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Senior Thesis

“The End of Unity: Grand Coalitions in Austria, Israel, and West Germany”
INTRODUCTION

This document consists of a straightforward comparison of case studies, grounded in an empirical tradition – insofar as ‘empirical’ is taken in its generic sense of “depending upon experience or observation”\(^1\) – but drawing upon theory where theory is useful. The cases under consideration are three unity governments, which ruled respectively in Israel from 1984-1990, in West Germany from 1966-1969, and in Austria from 1945-1966. As I will observe below, in the most analytical segment of the paper, the political frameworks that supported these unity governments resemble one another to a notable degree. The question that begs investigation is an outgrowth of the endings that the case-study narratives possess. What structural or circumstantial factors account for the different final moments of these three grand coalitions, which were born in similar contexts?

Unity governments are not uncommon animals in the world of modern parliamentary politics. They are the exception and not the rule, to be sure, but they appear frequently enough to allow for systematic study. Broadly speaking, unity governments may be divided into two sets, which are not mutually exclusive – those forced by crisis and those forced by electoral necessity (Nathan Yanai suggests that a country “facing a parliamentary deadlock after a no-win election”\(^2\) is de facto in a state of crisis, and thus conflates the abovementioned types, but here I assume that they are

\(^1\) Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 2001 ed., s.v. “empirical.”
separable). However, before I elaborate upon the circumstances from which each sort of unity government arises I would do well to distinguish all unity governments from the other types of government that may be found in parliamentary systems.

What is it that makes a unity government distinct? I would suggest that the characteristics that describe unity governments are to be found in the general profile of the coalitions that define them, for when such coalitions are negotiated and formed their leaders and the relevant publics easily recognize them for what they are. They are given names reflective of their status. Germans and Austrians, for example, called the unity governments that ruled them in the 1960s ‘Grand Coalitions’ and thus acknowledged their exceptional breadth. Numerous others, including Macedonians and Israelis, have referred to their unity governments in straightforward fashion, as ‘governments of national unity.’

The term ‘national unity’ is politically loaded and is often exploited for partisan purposes – as when party spokesman Vladimir Gjorcev called his party’s opponents’ departure from the broad coalition formed in 2001 “an act against Macedonian national unity,”3 or conversely when Fijian politician Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara labelled his scheme for a multiethnic cabinet a “proposed government of national unity”4 in order to emphasize his intent to draw proportionately from each of his country’s ethnic groups. However, the frequent use of the terms ‘unity’ or ‘national unity’ in the context of political rhetoric should not blind us to the truths expressed through the labelling of a

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governing coalition as a ‘unity government.’ Namely, we should remember that unity governments, as the term implies, unite an unusually broad spectrum of parliamentarians from several political parties in order to accomplish – more or less effectively – the work of governing a country; it is for this that they are remarkable.

I do not think it necessary to attempt to establish a numerical/statistical boundary to differentiate unity governments from ‘lesser’ species of coalition government; although one could posit that there is a calculable percentage of MPs whose participation is required to form a ‘true’ unity government, I suspect that a more telling definition may be found by descriptive rather than mathematical means: e.g., national unity governments are “coalition governments in which both major political blocs…are members.”

It would be plausible – and perhaps overly convenient – to state that a unity government comes into being when 66.7% or 75% or 80% of a parliament is represented in the cabinet, but it is sufficient to note that a unity government is formed when parties representing an overwhelming majority of voters join in a coalition including every major party.

Both conditions are important: It is unlikely that a coalition comprising the two dominant parties of a system but only 53% of the Parliament (major parties sans supermajority) would be considered a unity government, and also unlikely that a coalition with 72% of Parliament but excluding the second-largest party (supermajority sans a major party) would be legitimately considered a unity government. It should be noted that a party may be significant without being a major party – as is the case with the Freie Demokratische Partei [Free Democratic Party – FDP] in West Germany, which was a

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kingmaker because for several decades its choice of coalition partner determined which
of the major parties governed, yet was not considered a major party itself.

Also note that because government coalitions are rooted in the party system, and
this definition must therefore be rooted there as well, major forces that are not adequately
represented by extant political parties may go unrepresented in a unity government
without endangering its ‘unified’ status. The West German national unity government,
for instance, dated from 1966 to 1969, and thus overlapped extensively with a period of
great social unrest in West German society. Some of the many protesters whose views
laid to the left of the Social Democrats’ formulated themselves as an
Außerparlamentarische Opposition [Extra-Parliamentary Opposition – APO] in order to
emphasize their view that effective opposition could no longer be organized within the
Bundestag, where the official opposition consisted of 49 Free Democrats (versus 447
government-affiliated MPs). Recognizing that national unity governments by no means
include every powerful political force renders use of the term somewhat ironic, but only
political movements represented by major parties need be included to validate a
government of national unity.

One author writes (of the West German case) that “even many nonradicals were
uneasy that democratic principles might have been violated because [parliamentary/
representative] opposition seemed to have become ineffective.”

6  Wayne C. Thompson, The Political Odyssey of Herbert Wehner (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc.,
1993), p. 266.

7  Gerhard Lehmbruch, “The Ambiguous Coalition in West Germany,” in Government and Opposition
governments often alienate party members unwilling to work in this fashion with a party they’ve long opposed by concentrating on the commonalities between their constituent parties, and have been known to alienate or unnerve democratic theorists by concentrating power in the hands of a governing bloc with a crushing majority of votes in the parliament. When the Israeli unity government that began in 1984 lasted into 1990, thus outliving every previous Israeli unity government, one of the most common refrains among those opposed to its continuation was that a prolonged political union of Labor and the Likud would be unhealthy for democracy in Israel.

The National Unity Government that began with the 1984 Knesset elections was formed for electoral reasons, but each of the previous unity governments that had been formed in Israel was formed under crisis conditions. I wrote earlier that these two circumstances – crisis and electoral ‘stalemate’ – were the two which had commonly led to the formation of unity governments and grand coalitions, and I wish now to elaborate on that statement. I would not venture a guess as to which path has led to more instances of unity government, as I have not conducted a complete tally of such events, but unity governments formed in the heat of crises have been more common recently. In the last two years, Macedonian and Israeli heads of government invited opposition parties into government partly to strengthen their position in a difficult time.

On May 13, 2000, under heavy international pressure to put up a united front against ethnic violence, Macedonian Prime Minister Ljubco Georgievski brought every opposition party, large and small, into his government so that it might be more likely “to solve the current crisis in the interethnic relations of the small Balkan state.”

emphasize that this was not a coalition willingly negotiated but rather one that was created under duress, the head of one party that moved from opposition to government noted, “This government was not formed because of overwhelming love. As a country we are in great danger and face a serious military threat, and this government can address that.”

Georgievski’s government of national unity was born at a time when parliamentary elections were neither recently concluded nor incipient, making its origins’ identification as crisis-related rather than electoral comparatively easy, but this is not always the case.

