60 Years, 54 Coalitions: Coalition Stability in Israel 1949-2009

Shurik Draishpits, Noam Gidron, Mattan Sharkansky and Raz A. Sheinerman

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Abstract

Much of the Political Science literature has focused on governmental stability. Yet, not much research has focused specifically on the Israeli case. In this paper we try to mitigate this gap by empirically examining Israeli coalition stability in the past 60 years. After data has been assembled we use simple statistical methods to study which structural features influence coalition stability. We find that coalition size, measured by the number of MKs has the most significant effect, where larger coalitions are more stable. We further find, against common wisdom, that the government size is not positively correlated with greater coalition stability.

Introduction

A widespread claim among political scientists is that coalition governments are prone to be less stable and durable than one-party governments. The argument is based on the assumption that since coalitions are, by definition, constructed of several parties, they must respond to all coalition partners' interests and therefore prone to be harder to navigate. This claim is also common within the Israeli context, where both the Israeli public and the Israeli Knesset members complain about the allegedly chronic instability manifested in frequent elections, entrances and exits of parties into and from the coalition, etc.

The Israeli Knesset is elected in one of the most proportional electoral systems available.[1] Consequently, there was never one party big enough to form a government by its own.[2] In the last 60 years coalitions in Israel varied in several characteristics such as their duration, the number of their members, the number of parties in the coalition,

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[1] For example: Arend Lijphart, 'Constitutional Choices for New Democracies', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2 (1), Winter 1991, p.73; Matthew S. Shugart, '"Extreme" Electoral Systems and the Appeal of the Mixed Member Alternative', in: Matthew S. Shugart and Martin P. Wattenberg (eds.), *Mixed Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 47

[2] To illustrate the possible result of this phenomenon, it is enough to consider the 2006 elections after which the three biggest parties combined were insufficient to guarantee a parliament majority.

their type, etc. Thus, as a case study of coalition stability, Israel has a fascinating potential.

The purpose of this paper is to mitigate a gap in Israeli coalition studies. In order to accomplish this we first assess the actual coalition durations in Israel in the first 60 years of its existence, and then ask: *what are the institutional factors which affect coalition stability in Israel?*

Our main findings are: first, coalition durations in Israel have dropped significantly in the past 15 years, since the adoption of the direct election of the PM (1996). Second, when testing what institutional variables influence coalition duration, we find one variable being influential throughout our dataset – the coalition size as measured by the *number of MKs* (Members of Knesset) in the coalition.

By relying on existing theories on the one hand, and on empirical research conducted by us on the other hand, we believe that this paper can contribute in two main aspects: first, it examines coalitions in Israel, which have been mostly neglected up to now. In particular, the paper is trying to provide a comprehensive picture of Israeli coalition stability (which is examined by coalition duration). Second, the paper shifts the focus from government stability to coalition stability, which seems to us to be at least as relevant as the former to the Israeli context, as well as to other countries where coalition governments are frequently formed. Coalition duration is more sensitive than government duration to delicate changes in the government's agenda and thus to government stability. For example, during the 30th government (between 2003-2006) Shinuy, Ha'Ichud Ha'Leumi, Mafdal, and Israel Ba'Aliya left the coalition, then replaced by Avoda and Yahadut Ha'Torah. This clearly indicates a major shift in the orientation of the government, which would not have been captured had we limited our observation to the formal formation and termination of governments.

This paper has three parts: first, we explore the relevant literature on the subject and examine the main theoretical approaches and arguments regarding coalition and government stability. Then, we describe our methodology in researching Israeli coalition stability. Finally, we present and analyze our findings while discussing their consequences.

Theoretical Background

It is commonly argued that cabinet[3] duration is an important indicator of governments' stability, which in turn is often regarded as reflecting and/or affecting the legitimacy of the political system as a whole.[4]

Three main approaches can be identified in the literature with regard to cabinet duration and termination. First is the *Structural Factors Approach*, which seeks to identify structural factors that can increase or decrease government's durability. From this perspective, the duration of the government can be described as an attribute of its structural characteristics.[5] For example, researchers working in the framework of this approach may concentrate on several features: the *Bargaining Environmental Complex*,[6] which focuses mainly on the characteristics of the party system and the cabinet, such as fragmentation, size of cabinet, etc.; and *the Institutional Mechanisms Theory* which examines institutional variables such as investiture rules, the discretionary authority of the PM to call early elections, etc. To this one may add the *Ideological Diversity and Polarization Theory*,[7] which emphasizes the ideological structure of the party competition and the ideological composition of the coalition.

