

# Government Alternation and Patterns of Competition in Europe: Comparative Data in Search of Explanations

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*Government alternation is a fundamental component of any efficient democracy and it could be seen both as an empirical proof (in democracy there is government alternation) or as an ideal pattern of competition (in democracy there should be government alternation). However, to what extent do democracies work according to such an ideal pattern? A Government Turnover Index (GTI) is provided to answer this question with respect to 524 governments in 22 European contemporary democracies since World War II. As suggested by the data and by the GTI, there is not necessarily a link between democratic competition and government alternation, although some democracies are more likely to experience it. It is therefore necessary to direct the analysis towards some systemic factors which may favour or hinder government alternation (such as the party system structure and the institutional framework).*

The assumption that government alternation is and should be the natural outcome of democratic competition is implicit in any definition of democracy, although whether it should be considered at the same time the necessary and sufficient condition of the democratic process is open to question. If patterns of *perfect government alternation* mean an unbroken series of *complete* change (=100 per cent) of the incumbent government (i.e. one party or coalition of parties substituting another after a crisis or an election), this would prove to be a rare event among contemporary democracies. What occurs more often is *limited government turnover* defined as *limited* change (< 100 per cent) in the incumbent government, in relatively stable structures of party competition. In this paper, evidence of this apparent paradox is drawn from a set of data based on 524 governments in 22 European contemporary democracies from the end of World War II to

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the present time<sup>1</sup>, with the presentation and discussion of this data collection being the main goal of the paper. In the next section the methodology employed to collect the data is illustrated, and a Government Turnover Index (GTI) is introduced to measure the effective degree of government alternation among parties in the contemporary European democracies. Next, the data are presented in comparative perspective. Notwithstanding the difficulties in perceiving a sharp contrast between democracies as regards alternation or the lack of it, the data do reveal cases where competition approximates perfect alternation as opposed to cases where only limited turnover is to be found. Having assumed government alternation and its relative measures (GTI) as dependent variables, subsequent sections explore some causal links for these differences.

To summarise the findings, the GTI values are relatively high among the newly established democracies (i.e. the Eastern European countries) or where the post-World War II party systems have gone through a radical process of realignment (Italy after 1994). Among the 'old' European democracies the trends of the GTI values are less clear. In these democracies party systems and competition have stabilised over the decades. Nonetheless, it is still possible to identify one subset of cases where government turnover is a relatively rare event (Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Greece), but it is perfect or complete when it happens (100 per cent change of the incumbent government), and another subset based on limited turnover. These two subsets among the old democracies also differ if the position of the government in the institutional framework is taken into account. Where turnover tends to be complete or perfect the government is the stronghold of the institutional framework (a strong prime minister faces a weak head of state) and it is highly integrated in the parliamentary arena: a vote of no confidence in the government is normally conducive to parliament dissolution, and the cabinet is the 'executive committee' of the legislatures (Bagehot 1867). On this basis it is possible to formulate two sets of expectations. First, in the aftermath of the fundamental democratisation or of a drastic realignment of the party system, the turnover of the incumbent governments may prove high in the short run. This is because the decidability of the electoral competition and vulnerability of the incumbent government<sup>2</sup> are increased by weak party identification which itself follows from the establishment of new cleavage structures or the transformation of older ones. Second, when democracy is consolidated, turnover of incumbent governments tends to be low. In these cases the decidability of the electoral competition and vulnerability of the incumbent government are hindered by the stabilisation of the party systems and by stronger levels of party identification among voters. Turnover can be expected to be particularly low when the institutional framework strengthens the position of the prime minister with respect to the head of state or any other apical institutional actors, and/or when government survival is firmly linked to the survival of the legislature.

### **The Data Set: Methodology and Measures**

Government alternation can be seen as a property of democracy because as long as it is possible to contest and openly challenge the political authorities the democratic process may generate a dynamic of alternation in power. Nonetheless, political competition does not necessarily bring about a continuous exchange of positions between incumbent government and its challengers. To settle this aspect it can be useful to recall Sartori's (1982: 75) argument that 'Alternation refers to an expectation... Alternation is only about to say, then, that the gap between the two biggest parties is close enough, and that the likelihood that the opposition party substitutes the government party is believable.' Yet despite the importance of alternation, there has been surprisingly little research on some of the key questions: Do contemporary democracies work according to the principle of party alternation in power? To which extent do parties or coalitions of parties alternate in government in contemporary democracies? Finally, if they do so, what are the factors which help to account for the presence of government alternation?<sup>3</sup> Although some attention has recently been paid to government turnover, this has tended to be in the wider perspective of the positive coalition theory or in analyses of the impact of economic factors on the electoral results (Molina 2001). For instance, Diermeier and Merlo (2000) treated government turnover as a by-product of coalition formation and reshuffle in parliamentary democracies and did not pay any direct attention to the phenomenon in a comparative and empirical sense. Horowitz *et al.* (2009) deal directly with the concept of government turnover but their approach is at once too vague and too demanding to be of practical use in a comparative study. The change in the 'ruling leader or leaders', as they define 'government turnover', is a criterion so general as to encompass a multiplicity of situations ranging from the breakdown of a dictatorship to the reshuffle of a parliamentary coalition. Horowitz *et al.* (2009: 11) also extend their observations in too many directions to allow a firm grasp of the phenomenon, including leadership and ideological alternation, ideological distance, institutional fragmentation, and types of alternation. Their analysis is limited to the post-communist world and is too impressionistic to provide a safe guide.

One of the very few attempts to submit government alternation to a direct investigation and to provide some data is that of Fabbrini (1998). More recently, Fabbrini and Vassallo (1999: 72–4) have suggested distinguishing between 'alternation' (100 per cent change in party composition of the government or coalition government), 'peripheral turnover' ( $\geq 50$  per cent change) and 'semi-turnover' ( $< 50$  per cent change), although without making explicit the range of variation of the cases in each category. They also list and enumerate the cases of turnovers according to the various types rather than measuring their ratio against the total number of governments in each given case.

