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## Coalition governments and the erosion of opposition strength: An analytical perspective

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

#### KEYWORDS

*Coalition Governments,*  
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This study explores the effects of coalition governments on the strength and effectiveness of opposition parties, using Kenya, Germany, and Italy as case studies. Coalition governments, which form when no single party achieves an outright majority, are a common response to electoral fragmentation in democracies worldwide. While they can provide stable governance by bringing together diverse political groups, they often blur the distinction between government and opposition. This blurring weakens the opposition's capacity to hold the government accountable, undermining the democratic process. The

study employs a comparative case study approach, analyzing key examples of coalition governments in Germany, Italy & Kenya. In Germany's Grand Coalitions between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) have eroded the SPD's distinct opposition identity, weakening its electoral base and policy influence. In Italy, frequent coalition governments, necessitated by the country's proportional representation system, have resulted in policy gridlock and the fragmentation of traditional opposition parties, contributing to the rise of populist movements. Similarly, in Kenya, the 1999 merger between the National Development Party (NDP) and the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU), the 2008 power-sharing agreement following post-election violence, and the 2018 Azimio la Umoja coalition demonstrate how coalition formation can absorb opposition parties into the government, diminishing their ability to challenge government policies effectively. Data for this study is drawn from legislative records, coalition agreements, and a broad range of secondary sources, including academic literature and media reports. The findings reveal that coalition governments often lead to reduced opposition strength, which in turn compromises accountability, policy innovation, and overall democratic health. The study concludes

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that maintaining a strong and effective opposition within coalition frameworks is crucial for ensuring robust democratic governance, transparency, and responsiveness to the public's needs. These insights are vital for policymakers and scholars seeking to understand the complexities of coalition politics and its implications for democratic integrity.

### Background

Coalition governments, formed when no single political party secures an outright majority, are prevalent in many democracies worldwide. These alliances, created through negotiations among various political groups, ensure stable and functional governance (Kikasu & Pillay, 2024). Coalition governments are seen as a pragmatic solution to electoral fragmentation, fostering political inclusivity and mitigating the risks of political instability (Bergman *et al.*, 2024). The formation of coalition governments involves significant compromises among the participating parties. These compromises reconcile different political agendas and ideologies, allowing for a unified policy direction. However, this process can lead to diluted policy initiatives and a lack of coherent political vision, as coalition partners often prioritize maintaining the alliance over pursuing their distinct policy goals (König, 2017). This balancing act is crucial for coalition stability but can result in suboptimal governance outcomes, with policies that may not fully address pressing national issues (Fortunato, 2019).

One of the critical consequences of coalition governments is the impact on opposition parties. The traditional role of the opposition in a democracy is to provide checks and balances on the government, offering alternative policies and scrutinizing government actions (König *et al.*, 2023). In a coalition government, however, the opposition's strength and effectiveness can be significantly weakened. When major opposition parties join the coalition, the lines between the government and the opposition become blurred. This dilution of opposition roles undermines their

ability to hold the government accountable and serve as a credible alternative to the ruling coalition (Andeweg, 2013). Kenya's political history provides several compelling examples of how coalition governments can weaken opposition. In 1999, the National Development Party (NDP) merged with the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by President Daniel Arap Moi. This merger co-opted a significant segment of the opposition into the government, diminishing the ability of the remaining opposition to challenge the government effectively (Kalimi *et al.*, 2024).

Similarly, the 2018 "handshake" between President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga, which led to the formation of the Azimio la Umoja coalition, aimed to foster national unity and political stability but also blurred the lines between government and opposition, further weakening the latter's role in providing effective checks and balances (Rwigema, 2022). Understanding the impact of coalition governments on opposition strength is crucial. It sheds light on the challenges of maintaining democratic accountability and vibrant political contestation in coalition settings. This study will explore the experiences of countries such as Kenya, Germany, and Italy to provide insights into how coalition governments influence the dynamics of political opposition and the overall quality of democracy.

### Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of coalition governments on the weakening of opposition parties, focusing on how the inclusion of major opposition parties within coalitions affects their ability to function as

effective counterbalances to the government, with case studies from Kenya, Germany, and Italy to provide a comparative analysis of the broader implications for democratic accountability and governance quality.