Claiming that structural features could not explain much of the variance in coalition duration, critics of this approach argued that it fails the empirical test of explaining historical events.[8] This, in turn, led to the crystallization of a second approach, the *Events Approach*, according to which "[cabinet's] duration is solely a function of the appearance of [unpredictable] events which trigger governmental

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[3] 'Cabinets', 'governments' and 'coalitions' are sometimes used interchangeably. When referring to literature we use the terms originally mentioned. The terms 'coalition governments' and 'coalition cabinets' are commonly used to describe a formation of the executive power shared by more than one party. Since in Israel all governments have been coalition governments we will use the term 'government' when referring to the body composed of the PM, the ministers, and the deputy ministers. 'Coalition', on the other hand, will refer to the body composed of all factions represented in the government.

[4] Bernard Grofman and Peter van Roozendaal, 'Review Article: Modeling Cabinet Durability and Termination', *British Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 27, 1997, p. 420

[5] Michael Laver and Kenneth A. Shepsle, 'Events, Equilibria, and Government Survival', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42 (1), Jan. 1998, p. 30. Mentioned in the bibliography as examples for this approach: Strom, Kaare, 'Party Goals and Government Performance in Parliamentary Democracies', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 79 (3), Sep. 1985, pp. 738-754; Paul V. Warwick, 'The Durability of Coalition Governments in Parliamentary Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies,* Vol. 11 (4), 1979, pp. 465-498.

[6] Michael Laver and Norman Schofield, *Multiparty Government*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); James E. Alt and Gary King, 'Transfers of Governmental Power: The Meaning of Time Dependence ', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 27 (2), 1994, pp. 190-210.

[7] Paul V. Warwick, 'Economic Trends and Government Survival in Western European Parliamentary Democracies', *American Political Science Review,* Vol. 86 (4), 1992, pp. 875-887.

[8] John P. Frendreis, Dennis W. Gleiber and Eric C. Browne, 'The Study of Cabinet Dissolutions in Parliamentary Democracies', *Legislative Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 11, Nov. 1986, p. 629.

collapse".[9] These events may be economic (increasing rates of inflation and unemployment[10]), changes in the parties' strategies (e.g. from a cooperative to a competitive strategy[11]), etc. Advocates of this approach claim that it is stochastic factors such as exogenous critical shocks, rather than predicted and well known structural variables, which play a pivotal role in determining the downfall of governments.[12] According to this approach, "no government [is] inherently more durable than any other".[13]

It is important to clarify that while the Structural Approach is defined in terms of the factors that can be known *ex-ante* to affect government's durability (and is therefore deterministic in some way), the Events Approach focuses on the stochastic circumstances, i.e. those factors whose exact magnitude and timing cannot be known a-priori.[14]

Third is the *Hazard Approach*, or the *Unified Approach*, which tries to reconcile the former two approaches and is considered to be a synthesis of both of them.[15] On the one hand, the Hazard Approach recognizes that stochastic factors can indeed influence the durability of the government and that the survival of the government is not determined in advance. Yet, it also recognizes that "not all shocks will become critical events and destabilize the government".[16] Therefore, on the other hand, it maintains that "certain types of cabinets are predictably more durable than others".[17]

This paper adopts the Structural Approach for the analysis of coalitions' duration. This is due to the following reasons: first, in the tumultuous Israeli reality, it is difficult to determine which events should be considered as critical external shocks with

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[9] *Ibid*., p. 421

[10] Paul V. Warwick, 'Rising Hazards: An Underlying Dynamic of Parliamentary Government', *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 36 (4), Nov. 1992, pp. 857-876.

[11] Marthe Narud, 'Coalition Termination in Norway: Models and Cases', *Scandinavian Political Studies,* Vol. 18 (1), 2007, pp. 1-24.

[12] Browne, Frendreis and Gleiber, 'The Study of Cabinet Dissolution', cited by Grofman and van Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 421

[13] Laver and Shepsle, *Ibid*., p. 30.

[14] Grofman and van Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 423

[15] Gary King et al., 'A Unified Model of Cabinet Dissolution in Parliamentary Democracies', *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 34 (3), Aug. 1990, pp. 846-871; James E. Alt and Gary King, *Ibid*.; David Austen-Smith and Jeffrey Banks, 'Elections, Coalitions, and Legislative Outcomes', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82 (2), Jun. 1988, pp. 405-422; Warwick, 'Rising Hazards: An Underlying Dynamic of Parliamentary Government', pp. 857-876; Warwick, 'Economic Trends and Government Survival in Western European Parliamentary Democracies', pp. 875-887.

