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Department of Political Science
University of Gothenburg
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Parliamentary Control of Ministerial Policymaking*

Mikael Holmgren

Carl Dahlström

mikael.holmgren@oru.se

carl.dahlstrom@pol.gu.se

Abstract

A key issue in parliamentary democracy centers on the parliament’s ability to contain ministerial drift. Recent scholarship highlights the importance of strong legislative institutions for enforcing the parliament’s wishes, emphasizing that the ministers’ policy choices can often be corrected after the fact by the overseeing standing committees. In this paper, we argue that the parliament’s oversight can also create strong incentives for the ministers to adapt their policy positions *in advance*—and thereby obviate any need for actual parliamentary enforcement. To substantiate our analysis, we field five decades’ worth of data from the Swedish government and show that the ministers systematically stack their bills in the parliament’s favor already at the agenda-setting stage. Specifically, by selectively eschewing proposals from individual ministers that lie relatively far from the parliament’s ideological position, the ministers collectively ensure that the bulk of bills that reach the parliament will typically support the parliament’s interests. Our conclusions suggest that ministers in parliamentary governments may enjoy significantly less policy discretion than is commonly believed.

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1 Introduction

A key issue in parliamentary democracy centers on the parliament’s ability to contain ministerial drift. Parliamentary constitutions typically establish a singular chain of delegation that runs from the people, acting as the ultimate principal, through the parliament, government, and bureaucracy (e.g., [Martin and Vanberg 2011](#); [Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2003](#)). Because the parliament has limited resources for monitoring government performance, however, the possibility arises that the cabinet ministers may not always comply with the parliament’s preferences. By extension, the policy benefits that the government supplies to the people could come to reflect a quite different set of demands than those implied by the parliament’s electoral connection. To understand how parliamentary democracies actually work, we must accordingly determine how—or, indeed, whether—parliaments can reasonably effectively enforce their electoral commitments.

Recently, scholars have begun examining a variety of accountability mechanisms through which parliaments could hypothetically constrain ministerial policymaking, yet so far without converging on a firm conclusion regarding their efficacy. In principle, a decisive parliament could press its political interests by screening for responsive ministers prior to the government’s investiture (e.g., [Kam et al. 2010](#); [Thies 2001](#)), continuously reviewing their decisions in office (e.g., [Behrens, Nyhuis and Gschwend 2023](#); [Martin and Vanberg 2005](#)), and swiftly replacing unresponsive ministers as the need arises (e.g., [Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008](#); [Indridason and Kam 2008](#)). In practice, however, many parliaments appear reluctant to actually exercise their powers, which has led many observers to question their constitutional functions. [Lijphart \(2012\)](#), for example, argues that many parliaments routinely defer to the government’s leadership, and the fact that the ministers often appear to move without any explicit parliamentary instructions has spurred a rich literature that places the policy advantage squarely in the government offices (e.g., [Laver and Shepsle 1996](#); [Poguntke and Webb 2005](#)). If the parliament simply acquiesces to whatever policy initiatives the ministers may advance, then any constitutional notion of parliamentary supremacy would be illusory and the democratic chain of delegation’s legitimacy called into question.

In this paper, we investigate the institutional balance of power between the parliament and government, focusing on the ministers' agenda control in the legislative process. A limitation of much of the extant scholarship on executive-legislative relations in parliamentary democracies is that it places most of its focus on the parliament's actions, while paying less attention to the government's actions. Yet in a hypothetical scenario where the parliament's accountability mechanisms carry sufficient force to shift the government's incentives, the government could remain responsive to the parliament's interests even in the absence of any parliamentary actions. The most direct way to evaluate whether the parliament's various ministerial delegations generally succeed or fail, therefore, is not by examining the frequency of parliamentary interventions in government affairs, but rather by examining the extent to which the government's behavior reflects the parliament's preferences. In particular, a subservient government should generally want to quench any issue that might draw the parliament's ire *before* it has a chance to appear on the legislative floor, while a dominant government that could simply whip the parliament into submission would have no need for such precautions. By turning our attention to how the ministers actually use their agenda control, we can learn more about their institutional relations with their parliamentary overseers than has hitherto been the case.

To that end, we have assembled a novel dataset that tracks the Swedish government's preparation of legislative bills between 1975 and 2022. Our research design capitalizes on the fact that Swedish ministers often begin their legislative work by appointing an executive commission to prepare the bill's contents, formally referred to as a *Commission of Inquiry* (see e.g., [Dahlström, Lundberg and Pronin 2021](#); [Pettersson 2016](#)). The commissions' primary outputs typically take the form of a comprehensive policy report that reviews the current state of affairs, performs cost-benefit analyses of competing courses of action, and concludes with a set of concrete legislative proposals for the government's consideration. Crucially for our purposes, because the commissions' missions are determined by the ministers that ordain them, their reports also present an opportunity to investigate whose policy priorities are most likely to make it onto the government's legislative agenda. Specifically, by treating

all commission reports that were available for a given legislative session as a pool of *potential* proposals, we can model their likelihood to enter a government bill as a function of the ideological distance between the ordaining minister and the parliament. Because there is often a significant time lag between a given commission's ordainment and the commission's delivery of its policy report, we can use the variance caused by electoral turnover to simulate a variety of more or less plausible political scenarios, ranging from situations where the ordaining minister may lie at the very core of the parliament's ideological distribution to situations where the ordaining minister may lie at the very edges of the parliament's ideological distribution. Our dataset covers all ministerial commissions since 1975, which marks the enactment of the current Swedish constitution, and we have tracked their propensities to make it onto the government's legislative agenda by scraping all government bills for references to them.

Using a battery of hazard models, we show that ministers that lie relatively close to the parliament's ideological position are significantly more likely to convert their commissions into government bills than ministers that lie relatively far from the parliament's ideological position. For example, when we increase the ideological distance between the minister responsible for ordaining a given commission and the parliament's median legislator by two standard deviations, the likelihood that the government will cite the commission in a bill drops approximately by a third. The substantive implication is that, when the parliament's ideological position shifts in a particular direction, the type of proposals that the government advances generally follows suit. A left-leaning parliament implies that the government will suppress proposals from right-leaning ministers, whereas a right-leaning parliament implies that the government will suppress proposals from left-leaning ministers. Although we cannot pinpoint exactly where, when, or how the bills are censored—for instance, it could be done by individual ministers at the drafting stage, the cabinet as a whole at the finalization stage, or perhaps even the prime minister just before submission—we can pinpoint that the selection must occur in the executive branch, prior to any official parliamentary involvement. The general lesson is that the government's legislative agenda typically emerges from the parliament's preferences, not the other way around.

