacity to push through own policy preferences.

Intra-coalitional weakness is not so problematic for non-pivotal/central parties, which are much more flexible with regard to their potential partners. However, centrality in isolation often occurs in the more fragmented party systems. Such a context supports multilateral formation bargaining with a reduced control potential vis-à-vis the final outcome, in particular the conditions of government participation in terms of concessions. Although centrality makes participation likely, a complex bargaining constellation and an unclear distribution of bargaining power complicates the exploitation of this feature. In short, non-pivotal/central actors have advantages with regard to participation, but not to payoff-distribution leading to a medium amount of resources a party can use in government.

Inside government, a hierarchical mode is likely to be prevented by rather numerous partners and the absence of one actor with an overarching weight in terms of seats. While the potential to use their formation power is effectively limited, given multilateral internal bargaining and a moderate position within the coalition, such a party can be expected to increase its coalition weight compared with its formation weight (50 to 60). This is because a complex bargaining situation is internally an advantage while it is a disadvantage during formation. Moreover, compared to pivotal/non-central actors, leaving the coalition is much less costly because the party
might participate in a different constellation after the next bargaining round, which reduces intra-governmental adaptation pressure and with it the costs of break-out.

Small Parties’ Strategic Positions in European Parliamentary Democracies

So far, the typology has presupposed a one-dimensional policy space which leads us to the discussion of a problem confronting any typological approach on party systems. Laver and Hunt (1992) showed that on the whole two dimensions of conflict structure the competition in most political systems while the parties are normally located in the same way on both dimensions. Since the status of qualified pivotality is assigned to a small party primarily based on numerical criteria, we can assume that if a small party holds pivotality on the left–right dimension, it will do so on the second dimension as well. Although it is possible to draw basic conclusions about the impact of parties based on their ideological position and their numerical strength recurring in a one-dimensional scheme, some core information gets lost when ignoring that a small party might gain additional weight through the occupation of the median on the second ideological dimension constitutive for the party system. This said, it is nevertheless argued that centricity on the second dimension does not compensate for non-centrality on the left–right continuum since the second dimension (be it, for instance, foreign policy or the anti-clerical/pro-clerical divide) tends to have implications for fewer issues than the left–right dimension when it comes to governing. Moreover, the left–right axis can still be regarded as the dimension of party competition which tends to structure voters’ orientations to a stronger degree which necessarily affects a party’s strategic position. Consequently, whenever a big party faces two small parties as potential partners, each occupying a central position on one dimension, it is assumed that the left–right dynamics will prevail in formation bargaining, hence the central party on the left–right dimension will be preferred as a coalition partner. Accordingly, small parties will be classified regarding their position on the left–right dimension. At the same time, their ideological position on the second dimension will be indicated in order to get insights into how this feature is distributed in relation to the two major criteria.

To assess small parties’ strategic potentials, it is most appropriate to specify party size in relation to the particular party system in which they are embedded. To do so, parties are defined as small if they hold 100/N per cent of the parliamentary seats or less – N being the number of parties gaining parliamentary representation. In order to demonstrate the heuristic value of the proposed criteria, Figure 3 classifies 36 small parties in nine Western parliamentary democracies since the late 1970s according to their centrality and qualified pivotality. To assess parties’ strategic positions, I refer to data provided by Müller and Strøm (2003). While pivotality can be easily assessed based on the parliamentary seat distribution after each election,
order to assess small parties’ centrality two steps are necessary. As a first step, a small party is classified as central when it included the median legislator. Since the ideological centre space can be occupied by several parties, in a second step, I classify those small parties as central which do not hold the median legislator but are considered as centrally located by works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Qualified pivotality</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High formation and coalition weight</td>
<td>Medium formation and considerable coalition weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Free Democratic Party (Germany, 1976–94, median on the foreign policy dimension)</td>
<td>Free Democratic Party (Germany, 1994–98, median on the foreign policy dimension)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Centre Party (Norway, 1977–2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom Party of Austria (1983–99)</td>
<td>People’s Union (Belgium, 1979–99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-central</th>
<th>Considerable formation and medium coalition weight</th>
<th>Low formation and coalition weight</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese Communist Party (1985–95; 2002–05)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Party (Ireland, 1977–81)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchic People’s Party (Portugal, 1979–83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greens (Germany, 1983–90), Alliance ‘90 (Germany, 1990–99), Alliance ‘90/Greens (Germany, 1994–2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Democratic Party (Germany, 1998–2002, no median on the second dimension since 1998)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany, 1990–2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Alternative (Austria, 1987–2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Party of Austria (1979–83)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Democrats (Ireland, 1987–2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Democracy Party (Sweden, 1991–94)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Party-Communist (Sweden, 1977–2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Socialists (Denmark, 1979–88; 1994–2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress Party (Denmark, 1979–2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemish Ecologists (Belgium, 1981–99)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecolo (Belgium, 1981–99)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemish Bloc (Belgium, 1979–99)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Party of the Netherlands (1977–86)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:

