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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Political analysts often assume that the most effective form of parliamentary government is a single-party majority one or, in its absence, a coalition government that relies on a majority of its co-partisans in parliament. Despite the fact that a third of parliamentary governments are minority governments, they are often treated as bit players in the world of governance: ignored or dismissed as outliers. When discussed, they are commonly derided as weak and ineffective. But the latter is not always true. In fact, it may not even be mostly true. The track record of minority governments in Spain in recent years, which this book scrutinizes, shows that minority governments can be as effective at governance as single-party majority governments.

We know little about why some minority parliamentary governments perform better than others. Most of what we do know comes from studies of the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, where minority governments are frequent. While they have much to teach us, these countries have comparatively uncomplicated democratic political systems. They are small unitary states in which Left-Right ideological issues primarily dominate competition between multiple national, what I call *statewide*, political parties (Arter 2008, 56; Persson and Wiberg 2011). This raises the question of whether the lessons learned from the Scandinavian countries can account for government performance in a wide variety of democratic regimes. Therefore, we can potentially advance our understanding of minority governments a great deal by examining them in more complex institutional and partisan environments. Spain represents such a case.

At first glance, Spain’s heavily decentralized political system with 17 powerful regional governments and a variety of regionally-based parties—which advocate greater regional benefits, autonomy, or independence from the Spanish state—might appear to exacerbate the challenges
of minority government because of the dispersion of political authority and the apparent contentiousness of party competition. However, it is not despite these traits that Spain’s minority governments can govern; rather, this book makes the counterintuitive argument that it is in part because of them. Spain’s multilevel state and multidimensional party system—in which statewide and regional parties compete on Left-Right and territorial issues—shape the parties’ goals in ways that make them reconcilable and increase the opportunities for political exchange.

The comparative performance of distinct types of democratic regimes is a fundamental concern of students of democratic politics and is highly relevant to practical politics because performance directly impacts citizens (e.g., Cheibub 2007; Lijphart 1999; Linz and Valenzuela 1994; Skach 2005; Stepan and Skach 1993, among many others). A central debate centers on the merits and defects of parliamentary, presidential, and semipresidential systems. Within these regime categories, single-party versus coalition governments and majority versus minority governments are frequently examined to gauge their relative impact on government stability, legislative success and effectiveness, policy outcomes, and regime survival.

*Why Minority Governments Work* advances our understanding of how well minority parliamentary governments govern; how they build parliamentary majorities (Strom 1990a, 93); and, most importantly, why some perform better than others. It offers an explanatory framework for understanding minority government performance that improves upon existing hypotheses and can be used to understand a wide variety of cases. The framework includes the opportunities and constraints created by political institutions, the reconcilability of party goals, and the contingent partisan bargaining circumstances, all of which are understood through a multilevel perspective where relevant. The utility of the framework is demonstrated through an in-depth empirical examination of governments in Spain, and Spain is placed in comparative perspective.

Minority parliamentary governments are not unusual phenomena. Rather, they are very common. A parliamentary regime is one in which the government is responsible to an elected parliament and can be removed from office with a vote of no confidence (Müller, Bergman, and Strom 2008, 4). A minority government is one that comprises ministers from one or more political parties and one in which the party’s or parties’ legislators do not hold an absolute majority (50% + 1) of the seats in the parliament. Parliamentary regimes (45%) are the most
common regime in democratic political systems (Cheibub 2007, 43).\(^1\) Approximately half of the time (45\%) parliamentary elections produce an outcome where no single party wins a majority of parliamentary seats, typically referred to as a minority *situation*. In 41\% of these cases, a minority government is formed (77). Based on data from the European Representative Democracy project, between 1945 and 2010, 33\% of governments in Europe were minority ones (Andersson, Bergman, and Ersson 2014).\(^2\) According to another estimate, minority governments make up 32.3\% of governments in Western Europe and 41.1\% in Eastern Europe (Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2011, 434).\(^3\)