We contribute to several debates in parliamentary politics. Our findings support other recent revisionist accounts of the parliament’s oversight functions in the legislative process (e.g., [Martin and Vanberg 2011](#); [Russel and Gover 2017](#)). Far from simply acquiescing to whatever bills the ministers may present, the Swedish experience implies that the parliament is a critical part of the explanation for why we get the sort of public policies that we do. More jarringly, however, our findings also imply that studies that limit their view to overt parliamentary actions—bill amendments, ministerial interpellations, no-confidence votes, and so forth—may seriously underestimate the parliament’s true influence. As [Blondel \(1970, p. 78\)](#) pointed out some years ago, because parliaments can also carry significant preventive effects through rational anticipation, their reach can extend well beyond their own decision domains and shape the course of legislative decision-making all the way from the agenda-setting stage to the final passage vote (also see e.g., [Mayhew 1974](#); [Mezey 1979](#)). Our results provide rare evidence that this sort of strategic adaptation is not just a theoretical possibility but a recurring feature of the legislative process. Future research on executive-legislative relations would accordingly do well to further explore how legislative preferences can constrain executive actions, in parliamentary systems and beyond.

2 Literature

The past few decades has seen a resurgence of interest in the institutional balance of power between parliaments and governments and its implications for public policymaking. Until recently, scholars typically characterized the parliamentary policymaking process as dominated by the ministers, while relegating the parliament itself to a mere elector of the government ([Gamm and Huber 2002](#)). The contemporary literature, by contrast, has recast the parliament as a more potent constraint on the ministers’ policy discretion and active contributor to which policies will ultimately be selected. Much of this development has been driven by the introduction of various agency-theoretic approaches to both parliamentary democracy in general as well as its more specific executive-legislative structure (e.g., [Strøm,](#)

Müller and Bergman 2003). On this view, the parliament voluntarily delegates substantial agenda-setting and implementation powers to the government in order to advance its own political goals. Because the government may have both conflicting interests and superior information, however, the parliament's delegation could lead to unwitting abdication. While classics like Weber typically ended their analysis on this point, the contemporary literature has proceeded to ask what the parliament might then do in response to the government's potential defection. And the leading answer is that parliaments may in fact develop a wide array of institutional controls that could hypothetically help them limit the feasible set of policies that governments can pursue.

Some scholars have focused on the parliament's opportunities to assure common interests with the government from the outset of delegation. The most basic instrument in this regard is naturally the investiture procedure itself, as it typically affords the parliament a direct opportunity to determine the government's preferences through selective ministerial appointments (e.g., Bäck, Debus and Müller 2016; Cheibub, Martin and Rasch 2015; Kam et al. 2010; Lipsmeyer and Nicole Pierce 2011; Thies 2001). At the same time, the parliamentary parties that form the government may write explicit contractual agreements that clarifies what the ministers are expected to accomplish (Indridason and Kristinsson 2013; Klüver, Bäck and Krauss 2023) and establish dedicated coalition committees alongside the cabinet to continuously monitor the ministers' work (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008; Criscitiello 1993). In most modern democracies, moreover, these sorts of coalition-specific endeavours to constrain the ministers' advances will typically occur against a backdrop of long-standing procedural regulations deliberately designed to reveal hidden information and hidden action in the executive branch (e.g., McCubbins, Noll and Weingast 1987; Jensen and McGrath 2010). Because the ministers' policy discretion emerges as a predictable consequence of their access to the government offices, the parliament may also take a variety of strategic precautions against potential policy drift before granting them that access.

Other scholars have emphasized the parliament's oversight functions throughout the government's tenure. While the parliament may seek to establish any number of ex-ante controls

prior to the government's investiture, many of those mechanisms can also be difficult to enforce. The ministers' private preferences and general skills, for instance, can typically be only dimly observed and may consequently leave a good deal of performative uncertainty on the table. In a series of influential works, [Martin and Vanberg](#) (e.g., 2005, 2011, 2020) have emphasized the standing committees' roles in assuring that whatever deals get struck in parliament are also respected by the ministers. They argue that parliamentary committees can serve as vehicles for individual parliamentarians to develop expertise, review ministerial actions, and, critically, override government policy (also see e.g., [Behrens, Nyhuis and Gschwend 2023](#); [Carroll and Cox 2012](#); [Kim and Loewenberg 2005](#); [König et al. 2022](#)). In Sweden, for example, the parliament's standing committees are organized to match the government's executive departments and have an unlimited right to amend any bill within their jurisdiction ([Mattson 2016](#)). This illustrates that parliaments need not passively accept the government's informational advantage; instead, they can invest in their own parallel information systems that may help them both track and correct ministerial decisions.

A final group of scholars has considered the parliament's ability to revoke the government's authority. Most classical definitions of parliamentary democracy minimally include that the government must be at least tolerated by the parliament in order to retain its position. Although a vast literature has attempted to delineate the numerous factors that may bring about the end of a given government (e.g., [Bergmann and Saalfeld 2022](#); [Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009](#); [Warwick 1995](#)), for our purposes it is perhaps most important to emphasize that the tolerance requirement can also extend to individual ministers—either formally as part of the constitutional order or informally by way of the prime minister. [Huber and Martinez-Gallardo \(2008\)](#), for example, argue that ministerial turnover in parliamentary governments can be at least partially explained by the fact that the parties in power will actively seek to replace ministers who take actions against their interests (also see [Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding 2010](#); [Indridason and Kam 2008](#)). This matters because it implies that the parliament's governing coalition may often be able to intervene in the government's composition at the portfolio level, without necessarily rejecting the entire coalitional agree-

ment that sustains the government as a whole. Naturally, if the ministers are individually accountable for their own performances it would significantly reduce the transaction costs associated with keeping the government’s preferences aligned with those of the parliament and, by extension, contribute towards alleviating the risk of agency loss that could otherwise arise from potential conflicts of interest between the branches.

