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Coalition Government and Parliamentary Debates in Austria

How Does Martin & Vanberg's Theory of Coalition Communication Fare in a New Context?

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Introduction

Teaming up two or more parties for the purpose of governing is a challenging enterprise. For that reason and based on evidence from the pre-World War I and inter-war periods the classics of Comparative Government have considered this type of government weak and doomed to fail (Bryce 1921). While post World War II studies have drawn a less gloomy picture (e.g. Daalder 1971) the issue of how parties with divergent interests can govern together remained largely untouched. It has been re-framed in principal-agent terms in the recent literature on coalition governance. This literature has concentrated on mechanisms of mutual control and inter-party negotiations (Müller and Strøm 2000; Thies 2001; Timmermans 2003, 2006; Martin and Vanberg, 2004, 2005; Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2008; Strøm, Müller and Smith 2010; Müller and Meyer 2010a, 2010b) or has assumed the existence of party policy fiefdoms (i.e. policy territories where individual parties rather than the coalition are sovereign) (Austen-Smith and Banks 1990; Laver and Shepsle 1990, 1996). In other words, it addresses the *internal* working of coalitions. Clearly, the presence or absence of effective governance mechanisms should also impact on the coalitions' external appearance. A well-managed coalition will contain conflict in public and thereby avoid one possible pitfall of coalition government. Yet, agreement in coalitions can also raise suspicion among party supporters: have their agents sold out party goals for the sake of government office? Coalitions and the parties making them up thus need to be concerned also about their external appearance and need to think how they can avoid being trapped in coalition.

Relevant questions that emerge are: How can parties simultaneously be partners in government and maintain their identity? How can they accept collective responsibility for government policy that seems to contradict their programs and proposals from the opposition years or their commitments from the last election campaign? And how can they uphold party positions but fail to make them government policy? Martin and Vanberg (2008) have introduced a novel perspective on these problems in their article on coalition government and political communication. This pioneering work is our point of departure and reference study in this paper. We test their arguments with fresh data. While we do not exactly replicate their study, we take their arguments and test them with the best data available on a new case. The present paper is a first and preliminary attempt to do so.

The paper proceeds as follows: We first lay out and briefly discuss the theory of coalition communication as formulated by Martin and Vanberg (2008). We then turn to introducing the Austrian case. Next we discuss some measurement issues and present our data. From there we formulate operational hypotheses. We then present a series of descriptive tables that provide a first take at the hypotheses. In the penultimate section we turn to multivariate analysis. A brief conclusion follows.

The Problem of Coalition Communication

Martin and Vanberg's theory of coalition communication consists of three elements: (1) the claim that parties serving in coalitions are in particular need of communication about government policy; (2) the claim that this communication can best be studied by analyzing parliamentary debates; and (3) substantive expectations about variation in party communication efforts.

The need for coalition communication

Participating in a coalition requires policy compromise. Such compromise often means that cherished party goals cannot be achieved. For different reasons party activists, journalists, and opposition politicians may talk about a party 'selling out' to its coalition partner(s). Activists and issue-motivated voters are simply disappointed and their feelings are sincere. Their concern for their own case and their lack of understanding for the other side may make them view even the most balanced compromise as such 'selling-out'. Journalists and opposition politicians are more strategic. While the former want to provoke their interview partners the latter aim at driving a wedge between the government parties and their supporters or to steer intra-party conflict. Thus, Martin and Vanberg's (2008: 503) claim that 'participation in coalition has the potential to undermine a party's carefully established profile and to erode support among constituents with a particular concern for the party's traditional goals' is credible. Indeed, Narud and Valen (2008) show that the parties making up government coalitions collectively tend to lose votes and this trend is particularly strong since the 1980s. Yet, not each cabinet and each party suffers. This implies that parties serving in coalitions are

not doomed to fail. Explaining the coalition's policies and the individual parties' motives for agreeing on them to the electorate then is all the more important.

The centrality of parliamentary debates

Martin and Vanberg (2008: 507) make it 'the central claim' of their argument, 'that coalition parties make systematic use of legislative debates to make their case to their target audiences concerning the stance the party has taken on a particular bill.' Of course, coalition parties do not confine their communicating with the public to parliamentary debates. Yet, Martin and Vanberg (2008: 503) make a compelling case for selecting parliamentary floor debates for the purpose of studying coalition communication with the public. First, the floor is the natural arena for explaining and justifying government policy. Second, while much what is said on the floor may have been foreshadowed and followed by other attempts of the parties to reach out to the public, this does not prevent making the same arguments in parliament. Focusing on these debates has the methodological advantage of linking party communication to specific coalition policies. In our analysis below it has the further advantage that we can link the debates to specific reactions of the opposition that will reject, partly support, or unanimously support government policies. Of course, voting on bills comes after the debates. Yet, government parties are perfectly able to anticipate the opposition parties' stances and voting behaviour once the committee deliberations have come to a close if not earlier. The government parties' planning for debates hence is based on (almost) full information with regard to the opposition behaviour.

Conditions influencing coalition parties' needs for communication

How concerned party leaders need to be about suffering compromise costs 'depends critically on the level of policy disagreement within a coalition' (Martin and Vanberg 2008: 505). If intra-coalition preference divergence is small, the coalition partners suffer little policy costs from compromising. Martin and Vanberg thus expect 'more vigorous efforts' to engage in policy justification 'as an issue becomes more internally divisive for the coalition' (2008: 507). *Coalition issue divisiveness* is a concept that incorporates both the issue policy distance between the parties and the relative issue salience for the government as a whole.

A second factor that influences coalition parties' needs for communication to their constituencies is the *timing of decision-making*. Martin and Vanberg (2008: 505–6) theorize that intra-coalition divisiveness fuels debates more the closer the elections come.

