

Melanie Müller

Opposition Party Behavior and Minority Government Support

Challenges, Strategies and Trade-Offs



Nomos

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Melanie Müller

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Thank you! Danke! Tack!

The fact that this dissertation was completed is, to a large extent, not my merit. Pursuing higher education in a country that cultivates social stagnation, its outbreak rarely results from an individual achievement but, as in my case, from the support of a multitude of people. First and foremost, I want to thank my parents, without whom I would not have successfully completed high school. Secondly, I would like to thank the Friedrich-Ebert foundation and the European Union, without whose ideational and financial support I would not have been able to study in Germany and Sweden. A special thanks goes to my supervisor Marcus, who contributed significantly to my interest in political science and offered me the freedom to pursue a Ph.D. Many thanks!

Stockholm, 24.10.2021

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1 Introduction

(1) “When majority situations fail to occur, a preference for minority governments will promote the formation of a credible opposition, centripetal competition for votes, and a bipolar, alternational competition for office. The choice of large coalitions, on the other hand, will reinforce tendencies towards government heterogeneity and immobilism, oppositional impotence, and the growth of protest and extremist parties.” (Strøm 1990, 241f)

Governing in consensus democracies requires rational actors cooperating in inclusive coalitions and maximize power-sharing (Lijphart 1999, 33). Power-sharing in broad coalition cabinets bears the advantage of representing heterogeneous societies with diverse opinions (Lijphart 1999, 32f). Government formation processes and majority formation have, however, shown to become more difficult in many European democracies, taking more time while running higher risks of failure (Hellström, Bergman, and Bäck 2018; Müller and Strøm 2006). Especially the increase in societal polarization bears important ramifications regarding the inner workings of consensus democracies. New parties emerged and entered the parliaments. Parliamentary fragmentation and polarization are on the rise in multiple countries (Dalton 2008; 2017) (see Figure 1). Efficiently building stable majority cabinets appears to have become a substantial challenge for many parliaments (Indridason 2011).

Although the Scandinavian political systems, such as those in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, or Finland, do not fully reflect Leijphart's list of criteria for consensus democracy, they are, according to the literature, genuinely consensus-oriented (Anton 1969; 1980; Mattson 2016; Rustow 1955). Yet, these parliaments are also known for very high levels of party polarization (see Figure 1) (Dalton 2008, 907) while still forming highly efficient, long-lived, and extraordinary stable governments (Saalfeld 2008, 331; Strøm 1984; 1986). This is especially surprising since these countries are also known for frequent minority government formation. In addition to the Scandinavian countries, many scholars have highlighted that minority cabinets, in general, are not different from majority cabinets in terms of stability, electoral performance, and efficiency (Artés 2011; Field 2009; 2016; Strøm 1984).

Recent scholars have argued that minority government formation is especially prominent in parliaments with high party system polarization levels and a small number of veto points (Thürk, Hellström, and Döring 2020). When comparing majority with minority governments, Strøm argues that forming a minority government leads to higher levels of votes and office competition and lower levels of pluralism, and also lower chances for extremist party formation (see quotation (1), page 17). He further argues that minority government formation enables opposition parties to become credible and capable actors (see quotation (1), page 17). This is important to note since opposition parties under minority government formation are essential to the stability of a minority government (Christiansen and Pedersen 2014a). Yet no part of the government, these parties are partly responsible for government stability. A government type that sounds very inefficient and crisis-ridden has been thoroughly proven to be the opposite by many scholars (Bergman 1993; 1995; Christiansen 2008; Garritzmann 2017; Strøm 1984; 1986; 1990). By forming cross-parliamentary cooperation (Louwerse et al. 2017), opposition parties frequently support the minority government. The latter trades policy influence for oppositional support in the legislative process with the former one.