Building on these prior works, we focus on assessing the government’s actual responsiveness to the parliament’s preferences. The literature on executive-legislative relations in parliamentary democracies has amassed an impressive repertoire of studies that cover the full government life-cycle. Yet, as [Goodheart \(2013, p. 207\)](#) points out, while many parliaments do appear to engage in a variety of strategic actions seemingly targeted at limiting the ministers’ policy discretion—screening appointees, formalizing expectations, monitoring implementation, and so forth—the fact that these actions occur does not by itself provide any direct evidence of parliamentary influence on government behavior. For example, the parliament could painstakingly vet the preferences of each individual minister in order to assure common interests with the government from the outset of delegation. Once appointed, however, those ministers could soon find themselves submerged in government bureaucracy and more attentive to the needs of the permanent civil service than to the parliament ([Hecklo 1977](#)). Because the ministers may also possess their own range of tools to counter the parliament’s pressures, such as dissolution rights and confidence votes ([Huber 1996](#)), the resulting institutional order could still favor the government over the parliament. In the next section, we explain how we use common features of the parliamentary lawmaking process to investigate which branch generally sits in the lead.

3 Theory

Our goal is to determine the government’s responsiveness to the parliament’s preferences in the agenda-setting stages of the legislative process. We proceed from the simplifying assumption that parliamentary democracies typically produce law through a three-stage procedure,

where the key players are the individual ministers, the government cabinet, and the parliament's legislative assembly. In the prior stage, a minister may first propose a government policy to the cabinet. In the intermediate stage, the cabinet then collectively reviews the minister's proposal and decides whether to submit it to the parliament for legislative consideration. In the posterior stage, the parliament finally reviews the cabinet's submission and decides whether to turn the proposal into law. Concretely, we see this sequence as loosely corresponding to the ministers' private preparations within their respective departments, their joint deliberations at the collective cabinet meeting, and the parliament's eventual assessment of their work. Although each of these stages can of course be further disaggregated into many more detailed stages, we believe that this three-stage procedure adequately captures the most pivotal moments for our specific purposes.

For example, consider some of the core postulates in the classical executive dominance literature. Scholars in this tradition typically characterize the individual ministers as the most important legislative actors, owing to their superior information and agenda-setting advantages. As [Laver and Shepsle \(1996, p. 281\)](#) put it in their seminal work, "the agenda and implementation power that the cabinet exercises vis-a-vis the parliament is in turn exercised vis-a-vis the cabinet by individual ministers and their civil servants." The underlying assumption is that the executive departments function like a set of political property rights that grant the ministers exclusive control over their respective policy domains. Because the cabinet lacks both the authority and information to check the ministers' proposals on this view, the intermediate cabinet stage can accommodate only one potential outcome: All proposals will be accepted and sent along to the parliament. While the parliament could try to resist the ministers' advances in the posterior stage, they would nonetheless find their influence circumscribed by the fact that they must vote on bills decided by the cabinet. Since the ministers should typically only be inclined to propose policies that make them better off than the status quo, it follows that the parliament should typically only expect to benefit from the cabinet's bills to the extent that they happen to share the ministers' political interests. [Hallerberg \(2004, p. 16\)](#) describes the resulting order as a modern form of feudalism, with

the ministers essentially serving as the “lords of their ministerial fiefdoms.”

By contrast, we consider the possibility that the parliamentary chain of delegation carries force. Specifically, instead of taking the individual ministers’ autonomy as given, we hypothesize that ministers that lie relatively close to the parliament’s ideological position should be more likely to convert their policy proposals into government bills than ministers that lie relatively far from the parliament’s ideological position. We ground the hypothesis in the assumption that the collective cabinet meeting serves as a fully functional veto-gate between the individual ministers and the parliament’s legislative assembly. That is, while the ministers may all be free to propose whichever policies they want, the cabinet can also jointly decide to block any proposal before it is transformed into an official government bill. Provided that the parliament’s accountability mechanisms work as advertised, the cabinet should always carry a collective incentive to eschew proposals that might upset their parliamentary overseers. At the same time, the ministers’ individual incentives to challenge the parliament’s tolerance should generally increase with the ideological distance between them. Because the ministers that have the most to gain from advancing upsetting proposals correspond exactly to the ministers that the cabinet should be the most inclined to block, the result should be a selection process that privileges the parliament’s ideological allies over the parliament’s ideological opponents. For example, holding the minister constant, we predict that a liberal minister should generally have an easier time advancing successful proposals under a liberal parliament than under a conservative parliament. And holding the parliament constant, we predict that a liberal parliament should generally make it easier for a liberal minister to advance successful proposals than for a conservative minister.

Given these procedural priors, we see two potential pathways to parliamentary supremacy. On the one hand, the individual ministers could all make genuine attempts at pushing their most preferred policies, while the cabinet collectively blocks any proposal that goes against the parliament’s preferences. For example, [Martin and Vanberg \(2011\)](#) argue that the unveiling of government bills presents an important opportunity for ministers to signal their policy commitments and claim credit from their target audiences. Each minister could then

face strong incentives to press their proposals as far as they can, even if they know that they are unlikely to pass the cabinet's institutional check. On the other hand, if the ministers can anticipate likely defeats, they could also voluntarily withdraw their most preferred policies in order to economize on the potential opportunity cost. For example, [Cox \(2006\)](#) argues that the scarcity of plenary time establishes a natural incentive to restrict access to the legislative agenda. Instead of wasting their political capital on stillborn proposals, the ministers may then prefer to invest in proposals with better chances of success. Both scenarios would yield a legislative process that is stacked in the parliament's favor, but only in the first scenario would it be possible to observe an actual veto. In the second scenario, we would instead observe a more consensual form of cabinet decision-making, with few if any conflicts ever being realized.

While we do not specify a complete decision-making model, notice that our hypothesis is compatible with a variety of micro-foundations. For example, the lawmaking sequence we envision is essentially the same as in [Cox and McCubbins \(2005\)](#) well-known procedural cartel model, only applied to the parliamentary context. However, as they focus on the American case, they naturally bracket many issues that are peculiar to parliamentary systems, such as how real-world cabinets are actually organized and whether it makes any substantive sense to treat them as veto-gates (but see e.g., [Tsebelis 2002](#)). On that point, an important result from recent formal theories of parliamentary government is that the governing coalition can often make themselves better off by implementing an executive organization that centralizes at least some decision-making authority into a collective cabinet, as opposed to letting the ministers run their own departments independently ([Dewan et al. 2014](#); [Dragu and Laver 2019](#)). The empirical fact that the cabinet's decision-making rules are rarely regulated in any detail should accordingly not be mistaken as evidence of the cabinet's irrelevance, as this only implies that the ministers must then choose their procedures endogenously. Moreover, [Fong and Krehbiel \(2018\)](#) show that even a modest procedural right to delay a given proposal can provide considerable influence over which policies will ultimately be selected for legislative consideration, especially when time is scarce. This implies that real

cabinets need not necessarily carry a true veto-power to constrain the ministers' policy choices in the way we suggest; the fact that they exist as an impediment in what would otherwise be a more expedited procedure may suffice.