[16] Daniel Diermeier and Randolph T. Stevenson, 'Cabinet Terminations and Critical Events', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 94 (3), Sep. 2000, p. 627.

[17] King et al., 'A Unified Model of Cabinet Dissolution', cited by Grofman and van Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 421

the potential to destabilize the political sphere. Therefore, we find it methodologically problematic to apply the Events Approach to the Israeli case study. Second, we hope our conclusions may be of some relevance and contribution to decision makers in forming stable coalitions. In this sense, the structural-institutional approach is the most suitable and applicable for drawing practical conclusions. Third, we would like to close some gaps which exist in the literature regarding the Israeli case of coalitions' duration. Within the structural approach we focus on institutional variables while downplaying ideological ones due to the limited scope of this project.

Previous researchers in the structural-institutional approach identified a number of important variables influencing cabinet durability. Both effective number of parties and nominal number of parties, as measures of fragmentation, indicate "the degree to which a party system is dominated by one or a few parties, as opposed to being more equally divided among more parties".[18] The most common claim with regard to the relationship between government`s durability and *the number of parties* is that *the greater the number of parties in the coalition, the more difficult it is to reach common agreements, thus making the coalition more fragile*. Comparative empirical research usually supported this claim, but that is mainly because most durable coalitions consist of one party only.[19]

An important typology, commonly used by researchers, is made between: (a) *Minimum Winning Cabinets [Coalitions]* – "cabinets which contain parties with voting strength sufficient to ensure a parliamentary majority, but no more".[20] (b) *Oversized\Surplus Cabinets* – cabinets that are larger than minimum winning ones. (c) *Undersized\Minority Cabinets* – ones that are smaller than minimum winning cabinets.

It has become a widely agreed hypothesis that *minimum winning coalitions last longer than the oversized or undersized ones*. Thus, the "durability of cabinets is a function of the degree to which cabinets deviate from minimum winning status".[21] One of the main explanations for this claim is based on the idea of 'bargaining threat': whilst in a minimum winning coalition every party has an equal threat to abandon the

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[18] Grofman and Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 428

[19] Michael Taylor and V. M. Herman, 'Party Systems and Government Stability', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65 (1), Mar. 1971, pp. 28-37.

[20] Lawrence C. Dodd, 'Party Coalitions in Multiparty Parliaments: A Game Theoretic Analysis', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 68, Sep. 1974, pp. 1093-117; Lawrence C. Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), Cited by Grofman and Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 430

[21] Dodd, 'Party Coalitions in Multiparty Parliaments'. cited by: Grofman and Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 430

coalition, in non-minimal coalitions there are parties whose votes are not crucial for the survival of the government, and therefore may be allowed to leave the coalition.[22] Using this variable of deviation from minimum winning coalition, Dodd was able to explain about 30% of the variance in coalition duration. Riker went as far as claiming that "In n-person, zero-sum games, where side payments are permitted, where players are rational, and where they have perfect information, *only* minimum winning coalitions occur".[23]

Israel, in this regard, comprises a difficult case since *surplus* coalitions were not only formed but minimal winning coalitions rarely occurred. Much research on Israeli coalitions has been done on the reasons why surplus coalitions were preferred. One of the suggested reasons was that the electoral process in Israel is not a zero-sum game and side games do occur. Peretz and Doron give three explanations as to why major parties ask minor, seemingly unnecessary, parties to join an oversized coalition in Israel: (1) Opposition in Israel is active and constantly tries to bring down the coalition by offering the smaller parties payoffs for defection. The inclusion of surplus factions gives the government a safety net. Moreover, surplus parties have control on an insignificant part of the national budget and therefore including them in the coalition is costless. (2) Including surplus factions reduces the bargaining power of each individual faction in the coalition, thus making defection threats improbable or ineffective. (3) Additional parties lower the bargaining power of factions *within* the major parties and lower the risk of defection by those.[24]

Like Peretz and Doron, most of the research on the Israeli case focuses on the reasons for establishing surplus coalitions or historical descriptions of coalition formation.[25] However, the questions of coalition stability and duration in Israel have been mostly neglected up to now. It is this gap in the literature that we wish to abridge.

Methodology

Based on the theoretical background and previous studies presented above, and taking into consideration the limited scope of this paper, we have focused our study on

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[22] Grofman and Roozendaal, *Ibid*., p. 431

[23] William Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 32.

