Coalition and minority government

Many countries using parliamentary government elect their legislature by proportional representation, resulting in a situation where no single party gains a majority. Even single-member plurality elections no longer routinely deliver a majority government. In this situation, the tight link between the election result and government formation weakens, and government takes one of three main forms:

- a majority coalition in which two or more parties with a majority of seats join together in government. This is the most common form of rule across continental Europe; it characterizes Belgium, Finland, Germany, and the Netherlands in particular.

- a minority coalition or alliance. These are formal coalitions or informal alliances between parties which, even together, still lack a parliamentary majority. Minority coalitions have predominated in Denmark since the 1980s.

- a single-party minority government formed by the largest party. Single-party minority cabinets are common in Norway and Sweden.

Figure 16.3 shows the party composition of West European governments in the second half of the twentieth century. Majority coalitions were most frequent, followed by single-party minority governments, minority coalitions, and single-party majority governments.

Through both its statements and its silences, the constitution helps to account for these contrasts. Many constitutions explicitly specify the hurdles a new government must clear before taking office. As Box 16.4 shows, some constitutions (including most recent ones) demand that the legislature demonstrates majority support for a new government through a formal vote of investiture. Clearly, this requirement for a positive investiture vote by the assembly encourages the formation of a majority coalition with an agreed programme.

However, some constitutions do not require a majority vote for a new administration. In Sweden, for example, the proposed prime minister can form a government as long as no more than half the members of the Riksdag object (Bergman, 2000). The requirement is to avoid majority opposition rather than to command majority assent. In other countries, the constitution is entirely silent on the procedure for approving a new government. In these circumstances, the new administration takes office, and continues in power, until and unless it is voted down by the assembly. These less demanding conventions – a negative investiture vote, or none at all – facilitate the formation and survival of minority governments.

However, minority administrations often receive the support of other parties in parliament which, even outside office, can continue to influence legislation through their presence on parliamentary committees. These parliamentary support parties may even make an agreement with the governing party to offer their support in specific policy areas (Bale and Bergman, 2006). Such circumstances (which have become the norm in India, for instance) constitute a parliamentary coalition without a governing coalition. Some Green parties have succeeded in influencing environmental policy by this route.