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The Agenda Setting Power of the Prime Minister Party in Coalition Governments

Christoffer Green-Pedersen (cgp@ps.au.dk)

Peter B. Mortensen (peter@ps.au.dk)

Florence So (fso@ps.au.dk)

Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, 8000 Arhus C, Denmark

Christoffer Green-Pedersen is corresponding author, phone: + 45 87165692

Christoffer Green-Pedersen is professor of political science at Aarhus University. His main research interests are party competition, agenda setting, and public policy

Peter B. Mortensen is professor of political science at Aarhus University, Denmark. His research interests include agenda setting, public policy, public spending, and public administration. He is currently heading the CAPCAS (Causes and Policy Consequences of Agenda Setting) project.

Florence So is postdoc at Aarhus University. Her main interests are party organization, party competition, and leadership change.

Abstract:
Despite coalition governments being the most widespread form of government, many aspects of coalition politics are still poorly understood. This is especially true for questions relating to the role of the prime minister party within the coalition. Being the prime minister party seems to imply considerable influence, but little evidence actually exists as to the factors shaping the influence of the prime minister. This paper offers a new approach to studying the factors conditioning the influence of the prime minister party in a coalition. The approach is focused on the extent of issue overlap between the party manifesto of the prime minister party and the first government speech after the election. This approach makes it possible to actually analyze the factors shaping the influence of the prime minister party. The results show that the PM party is constrained by the issue emphasis of its coalition partners but less so when it holds dissolution power and more when it has many coalition partners when controlling for the seat share of the PM party. The paper thus both offers a new approach to study the coalition compromise and new evidence on the factors shaping the influence coming from holding the PM position.

Key Words:
Coalition politics, government speeches, party manifestos, dissolution power

The functioning of coalition or multi-party governments has long been a central concern for political science (e.g., Müller and Strøm 2000). While the literature has traditionally focused on coalition formation, questions about coalition politics, or the actual functioning of coalition governments, have gained increased attention. In a recent piece, Martin and Vanberg (2014) summarize this discussion by arguing that coalition politics is best understood as a coalition compromise. It is not simply the party holding a given ministerial portfolio that determines coalition policies, nor is it the median legislative party. Instead, these policies reflect compromises between the parties forming a coalition.

The emphasis on the coalition compromise raises new and important questions. In particular, in this paper, we focus on the role of the prime minister and his or her party. Anyone following coalition formation will notice that the position as prime minister seems especially important to the parties. Recent studies have shown that this is for good reasons. For instance, Furtunato and Adams (2015) show that voters tend to identify the position of the government with that of the Prime Minister, and a recent study by Thomson et al. (2017) indicates that gaining the position as Prime Minister provides a party better possibilities of fulfilling its electoral pledges. However, empirical research into the influence within a coalition of the party holding the PM position is still rather limited.

This paper contributes to this by investigating what constraints the party of the prime minister in setting the policy agenda of the government. Does the influence of the party holding the prime minister position vary with the number of coalition partners, the number of seats held by the party of the prime minister, and/or the formal powers of the prime minister, such as the right to dissolution? Investigating such questions empirically is important to advance our understanding of a certain party gaining the PM position. It is further important for advancing the coalition literature from recognizing that coalition politics leads to a compromise towards an understanding of the politics and functioning of coalition governments.

One reason why the literature on government coalitions has been relatively slow in addressing questions about coalition compromising is the difficulties of investigating this empirically. Ideally, a study of the nature of coalition compromise needs data on both the emphasis of the coalition partners and on a common output from the coalition, which needs to be measured on a common scale. To meet this requirement, we utilize the content of the annual speech delivered by the prime minister at the opening of each parliamentary session[1]. These speeches represent both an important opportunity for the government to communicate its issue emphasis to the public and a highly visible commitment to certain legislation in the coming parliamentary year. Furthermore, the speech is a joint output from the coalition in which the prime minister speaks on behalf of the entire government. This implies that it should only contain issues that coalition partners can (minimally) agree on since the prime minister is unlikely to convey disagreement among coalition partners. This paper examines how the consistency between the issues that the party of the prime minister has advocated for during the election and the issue priorities in the following speech is influenced by coalition characteristics.

Our approach builds on a policy agenda-setting perspective (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; Timmermans and Breeman 2015). The agenda-setting perspective focuses primarily on the priority of different issues, such as the economy, defense, and education, rather than on the policy positions of the issues or the broader left-right dimension. This focus on issue agendas is consistent with the idea of issue competition in which political parties compete by emphasizing the issues they would prefer to see dominate politics (Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983). In this perspective, the central question is: "To what extent is the issue agenda of the prime minister's party reflected in the agenda representing the coalition government and, not least, how is this relationship moderated by certain characteristics of the coalition?"

[1] In a few countries, such as the Netherlands and the UK, the speech is delivered by the head of state, i.e., the king or queen. However, this is done on behalf of the government holding power (see, e.g., Mortensen et al. 2011).

Our data covers observations over time from Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. These countries vary in terms of the formal powers of the prime minister, the typical number of coalition partners, and the type of coalition, which makes it possible to shed light on the moderating effects of such factors. The paper draws on data on the issue priorities of the individual coalition partners as well as data on a common issue agenda presented by the coalition, i.e., the executive speeches. This data has features that are attractive from the perspective of the coalition literature.

The empirical analysis shows that the extent to which a prime minister's party is constrained by its coalition partners depends on both the formal power of the prime minister and the number of coalition partners. Holding dissolution power makes the prime minister's party less constrained by the agenda of its coalition partners. On the other hand, having more coalition partners imposes a further constraint on the prime minister's party. Furthermore, the latter constraint also holds when the number of seats in the coalition controlled by the party of the prime minister is controlled for. The broader implications of these findings are discussed in the concluding section of the paper.

Coalition politics

Coalition politics has been at the core of political science for a long time focusing on coalition formation (Martin and Stevensson 2001) and portfolio allocation (Laver and Shepsle 1996). However, research on coalition politics has increasingly moved into broader questions about the functioning and internal dynamics of coalitions. One central aspect of this development has been a growing interest in the instruments of coalition governance. (e.g., Strøm, Müller, and Bergman 2008; Timmermans and Moury 2006). However, the actual analysis of coalition politics has been rather

limited. For instance, most of the studies of coalition agreements have focused on the existence of the instrument itself rather than on the content of these agreements (Müller and Strøm 2008).