Finally, even when political parties consider plenary debates first and foremost as an opportunity to communicate to the general public and their voters rather than with each other they cannot ignore what the other parties say or do as it will influence the credibility and effectiveness of their communication efforts. A third factor therefore is the opposition's behaviour. Martin and Vanberg theorize that government and opposition party speeches are systematically related. When opposition parties engage in criticizing government bills the government parties cannot let this happen without rebuttal as this might leave the audience with the impression that they cannot invalidate the arguments. And no self-respecting opposition party will let go a rebuttal without refutation and no self-respecting government parties the more government communication efforts are expected (2008: 508–9). Martin and Vanberg treat the opposition influence as a control variable. They do not develop expectations about the relative impact of intra-coalition needs for communication and the government–opposition conflict on parliamentary debates.

Bringing in the Austrian case

In this paper we analyze the Austrian case and thereby compare it with the two countries – Germany and the Netherlands – analyzed by Martin and Vanberg (2008). Most of the 'similar case' arguments employed by Martin and Vanberg also hold for Austria. Like these two countries Austria was governed by coalitions throughout the observation period, it is a nonmajoritarian system with a PR electoral system, an elaborated parliamentary committee structure shadowing government departments, and parliamentary sovereignty in determining its floor agenda. Therefore, when Martin and Vanberg (2008: 507) claim that their two countries 'are representative of other European democracies in a number of important ways' this also applies to the Austrian case. And we cover a largely overlapping time period (1996– 2006 compared to 1994–2002 for Germany and the Netherlands). Although we study a single country, we include more legislative debates than Martin and Vanberg (2008).

Historic precedent

Austria's first Grand coalition of the ÖVP and SPÖ, particularly in the 1949-66 period (when cabinets were formed in minority situations and the new regime had firmly established itself), provides an interesting case that in a way is the extreme case for the Martin and Vanberg (2008) idea of coalition communication. Given the huge gap between the ÖVP and the SPÖ in all policy areas, government proposals submitted to parliament were either compromises between these two parties or resulted from logrolling between them (Dreijmanis 1982). Consequently, hardly any government bill satisfied both parties to the same extent. Yet, the coalition agreements enforced coalition discipline on the parties (i.e. they were not allowed to form parliamentary alliances outside the coalition) (Müller 2000). This often led both parliamentary groups to criticise the government's proposal from their partisan points of view. Nevertheless, MPs stressed that their respective party team in government had done the very best under the given circumstances: It was the coalition partner who was to blame for all the problems the legislative proposal contained from a partisan perspective. And without the restless efforts of their party team in government the outcome would be much worse. The British High Commissioner to Austria, witnessing parliamentary debates in the early 1950s, for instance, found it difficult to understand that the two parties fighting each other in the debate, formed a coalition together and were going to uniformly support the hotly debated government proposal in the parliamentary vote to be held immediately after the debate (Rauchensteiner 1987: 257). Moreover, the coalition parties often presented bills or amendments to Parliament that aimed at demonstrating how a law bearing the imprint only of the proposing party would look like. A similar pattern could be observed in the practice of questioning cabinet members: while ministers of the respective coalition partner were asked questions with a critical tendency, the parliamentary questions put to party comrades in the government were intended to provide an opportunity for the announcement of good news.

This behaviour was labelled '*Bereichsopposition*' (sectoral opposition) by Otto Kirchheimer (1957).

Institutional Rules

The vast majority of the speeches in our analysis were given under the plenary time regime set by the 1996 amendment of the parliamentary rules of procedure (Geschäftsordnungsnovelle 1996, Bundesgesetzblatt 438/1996). This law was enacted just before the summer recess and came into force in September 1996. It came in reaction to repeated filibustering by the Greens after they had entered the national parliament in 1986, when they obstructed parliamentary proceedings through 'marathon speeches' of their MPs,¹ the reform aimed at economizing parliamentary debates by rationing speeches and containing their length but also at making them more lively and promoting the exchange of arguments rather than providing a forum for reading longish speeches to a bored audience (Schefbeck 1996, 2006). According to the rules (§ 57) individual speeches have a maximum length of 20 minutes and can be contained to ten minutes for the first two speakers and to five minutes for all following speakers of a party by majority decision. The majority can also decide to limit the total time of all speeches per party, meaning that each party has a time quota available and can allocate it to its MPs according to its own needs. Such quotas can relate to individual agenda items or the entire agenda of a plenary meeting. In the latter case a two-thirds majority is required. The rules of procedure fix the minimum speaking time per party to 30 minutes. In the case of party 'block grants' for individual agenda items or entire debates the time is allocated according to the 'Viennese hour' model that provides each party with a basic amount of speaking time which is topped up by time allocated proportional to party seat shares. In the 2006–08 parliamentary term the 'Viennese hour' meant speaking times of 14.5 minutes each for the SPÖ (with 68 seats) and ÖVP (66 seats), 11.5 minutes for each of the FPÖ and the Greens (21 seats each), and eight minutes for the BZÖ (7 seats). Finally, how bis is the cake to be divided applying these rules? According to a decision of the procedural committee (made in the 1996–99 term), the total length of a plenary debate is no less than 6.5

¹Record holder for the longest speech given in the Austrian parliament is a Green MP. Her speech, in March 1993, lasted 10 hours and 35 minutes, from early evening to next day early morning. It was held in protest against Austrian ratification of an international treaty.

hours under the 'block grants' regime (Atzwanger and Zögernitz 1999: 284). And the rules of procedure set a cap at 10 hours.