Given the frequency of minority governments, it is essential to better understand why some minority governments perform better than others. This book examines governing capacity, understood as the government’s ability to make significant, authoritative decisions regarding the country’s public policies. It is gauged in terms of the government’s legislative success in office, the duration of the government and the reason for its termination, and the electoral performance of the incumbent governing party or parties. It focuses on governing capacity in part because minority parliamentary governments are most frequently criticized precisely for having weak governing capacity. Nonetheless, minority parliamentary governments have at times been applauded for other virtues, such as increasing the quality of political debate, strengthening the role of parliament, and boosting representation (see: e.g., Russell 2008), which are not evaluated here.

The central argument of *Why Minority Governments Work* is that the governing capacity of minority governments is shaped by political institutions, the reconcilability of the parties’ goals, and the contingent partisan bargaining circumstances, which impact the government’s bargaining power and the incentives for opposition parties to cooperate or obstruct. Spain’s minority governments work in part because the political institutions and contingent partisan bargaining circumstances tend to strengthen the government’s bargaining position. Moreover, the goals of Spain’s statewide governing parties and regional parties are distinct yet often reconcilable, fostering cooperation during minority governments. In the context of the multilevel state, the statewide governing party can make policy concessions to regional parties in the national parliament where regional parties are policy-seeking and offer office concessions *at the regional level* where regional parties are office-seeking, in exchange for achieving its priority goal of governing Spain.
Why Minority Governments Work

The Performance of Minority Parliamentary Governments in Office

At the time Strøm (1990a, 21) was writing his classic book *Minority Government and Majority Rule*, he noted that conventional wisdom associated minority cabinets “with political malaise, irrationality and poor performance.” He compiled (16–18) myriad negative assessments of minority government related to problems of stability (Von Beyme 1985, 327), efficiency (Linz 1978, 66), and effectiveness. Powell (1982, 142–143) associated two of the three types of minority government in his typology with weak policy capacity. What he labeled a caretaker minority government was seen to be “kept in office as long as it remains passive in policy formation.” Powell viewed what he called preelection caretaker minority government, the category with the largest number of cases, as having limited policy capacity in that the government “does not attempt major policy initiatives.” Johnson (1975, 87) noted that minority parliamentary government is “genuinely weak because it works out its policies alone, pretending as it were that it is a majority government, and it is then always exposed to the risk of defeat. It tends too to be opportunistic, looking for expedients which might lift it out of its minority position.”

The depiction of minority government in political circles was also quite negative. In the Canadian context, as Forsey (1964, 1) colorfully stated, “During the election of April, 1963, Liberal speeches and editorials tended to depict minority government…as a nameless, faceless horror, the political fate that is worse than death.” He also referred to the “popular Canadian notion” of minority government as “incompetent, weak, indecisive, if not worse” (3).

While the portrayals of minority governments have perhaps improved, more recently, Helland (2004, 391) stated: “Minority rule produces weak government.” According to Skach (2005, 12): “The most viable governments in parliamentary systems seem to be majority governments, the least viable minority governments.” In their description of types of semipresidential systems, Colton and Skach (2005, 116) noted: “Divided minority government combines the most problematic kind of presidential government (divided government) with the most problematic kind of parliamentary government (minority government).” In the Spanish political context, then Popular Party opposition leader Mariano Rajoy accused Socialist Party prime ministerial candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, whose government would not have a majority of co-partisans in parliament, of offering a “weak and unstable
government” when Rodríguez Zapatero made his case to be elected in 2004.