Another fruitful comparative study of government alternation in Europe was provided by Mair (2006, 2008). According to Mair (2008: 242–3), there are three systemic properties of any structure of competition: the *form* of alternation, which distinguishes cases where the ‘turnover in government is wholesale’ from cases where ‘turnover tends to be partial’; the *degree of innovation in government formation*, which refers to the patterns of government and coalition formation; finally *access to office*, which signals ‘the relative ease with which newly formed parties can join the government’. The Index of Government Alternation (IGA) suggested by Mair (2006: 251; 2008: 245) measures the party share of the cabinet positions as the ‘total number of ministers in the cabinet, including the prime minister’. Mair’s IGA is innovative and offers the possibility to attempt a cross-national comparison of party alternation in government, rather than submitting the phenomenon to a qualitative and speculative analysis. Nonetheless, the IGA elaborated by Mair stresses the changes in government composition rather than the *level of alternation*, as it claims. This is particularly true in those cases (e.g. Italy, Finland, and Belgium) where a relatively high turnover in the distribution of the ministers is recorded over time within a stable coalition structure. Secondly, all the ministers, including the office of the prime minister, are considered as equal, but it is evident that it makes a substantial difference *in terms of power* for the parties in the game to hold the office of prime minister, and for instance to control the Treasury, or the Foreign Office, rather than the Ministry of Tourism or the Ministry of Culture. Very often in a coalition structure a large or dominant party (such as the Christian Democrat Party in Italy) may favour a relatively high alternation of ministers in a sequence of cabinets but keep the key offices safely in its hand, above all the office of prime minister. Once again, IGA would signal a high level of alternation in a rather stable and unchallenged coalition power structure.<sup>4</sup>

To avoid to these limitations, I will introduce here a Government Turnover Index measured as follows:

$$GTI_{1,2} = \left( \sum_{G=2}^n p/P \right) / G - 1$$

In  $GTI_1$ , given a series of governments  $G_1, \dots, n$ , for each  $G$  in the series,  $p$  and  $P$  are respectively the number of new parties in government and the total number of parties in government, whilst in  $GTI_2$  they are respectively the percentage of parliamentary seats controlled by the new parties in government and the total percentage of parliamentary seats controlled by the government. Finally,  $G$  is the total number of governments in each temporal series.  $GTI_1$  measures the government turnover as a ratio between the net party changes in the governments and the total number of governments in the set.  $GTI_2$  measures the government turnover as a ratio between the percentages of the party

changes in the governments (percentages of parliamentary seats) and the percentages of the parliamentary support of the governments in the set. Hence  $GTI_{1,2}$  ranges from 0 (with regard to  $G_{n-1}$ ,  $G_n$  exhibits no party changes at all, that is neither ‘perfect government alternation’ nor ‘limited turnover’ has occurred) to 1 (with regard to  $G_{n-1}$ ,  $G_n$  is a totally renewed government, that is ‘perfect government alternation’ has occurred), while for any of its intermediate values  $GTI_{1,2}$  signals ‘limited turnovers’ in power. Starting from  $G_2$ ,<sup>5</sup>  $GTI_{1,2}$  can be disaggregated for each government in each given series, but here I will only present and discuss the aggregated average results. I will also employ and discuss a third version of  $GTI$  ( $GTI_3$ , see below Tables 3 and 7). For each country  $GTI_3$  is simply an average of  $GTI_2$  scores on all the recorded turnovers.

Before introducing the results, the data set and the survey methodology will be presented.<sup>6</sup> There is no sampling and  $GTI_{1,2}$  is calculated on the universal set of 524 post-World War II governments in 22 European contemporary democracies.<sup>7</sup> These have at least one institutional feature in common, which is that either their governments or prime ministers – sometimes both as a collegial body – need to receive the endorsement of the legislature. In other words, the governments of these 22 democracies must enjoy some level of parliamentary support if their survival is to be guaranteed, regardless of other specific institutional properties. Concerning the party composition of the governments and the relative party distribution of seats, this study refers exclusively to the situation in the Lower Houses.<sup>8</sup> A new government is recorded when one of the following events occurs:<sup>9</sup>

1. Change of prime minister;
2. Formal resignation of the government after the election and the appointment of a new head of state, or after legislative elections and before the inauguration of a new legislature;
3. Changes in the party composition of the coalition government followed by formal resignation of the government.

With regard to the three possible dimensions of the structure of the competition recalled above (Mair 2008: 242–3), the present analysis is limited to the *form* of alternation. There are two arguments to support this choice. Firstly, the form which alternation may take in any given structure of competition reveals the basic properties of the party system dynamic. Some party systems may function according to a centripetal dynamic and the government alternation between two parties or coalitions of parties may become a recurrent pattern. Other party systems may be characterised by prevailing centrifugal drives which change the competition dynamic from bilateral to multilateral and a sharp government alternation of two opposite competitors is rather uncommon. Secondly, as Mair (2008: 242) recognised, in some cases ‘turnover tends to be partial’ and therefore a formal analysis of alternation needs to take into consideration the degree of change in the

coalition governments. This is why, following Fabbrini and Vassallo (1999) and adapting their terminology, the changes in the government composition are classified as:

- a) *complete turnovers* if there is a 100 per cent change in the government party composition;
- b) *semi-turnovers* if the change in the government party composition is  $\geq 50$  per cent;
- c) *partial turnovers* if the change in the government party composition is  $< 50$  per cent.

### **A Comparative Sketch of Government Alternation in the European Democracies**

The comparison here advanced concerns 22 European contemporary democracies where, regardless of other institutional features, the government takes office after a collegial investiture vote or after an investiture vote for its leader (prime minister, *Bundeskanzler*, *Presidente del Consiglio*, *Taoiseach*, etc.) by the parliament. The data referring to France have been arranged separately between IV Republic (1947–1958) and V Republic (1959–2010). The historical series of governments refer to the period 1945–2010, but obviously in some cases the data collection starts more recently and according to the country's last democratisation.<sup>10</sup>