In recent years, scholars such as Martin and Vanberg (2011; 2014) have begun to investigate coalition politics empirically. They (2011) test three competing models based on a study of the number of changes made to bills in Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. The first model implies that the party holding the legislative median determines which changes are made to bills before passing. The second model stipulates that changes in the bills will reflect the preferences of the party holding the relevant ministerial portfolio (Laver and Shepsle 1996). The third model, which is the one receiving the most empirical support, is the idea of a "coalition compromise" in which policies reflect a compromise across the policy preferences of the coalition partners. Relatedly, Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017) investigate how German parties balance the electoral imperative (the need for each party to gain votes) and the coalition imperative (the need to govern together) over time, using press releases to extract parties' policy issue emphasis. The findings reveal that German parties differentiate themselves right after and just before elections (for related studies, see Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik 2014; Timmermans and Breeman 2015; Zubek and Klüver 2015).

Despite these recent contributions, our understanding of coalition politics remains rather limited. One question that has hardly been touched upon is the role of the prime minister and his or her party. Martin and Vanberg (2011) did not find support for the ministerial portfolio model, but the prime minister's position is a special portfolio that cannot necessarily be compared to being, for instance, minister of education. One of the few studies dealing directly with the implication for the party holding the PM position is the recent study of pledge fulfillment by Thomson et al (2017). This study finds that gaining the PM position implies higher chances of pledge fulfillment, though the chances seem to vary across cases (op. cit. 537, 541). This study thus points towards the importance

of a party gaining the PM position, but also towards a need for studying the conditions under which gaining the PM position implies more influence within a coalition.

One literature that has dealt more directly with the role as prime minister and his or her party within a coalition is the literature on legislative politics. This literature has studied how formal procedures such as dissolution power and control of amendment procedure shape legislative politics in parliaments (cf. Huber 1992). Such procedures are often under the control of the prime minister. This literature has focused on when such procedures are used (e.g., Strøm and Swindle 2002, Huber 1992) as well as their effect. In terms of the latter, Becher and Christiansen (2015) have shown—based on Danish data—how the threat to dissolve a parliament makes it easier for a government to pass its bills, at least right after an election. Although these works reveal important institutional mechanisms for the prime minister's party to pass its preferred bills in the legislature, we do not yet know whether they also influence the issue agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party within the coalition. This distinction is important. The ability to pass legislations reflects the prime minister's positive agenda-setting power. That is, it reveals which policies the prime minister's party would like to enact into law. However, studying coalition dynamics through the lens of the legislative process may mask the negative agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party and/or its coalition partners, i.e., preventing certain issues from gaining attention.

In sum, many questions including the potential influence of the prime minister's party remain unanswered. The recent study by Thomson et al (2017) indicates that gaining the PM position at least in some cases means more influence within a coalition, but we need a better understanding of when this is the case. Studies within the broader literature on legislative politics would further indicate that formal powers of the prime minister are important for coalition politics. Combining this research with an agenda-setting approach, the next section derives a set of central implications for the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party in a coalition.

A policy agenda-setting approach to coalition politics

Theoretically, the coalition literature typically focuses on party policy positions, often collapsed to one or a few general dimensions of conflict. In the following, we draw on a somewhat different approach, namely, policy agenda-setting theory, which has recently been combined with theories of issue competition among political parties (cf. Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015). This approach highlights how the prioritization of scarce issue attention across different policy issues is a key process in any democratic system as well as within coalition governments (Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Timmermans and Breeman 2015). How much political attention is directed towards the economy, health questions, or environmental problems has important consequences for both the policy decisions made and for how voters evaluate political parties.

At the same time, parties have different issue preferences (Budge and Farlie 1983). Social democratic parties typically want to see attention directed towards social policy issues because they consider these issues important and/or because attention to these issues may be electorally beneficial to them. However, a green party would probably prefer more emphasis on environmental policy. Although somewhat different from the positional approach that dominates studies of coalitions, this agenda-setting approach also highlights that coalitions are composed of actors with different preferences who are struggling to gain as much influence in the coalition as possible. Thus, the main reason for approaching coalition compromising from a policy agenda-setting approach is not that it points to very different factors potentially influencing coalition politics; rather, it offers a potential solution to a central challenge for the coalition literature, namely, how to actually study coalition compromising.

To tackle such challenges, we take on a new approach focusing on the issue content of the prime minister's annual speech in parliament, which he or she delivers at the beginning of the parliamentary session. These speeches have increasingly been analyzed from a policy agenda-setting

perspective (e.g., Mortensen et al. 2011, Breeman et al. 2009; Jennings and John 2009). There are good reasons for this since these speeches are important for the government in several ways. First, they represent an important opportunity for a coalition to signal its issue emphases to the public; that is, the issues that the government will focus on in the coming parliamentary session. As Sagarzazu and Klüver (2017) and Martin and Vanberg (2008) argue, communication to the public is a very important objective within a coalition, although this is often overlooked by the coalition literature. These speeches typically receive substantial media coverage, and attracting attention to its preferred issues is therefore important for a party in a coalition. Second, within a coalition, the opening speech presents the legislative program of the coalition. Attention to an issue in the executive speech is thus important for a party if it would like to see legislation on the issue. On the other hand, if a party would prefer to block action on an issue, an effective way would probably be to leave it out of the opening speech. Klüver and Zubek (2017) have thus shown that the promises Danish government make in connection with the speech in terms of proposing legislation in the next parliamentary session are kept in 86% of the cases (op. cit., 7).[2]

Furthermore, compared to other studies of coalition communication to the public, analyzing the government speech has one central advantage, namely, that it is a joint communication product. If one compares, for instance, press releases from the different coalition partners (Sagarzazu and Klüver, 2017), showing that they pay attention to similar issues raises the immediate question of whether they in reality disagree fundamentally about their policy position on the issues. However, in a government speech, it is very hard for coalition partners to state explicit disagreement. In that case, they would rather avoid the issue. Martin (2004) finds exactly that when coalition governments form

[2] Alternatively, one could also have studied coalition agreements, but the governmental speeches are preferable because they are clearly meant as a means for communication with voters. Coalition agreements are not meant to be directly communicated to the electorate, see also footnote 4.

their legislative agendas, they prioritize policy issues that do not cause internal conflict in the coalition. Thus, once the prime minister begins to communicate about issues in a high-profile situation such as the executive speech, some kind of agreement on the issues within the coalition has to be reached. This makes the government speech particularly attractive to analyze.

As argued above, the policy agenda-setting approach falls neatly in line with the recent focus within the coalition literature on the coalition compromise. It implies that any coalition will involve a balance between agreement and disagreement over issue attention. As argued by Huber (1992, 684–685), any study of coalition compromising will have to take into account that a coalition will exhibit a mixture of disagreement and agreement. Disagreement is a necessary component of coalition governance, whereas agreement enables the formation of a coalition government.