1 CPP did not enter parliament in 1994.
2 The CD did not enter parliament in 2001.
3 In the 1999 election the Freedom Party of Austria received as many seats as the Austrian People’s Party.
4 This party only gained representation twice and had less than 2% of the seats. Yet it participated in government and therefore has been included.
5 The LS did not enter parliament until the election in 1994.
6 The Progress Party did not enter parliament in 2001.
7 Since 1989 CPN, PSP, EVP and PPR merged into Groen Links.
applying a spatial conception of centrality (Green-Pedersen 2004; Hazan 1997; Krouwel 2005) which is additionally backed up by existing case study literature (Müller and Strøm 2003). Whenever a small party occupies the median on the second policy dimension, this is indicated in brackets.25

Figure 3 clearly indicates that small parties’ strategic advantages are very unevenly distributed across European party systems. By far the most parties fall into the non-pivotal/non-central category. Given that this group of small parties is assumed to have the hardest time to realise own policy goals, the empirical distribution of small parties re-emphasises the necessity to consider the problem of transferring party pledges into government policy from an actor-centred perspective: Indeed, a big party can be equally non-central and non-pivotal. Yet despite the resulting disadvantages, after having entered government, it is much easier for a big party to push through its policy preferences than for a small one. Consequently, the latter’s calculations when assessing the merits and perils of government participation will look considerably different.

In six of the nine party systems small parties could occupy a pivotal status at certain points in time – with or without being central on the left–right dimension. They mostly – albeit not always – occurred in concentrated party systems. The mapping of parties indicates that the theoretically very favourable position of qualified pivotality is empirically as hard to acquire as to maintain. In fact, where small parties flourish, their strategic potential declines. Following Mair’s distinction between ‘large’, ‘medium’ and ‘small party systems’, each characterised by parties of corresponding size (Mair 1991: 47–8), small parties tend to gain strategically in the former and to lose in the latter.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the two parties which maintained a pivotal/non-central status for the longest period, the Austrian Freedom Party and the Irish Labour Party, have occupied the median on the second policy dimension constitutive for their respective party systems. In ‘small’ or ‘medium party systems’, predominantly populated by non-pivotal small parties, as in Sweden, Norway or the Netherlands, it is big parties which occupy this position. The German Free Democrats and the Portuguese Democratic Renewal Party as pivotal/central actors occupied the median on both dimensions. Following Figures 2 and 3, pivotal/non-central parties are expected to do worse than the pivotal/central cases both during formation and in government irrespective of their positions on the second dimension. Still, the observation that pivotal/non-central parties tend to occupy such a median position, while non-pivotal/central parties do not, is telling: Conceptually, it re-emphasises the need to keep centrality and qualified pivotality separate in order to identify how different sets of features are related. Substantially, it allows for the interpretation that the presence of this ideological advantage might facilitate the maintenance of a pivotal status over the course of several elections.
This is crucial since only four of 36 parties could occupy a pivotal/central position and did so often only for a short period. In Sweden and in Norway, which have rather fragmented party systems, the strategic advantage resulting from qualified pivotality was lost after the following election and the parties returned into the non-pivotal/central category. In these two contexts the formation of minority governments of the biggest party in the system occurs regularly, making it more difficult for small parties to exploit their strategically favourable position than in systems in which majority governments are the rule. The German Free Democrats, in contrast, could profit from both advantages, qualified pivotality and centrality, for a considerable time span having been decisive for several minimum winning coalitions on both sides of the ideological spectrum. However, after the Greens had entered the Bundestag and the German party system developed from a ‘two-and-a-half’ party system format towards moderate pluralism, first the Free Democrats lost their pivotal and afterwards their central status. Following the theoretical arguments put forward, such status changes indicated by small parties travelling from one category to the other are expected to show in changing rates of government participation, and in case of entry, in the changing amounts of formation concessions and policy achievements in government.