Prior to Strøm’s work, little systematic comparative research had been done on minority government. Still today, the bulk of the literature attempts to explain their formation rather than their governing dynamics or performance once in office (Bale, Boston, and Church 2005; Bergman 1995; Crombez 1996; Dodd 1976; Herman and Pope 1973; Laver and Schofield 1998, 88; Laver and Shepsle 1996, 264; Luebbert 1984; Rasch 2011; Reniu i Vilamala 2002; Schofield 1993; Strøm 1990a). While understanding the formation of different types of governments is clearly important, we cannot stop there, particularly in cases of minority government. The point of analyzing government formation is that the type of government and who is in government matters. Yet, the dynamics of governance can change a great deal during minority governments without a change of government.

An example from Spain illustrates this point. In 1993, when the Socialist Party won the parliamentary elections short of an absolute majority, Felipe González was elected prime minister with the votes of his party, those of the Catalan nationalist Convergence and Union, and those of the Basque Nationalist Party, and González formed a single-party minority government. However, when the González government sought allies to pass its first general budget for 1994, the most important piece of legislation a government must pass, the Basque Nationalist Party played hardball, abstaining and voting against the government on occasion. The budget passed, instead, primarily with the support of the Canary Islands Coalition and Convergence and Union. In fact, the Canary Islands Coalition turned out to be as consistent of an ally as the Basque Nationalist Party during the legislature as a whole. Therefore, in order to understand minority governments, we cannot just examine formation; we must also examine what happens once they gain office.

While the literature on minority parliamentary governments in office is still scant, existing research demonstrates that some minority parliamentary governments (within and across countries) perform better than others in terms of their public approval, duration, ability to pass legislation, and manage particular political challenges (Crowley 2003; Elgie and Maor 1992; Green-Pedersen 2001; Strøm 1990a; Strøm, Narud, and Valen 2005). Yet, there is no theory that attempts to explain the variation. There are indeed hypotheses that identify key variables, such as the regularity of minority government (Strøm 1990a); whether the parliamentary regime resembles a majoritarian or consensus institutional model (Cody 2008; Paun 2011); the government’s majority-building
strategies in parliament, that is, whether or not it relies on the formalized support of other parties in parliament (Bale and Bergman 2006b; Chalmers 2009; Herman and Pope 1973; Strøm 1990a); the design of parliamentary rules and procedures that affect the bargaining power of the government (Herman and Pope 1973; Strøm 1990a; Tsebelis 2002); and those based on the parties’ policy goals and positions in parliament and electoral calculations (Bale and Bergman 2006a; Green-Pedersen 2001; Strøm 1990a; Tsebelis 2002).

While these hypotheses offer a useful starting point, they cannot adequately account for the performance of minority governments comparatively because they all focus on political dynamics and institutions at one territorial level—the national one. This is not surprising given that most studies of the performance of minority governments focus on countries with unitary states or where national governance is primarily a national level matter. Therefore, the existing literature is theoretically underdeveloped. Understanding minority governments in general and building theory about them require that we examine minority governments in multilevel states where governance also occurs at the regional level and in multilevel, multidimensional party systems where parties compete at various territorial levels and on Left-Right as well as other prominent sets of issues.

Parliamentary institutions and the weight and policy positions of parties in parliament presumably matter because they impact the bargaining relationship between the government and the opposition parties in parliament. Why Minority Governments Work argues that party strategies and bargaining relationships are also affected by (1) the design of the state—for example, whether a regional tier of government exists, the degree to which the state’s territorial organization and powers are subject to change; (2) competitive party politics at the regional level, where one exists—for example, the alliance patterns and composition of regional governments; (3) the types of party systems, for example, if the party system is primarily one-dimensional or multidimensional and the specific cleavages, whether parties compete at multiple territorial levels; and (4) the political parties’ goals, and, where relevant, their distinct goals in different territorial arenas, for example, in the national and regional arenas.