In Table 1 the cases and their relative data are ranked according to the number of governments in each set. The initial hypothesis, that in a democracy government alternation is not the necessary outcome of competition, is partially confirmed. Given 524 governments with clear parliamentary majorities formed in Europe during 1945–2010, 233 turnovers were recorded (44 per cent). This is to say that in roughly every other government which took office some turnover happened, whereas in 56 per cent of European governments there was no change in party composition when compared with their predecessors. If the turnover percentages with respect to each country are considered, it is easy to verify how the distribution of the cases varies. Austria, Great Britain, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Germany, Greece, and Czech Republic rank equal to or below 40 per cent of the turnover threshold, while Finland, Norway, Netherlands, Ireland, France IV Republic, Romania, Portugal, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia rank equal to or above the 50 per cent threshold. A second general remark concerns the overall distribution of the 233 recorded turnovers. In 100 cases (43 per cent) complete turnovers occurred, but this percentage decreases to 19.1 as a ratio of the total number of governments (this ratio is reported in brackets at the bottom of columns 4, 5, and 6 in Table 1). Complete turnovers of the incumbent government are indeed rare events. Semi- and partial turnovers occur respectively 83 times (36 per cent; 15.9 per cent against the universal set of

TABLE 1  
GOVERNMENT TURNOVERS IN 22 EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES  
(1945–2010)

Countries	Governments		Turnovers			Tot.	%
	Tot. N.	Caretaker	Complete = 1	Semi $\geq 1\frac{1}{2}$	Partial $< 1\frac{1}{2}$		
Italy	55	1	5	12	5	22	40
Finland	40	3	1	7	15	23	58
Belgium	39	0	2	12	3	17	44
Denmark	35	0	10	1	2	13	37
France V Rep.	34	0	8	5	3	16	47
Norway	30	0	14	1	0	15	50
Sweden	29	0	5	4	0	9	31
Austria	26	0	1	4	0	5	19
Netherlands	25	0	1	10	5	16	64
Ireland	24	0	9	5	0	14	58
Great Britain	24	0	7	0	0	7	29
France IV Rep.	22	0	0	0	12	12	55
Germany	21	0	1	6	1	8	38
Greece	17	1	5	0	1	6	35
Romania	16	0	3	3	2	8	50
Portugal	16	4	4	3	1	8	50
Poland	14	0	6	0	0	6	43
Spain	11	0	3	0	0	3	27
Czech Rep.	10	1	2	2	0	4	40
Slovakia	9	0	4	2	0	6	67
Bulgaria	9	2	4	2	0	6	67
Hungary	9	0	4	0	0	4	44
Slovenia	9	0	1	4	0	5	56
Totals	524	12	100	83	50	233	44
%	98	2	43 (19.1)	36 (15.9)	21 (9.5)		
		100%		100%			

governments) and 50 times (21 per cent; 9.5 per cent against the universal set of governments).

However, the 'quality' of the turnover differs. In the cases of the 'old democracies' of the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Belgium, France IV Republic, and Austria, the number of complete turnovers as a ratio of the total number of governments is negligible. On the other hand, there is a group of countries which experience almost exclusively complete turnovers, although they may be rare: Norway, Denmark, Great Britain, Spain, Greece, and significantly all the post-1989 'new' democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. Finally, in other cases the picture is less clear. For instance, France in the Fifth Republic has a strong record of complete turnovers (eight) which equal the combined record of semi- and partial turnovers (eight). Similarly, five complete turnovers against four semi-turnovers were recorded in Sweden, nine complete against five semi-turnovers in Ireland, four complete against three semi-turnovers and one partial in Portugal, and finally the five complete turnovers recorded in Italy are all to be dated after the post-1994 party system realignment.

The impression that government alternation is not the ‘normal’ way of working for contemporary European democracies is strengthened once the average scores generated by GTI are introduced (see Table 2). It should be recalled that a pattern of ‘perfect’ government alternation would be signalled by a value of 1 for GTI, while 0 signals a complete absence of alternation. With the exception of Slovakia and Bulgaria, some cases score values of around 0.50 (Ireland, Norway, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia), most cases score values below 0.40, and in some cases (Finland, Germany, France IV Republic, and Austria) the score is below 0.25.<sup>11</sup> Apart from Ireland and Norway, the other European democracies based on a pattern of alternation (France V Republic, Denmark, Greece, Great Britain, Spain, and Sweden) score relatively low values. Finally Germany and Austria’s rankings are remarkable, as they show very limited government alternation, although their positioning deserves closer consideration.

Given a series of governments,  $GTI_1$  measures the turnover in power as a ratio of the number of new parties in office over the total number of governments considered. Therefore  $GTI_1$  may reduce the effective turnover in power because it does not measure the weight of the parties

TABLE 2  
GOVERNMENT TURNOVER INDEX (GTI) IN 22 EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY  
DEMOCRACIES (1945–2010)

Countries	<i>GTI</i>		
	(1) Parties	(2) Aver. %	(3) Turn. %
Slovakia	0.71	0.65	0.76
Bulgaria	0.64	0.65	0.87
Ireland	0.51	0.48	0.79
Norway	0.51	0.49	0.95
Hungary	0.50	0.50	1.00
Poland	0.46	0.46	1.00
Slovenia	0.46	0.47	0.62
Czech Rep.	0.37	0.28	0.62
France V Rep.	0.36	0.26	0.58
Romania	0.36	0.27	0.59
Denmark	0.33	0.31	0.80
Greece	0.33	0.34	0.90
Netherlands	0.32	0.26	0.40
Portugal	0.31	0.27	0.63
Great Britain	0.30	0.30	1.00
Spain	0.30	0.30	1.00
Italy	0.26	0.14	0.36
Belgium	0.26	0.21	0.47
Sweden	0.26	0.22	0.70
Finland	0.22	0.20	0.36
Germany	0.21	0.18	0.45
France IV Rep.	0.17	0.17	0.30
Austria	0.12	0.10	0.52
Averages	0.36	0.33	0.68



(parliamentary seats) involved.<sup>12</sup>  $GTI_2$  and  $GTI_3$  were hence calculated in order to correct to a certain extent the original picture. Nonetheless, if we now address our attention to the weight of the parties involved in the turnovers ( $GTI_2$ , column 3 in Table 2), only in three cases (Bulgaria, Slovenia, and Greece) does the average magnitude of the turnovers increase, while it generally decreases in all the other cases. Turnovers appear to be even more limited in Germany ( $GTI_2 = 0.18$ ) and in Austria ( $GTI_2 = 0.10$ ) due to the particular structure of the party competition in those two cases, in which two small liberal parties (FDP in Germany and FPÖ in Austria) occupy the pivotal position in the political space and enter into coalition with the two major socialist parties (SPD in Germany and SPÖ in Austria) and conservative parties (CDU/CSU in Germany and ÖVP in Austria).<sup>13</sup> Other cases characterised by limited turnover or by turnover of small parties are Italy ( $GTI_2 = 0.14$ ), Czech Republic ( $GTI_2 = 0.28$ ), France V Republic ( $GTI_2 = 0.26$ ), and Romania ( $GTI_2 = 0.27$ ).