This study makes three arguments that will be elaborated and tested to grasp the challenges, strategies, and trade-offs parties under minority government formation face. A) *All* parliamentary parties in political systems with frequent and conscious minority government formation are rational actors interested in stabilizing the political system and, thus, behave in a system-compliant manner. B) Even though parliamentary parties are highly consensual to make the minority government work, they have party-specific interests and goals. C) Explaining opposition party behavior under minority governments must focus on the strategies that opposition parties pursue to fulfill B while not neglecting A.

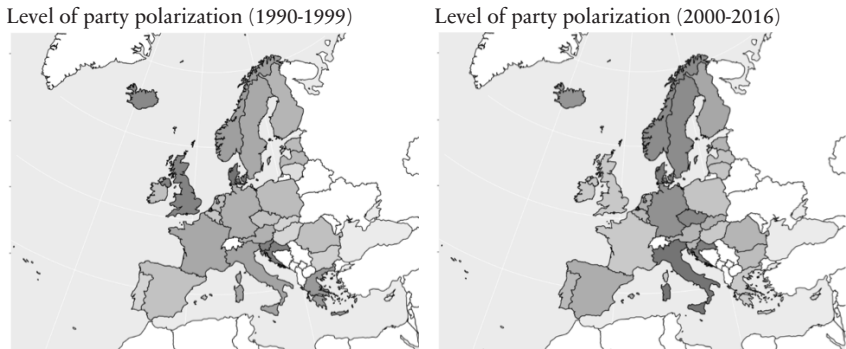
To explain governing under minority government formation, one must acknowledge the opposition's vital role, bearing responsibility for government stability and securing the political system's effectiveness. Making sense of minority government formation by focusing on the opposition's function is crucial concerning recent developments and challenges in government formation processes.

Strøm's prediction for large coalition cabinets from 1990 appears to have partially become a reality almost 30 years later. European democracies with polarized political systems are experiencing high uncertainty levels, increased bargaining complexity, and challenging government formation processes (Ecker and Meyer 2015; Golder 2010). In particular, the increase

in social plurality and the parliamentary entry of further, almost always right-wing extremist parties (Akkerman, Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Dreyer and Bauer 2019) has made the formation of majority governments more problematic in recent years. The overall seat share of right-wing populist parties is over 20 percent in multiple parliaments and has dramatically increased in almost all European countries (Döring and Manow 2019). Scandinavian political systems are no exception to these latest developments but more pioneers (see Bergman and Strøm 2011). Against Strøm's predictions, right populist parties in Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Norway entered the parliaments already in the 1990s and increased the level of parliamentary polarization (see Figure 1) (Akkerman and Hagelund 2007; Aylott and Bolin 2015; Christiansen 2016; Christiansen and Pedersen 2014b). Even if a higher number of parliamentary parties would lead to a greater choice of coalition options, these new parties' extreme position and the rise in polarization make it difficult to build large coalitions (Indridason 2011, 713; Winter and Dumont 2008, 150). Excluding parties from government formation reduces the choice of possible alliances and, as Strøm argues, hardens the front to the opposition.

When comparing the polarization level in different European democracies between 1990-1999 and 2000-2016, an increasing pattern in almost all countries can be observed (see Figure 1). Even though a few countries, such as France and Great Britain, display decreasing polarization levels, the vast majority moves in the opposite direction, including the Scandinavian countries (see Figure 1). Even though these countries are generally known for a polarized party system, each Scandinavian political system's polarization level again strongly rose throughout the last two decades.