With this as point of departure, our baseline expectation is that the more the issue emphasis of coalition partners differ from that of the prime minister's party (i.e., disagreement in issue emphasis), the weaker is the link between the issue emphases of the prime minister's party and the agenda of the coalition government. Note that the aim of the paper is not to investigate which parties are most influential in a coalition. Instead, we investigate how and not least when disagreements with coalition partners on issue emphases constrain the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party. The starting point then is that disagreement in a coalition constrains the PM party and this is summarized in the following baseline hypothesis:

H1: The more the prime minister's party and its coalition partners' issue emphases diverge, the less the issue agenda of the prime minister's party is reflected in the government's issue agenda.

Having established this baseline hypothesis, we can now examine the factors moderating this relationship between intra-coalition divergences of issue emphasis and the reflection of the PM party's issue agenda in the government's issue agenda.

The first factor we address is the formal power of the prime minister. As Huber (1992, 684–685) concludes, formal procedures can influence the strategic interaction between coalition partners, but the effects of such procedures depend on the extent of disagreement among coalition partners. Furthermore, Huber (1996) also shows how institutional powers of the prime minister strengthen the influence of his or her party even when not evoked. Thus, even if the likelihood of invoking these instruments depends on specific situational factors, such as the standing of the prime minister's party in opinion polls, the formal literature on such instruments would suggest that they strengthen the prime minister's party in general.

A central formal power of the prime minister is the prime minister's dissolution power, i.e., the right to dissolve parliament. Using legislative data from Denmark, Becher and Christiansen (2015) find that when conflicts arise between the party of the prime minister and its coalition partners, the threat of dissolution offers the prime minister's party more freedom to propose its favored policies. Although government's annual speeches do not correlate perfectly with the parliament's legislative agenda, they do serve as a signal of upcoming bill proposals and the government's policy agenda as shown by Klüver & Zubek (2017). Since prime ministers, who can unilaterally dissolve a parliament, have more control over the policymaking process, they can be more certain that their proposals will be passed. As such, they can more confidently announce their intentions for drafting their desired policies during the annual speeches. Therefore, the constraining effect of disagreement on issue attention within the coalition is likely to depend on whether the prime minister has the power to dissolve parliament:

> *H2*: The constraining effect of the issue emphasis of the coalition partners (see H1) is weaker when the prime minister possesses dissolution power.

The number of coalition partners is another factor that might affect the prime minister's agenda-setting power. The more parties in government, the more varied the issue emphases should be among

coalition partners. Since the prime minister's party would need to accommodate the issues that its partners intend to advocate, it would need to incorporate its partners' preferred issues into the government's issue agenda, even if the issues are not important in the eyes of the prime minister. At the same time, the question remains whether the presence of a coalition partner alone can constrain the party of the prime minister, or whether the relative strength of the coalition partners matters more. For instance, if the party of the prime minister holds 40 percent of the seats in parliament, does it matter whether the remaining seats of the coalition are distributed across one or three coalition partners? We expect that the number of coalition partners has an independent effect on the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party. Being part of a coalition implies a voice in the internal discussion of a coalition that is not necessarily proportional to the number of seats held by a given party. A coalition partner with 20 seats can be expected to have more influence than one with five seats—however, not four times as much.

The seat share of the prime minister's party is also expected to matter for its influence, but so is the number of coalition partners. Finally, as in the case with dissolution power, both factors can only be studied when the degree of disagreement within the coalition is taken into account. Therefore, we focus on how these two factors moderate the constraining effect of disagreement in issue attention within the coalition:

> H3: The constraining effect of the issue emphasis of the coalition partners (see H1) increases with the number of parties in the coalition.

> H4: The constraining effect of the issue emphasis of the coalition partners (see H1) decreases with the relative seat share of the prime minister's party within the coalition.

One caveat is that the above hypotheses are treated as moderators of the relationships between a coalition's degree of issue emphases diversity and the government agenda (i.e., interactions). If, for instance, there is perfect agreement in the issue emphasis between the prime minister's party and its

coalition partners, then there is no way of disentangling whether the possession of dissolution power alters the ability of the prime minister's party to impose its preferred policies on the government agenda. Thus, it is theoretically appropriate to conceptualize these factors as moderators, and their role in affecting the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party as conditional.

Data and research strategy

We cover coalition governments in four countries: Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. These countries vary in the typical types of government, ranging from minority governments in Denmark to supersized majority governments in Belgium.[3] They also differ in the number of coalition partners, e.g., Belgium typically has a large number of coalition partners. In terms of their institutional characteristics, the countries also vary. The prime minister has dissolution power in Denmark, whereas the German prime minister only has a limited degree of dissolution power. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the prime minister has no such power (Goplerud and Schleiter 2016, 435–436). Thus, the selection offers a dataset with considerable variation in both the type of coalitions formed and institutional rules surrounding these coalitions.

In all four countries, the executive speech is an important annual event that attracts substantial media attention.[4] In Denmark, the speech is delivered by the prime minister on behalf of the government when parliament opens in early October (Mortensen et al. 2011). In the Netherlands, the

[3] In some periods, Danish governments have been single party governments. These are not included in the dataset.

[4] An alternative measure would have been coalition agreements, which are typically more extensive. However, for Denmark and Germany, coalition agreements have not yet been coded based on the CAP coding system, partly because the tradition of writing formalized coalition agreements is less established in these two countries (Müller og Strøm 2008).

executive speech is delivered by the monarch on behalf of the government. The speech marks the beginning of the budgetary year and is given at a joint session with both chambers of the Dutch parliament on the third Tuesday in September (Breeman et al. 2009). In Belgium, an executive speech was not introduced until 1993. However, it has become an important event in Belgian politics on the second Tuesday in October, marking the beginning of the parliamentary year. The speech is delivered by the prime minister and is followed by a vote of confidence (Joly, Zicha and Dandoy 2015). Finally, in Germany, the chancellor gives government speeches (Regierungserklärungen). Typically, these speeches outline the core program of a new government or describe the state of the nation (Breunig and Schnatterer 2017).[5]

As argued above, in order to study the degree to which the issue emphasis of the prime minister's party is incorporated in the government's issue agenda, we need a measure of the issues that the prime minister's party and the other coalition partners prefer the government to emphasize. For this purpose, we utilize the party manifestos presented at the election before the coalition was formed. We focus on the first government speech after the election.[6]

Both manifestos and speeches have been coded according to the CAP coding scheme, which consists of more than 230 subtopics, all of which have been aggregated into 19 policy issues (see Bevan 2014; Baumgartner, Jones and Wilkerson 2002) (a list of the issues is presented in Table A1 in the online appendix.). All datasets come from the comparative agendas projects in the different

[5] If several government speeches were given by a chancellor the same year, the most important speech was identified. Speeches covering several topics were privileged over one-issue speeches (e.g., on the occasion of events such as European Council meetings) and longer speeches over shorter ones (Breunig and Schnatterer 2017).