Conclusion

Together with the various hypotheses that have been proposed here, the classification in Figure 3 provides the starting point to analyse small parties’ strategic capacities to defend and realise policy goals more systematically than has been done so far. The typology offers several comparative perspectives: 1) the comparison between small parties’ weights within different party systems; 2) the comparison between the weight of small parties that occupy different positions within the same party system 3) the comparison between the formation and the coalition weight of the same party and 4) the comparison of the same party’s different weights when it changes its strategic position over time. Confronting the abstract categories with the empirical mapping of its constitutive variables demonstrates the advantages of typologies: they bring a wide range of experience under relatively few headings and provide a summary from which we can proceed to a detailed differentiation of political phenomena (Smith 1979).

On a more general level, this article has put forward four arguments. First, there is the need to separate coalitions analytically as an arena of interaction from the parliamentary party system when analysing actors’ strategic choices, a perspective that is not very prominent in the current literature. The processes that occur within a coalition are as crucial as the coalition bargaining leading to this constellation in the first place, a conviction that is already reflected in the growing empirical literature on the mechanisms that structure supposedly stable coalitions internally. These
processes are difficult to conceptualise and even more difficult to analyse but the results justify the efforts.

Second, the typology presented above indicates that the strategic capacities of small parties are heavily affected when joining a coalition. This seems self-evident. However, after having qualified numerical pivotality in such a way as to realistically expect a bargaining advantage for a small party during coalition formation flowing from it, the concept implies that the final coalition is likely to strengthen the already dominant position of the bigger partner. This conclusion is only possible because it is defined as a function of the party system analysed, which directly affects the cabinet types that are likely to follow, a conceptual decision that considers ‘party’ not only as a ‘strategic actor’ but also as a ‘part’.

Third, a comparative analysis of parties’ problems of goal co-ordination can profit from systematically linking the actors’ own characteristics (‘smallness’ or, as a possible alternative, ‘newness’) with central aspects of their structural environment (‘party system’ and ‘coalition’). This is because both sets of factors directly affect the respective actors’ cost–benefit calculations.

Finally, the strategy of focusing on specific types of parties facilitates the formulation of consistent cross-national claims, which are sufficiently differentiated to link existing case studies and to guide future comparative work. The classification of small parties delivers clear expectations about different parties’ capacity to defend and realise core policy commitments during coalition formation and in coalition government – a core question for future party research and a particular challenge for small parties, since for most of them the journey from party pledge to government policy is likely to be a long one.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on my MA thesis submitted at the University of Mannheim. My major thanks go to Peter Graf Kielmansegg, my teacher and supervisor during my time in Mannheim. Many other people helped to improve the manuscript: I am grateful to André Bächtiger, Evelyn Bytzek, Jonathan Hopkin, Matthias Lehnert, Otto Leirbukt, Peter Mair, Bernhard Miller and Diana Panke as well as the two anonymous reviewers. All remaining errors are mine.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, ‘party system’ refers to the parliamentary party system only.
2. The major divide in this strand is between policy-blind approaches that refer to size as the main determinant (Riker 1962) on the one hand, and policy-based approaches that refer to the ideological compatibility of political coalitions on the other (de Swaan 1973). Several efforts have been made to combine both factors. Still, one factor usually dominates the other.
3. Parties are understood as government parties if they hold ministerial posts. Accordingly, parties are understood as part of the opposition if they do not do so also when they support the government in the passage of legislative proposals.

4. Anti-system parties are an exception. Yet they represent only a small minority.

5. Either heterogeneous coalitions will not form or will be chronically unstable.

6. As an exception, Bartolini (1998) does so in one of his contributions to party system change. He points out the necessity to distinguish coalition potential from governmental power. When assessing governmental power he differentiates between government participation (yes/no), the coalition format and the intra-coalitional status of a party (leading, equal or junior position) and ranks parties’ share of power according to these factors’ respective configurations. Yet he does not systematically consider actor-specific differences in the capacity to translate coalition potential in governmental power. Instead, factors which intervene between coalition and governmental power are regarded as idiosyncratic and short-term elements (Bartolini 1998: 55).

7. The table only includes approaches in which ‘size’ plays a crucial role for power distribution. On the whole, theories that assume policy-oriented actors do not deal with internal power distribution because they predict the formation of an ideologically homogenous, hence stable coalitions which ex ante implicitly excludes the topic of intra-coalitional power distribution. However, there are exceptions, e.g. Budge and Keman (1990).