Figure 1: Party Polarization in European countries in comparison

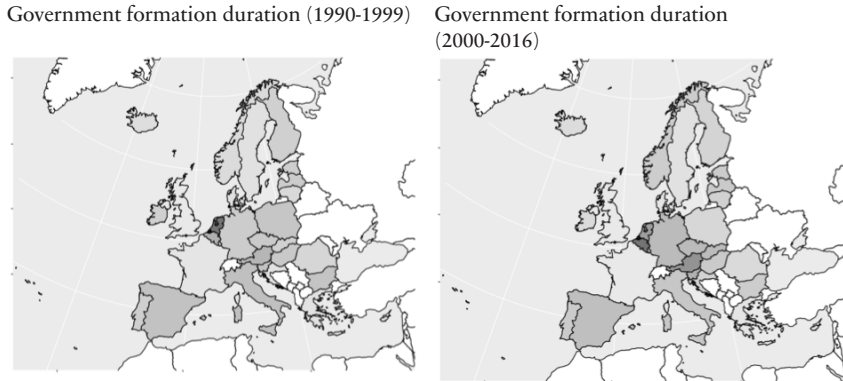


Notes: Darker colors indicate higher levels of party polarization; lighter colors lower levels of party polarization. Left-hand side of the figure depicts the average level of polarization for each country during 1990-1999. Right-hand side of the figure depicts the average level of polarization for each country during 2000-2016. Figure and data source: Hellström, Bergman, and Bäck (2018)

The general rise in polarization level can lead to more challenging bargaining fronts and a more complex government formation process, reflecting in inconclusive coalition bargaining (Winter and Dumont 2008, 137). Even stable political systems such as in the Federal Republic of Germany or the Netherlands experienced inconclusive coalition bargaining rounds and extensive government formation delays (Decker 2019; Henley 2017). Such developments have a destabilizing effect on the economy (Golder 2010) and society and can fuel further polarization.

Challenging government formation processes are also reflected in the increased average formation duration (see Figure 2). In many countries, a general increase in the government formation duration is observable when comparing the 90s decade with the last two decades. Even though there is a slight increase in Norway's average government formation duration, the overall duration of Scandinavian formation processes is very low and, in contrast to recent developments in other European countries, appears to be stable.

Figure 2: Government formation duration in European countries in comparison



Notes: Darker colors indicate longer government formation durations (measured in days); lighter colors shorter government formation duration. Left-hand side of the figure depicts the average government formation duration for each country during 1990-1999. Right-hand side of the figure depicts the average government formation duration for each country during 2000-2016. Figure and data source: Hellström, Bergman, and Bäck (2018)

Efficiently building secure majority cabinets appears to have become one of the main challenges for multiple European democracies. Still, Scandinavian democracies do stand out. They have their fair share of far-right populist parties in parliament, rely almost exclusively on minority cabinets, and are among the most polarized countries in Europe (see Figure 1). Yet, their political system is extremely stable, having comparatively concise government formation processes (see Figure 2) (Ecker and Meyer 2015, 3; Hellström, Bergman, and Bäck 2018) and for the case of Sweden and Norway, a very long relative cabinet duration (Hellström, Bergman, and Bäck 2018). Even though government crises are also known to Scandinavian countries, these usually found a way to compromise and thus avoid new elections (Aylott 2014; Hellström 2018).

Strøm argues that minority cabinet formation instead of forming large coalitions leads to a more reliable political system and secure government stability, despite the presence of pluralism (see quotation (1), page 17). By frequently forming minority governments, the chances for alternation and thus a change of government is higher. According to Strøm, this bears two advantages: First, higher chances for alternation gives “established parties a breathing space in which they can respond to new electoral demands” (Strøm 1990, 241). Second, by facilitating alternation, parliamentary parties run lower risks of remaining a permanent opposition party and are, as a consequence, becoming more responsible for government stability. Even

though a party might be in opposition in a certain period, knowing that there is a real chance to join the government in the future will influence the party's readiness to behave in a responsible fashion despite sitting on the opposition bench (Sartori 1966; Strøm 1990, 241).

Advocating minority government formation to other democracies as a government stability measurement requires in-depth knowledge of this government formation type's functioning and principal procedure. Reviewing the literature on minority governments in general, which kick-started with the seminal work by Strøm (1990), gives a detailed picture of the inner-workings on the governmental side of such a government type. However, opposition parties' behavior under minority governments, partly responsible for government stability, is insufficiently investigated. In general, the research focus in political science is government-biased, primarily studying government activities and undermining the opposition's role. Studying opposition party behavior is, therefore, essential for understanding the functioning of every political system. However, it is inevitable when studying minority governments. Explaining opposition party behavior regarding the pivotal position, being able to jeopardize a minority government's stability is crucial when presenting government formation options to democracies struggling with inefficient government formation processes and polarized party systems. Still, to this date, only a few scholars have paid attention to this.