In terms of party speaking times these rules clearly allow the majority – in our observation period this is the government parties – to tailor debates according to their needs. They can grant more time to agenda items they want to communicate more thoroughly and they can contain debates they want to keep short. Clearly, there are limits to the latter: to gag the opposition too obviously might turn out more costly than engaging in debate. For our theoretical question the government parties' ability to provide more room for some items is a crucial precondition.

Floor time is a scarce and precious commodity and it gets ever more precious as the end of the a legislative terms as both Martin & Vanberg (2008: 506) and others (Döring 2004) have argued. Direct TV broadcasting of many debates and broad coverage in the daily press guarantee the plenary meetings more public attention than any other parliamentary activity (Schefbeck 2006: 162). And Martin and Vanberg's claim that the people involved in the debates use many other venues to push their party's message from the plenary meeting across also holds for Austria (Müller et al. 2001: Ch. 7).

Context

We study party behaviour in three cabinets all of which were majority supported (Table 1). Two were Grand coalitions of the SPÖ and ÖVP and one a so-called 'small' coalition of the ÖVP and FPÖ/BZÖ. Yet, the two cabinets with identical party composition are quite different in their internal relations. The 1996–99 SPÖ-ÖVP cabinet was last in a series of Grand coalition cabinets (beginning in 1986). Participants and observers agree that it was characterized by internal stalemate. With regard to socio-cultural issues it was uncomfortably sandwiched between the Greens on the left and the FPÖ on the right. With regard to socioeconomic issues it was between Scylla and Charybdis of frustrating voters either by harsh reforms or by failing to address the vital needs of the country. The coalition's choosing the latter was the important policy motive (combined with perhaps even stronger office and electoral motives) behind the ÖVP turning to the FPÖ in 2000. Notwithstanding what came after the 1999 election, the 1996–99 government was 'business as usual' for the government parties.

Government coalition	Government coalition 'colours'	Government term	Coalition's parliamentary support base (% of parliamentary seats)	Survey
SPÖ-ÖVP*	Red-Black	1996–1999	67.8	1997/98
ÖVP-FPÖ	Black-Blue	2000-2002	56.8	_
ÖVP-FPÖ/BZÖ*	Black-Blue/Orange	2002-2006	53.0	2003

Table 1: Austrian Government coalitions (1996–2006)

Notes:

The party of the head of government (Federal Chancellor) is first-listed. * Cabinets included in the analysis.

It is worth also providing some context information for the ÖVP-led 'small coalition'. It was the second consecutive cabinet with this party composition. The first one was internally balanced, as the ÖVP and FPÖ were of equal parliamentary strength. It was under heavy domestic and international pressure because of the FPÖ's participation that was considered inappropriate and violating pre-election commitments of the ÖVP. This initially had a unifying influence on the cabinet. Yet, once the pressure ceased the government broke down over FPÖ-internal conflicts, leading to early elections in 2002. The elections returned the ÖVP as the strongest party and reduced the FPÖ to about a third of its previous strength. Notwithstanding these antecedents, the coalition was renewed and lasted for the full term. This is the cabinet included in our analysis. Yet, the FPÖ remained an 'interesting' coalition partner: in that term its government and parliamentary teams broke away from their party, maintaining the coalition with the ÖVP under the new label BZÖ. As its predecessor cabinet, the 2002–06 cabinet faced parliamentary opposition only from the left (SPÖ, Greens).

Data and Measurement

Measuring communication efforts

Martin and Vanberg focus on the total length of the legislative speeches per party. In their words: 'speech length is a reasonable proxy for the extensiveness of a party's attempt to communicate its position on a particular scale' (2008: 507). In contrast, in our study we use

the number of speakers per party to measure such effort. We think this indicator is superior as each speaker brings to bear two things, the arguments for the case and his or her personal reputation with the target group and as a policy expert. In other words, each MP gives witness about the party efforts and achievements in working out the legislation under discussion. Given that laws are often characterized by complex relationships between policy goals, instruments, and outcomes the arguments may not simply speak for themselves. Hence, the rapport a speaker has with the target audience is important. More speakers then mean addressing more sub-constituencies, defined geographically, in terms of age, gender, profession, or something else.

In any case, the correlation between party speech length (i.e. the total length of all party speeches on a legislative proposal) and the number of party speakers is very high. We have calculated it for the 22rd legislative period where Pearson's R is 0.93 for both the SPÖ and ÖVP and 0.96 for both the FPÖ and Greens.

Measuring policy distances

In contrast to Martin and Vanberg (2008) who draw on Benoit and Laver's (2006) expert survey we measure policy distances by employing data from surveys among Members of Parliament (MPs). Hence, we use real preferences of actors rather than guesswork of experts. This is particularly beneficial, as only ten Austrian experts responded to the Benoit and Laver survey (while response rates for Germany and the Netherlands were good). Compared to the pioneering study of Martin and Vanberg (2008) who had to rely on one measurement point of party preferences for their eight-year period we have three measurement points for four consecutive parliamentary terms (Müller, Eder and Jenny 2010).² Table 2 provides the intracoalition party distances on the socio-economic and socio-cultural policy dimensions, the two most important divisions in Austrian politics.

² Another difference relates to the measurement of policy distances. Faced with multi-party coalitions in the Netherlands Martin and Vanberg (2008: 508) calculate the intra-coalitional policy distance as the absolute distance between each coalition party and the party holding the relevant ministry. They aggregate these distances by using weights (according to the seat contribution of the non-ministerial party to the coalition). Faced with two-party coalitions in Austria, we can simply measure the policy distance between the cabinet parties.