8. A redefinition of the concept of pivotality follows below.

9. Agrarians are an exception: they would not participate without the ministry of agriculture and fisheries (Budge and Keman 1990: 159).

10. Note that in order to include systems in which minority governments are common, the following categories do not presuppose any stable executive support in the legislature but can also refer to legislative coalitions. In democracies with majority cabinets, it suffices to specify the weight of actors with reference to exclusively executive coalitions, since stable legislative support is assumed to be a consequence; see, for a comparative analysis of party discipline, Sieberer (2006). In contrast, in minority parliamentarism, legislative support has to be built up anew each time when a draft is introduced, since legislative coalitions can be composed of different fractions from bill to bill (Bolleyer 2001: 1530–1). Accordingly, an actor does not need to be part of a stable government coalition in order to possess ‘coalition power’. Although the policy impact of a support party is less stable over time, hence less secure, it gains freedom from being blamed for unpopular government policies.

11. Most of the time government participation leads to electoral losses for the respective parties. An examination of coalition governments in 13 countries has shown that 62 per cent of the governing parties lost votes in the following elections (Müller and Strom 2003).

12. An additional proxy could be the number of procedural rules for conflict management in the coalition treaty which is of particular relevance for small partners regarding issues that could not be settled during formation or that become contested in government although there has been agreement during formation. Empirical research indicates that coalition agreements have institutionalised as a part of government formation in most Western European countries with coalition governments. Only in countries with frequent minority cabinets are agreements less established. Albeit varying considerably in length, and regarding their content, policies form usually over 90 per cent of the commitments. Most crucially, due to time constraints party leaders tend to concentrate on issues that divide them. In Belgium and Dutch agreements, explicit commitments were frequent, where differences appeared easy to split, while implicit compromises were made when party principles such as moral issues were involved (Timmermans 2003: 13–14; 133–4).

13. For a detailed discussion of possibilities for operationalisation see Leirbukt (2004).

14. A direct change of the government coalition is only possible when there is no rule that demands that government dissolution be followed immediately by new elections.

15. Parties do not only strive for electoral success but also for the support of their members, who contribute to them financially and are eager to see party policy realised.
Accordingly, Warwick found that large parties tend to be assigned the formateur status since the closer a party is to majority status, the less need it has for partners (Warwick 1996: 474). Since small parties usually cannot profit from this advantage, the role of the formateur is not further discussed since the typology focuses on differences between types of small parties.

Empirical findings hint in the same direction: Studies on portfolio allocation suggest that small parties are proportionally 'overpaid', yet only if the number of coalition partners is small. That is, with an increasing number of coalition partners, the observed overpayment in ministries vanishes (Browne and Franklin 1973; Browne and Frendreis 1980).

Empirical findings show that big parties are not oriented towards minimising the seats of a future coalition as some coalition theories propose (Riker 1962). Otherwise small actors would need an identical seat share in order to count as equivalent.

Fragmented party systems with strongly bipolar dynamics can decrease complexity considerably since parties clearly associate with a bloc. Yet the pressure to take sides affects centrally located parties as well. Parties cannot exploit their middle position because it is constitutive for bipolar systems that parties need to associate with one of the two blocs.

Roozendaal emphasised the advantage of occupying a central position. At the same time, he criticised the concept of the central player because it also identified small parties as central, which were – according to him – too weak to represent 'real centre parties' (Roozendaal 1990: 331). Therefore he extended the concept by the criterion of numerical strength which excluded any small parties ex ante.

Again, a party can also be quite secure to enter government when having only one coalition option, as is the case with pivotal/non-central actors.

Another factor influencing internal dynamics is the degree of ministerial autonomy indicating the degree of collectivity (or segmentation) of cabinet decision-making (Thiébault 1993). This aspect indirectly affects the relevance of collegiality. One might argue that the more decisions are taken by individual ministers and are not taken into cabinet the less a small party needs to fear the bigger partners' dominance and the less important is the degree of collegiality. However, according to experts, a division of labour can be found with regard to routine decisions but barely exists on major policy issues (Strøm and Müller 1999b: 274–5).

This implies that small parties are not considered to be less responsible for the maintenance of the coalition than their big partners.

Only those parties are considered that held on average 2 per cent of the seats over the elections under consideration. Exceptions are made in cases where parties have entered government despite minimal size or punctual occurrence.

Since the works using a spatial conception of centrality refer to a one-dimensional policy space, small parties can be only indicated as central on the second dimension when occupying a median position as indicated by Müller, Strøm and their associates (Müller and Strøm 2003).

References