When reviewing the literature on oppositions, one experiences an inconsistent and outdated understanding of opposition as a confrontational counterpart to the government (Blondel 1997; Dahl 1966, xviii; Garritzmann 2017, 2; Norton 2008). As referred to by many scholars, the Trinity of Opposition declares the functions 'Critique, Control, Alternative' as an opposition's core tasks (Bolingbroke 1749; Dahl 1966; Sternberger 1956). According to the Trinity, the opposition's responsibility is to critique the government in the electorate's eyes, control government activities, and present a personnel and political alternative to succeed alternation. However, an overall confrontational stance towards the government, as advocated by the traditional scholars, does not reflect in parliamentary government-opposition relationships. Numerous scholars have criticized the Trinity, arguing that cross-parliamentary cooperation frequently happens in many political systems (Garritzmann 2017; Haberland 1995; Helms 2002; 2010; Louwse et al. 2017; Müller 2020; Norton 2008; Steffani 1968). Especially in consensus democracies, oppositions are considered a co-government, receiving access to policy influence without cabinet membership.

Recent studies focusing on oppositions in different European democracies have even completely excluded this traditional literature strand (Anghel and Thürk 2021; Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b). Focusing on different literature strands and theories when aiming to explain opposition behavior is comprehensible since the concept of ‘Critique, Control, Alternative’ can at best be considered a meta-theory. The idea offers only limited opportunity to develop detailed hypotheses on general opposition behavior. This limitation is further intensified in minority governments, where the opposition bears partial responsibility for government stability. A purely confrontational stance towards the minority government, as promoted by the traditional literature on oppositions, would harm the government and impair the stability of the political system.

Instead, elaborating expectations on opposition party behavior under minority government will build on the literature on party behavior, combined with the literature on coalition behavior and the literature on minority governments. Literature and theories of party behavior allow developing party-specific expectations. This is crucial regarding the basic assumption that ‘opposition’ is not a homogeneous actor (Hix and Noury 2016), but rather consists of different opposition parties. Opposition parties are expected to behave differently influenced by their individual party goal.

Coalition theories are utilized to describe the cooperative element between opposition parties and a minority government (see also Bale and Dann 2002). Cooperation between coalition parties has extensively been studied and will in the present study serve as a template for explaining cross-parliamentary cooperation under minority government formation. Building the argumentation on the rich literature strand of coalition behavior allows elaborating precise hypotheses for opposition behavior and minority government support. Beyond, applying coalition theories for explaining cross-parliamentary cooperation under minority government formation allows testing the theories’ generalizability.

Lastly, acknowledging the unique circumstances given by minority government formation that the theories on party and coalition behavior are applied to, the literature on minority government formation and its premises will be included to elaborate expectations on opposition party behavior. Combining coalition theories, party behavior theories, and minority government formation literature to explain opposition party behavior and minority government support dynamics is a novelty that may also serve as a guide for future research. Hence, this study adds to the existing

literature on the inner-workings and functioning of minority governments by adopting an opposition's perspective.

Even though the literature on minority governments focuses mostly on the government, it also reveals some about opposition parties' behavior. Opposition parties have a unique position in a minority government formation deriving from their pivotal role and bargaining power. These parties commonly sign agreements with the minority government and support the government in legislation (Anghel and Thürk 2021; Christiansen and Damgaard 2008; Otjes and Louwerse 2014). The opposition party thereby trades its support towards the minority government for policy influence (Bergman 1995; Strøm 1990). Minority government support by an opposition party can either address single issues or a range of policy areas, thus allowing them to influence legislation and presenting themselves as reliable cooperation partners (Bale and Bergman 2006a, 206). Minority government support by an opposition party is often essential to the stability of a minority government (Christiansen and Pedersen 2014a), which lends those opposition parties considerable bargaining power (Bale and Bergman 2006b, 440). Still, opposition parties that support the government are largely independent of it as they do not share in the rewards of ministries or cabinet seats and are less likely to become associated with government policy outputs (Bale and Dann 2002; Christiansen and Seeberg 2016; Thesen 2016).