The Israeli national unity government of 2001, for instance, was constituted in the immediate aftermath of elections for Prime Minister held in February, and because of its close connection to that vote might be instinctively classified as formed for electoral reasons. The case for that classification is less clear than it seems, however; in all probability, listing the present Israeli coalition as either electorally-forced or motivated by crisis would be oversimplification. Militating against the labelling of Ariel Sharon’s unity government as the child of electoral circumstances is the plausibility of a governing coalition that did not include the Labor Party. The composition of the Knesset was predetermined because the February election affected only possession of the Prime Minister’s seat, and many commentators predicted that Labor, weakened by a renewed fight for primacy among its elite politicians, would be incapable of organizing itself to join the Likud in a unity government – thus opening the door for “the [credible] scenario of a narrow…right-wing government.”

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Insofar as Sharon had an acceptable, plausible, and mathematically feasible majority government awaiting him on the right side of the spectrum, it is possible to argue that the intifada begun in September 2000 and the crisis it created were what prompted him to create a national unity government. The ellipsis in the previous quotation, however, covers up one reason to suggest that Sharon’s unity government was created more by politics than by crisis. That the smaller option is ‘narrow’ and ‘right-wing’ (especially compared to the national unity option) are matters of fact; that it is ‘extreme’ – the word elided above – is a matter of rhetoric.

Some commentators looking upon the Knesset seated at the time of Sharon’s ascendance gave a political explanation to the formation national unity government that Sharon proposed prior to the election: “It would be difficult for leaders of the Left to abet the establishment of an extreme right-wing government….Patriotic arguments will join the appetite for high office and send them unhesitatingly into a Sharon government.”

Here we see the national unity government propelled not by the second intifada but by political calculation on the part of the Left, which would otherwise have been reduced to opposing (from a weak position marked by fragmentation and the aftermath of a landslide defeat) a ‘nightmare’ coalition it could have prevented.

Although the present Israeli national unity government does not exemplify either a crisis-born or a electorally-based case, Israel does present exemplars of both types, and despite appearances the government Ariel Sharon now leads does serve a useful purpose here. The Israeli government coalition which demonstrates most usefully the concept of a national unity government born for the purpose of facing a crisis is the coalition formed in June 1967, when Menachem Begin’s Gahal (the major opposition party) and every
other opposition party save the Communist and Arab lists joined Levi Eshkol’s Alignment (the major government party) and the four other governing parties in “an emergency war cabinet…formed in anticipation of the Six-Day War.” Likewise, the Israeli national unity government formed in 1984 and not ended until 1990 – described later in this paper – is a useful electorally-based case, for reasons I will give below.

The above narrative of the formation of the national unity government currently in power in Israel has concurrent elements of crisis circumstances favoring a broad-based government and electoral calculations encouraging Labor to joining the Likud. This prominent present-day case not only emphasizes that diagnosing the parentage of a national unity government can be difficult but also emphasizes that when electoral realities are involved with the birth of a national unity coalition they force the coalition partners together not through mathematics but through politics. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a parliament where the only mathematically possible coalition results in a national unity government. Arguably, two parties which each control half of the MPs in a given chamber could be forced into coalition together, but even that conclusion is not inevitable. One party could find a minority government more politically palatable, if such a thing were constitutional, or a single member could create a coalition by defecting (if Vermont Senator James Jeffords had been elected in a parliamentary system, this might have been the result of his quitting the Republican Party), or if neither party could see its way clear to acquiescing to a national unity government it is even possible that new elections could be called.

Thus, even the extreme case, where only grand coalitions are mathematically feasible, might not spawn national unity governments in 100% of cases; it is politics that makes or breaks national unity governments, in the extreme case of an evenly-divided parliament or however the house may be divided between the competing parties. In Israel in early 2001, these political considerations included the Likud’s perception that reaching out to Labor would be more popular and more useful than bringing the rightists into government and Labor’s worries that if it went into opposition it would be further weakened at the next election by competitors’ claims that it should have prevented the hypothetical narrow coalition. In some of the other cases on which I have decided to focus, the political circumstances may seem somewhat similar, as when the Austrian minor parties were “treated…as lacking Koalitionsfähigkeit”\textsuperscript{13} [legitimacy for participation in a governing coalition], but of course there are many varieties of the political straitjackets that have coerced parties into forming national unity governments, and we should expect each case to be substantially different.

**CASES**

**West Germany, 1966-1969 – The SPD and the CDU/CSU**

Kaare Strøm and Wolfgang C. Müller contend that “typically, party leaders…seldom actively look beyond the next election in which they will be involved. Nevertheless, the time horizons of politicians may differ, as some take a more long-term perspective than others.”\textsuperscript{14} Herbert Wehner, during the 1950s and 1960s the *eminence grise* of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [Social Democratic Party of

Germany – SPD], is evidently an atypical politician from their point of view. It was he who led the effort to create a grand coalition in the 1960s, battling opposition from the more ideological wing of the SPD, in order to accomplish a medium-term goal. He wished to prove that the SPD was as capable of providing good governance for the Bonn Republic as the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union – ‘Christian Democrats’ – CDU/CSU], which with the help of the FDP had governed West Germany since the end of the Allied occupation.

Because he had long viewed proving the SPD’s competence as a prerequisite for entering government as the preeminent partner in a coalition (i.e., without the Christian Democrats), Wehner had long been trying to bring the SPD to a point from which it could join the CDU/CSU in government. It was he who had “periodically from 1961 to 1966…discreetly probed the possibilities for such a grand coalition as the best way for the SPD to gain respectability…” but his focus on eventual condominium with the CDU/CSU had affected his actions even before those years. Especially notable was his stance at the party congress held in Bad Godesborg in 1959, at which the SPD took a very important step toward power: It stopped being a party officially wedded to its near-Marxist Weltanschauung and became a catch-all party devoted to making itself palatable to voters outside its working-class base.

Wehner and his allies – notably Erich Ollenhauer, who had started the ball rolling on the Bad Godesborg reforms even before Wehner had come to hold those views – were

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concerned about the SPD’s image among the voters on the fringes of the CDU/CSU because so long as only socialist sympathizers and hardcore leftists voted for the SPD they would never get more than 1/3 of the vote. That had been their high-water mark in the years between World War II and the Bad Godesborg congress, and the reformers understood that without expanding its base the SPD would never overcome the “presumed middle-class prejudice against a social democratic party [sic] lacking governmental experience and confirmation”16 and rise out of the ‘one-third ghetto,’ as they called it. In essence, the reformers of 1959 adjusted the balance between socialism and democracy in the Social Democratic Party, by rewriting its party program to show that it had “decided no longer to challenge the capitalist order, but instead to correct its flaws through social reform.”17 Among much of the rank and file that had populated the ‘ghetto’, the words ‘capitalist order’ were still a slander upon the Christian Democratic government, but from 1959 onward the SPD was regarded among swing voters as a mild-mannered reformist party rather than as a threat to a bourgeois way of life.