Finally  $GTI_3$  (fourth column in Table 2) measures the average party turnovers according to the weights of the parties (percentage of parliamentary seats) as a ratio of the turnovers rather than in relation to the total number of governments in the series.  $GTI_3$  increases the level of detected turnover in all the European democracies scrutinised. The measures provided by  $GTI_3$  are significant because they reveal that, although government alternation may be a rare event, when and where it happens the turnover of the government incumbents is substantial. Indeed, for Great Britain, Spain, Hungary, and Poland  $GTI_3 = 1$ , while for Norway  $GTI_3 = 0.95$ , and for Greece  $GTI_3 = 0.90$ .

Tables 3 and 4 add more details to the picture of political turnovers. Table 3 shows that 79 out of the 100 complete turnovers recorded have occurred after the elections and hence at the inauguration of a new legislature.<sup>14</sup> The data are coherent from this point of view, with the notable exception of France V Republic, Norway and Ireland, where complete turnovers of the government incumbents have sometimes taken place during the legislatures. However, a great majority of 79% cases of post-election turnovers confirm the expectation that a high degree of decidability of the electoral competition (Bartolini 1999, 2000, 2002) is a basic condition of effective party alternation in power. On the other hand, the 108 semi- and partial turnovers (see Table 4) are distributed quite equally between 'after elections' (57 cases, 53 per cent) and 'during the legislature' (51 cases, 51 per cent) apart from the two notable exceptions of Italy (1948–1993) and France IV Republic, which were indeed characterised by high government instability and by frequent government reshuffles and breakdowns during the legislatures. It is worth noting that turnovers during the legislatures are also frequent in those cases (France V Republic, Finland, Portugal, and Romania) where the parliamentary governments and their leaderships face an elected head of state who may resort to his/her constitutional powers to exercise influence over the parliamentary arena.<sup>15</sup>

TABLE 3  
TIMING OF COMPLETE TURNOVERS IN 22 EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY  
DEMOCRACIES (1945–2010)

Countries	N. complete Turnovers	After elections	%	During leg.	%
Norway	14	7	50	7	50
Denmark	10	8	80	2	20
Ireland	9	3	33	6	67
France V Rep.	8	5	63	3	38
Great Britain	7	7	100	0	0
Poland	6	5	83	1	17
Greece	5	5	100	0	0
Italy (1994–2010)	5	5	100	0	0
Sweden	5	5	100	0	0
Portugal	4	4	100	0	0
Bulgaria	4	3	75	1	25
Hungary	4	4	100	0	0
Slovakia	4	3	75	1	25
Romania	3	3	100	0	0
Spain	3	3	100	0	0
Czech Republic	2	2	100	0	0
Belgium	2	2	100	0	0
Finland	1	1	100	0	0
Germany	1	1	100	0	0
Austria	1	1	100	0	0
Netherlands	1	1	100	0	0
Slovenia	1	1	100	0	0
Totals and average %	100	79	79	21	21

TABLE 4  
TIMING OF SEMI- AND PARTIAL TURNOVERS IN 22 EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY  
DEMOCRACIES (1945–2010)

	Semi-and partial	After elections	%	During leg.	%
Italy (1948–1993)	17	5	29	12	71
Finland	14	8	57	6	43
France IV Rep.	12	2	17	10	83
Netherlands	11	9	82	2	18
Belgium	9	6	67	3	33
France V Rep.	8	4	50	4	50
Ireland	5	4	80	1	20
Romania	5	2	40	3	60
Germany	5	4	80	1	20
Sweden	4	2	50	2	50
Slovenia	4	3	75	1	25
Denmark	3	2	67	1	33
Portugal	3	1	33	2	67
Slovakia	2	1	50	1	50
Czech Republic	2	1	50	1	50
Austria	2	2	100	0	0
Norway	1	0	0	1	100
Bulgaria	1	1	100	0	0
Totals and average %	108	57	53	51	47

### In Search of Some Explanations

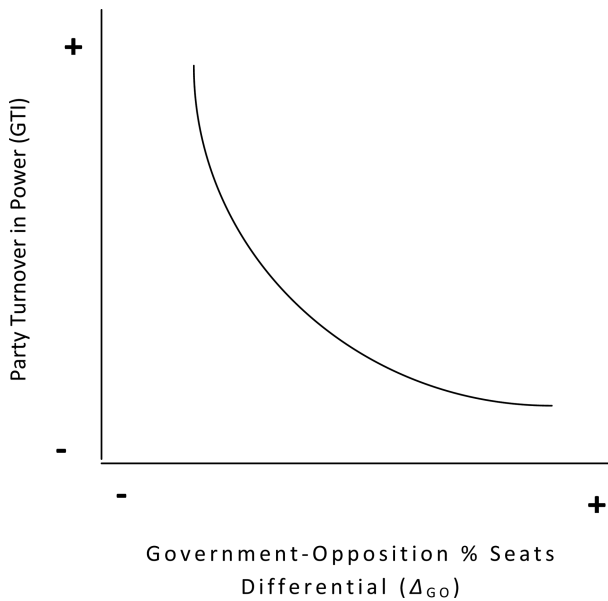
Finding a coherent and consistent interpretation of these data is not easy, but there is some evidence that the hypotheses set out above are worth exploring. Before addressing this question, however, I will take the basic hypothesis which can be drawn from Sartori's suggestion that alternation refers to an expectation, or to the belief that the party (or parties) in opposition can substitute the government party (or parties), and submit it to statistical control. As was argued, Sartori (1982: 75) admits that the likelihood of such an event is higher when 'the gap between the two biggest parties is close enough'.