Table 2: Intra-coalition party	distances	on the s	ocio-econo	omic and	socio-cultural	dimensions
(1996–2006)						

Government coalition	Socio-econom	ic dimension	Socio-cultural dimension		
	Mean issue Median issue		Mean issue	Median issue	
	distance	distance	distance	distance	
SPÖ-ÖVP (1996–1999)	0.38	0.44	0.30	0.39	
ÖVP-FPÖ (2002–2006)	0.07	0.08	0.08	0.06	

Notes: The socio-economic dimension is based on MPs' responses to 4 issue items. The socio-cultural dimension is based on responses to 3 issue items. Original item scales were 7- point. All item scales have been standardized to the 0-1 interval ahead of computing means and medians.

Table 2 clearly shows that Grand Coalition governance is burdened by much larger policy divergence than the centre-right coalition of the ÖVP and FPÖ. Indeed, our data show only small differences between the ÖVP and FPÖ but substantial ones between the two major parties. This holds for both policy dimensions. Note that there are important inter-temporal changes: In the 1996–99 term the policy distance between the SPÖ and ÖVP is greater in the socio-economic policy dimension than in the socio-cultural one. In the 2002-06 term the policy distance between the SPÖ and FPÖ was slightly larger on the socio-cultural dimension then on the socio-economic policy dimension.

Salience

Currently, we do not have a time-variant salience measure. Yet, given that the policy areas reported by Benoit and Laver (2006) are already selected as the most important ones for party competition in the respective countries perceived party failure in each one should have the potential to inflict serious damage on the parties. Moreover, what really matters to voters and parties is not the salience of the issue dimension but the salience of individual issues. If each dimension contains issues that are of critical importance plus issues considered largely irrelevant it is the proportion of highly relevant issues that matters. We could think of one issue dimension containing a great number of issues and another with only few issues but each dimension including a few issues that are politically critical. If the experts in the Benoit and Laver (2006) survey rate the salience of issue area with the resulting salience values can

cause significant distortion. To avoid that problem we would need issue-specific salience measures. For all practical purposes this would mean salience values for individual pieces of legislation. Neither Martin and Vanberg (2008) nor we can currently employ such measures. In their absence we refrain from salience weighing in our first model. We use the Benoit and Laver salience measures in second model together with our preference data. Finally, we use both the policy distance and salience values of Benoit and Laver together with our legislative data. This, of course, is the closest we come to a replication of the Martin and Vanberg approach in testing their theory with Austrian Data.

Hypotheses

We have now in place everything to formulate operational hypotheses in accordance with the Martin and Vanberg theory of coalition communication:

As policy distances are large in Grand coalitions but negligible in small coalitions we expect:

H1. Parties serving in Grand coalitions will deliver more parliamentary speeches than parties in small coalitions.

As policy distances in Grand coalitions differ between policy areas and terms we expect:

H2a. Government parties will deliver more parliamentary speeches in the 1996–99 coalition in the socio-economic policy dimension.

H2b. Government parties will deliver more parliamentary speeches in the 2002–06 coalition in the socio-cultural policy dimension.

H3. Coalition parties will deliver more parliamentary speeches the closer the election comes.

Parliamentary Debates in Austria 1996–2008

Length of speeches

We have detailed data on individual speech length for about two thirds of the legislative period that started in 2002 and lasted to 2006. Table 2 provides the seat-weighted mean speech duration in two different policy dimensions, the socio-economic dimension and the socio-cultural dimension. The floor debates that fit into these two policy dimensions are a subset of all debates on legislative bills in the National Council. Selecting and classifying the relevant debates was done with the help of the parliamentary committee system. In the Austrian case each legislative bill is processed by one committee only. We have classified all the bills deliberated on by the following five parliamentary committees Labour and Social Affairs, Budget, Finance, Industry and Economy into the socio-economic dimension. We classified bills that went through the committees for Interior Affairs or Justice as belonging to the socio-cultural dimension. Budgetary bills and 'Budget accompanying bills' (Budgetbegleitgesetze), clearly part of the socio-economic realm, have been deliberately excluded in most of our analyses, as was done by Martin and Vanberg (2008: 507). The annual budget debate is huge in size compared to an ordinary debate on a domestic law. Budget debates constitute outliers that have an extraordinary impact on results as will be shown in table 2. All the remaining debates are on domestic law proposals, not on the ratification of international treaties. Martin and Vanberg also excluded constitutional laws and amendments from their study, whereas we have left them in our sample. Apart from the higher majority threshold for successful passage the legislative procedure used is identical with the procedure used for ordinary legislation.

We provide weighted means of speech duration, due to the different time allotments related to party size. We use the parliamentary seats as weights. The individual speech length of all speakers belonging to the party in a single debate was first summed up and then divided by the number of seats held by the party. Then the mean over all debates belonging to the same policy dimension was calculated. The results are shown in table 2 to tables 4, first for the then government parties ÖVP and FPÖ and then for the opposition parties SPÖ and Greens.

The first row of in Table 2 gives the weighted speech length with debates on budget bills and budget-accompanying bills included in the sample. The numbers of cases given refer to

number of bills, not the number of seats. The coalition government ruling in that period was made up two parliamentary parties of unequal size. The parliamentary party group of the ÖVP was more than 4 times larger than the party group of the Freedom Party with a seat ratio of 4.39. The weighted mean speech length was less than one minute among ÖVP delegates and almost double in length among FPÖ MPs. These numbers include the debates on budget bills. The next row shows speech length after excluding the budget debates. It drops down to 0.38 minutes for the ÖVP and 0.9 minutes for the FPÖ in debates belonging to the socio-economic dimension. Debates on socio-cultural bills were slightly shorter for both parties with 0.32 and 0.81 minutes on average, respectively. Due to the disproportionately larger time allotment for smaller parties FPÖ MPs were able to talk more than twice as long as MPs belonging to the People's Party. Comparing the two policy dimensions we find slightly more interest among the two government parties as measured by speech length in talking on socio-economic issues than on socio-cultural issues.