[6] Mortensen et al. (2011) find relative stability in the issue content of the government speech over time in Denmark and the Netherlands. The analysis in the following was also repeated for the second speech after the election, see below. The distance in time between the election and the first government speech after the election varies, but as explained later we control for this "time distance" variable in the statistical analysis.

countries. For each speech or party manifesto, the coding unit has been either quasi-sentences (Belgian data, German speeches, and Dutch speeches), natural sentences (Danish data and German manifestos) or paragraphs (Dutch manifestos). All datasets are hand-coded by trained student coders.[7]

In terms of time period, we cover a time period lasting as long as data has been available. The exact periods in which we have both manifesto and speeches data are: Germany 1980–2002, the Netherlands 1983–2007, Belgium 1995–2003, and Denmark 1953–2011.

Our dependent variable concerns the ability of the prime minister's party to incorporate its issue emphasis into the government's annual speech. Thus, we need to construct a measure of similarity in issue attention between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the first annual speech in parliament after the election. Furthermore, to test the hypotheses presented above, we also need a measure of how much the issue emphasis of the prime minister's party and that of its coalition partners diverge.

To construct such measures, we take our point of departure in Sigelman and Buell's (2004) "issue overlap measure." The logic of this measure is to capture the extent to which two agendas are similar in how much attention they devote to the issues on the agenda. For instance, it has been used to compare agenda similarities in US presidential elections (Sigelman and Buell 2004) and similarities across government speeches in different countries (Mortensen et al. 2011).

The measure of our dependent variable is constructed as follows. For each issue *i*, we take the absolute difference between the attention paid (in percentage) by the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the attention devoted to the issue (in percentage) in the annual speech of the government. Next, we take the sum of all absolute differences in issue attention and divide this sum by two, the latter calibrating the measure to range between 0 and 100. This value thus represents the sum of attention differences between the party of the prime minister's manifestos and the first government

[7] Footnote with thanks to scholars who have kindly provided data (blinded for the review process).

speech after the election. To transform the measure into one that measures the level of similarity, i.e., issue overlap, we then subtract this sum of absolute differences from 100. The closer the score is to 100, the higher the degree of average issue overlap between manifestos of the prime minister's party and the speech of the government. Thus, this variable is based on the below formula from Sigelman and Buell (2004, 653), where n is the number of issues:

$$Issue\ Overlap = 100 - \sum_{\iota=1}^{n} (|Government_{speech,\iota} - PM_{manifesto,\iota}|)/2$$

Based on a similar logic, we calculate the issue attention differences between the manifesto of the prime minister party and the manifestos of its coalition partners. Thus, for each election we calculate the sum of issue attention differences between the party of the prime minister and each of its coalition partners, divide by two and then by the number of coalition partners in order to standardize the measure. However, note that we do not subtract this sum of absolute differences from 100 since this variable is used as an indicator of issue diversity within the coalition. Note also that by using the absolute differences in the level of attention, we avoid the possibility that differences across coalition partners would cancel each other out, i.e., where one coalition partner pays more attention than the prime minister's party does, while the other partner pays less attention. At the same time, since a simple average measure would be more sensitive to the direction of deviations in issue emphasis, we explore the effect of using alternative specifications in the analysis section. The measure of issue diversity is calculated as the average of the following issue attention differences within a coalition:

$$Issue\ diversity = \sum_{\iota=1}^{n} (|PM_{manifesto,\iota} - Partner_{manifesto,\iota}|)/2$$

.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for these two variables. The upper part of Table 1 shows that the issue overlap between the prime minister party manifesto and the government speech varies

both across the four countries and over time within each country across election periods. We find the highest overall averages in the Netherlands and in Germany, 68 and 65, respectively, whereas the averages in Denmark and Belgium only sum to 53 and 56, respectively. The lower part of Table 1 illustrates that also the average degree of issue diversity in the coalitions varies both within and across the four countries. The prime minister party's issue emphasis does not correspond perfectly with those of its coalition partners. Much in line with the coalition literature, this suggests that there is potential for conflict between coalition partners and the prime minister's party. This seems most pronounced in Denmark where the average issue diversity between the prime minister's party and the individual coalition partners is the highest.

[Table 1 about here]

The conditional variables of main interest are described in the following. In combination with the coalition issue diversity measure, they are expected to moderate the relationship between the party of the prime minister's relative attention to an issue and the attention paid to the issue in the annual speech. The first explanatory variable is the dissolution power of the prime minister (see Hypothesis 2). Here, we draw on the recent measure of dissolution power published by Goplerud & Schleiter (2016).[8] They construct an index of dissolution power by its five cross-nationally comparable dimensions,[9] which yields a continuous scale from 0 to 10, with 10 representing the highest degree

[8] They define dissolution power as "the constitutional prerogative of a political actor to (1) initiate or (b) advance a political process that can result in early elections, or to (c) decide the early dissolution of parliament" (Goplerud and Schleiter 2016, 430).

[9] These five dimensions are: "(a) constraints on an actor's ability to place dissolution on the agenda or advance the dissolution process (referred to below as *agenda setting role*); (b) constraints on their ability to take the final decision

of dissolution power. When focusing on the dissolution power of the prime minister, the scores for the four countries are 10.00 for Denmark, 2.50 for Germany, and 0 for both the Netherlands and Belgium (ibid, 435–436).[10]

The second conditional variable is the number of coalition partners in a government (see Hypothesis 3). This includes all parties that fielded ministers in the cabinet, but it does not include support parties of minority governments. We analyze the number of coalition partners by the use of a binary variable (*More Than One Coalition Partner)*, which takes on the value of 0 when the prime minister's party has one coalition partner and 1 if there is more than one partner. In our dataset, the number of coalition partners varies from one to five. However, governments with more than two coalition partners are exclusively found in Belgian and Danish governments from 1982 to 1988. Creating an ordinal measure of the number of coalition partners may conflate the effects of many coalition partners with country-specific effects. As such, we adopt a dichotomous measure to examine whether having two or more coalition partners systematically attenuates the agenda-setting power of the prime minister's party.

Our third conditional explanatory variable is *PM Seat Share* (see Hypothesis 4). This variable represents the percentage of the prime minister party's seat share in the coalition, taken from the

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that triggers dissolution (*trigger*); (c) collective action constraints which apply to collective actors—such as governments and legislatures—who must achieve internal consensus before they can use their institutional powers (*collective*); (d) time barriers on dissolution—for instance, bans on dissolution during the last part of the parliamentary or presidential term (*barriers*); and (e) conditionality of the agenda setting role or the trigger powers of an actor on the binding consent of another actor or on nonbinding consultation (*conditionality*)" (Goplerud and Scleiter 2016, 430-431).

[10] The measure aims at capturing assembly dissolution power, but our focus is only related to the prime minister. Using an alternative binary measure of dissolution power from Andersson, Bergman and Ersson's (2014) European Representative Democracy (ERD) dataset show no substantial differences in the results. These results are displayed in Table A2 in the online appendix.