### **Justification**

This study is justified by the critical need to understand the impact of coalition governments on the effectiveness of opposition parties, as robust opposition is essential for maintaining democratic integrity, ensuring high-quality governance, and fostering political stability. By examining the dynamics of coalition formation and its effects on opposition strength in Kenya, Germany, and Italy, this research will provide valuable insights for policymakers, political analysts, and scholars. The findings will inform strategies to preserve the essential checks and balances provided by opposition parties, even within coalition frameworks, thereby supporting the resilience and accountability of democratic systems.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a comparative case study approach to investigate the impact of coalition governments on the weakening of opposition parties, focusing on Germany, and Italy & Kenya. In Germany, the study analyzes the effects of Grand Coalitions between the CDU and SPD. For Italy, it assesses how frequently coalition governments influence opposition dynamics. Kenya's case study examines the 1999 NDP-KANU merger, the 2008 coalition formed after the post-election violence, and the 2018 Azimio la Umoja coalition. Data is collected from primary sources such as legislative records and coalition agreements, as well as secondary sources such as academic literature and newspapers like *The Standard* (Kenya), *Der Spiegel* (Germany), and *Corriere della Sera* (Italy). The analysis involves thematic and comparative

methods to identify key trends and impacts. Interview records in both print and televised media with political analysts provide additional insights. The study aims to offer recommendations for maintaining effective opposition roles within coalition frameworks.

### **Discussion**

#### *Case Study: Germany*

Germany's experience with Grand Coalitions, particularly those involving the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), as Jacoby (2017) puts it provides a compelling illustration of how coalition governments can impact the strength and effectiveness of opposition parties. Grand Coalitions are typically formed when no single party secures a majority, aiming to ensure stable governance by uniting the major political forces (Badran, 2021).

The formation of the first Grand Coalition in 1966 between the CDU/CSU and the SPD was a direct response to economic difficulties and political instability. The coalition sought to address these issues by combining the strengths of the major parties. However, it also marked a significant shift in the SPD's role. As noted by Messina (1995), in 1966 the Grand Coalition's formation led to the dilution of the SPD's opposition role, impacting its ability to present a strong alternative to the government. The 2005 Grand Coalition, reformed with the CDU and SPD, further exemplifies the consequences of such political arrangements. While the coalition provided stability, it weakened the SPD's distinct opposition identity, leading to diminished electoral support and internal party conflicts (Jacoby, 2017; Lees, 2010). The Hartz IV reforms, enacted as part of this coalition's agenda, aimed to overhaul Germany's welfare system and labour market. These reforms, however, faced significant criticism for compromising social

benefits, reflecting the SPD's struggles in maintaining a robust opposition stance (Immel, 2021).

The effects of Grand Coalitions continued with the 2013 coalition between the CDU and SPD, which further marginalized smaller opposition parties like the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens (Zawilska-Florczuk, 2013). The *Mietpreisbremse* (rent control) law, passed in 2015 under this coalition, sought to address rising rental prices but faced criticism for its perceived inadequacy and the compromises made during its formulation (Breidenbach et al., 2022). Asingo, (2013) observed that such coalition agreements often reduced the visibility and impact of opposition parties, undermining their capacity to challenge the dominant coalition effectively.

Newspaper reports provide further insight into these dynamics. *Der Spiegel* (2009) highlighted that the SPD's participation in the 2005 Grand Coalition led to significant losses in the 2009 federal elections, due to internal conflicts and reduced electoral support. Bergman et al. (2024) noted on the marginalization of smaller parties and the detrimental effects of coalition agreements on their ability to influence policy. These sources collectively illustrate how Grand Coalitions, while aimed at providing governance stability, often lead to the weakening of opposition parties by reducing their influence, visibility, and electoral success. In summary, Germany's experience with Grand Coalitions underscores the complexities and trade-offs inherent in such arrangements. While they can stabilize governance, they often result in a weakened opposition, highlighting the challenges of maintaining robust democratic checks and balances within coalition frameworks.

#### *Case Study: Italy*

Italy's political system, marked by frequent coalition governments, provides a notable case study on the impact of such arrangements on opposition strength and effectiveness. The necessity for coalitions arises from Italy's proportional representation electoral system, which often results in a fragmented parliament (Passarelli, 2018). This fragmentation necessitates broad-based coalitions, which, while designed to achieve majority governance, often lead to significant policy gridlock and weaken traditional opposition parties.

The dissolution of the First Republic in the early 1990s and the subsequent rise of the Second Republic introduced new dynamics in Italian politics (Silveri, 2015). The Prodi government (1996–1998), formed by the Olive Tree Alliance coalition, exemplifies the challenges inherent in coalition governance. This coalition, comprising ideologically diverse parties, struggled with internal discord, resulting in diluted legislative effectiveness and compromised policy outcomes (Conti & Marangoni, 2015). The inability to achieve cohesive policy objectives diminished the coalition's impact on key issues and weakened the opposition's capacity to provide a meaningful challenge.

The resultant policy gridlock from coalition governments has fostered significant voter dissatisfaction, leading to the emergence of populist movements. Parties such as the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League have capitalized on public frustration with coalition-induced inefficiencies (Bassini, 2020). These populist parties critique the failures of traditional coalitions and present themselves as alternatives to the established political order, thus highlighting the weakening of traditional opposition structures (Pilet & Gherghina, 2024).