Finally, while we focus on the ministers' ideological relations with the parliament, we are not suggesting that this is the only factor that can affect the course of legislative decision-making. For example, some ministers could be more charismatic, persistent, or skilled than others and therefore better equipped to push their favored policies through the cabinet and into the parliament. Likewise, some parliaments could be more affluent, professional, or unified than others and therefore better equipped to punish recalcitrant ministers. In general, because democratic government is always government *pro tempore* (Linz 1998), the political conditions that undergird the legislative process can differ radically from one situation to another. In the next section, we therefore focus on explaining how we designed our study to work around many of these alternative explanations.

4 Research Design

To assess how the parliament's preferences might constrain the ministers' advances, we have assembled a novel dataset that tracks the Swedish government's preparation of legislative bills between 1975 and 2022. The core of our dataset consists of 4 489 executive commissions that the Swedish ministers have ordained to investigate various policy issues throughout the observed period. The commissions grant us direct access to some of the earliest steps that the individual ministers can take in the legislative process and constitute a set of concrete empirical units that we can track using the government's own documentation. In essence, our basic idea is to first define the ministers' commissions as a pool of potential proposals that can be either accepted or rejected by the cabinet as a whole; and then, predict the likelihood of each potential outcome using the ordaining ministers' ideological relations with the parliament. This setup allows us to investigate how the collective cabinet might respond to proposals stemming from various types of ministers—and crucially, whether the decision

outcome tends to reflect the parliament’s preferences. Because our research design depends on some of the more peculiar characteristics of the Swedish case, however, in this section we first briefly describe the Swedish lawmaking process, before presenting our data and methods.

4.1 The Swedish Case

The principal benefit of our research design is that it grants us direct access to the agenda-setting stages of the legislative process. As Sweden is a parliamentary democracy, the parliament has the sole constitutional authority to make law, while the government is responsible for preparing and implementing that law (Bergman 2003). In practice, however, the cabinet ministers often *delegate* their policymaking responsibilities to various agents in the public bureaucracy, such as administrative agencies, departmental bureaus, or executive commissions. In the commission case, which is our primary focus, this act of delegation follows a formalized procedure that begins with a specific ministerial ordainment and concludes with a public review of the commission’s policy report. Once the commission procedure concludes, the cabinet must then jointly decide whether to accept the commission’s proposals into an official government bill or to set them aside for other legislative opportunities. If the cabinet decides to reject the proposals, the commission’s policy report will simply be sent off to the government archives. If the cabinet decides to proceed with a bill, on the other hand, they will then finally submit the proposals to the parliament for legislative consideration—which typically includes a series of standing committee reviews, floor debates, roll call votes, and so on. Because we can observe this entire sequence of events, we can also probe the ministers’ propensities to eschew certain proposals from the government’s legislative agenda by examining which commissions that tend to make it onto a bill and which commissions that tend to be left to the archives.

Importantly for our purposes, while the Swedish constitution holds the cabinet ministers collectively responsible for all government decisions, they have historically treated the commission procedure as a departmental prerogative. The formal foundation for this arrangement has been codified through a series of executive orders, with *Kommittéförordning* SFS

1998:1474 providing the most current regulatory framework. Among other factors, the rules explicitly empower the government to delegate any personnel management responsibilities to the individual ministers, and in practice the commissions' formal instructions will typically be developed within the respective departments and published as specific departmental orders.¹ There exist no formal limits to who can serve on a commission beyond standard national security concerns, and in practice the ministers can often appoint a mix of academics, bureaucrats, lawyers, politicians, and other stakeholders (Petersson 2016; Dahlström, Lundberg and Pronin 2021). The commissions' policy reports are published under the Swedish Government Official Reports moniker and must always go through a public review period before receiving any official consideration. Although not regulated in as much detail as the American notice-and-comment procedure for instance (see e.g., McCubbins, Noll and Weingast 1987), the general idea is to give administrative agencies, employer organizations, trade unions, and other vested interests an opportunity to examine potential policy proposals before they have a chance of becoming law (Lundberg 2014). In total, the ministers typically ordain about a hundred new commissions every year.

The cabinet's intermediate review follows as a natural consequence of the fact that it is the only executive institution with the right to propose new legislation. That is, while the ministers typically manage their own commissions within their respective departments, they still require the approval of the other ministers at an official cabinet meeting in order to convert a given commission's proposals into an official government bill. However, note that the cabinet's decision-making procedure is essentially unregulated, which implies that the ministers could in principle settle their potential disagreements in whatever manner they please. Currently, the only real constitutional requirements are that the cabinet meetings must be chaired by the prime minister, include at least five other ministers, and with appropriate protocols taken on any discussion. While no official records exist regarding the commissions'

¹On rare occasions multiple ministers may also collaborate to create cross-departmental commissions, in which case they will handle all the organizational decisions jointly.

actual legislative impact, historical evidence suggests that most of their proposals will eventually find their way into a bill. In fact, by some estimates about 40 percent of all Swedish legislation in the 1960s and 1970s were based on commission proposals ([Johansson 1979](#); [Premfors 1983](#)). As we show in the Appendix, this is also broadly consistent with our data; about half of all bills presented to the parliament during our observation period reference at least one commission report.

Finally, if the cabinet decides to convert a given commission’s proposals into a bill, it is then up to the parliament to determine the bill’s merits. As in most other parliamentary systems, the Swedish parliament relies on a set of specialized standing committees to oversee the government’s policy initiatives and process all incoming legislative proposals. In terms of membership, the committees usually mirror the partisan composition of the chamber, with the various parliamentary parties conventionally receiving committee seats in proportion to their chamber seats. The committees have historically been organized to match the government’s executive departments and are generally considered quite powerful (e.g., [Mattson and Strøm 2004](#); [Martin and Vanberg 2020](#)). Although the committees lack an explicit veto power, they do possess the formal authority to amend any bills that may come their way and set their own schedules, effectively enabling them to both rewrite and shelve proposals as they please. In practice, though, the committee majority will typically accept most bills without making any major changes ([Mattson 2016](#)). Notably, the general absence of overt parliamentary interventions in the government’s legislative agenda also extends to the final passage vote. In a recent study of all the parliament’s roll call votes between 2002 and 2018, [Lindvall et al. \(2020\)](#) found that the chamber accepts the committee majority opinion 99 per cent of the time.

