CHAPTER 5

Governing Capacity and Partisan Bargaining Circumstances

How well do Spain’s minority governments work? This chapter first presents the empirical puzzle that the rest of the book explores. Spain’s minority governments exhibit far stronger governing capacity than the cross-national averages in terms of their ability to accomplish their legislative agendas and remain in office. Notably, their governing capacity is comparable to single-party majority governments in Spain.

The second section begins to explain why. It analyzes the governments’ partisan bargaining circumstances in a multilevel perspective. In doing so, it goes beyond parliamentary arithmetic and policy positioning in the national parliament to also consider the parties’ governing circumstances in the regional arena. Spain’s minority governments have strong governing capacity in part because they have tended to confront favorable partisan bargaining circumstances, though with some variation.

The Governing Capacity of Spain’s Minority Governments in Comparative Perspective

This section assesses of the governing capacity of minority governments in Spain between 1982 and 2011. Recall that governing capacity is defined as the government’s ability to make significant, authoritative decisions regarding the country’s public policies. Measuring governing capacity is fraught with difficulties. We need measures that can travel across countries and time and that do not have a partisan or ideological basis, and which indeed gauge capacity and not something else. I have opted here to measure governing capacity in terms of legislative success,

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cabinet duration and the reason for termination, and electoral success. This choice builds on Strøm (1990a, 113–129), who derived performance measures from the objectives of the political parties, namely policy, office, and vote goals.¹

Legislative success most intuitively taps into the definition of governing capacity because it directly measures decision-making on public policies that must pass through parliament. However, a government’s term in office combined with its reason for termination also measure its ability to make significant decisions on a larger policy program. Electoral success only poorly estimates governing capacity; election results pick up a wide variety of assessments of government performance, including ideological ones. Also, electoral success could indeed mean that the government is avoiding significant decisions to escape an electoral backlash. Nonetheless, in a democratic regime, it is important to consider voter assessments, at least as context for interpreting the government’s legislative success and duration. Ultimately these measures provide a rough indication of governing capacity, which can be supplemented with more contextualized assessments.

**Legislative Success**

The first indicator of governing capacity is the legislative success of the government, measured by the number and percentage of government-initiated bills that are passed. This measure of course does not estimate the importance of the bills, except in that government bills tend to be the most important bills parliament considers. Overall, Spanish governments perform well. Between 1982 and 2011, they passed 88.6% of their bills (see table 5.1). This is a better record than the 80.2% cross-national average success rate of parliamentary governments (Cheibub, Przeworski, and Saiegh 2004, 578). Also, in Spain, parliament rejected very few bills. During this period, there were only five instances. The overwhelming majority of bills that do not become laws expire.

In Spain, minority governments on average passed 87.8% of government-initiated bills. This statistic is substantially higher than the highest cross-national averages of 79.3 (Cheibub, Przeworski, and Saiegh 2004, 578) or 82% (Saiegh 2011, 88–89) for parliamentary single-party minority governments. Perhaps more revealing, Spain’s single-party majority governments are only slightly more successful (89.3%) legislatively than minority ones (87.8%). Also, Spain’s minority governments are only modestly less productive in terms of the number of government-initiated laws passed compared to their majority counterparts. Parliaments with minority governments on average passed 136 government-initiated