The implications of coalition politics are further illustrated by legislative examples and media commentary. The Hartz reforms, enacted under the 2005 Grand Coalition in Germany, provide insight into how coalition compromises impact policy formulation and opposition dynamics. Similarly, in Italy, coalition politics have resulted in critical legislative challenges, such as the contested economic reforms under various governments. Conti and Marangoni, (2015) have discussed the pervasive issue of legislative inefficacy attributed to coalition politics, while Ferrera (2019) in his *Corriere della Sera* piece notes the socio-economic factors contributing to the rise of populist parties in Italy.

The piece highlights how economic insecurity and social fears have led citizens to seek immediate solutions, often provided by populist leaders through simplistic slogans and promises. This trend reflects a reaction to the perceived failures of traditional coalitions to address pressing societal issues. Additionally, Orioli (2019) in *Il Sole 24 Ore* analyzed the impact of coalition-induced gridlock on Italy's economic policies, reflecting broader governance issues. In summary, Italy's experience with coalition governments underscores the complexities and trade-offs inherent in such arrangements. While intended to provide stable governance, coalitions often lead to policy gridlock, weaken traditional opposition structures, and contribute to the rise of populist movements. This case study highlights the broader implications of coalition politics on democratic governance and opposition dynamics.

#### Case Study: Kenya

Kenya's political trajectory vividly illustrates how coalition governments and strategic mergers can significantly impact the strength and effectiveness of opposition parties. Key events and legislative changes underscore this dynamic.

The 1992 general elections marked a crucial shift in Kenya's transition from a single-party state to a multi-party democracy. Despite this landmark change, the elections were marred by widespread violence and controversy. The ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by President Daniel Arap Moi, managed to retain power having faced a disjointed opposition political parties. The fragmented nature of the opposition during this period revealed the challenges in mounting a unified challenge against the ruling party, highlighting the need for a more cohesive opposition both in the 1992 and 1997 general elections (Khadiagala, 2010). However, the ruling parties' strength had been weakened resulting in the need to co-opt the opposition to bolster its dwindling control of house business debates and the agenda of the government.

In 1999, Daniel Arap Moi orchestrated the merger of the National Development Party (NDP) with KANU. This strategic consolidation aimed to strengthen KANU's political base in anticipation of the 2002 elections. By integrating the NDP into KANU, Daniel Arap Moi effectively diminished the opposition's capacity to challenge the government and scrutinize its policies (Throup & Hornsby, 1998). This merger also impacted legislative developments; for instance, the Political Parties Act of 1997, designed to regulate party formation and management, lost some of its impact due to the consolidation of opposition voices within KANU. Similarly, the Constitution of Kenya Review Act of 1997, which initiated crucial constitutional reforms, faced delays and compromises due to political consolidation (Okul, 2020).

The political landscape shifted again with the formation of a coalition government in 2008 following the disputed 2007 elections. Kagwanja and Southall (2009) noted that the agreement between the Party of National Unity (PNU) and the

Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) aimed to restore stability but had significant consequences for opposition dynamics. The National Accord and Reconciliation Act of 2008, which established this coalition, blurred the lines between government and opposition. This dilution of opposition strength was evident in the legislative sphere, with the coalition's influence on the Constitution of Kenya, 2010, which introduced crucial reforms but also led to compromises affecting the opposition's oversight capabilities (Murunga *et al.*, 2014). As Kiprono, (2020) noted, "Opposition political parties play a critical role in enhancing good governance by ensuring that there is accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in the management of public affairs." He also argues that "the co-optation of opposition parties into government weakens their ability to act as effective checks and balances on the executive thus handing over a free "cheque" for the executive". According to *The Standard*, the coalition's formation reduced the opposition's leverage, as it was co-opted into the government, diminishing its role in critical policy debates (Kikechi, 2024).

The 2018 "handshake" between President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga resulted in the formation of the Azimio la Umoja coalition. This move, aimed at fostering national reconciliation, further diluted the role of traditional opposition parties (Cheeseman *et al.*, 2024). The Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) Bill of 2020, emerging from the handshake, sought to introduce constitutional and legislative reforms aimed at national unity and governance issues (RoK, 2020). However, it faced criticism for potentially consolidating power within the coalition and weakening opposition voices. Agutu (2020) highlighted in the *The Star Newspaper* concerns that the BBI might consolidate power within the coalition, reducing the effectiveness of the opposition. Kirui, (2022) argues that such post-

poll deals and coalitions often undermine the opposition's effectiveness by concentrating power and reducing democratic checks and balances. As noted by *The Star* (2024) the political realignment has led to a situation where opposition voices are increasingly marginalized, impacting the overall democratic process.