This book breaks new ground in its examination of minority government performance in conjunction with the territorial distribution of state power and the territorial interests of political parties. Political decentralization in democratic regimes has increased (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010), along with the salience of territorial politics and the
greater success of regional parties (Brancati 2008). Increasingly unitary, centralized states are the outliers. Therefore, we must better understand the impact of multilevel governance, regional parties, and territorial cleavages on national governability (e.g., Alonso 2012; Bermeo 2002; Brancati 2005, 2009; Elias and Tronconi 2011; Lijphart 1977; Stepan 1999). Coalition studies have begun to take multilevel territorial politics seriously; however, to date, these studies have focused on government formation (Falcó-Gimeno and Verge 2013; Reniu i Vilamala 2002; Ţefuriuc 2013).

Explanatory Framework and Research Strategy

Why Minority Governments Work seeks to contribute to the comparative understanding of the performance of minority parliamentary governments and, at the same time, respect the specificities of the Spanish case. These goals are not mutually exclusive.

The book offers an explanatory framework that improves upon existing hypotheses and can be used to understand a wide variety of cases. It builds on the principle that the institutional context in which minority governments come to power is crucially important for their performance once in office. Yet only examining national-level institutions, as has been the norm, does not adequately capture the complexity that can account for minority government performance and is therefore theoretically underdeveloped and insufficient. The framework used here considers national and regional institutions, where they exist, and how they affect parties’ bargaining relationships and incentives to cooperate or obstruct. Since parties must cooperate for minority governments to work, the explanatory framework incorporates an analysis of the reconcilability of the parties’ goals. Its innovation lies in examining party goals in multilevel, multidimensional perspective, where relevant. Multilevel perspective means that it considers party goals at the regional and national levels, where relevant, and the parties’ priority territorial arena, that is, whether they prioritize regional- or national-level politics. Multidimensional perspective means that it considers the number of policy dimensions on which parties compete and how the salience of each for the respective parties and the distance between their positions affect interparty cooperation.

Finally, the framework considers the contingent partisan bargaining circumstances, yet in a way that better captures bargaining conditions in a multilevel state. Prior research has focused on the national parliament, particularly parliamentary arithmetic, the government’s
policy positions vis-à-vis other parties in parliament, and the government’s ability to shift allies. However, minority governments can also be strengthened or weakened by what potential allies want or need in the regional arena. Therefore, the framework includes how bottom-up regional political circumstances, for example, parties’ regional-level office goals, affect bargaining.

*Why Minority Governments Work* demonstrates the utility of the explanatory framework and the causal reasoning behind it through an in-depth empirical examination of several governments in Spain. It systematically explains the strong governing capacity of Spain’s minority governments. Case studies are particularly good for theory development and identifying missing variables, especially those that are unexpected or counterintuitive (George and Bennett 2005; McKeown 2004; Munck 2004). This is because of the researcher’s close analysis and deep knowledge of the case.

The analysis of Spain is solidly grounded in original field research and a rich variety of empirical materials. It is based on more than 50 personal interviews with party leaders, ministers, and parliamentarians, conducted over a three-year period in Madrid and the regions of Catalonia, the Basque Country, and Canary Islands, the three most important regions for understanding minority governments; a newly constructed dataset of approximately 10,000 votes in Spain’s parliament during 15 years of minority governments; a dataset of the types and party composition of regional governments; press accounts; and an array of other primary materials, data, and the secondary literature.

Case studies allow the researcher to carefully trace the causal connections between variables (Ragin 2004). The deep examination of the Spanish case helps ascertain why political actors behave in certain ways in response to particular institutional and partisan circumstances. Any study based on the empirical analysis of a single case must confront the question of generalizability. Therefore, the concluding chapter evaluates the explanatory power of the framework and derives comparative lessons from the Spanish case.

**Spain’s Minority Governments in Comparative Perspective**

Spain is a critical case for advancing the comparative understanding of minority government performance. It is among the European countries with the highest frequency of minority governments. Using data from 1945 to 2010, Spain has the second highest frequency of minority government in Europe, surpassed only by Denmark (see table 1.1).
<table>
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<th>Country</th>
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<th>Minority governments in minority situations (N)</th>
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**Note:** This book considers only 7 of the 11 (63.6%) governments in Spain to be minority ones. The government between 1989 and 1993, while only holding exactly half of the seats, governed with a de facto majority.