Our empirical analyses utilize information from all three of these stages—that is, the ministers’ initial delegation, the cabinet’s intermediate review, and the parliament’s final confirmation. The decision outcome we seek to model corresponds to the cabinet’s decision to convert a given commission into a government bill or not. In line with our more general theoretical discussion, we thus effectively treat the cabinet as an institutional veto-

gate where the ministers may jointly decide to either approve or reject a given commission's contributions, and the puzzle we seek to solve concerns when they will actually decide to exercise their veto powers. To predict the cabinet's decision, we focus on the ideological relations between the minister responsible for ordaining a given commission and the parliament's median legislator. As we argued previously, provided that the parliament's accountability mechanisms work as advertised, then the cabinet should be more inclined to block proposals from ministers that conflict with the parliament's preferences than proposals from ministers that align with the parliament's preferences. We operationalize the cabinet's potential veto using original data that tracks the commissions' propensities to be cited in government bills, and draw on extant research on party manifestos to track the ideological relations between the ordaining ministers and the parliament. In the next section, we describe our data in more detail.

4.2 Data

Our analytical dataset covers all commissions that the ministers have ordained from 1975 until 2022, along with all the bill citations they have managed to amass over the observed period. To construct the dataset, we have combined information from the Swedish parliament's public data archive and a series of annual cabinet reports. The parliamentary archive contains information on all bills the government have submitted during the observed period, while the cabinet reports describe all commissions the ministers have ordained over the same period. To locate the citations, we have then used conventional web-scraping methods to search all bills for references to all commissions. We have organized the dataset as a time-series cross section, with one observation for each commission in each legislative year, and recorded their potential citations as a binary outcome. If a given commission is cited in a given year, it is coded as 1; otherwise, it is coded as 0. In total, the dataset contains 105 954 observations of 4 489 commissions over a period of 48 years and with 8 970 positive citation outcomes. We use this measure of the commissions' citation outcomes as the dependent

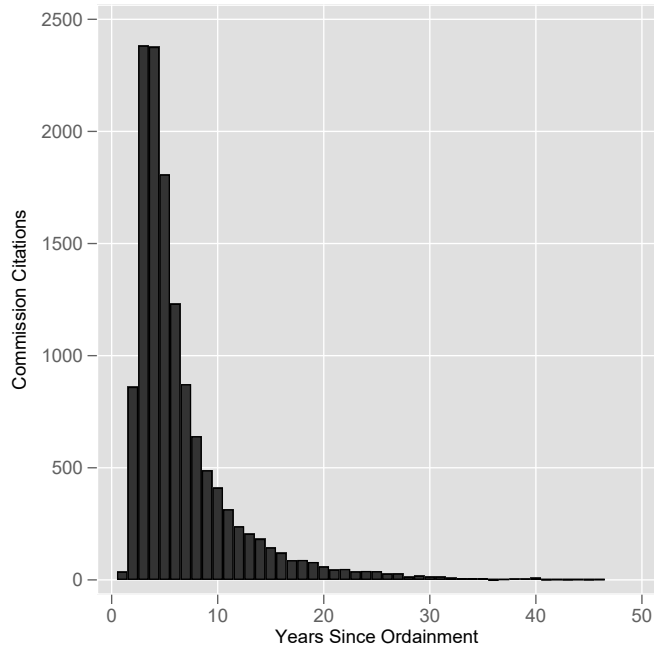


Figure 1: Citation Frequency by Commission Time.

variable in all our empirical analyses.²

To illustrate the outcome variance, we graph the distribution of citations by commission time in Figure 1. The y-axis shows the frequency of commission citations, while the x-axis shows the number of years that have elapsed since a given commission’s ordainment. For example, a commission that is ordained in 2000 and cited in 2004 will contribute one citation count to the five-year frequency. As can be seen from the temporal distribution, most of the legislative action usually occurs within a ten-year period from a given commission’s ordainment—enough to cover two full electoral terms by a good margin. The relatively long right-hand tail, however, also reveals a few commissions with more enduring legacies. For example, in 1978 minister Friggebo ordained a commission to evaluate the need for new legisla-

²Note that, because we do not start recording the commissions until the year in which they are ordained, the dataset can also be described as an unbalanced panel. For example, if a given commission is ordained in 1975, we will observe it for the full duration between 1975 and 2022, yielding 48 yearly observations. If a given commission is ordained in 1992, however, we will only observe it from 1992 until 2022, yielding 31 yearly observations. We explain how we deal with this imbalance in the methods section.

tion in public planning and building, denominated as Bo 1978:07 *PBL-utredningen*. In 1979, the commission delivered its 900-page long policy report, SOU 1979:65-66 *Markanvändning och byggande*, which would later serve as the foundation for a government bill proposing a complete overhaul of the old planning and building regulations, prop. 1985/86:1 *Med förslag till ny plan- och bygglag*. But the commission's contributions to the government's legislative agenda did not stop there. In fact, even though most of the commission's key proposals had already been implemented by the end of the 1980s, several generations of ministers following thereafter have kept referring back to the commission's legal reasoning to motivate even more legislation (e.g., Prop. 2019/20:52 *En utvecklad översiktsplanering*). While Friggebo's planning and building commission is an extreme example, it clearly illustrates that the ministers' commissions can remain on the bargaining table for significant lengths of time.

To operationalize the ordaining ministers' ideological relations with the parliament, we utilize the partisan ideology scores assembled by the Comparative Manifesto Project ([Lehmann et al. 2023](#)). Historically, the main contenders for government formation in Sweden have been the Social Democratic Party on the left, who dominated Swedish politics for most of the post-war period, and a liberal-conservative multi-party coalition on the right, who first emerged as a proper alternative in the 1970s ([Hellström and Lindahl 2021](#)). We assume that the ministers generally serve as the fiduciaries of their parties and that the manifesto data adequately captures their positions on the classical left-right dimension (but cf., [Lowe et al. 2011](#)). To arrive at a comparable scoring for the parliament, however, we also require a theory of how the individual parliamentarians might coalesce into a reasonably cohesive unit. The two leading alternatives respectively emphasize the pivotal influence of the median legislator of the chamber (e.g., [Krehbiel 1998](#)) and the median legislator of the governing coalition (e.g., [Cox and McCubbins 2005](#)). Because we have no particular stake in this debate, we will consider both the chamber median's party and the coalition median's party as valid representatives of the parliament's position. With comparable ideology scores for both the ministers and the parliament across our entire study period, we can then calculate the absolute ideological distance between the ordaining minister and the parliament in each

legislative year for each individual commission through simple subtraction. We refer to the two alternative measures as *Chamber Distance* and *Coalition Distance*, respectively.