One of the simplest ways of verifying this theory is to measure the percentage difference in parliamentary seats between the parties in the coalition government and the parties in opposition, which we will refer to as Government–Opposition % Seats Differential ( $\Delta_{G-O}$ ). One would expect that the higher the  $\Delta_{G-O}$ , the less likelihood there is of rapid government alternation, in that it would be unrealistic to expect that the opposition would gain sufficient seats in the next elections to become the new majority.<sup>16</sup> In other words, if the majority supporting the government or the party in government is too strong, there would be no realistic expectation of a government turnover. If  $\Delta_{G-O}$  is an *ex ante* measure, GTI will provide us with a reliable *ex post* measure, therefore when  $\Delta_{G-O}$  decreases GTI should increase and Figure 1 shows this hypothetical correlation.

The statistical correlation between the average  $\Delta_{G-O}$  and GTI is negative and coherent with this hypothesis but unfortunately rather weak (see column 2 in Table 5). The average  $\Delta_{G-O}$  over the 524 governments recorded in the data base is 9.0 (see column 2 in Table 5) and the range of variation is very high (65.9, the lowest value being Denmark at  $-19.4$ , and the highest Austria at  $46.5$ ). Once the distinction is introduced between complete, semi- and partial turnovers, the average  $\Delta_{G-O}$  drops respectively to 0.9 (column 6 in Table 5) and to 0.7 (column 7 in Table 5), but the ranges of variation are still high (complete turnovers: 75.4, lowest Finland at  $-46$ , highest Netherlands at 29.4; semi- and partial turnovers: 55.5, lowest Norway at  $-28$ , highest Germany at 27.5). Moreover, GTI does not correlate in the expected way with  $\Delta_{G-O}$  with reference to the complete turnovers, as is shown by the positive values of  $\rho$  (last three rows in column 7). Only GTI<sub>3</sub> shows a moderate negative correlation as expected, but not with  $\Delta_{G-O}$  with reference to the complete turnovers.

It appears quite evident that  $\Delta_{G-O}$  cannot be the necessary and sufficient condition of the government turnover. Firstly,  $\Delta_{G-O}$  measures the gap between government and opposition as an initial (at the beginning of the legislature) status quo, while GTI depends on the next electoral results, that is on the choice of the electorate. The potential electoral party strength may obviously vary during the legislative term as a function of the party's

FIGURE 1  
 HYPOTHETICAL CORRELATION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT – OPPOSITION % SEATS DIFFERENTIAL ( $\Delta_{GO}$ ) AND PARTY TURNOVER IN POWER (GTI)



popularity among the electorate. Nonetheless, large gaps in terms of parliamentary seats are not easily filled even when a very unpopular government is facing a rising opposition. Opinion polls are one thing, elections another.

A second reason why  $\Delta_{G-O}$  fails to explain government turnover could depend on the impact of other and more relevant variables. Although party systems vary according to a wide range of parameters (Bardi and Mair 2008), it is still possible to identify five main patterns of competition in the European party systems if the distribution of parties on the political space is taken into account (see Figure 2):<sup>17</sup>

1. Bilateral Distribution (*Two-Party System*, Sartori 1976): Great Britain until 2010, Scandinavian democracies, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Greece, France V Republic since the 1980s;
2. Polarised Bilateral Distribution (*Polarised Bipolarism*, Ieraci 2007): Italy 1994–2010, some Eastern and Central European countries;
3. Bilateral Distribution with Pivot (*Two-and-a-Half Party System*, Blondel 1968): Austria and Germany, Great Britain since 2010;
4. Multilateral Distribution with Dominant Party (*Polarised Pluralism*, Sartori 1976): Italy 1948–1992, France IV Republic.

TABLE 5  
 GOVERNMENT TURNOVERS IN 22 EUROPEAN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES  
 (1945–2010): CORRELATIONS BETWEEN GTI AND GOVERNMENT–OPPOSITION %  
 SEATS DIFFERENTIAL ( $\Delta_{G-O}$ )\*

Countries	Average $\Delta_{GO}$	GTI			$\Delta_{GO}$ Complete turnovers	$\Delta_{GO}$ Semi- and partial turnovers
		Parties (1)	Aver. % (2)	Turn. % (3)		
Slovakia	8.8	0.71	0.65	0.76	10.7	1.3
Bulgaria	0.7	0.64	0.65	0.87	12.8	-12.4
Ireland	6.6	0.51	0.48	0.79	6.5	11.2
Norway	-7.4	0.51	0.49	0.95	-11.9	-28
Hungary	16.7	0.50	0.50	1.00	20.4	n.a.
Poland	1.4	0.46	0.46	1.00	-9.4	n.a.
Slovenia	15.6	0.46	0.47	0.62	31	9.5
Czech Republic	-3.9	0.37	0.28	0.62	0	-22.5
Romania	0.4	0.36	0.26	0.58	-11.4	-8.5
France V Rep.	17.8	0.36	0.27	0.59	1.3	14.4
Denmark	-19.4	0.33	0.31	0.80	-28.3	-16.5
Greece	21.8	0.33	0.34	0.90	6.3	15.2
Netherlands	21.6	0.32	0.26	0.40	29.4	14.3
Portugal	4.2	0.31	0.27	0.63	-1.9	-2.6
Great Britain	10.1	0.30	0.30	1.00	7.1	n.a.
Spain	-0.3	0.30	0.30	1.00	-3.2	n.a.
Italy	5.1	0.26	0.14	0.36	13.7	-2.4
Belgium	25.0	0.26	0.21	0.47	3.3	18
Sweden	-5.4	0.26	0.22	0.70	-16.3	-24.4
Finland	15.8	0.22	0.20	0.36	-46	6.6
Germany	17.4	0.21	0.18	0.45	2.6	27.5
France IV Rep.	7.8	0.17	0.17	0.30	n.a.	-0.2
Austria	46.5	0.12	0.10	0.52	3	13.7
Averages	9.0	0.36	0.33	0.68	0.9	0.7
Correlation with GTI <sub>(1)</sub>	-0.33				0.31	-0.28
Correlation with GTI <sub>(2)</sub>	-0.29				0.29	-0.25
Correlation with GTI <sub>(3)</sub>	-0.35				0.03	-0.43

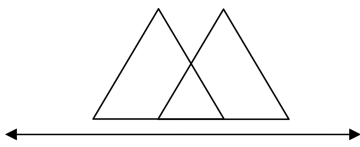
Notes: n.a.: not available.