Table 2: Seat-weighted length of speeches in minutes on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues (2002–2005)

Socio-economic dimension									
	Ö	VP	FI	2Ö					
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)	Means ratio	Seat ratio			
All bill debates	0.91	(110)	1.77	(112)	0.51	4.39			
Without budget bill debates	0.38	(104)	0.90	(106)	0.42	4.39			
Socio-cultural dimension									
All bill debates	0.32	(51)	0.81	(51)	0.40	4.39			

Note: Number given for mean is the total number of minutes spoken by a party's list of speakers divided by its total number of seats in the plenary debate ahead of the final vote. Data are from debates on bills in first half of 22nd legislative period.

Table 2 provided average numbers over all bills belonging to the same policy dimension without differentiating between major, important bills and minor amendments or between bills that were consensually passed by government and opposition and highly conflictual bills that were passed by the government parties against protest by the opposition.

Table 3 differentiates the speech length in legislative debates according to the subsequent voting behaviour of the opposition parties. As can be seen there is a clear positive relationship between average speech length and the opposition's voting behaviour. Average speech length

roughly doubled for both government parties when they faced a leftist opposition of Social Democrats and Greens that were united in their rejection of a bill. Government MPs talked less if at least one of the opposition parties subsequently supported them in passing a legislative project. The parliamentary parties' voting behaviour in the final vote usually is common knowledge among the political actors well ahead of the floor debate. So the government parties seem to invest more time in the public defense the government's projects whenever they can't build on the approval of the parliamentary opposition. The speech length pattern shown in table 3 points out the function of these parliamentary debates. They serve the purpose of justification of political decisions that have been already taken by the different political actors at this stage of the procedure and not deliberation over arguments and an attempt to convince others in the search for consensus. If the latter were true, we should expect rather the opposite pattern of speech lengths.

Socio-economic dimension								
Bills passed by	ÖVP		F	PÖ				
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)	Means ratio	Seat ratio		
Unanimous vote	0.24	(47)	0.53	(48)	0.45	4.39		
Government parties + one opposition party	0.46	(14)	0.88	(14)	0.53	4.39		
Government parties	0.50	(43)	1.04	(44)	0.48	4.39		
All bills	0.38	(104)	0.79	(106)	0.48	4.39		
	5	Socio-cultura	l dimension					
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)	Means ratio	Seat ratio		
Unanimous vote	0.25	(35)	0.64	(35)	0.38	4.39		
Government parties + one opposition party	0.35	(6)	0.95	(6)	0.37	4.39		
Government parties	0.57	(10)	1.33	(10)	0.43	4.39		
All bills	0.32	(51)	0.81	(51)	0.40	4.39		

Table 3: Mean length of government parties' speeches and parliamentary voting behaviour

Note: ¹Budget bill debates excluded from the analysis. Data are from debates on bills in first half of 22nd legislative period (2002-2006).

Table 4 provides the same kind of data for the two opposition parties. In this table we further differentiate and provide the numbers separately for the bills on which the SPÖ agreed with the government parties while the Greens did not and vice versa.

Socio-economic dimension								
Bills passed by	SPÖ		Gre	eens				
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)	Means ratio	Seat ratio		
Unanimous vote	0.23	(48)	0.38	(48)	0.62	4.06		
Government parties + SPÖ	0.58	(6)	0.95	(6)	0.60	4.06		
Government parties + Greens	0.30	(7)	0.40	(7)	0.74	4.06		
Government parties	0.51	(44)	0.99	(44)	0.51	4.06		
All bills	0.37	(106)	0.67	(106)	0.55	4.06		
	Soc	io-cultural d	imension					
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)	Means ratio	Seat ratio		
Unanimous vote	0.26	(35)	0.51	(35)	0.51	4.06		
Government parties + SPÖ	0.43	(6)	0.59	(6)	0.72	4.06		
Government parties + Greens	-	-	-	-	-	-		
Government parties	0.59	(10)	0.93	(10)	0.64	4.06		
All bills	0.34	(51)	0.60	(51)	0.57	4.06		

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Table 4. Mean	speech duration	of opposition r	parties and	voting be	haviour
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Notes: Budget bill debates were excluded from the analysis. Data are from debates on bills in first half of the 22nd legislative period (2002–2006).

Again, we can observe that bills that were unanimously passed drew less attention from opposition parties in parliamentary debates than bills that they did not approve of. The Greens spent as much time on average on bills that they supported regardless whether the SPÖ were in favour of these bills or not. And they spent more than double the time on bills that they did not approve of, again regardless of the other opposition party's attitude towards these bills. The same pattern can't be observed for the SPÖ with respect to the behaviour shown by the Greens. However, the numbers of cases are rather small. So we are hesitant to make too much out of these differences.

Overall, when looking at the two different policy dimensions, there is no clear, systematic effect on average speech lengths. After controlling for degree of political support the debates on socio-economic issues seem to last about as long as the debates on socio-cultural issues.

Share of speakers per party

The previous section provided data on average speech length based on the assumption that every MP from a parliamentary party group is a speaker in every debate. In this section we shed some light on the share of MPs from the government parties that indeed did speak in the individual debates. We have data on the numbers of speakers among government parties for the three legislative periods from 1996-2006. As table 5 shows, in the Red-Black coalition ruling from 1996-1999 on average about 5 to 7 percent (if budget debates are included) of the SPÖ and ÖVP MPs took part in an average legislative debate. The SPÖ had 71 seats, the ÖVP 52 seats. In absolute terms this translates into 3-4 speakers per government party in each debate.