4.3 Methods

We approach our data from an event history perspective. Because the citation rate obviously suffers from significant duration dependence (cf. Figure 1), we require a modeling framework that accounts for the possibility of time-varying effects and outcome propensities. In general, we do not want to compare, say, a thirty-year old commission that may already have been implemented and long forgotten with a three-year old commission that may still be under consideration and hotly debated. Instead, we only want to compare thirty-year-old commissions with other thirty-year-old commissions, and three-year-old commissions with other three-year-old commissions. Additionally, we also do not want to impose any strong assumptions about a given commission’s citation trajectory over time or how it might perform under different political configurations. For our research design to work, we must allow for the possibility that the citation rate could be relatively constant for extended durations, yet also shift abruptly between periods of relative calm and activity. Therefore, we start by ensuring that we can handle any form of duration dependence that might plausibly arise in the data and then build the rest of our model specification on top of that foundation.

Specifically, we ground our analysis in a class of flexible parametric survival models, originally due to [Royston and Parmar \(2002\)](#).³ These models typically start from the classical proportional hazards equation

$$h(t|X_i) = h_0(t)exp(\beta X_i) \tag{1}$$

where $h(t|X_i)$ denotes the event rate h at time t for subject i with covariate profile X , $h_0(t)$ the baseline event rate when all covariates equal zero, and βX_i the covariate coefficients

³For a recent review, see [Collett \(2023\)](#). While these models have primarily been developed in biostatistics, the general approach is quite similar to [Beck, Katz and Tucker \(1998\)](#) classic paper on binary time-series cross-section analysis.

we want to estimate. However, whereas conventional parametric models assume a specific distribution for $h_0(t)$ —such as the exponential, gamma, or Weibull—flexible parametric models instead use splines to estimate $h_0(t)$ from the data. In our case, the actual event distribution appears close to log-normal (cf. Figure 1) and should thus not be terribly difficult to approximate. We model the event rate on the log-cumulative hazard scale and implement spline knots at the 0th, 33rd, 66th, and 100th percentiles of the distribution of uncensored log event times. Because we encountered some modest evidence of time-dependent effects, we also interact our distance predictors with the boundary knots to let the coefficients vary towards the lower and upper percentiles of the time distribution. We use a cluster-robust variance estimator to adjust for the fact that our data structure permits repeated events on the same subject.

In addition to our distance predictors, we add four sets of fixed-effects to our covariate vector. We construct a dummy variable for each ordaining minister, executive department, electoral term, and election year. The minister-effects allow us to partial out any time-constant background factor that may vary between ministers—such as their gender, party affiliation, or work experience—by effectively restricting our comparisons to the same minister. For example, instead of comparing minister Friggebo’s planning and building commission against other ministers’ commissions, we only compare it against minister Friggebo’s own commissions. The department-effects account for the fact that the ordaining ministers always operate within a given policy area and, moreover, may sometimes be reassigned to different departments. Because different policy areas can feature wildly varying levels of legislative activity, we do not want to treat commissions ordained under, say, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Defense as if they are one and the same. The term-effects cover all system-level factors that tend to change along with the electoral process, and perhaps most notably the parliament’s and government’s ideological compositions. For example, coalition governments could have a more difficult time settling on a common policy than single-party governments, and the parliament’s ability to strike back against the ministers could likewise depend on its relative fragmentation. However, because we implicitly hold both the par-

liament and government constant through the electoral terms, these sorts of compositional differences cannot confound our results. Finally, because our research design hinges on electoral turnover for identification, we also include a dummy variable that denotes whether a given commission was enacted in the first year of a new electoral term. This is to adjust for the potential selection effect that could arise if the ministers were to, say, ordain all the most important commissions immediately upon entering office and then save the less important commissions for later.

Finally, to recover marginal estimates of our distance predictors’ performances, we standardize all results to the observed covariate distribution (Hernán and Robins 2020). That is, we first model the citation rate under relatively low levels of ideological distance and the same covariate distribution as in the entire study population; and then, we compare the result against a model with relatively high levels of ideological distance and the same covariate distribution as in the entire study population. The point of the standardization is to bring us as close as possible to a counterfactual “what if” comparison, using the past half-century of Swedish political history as the backdrop. We review the results below.

5 Results

We present results from two model specifications. Recall that we track the ministers’ commissions on a yearly basis and that we field two alternative predictors to model their propensities to be cited in a government bill. In the *Chamber Distance* model we focus on the ideological distance between the ordaining minister and the median legislator of the parliament’s chamber, while in the *Coalition Distance* model we focus on the ideological distance between the ordaining minister and the median legislator of the parliament’s governing coalition. Both models include fixed-effects on the ordaining minister, executive department, electoral term, and election year. Because of the relative complexity of our regression models, we present the results graphically and relegate the parameter estimates to the Appendix. We include 95% confidence intervals throughout.

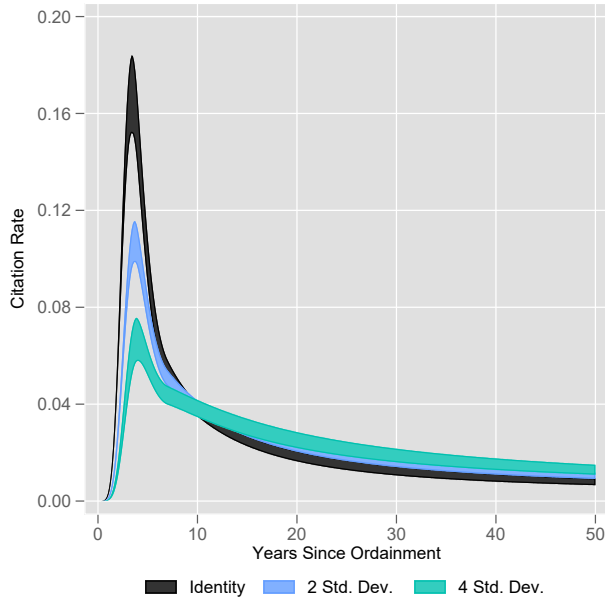


Figure 2: Chamber Distance.