\*For each country  $\Delta_{GO}$  is calculated on the current distribution of seats in the Lower House.

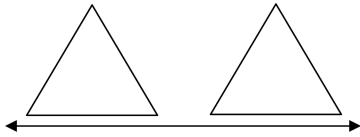
5. Multilateral Distribution with no Dominant Party (*Moderate Pluralism* and *Fragmented Party System*, Sartori 1976): Netherlands, some Eastern and Central European countries.

Type 1 corresponds to the well-known Downs (1957) model of competition, in which two parties or two party poles compete over the metrical centre of the space and overlap to some extent. Bilateral distributions are to be found even in multi-party systems characterised by a limited number of relevant parties (3–4) with a moderate ideological distance between them, as in *moderate pluralism systems* (Sartori 1976). The dynamic of the competition of a moderate pluralism is therefore similar to the two-party system. Great Britain had a ‘bilateral distribution’ of parties until 2010, and the Scandinavian democracies of Norway and Denmark, as well as Ireland, Spain, Portugal, and Greece, resemble this model. In France a similar

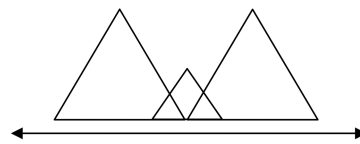
FIGURE 2  
PATTERNS OF COMPETITION IN THE EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEMS



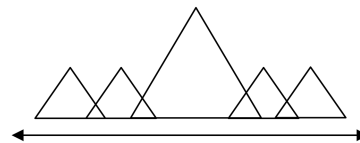
Bilateral Distribution (*Two-Party System*, Sartori 1976), i.e. Great Britain until 2005, Spain, Norway, Sweden, France since the 80s



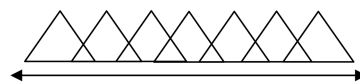
Polarised Bilateral Distribution (*Polarized Bipolarism*, Ieraci 2007), i.e. Italy 1994–2010, Eastern and Central European countries



Bilateral Distribution with Pivot (*Two-and-a-Half Party System*, Blondel 1968), i.e. Austria and Germany, Great Britain 2010



Multilateral Distribution with Dominant Party (*Polarized Pluralism*, Sartori 1976), i.e. Italy 1948–1992, France IV Republic



Multilateral Distribution with no Dominant Party (*Moderate Pluralism and Fragmented Party System*, Sartori 1976), i.e. Netherlands, Belgium, Eastern and Central European countries

pattern of competition has been established since the 1980s, when the Socialist party became the dominant force on the left wing of the political space and could challenge the Gaullists. Although GTI scores may prove low, complete government turnovers do occur over time in a bilateral distribution of parties (see Table 1). To bring down a government may prove to be a difficult task because of the stabilisation of the party system over time and the position of the government in the institutional setting; on the other hand, semi- or partial turnovers occur relatively rarely.

Type 2 would appear similar to type 1 except that the party distribution is polarised and there is no overlap between the two parts, as in the case of Italian *polarised bipolarism* (Ieraci 2007). Italy has been moving towards this model since the 1994 party system realignment, and some of the Eastern and Central European countries also approach this situation. Party competition tends to be immoderate and the government turnover is very high because of the general instability of the distribution. For example, there have been five

complete turnovers in Italy in the last 15 years, which is one in every legislature. According to the expectations indicated above, this distribution is quite often the outcome of some drastic realignment of the party system (Italy) and/or of the fundamental democratisation of the country, which establishes new party identities and a new structure of cleavages. Type 3 corresponds to the German and Austrian two-and-a-half party systems, where a centre minor (half) party occupies a pivotal position in the political space. Complete government turnover is virtually absent in this model, as shown by the two above-mentioned cases, and the 'half' party swings from one alliance (with the left wing) to the other (with the right wing), determining some partial government turnovers. However, these turnovers primarily affect the two major parties and consequently low  $GTI_{1,2}$  scores are balanced by relatively high  $GTI_3$  scores (0.45 and 0.52 for Germany and Austria respectively; see Table 2).

Type 4 corresponds to the well-known 'polarised pluralism' model used by Sartori (1976) to interpret Italian post-war politics and the French Fourth Republic. The measures of government turnovers, which are exclusively semi and partial, are very low and the coalition politics is dominated by a large centre party (such as the Christian Democratic Party in Italy) or centre pole which leads the coalition governments in alliance with some minor parties from the moderate left and/or from the moderate right. In Italy during the period 1948–1994, only five governments out of a total of 46 were led by a non-Christian Democrat *Presidente del Consiglio*. Finally a 'multilateral distribution with no dominant party' (type 5) is to be found in the Netherlands, Belgium, and in some Eastern and Central European Countries. In Belgium and in the Netherlands there have been no dominant parties and the coalition governments have included over time parties that have come out of confessional, ethnic-linguistic, and socio-economic cleavages. The prevailing types of government turnover are semi and partial: in Belgium there have been two complete government turnovers and in the Netherlands only one (see Table 1 above). In Eastern and Central Europe, after the collapse of the Communist regimes, the new party systems which emerged from the democratic transition sometimes proved highly fragmented, exceeding the threshold of six parties established by Sartori (1976) to identify polarised systems and atomised systems.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the new-born political parties lacked any clear ideological identity and they were appealing to both the left and right electorate, sometimes as a result of large electoral alliances. The Civic Democratic Party in the Czech Republic combines progressive or liberal features with conservative ones, presenting itself as a non-party formation, similar to the *Alianța PSD-PC* (Social Democratic and Conservative) in Romania. Nonetheless, as was expected, Eastern and Central European party systems have been since their foundation under the influence of a strong process of democratisation and their cleavage structures have not yet *frozen*, contrary to the structure of cleavages in the Western European democracies which underwent a similar

process during the inter-war period (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Complete government turnovers are therefore possible in these countries, as shown in the cases of Bulgaria (two complete turnovers), Slovakia (four), Romania (three), and Czech Republic (two) (see Table 2 above).