European Representative Democracy (ERD) dataset (Andersson, Bergman and Ersson 2014). It is constructed by dividing the number of seats of the prime minister's party by the total number of seats for government parties.

Controls

In the analysis, we include the following control variables, which are all taken from the ERD dataset. As discussed above, the existence of a coalition agreement is argued to be central for coalition governance, and its existence may therefore constrain the prime minister's party as well. As such, we include a variable indicating whether the government has created a formal agreement or not. *Coalition Agreement* is an indicator variable, with 1 meaning that the coalition is based on a formal coalition agreement, see footnote 2. In addition to dissolution power, other formal prime minister cabinet powers may lessen the constraints of coalition partners' issue emphases on the ability of prime minister parties to set the issue agenda of the government. As such, we also include the variable *PM Cabinet Powers*, which does not include dissolution power. [11]

Since the governments in the countries vary in terms of majority vs. minority status, we also included the variable *Majority Government* to control for possible influence of government status. The variable is equal to 1 if the government parties together occupy over 50 percent of the parliamentary seats, and 0 otherwise. In contrast, we expect non-minimum winning coalitions to

[11] According to Anderson, Bergman, and Ersson (2014), the "variable consists of: the existence of an actual decision rule for cabinet decision-making (one point if the prime minister sums up the cabinet discussion or if majority voting applies, and zero if cabinet decisions are made unanimously) (i); the prime minister has the right to appoint (ii) and dismiss (iii) ministers; ministers can only be removed by parliament if parliament dismisses the prime minister/full cabinet (iv); the prime minister has the right to decide ministry jurisdiction (v); the prime minister has steering or co-coordinating rights vis-à-vis ministers (vi); and the prime minister has control over the ongioing cabinet agenda (vii)."

constrain the ability of the prime minister's party to prioritize its own issue emphases onto the government's issue agenda. Since oversized coalitions by definition contain more parties than necessary to achieve majority status, the government should contain a surplus of parties. Since these additional parties would advocate for their preferred issues, the prime minister's party would need to accommodate their issue emphases in order to ensure coalition survival. The binary variable *Oversized Coalition* takes on the value of 1 if the government is a non-minimum winning coalition, and it takes on the value of 0 otherwise. We also controlled for the number of days between the election where the manifesto was produced and the speech. Most importantly, on average, the number is lower in Germany because the date of the speech is unfixed as opposed to the other three countries.

Finally, classic works on coalition formation (see above) argue that the agenda-setting influence of the prime minister's party may depend on whether the prime minister's party holds the median legislator position. The ability to form alternative coalitions implies that the prime minister's party can strip its coalition partners of their government status, which reduces any potential threat from partners if the prime minister's party prioritizes its own preferred issues in the government's issue agenda. Accordingly, this variable draws on a classic spatial logic and not an issue competition approach. From a salience perspective, focusing on 19 different issues, the concept of a median party is less obvious than in a one-dimensional spatial universe. However, given the focus on this variable within the coalition literature (see also Martin and Vanberg 2011), it is an important control variable. The variable *PM Party as Median* holds the value of 1 if the prime minister's party is also the median party in the legislature (in terms of its left-right ideological placement), and it holds the value of 0 otherwise.[12]

In the statistical analysis reported below, we disaggregate the measures of issue overlap

[12] We use v400C from the ERD dataset, which focus on the left-right dimension as the first dimension in the party system.

between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the speech as well as the measure of issue diversity in the coalition. This means that we measure overlap and diversity, respectively, for each of the 19 major issue categories (by each election and each country). There are 19 issues measured for 32 post-election government speeches from coalition governments across the four countries. This sums up to 622 observations.[13]

Our dataset includes several layers (issues, speeches, and countries) that may be considered as groups or clusters of data. Certain issues, such as the economy or the defense, may systematically occupy a higher proportion of the government's issue agenda as well as each party's manifesto. Special political circumstances, e.g., an oil spill, may also skew the variation in attention that each issue would receive in the annual government speech. Finally, some issues may be more widely discussed in certain countries such that parties and speeches in that country systematically pay more attention to those issues than in other countries. All this would cause the error terms to correlate within an issue, a particular speech, and a specific country. As such, we employ multilevel models to incorporate potential error correlation.

Yet, as Stegmueller (2013, 758) states, the minimum number of countries as the top level should preferably be above 15–20. Otherwise, the maximum likelihood estimates and confidence intervals may be biased, particularly if there are cross-level interactions (which is the case for our models). To ensure that our results are not biased due to the low number of countries, we also ran models with issue fixed effects. The main results do not differ substantially from those of the

[13] The German data contains two additional main topics, namely, "local politics" and "re-unification." Thus, there are 21 topics in the German case. The dataset contains 14 speeches from Danish coalition governments, eight from Dutch coalition governments, seven from German coalition governments, and three from Belgian coalition governments, respectively. Whether the speech is from the same year as the election or the year after depends on the timing of the election.

multilevel models, and none of the statistical significance levels of the variables have changed.[14] In addition, as revealed by the variances of the speech year and the random effects parameters of the country levels, neither levels exert a statistically significant effect on the variation in the overlap between the speech and the manifesto of the prime minister's party. This assuages the concern that the findings are subject to statistical bias.

Given the use of relative shares, censoring, left or right, may be a problem in this data because the measures of overlap and diversity can only range between 0 and 100. We address this question in two ways. First, we leave out observations in which neither the prime minister's party nor any of its coalition partners have addressed the issue studied in their election manifestos. Therefore, the number of observations in the analyses reported below is 552.[15] Second, we conducted robustness tests in which all main analyses reported below have been re-estimated using a tobit panel regression approach, which is developed to handle data where censoring might be a problem. Given that this re-estimation does not alter any of the conclusions reported below, we conclude that censoring is de facto not a major problem in this data (results can be found in Table A8 and A9 in the online appendix).

Findings

Table 2 displays the main results of the statistical analysis. Model 1 provides a first assessment of the baseline hypothesis (H1) corroborating the expectation that the degree of overlap between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the subsequent government speech decreases as a function

[14] See Table A3 in the online appendix for these results.

[15] Additional analyses show that this restriction does not influence the results reported below substantially.

of a diverse prioritization of issues in the manifestos of the governing parties from the last election before the government speech. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that none of the other coefficients in Model 1 in Table 2 are statistically significant, which corroborates the basic point that we need to take the degree of coalition disagreement into account in order to understand the effects of these factors.

[Table 2 around here]

The stepwise introduction of the interaction terms in Table 2 makes it possible to assess how sensitive the statistical estimates are to changes in model assumptions. Whereas it is no surprise that the constitutive terms change when interaction terms are added, the robustness of the interaction terms both with and without the other interaction terms implies that we can confidently direct our attention to the full model (Model 5) when evaluating the hypotheses.