[24] Donald Peretz and Gideon Doron, *The Government and Politics of Israel* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997)*,* ch. 6.

[25] For example: Dani Korn and Boaz Shapira, *Coalition Politics in Israel* [Hebrew], (Tel-Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1997); Paul R. Abramson et al., 'Coalition Considerations and the Vote', in: Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (eds.), *The Elections in Israel 2006*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), pp. 45-68.

finding institutional factors influencing coalition stability in Israel. The first order of business must therefore be defining coalition stability or rather – instability.

We considered the following cases as the formation of a new coalition:[26]

1. The formal formation of a new government. By Israeli law these are constituted after the Knesset has expressed confidence in the new government presented by the Prime Minister.[27]
2. The entrance of a new Knesset faction to an existing coalition.[28]
3. The departure of a Knesset faction from an existing coalition.[29]

The Following cases were considered as the termination of a coalition:

1. The formal termination of the government. By Israeli law the government terminates in the following cases:
   a. Resignation of the Prime Minister.[30]
   b. If the Prime Minister dies or is 100 days incapacitated.[31]
   c. An expression of no confidence by a majority of Knesset Members agreeing on someone else to form a new Government.[32]
2. A decision of the Knesset to prematurely dissolve itself.
3. The election of a new Knesset.
4. The entrance of a new Knesset faction to an existing coalition.
5. The departure of a Knesset faction from an existing coalition.

The above definition purposefully excludes the duration of the government as a 'transition government'. Taking into account some transition governments lasted several months and the fact that transition governments are not affected by stability factors as

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[26]Arend Lijphart, 'Measures of Cabinet Durability', *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 17 (2), 1984, pp. 265-279.

[27] *Basic Law: The Government*, Section 13d from the Knesset site:
http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic14_eng.htm

[28] The joining of single Knesset members to a coalition or their departure from one was not considered the formation or termination of the coalition. Several changes in the coalition makeup within one month were considered a single coalition termination and formation.

[29] At the time of formation, the joining parties sign a political agreement that expresses their common denominator. A withdrawal from the coalitions is the common visible indicator for a breaking of the agreement. The agreement also specifies the government`s power distribution among the parties. "This distribution reflects the power balance within the coalition and the importance of each partner to the chance of actually forming a government". [Gad Yaacobi, *The government of Israel* (New York: Praeger, 1982), p. 74] As a consequence, in Israel, every change in the composition of the coalition, being a withdrawal or a joining by another party, makes for a different coalition by definition.

[30] *Basic Law: the Government*, Section 19 from the Knesset site:
http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic14_eng.htm

[31] *Basic Law: the Government*, Section 20 from the Knesset site:
http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic14_eng.htm

[32] *Basic Law: the Government*, Section 28 from the Knesset site:
http://www.knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/basic14_eng.htm

regular government are, this definition was necessary to pinpoint the structural factors we are searching for.

We operationalized coalition stability, our *dependent variable*, in two methods. First, we considered an *absolute* index of coalition duration: the number of months from coalition formation to termination.[33] Second, we calculated a *relative* index for coalition duration: percent out of the maximal duration a coalition could have survived.[34] While the relative operationalization might be considered more accurate as it considers the maximal length a coalition *can* take place, the absolute operationalization's advantage is its taking into account the *perceived* stability (by the public) of the coalition, which is an important index in itself.

The following variables were tested as *independent variables* that might affect the coalition stability:

1. *Coalition size* – measured by two indexes:

    a. *Number of MKs in the coalition* – the number of Knesset members whose faction is a part of the coalition on the day the coalition was formed. Our hypothesis is that *the greater the number of MKs in the coalition the more stable it shall be.* For in Israel, the opposition is constantly active in trying to allure members of the coalition to defect. As the number of members in the coalition increases, defection of MKs from the coalition should not destabilize the government and is therefore less likely to occur.

    b. *Number of Knesset factions in the coalition* on its formation day. Our assumption is that *ceteris paribus, the more parties in the coalition, the less stable it shall be,* as suggested by previous comparative researches presented above.

2. *Coalition fragmentation* – measured by the effective number of factions taking part in the coalition the day it was formed.[35] Our hypothesis is *the greater the effective number of factions in the coalition, the less stable it shall be*. The lack of a relatively dominant faction within the coalition

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[33] The duration in months was calculated by: $\frac{duration\ in\ days}{30.4}$. The denominator was calculated by dividing the number of days in a year by 12 (months).