	SPÖ	-ÖVP coali	ition					
	Socio-e	conomic dir	nension					
	SPĊ)	Ö	VP				
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)				
All bill debates	0.06	(252)	0.07	(252)				
Without budget bill debates	0.05	(247)	0.06	(247)				
Socio-cultural dimension								
All bill debates	0.05	(61)	0.05	(61)				

Table 5: Share of party speakers (1996–1999):

Notes: Number presented is a weighted mean. It is the mean total number of speakers from the same party calculated over all indicated debates and then divided by the party's total number of seats.

Table 6 and 7 provide the same kind of data for the two subsequent legislative periods. During both, Austria was ruled by ÖVP-FPÖ. However, in the period from 1999-2002 ÖVP und FPÖ were partners of equal size (52 seats each), while they were very unequal from 2002-2006. In the latter period the ÖVP had 79 seats while the FPÖ had only 18 seats.

ÖVP-FPÖ coalition									
Socio-economic dimension									
	ÖV	P	F	PÖ					
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)					
All bill debates	0.07	(178)	0.08	(178)					
Without budget bill debates	0.06	(175)	0.08	(175)					
	Socio-c	ultural di	mension						
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)					
All bill debates	0.06	(50)	0.05	(50)					

Table 6: Share of party speakers (1999–2002)

Notes: Number presented is a weighted mean. It is the mean total number of speakers from the same party calculated over all indicated debates and then divided by the party's total number of seats.

ÖVP-FPÖ coalition									
Socio-economic dimension									
	ÖV	P	FI	2Ö					
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)					
All bill debates	0.16	(111)	0.30	(113)					
Without budget bill debates	0.08	(109)	0.16	(109)					
	Socio-c	cultural din	nension						
	Mean	(n)	Mean	(n)					
All bill debates	0.06	(51)	0.17	(51)					

Table 7: Share of party speakers (2002–2006)

Note: Number presented is a weighted mean. It is the mean total number of speakers from the same party calculated over all indicated debates and then divided by the party's total number of seats.

The ups and downs of the relative numbers of speakers per debate reflect the ups and downs in party size. In absolute terms, the pattern has not changed much over time. There were 3-5 speakers per government party in an average debate. Extraordinary large numbers of speaker during budget debates in the second period of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition have pushed the means up to 0.16 for the ÖVP and to 0.30 for the FPÖ, but after excluding these outlier debates and taking the small size of the FPÖ party group into account, there is no evidence that parliamentary debates have changed with regard to the number of speakers over time.

The small share of a parliamentary group that takes the word in an average debate, however, is as an interesting fact in itself. It points to the importance of division of labour and policy specialization in structuring the role of debate speakers in the Austrian parliament. The leaders of the parliamentary parties are 'policy allrounders', that will take the word on all kinds of topics. The remainder of the list of party speakers, however, will be usually sampled from the subgroup of party MPs sitting in the committee that had previously deliberated on a specific bill.

Political conflict has an impact on the size of the speakers list. We have previously shown (in table 2 to 4 above) that the average speech duration of a speech tends to grow when there is no unanimous support for a bill in parliament. In these earlier tables we presented weighted means that used a fixed denominator (total number of seats per party), regardless of the number of speakers who actually took the microphone in a debate. The following tables – based on the actual number of speeches given –, tell us, that political conflict adds to the size of the speakers list rather than to individual MPs' speech length. This makes sense given the limits on individual speaking time set by the parliamentary regulations. It's the total time reserved for debate on a bill that is negotiated among the parliamentary parties when setting a parliamentary session's agenda.

Though the pattern is not as clear-cut in the first of the three periods studied, it gets very clear in the latter two periods: Whenever the government's majority passed a bill without any opposition support, all the parties making up the two sides of the divide enlisted more speakers to the debate. The specific policy dimension, whether socio-economic or sociocultural, on which government and opposition, disagreed, did not seem to matter. There is no indication for any of the parties in the sense that they tended to enlist more speakers on socioeconomic issues than on socio-cultural issues or vice versa throughout the three periods observed.

Socio-economic dimension									
Bills passed by	SPÖ (G)	ÖVP (G)	FPÖ	Greens	(n)				
Unanimous vote	0.04	0.06	0.09	0.11	(59)				
Government parties + one opposition party	0.05	0.06	0.12	0.14	(106)				
Government parties	0.05	0.06	0.10	0.15	(82)				
All bills	0.05	0.06	0.09	0.13	(247)				
	Se	ocio-cultural dim	ension						
Unanimous vote	0.04	0.06	0.06	0.15	(28)				
Government parties + one opposition party	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.15	(21)				
Government parties	0.06	0.07	0.10	0.20	(12)				
All bills	0.05	0.07	0.07	0.16	(61)				

Table 8: Share of speakers and voting behaviour (1996-1999)

Notes: Budget bill debates were excluded from the analysis. G ... government party

Table 9: Share of speakers and voting behaviour (1999-2002)

Socio-economic dimension								
Bills passed by	SPÖ	ÖVP (G)	FPÖ (G)	Greens	(n)			
Unanimous vote	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.10	(83)			
Government parties + one opposition party	0.05	0.05	0.06	0.15	(29)			
Government parties	0.10	0.09	0.11	0.21	(63)			
All bills	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.15	(175)			
	S	ocio-cultural din	nension					
Bills passed by	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.09	(16)			
Unanimous vote	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.10	(6)			
Government parties + one opposition party	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.14	(28)			
Government parties	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.12	(50)			

Note: Budget bill debates were excluded from the analysis. G ... government party