With respect to Hypothesis 2, Model 5 in Table 2 supports the expectation that the negative marginal effect of coalition issue diversity on the overlap between the manifesto of the prime minister’s party and government speech decreases when the prime minister’s party holds dissolution power. However, when there is no disagreement on issue emphasis, the dissolution power of the prime minister's party does not offer the party more agenda-setting power (since *Dissolution Power*'s coefficient is not statistically significant in any of the models). This is consistent with our expectation. If there is no disagreement in the first place, it is not necessary for the prime minister's party to gain additional institutional power to force its preferences on the government's agenda.

The interactive effect is illustrated in Figure 1, which depicts the marginal effects of coalition issue diversity for prime minister parties with dissolution power and prime minister parties without dissolution power. In both instances, coalition issue diversity weakens the link between prime

minister manifesto and government speech, but the constraining effect is lower for prime ministers' parties with high dissolution power. Specifically, for prime ministers' parties with no dissolution power (one standard deviation below the mean degree of dissolution power), the marginal effect of the difference in PM-partner issue emphasis is -0.77. That is, a one-point increase in the average PM-partner manifesto diversity is associated with a 0.77-point decrease in the degree of issue overlap between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the government speech. When the dissolution power is 8.84 (one standard deviation above the mean), the marginal effect is -0.41—a marginal effect increase of 0.36.

One might expect that the effect of dissolution power changes during the legislative term and that the effect disappears over time because an election will come anyway. To investigate this, we ran the models for the second government speech given after the election. The results reveal that the coefficients for dissolution power remain statistically significant when interacted with the variable for the average coalition disagreement in Models 2 and 5, while the variable itself is not statistically significant in any of the models (results can be found in Table A4 in the online appendix). This suggests that when disagreement on issue emphasis occurs, the prime minister's party can still utilize dissolution power to force its preferred issues onto the government's agenda, and it can continue to do so past the first government speech.

[Figure 1 around here]

Regarding Hypothesis 3, Table 2 shows that coalition issue diversity has a stronger negative effect on the link between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and government speech when the prime minister's party has more than one coalition partner. Distinguishing further between two and more partners provides some indication that two partners are more constraining for the prime minister

than three or more partners.[16] However, the limited number of observations makes it difficult to assess the robustness of such more fine-grained distinctions. With some statistical certainty, we can conclude that it makes a difference to have one rather than several coalition partners. In Figure 2, we illustrate these effects graphically, showing how the marginal effects of coalition disagreement are more negative when you have two or more coalition partners compared to the case where the prime minister's party only has to compromise with one coalition partner. When the prime minister's party only has one partner, the marginal effect of coalition issue diversity on the degree of overlap between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the government speech is -0.27. When the prime minister's party has more than one partner, the marginal effect jumps to -0.57—a decrease of 0.30.

[Figure 2 around here]

Finally, Table 2 provides no support for Hypothesis 4, which claimed that the seat share of the prime minister's party—everything else being equal—would make the prime minister's party less constrained by the issue emphasis of the coalition partners. The estimated coefficients of this effect shown in Models 4 and 5 in Table 2 point in the expected direction. However, in the full model (Model 5) in Table 2, it does not reach the conventional level of statistical significance (p=.11). This is also evident from the illustration of marginal effects in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 around here]

We have investigated the robustness of these results in various ways. First, one objection might be that the findings are driven by a few issues. To assess this, we have rerun the analysis based only on the ten issues that have received the most attention in the respective countries. All main results are

[16] Results can be found in Table A6 in the online appendix.

reproduced based on this reduced dataset (results can be found in Table A5 in the online appendix).

Second, we have investigated whether issue diversity between the prime minister's party and coalition partners is a suppressor variable, which reduces the effect of some of the other variables. We tested this by leaving out the issue diversity variable. However, this does not affect the coefficients of the other variables, which further suggests that the constraining effect of these conditions cannot be understood without knowledge of the actual issue diversity or issue similarity within the coalition.

Finally, we have explored in more detail how disagreement in issue attention with the coalition partners constrains the prime minister's party. In the analyses reported above, we constructed the measure of disagreement on each issue by first calculating the dissimilarity between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the manifesto of each coalition partner. In the case of more than one coalition partner, a simple average across the individual differences was then calculated. This measure ignores whether one of the coalition partners pays more attention to an issue than the prime minister's party and whether another coalition party pays less attention to the issue than the prime minister's party.

An alternative measure more sensitive to directional differences would be to calculate a simple average of issue attention across all coalition partners. However, in reality, the two measures turn out to be highly correlated, and all main findings reported in Table 2 can be reproduced using the simple average disagreement measure. In addition, we have examined if it matters whether the prime minister's party pays more or less attention to an issue than the coalition partners. Theoretically, it is unclear whether or not we should expect the prime minister's party to be more constrained by the disagreement on issues it has given more attention in its manifesto than its coalition partners. Thus, this additional analysis aims to examine whether the constraining effect of this attention disagreement is to be found in both cases. To shed light on this, we have separated the

simple average measure of attention disagreement into two variables: One measures only those instances where the prime minister's party pays more attention to an issue than the average coalition partners (otherwise 0); another measures when the prime minister's party pays less attention to an issue than the average coalition partners (otherwise 0).

The marginal effects of these two variables are shown in Figure 4.[17] The negative effects of both variables show that disagreement in both directions has a negative effect on the degree of overlap between the manifesto of the prime minister's party and the subsequent government speech. This important finding bolsters the general argument about the constraining effect of coalition disagreement. Furthermore, it seems as if the constraining effect is stronger on issues where the coalition partners pay less attention (the coefficient is -0.67) than the prime minister's party does (the coefficient is -0.16). This could suggest that coalition partners are better at blocking attention to issues they prefer not to talk about than to increase attention to issues they prefer emphasized.

[Figure 4 around here]

Conclusion

A number of recent studies have pointed towards the crucial role of the Prime Minister in coalition governments. Fortunato & Adams (2015) have shown that voters tend to use the position of the Prime Minister as proxy for the position of the entire coalition. Fortunato & Stevensson (2013) have shown that voters are better able to correctly identify the position of the PM party compared to coalition partners. Thus, voters seem to identify a coalition government with the PM party. The recent study by Thomson et al. (2017) indicates that this focus on the PM party may be explained by the PM party being more influential within a coalition. However, what shapes the influence of the PM party within a coalition has hardly been explored within the otherwise extensive literature on coalition politics.

[17] The regression output for this analysis can be found in Table A7 in the online appendix.