Ian Budge and Michael J. Laver, speaking in particular of participation in structures for government decision-making, note that political gains may be regarded either intrinsically or instrumentally: “In the first place, the rewards of office may be valued intrinsically, in and for themselves. In the second place, office may be valued only instrumentally for the ability that it gives to influence policy outputs.”18 If we take advantage of their characterization of political spoils as valued intrinsically and/or

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16 Lehmbruch, p. 184.
17 Thompson, p. 171.
instrumentally, a curious chain of historical cause and effect can be located around the reforms that took root in the SPD through the early 1960s.

Becoming a catch-all party, capable of selling itself to centrist voters as well as the left-of-center base, was only the first step in the Wehner claque’s plans for the SPD. However, the party did not value its new and improved constituency merely for its intrinsic utility; beyond the fact that having broader appeal meant having a larger number of votes laid the fact that these particular votes had an instrumental utility as well, helping the SPD appear to the electorate as a whole as a responsible party, believed by moderates to have divorced itself from its outdated ideology. Furthermore, the image of responsibility that the enlarged voter base stemming from Bad Godesborg created was also valued instrumentally as well as intrinsically, for only with the aid of this revamped public image could the Social Democrats enter the government in coalition with either the FDP or the CDU/CSU. Lastly, as noted in the above summary of Herbert Wehner’s ultimate intentions, SPD entry into government had an instrumental goal beyond controlling government policy: Carving a place for the SPD as a major party with Koalitionsfähigkeit, so that it could join the Christian Democrats on the ‘list’ of parties that could legitimately lead a governing coalition.

It should be noted that Wehner’s plans bore fruit when the Grand Coalition ended following the 1969 elections. In that vote, the SPD increased its share of the electorate by 3.4%, a very respectable increase that allowed it to convince the FDP to join it in a coalition (thus ending the FDP’s three-year stint as an opposition party, a role it would not fulfill again until the SPD and Greens joined to lock the FDP and CDU/CSU out of government in 1998). At the next elections in 1972, the SPD further increased its share
of the vote by 3.1%, and although in future elections as a coalition partner it lost votes more often than it gained them these early improvements showed the returns on the Bad Godesborg reforms. By using coalition with the CDU/CSU to show itself to be a responsible coalition partner, the SPD improved its visibility and legitimacy among the electorate, to the tune of a 3.3% average gain in votes after the novel experience of its first two terms in government. Because the SPD leadership had as its goal governmental power (valued intrinsically and instrumentally), it will come as no surprise that once their party possessed respectability and a sufficiently large share of the electoral pie the Social Democrats opted for coalition with the FDP, which allowed it to be the majority partner and behave with lesser constraints than it had had when it shared power with the CDU/CSU.

The lesser constraints to which I refer do not come from the partner-swapping per se. The SPD-FDP coalition, like the SPD-CDU/CSU coalition, was a minimal-winning coalition, and either party could therefore kill the deal by announcing its intent to leave the government. While keeping the FDP happy through concessions, payoffs, or other mechanisms may conceivably have been easier than pacifying the Christian Democrats – insofar as the FDP’s policy differences with either major party are fewer than the major parties’ policy differences with one another – the most prominent constraints which the SPD loosened by replacing the CDU/CSU with the FDP are independent of the magnitude of the policy differences between the coalition partners, and instead involve the size differences. Here the SPD gains a noticeable advantage from switching into a new coalition, for instead of having near-parity with the CDU/CSU it outweighs the FDP,

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19 Figures from Thomas Saalfeld, “Germany: Stable Parties, Chancellor Democracy, and the Art of Informal Settlement,” in Müller and Strøm, Table 2.8, p. 79.
and thus has overwhelming majorities in many areas important to politics and to coalition negotiations, including in the number of MPs it controls and the number of ministers it can claim in the division of portfolios. Only Wehner’s insistence that the SPD prove its suitability in a Grand Coalition prevented the Social Democrats from forming a mathematically possible (albeit narrow) coalition with the FDP in 1966.

Yet, as emphasized above, it takes more than mathematics to create a Grand Coalition. We have seen what drove the SPD to push for a unity government, but what made the CDU/CSU accept their offer? Personal connections helped to pave the way – Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, the man selected by the CDU/CSU for the chancellorship, had worked with Wehner on several previous occasions, and the men evoked sympathy in one another because both had been attacked for their past involvement with verboten movements (Wehner with the Communists and Kiesinger with the Nazi Foreign Ministry) – but they were by no means the whole story. Most important is that “the FDP had burned most of its bridges to the CDU/CSU by being intransigent on raising taxes”20 – and, of course, by rejecting Chancellor Ludwig Erhard’s government and thereby provoking the early elections of 1966.

With the FDP unavailable, the CDU/CSU had to choose between keeping power in a unity government or lapsing into opposition, and given those choices and the willingness of the SPD the Christian Democrats “decided rather easily to enter a grand coalition.”21 Continued presence in government was important for the CDU/CSU’s ability to regain prestige it had lost during Adenauer’s turbulent last years as Chancellor and Erhard’s two rocky terms. The SPD wished to demonstrate that it could be

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20 Thompson, p. 247.
21 Thompson, p. 249.
successful in power, and also to avoid membership in a troublingly narrow coalition with “economically conservative German nationalist” Erich Mende, head of the FDP; the CDU/CSU wished to maintain its hold on power, even though this meant reducing its share in that power, and was understandably reluctant to return to coalition with the fractured party that had just toppled its previous government. Under such circumstances, a grand coalition was an eminently logical conclusion for the parties to reach.

Before these political desires could be converted into political realities, however, there was a final hurdle – “the always delicate distribution of cabinet posts,” usually a prominent subject in negotiations for coalition, alongside the resolution or temporary tabling of policy differences. In the case of the Grand Coalition, policy was handled relatively informally: Although the matter of deciding which policies could be implemented without dissolving the coalition was discussed, no written document appears to have existed. “The policy contents of the coalition agreements…were summarized in the Chancellor’s inaugural Government Declaration,” and where the policy compromises were accepted by the center edge of the parties but not the margins the parliamentary delegations were allowed limited Bereichsopposition [“principle of opposition”] privileges. In practice, however, full-scale clashes in the Bundestag were avoided not only by the fringes’ acceptable Bereichsopposition but also by “regular meetings (‘parlamentarische Tischrunde’ [parliamentary Round Tables]) of the parliamentary party leaders [which] gained in importance and were dubbed as the

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22 Thompson, p. 248.
23 Thompson, p. 250.
24 Saalfeld, p. 53.
‘counter-government [Rainer] Barzel/[Helmut] Schmidt.’ We see from these operational solutions to coalition parties’ differences that policy clashes in the Grand Coalition were dealt with flexibly and through a number of channels, and should also note that the distribution and selection of ministries and their heads did not cause overmuch stress between the SPD and the CDU/CSU when they ruled together.