Despite operating in a deeply consensus-driven political system, opposition parties under minority government are not purely consensual in a fashion that would not allow a confrontational stance towards the government. After all, these parties are interested in following their aspirations, either being policy influence, electoral support, or appointing government offices. Opposition parties under minority government have therefore shown to have strong incentives to preserve their distinctiveness from the government (Christiansen and Seeberg 2016), hoping that such a strategy leads to more favorable circumstances, such as a better bargaining position, after the next election (Strøm 1984, 212).

Being an opposition party facing a minority cabinet instead of a majority cabinet implies a more flexible relationship vis-à-vis the government, influencing policies while sitting on the opposition bench. However, these circumstances are also likely to accentuate a strategic challenge that opposition parties face: They are responsible for making a stable minority government work while also facing strong incentives to pursue their own party goals to meet supporters' expectations (Bale and Bergman 2006b). Opposition parties under a minority government face the dilemma of

being in direct competition with other parties, including the government, while also having a special responsibility to support it.

Therefore, the present study asks **(1) under which circumstances do opposition parties support a minority government and (2) which strategies do opposition parties then pursue to handle the opposition dilemma?**

The present study addresses this question by looking at the role of different opposition party goals and strategic cooperation incentives derived from coalition theories to manage competing expectations – in this case, supporting the government vs. catering to supporters and increasing voter support. It is still an open question under which precise circumstances opposition parties chose to support minority government legislation and under which circumstances they rather refrain from such endorsement and, in the case of cooperation, how the bargaining environment with the government is shaped. To date, there is no systematic empirical evidence on this question.

More recent studies have extensively covered opposition party behavior under minority government with regards to policy, ideology, and voter dimensions as well as the institutional context of the political system (Anghel and Thürk 2021; Bale and Bergman 2006a; 2006b; Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b; Hix and Noury 2016; Klüver and Zubek 2017; Louwerse et al. 2017; Otjes and Louwerse 2014; Thesen 2016; Tuttnauer 2018). Missing from the literature is an empirical systematic longitudinal investigation of the general strategic calculus of opposition party behavior and the dynamic nature of such opposition party support under minority government formation's unique circumstances. Beyond, the literature has touched on the bargaining environment of opposition-government cooperation, focusing on opposition party critique as an instrument for fulfilling policy influence aspirations (Christiansen and Seeberg 2016). Recent perspectives argue that not all opposition parties under minority government primarily strive for policy influence, but they also strive to attain offices or expand votes (see Anghel and Thürk 2021; Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b). Therefore, the present study analyzes the bargaining environment from a broader perspective allowing for variation in the opposition parties' primary goals.

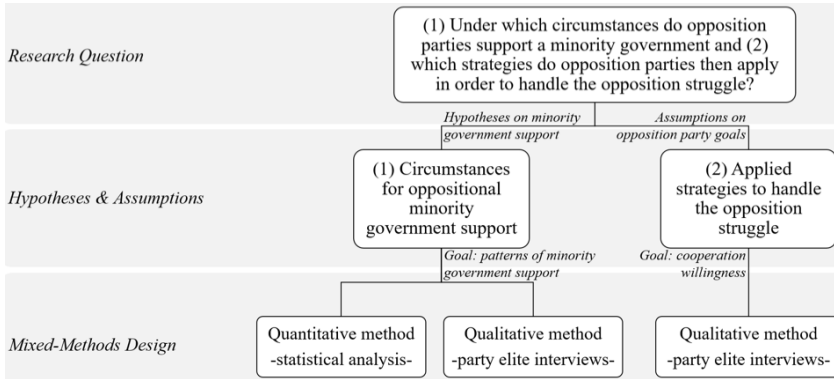
The present study's main contribution lies in addressing this gap in the literature by analyzing in a longitude fashion how minority government support by opposition parties varies with regards to the pursued strategies in order to handle the dilemma of striving for a certain goal while still making the minority government work. By applying a mixed-methods design, the study aims to shed light on this aspect of party competition and