**Source:** Data from the European Representative Democracy Data Archive (Andersson, Bergman, and Ersson 2014).
Furthermore, along with Bulgaria, it is the only European country that consistently formed minority governments in minority situations. Since its transition to democracy in the mid-1970s, Spain has not had a national-level coalition government. Between 1977 and 2015, this study considers 7 of Spain’s 12 (58%) governments to be minority ones.  

Spain clearly challenges the depiction of minority governments as weak and ineffective. Spain’s minority governments exhibit stronger governing capacity than the cross-national averages and are comparable to their single-party majority counterparts in Spain, measured in terms of government duration, the government’s ability to pass its legislation, and the incumbent party’s electoral performance. These indicators leave room for policy failures and political mismanagement; yet the important point is that Spain’s minority governments indeed govern.

Spain is an essential case for theory building because its partisan and institutional traits provide fruitful terrain in which to examine the effects of multilevel territorial politics. Existing explanations cannot account for the strong governing capacity of Spain’s minority governments because they concentrate on institutions and partisan dynamics at the national level, and therefore exclude the territorial aspects of politics that are so essential for understanding its minority governments. In this way, the Spanish case has relevance for the typically complex societies and parliamentary regimes outside Western Europe, such as India.

Spain also presents an intriguing puzzle. Despite frequently being known for the contentious aspects of its politics, such as the Catalan and Basque nationalist movements demanding a redefinition of their territories’ relationship with Spain, its minority governments are predominantly supported by regional parties and the governments indeed govern. This book develops the complex territorial and institutional politics that help account for why regional parties challenge the state (Alonso 2012) at the same time that they support its governments.

The empirical analysis focuses on the performance of Spain’s governments between 1982 and 2011. During this period, there were four single-party majority governments (1982–93, 2000–4) and four single-party minority governments, three led by the Spanish Socialist Party (1993–96, 2004–11), and one by the Popular Party (1996–2000). The analysis largely excludes the minority governments of the Union of the Democratic Center during the initial years of democracy (1977–82). There are good theoretical reasons for doing so. First, Spain’s democracy was not consolidated until after 1982. Second, a great deal of inter-party consensus and negotiation characterized Spain’s transition to and
early years of democracy. Finally, some of the institutional arrangements envisioned in the 1978 democratic constitution were still being developed during the legislative period between 1979 and 1982. For example, the establishment of elected regional governments was not completed until 1983, and, the standing orders of the parliament, which had been provisional, were significantly changed in 1982, both of which are critical for the analysis. While the book primarily seeks to shed light on why minority governments in Spain exhibit strong governing capacity in cross-national perspective, it pays some attention to variation across minority governments within Spain.

**Organization of the Book**

The book is divided into three parts. Part I presents the comparative theoretical and empirical terrain and the explanatory framework used to account for governing capacity. Part II provides the empirical analyses to account for the strong governing capacity of Spain’s minority governments. Part III returns to the larger questions about the significance of the book’s findings and the performance of minority parliamentary governments cross-nationally.

In Part I, chapter 2 evaluates how well minority parliamentary governments govern by comparing them to other cabinet types, and dissects the existing literature that seeks to explain minority government performance. Chapter 3 outlines the book’s explanatory approach and summarizes why Spain’s minority governments work. Chapter 4 provides a primer for readers who are less familiar with Spain and describes the critical institutional and partisan traits that are important for the explanatory analysis in Part II.