[34] Warwick, 'The Durability of Coalition Governments in Parliamentary Democracies', p. 468.

[35] $N = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i^2}$ where n is the number of all factions in the coalition and p_i^2 is the square of each party's proportion of all seats in the coalition

creates a continuous tension among the factions in the coalition, and thus leads to its destabilization.

3. *Government size* – measured by the number of people in ministerial positions (including the Prime Minister and excluding deputy Ministers) in the government the day the coalition was formed. This variable seems important since in Israel it is often claimed that large governments are necessary to insure the satisfaction of the parties in the coalition. Thus we suppose that *the greater the number of ministers in the government the more stable the coalition shall be*.

4. *Number of extra parties* – the number of parties which if removed from the coalition will nevertheless leave a coalition with a majority of the members in the Knesset. Knowing that leaving the coalition will not destabilize the government, a faction has little incentive to leave the coalition and thus give up its share in the governmental resources. Therefore, we hypothesize that *the greater the number of extra parties, the incentive to leave the coalition decreases and the coalition shall be more stable*.

5. *Coalition type* – determined on the day the coalition was formed according to the following definitions:

    a. A *minority coalition* is a coalition that does not consist of a majority of MKs.

    b. A *minimal winning coalition* is a coalition that consists of a majority of MKs in which the number of extra parties is 0.

    c. A *surplus coalition* is a coalition that consists of a majority of MKs in which the number of extra parties is greater than 0.

As elaborated above, researches' convention is that minimal wining coalitions are more stable than minority coalitions or surplus ones. However, researchers have also identified exceptions. We believe Israel is such an exception for the same reasons stated for previous variables. Thus, we expect *surplus coalitions to be more stable than minimal winning ones, which in turn shall be more stable than minority coalitions*.

Data was collected from governmental websites,[36] and from Korn's and Shapira's book dealing with Israeli coalitions.[37] Including all Israeli governments from 1949 (when the first government was formed) until 2009 (when the current government was formed)[38] the number of coalitions by the definition aforementioned is N=54.

Findings and Discussion

We find that the average duration of coalitions in Israel in between 1949-2009 was 11.64 months. The longest coalition was headed by Golda Meir between August 1970 and December 1973 surviving 40.89 months. The shortest coalition lasted less than a month (27 days) and was headed by Moshe Sharet between June 29th and July 26th 1955. Appendix 1 consists of all coalitions with both relative and absolute indexes.

We examine coalition stability while looking at four distinct periods of the political system: (1) a dominant party system (1949-1977); (2) a two-party system (1977-1996); (3) a directly elected PM system (1996-2003); (4) the residues of the directly elected PM system (2003-2009). This division is based on critical changes in the Israeli party system, changes which indicate unique features for each period.

As was mentioned at the methodology section, coalition stability was measured by two indexes. Therefore, a first important finding would be the correlation between these two indexes. While a correlation between these indexes is expected (as they both measure coalition duration), each gives us unique information. Indeed we find a strong correlation between these indexes: $R=0.71$ $p<0.001$.

Appendix 2 describes the analysis of our stability measures by the *four* periods mentioned. Notice the drop between the two first periods (i.e. up to the 1996 electoral system change) and the two second periods (i.e. since the 1996 electoral system change). When merging the first two periods and the second two periods (appendix 3) we notice more clearly the differences between them in coalition duration: in the

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[36] *All governments of Israel*, from: the Knesset site:
http://www.knesset.gov.il/govt/eng/GovtByNumber_eng.asp
Cabinet Meeting Press Releases, from: the Prime Minister's office site:
http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Archive/Cabinet/
Current Events List, from: the Prime Minister's office site:
http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Archive/Current+Events/
Press Releases List, from: the Prime Minister's office site:
http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Archive/Press+Releases/
[37]Korn and Shapira, *Ibid*.
[38] The 2009 Netanyahu government was not included in our data as we have no information of its durability at this time.

absolute measure there is a decline from 13.15 months to 8.43 months, and in the relative index from 45.2% of the maximum term to 21.6% of the maximum term.

These results were found to be statistically significant using F-test: concerning the absolute index, p=0.058 (which we consider close to statistically significant) and for the relative index p=0.005. Therefore, during the description of our findings we mostly mention a distinction between the period before 1996 and the period since then. This decision was further supported by the fact that the number of cases in the third and fourth periods was small (N=8 and N=7 respectively), so in order to receive statistically significant results the latter two periods were united (N=15).