There is striking evidence that in some cases only complete government turnovers were recorded (Great Britain, Poland, Greece, Hungary, Spain, Italy 1994–2010) or the overwhelming majority of the total turnovers were complete (Norway, Denmark, Ireland), while in other cases the vast majority of the government turnovers were semi or partial (Italy 1948–1992, France IV Republic, Finland, Netherlands, Belgium). This prompts the question: apart from the patterns of competition in the European party systems, are there other potential explanatory factors of these trends? One of the factors that might be important here is the institutional framework. Indeed, with the exception of the cases of post-1994 Italy and Hungary, government and parliament interact in a highly *integrated arena* in all the cases characterised by complete turnovers. The degree of integration between government and parliament is shown by some institutional properties. The government firmly controls parliamentary activity and above all determines the timing of elections thanks to its constitutionally guaranteed power to dissolve the parliament. The government's life-span therefore tends to coincide with the term of legislature; the government is not easily vulnerable as long as it is protected by its parliamentary support, and it can prove difficult to overthrow it in the electoral arena (Ieraci 2003, 2010). Conversely, where the government is weak or poorly integrated with the parliament (i.e. it does not control the legislative process, or determine the timing of elections), complete turnovers are rare compared to semi- and partial turnovers.

Secondly, where complete turnovers are frequent, the position of the government in the parliamentary arena is not jeopardised by any external institutional factors, such as the presence of a head of state which creates a 'dual executive'. However, in some cases (France V Republic and Romania) the head of state controls relevant constitutional power, including the power to dissolve the parliament, to dismiss the government, and to appoint new prime ministers, while in other cases (Finland, Portugal, Poland, and Bulgaria) his/her legislative and executive powers are much more limited. The former type, which is based on a strong presidency, could be considered a 'semi-presidential' form of government, while the latter, which is characterised by a weaker presidency, could be labelled a 'semi-parliamentary' form of government.<sup>19</sup> In Table 6 the interventions of the head of state as causes for the government termination are divided into 'non-conflictual' (formal resignation of the prime minister after the election of the head of state) and 'conflictual' (direct intervention of the head of state on the government composition, resignation of the prime minister),<sup>20</sup> and the cases are distributed according to the form of government, either 'semi-presidential' or 'semi-parliamentary'. In the case of the French V Republic,



TABLE 6  
INTERVENTIONS OF THE HEAD OF STATE AS CAUSES FOR TERMINATION OF  
THE GOVERNMENT

Form of government	Country	N. of gov.	Causes for termination		Total (%)
			Non- conflict	Conflict	
Semi-presidential <sup>a</sup>	France V R.	34	8	5	13 (38%)
	Romania	16	2	2	4 (25%)
Semi-parliamentary <sup>b</sup>	Finland	43	6	0	6 (14%)
	Portugal	20	1	1	2 (10%)
	Poland	14	1	0	1 (0.07%)

<sup>a</sup>‘Strong presidents’, popularly elected, with relevant legislative and executive powers.

<sup>b</sup>‘Weak presidents’, popularly elected, with limited legislative and executive powers.

out of 34 governments the government resigned 13 times because of an intervention of the head of state, while in the case of Romania, out of 16 governments, four causes for termination due to similar interventions were recorded. To some extent conflicts between president and government are traceable even among the ‘semi-parliamentary’ forms of government, although they are less frequent and less conducive to parliamentary crises.

## Conclusion

Government alternation is the expectation in any democracy but it has not been commonplace in the recent past of European democracies. It is not easy to bring down a government and to substitute it with new political personnel. Government alternation is more the myth than the reality of democracy. Through the elaboration and application of an index (GTI) to measure the extent of the turnover in power among parties in contemporary European democracies, several findings and hypotheses have been illustrated. First, semi- and partial turnovers are more frequent than complete turnovers of the incumbent governments. Second, semi- and partial turnovers often occur during the legislature and they are frequently caused by conflicts among the parties or between the government and other institutional actors. This first finding comes as no surprise in view of the multi-party structure of the competition in all the 22 European democracies, including Great Britain since 2010. The fragmentation of the party systems and the relative distribution of the parliamentary seats may favour the emergence of one or more parties which occupy a dominant position in the coalition game, but a perfect turnover of the government incumbents is clearly unlikely. The second finding is a coherent implication of the first. Parliamentary coalitions are relatively unstable in parliaments characterised by a fragmented distribution of seats, hence there is always the risk of conflict among the parties. Parties try to exploit their relative positions in parliament in order to condition the action of the government, and the possibility of changing coalition partners is sometimes threatened and often

practised. These conflicts may be exacerbated by the interposition of a third institutional actor (a president, or head of state, for instance) in the government–parliament interplay.

A third finding is that complete turnovers often occur after the elections and a natural termination of the legislature term. Fourth, the likelihood of government turnovers is not significantly correlated to the gap between government and opposition in terms of percentage of parliamentary seats ( $\Delta_{G-O}$ ). Fifth, in some cases (Norway, Great Britain, Spain, Ireland, and Denmark) the structure of the party competition favours complete turnovers of the incumbent government. Sixth, complete turnovers are more likely where the institutional position of the government in the parliamentary arena is relatively secure and strong, and the government does not suffer the challenge of another institutional actor competing with it over the control of the parliamentary arena or over the executive powers.

Complete turnovers are rare in Europe, but elections are often a turning point especially when the legislature reaches its expected term. The third, fourth, and fifth findings could be expressed as a democratic paradox: the longer a government survives in the legislature, the more likely it is to be defeated in one of the next political elections. Staying in power is costly in terms of popular support, particularly if the government decisions can be easily identified, a prominent prime minister can be made directly accountable for them (finding 6), and there is a bilateral distribution of the party competition. Given similar circumstances, even a large gap between government and opposition in terms of percentage of parliamentary seats may not suffice to protect the incumbent government.