In Part II, chapter 5 demonstrates the strong governing capacity of Spain’s minority governments comparatively in terms of legislative success, government duration, and electoral performance. It also demonstrates that Spain’s minority governments faced favorable partisan bargaining circumstances in multilevel perspective, though with some variation. Chapter 6 analyzes how Spain’s minority governments build majorities, distinguishing between formalized support agreements and ad hoc alliances. It argues that identifying the government’s majority-building strategy is useful for understanding how minority governments govern, but it does not explain how well. Governing capacity was not contingent on the use of a particular strategy; rather, minority governments in Spain governed effectively using both ad hoc alliances and formalized support agreements. Nor was governing capacity contingent...
on the governing party occupying the central policy position in parliament. It shows that in their efforts to build majorities, all minority governments allied predominantly with regional parties in parliament. In this regard, Spain stands out from other minority governments in Europe.

Chapter 7 evaluates the effects of national-level parliamentary institutions on governing capacity. It argues that parliamentary institutions strengthen the bargaining power of governments in Spain and heighten some opposition parties’ incentives to cooperate with it, thereby making governing in minority easier. Spain’s parliamentary institutions tip the balance more in favor of the government than do the parliamentary institutions in most European democracies, including Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. It also shows that the institutional tools are used more during minority governments than majority governments in Spain, providing evidence of their importance.

Chapter 8 examines the parties’ goals in multilevel perspective. It makes the argument that the reconcilability of party goals affects the governing capacity of minority governments. The chapter analyzes parties’ policy, office, and vote goals at the regional and national levels, and their priority territorial arena. It demonstrates that the relevant regional parties in Spain are policy seeking at the national level, with little to no interest in governing, and office seeking at the regional level, which they prioritize. In contrast, the main statewide parties with the potential to govern prioritize office at both state levels, yet the national arena is more important to them. Therefore, Spain’s statewide governing and regional parties’ goals are distinct yet often reconcilable.

Chapters 9 and 10 analyze how statewide governing and regional parties’ goals are reconciled during national minority governments. A key to understanding the strong governing capacity of Spain’s minority governments is that minority governments can make policy concessions to regional parties in the national parliament where regional parties are policy-seeking and offer office concessions at the regional level where regional parties are office-seeking, in exchange for achieving their priority goal of governing Spain. Chapter 9 documents the exchange of office and policy between the statewide governing party and regional party allies, respectively, at the national level. It shows that policy compromises occur along and across the two primary dimensions of party competition, that is, Left-Right and territorial. The multidimensionality of the party system and the importance of the distinct dimensions of party competition for the parties, in general, facilitate policy compromise between regional and statewide governing parties. Chapter 10
documents the multilevel exchange of office security and governability between statewide and regional parties at their priority level of governance, the national and regional, respectively. It also explores whether office concessions to regional parties provide additional assurance of governing capacity for national minority governments. While not conclusive, the evidence suggests that agreements that contain office benefits may be comparatively more solid.

Chapter 11 evaluates the bottom-up dynamics of governance, that is, how each regional party’s governing status at the regional level affects the bargaining relationship between statewide and regional parties in the national parliament. The analysis shows that a regional party’s governing status at the regional level—particularly whether it is governing, and, if so, in which type of cabinet—affects the level of support it provides to a minority government at the national level. A regional party’s support for the national government is in part dependent upon its own need for political support to govern in its region. The multilevel governing dynamics, generally, provided the national minority government with the flexibility to govern, maintain power, and pass legislation. However, the evidence also suggests that certain regional governing dynamics can complicate the national minority government’s ability to govern.

In Part III, chapter 12 summarizes the book’s findings and derives lessons for understanding minority governments comparatively, including in the Scandinavian countries, Canada and India. The evidence presented throughout the book demonstrates that Spain’s multilevel state and multidimensional party system, with regional parties that operate at both the national and regional levels, fostered governability during periods of national minority government. However, this outcome is not guaranteed. While institutions tend to be sticky, parties’ goals and contingent partisan bargaining circumstances can change more easily, which could weaken a minority government’s ability to govern. The chapter therefore also explores the potential impact of Spain’s current political crisis on governance in the future.
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