This paper focuses on two types of factors that shape the influence of the PM party: The number of coalition partners and the formal powers of the prime minister. Generally, when the number of coalition partners increases, we see the prime minister's party lose influence. Our results also indicated that this is an effect of the number of coalition partners more than the number of seats held. Thus, if one compares prime minister parties from Denmark and Belgium, which hold a similar number of seats, the party of the Belgian prime minister will typically be more constrained than the party of the Danish prime minister because of the large number of parties in the Belgian coalitions.The other factor is the formal powers of the prime minister. The position as prime minister is equipped with different degrees of formal power. The analysis showed that the power of dissolution is a central asset for those prime ministers who have it.

In recent decades, many Western party systems have become more fragmented as more parties gain significant parliamentary representation. This again makes broader coalitions more necessary. One straightforward implication of this would be that the PM party losses influence in the coalition. Our results support this to the extent that the coalition partners come with issue agendas different from the PM party, which is highly likely. However, at the same time our results also show that the extent to which this will constrain the PM party varies. For instance, our results indicate that a growth in the number of coalition partners is likely to constrain the influence of the PM party, even if the party itself does not become weaker in terms of seats.

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Tables and figures

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the two main variables

		Mean	**Std.**	**Min**	**Max**
Issue overlap between the prime minister's party and speech	Overall	59.5	13.2	30.7	83.0
	Between countries		7.1	52.6	67.7
	Within countries		11.3	34.1	74.7
Issue diversity between the prime minister's party and coalition partners	Overall	37.8	16.2	16.5	72.8
	Between		12.4	25.8	51.6
	Within		10.4	18.6	66.6

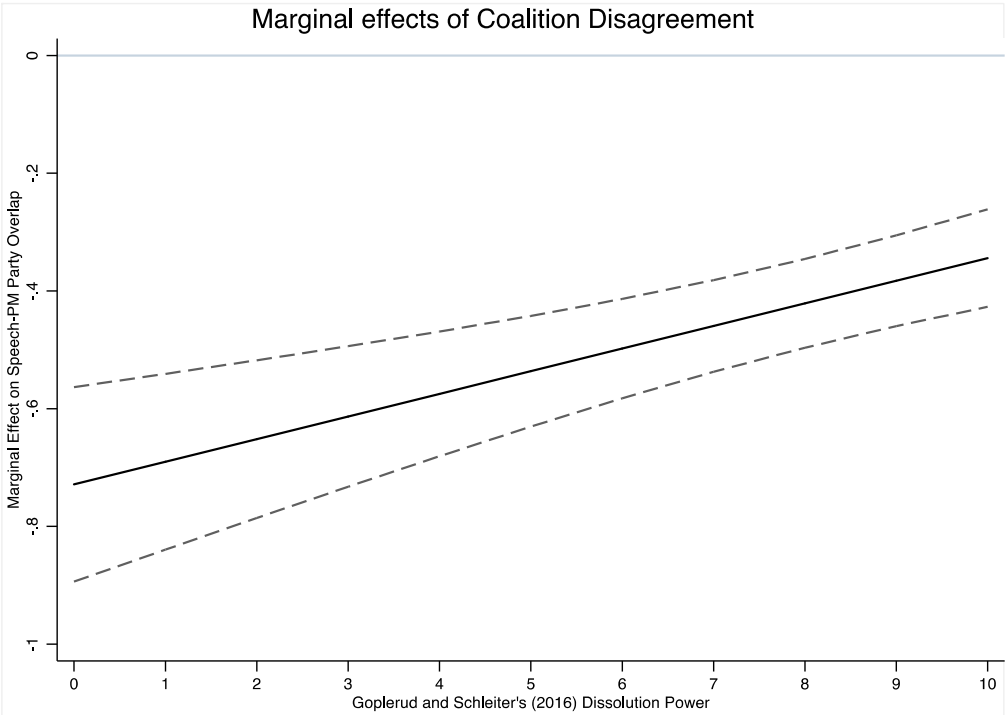
Note: The absolute minimum values are zero; maximum values are 100.

Table 2: Determinants of issue-specific overlap between the executive speech and the manifesto of the prime minister's party

	Hypotheses	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Average manifesto diversity between the prime minister	H1	-0.44**	-0.77**	-0.27**	-0.67**	-0.65**
and coalition partners [A]		(0.04)	(0.08)	(0.06)	(0.16)	(0.19)
Prime minister's dissolution power [B]		0.05	-0.15	0.09	0.03	-0.11
		(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)
More than one coalition partner (0 1) [C]		0.22	0.61	1.81*	0.20	2.05*
		(0.82)	(0.81)	(0.90)	(0.82)	(0.89)
Prime minister's party seat share in government [D]		1.34	1.94	2.43	-0.36	2.49
		(1.94)	(1.92)	(1.93)	(2.28)	(2.30)
[A] × [B]	H2		0.04**			0.04**
			(0.01)			(0.01)
[A] × [C]	H3			-0.30**		-0.28**
				(0.07)		(0.07)
[A] × [D]	H4				0.37	0.09
					(0.26)	(0.26)
Controls						
Prime minister cabinet power		-0.02	0.07	-0.03	0.04	0.08
		(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Formal coalition agreement (0 1)		-0.59	-0.49	-1.02	-0.78	-0.94
		(0.75)	(0.74)	(0.75)	(0.76)	(0.75)
Oversized coalition (0 1)		1.21	1.26	1.11	1.19	1.17
		(0.95)	(0.93)	(0.93)	(0.95)	(0.92)
Majority government (0 1)		1.05	0.71	1.75	0.94	1.34
		(1.13)	(1.11)	(1.12)	(1.13)	(1.12)
Prime minister's party is median party		-0.04	0.24	0.18	0.08	0.45
		(0.61)	(0.60)	(0.60)	(0.61)	(0.60)
Number of days between election and speech		0.0002	0.001	-0.0004	0.0002	0.0006
		(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Constant		96.12**	96.25**	94.37**	97.32**	94.91**
		(2.17)	(2.13)	(2.18)	(2.30)	(2.33)
Random effects parameters						
Variance (issues)		1.40*	1.31*	1.41*	1.39*	1.33*
Variance (speech)		3.16	3.11	3.11	3.15	3.06
Variance (countries)		3.16	3.11	3.11	3.15	3.06
Residual deviation		1.20	1.18	1.18	1.19	1.16
Observations		552	552	552	552	552
Number of groups		20	20	20	20	20