Number of MKs in the coalition

When examining the period as a whole (N=54) we receive impressive results. The correlation between the number of MKs in the coalition and the absolute index is R=0.297 and p=0.014; and the correlation between number of MKs in the coalition and the relative index is even more impressive: R=0.406 and p=0.001. This correlation holds when controlling the number of factions in the coalition and the number of extra factions in the coalitions (the absolute index: R=0.235, p=0.047; the relative index: R=0.338, p=0.007).

These findings support our hypothesis that the greater the number of the MKs in the coalition, the longer it survives. Nonetheless, it is worth paying a closer attention to the distinctions between the various periods.

Concerning the division to periods: the first period (1949-1996) is characterized by a strong and statistically significant correlation (the absolute index: R=0.274, p=0.046; the relative index: R=0.374, p=0.01). This correlation holds in the relative index when controlling for the number of factions in the coalition and the number of extra factions in the coalition (R=0.288, p=0.042). However, no correlation was found between the absolute index and the number of MKs when controlling for the number of factions and the number of extra factions in the second period.

When examining the second period by our two sub-periods (1996-2003 and 2003-2009) we observe a stark difference between the two. While in the 1996-2003 period we find a surprising negative correlation using the relative index and controlling for the number of factions and the number of extra factions (R=-0.58, p=0.114), in the

fourth period (2003-2009) we find a strong positive correlation with the relative index while controlling for the same variables (R=0.422, p=0.239).[39]

As noticed, in most cases the impact of the number of MKs in the coalition is enhanced by the impact of the number of factions and the number of extra factions in the coalition. Yet, there is still a strong and statistically significant correlation when controlling for these variables. Interestingly, the correlation inverts in the third period when the PM was elected directly. This finding supports the notion that this period was distinctive in its political dynamics. It should be noticed that the distinctiveness of the third period will also be apparent in subsequent results.

We offer several possible explanations to our main finding, the positive correlation between the number of MKs and the durability of the coalition. First, a basic explanation may be that larger coalitions mean smaller oppositions thus indicating there are fewer available MKs that operate in order to destabilize the coalition.

Second, the greater the number of members in the coalition, defection of MKs from the coalition is not expected to destabilize the government and, therefore, the motivation to defect from the coalition is diminished.

Third, inspired by Maor's model of coalition functioning,[40] the more MKs in the coalition, the more it can contain internal disagreements. Wide coalitions can allow single MKs and even factions to express their dissent from time to time and deviate from the coalition's agenda while not risking a defeat in the Knesset. This, in turn, allows tension relief inside the coalition and keeps all partners of the coalition relatively satisfied.

Fourth (and as an expansion of the latter explanation), from the PM's perspective, a larger coalition allows the formation of ad-hoc coalitions for specific decisions, thus allowing the PM a greater leeway for maneuvering within the coalition and by this reducing the risk of coalition collapse due to internal quarrels.

Number of factions and number of extra factions

Allegedly, a weak correlation exists between the number of factions and one of the indexes of coalition stability (with the relative index R=0.225, p=0.051), however,

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[39] It should be noted that these results are not statistically significant. This is mainly due to the small N in the third and fourth sub-periods.

[40] Moshe Maor, *Parties, Conflicts and Coalitions in Western Europe: Organizational Determinants of Coalition Bargaining* (London: Routledge and LSE, 1998).

controlling for the number of MKs in the coalition indicates this is a false link. This was also the case when splitting the data into two or four periods.

Regarding the number of extra factions in the coalition, we find a weak and yet statistically significant correlation with the relative index (R=0.253, p=0.032). However, controlling for the number of MKs and the effective number of parties once again reveals this as a false connection.

Examining this variable periodically proves to be intriguing. While in the first periods (up to 1996) no strong or statistically significant correlation was found, in the third period (1996-2003) a negative and strong correlation was found (with the absolute index R=-0.626 p=0.066, and with the relative index R=-0.409, p=0.181), this while controlling for the number of MKs in the coalition. However, when controlling also for the effective number of parties in the coalition this correlation weakens to R=-0.419, p=0.204 in the relative index and virtually disappears in the absolute index to R=-0.139, p=0.397. In the fourth period a positive correlation was found (with the absolute index R=0.862 p=0.014, and with the relative index R=0.466, p=0.176), again, while controlling for the number of MKs in the coalition. This correlation, moreover, does not disappear when controlling also for the effective number of parties (with the absolute index R=0.879 p=0.025, and with the relative index R=0.218 p=0.362).

