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Thesis Paper:
Grand Coalitions –
Political Reasons and Political Impacts

Introduction

The German Elections 2005 as well as the Austrian Elections 2006 led to a grand coalition – a specific form of government in parliamentary democracies with both advantages and disadvantages. From one point of view, grand coalitions can be regarded as “contradiction to the parliamentary system” or “democratic sin”. From another point of view, grand coalitions can be regarded as “political necessity” or even as “best form of government”. In any case, it is a matter of fact that grand coalitions and „minimum winning coalitions“ are different – concerning the political impacts as well as the political reasons.

Reasons for grand coalitions

It may be argued that grand coalitions are nearly always the product of a political crisis – either a state crisis (war) or a parliamentary crisis (missing majority for a stable “minimum winning coalition”). Finally, there are two major reasons for the creation of a grand coalition: parliamentary reasons and non-parliamentary reasons.

Non-parliamentary reasons

Grand coalitions can be built because of a major political crisis or a strong political fragmentation in a country. In some democracies grand coalitions or even all-party coalitions were formed during a war or in a post-war period. For example, in the United Kingdom an all-party government was created from 1940 to 1945. In Austria an all-party government was built from 1945 to 1947, followed by several grand coalitions which were frequently formed because of the strong political fragmentation in Austria – and its political consequence: the political culture of “concordance democracy”.

Parliamentary reasons

Grand coalitions can also be built because of missing majorities for the creation of a stable governing majority in parliament. If there is no majority for a single party government, there is a need for a coalition government – which is usually the case in parliamentary systems with a proportional electoral system. In Germany, for example, there has nearly always been the need for a coalition government. However, the parties are sometimes unable or unwilling to build a stable “minimum winning coalition” government.

If there is no majority for a two party coalition government in a “five party system”, there are only three alternatives for the creation of the government:

The first alternative is the creation of a coalition government made up of more than two parties. However, these “multi party coalitions” are highly unstable: They lack programmatic convergence and, as a consequence, political stability.

The second alternative is the creation of a minority government. However, a minority government can lead into “ungovernability” as the government has no reliable majority in parliament. In addition, in several democracies minority governments would not be accepted. They would rather be regarded as a crisis of the political system. In other words: Minority governments are only working, if they are not (completely) obstructed by the opposition parties in parliament and if they are culturally accepted.

The third alternative is the creation of a grand coalition – which seems to be the best alternative. Consequently, the major parties can finally be forced to build a grand coalition – which was the case in Germany 1966 and 2005.

The two German grand coalitions (1966 – 1969; since 2005) were built because of parliamentary reasons: The parties were either unwilling to build a two party coalition government (1966) or unable to build a two party coalition government (2005). In 2005 neither the CDU/CSU nor the SPD nor their electorate favoured a grand coalition. The SPD intended to build a coalition with B'90/Die Grünen and the CDU/CSU intended to build a coalition with the FDP. But neither a “red-green coalition” nor a “black-yellow coalition” received an absolute majority of seats in the German Parliament. In the end, the two major parties were forced to build a grand coalition.

Political impacts of grand coalitions

Grand coalitions (compared to “minimum winning coalitions”) imply advantages as well as disadvantages – which, of course, depend on the prevailing point of view. Some political impacts of grand coalitions are empirical facts which are generally undisputable. Other political impacts of grand coalitions are theoretical perceived political advantages or disadvantages which cannot be generally empirically proven and depend on the specific “political cybernetics” of a grand coalition.

Main advantage of grand coalitions

The most important advantage of grand coalitions is the representation of the two major parties or the two most important parties in the government. In other words: A vast majority of the electorate (about two thirds or more) is represented in the government. For example, the grand coalition in Germany built after the 2005 German Elections is based on 69.4 per cent of the votes, while the “red-green coalition” built after the 2002 German Elections was only based on 47.1 per cent of the votes.

However, it is necessary to point out that the electorate votes for parties, not for coalitions. In the German Elections 2005, for example, a vast majority of the electorate voted for the parties (!) of the grand coalition, but not for the grand coalition: The grand coalition was based on

69.4% of the votes, but not on the intention behind these votes as only 35% of the voters favoured a grand coalition.

Further – theoretical perceived – advantages of grand coalitions

The following political impacts of grand coalitions are theoretical perceived advantages which might – partially and temporarily – manifest themselves into reality.

A theoretical perceived advantage of grand coalitions is the representation of the political will of a vast majority of the electorate in the government. In other words: A vast majority of voters could identify themselves with the policy of the government. However, coalitions and their political programme are made by party leaders independently from the voters' will, sometimes even against the voters' will.

Another theoretical perceived advantage of grand coalitions is the reduction of policy gridlock. In other words: The potential for policy change increases as the major parties are able to implement major policy reforms (perhaps constitutional reforms) without obstruction by opposition parties. For example, in Germany the parties of the grand coalition do not need the support of opposition parties to implement major policy reforms as they control both Houses of Parliament, the Bundestag and the Bundesrat. "Minimum winning coalitions" have often had no majority in the Bundesrat and, as a consequence, to deal with another "veto player" to implement major policy reforms.

Another theoretical perceived advantage of grand coalitions is the implementation of policy reforms (perhaps constitutional reforms) which are urgently needed (for example, to avert a major political crisis or to solve a major political problem), but highly unpopular. A grand coalition is more likely to implement unpopular policy reforms than a "minimum winning coalition" as both major parties are responsible for policy decisions and, as a consequence, no major party can capitalize from protests by the electorate.

Disadvantages of grand coalitions

The most important disadvantage of grand coalitions is the creation of a "political cartel" or a kind of "democratic dictatorship" which prevents democratic change. In other words: There is no opposition which is functioning as a real alternative to the governing parties and could

replace the government. If the two major parties build a grand coalition for more than one electoral period, the sense of democratic elections and the idea of democracy – which implies the idea of democratic change – are finally undermined.

Further – theoretical perceived – disadvantages of grand coalitions

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A theoretical perceived disadvantage of grand coalitions is the “governmental superpower” and, as a result, the “political powerlessness” of the opposition. In other words: The opposition could have problems in controlling the government efficiently as some parliamentary controlling instruments, for example, the creation of an investigation committee, can only be used by major parties or a coalition of smaller parties.

Another theoretical perceived disadvantage of grand coalitions is the increasing fragmentation of the party system and its negative consequences for the building of the government (a stable “minimum winning coalition” government). In other words: Grand coalitions favour the electoral chances of small parties, perhaps extreme parties, as small parties are able to capitalize from the protests against the government. As a consequence, grand coalitions could complicate the prospective electoral chances of a stable “minimum winning coalition”. Moreover, if the small parties are not able to capitalize from the protests against the government, these protests will “flood” into non-parliamentary opposition movements and undermine the system of representative democracy.

Another theoretical perceived disadvantage of grand coalitions is a form of “governmental gridlock” – which occurs, if the parties of the grand coalition do not cooperate closely and efficiently. In other words: If the parties of the grand coalition do not “freeze” the party competition, they will not be able to implement (major) policy reforms and, as a consequence, they will cause policy gridlock.

Another theoretical perceived disadvantage of grand coalitions is the abuse of its parliamentary superpower – which could happen, if the parties of the grand coalition cooperate closely and efficiently. In other words: The parties of the grand coalition are able to use their parliamentary superpower to protect and extend it. For example, they could change the electoral system to their own advantage.