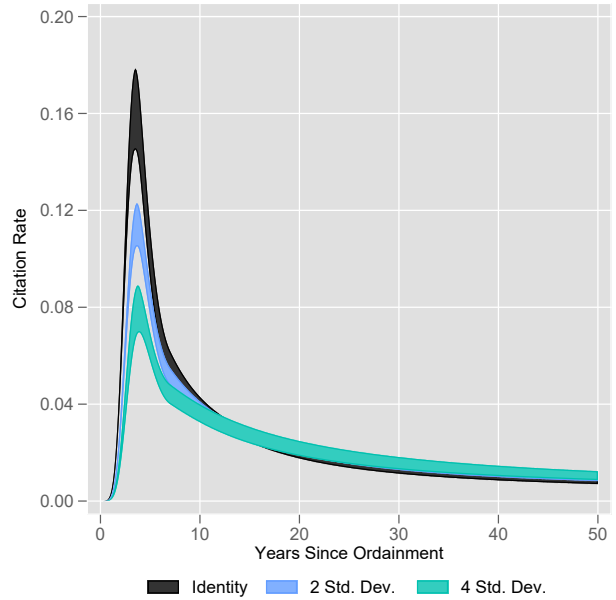


Figure 3: Coalition Distance.

In Figure 2 and 3, we first show the predicted citation rate by commission time. The y-axis shows the rate at which the commissions earn bill citations, while the x-axis shows the number of years that have elapsed since a given commission's ordainment. In a descriptive context, the citation rate for a given year could be calculated simply by dividing the number of cited commissions by the total number of observed commissions. For example, a citation rate of 1 in year 3 would imply that all commissions managed to enter a bill three years after their ordainment, while a citation rate of 0.5 in year 3 would imply that half of the commissions managed to enter a bill three years after their ordainment. Because we include a slew of fixed-effects in our models, however, our predicted citation rate is more akin to a weighted average than a raw proportion. For example, when we add the minister-effects to the mix, we effectively calculate a distinct citation rate for each individual minister; and then, take the weighted average of all of those individual citation rates to recover a minister-adjusted population estimate.

To assess our hypothesis, we report predicted citation rates for three different levels of our distance measures. The black field shows the outcome when the ordaining minister and median legislator have the same ideological position, the blue field when they differ by two

standard deviations, and the teal field when they differ by four standard deviations. As we can see from the graphs, the curves all follow approximately the same pattern as the raw citation frequencies we reported in Figure 1, with a sharp rise and fall in the early years followed by an extended right-hand tail in the later years. This is a good sign, as it indicates that our models follow the data closely. Additionally, notice that the curves all converge towards the end of the time-span. In fact, they are essentially indistinguishable from around 8 years in and onwards. This indeterminacy should however be unsurprising given our descriptive statistics. While we include predictions for the full duration for reference, in practice we observe quite few citations beyond the 10 year mark. Consequently, the tail predictions are mostly mechanical extrapolations from the comparisons we make in the earlier periods, rather than based on any particular observed values.

The most important pattern for our purposes, though, concerns the dramatic difference in the peaks. For example, in the *Chamber Distance* model, the point estimates for the three curves at the three-year mark are approximately 0.17 (black), 0.11 (blue), and 0.07 (teal). Translated into a percentage increase, this means that the predicted citation rate for ordaining ministers with the same ideological position as the chamber median is about 55% higher than for ordaining ministers that lie two standard deviations away from the chamber median, and 143% higher than for ordaining ministers that lie four standard deviations away from the chamber median. Put differently, ministers that align with the parliament’s preferences appear to enjoy a clearly visible fast-track to the government’s bills, while ministers that break with the parliament’s preferences are relegated to the slow-track. The *Coalition Distance* model implies a slightly less pronounced difference between the curves, but still with confidence intervals that overlap those in the *Chamber Distance* model.

In Figure 4 and 5, we also show the cumulative citation probability by commission time, based on the same predictor levels as above. While the citation rate illustrates the commissions’ conditional probabilities of being cited in a given time interval, these conditional probabilities will naturally accumulate over time. In fact, according to our models, the government should be expected to cite most of the ministers’ commissions eventually—as

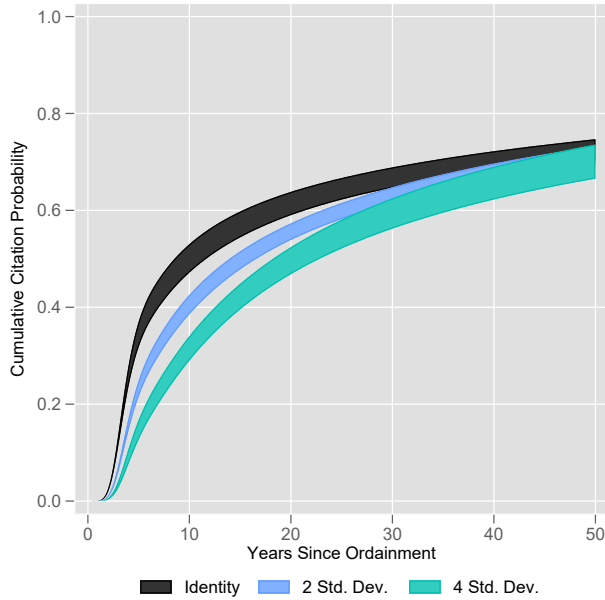


Figure 4: Chamber Distance.