Austria, 1945-1966 – The SPÖ and the ÖVP

The Austrian unity government that ruled in the two decades following World War II was organized following the first postwar democratic elections, held in November 1945. Only the Sozialistische Partei Österreichs [Socialist Party of Austria – SPÖ], the Österreichische Volkspartei [Austrian People’s Party – ÖVP], and the Kommunistische Partei Österreichs [Communist Party of Austria – KPÖ] were cleared to participate by the Allied commission governing Austria. When the polls had closed and it was time to form a government the KPÖ had two black marks against it: Not only was it a branch of the Communist International, controlled by Stalinists in Moscow, but it also made a dreadful showing in the elections, collecting only a little over 5% of the vote. It was clear to all that the KPÖ would be included in government only by the sufferance of the larger parties, and would be effectively powerless; it had by and large been rejected by the electorate, it was Koalitionsfähigkeit only because the Russians were still present within Austrian borders, and its elevation to a stature allowing it real power would have ruined relations with the Western powers that controlled three-quarters of the country and the majority of the available financial aid. Even before the election leaders of national

stature, including the transitional head of government and elder statesman Karl Renner, “had indicated to the Western powers that some form of coalition would have to be set up…between the two democratic contestants.”28 Perhaps if the Communists had registered a larger turnout, such as twenty or twenty-five percent, accommodations would have had to be made with the KPÖ beyond mere inclusion, but as things were the SPÖ and the ÖVP were free to create what a wholly legitimate democratic government of national unity for occupied Austria.

The two main parties were, by the statements of Renner, of other Austrian politicians, and of the occupation authorities, destined for a national unity government. A two-party government of national unity, however, was maintained long past the crisis stage that had prompted the recognition of its necessity. It remained after economic recovery had come over most of the country (the Soviet sector was the exception, ravaged as it was by the Soviets’ managing it for the benefit of the Communist bloc rather than the Austrians), it remained after a fourth party appeared on the scene in 1949, and it remained after the country had become independent of its occupiers in 1955. The question most relevant to this case study is not why the government was originally formed, as that is best answered through investigation of the crisis afflicting Austria at the time, but why it stayed together until 1966, and fell apart then only after protracted negotiations for its continuation.

I will deal first with why the Austrian Grand Coalition survived the three watershed events listed in the above paragraph. First, it did not end once it and the Marshall Plan had cooperated to revive the economy, and this makes sense: If the

27 Saalfeld, p. 62.
government has made great strides in repairing the country, and has evidently had a benign influence, there is no compelling reason to change it. Thus the 1947 elections did not destroy the national unity government. At the next elections, in 1949, another minor party, the *Verband der Unabhängigen* [League of Independents – VdU], appeared on the ballot and won sixteen seats, three times the total held by the Communists. They too were tainted by a lack of *Koalitionsfähigkeit*, for much of their membership consisted of “the small fry of the recently amnestied Nazis,” 29 cleared by the Allies’ denazification programs. The ÖVP and the SPÖ now were not only without suitable parliamentary allies, they each clearly possessed less than 50% of the seats in the Parliament; if anything, the case for the Grand Coalition was strengthened by the arrival of the VdU.

This analysis of Austrian electoral politics remained true until “the equilibrium maintained by the mechanics of the coalition formally ended in 1966” 30 with the SPÖ’s vote to reject a renewal of the Grand Coalition. The VdU reorganized and rechristened itself as the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* [Freedom Party of Austria – FPÖ] in 1956, but it was not considered wholly free of its initial members’ Nazi pasts and was in any case not strong enough to ensure its coalition partner a stable government. Not until 1983 was the FPÖ proven clean enough to join the government, and though the SPÖ needed it then to maintain its hold on power Jörg Haider’s rise to the FPÖ leadership in 1986 sent its reputation downhill and its MPs out of government. Between 1966 and 1983, however, it was the case both that the FPÖ was of necessity kept out of government and that the unity government was unnecessary. This was so because at each election in those

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29 Brook-Shepherd, p. 391.

30 Sully, p. 23.
years one of the major parties – first the ÖVP and then the SPÖ – was sent to Vienna with a parliamentary majority.

Two important features of the Austrian case are yet to be discussed: The negotiated agreements that limited the parties’ operations within the Grand Coalition, and the end of the coalition following the 1966 elections. The latter event may seem unremarkable if you only look at the numbers – with only the election results in hand, you would note that the ÖVP reached a majority that year, and so it was only natural that ÖVP party leader Josef Klaus (who was in any case a representative of factions “less predisposed to reach an understanding with the SPÖ”\(^{31}\)) would form a single-party majority government with himself as Chancellor. What is remarkable was not the result, which did indeed follow logically from the voting, but the length and seriousness of the SPÖ-ÖVP negotiations that followed the elections – which were devoted to the rejuvenation of the Grand Coalition, even though the ÖVP could quite legitimately rule alone.

What logic lay behind the willingness of the People’s Party to share power when it could rule alone? One reason was straightforward: “Both SPÖ and ÖVP had fought the 1966 election with the pledge that the grand coalition should subsequently be renewed.”\(^{32}\) The ÖVP eventually jettisoned that promise, with justification, but it made a show of trying to keep the promise, and probably would have been satisfied to do so. The SPÖ’s reasons for entering the negotiations were also straightforward, because their route to government required the ÖVP, and although the People’s Party could be expected to impose some conditions from its position of power the SPÖ had no reason not to find out

\(^{31}\) Sully, p. 72.
what those conditions were. The rationale behind the ÖVP’s opening negotiations, however, is less readily apparent. Beyond the malleable campaign promise, analysts can offer little beyond a desire to pacify the populace’s natural desire for consistency of government in good times; the Grand Coalition had worked since the Second World War, over two decades earlier, and discontinuing it was such a counterintuitive idea that polls published in 1964 had shown that the break-up of the SPÖ-ÖVP coalition might “cause civic unrest, as a majority of citizens…expected.” Another possible explanation for the ÖVP’s odd behavior as a majority party is more hard-nosed, and although it appears in an article written “from the perspective of the SPÖ” it should be included because it is eminently plausible.

Wolfgang Müller suggests a nearly Machiavellian plan may have been behind ÖVP overtures for the continuation of the Grand Coalition. An economic downturn, the first of any significance since the postwar recovery, was widely held to be coming to Austria soon, and in that context trouble was expected in the creation of a balanced budget. At an SPÖ congress convened to determine the party’s response to the ÖVP, “some party leaders expected [that the ÖVP] would pack all the unpopular decisions into the first budget and then, at a strategically convenient time, terminate the coalition.”