Generally speaking, *these findings do not seem to present a clear and coherent conclusion regarding our hypothesis*. While we hypothesized a positive correlation between the number of extra parties and the duration of coalitions, the findings show different trends in our four periods. We especially find the third period's findings anomalous to our hypothesis and to the rest of the periods.

The effective number of factions (coalition fragmentation)

When analyzing all periods together there seems to be no strong or statistically significant correlation between the effective number of factions in the coalition and between our two indexes of coalition duration. When controlling for the number of MKs, number of factions and number of extra factions in the coalition, no significant correlation is found for the first two periods (1949-1996). However, in the last two periods (1996-2009) when controlling for the three variables we find a strong and negative correlation (with the absolute index R=-0.441 p=0.076, and with the relative index R=-0.435 p=0.079).

These results only partially support our hypothesis as a significant correlation was found only for the last two periods (since 1996). A possible explanation for this might be the small variance in the effective number of factions in coalitions in the first two periods (appendix 4). A diminished variance in the number of effective factions hints coalitions had similar fragmentation properties, thus decreasing our ability to find a strong correlation.

Government Size

Surprisingly, most periods have not corroborated our hypothesis. Examining all periods together we receive a weak and insignificant correlation between government size and our duration indexes (with the absolute index: R=0.011, p=0.47, and with the relative index: R=0.045, p=0.373). Controlling for the number of MKs, number of factions and number of extra factions the correlation remains weak and insignificant (the absolute index: R=-0.118, p=0.205, and with the relative index: R=-0.146, p=0.153).

Dividing our data into two periods, while we find no correlations in the first period, the second period exemplifies a negative correlation. When controlling for the number of MKs, number of factions and number of extra factions in the coalition the absolute index gives a strong correlation (R=-0.45, p=0.071), which we also consider quite significant considering the small N. The relative index gives ambiguous results: R=-0.26, p=0.208.

This brings us to the following conclusion: although not all results are statistically significant, some findings suggest the possibility of a negative connection between the number of ministers and the stability of the coalition. However, it is worth mentioning that big governments do correlate with large coalitions (the number of MKs) – R=0.402, p=0.001. Therefore, while government size does not influence stability directly, one may claim that it can assist in establishing large coalitions, which in turn stabilizes them as mentioned before.

Coalition type

Because coalition type is not a classical ordinal variable, we will not analyze the Pearson correlation. Out of 54 coalitions examined in this paper, 40 were surplus, 8 were minority, and 6 were minimal winning coalitions. This finding coincides with

previous researches claiming that surplus coalitions in Israel are the rule, rather than the exception. This, despite the fact we operationalized coalitions in a different manner.

Examining the mean length of the coalitions by type (appendix 5) shows that *surplus coalitions are the most stable by far according to both indexes, as we indeed have hypothesized*. While according to the relative index minority coalitions are more durable than minimal winning coalitions, examining the absolute index proves the opposite. This may be explained by the small number of cases in both categories of coalition types, which also obligates us to state our conclusions with great caution.

Summary and Conclusions

This essay had two main purposes: first, to try to fill in the empirical gap regarding the duration of coalitions in Israel during the first 60 years of the state's existence. In this context we have shown that generally speaking there is a sharp decline in the coalitions' duration since the 1996 electoral system reform. Our second purpose was to outline the institutional variables that affect coalitions' duration in Israel. Here we have found that the most significant result was the number of MKs in the coalition.

Our second (and main) finding comprises a twofold significance: on the one hand, it contradicts a wide range of previous researches, according to which minimal winning coalitions are more stable than surplus coalitions. On the other hand, and not less importantly, it may push us towards a more optimistic view of our politicians, indicating that their desire to compose large coalitions may stem from a rational understanding of what would make their coalition more stable. However, it should be noticed that further politicians' assumption that large *governments* will contribute to coalition stability wasn't found to be statistically established. This finding was intuitively stated by a senior political consultant: "There is no advantage in a large government – its management is complicated, awkward and problematic. […] There may be governmental stability, but this is *due to the coalition, not the government*."[41]

While acknowledging the limitations of our research, we nonetheless believe it can serve as a good starting point for answering additional questions that warrant further research: are the conclusions drawn from this research relevant only to Israel and its unique political climate or whether coalitions in other countries are affected by the same factors as well? How, if at all, would a different operationalization of the concept of

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[41] Daniel Edelson, 'This Fat Government', *YNET*, 31.03.2009 [in Hebrew].
http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3694522,00.html (05.06.10)

'coalition' affect the above-mentioned findings? What is the link between institutional variables (examined in this paper) and other types of variables (belonging to other approaches), such as: ideology and external shocks?