Finally, the seventh finding is that in other cases (Italy 1994–2010 and the new Eastern and Central European democracies) the realignment of the party system, following systemic crises or fundamental democratisation, may have favoured complete turnovers. Some European party systems have recently experienced a sudden realignment or have risen from the ruins of former dictatorships or authoritarian regimes. While the West European party systems are relatively stable and the cleavage structures relatively frozen, the regime crises in Eastern and Southern Europe have triggered new processes of realignment of the party systems. The factors which may inhibit complete government turnover are suddenly removed or have become ineffective. In these cases, the high levels of government turnover are more the effect of the deconstruction of the old party system or of the collapse of the previous structure of cleavages than the natural outcome of a consolidated pattern of competition.

### **Acknowledgements**

Although it is too late, I would like to thank Peter Mair for all his advice and support in the publication of my article. Peter helped me to clarify the presentation of the Government Turnover Index here employed.

## Notes

1. The data collection was started in the late 1980s and was employed by Ieraci (1996a, 1996b). Subsequent updating has been part of various research projects fulfilled through the years at the *Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali* in connection with CASIP (*Centro Interdipartimentale di Analisi dei Simboli e delle Istituzioni Politiche*), University of Trieste. The data are based on a variety of cross-checked sources ranging from Keesing's Contemporary Archives Record of World events to the websites of central governments and parliaments, available through Inter-parliamentary Union (<http://www.ipu.org>) and Worldwide Government on the WWW (<http://www.gksoft.com>), and other secondary sources. The characteristics of the data set are illustrated below.
2. Decidability and vulnerability, together with contestability and availability, are key dimensions of competition according to Bartolini (1999, 2000, 2002).
3. The issue of the conceptual meaning of alternation for the current working of the contemporary democracies was tackled among the first by Aron (1982; see also Pasquino 1995).
4. Mair (2008: 244–5) employs the indicator *changes in the party composition of government* as a further measurement of the patterns of alternation in government. Some standard indicators of alternation, such as the appointment of a cabinet after an election or the replacement of the prime minister, are not referred to. The political election is such a turning point in the democratic process that ignoring it seems disputable. Moreover, after the dissolution of the legislature, in any parliamentary democracy the incumbent cabinet formally resigns, a *new* cabinet is appointed, and *new* ministers swear in. The prime minister is a key position in any cabinet but its substitution is not considered by Mair (2006, 2008) an indicator of change in the partisan composition of the governments.
5. Obviously the first government assumed in the series ( $G_1$ ) has no term of comparison. This is why in the formula the summary is calculated starting from  $G = 2$ , and why  $GTI$  is a ratio of the party change over the total number of governments in the series with the exclusion of the very first ( $G - 1$ ).
6. The criteria of identification of each record (government composition, supporting majority, termination of the government and similar) have been for years objects of dispute. A critical review of the various solutions is provided by Lijphart (1984).
7. The total number of governments in this data set amounts to 536, but the calculation of  $GTI$  could not be applied to 12 caretaker governments with no clear majority support in parliament.
8. In some cases, notably Italy, the investiture vote of confidence must be delivered by both parliamentary Houses, *Camera dei Deputati* and *Senato*.
9. The survey criteria adopted here are similar to those employed by the authors of *Political Data 1945–1990* (European Journal of Political Research 1993: 5) and by Müller-Rommel *et al.* (2004).
10. Spain from 1977; Portugal from 1976; Greece from 1974; Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Slovenia from 1993; Bulgaria and Poland from 1991; Romania from 1992; Hungary from 1990.
11. To make the point clearer it may be necessary to translate some of these threshold values of  $GTI_1$  with concrete examples. Given a two-party system with party A and party B,  $GTI_1 = 1$  when the sequence of parties in power is 'A, B, A, B, ...',  $GTI_1 = 0.5$  when 'A, B, B, B, A, B, B, B, A, ...', and  $GTI_1 = 0.25$  when 'A, B, B, B, B, B, B, B, A, ...'. If one takes into consideration that government alternation may be scheduled by the election timing (every 3, 4, or 5 years depending on the country's constitutional provisions), its exceptionality should be evident given the values of  $GTI_1$  displayed in Table 3.
12. Assuming a coalition government formed by parties A (25 per cent of parliamentary seats), B (18 per cent), C (11 per cent), followed by a coalition government A, B, D (8 per cent), and finally by a coalition government A, B, E (20 per cent), then  $GTI_1 = 0.33$  in both turnovers, regardless of D and E different weights in terms of parliamentary seats.

13. Germany and Austria's party systems resemble what Blondel (1968) called 'two-and-half party systems' (see also Siaroff 2003).
14. Electoral performance is nonetheless a rather poor predictor of getting into office (Mattila and Raunio 2004).
15. These constitutionally guaranteed legislative powers of the elective head of state do vary significantly from case to case (Ieraci 2003, 2010).
16. This hypothesis is coherent with the classic model of party competition by Downs (1957), according to which two parties or two coalitions of parties try to reduce their ideological distance by moving towards the centre of the political space, as an attempt to reduce their potential differential in votes and seats.
17. On the various approaches to the comparison of party systems (Mair 2002).
18. From the left to the right of the political spectrum, seven parties can be counted in Bulgaria, six in the Czech Republic, seven in Poland, seven in Romania, eight in Slovakia, seven in Hungary (see Bozóki and Ishiyama 2002; Lewis 2000). Attention to the problem of measuring the number of parties is addressed by Dunleavy and Boucek (2003).
19. There is a third group of cases (Slovakia, Ireland, Austria, and Slovenia) where the popularly elected head of state does not control relevant legislative and executive powers. These are therefore 'apparent dual executives'. On the distinction between semi-presidential and semi-parliamentary systems, see Ieraci (2003, 2010).
20. In the data base (see note 1 for reference) the events preceding a government fall or termination have been treated simply as conflictual versus non-conflictual, although the actual causes for termination were recorded. The following have been considered conflictual causes for termination: withdrawal of support from one or more parties in coalition; disagreement over policies conducive to the resignation of ministers; no confidence vote by parliament and/or defeat in parliament; dismissal by the head of state or resignation because of disagreement with the head of state. The following have been considered non-conflictual causes for termination: formal resignation after new political election or after the election of the head of state; voluntary resignation of the prime minister, change of the prime minister because of health reasons, death or appointment to a different office (Ieraci 1996b: 52–3).

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