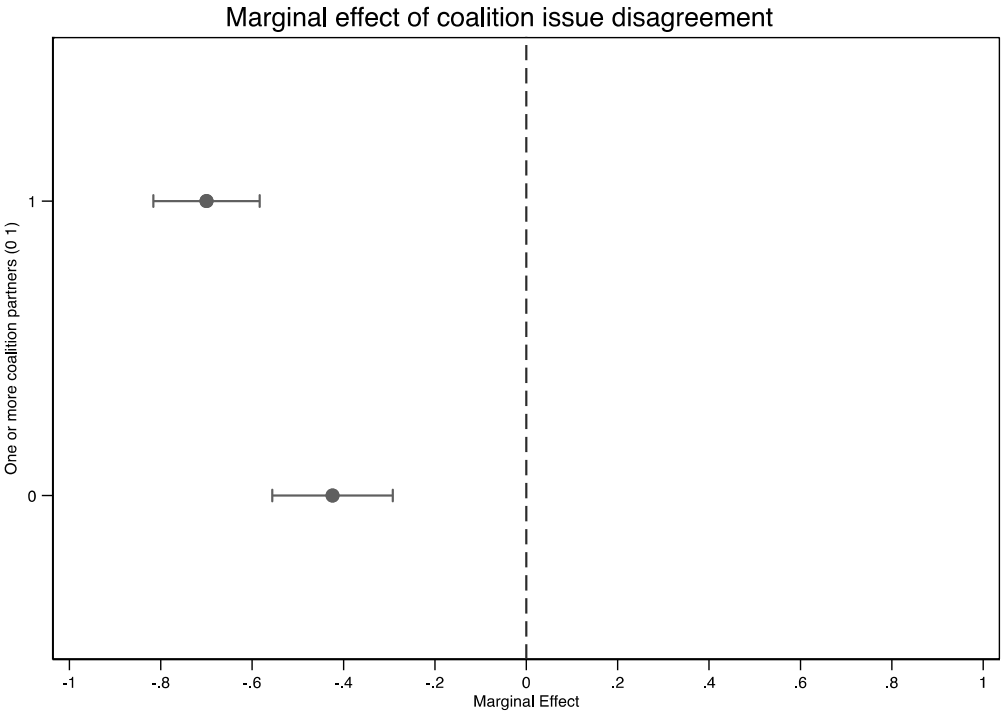
Note: Standard errors in parentheses; ** p<0.01, * p<0.05.

Figure 1. The conditional effect of prime minister dissolution power



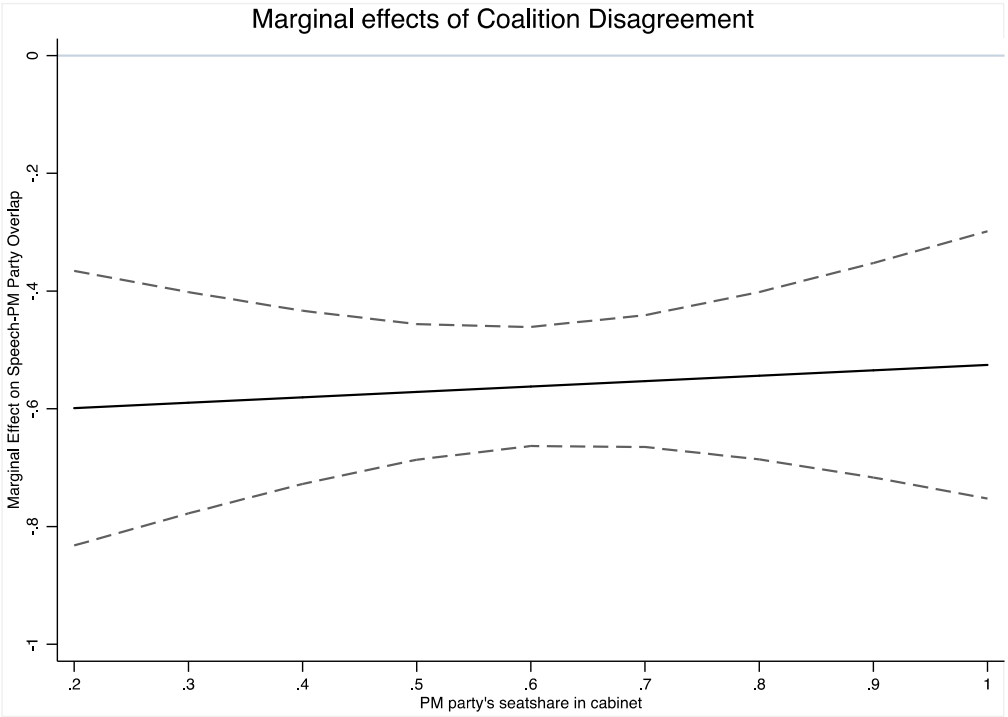
Note: Calculated based on Model 5 in Table 2.

Figure 2. The conditional effect of number of coalition partners



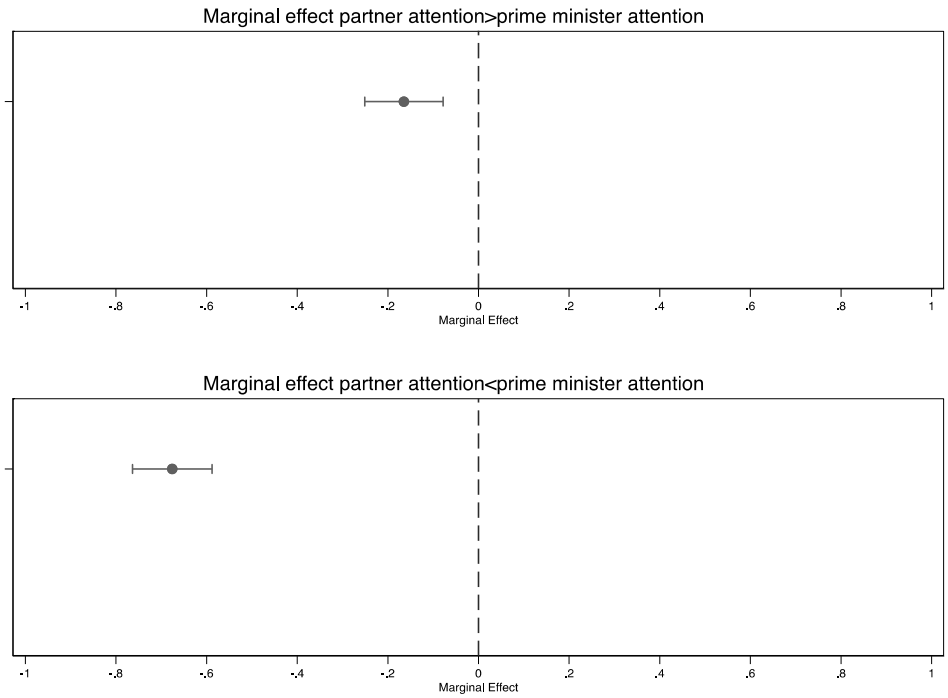
Note: Calculated based on Model 5 in Table 2.

Figure 3. The conditional effect of prime minister party seat share in cabinet



Note: Calculated based on Model 5 in Table 2.

Figure 4. The effect of coalition disagreement on prime minister speech overlap



Note: Calculated based on Table A7 in online appendix.