There is no reason to dismiss this theory out of hand; the ÖVP must at the very least have been tempted by the idea of bringing the SPÖ in to vote on necessary but painful measures and then sinking the Socialists’ electoral chances by dropping them from government when the recovery began. The minutes of that congress, and a reading of the

33 Müller 2000, p. 173.
34 Müller 2000, p. 186.
communications between Klaus and SPÖ leader Bruno Pittermann, indicate that the most significant point of difference between the parties involved guarantees desired by the SPÖ that the coalition would be ended only at the next election, or else at one of the other proposed times when the parties’ separation would probably not hurt the SPÖ, so it is certain that the Socialists were mindful of the possibility that the ÖVP was setting them up for a fall.

The Austrian coalition agreements, which were written out for clarity’s sake during every coalition except the very first and have been published at the start of every coalition government since 1956, have dealt separately with the two most notable aspects of coalition negotiations: Allocation of ministries and selection of policy initiatives. The former was thoroughly dealt with via the system of Proporz, whose power began to wane only in the 1990s. Gordon Brook-Shepherd calls it a “negative aspect of coalition politics…set in concrete in Austrian life.”36 Proporz is the shorthand for a system of party patronage that extends to nearly all government-appointed positions, in nationalized or semi-nationalized industries as well as in the government ministries, and divvies up those positions in order to assign them to party members according to the parties’ strength in Parliament. Organizations were seldom given over to one party or the other; typically an undersecretary, for instance, would be of a different party than his supervisor, so that he might act as both a watchdog and a stakeholder for his party. The proportional aspect of this system remained operational even when only one of the major parties was in government, so that the spoils did not go only to the victor. The extensive political swag that was available in the form of governmental and semi-governmental

35 Müller 2000, p. 182.
36 Brook-Shepherd, p. 385.
jobs granted the ÖVP and SPÖ an important means of maintaining their power at the expense of other parties, and discouraged career-minded bureaucrats and entrepreneurs from leaving their political duopoly.

Policy, on the other hand, was not so generous to most individuals, even MPs. “Rather specific mechanisms were set up to decide on specific policy questions,”37 and once policies had been set the parliamentary factions were expected to abide by them strictly. The hypothetical 1966 coalition agreement, which was not passed by the SPÖ decision-makers, acknowledged ÖVP power to use its majority, but still strenuously insisted that “the two governing parties should strive for joint action both in the cabinet and in parliament,”38 in a nod to the previous policy of total obedience to Grand Coalition positions, articulated in “the coalition agreements prior to 1966 [which] had completely bound the parties in parliament and had explicitly ruled out parliamentary activities by the coalition parties to which they had not agreed in advance.”39 Proporz ostensibly acted as a counterweight to the parliamentary lockstep by providing a way for workers representing different parties and perhaps different policies to transparently scrutinize and criticize the policies advocated by their colleagues. Like Proporz, however, the practice of deciding policies privately and then sending them to Parliament for a predetermined vote outlived the Grand Coalition, and some theorists worried that just as Proporz has its drawbacks the amiable backroom formation of policy may have encouraged “complacent stability and reliance on automatic procedures for the resolution of conflict”40 and inhibited practices crucial to democracy, such as public debate and that modicum of

38 Müller 2000, p. 178.
39 Müller 2000, p. 176.
40 Sully, p. 24.
conflict that reassures observers of the system’s ability to handle challenges to status quo policy.

Israel, 1984-1990 – The Likud, Labor, and their smaller partners

Ilan Greilsammer, seeking to prepare his readers for a comparison of French power-sharing arrangements with the Israeli National Unity Government of the late 1980s, divides all coalition governments into four categories: those where the parties have only marginal differences, those where the parties possess unequal power, those where the parties share power voluntarily, and those that do not meet any of the other three conditions. He defines this fourth class, which includes his case studies, in terms of the other three cases: “There are three types that do not resemble the Israeli case [and by extension the French case].”\(^{41}\) We have witnessed all of the first three types in the course of the other two case studies, namely (1) the partnership CDU and the CSU, which are separate parties only because the Christian Social Union maintains its Bavarian regionalism, (2) the normative West German coalitions, featuring a party of the FDP’s choice dominating the FDP, which only has power when coalitions are being negotiated and not once it is in the Bundestag formulating policy, and (3) the normative Austrian coalition, extant before 1966 and from 1986 until the October 1999 resurgence of the FPÖ, which featured extensive cooperation and a sense among both the parties and the populace that SPÖ-ÖVP coalitions were the natural condition for Austrian government.

Greilsammer chose his taxonomy carefully, of course, and the two governments which he wished to study are both found in that idiosyncratic fourth category, where parties with deep policy disagreements but nearly equal political power involuntarily

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form a coalition government under circumstances which allow no other arrangement. He was studying ‘cohabitation,’ which is a broader category than I am considering at present and is expansive enough to free Greilsammer to cover the French government of the 1980s, wherein François Mitterand’s *Parti Socialiste* [Socialist Party – PS] governed using his presidential prerogatives even as the Gaullists of *Rassemblement pour la République* [Rally for the Republic – RPR] governed on the strength of their parliamentary majority. What distinguishes member parties in a unity government from mere cohabitants is simply that rather than exerting the differential powers of separate institutions they are attempting to share, and sometimes to operate jointly, the powers of one or more branches of government. Where the PS and the RPR are open antagonists, the Likud and Labor must behave as though they are “one, but only one, of the senior partners” in government, for they must cooperate within the system they share, where the executive and legislative branches are largely fused rather than possessed of separate powers as in France, in order to achieve the surpassing goal of any governing coalition – “to pursue in concert the goal of exercising control over the governing apparatus of the state,” so that such control may be used instrumentally in implementing both partisan and national policies..

The Israeli unity government that took office in 1984 introduced a new wrinkle in ritualized sharing: the rotation of officeholders as a tool for spreading governmental power even more equitably. The Labor Alignment and the Likud achieved near-parity in their 1984 electoral performances, acquiring with their sworn allies 54 seats for each

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bloc. A Knesset majority would require 61 seats, but the remaining twelve seats were split among the National Religious Party, which “refused to join any but a national unity government,” and smaller parties without Koalitionsfähigkeit, such as Meir Kahane’s one-man extremist party Kach and the Progressive List for Peace, perceived as dangerously pro-Palestinian. The dozen MKs who were not sworn to either bloc were unreachable for the filling of the seven seats either bloc would have needed for a majority government, so Labor and Likud were forced into the most fractious unity government Israel had yet seen, and had to find a way to manage under the circumstances.

This government was not one that fit the historical pattern where “whenever a foreign threat required it, partisan differences were transcended by national unity toward the outside world;” it had instead come together because it had no other available options. And while the economic and military crises that were underway at the time of the elections gave the coalition blocs some policy dilemmas which they could solve in unified fashion it did not provide them with the solidarity that the wartime coalitions had seemingly possessed. Despite the state’s problems with inflation and with engagement in Lebanon, and especially after those issues had been defused, “it was presumptuous to expect that a pluralistic government in which the two principal partners saw themselves as divided by great ideological differences on key issues would be able to reach major decisions.” A framework would have to be in place to resolve policy conflicts in areas

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44 Yanai, p. 171.
other than economic recovery and withdrawal to the Lebanese border, which featured consensus between the governing parties.