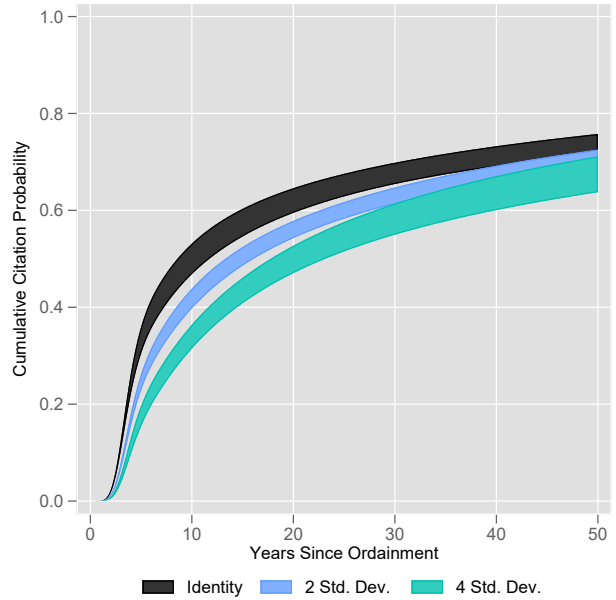


Figure 5: Coalition Distance.

highlighted by the curves' eventual convergence at about a 75% citation probability. The difference is just that some ministers will typically have to wait substantially longer than others in order to gain the government's approval. For example, the *Chamber Distance* model indicates that ordaining ministers with the same ideological position as the chamber median will see about 50% of their commissions enter a bill within a ten year period from their ordainment. By contrast, ordaining ministers that lie two and four standard deviations away from the chamber median will only see about 40% and 30% of their commissions enter a bill in the same time interval, respectively. In the extreme case of a four standard deviation distance, the ministers would have to wait more than a full additional decade before reaching the same 50% citation probability, while a two standard deviation distance would increase the expected duration by about half a decade. Analogously to the citation rate predictions, the *Coalition Distance* model implies a slightly less pronounced difference, but still with confidence intervals that overlap those in the *Chamber Distance* model.

While our results point towards a powerful parliamentary effect on the government's policymaking behavior, it is of course important to recognize that these are counterfactual *ceteris paribus* predictions that we have reconstructed from a much more fragmented polit-

ical history. In reality, parliaments will be elected and dissolved, governments formed and terminated, and ministers appointed and replaced. The point of our modeling exercise is not to provide an accurate depiction of any particular parliament, government, or minister. The point is to demonstrate that the legislative process features a substantial amount of policy selection already in its preparatory stages, and that this selection is consistent with what we would expect if the government was responsive to the parliament. Based on the past half-century of Swedish politics, ministers that share the parliament’s preferences appear to be systematically privileged in the government’s agenda-setting order when compared to ministers that conflict with the parliament’s preferences. By implication, the bills that the government ultimately submits to the parliament cannot generally be treated as an unrestricted representation of ministerial preferences. Instead, they will arise from a curated selection of policy issues that are more likely to be sourced from the parliament’s ideological allies than from the parliament’s ideological opponents. In a very concrete sense, then, the entire legislative process appears to be stacked in the parliament’s favor from the outset. With that said, our research design is not perfect, and we therefore conclude by considering some potential extensions to our study.

6 Discussion

In this paper, we have investigated the institutional balance of power between the parliament and government, focusing on the ministers’ agenda control in the legislative process. We started from the observation that most contemporary research on executive-legislative relations in parliamentary democracies focuses on the parliament’s actions, while paying less attention to the government’s actions. While we have learned a lot from this approach over the years—concerning, for instance, the parliament’s propensity to amend government bills (e.g., [Behrens, Nyhuis and Gschwend 2023](#); [Martin and Vanberg 2020](#))—it also risks obscuring all of those instances where the government may seek to appease the parliament’s interests from the outset. To contribute towards rectifying this limitation, we examined five

decades' worth of lawmaking data from the Swedish government. The results indicate that many potential policies that the government could have proposed will in fact be killed long before they have a chance of appearing on the legislative floor. The selection process' direction, moreover, follows predictably from the proposing minister's ideological relations with the parliament. In general, ministers that lie relatively close to the parliament's ideological position will be significantly better positioned to convert their proposals into actual government bills than ministers that lie relatively far from the parliament's ideological position. Based on the Swedish experience, we therefore conclude that the parliamentary chain of delegation appears to carry a good deal of force.

With that said, our conclusions also carry several important qualifiers. Perhaps most notably, a substantial body of scholarship argues that the ministers may not only seek to sway the enactment of new law, but also the law's implementation. Indeed, in addition to their proposal powers, ministers typically have the opportunity to appoint central government personnel, organize administrative agencies, redistribute executive resources, and engage in a variety of other more bureaucratic activities that could potentially shape the final policy outcome (e.g., [Dahlström and Holmgren 2019, 2023a](#); [Holmgren 2018](#)). If the ministers' true advantage lies on the implementation side of the legislative process, then focusing solely on the agenda-setting stage could prove misleading. While scholars of American politics have recently made significant strides in connecting the federal bureaucracy's organization and behavior with Congressional preferences (e.g., [Acs 2019](#); [Chiou and Rothenberg 2014](#); [Lowande and Rogowski 2021](#)), no comparable research efforts currently exist in the parliamentary context. Although our study obviously cannot reveal whether or to what extent the ministers may serve the parliament's interests also in more general public administration, we do believe their responsiveness in the agenda-setting stage can at least suggest it as a plausible hypothesis for future work (cf. [Dahlström and Holmgren 2023b](#)).

Additionally, our findings are constrained by some of the more peculiar features of the Swedish case. For instance, almost all governments we observe are minority governments, which could make the ministers more sensitive to the chamber median than would otherwise

be the case. Plausibly, had Sweden had more robust majority governments, the results could perhaps have swung more off-centre towards the coalition median instead (in the spirit of [Cox and McCubbins 2005](#)). At the same time, the commission procedure we focus on is deliberately designed for public awareness and always comes with a built-in notice and comment feature. Because all major stakeholders will be able to follow the policymaking process from start to finish and take a public stand on the issue if they so please, the commissions may represent a relatively easy case both for the parliament to pressure the government and for the government to learn what the parliament wants. In situations with more hidden information and hidden action, it would presumably be more challenging for both branches to anticipate what the other may bring to the table and reach a reasonably efficient solution without engaging in a more direct confrontation. Replicating our research design under different configurations of government control and proposal procedures could accordingly also yield different results.

On the other hand, our findings are also bolstered by the fact that Sweden's constitutional order lies very close to an ideal-typical parliamentary democracy (see e.g., [Moe and Caldwell 1994](#); [Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2003](#)). While this does not necessarily imply that our results will travel neatly to all other parliamentary systems, it does provide a transparent foundation for further investigations into how more or less radical departures from the classical ideal-type may shift the power relations between the branches. Ultimately, our results indicate that it is very much possible to build a parliamentary system that works as advertised with regards to government accountability, but our research design also has little to say about which specific instruments that sustain this outcome. A natural extension of our study would accordingly be to incorporate more institutional variation into the analysis in an effort to more precisely identify the factors that keeps the government in check. Such a research program could contribute not only to our understanding of parliamentary democracy, but also the institutional foundation of democratic governments more broadly.

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