contribute to the literature on government-opposition dynamics and the inner-workings of minority governments with an empirical analysis on oppositional minority government support and the bargaining environment in the Swedish Riksdag in the period between 1991 to 2018.

Applying mixed-methods research (MMR) bears the advantage of combining qualitative and quantitative methods to aim for a broader understanding of the study (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007, 123). Based on the research question, the analysis consists of a double connected mixed-methods approach, first applying a concurrent and equal mixed-methods approach, and second a supplemental qualitative approach. The former one – the concurrent mixed-methods approach – follows a deductive logic (Creswell 2010; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, 23 & 67) and aims to test the elaborated hypotheses (see Figure 3). The latter one – the supplemental approach – is applied to dredge evidence from the concurrent mixed-methods design by qualitative means (see Figure 3). This method follows an inductive logic (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009, 25), which is especially suitable for exploratively filtering information regarding an opposition party's reasoning and motives for minority government support.

Based on the research question, hypotheses regarding the support behavior of opposition parties are elaborated. Further, the study develops assumptions on party behavior based on different party goals. The concurrent mixed-methods approach is addressing the hypothesized effects concerning the circumstances of minority government support. By employing quantitative statistical analysis on plenary voting behavior and conducting qualitative party elite interviews, patterns of support behavior are to be identified (see Figure 3). The qualitative interviews will also deepen the understanding of the minority government support's preceding bargaining and an opposition party's strategic motives (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The research design summarized



The present study will approach as follows: The succeeding chapter (chapter 2.1) will first review the traditional literature strand on oppositions while assessing its explanatory power regarding the applicability on the subject of analysis: opposition party behavior and minority government support. Then, the inner-workings of minority governments and the opposition role focusing on the opposition party dilemma are elaborated (chapter 2.2). As already argued above, opposition parties' support under minority governments is essential for government stability. At the same time, these parties also face the challenge of competing for votes against other parties, including the government. Despite the necessary minority government support, opposition parties are expected to have strong incentives to highlight a distinct party profile and not appearing too close to the minority government. After the opposition dilemma is presented, coalition theory will elaborate hypotheses regarding opposition parties' support patterns towards a minority government (chapter 2.3). Assumptions on opposition party-specific cooperation willingness will be developed based on the theory on party behavior to grasp the motive for minority government support (chapter 2.3.5).

The following method chapter (chapter 3) will explain the applied mixed-methods research design and its applicability to the study. The datasets, derived from electronic registered plenary voting and qualitative interviews with party elites, will be discussed regarding their contents, origin, and methodological use. The quantitative and qualitative testing of the hypotheses regarding minority government support patterns (chapter 4 and chapter 5) is followed by the qualitative examination of the assumptions on opposition parties' cooperation readiness (chapter 7). This subse-

quent qualitative analysis aims to shed light on the motives for minority government support and the bargaining environment of government-opposition cooperation. The analysis will be concluded by a discussion chapter, summarizing and disputing the results in the light of generalizability, limitations, and further implications for consensus European democracies (chapter 8). Eventually, the conclusion chapter (chapter 9) will summarize the findings, present the key messages of the study, and in more detail, capture the discussion on the recent challenges in multiple European democracies. This final chapter discusses the extent to which the results of interparliamentary cooperation under minority government can be transferred to other consensus democracies. It aims to identify and discuss what these countries can learn from a political system with frequent minority government formation but still very stable governments.