The solution at which Shimon Peres’ Labor Alignment and Yitzhak Shamir’s Likud arrived for managing the unwieldy National Unity Government was this: For the first two years of the 11\textsuperscript{th} Knesset’s four-year term, Labor would run the Prime Minister’s office and the Likud would control the Foreign Ministry; at the midpoint of the term, in 1986, the parties would swap those responsibilities and a Labor Foreign Minister would be appointed to balance the Likud Prime Minister. The remainder of the ministries would be divided evenly among the Likud bloc and the Labor bloc, with the twenty-fifth, ‘leftover’ Religious Affairs ministry going to the National Religious Party, which controlled 4 MKs who were in government but not in either major bloc. As October 1986, the appointed month for rotation, approached, there was some high-profile speculation about whether Prime Minister Peres, serving in the first half of the Knesset term, would accede to pressures administered “by some of his associates to overturn the rotation agreement and opt for early elections.”\textsuperscript{47} Rotation occurred as planned, however, partly because Peres couldn’t afford to renege on an agreement he had signed and partly because the electoral math that had created the stalemate did not appear to have changed significantly (if the next elections, in 1988, were any indicator of the interim conditions, the spread of votes indeed did not change much, for the national unity government was continued after those votes were counted). Shamir, who served as Prime Minister in the third and fourth years of the Knesset term, also had little incentive to call for early elections – after all, his party was in power and did not stand to make any obvious gains if it opened the polls.
Perhaps the most absurd result of the forced power-sharing arrangement came in its final three or four years, when the state of Israel effectively spoke with two voices, one from the Laborite Foreign Ministry and one from official head of government Yitzhak Shamir. Both parties were trying to keep the deeds of their party in the public view, and take credit for dynamic leadership and the goods produced by government: In a sentence, they were proving that “the aim of cohabitation is to prepare for its aftermath,”\(^{48}\) by using their roles to improve their electoral profile. This sort of positioning work happens in ordinary times as well, but under normal circumstances one of the major powers in the land is in opposition, and spends its time unabashedly critiquing the government. When both major blocs are in the government, their elites can only accomplish that ordinary goal by taking as much credit as is plausible for government successes and making government ministers of the opposite party look ineffective. Greilsammer gives the example of foreign junkets: For much of 1987 and 1988, wherever Peres or Shamir went, the other was sure to follow, because the opponents’ moves had to be mirrored in order to assure that it did not seem as if they were the only party attempting to better Israel’s international position. As one might imagine, this made for effective policy making, especially at the all-important nexus of security schemes and diplomatic initiatives.

With both parties claiming at least limited jurisdiction in such matters as the peace negotiations with the states and peoples bordering Israel, and beyond that claiming legitimacy for their vision of the proper conduct of those negotiations, the Israeli political game was complicated anew when the Reagan Administration renewed its efforts to

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\(^{47}\) Yahai, p. 185.

\(^{48}\) Greilsammer, p. 47.
create political engagement between the Israeli government and the PLO. The immediate result of the American initiative “was a conflicted foreign policy carried out at the same time by both Shamir and Peres.”\(^{49}\) Over the last two to three years of the national unity government, which coincided with the transition from the Reagan presidency to the [first] Bush presidency, the parties increasingly used warring peace proposals, public statements, and lines in the sand to claim primacy for their visions.

Labor, ensconced in the Foreign Ministry but lacking the chief policy-making organs in the Prime Minister’s offices and subject to Knesset votes decided by the “slight electoral edge”\(^{50}\) the Likud had been granted in the 1988 elections, encouraged the Americans’ vision of fruitful contact between the Israelis and the PLO, but could do little to discourage obstructionism from the Likud. Shimon Peres’ two tools were threats to pull Labor out of the national unity government and expressions of dismay or good cheer, voiced from his pulpit at the Foreign Ministry. Yitzhak Shamir, despite ‘official’ dominance by Likudniks in the 12\(^{th}\) Knesset, was also in a bind. A group can only travel at the speed of its slowest members, and the so-called ‘constraint ministers’ – notably Likud members Ariel Sharon, David Levy, and Yitzhak Modai – were doing their best to keep any process that legitimated the PLO from going anywhere at all.

To maintain an image as a moderate party leader trying for peace with the Palestinians despite the intifada begun in 1987, Shamir made occasional public statements backing parts of the Shultz or Baker peace plans (named for the American Secretaries of State spearheading each effort). When these statements that he made on behalf of the Likud went too far toward moderation, however, the hardliners would call

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Shamir to a meeting of the party’s central committee and demand that he retract his support for, e.g., the holding of elections for a Palestinian negotiation team while the intifada had not yet been halted. Shamir generally acquiesced in the face of the political threats posed by the constraint ministers, who controlled a quarter of the Knesset, could thereby seriously hamper the government, and whose members periodically “pledged to block the election plan,” as Ariel Sharon did, or “called on both Shamir and Peres to resign” in a statement given by Yitzhak Modai.

That state of affairs could not continue forever. If Labor continually threatened to resign from government and never showed any sign of doing so, its threats would eventually be regarded less seriously and voters might come to think that it had become so attached to holding office that it could not follow through on its pledges to protest unacceptable behavior by sacrificing its role in government. And if Prime Minister Shamir continually made positive statements about peace in public only to continually renounce them when pressured by his party’s ideologues, he would come to be regarded as a leader buffeted by the two separate winds of American peace and Sharonite obstructionism, too weak to escape. It seems remotely plausible that the unity government’s false starts towards its own destruction could have repeated themselves until the 1992 elections came about and ended the coalition naturally, but the reality is that push came to shove in March 1990. Shamir then invoked images of Labor encouraging troublesome Palestinian aspirations, and fired Peres, ostensibly for giving succor to the Palestinians with his support for peace initiatives that, by Prime Minister Shamir’s argument, left “the Likud [as] the only buffer between Israel and a Palestinian

51 Flamhaft, p. 165.
The Labor Alignment followed Peres out of government, and no-confidence votes that had already been on the Knesset agenda passed with an exact majority, 60-55, including the necessary support of Labor for the dissolution of the government.