Furthermore, notice that within the institutional approach the variables examined in this paper were only those that the coalition formateur can influence upon coalition formation. Further research may also test other institutional variables such as the parliamentary fragmentation and party nature (which are given).

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Coalition Duration
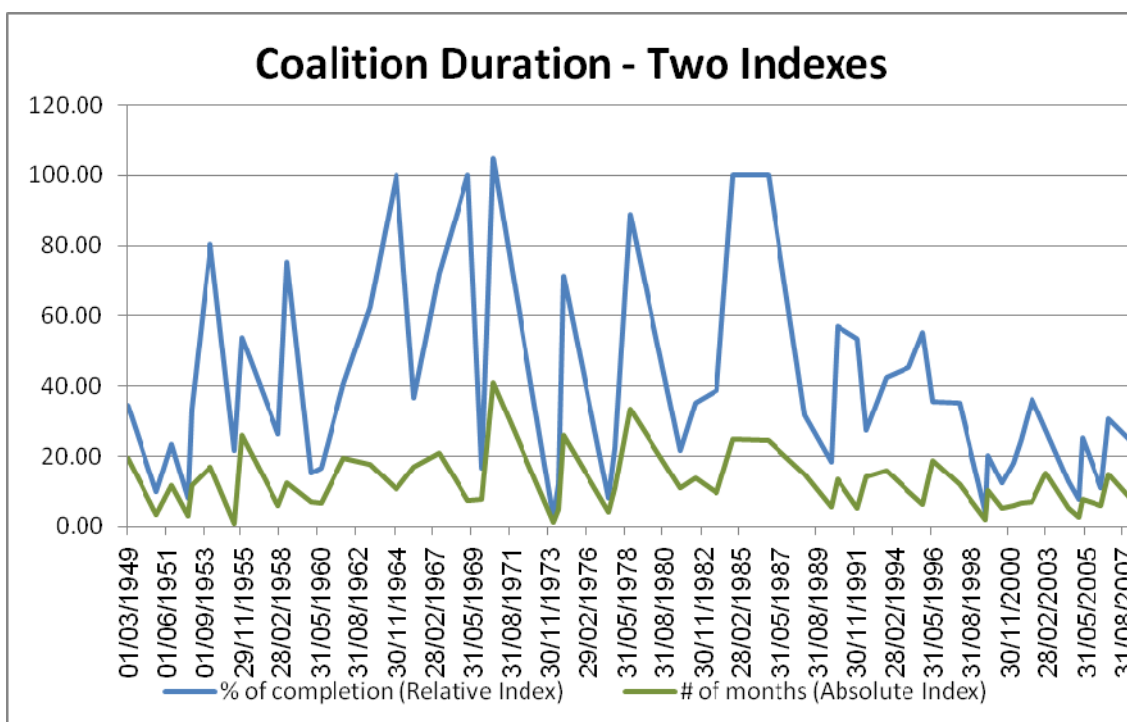
Appendix 2: The Mean length of coalitions in four periods

era of party system		Length in months	Percent Out of Max. Term of Coalition
Dominant Party	Mean	12.8961	44.2339
	N	23	23
Two Party System	Mean	13.5200	46.5831
	N	16	16
Directly Elected PM	Mean	8.3638	23.2388
	N	8	8
Return to Parliamentarism	Mean	8.4971	19.7929
	N	7	7
Total	Mean	11.8393	38.6513
	N	54	54

Appendix 3: The Mean length of coalitions in two periods

Era Recoded		Length in months	Percent Out of Max. Term of Coalition
1949-1996	Mean	13.1521	45.1977
	N	39	39
1996-2009	Mean	8.4260	21.6307
	N	15	15
Total	Mean	11.8393	38.6513
	N	54	54

Appendix 4: The standard deviation of the effective number of parties in the coalition by four periods

era of party system	Std. Deviation	Mean
Dominant Party	.56636	2.1587
Two Party System	.50577	2.1306
Directly Elected PM	1.19409	3.9975
Return to Parliamentarism	.82554	2.6971
Total	.95201	2.4926

Appendix 5: Mean length of coalition by type

Coalition Type,		Length in months	Percent Out of Max. Term of Coalition
minority	Mean	6.6062	29.6963
	N	8	8
minimal winning	Mean	9.3050	21.8917
	N	6	6
surplus	Mean	13.2660	42.9563
	N	40	40
Total	Mean	11.8393	38.6513
	N	54	54

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