2 Explaining opposition party behavior and minority government support – a literature review

When trying to understand opposition behavior under minority governments, there are several literature strands to consider. First and most convenient, the literature on oppositions is to be reviewed. However, such an approach appears rather unrewarding regarding the outdated understanding of opposition as a confrontational counterpart to the government, as will be argued in more detail in chapter 2.1.

The special circumstances arising from minority government formation and majority rule require a different approach to explain opposition behavior and cross-parliamentary cooperation. To explain opposition behavior and minority government support, coalition theories, as well as party behavior theories, will be considered to a) elaborate hypotheses on oppositional minority government support and b) get a deeper understanding of the motive for minority government support with special attention to the underlying opposition party strategies.

This chapter thus takes the following approach: The first sub-chapter 2.1 reviews the traditional literature strand on oppositions along with an assessment of its explanatory power regarding the applicability on the subject of analysis: opposition party behavior and minority government support. Second, literature-based background information on minority governments and the opposition role will be considered in chapter 2.2. Special attention is paid to the dilemma that oppositions under minority governments face. Minority government support by at least one opposition party is crucial to maintain governmental stability. Simultaneously, opposition parties also have strong incentives to keep a distinct party profile from the government to reach for alternation. After the circumstances of minority government formation are elaborated, chapter 2.3.1 till chapter 2.3.4 focus on the supportive element in the relationship between opposition parties and minority government to develop detailed hypotheses regarding minority government support. Further, party behavior theories will be reviewed to elaborate assumptions regarding an opposition party-specific behavior (chapter 2.3.5). A brief summary of the expectations is presented in chapter 2.4.

2.1 *Literature on opposition behavior – a general review*

Parliamentary oppositions in Western democracies are subject to substantial variations, as has already been shown by many scholars (Dahl 1966; Euchner 1993; Helms 2002; Norton 2008), but also in more recent research (Bröchler, Glaab, and Schöne 2020; Garritzmann 2017; Giorgi and Ilonszki 2018b; van Biezen and Wallace 2013). Traditionally, the opposition has been described as “the government in waiting” (Schneider 1998, 250), which expects the opposition to pursue alternation as a primary goal. Nonetheless, opposition research was considered the “stepchild of science” (Oberreuter 1993, 64; Schumann 1976, 22). Several authors continue to criticize the neglect of the opposition (Blondel 1997, 462; Garritzmann 2017, 2f; Helms 2002, 9; Höreth and Ketelhut 2020, 97–99), claiming that the term “opposition” is used inconsistently and without any systematic approach (Blondel 1997, 462f; Dahl 1966, xviii; Garritzmann 2017, 2; Norton 2008). This is surprising, given that opposition, in the light of New Dualism, is one of the two major parliamentary groups. In 1749 Lord Henry St. John Vis-count Bolingbroke first assigned specific opposition functions and thus laid the groundwork for the New Dualism, in which the opposition faces a government.

(2) „It follows from hence, that they who engage in opposition are under as great obligations, to prepare themselves to controul, as they who serve the crown are under, to prepare themselves to carry on the administration.“ (Bolingbroke 1749, 60)

Bolingbroke speaks of a control function that the opposition must fulfill. At the same time, the opposition shall not simply remain on its opposition status but must prepare itself for a government change through alternation.

Later attempts to conceptualize opposition have been based on Bolingbroke’s first categorization and led to the Trinity of Opposition “Critique, Control and Alternative” (first mentioned in Sternberger 1956, based on Bolingbroke 1749). Dahl (1966) attempts a definition of opposition that is based on the Trinity of Opposition. Even if it is rather vaguely formulated, it is possible to identify oppositional behavior patterns.

(3) “Suppose that A determines the conduct of some aspect of the government of a particular political system during some interval. (...) Suppose that during this interval B cannot determine the conduct of the government; and that B is opposed to the conduct of government by A. Then B is what we mean by ‘an opposition’. Note that during