Table 10: Share of speakers and voting behaviour (2002-2006)

Socio-economic dimension						
Bills passed by	SPÖ	ÖVP (G)	FPÖ (G)	Greens	(n)	
Unanimous vote	0.06	0.05	0.11	0.09	(49)	
Government parties + one opposition party	0.08	0.08	0.15	0.13	(14)	
Government parties	0.12	0.11	0.22	0.22	(46)	
All bills	0.09	0.08	0.16	0.15	(109)	
Socio-cultural dimension						
Unanimous vote	0.06	0.05	0.14	0.10	(35)	
Government parties + one opposition party	0.08	0.08	0.19	0.15	(6)	
Government parties	0.11	0.10	0.26	0.16	(10)	
All bills	0.07	0.06	0.17	0.12	(51)	

Notes: Budget bill debates were excluded from the analysis. G... government party

Testing Martin & Vanberg' Theory with the Austrian case

The previous section has explored our data on legislative debates in the Austrian parliament in different ways. We now turn to a multivariate analysis. We aim at testing the theoretical argument championed by Martin & Vanberg (2008) and tested against debates in the German and Dutch parliaments. Currently, some gaps in our database impede a full replication of their multivariate model with Austrian data for the same time period. Notwithstanding this caveat we consider some of our alternative operationalizations to the theoretical concepts of Martin and Vanberg superior to those employed in their original analysis.

As already discussed above we employ the number of party speeches rather than the length of party speech time as dependent variable. However, as we have shown above, at the aggregate level of the parliamentary party the total duration of speeches and the number of speakers are interchangeable measures in the Austrian parliament.

With regard to important independent variables Martin & Vanberg rely on one-point expert survey data (the Benoit and Laver (2006) study) while we can draw on elite surveys with Austrian MPs for three observation points. Martin & Vanbergs (2008: 508f) use two variables for 'Issue divisiveness', one for the government parties and one for opposition parties. These rely on position and salience data from the Benoit and Laver expert survey. They also use information on the minister responsible for a bill and weigh position and salience by the seat shares in the coalition. We employ a simpler calculation of issue divisiveness as we have only two party coalitions to deal with. We take the distance between the positions of the two government parties involved on the issue dimensions as our measure of government party issue divisiveness. The same approach is used to calculate the divisiveness of opposition parties.

We add another distance measure, this time for the distance between the government and the opposition parties. We first calculate a hypothetical government position as the mean of the government party positions. We then calculate the distances between this position and the positions of opposition parties. We aggregate these differences by applying the absorption

rule, that is we taken the distance between the government position and the most 'extreme' position(s) of the opposition parties.³

Note that the two policy dimensions, the socio-economic dimension and the socio-cultural dimension, produce variation in these three position-based variables.

Instead of the number of 'days remaining in the electoral cycle' for a specific bill, the timing or sequence variable in the Martin & Vanberg model, we use the chronological number of the bills passed. This scale also indicates the time remaining in the electoral cycle.

A few comments on the other variables in the Martin & Vanberg model are in order: Party seat share is also included in our model. The number of committee referrals is a constant (i.e. 1) in the Austrian case and cannot be used. The varying substantive importance of bills (operationalized by Martin & Vanberg as the 'number of articles in the bill' and the number of days the bill has spent in the parliamentary process) is not yet part of our model, but will be included in the next model iteration.

In the previous section we already have identified a strong bivariate relationship between the number of speeches and the parliamentary parties' voting behaviour. Therefore we include two new dummy variables in our model, one for bills supported exclusively by government parties and one for bills passed with support of at least one opposition party. The reference category then is the bills that were passed unanimously. Martin and Vanberg (2008: 508) operationalize the need to talk longer in debates due to rhetorical pressure from the opposite side of the parliamentary aisle through the 'expected speech length for opposing side', a variable created by simulating the amount of contrary speech in a debate. We suspect that this variable effectively captures the phenomenon we found for Austrian debates, namely that political conflict between government and opposition leads to longer and/or more speeches.

Table 11 presents the result of our multivariate negative binomial model on 466 legislative debates from two legislative periods. Standard errors are clustered by legislative bill.

³ In the first of the two periods the government faced opposition on both the left (Greens, Liberals) and the right (FPÖ). In this case we simply added the two government-opposition distances. In the second period, both the opposition parties placed themselves to the left the government. Here we take the distance to the 'more extreme' opposition party.

Central to Martin & Vanbergs argument is the degree of divisiveness among partners in a coalition, operationalized as the mean policy distance of government parties in our model. The sign of the variable's coefficient is positive and thus conforms to their theoretical argument. However it is not statistically significant. The two other position-based variables, the policy distance between opposition parties and the policy distance between the government and opposition parties, also lack statistical significance. The positive coefficient of the distance between the government and the opposition is as expected. Yet, this is not the case for the negative coefficient for the divisiveness among opposition parties.

	Coefficient estimates
	(clustered S.E.)
Party Seats	-0.01
	(0.00)***
Government Party	0.28
	(0.03)***
Mean policy distance of Government Parties	1.01
	(1.90)
Mean policy distance of Opposition Parties	-2.01
	(2.23)
Mean policy distance between Government position and opposition parties	2.51
	(3.33)
Chronological number of debate in legislative period	-0.00***
	(0.00)
Bill supported by government parties and at least one opposition party	0.20***
	(0.07)
Bill supported by government parties only	0.40***
	(0.07)
Constant	0.65
	(1.32)
N	1861
Log-likelihood	-3919

Table 11: Negative Binomial Model of the Number of Speeches in Legislative Debates

Note: N=1861 (4 parties x 466 debates on bills from the 20^{th} (1996–1999) and the 21^{st} (2002–2005) legislative periods.) Standard errors are clustered by legislative bill. Budget bill debates are excluded from the analysis. *** indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 error level.