Let us backtrack a moment from the end of the coalition to discuss its operation. Perhaps in anticipation of the sharp clashes between the viewpoints held by MKs in the two participating blocs, which would vary more widely than in most governing coalitions, the national unity government’s Knesset wing found that “coalition discipline was tightened in an extreme manner that had no precedent in the past…” Even though under ordinary circumstances “candidates who win a place in the Knesset commit themselves to party discipline…and bloc voting is highly predictable,” MKs participating in the 11th Knesset were formally ordered to “vote for government proposals at all stages of legislation” in a clause that plainly assumed that all Knesset bills put forward by the government would have been vetted for acceptability to all coalition members before being submitted for the MKs’ consideration. Knesset members and some observers worried that Bereichsopposition was being rendered inviable not at the parliamentary level but at the systemic level through the 1984 coalition agreement, which restricted parliament to an unusual degree. Opposition members, and coalition members, were allowed as before to read questions into the official record at the same rates they had maintained during previous coalitions of all stripes, thus maintaining the ‘principle of opposition’ within the Knesset.

52 Flamhaft, p. 166.
53 Flamhalf, p. 172.
56 Goldberg, p. 197-8.
57 Goldberg, p. 201.
However, the national unity government’s emphasis on making policy solely via government proposals and private members’ bills that had been deemed ‘kosher’ by the coalition members prompted warnings that such a procedure “threatens the Knesset in the form of a tendency to ignore its existence and prerogatives, void it of any content, and transform it into a superfluous appurtenance of the governmental system.” In response to the restrictions of its policy-making role, however, the 11th Knesset made more effective use of its “functions of investigation, discussion, criticism and supervision,” signalling, in one analyst’s view, the start of “a likely functional separation of powers between the executive arm and the legislative arm.”

COMPARISON

We may begin by noting the most superficial of the similarities between the electoral systems found in post-war Austria, the Federal German Republic, and the State of Israel. All three countries live under parliamentary systems, for instance, and grant most executive powers to the Prime Minister or his functional equivalent, the Chancellor, who acts as head of government and also heads the coalition that develops in Parliament following the vote that brought his party to power. All three also possess an almost purely formal president, who acts as head of state on certain occasions and may have limited discretion in using his or her powers. Each of the three states contains two dominant parties, although the number of subdominant parties varies from state to state, most often being largest where the most social cleavages occur, in Israel (this is a product of the widely acknowledged trend where “each party that is added [to a system] produces

58 Speaker of the Knesset Shlomo Hillel, in Divrei Ha’Knesset, September 13 1984, p. 52, quoted in Goldberg p. 198.
59 Goldberg, p. 218.
an additional issue dimension, *and vice versa*60). All three parliaments are divided into party-bound fractions by means of a system of proportional representation, which differs in operational details at many points across the national institutions but notably kicks in at different minimum percentages in each country: In the *Bundesrepublik* 5% of the vote is necessary for legitimacy, in Austria the threshold changes depending on calculations based partly upon voter turnout, and in Israel any party with more than 1.5% of the vote is allowed into the Knesset.

These characteristics are the ones that make these three states prone to rule by electorally-founded unity governments. It would not be impossible for a grand coalition to form by political necessity in a system with a strong, separately-elected executive, with a single-member-district electoral scheme, or with more or fewer than two dominant parties, but in every case the structural feature that has taken root in Germany, Israel, and Austria makes such coalitions more likely. Where the parliament is the lesser half of the government (as in a system based on a chief executive independent of Parliament); where the system favors the elimination of minor parties, with predominantly conflictual relations among the major parties as a result (as in a single-member-district system, where the parties tend to fight one another because minor parties are not generally powerful enough to endanger their success); or where one or three or more major parties exist, making unity government pointless or unattainable except in crisis (the presence of one major party renders unity governance redundant, and if there are more than two

major parties they are unlikely to be forced into an all-encompassing coalition by politics as usual), unity governments are either less likely or of lesser stature.

By virtue of their joint membership in the relatively small pool of historical circumstances that have spawned national unity governments, the party systems visible in Israel in 1984, West Germany in 1966, and Austria in 1955 – the last year in which the Grand Coalition could plausibly have claimed ‘crisis status,’ as the Allied occupation ended in October – also share a number of characteristics. I use the phrase ‘party systems’ rather casually here, to describe the measurable short-term vital statistics of the constellation of parties (as opposed to the medium- or long-term consequences of party interaction under each nation’s rules), and consider this diction defensible because it is the political moment which spawned the unity governments to which I refer rather than the political climate of the half-century lifespans of the countries in question. The most relevant commonalities in these three party systems are the ‘modern,’ catch-all nature of the major parties; the resultant, very relative compatibility of the major parties’ programs; and the parity between the major parties, usually established concretely by the results of elections before and during the unity governments.

The primary political parties in most post-war Western republics followed the same general trajectory by becoming ‘catch-all’ parties; this trend developed relatively early in Europe, where it was chronicled as early as 1966,61 and somewhat later in Israel. The successful parties of the post-war era found “an alternative to more adversarial appeals…representing themselves to the electorate not as the party of the working class

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or the economic elite, but as the best modernizing party. As an example, the Social Democrats in Germany accomplished this transition publicly and dramatically with the revision of their platform at Bad Godesborg. The parties did not abandon their traditional constituents – the ‘working classes’ and ‘economic elites’ of the above quotation – but tried mightily to extend them. They made more general appeals and tempered their Weltanshauungen. National leaders, “having leanings in one direction or another derived from the old ideologies but basically pragmatic in their orientation,” “aimed their campaigns at the centre, hoping to catch their voters there.” Voting still followed ideological patterns, but policy-making and coalition operations began to depend more on centrism than they previously had (in Israeli politics, Yitzhak Shamir’s conflicts with the ideological wing of his party, the Likud, may have been the progeny of his willingness to use catch-all strategies).

Policy compatibility between the two primary parties is less in Israel than in Germany and Austria, due to the higher number of issues that are open for interparty debate, but it is nevertheless present. As parties make the decision to become catch-all parties, they begin to de-emphasize the policies which had originally made them incompatible with their rivals – they maintain some of the policies, out of conviction and in order to keep their base constituency content, but publicly recognize the ways in which they can reach across the party divide to centrist voters who could choose either party. Some analysts believe that even ostensibly ideological parties, such as Israel’s National Religious Party, have striven to expand in this manner, and sometimes “become so

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63 Daniel Elazar and Shmuel Sandler, “Introduction,” in Elazar and Sandler, p. 15.
pragmatic that the ideological dimension [is] only minimally relevant.\textsuperscript{65} Self-identification as a catch-all party with strategies aimed at possessing the center is probably not necessary for the formation of unity governments (and it certainly isn’t sufficient), but the strategic admission of similarities makes parties’ joining a grand coalition more acceptable to voters and simpler for political leaders.