Coalitions can weaken opposition parties in several ways. Firstly, they often lead to the fragmentation of opposition forces, as key figures and parties are absorbed into the coalition, diminishing their ability to challenge the government effectively (Lodge, 2014). Secondly, coalition governments tend to create a blurred line between government and opposition, leading to reduced scrutiny and accountability (Maasi, 2025). This consolidation of power can result in legislative compromises that undermine the opposition's capacity to enact robust oversight and advocate for alternative policies (Willis *et al.*, 2021). These dynamics highlight the complexities of coalition governance and its impact on democratic practices. These events illustrate how strategic mergers and coalition governments in Kenya have reshaped governance while impacting the effectiveness of opposition parties. The consolidation of power through these arrangements often results in a weakened opposition, underscoring the complexities and trade-offs inherent in coalition governance.

#### *Consequences of Weakening Opposition*

The weakening of opposition parties within coalition governments has profound implications for democratic governance and political stability, as illustrated by experiences in Germany, Italy & Kenya. The Germany's experience with Grand Coalitions between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) provides an interesting perspective on this issue. The 2005 Grand Coalition, while stabilizing

governance, resulted in a weakened SPD, diminishing its opposition identity and electoral support. The Hartz IV reforms of 2005, which were part of this coalition's agenda, faced criticism for their impact on social benefits, reflecting the SPD's reduced role in challenging government policies (Immel, 2021). The subsequent Grand Coalition formed in 2013 continued to marginalize smaller opposition parties, affecting their ability to influence policy and engage in effective debate (Jacoby, 2017).

In Italy's experience with frequent coalition governments has highlighted the fragmentation and weakening of opposition. The often ideologically diverse and unstable coalitions lead to policy gridlock and foster voter dissatisfaction, contributing to the rise of populist parties that further fragment the political landscape (Conti & Marangoni, 2015). The frequent changes in government coalitions, such as those seen in the early 2000s and the 2010s, illustrate how coalitions can marginalize traditional opposition parties and disrupt stable governance (Chiaromonte & D'Alimonte, 2018; Hortala-Vallve *et al.*, 2024).

Similarly, in Kenya, the formation of coalitions, such as the 1999 political merger, 2008 power-sharing agreement and the 2018 handshake between Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga, has often led to a diminished role for opposition parties. This reduction in opposition strength has resulted in decreased government accountability and a blurring of lines between government and opposition (Kadima & Owuor, 2014). For instance, the 2008 coalition between the Party of National Unity (PNU) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) significantly weakened ODM's ability to challenge government actions effectively, compromising the scrutiny of policies and reducing

the opposition's impact on governance (Kisobo, 2013; RoK, 2008).

In each of these cases, the weakening of opposition parties within coalition governments has led to reduced accountability, compromised policy innovation, increased electoral volatility, and overall diminished democratic health. This underscores the critical role of a strong and effective opposition in maintaining a vibrant democracy, ensuring that governance remains transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the populace (Mair, 2009; Norris, 2011). As Kiprono (2020) noted, "Opposition political parties play a critical role in enhancing good governance by ensuring that there is accountability, transparency, and responsiveness in the management of public affairs".

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of coalition governments in Kenya, Italy, and Germany reveals significant insights into the consequences of weakening opposition parties. In each case, the formation of coalitions or strategic mergers has led to a reduction in the strength and effectiveness of opposition parties, with notable implications for democratic governance and political stability. In Kenya, the 2008 power-sharing agreement and the 2018 handshake between President Uhuru Kenyatta and Raila Odinga exemplify how coalitions can diminish the role of opposition parties. These arrangements, while aimed at stabilizing governance, often blur the lines between government and opposition, reducing the opposition's capacity to provide robust scrutiny and challenge government policies effectively.

The weakening of opposition forces can undermine accountability and reduce the government's responsiveness to public concerns. Italy's experience with frequent coalition governments illustrates the fragmentation and weakening of

opposition through broad and ideologically diverse alliances. The instability and gridlock resulting from such coalitions contribute to voter dissatisfaction and the rise of populist parties, further fragmenting the political landscape and weakening traditional political structures. This dynamic highlights how coalitions can compromise the effectiveness of opposition parties and lead to less innovative and responsive governance. Germany's Grand Coalitions between the CDU and SPD demonstrate another dimension of how coalitions impact opposition strength. The 2005 and 2013 coalitions resulted in diminished opposition identity for the SPD, leading to electoral losses and internal strife. Legislative outcomes, such as the Hartz IV reforms and Mietpreisbremse law, reflect the challenges faced by opposition parties in influencing policy and maintaining a critical stance within coalition frameworks.

The weakening of opposition parties within coalition governments across these countries underscores several key consequences: reduced accountability, compromised policy innovation, increased electoral volatility, and diminished democratic health. A strong opposition is crucial for ensuring transparent, accountable, and effective governance. The findings from Kenya, Italy, and Germany highlight the importance of maintaining a vibrant opposition to uphold democratic principles and ensure that governance remains responsive and equitable.

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