All the other variables in the model are statistically significant and mostly work as expected. The party size variable ('Party seats') has a negative coefficient but its effect is diminished by the positive coefficient of the 'Government Party' variable. The negative coefficient for the chronological number of the debate indicates that the later in a legislative term a debate occurred, the smaller was the number of speeches per party. And the fewer parties supported a bill in parliament, the more all the parties talked about it as indicated by the positive coefficient of the last two dummy variables.

In Table 12 we employ the same statistical model, but draw on the Benoit & Laver expert survey data for the calculation of the three policy distance variables instead of data from our MP surveys. However, the Austrian case does not conform to the Martin & Vanberg argument. The coefficients indicate that the results for the distance variables seem to be even worse whereas all the other variables have the same coefficients.

	Coefficient
	estimates
	(clustered S.E.)
Party Seats	-0.01
	(0.00)***
Government Party	0.28
	(0.03)***
Mean policy distance of Government Parties	-0.00
	(0.47)
Mean policy distance of Opposition Parties	-0.38
	(0.35)
Mean policy distance between Government position and	0.17
opposition parties	(0.59)
Chronological number of debate in legislative period	-0.00***
	(0.00)
Bill supported by government parties and at least one	0.20***
opposition party	(0.07)
Bill supported by government parties only	0.40***
	(0.07)
Constant	1.51
	(0.50)
Ν	1861
Log-likelihood	-3919

Table 12: Negative Binomial Model of the Number of Speeches in Legislative Debates with Benoit & Laver expert survey data

Note: N=1861 (4 parties x 466 debates on bills from the 20^{th} (1996–1999) and the 22^{nd} (2002–2005) legislative periods.) Standard errors are clustered by legislative bill. Budget bill debates are excluded from the analysis.

The Laver & Benoit data set includes a measure of issue importance, i.e. salience for each party. We have included a 'government salience' variable as an additional variable in a third model. 'Government salience' is calculated as the mean of the two individual government parties' saliences. However, with regard to the central independent variable we are interested in – the policy distance between the government partners (government divisiveness) – the picture remains unchanged. There is still no substantial, statistically significant effect.

Returning to our operational hypotheses H1 to H3, derived from the Martin & Vanberg argument, we conclude that the results of the two models do not provide any support for them. The lack of results for the policy distance between the parties indicates that Grand coalitions do not engage in more parliamentary attempts at explaining government policy to their constituencies than parties in small coalitions. There is also no empirical support for the hypothesis that government parties tend to deliver more speeches on the political dimension where they are further apart from each other. Our third hypothesis stated that coalition parties will deliver more speeches the closer the election comes. The analysis here offers no confirmation. The coalition parties do not engage in more parliamentary communication efforts (i.e. delivering more speeches). The results suggest that exactly the opposite is the case. The nearer the election comes, the less speakers per party are taking the floor which also means less parliamentary floor time is spent per legislative bill. Obviously, the scarcity of floor time leaves the parties with the choice between completing their legislative program and explaining individual measures to their potential voters. Our data suggest that in a birds' perspective the parties opt for the former. Note that this does not preclude giving selective emphasis to individual agenda items when it comes to engage in electorally relevant communication from the floor of parliament.

Conclusion

Martin & Vanberg (2008) put forward an interesting theoretical argument on how the political communication needs of coalition translate into parliamentary debates. In this paper we have provided an initial test of their theory and partial replication of their analysis with new data from another consensus democracy. Austria is in many respects a 'most similar case' compared to their previously studied countries Germany and Netherlands. Martin & Vanberg found a systematic relationship between the size of the policy distances of coalition partners and their efforts to communicate with their constituencies via speeches in parliamentary debates. We have derived operational hypotheses from their theory fitting to our data. The first hypothesis stated that parties in Grand coalitions deliver more parliamentary speeches than parties in small coalition. As Grand coalitions of the SPÖ and ÖVP bridge the left–right divide they are characterized by larger policy distances between the coalition partners on the two most important policy dimensions. Therefore they are theorized to have a greater need to

justify the compromises forged in government bills to their respective constituencies. Our comparative analysis of the Austrian Grand coalition from 1996–1999 with the right-wing coalition of 2002-06 did not confirm this expectation. In the Grand coalition the government partners were farther apart on socio-economic issues than on socio-cultural issues. In the right-wing coalition the order of distances was reversed. The coalition partners were further apart on the socio-cultural dimension and occupied more similar positions on the socioeconomic dimension. In terms of the number of speeches in floor debates we have found no evidence that the variation in political distances between coalition partners on the two political sub-dimensions had an impact on the communicative behaviour of the government parties. The third hypothesis stated that coalition parties will deliver more parliamentary speeches the closer the election comes. It postulated a time-varying need for government parties to communicate with the electorate. The closer the election date the more pressing is the need for government parties to justify the legislative results of their partnership and the political compromises involved. The empirical pattern indicates that there is another pressing need that takes precedence: the need to use the remaining parliamentary floor time efficiently. This means settling with fewer speakers per bill to get more bills passed before the legislative period expires. In short, the theoretical model of coalition communication proposed by Martin & Vanberg does not seem to hold for Austria.

We are quick to add a note of caution: This is a first, preliminary and partial attempt at replicating the Martin & Vanberg communication model. Much remains to be done to arrive at full replication. However, we would be very surprised to find the final version of the statistical model producing results completely different for the ones presented here and that would conform to the predictions of Martin & Vanberg. Our first, initial analysis rather suggests that their model of coalition communication is less universal than expected by the authors.

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