Parity in the electoral sense has more to do with the formation of non-crisis-oriented unity governments than with their ease of operation (which is notably affected by the shift from primarily ideological to primarily catch-all campaigning). It is also approximate, as parties rarely receive precisely the same number of seats in Parliament, and certainly do not receive the exact same numbers of votes, which would be required for exact electoral parity. The party systems involved here possessed varying but consistently low differentials between the major parties’ scores in the elections preceding the grand coalitions (~10% in West Germany, ~5% in Austria, and approaching zero in Israel when the blocs are considered rather than the parties). Some might consider electoral parity among parties an indicator that parties possess equivalent power as well, but I posit this contention here primarily to have it as a straw man, for although I believe power is important to this discussion I find that, where power is concerned, ballot boxes do not provide information complete enough to be useful. They take a snapshot of parties’ power relations, and although they may thereby produce a scalar measure of power the vector expressing power is more useful: Are a party’s fortunes rising or falling? The directional aspect that is lacking in translations of votes to power is what I feel is crucial in explaining some of the various denouements of the unity governments considered herein.

\textsuperscript{65} Elazar and Sandler 1990b, p. 15.
CONCLUSIONS

Let’s review the end of each story, in capsule format:

1) Austria, 1945 (or 1955) to 1966: Suspicion of Malice. The Socialists, in deciding to oppose the People’s Party rather than joining it in a continuation of the twenty-year-old Grand Coalition, acted because they feared the consequences of making themselves open to ÖVP machinations. All previous coalition agreements had featured “the coupling of the term of the coalition with that of the parliament:” if one party was abandoned by the other, new elections were in order. Without that guarantee – and the ÖVP was only willing to “incorporate a passage in the government declaration stating that it was the firm will of both parties to implement the government program and to avoid any crisis” – the SPÖ strongly suspected that it would be brought in to do the unpopular work of forestalling an economic downturn and then dropped so that the ÖVP could finish its term as the sole party in government to preside over the recovery.

2) West Germany, 1966 to 1969: Herbert Wehner Thinks Ahead. This unity government ended, in one sense, because it had done what it was formed to do: “Wehner’s strategy of making the SPD ‘a party capable of governing’ through participation in the Grand Coalition had succeeded.” There was some initial waffling among some Socialists, including Wehner, who thought their success at the polls might rise even further (a 10% rise across three elections) if they supported another Grand Coalition. However, Willy Brandt wished to be Chancellor – he stated in his campaign “that he could not imagine any coalition in which he would be foreign minister,” as he

66 Müller 2000, p. 179.
68 Thompson, p. 297.
69 Thompson, p. 298.
was in the unity government – rather than second fiddle to the CDU/CSU, and insisted upon teaming with the Free Democrats. He got his wish, although the FDP drove a harder bargain than it had with the Christian Democratic Union, and was appeased because the coalition had such a small majority that having an unhappy partner was an unsafe bet.

3) Israel: Mutual Assured Destruction. The primary difference that remained between the Likud and Labor by the mid-1980s involved the prospect of territorial compromise. Their tiptoeing toward friendship, or more probably competition based on catch-all precepts rather than ideological tenets, was far overmatched by the opposing positions they took on the American-backed plans for a conference between Israel and the Palestinians. The necessity of eventually responding concretely to those proposals seriously taxed the cooperative process of running a government, and in July 1987 the parties began to voice increasingly firm stands. Prime Minister Shamir had to be egged on by his party’s right wing, but presented a plan so unacceptable to the left-of-center members of the Knesset that “some of the Labor Alignment called for the resignation of the party from the government [and] Mapam, Shinui, and the CRM submitted…a vote of nonconfidence.”70 Labor ministers Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin threatened to leave government, and although they did not follow through their party did, one month later, knowingly publish a set of principles for peace negotiations that the Likud would be compelled to reject. This pattern of co-governing parties continually baiting each other on the biggest issue about which they disagreed eventually ended as it had to, with a split in the government following a Labor-Likud standoff over the outline presented by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III.
In cases one and two, the shifting power relationship between the two major parties is a culprit in the ending of the Grand Coalition. In Austria, the rise of the ÖVP is conveniently captured by the incomplete voting-booth snapshot from 1966, which reveals the outright majority the ÖVP won, but it isn’t the whole story. What devastated the unity-government-that-wasn’t following the ÖVP victory were worries about the vector expression of power: Would a party rise or fall if it participated? The People’s Party recalled the successes of past years and decided that it would get high marks from the people if it tried to continue the system that had given them those successes – or else it prophesied that if it could make the SPÖ look bad when the economy tanked. The SPÖ was assuredly looking at its future; it held off on coalition precisely because it feared the damage the ÖVP could do to its prospects for increasing its power at the next election. Similarly, the SPD entered and left the West German Grand Coalition because its power with respect to the CDU/CSU was increasing. It had to prove that the people were choosing correctly in elevating it so, but when the upward trend was confirmed by the 1969 elections Brandt took advantage of it and ordered a coalition with the FDP. Wehner, the architect of the SPD’s rise, was more cautious, and recommended extension of the unity government because he suspected that even larger gains could be had by holding off on forming a government outright controlled by the SPD; he too was looking carefully at the Socialists’ hopes for increased power.

With the Socialists in Germany and Austria making their respective decisions – rejection of the Christian Democrats in pursuit of success in government, and rejection of the People’s Party in pursuit of success in opposition – based on forecasts for their perceived power, one might expect to find similar concerns among leaders in the Israeli

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70 Flamhaft, p. 167.
parties. This did not happen. Why does Israeli’s unity government break the pattern – if we may generously call a stencil derived from two cases a pattern – of letting reasoned concerns about future electoral power break down the coalition? One reason is that the parties participating in the government of national unity in 1990 were willing hostages to events. The Teutonic Socialists had made their decisions openly, during the coalition negotiation periods following elections, but the Israeli parties disguised their maneuvering and their feelings about the renewed grand coalition as part and parcel of the work of governing the country, and their coalition was ended in midterm, two years ahead of schedule. Proposals and counter-proposals flew freely, and near the end of the back-and-forth even one of the minority parties, Shas, tried to turn events to its advantage by “offer[ing] a compromise that allowed Labor to return to the cabinet”\(^\text{71}\) and thus appearing as the level-headed party looking to stave of the coalition’s collapse.

Events precluded the making of decisions purely based on hypotheses about theoretical gains in power, because the events went to the heart of what separated the ideologues in the parties: the fate of the Zionist enterprise, as implemented in the territories. Power was a consideration – both parties wanted to appear powerful to their voters, and saw standing firm about the peace process as a way to do that, and Yitzhak Shamir stayed at odds with his constraints ministers because he saw power coming from his attempts at moderation – but only insofar as it was viewed through the schismatic lens of interaction with the Palestinians. The cleavage that ran between the Likud and Labor in that respect, which had no parallel in the European party systems studied here, combined with circumstances that magnified the rift (Palestinian intifada and American intervention) until it shattered the unity government in a slow-cooking morass of

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\(^{71}\) Flamhaft, p. 172.
recriminations which mounted to such a heat that neither party would voluntarily stay in their coalition. What a party on the rise accomplished in Germany and a wary party accomplished in Austria, combative parties on a high-profile search for peace accomplished in Israel: An end to an experiment in governance – the use of the broadest plausible coalition to rule a country.

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