

Opposition in parliamentary democracies: a framework for comparison

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INTRODUCTION

The right to oppose government is a fundamental feature of liberal democracy. That right is manifested in a variety of ways and forums, including the ability to sue government in the courts, the holding of free elections, and the privilege of unrestricted speech within legislatures. Especially in systems of parliamentary government, however, opposition is not merely a set of entitlements but a tangible institution and set of institutionalized relationships. Moreover, as with other governmental institutions, opposition differs in form between and within nations. In the study of institutions comparison is the engine of knowledge creation.

The aim of this article is thus to assist understanding of opposition by setting out, and making a case for, an analytical framework which might be used to compare opposition across jurisdictions. As Kaiser (2008, 20) has observed '[d]espite a promising start with Robert Dahl's 'Patterns of Opposition', comparative research on parliamentary opposition is still in its infancy.' Since it is widely acknowledged that Dahl provides a relevant starting point for the contemporary study of opposition, the article begins with an analysis of Dahl's pioneering contribution. The article shares Dahl's interest in relating characteristics of opposition to the wider political system, but it is less ambitious than Dahl in restricting the focus, for the most part, to legislatures in parliamentary systems of government. The Australian case is of particular interest in the article. While Australia has inherited Westminster understandings about parliamentary opposition, these are a less perfect fit with the Australian political system than is often assumed.² The framework developed is selectively applied to Australian jurisdictions to illustrate distinctive features of Australian opposition, as well as differences within Australia.

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2 Kaiser (2008, 22-23) notes that all of the Westminster democracies have departed from the classic Westminster assumptions about opposition.

ROBERT DAHL REVISITED

Dahl (1966) identified six 'ways' in which oppositions may differ. Three of these appear to be primary influences: (i) the organizational cohesion, or 'concentration', of the opponents

Dahl's key factors were shown to be useful in distinguishing opposition in Australia...[H]owever, all of these features of opposition in Australia are primarily, if not exclusively, a product of Australia's strong upper houses, with lower house government-opposition dynamics conforming more closely to the Westminster conception

of government; (ii) the 'competitiveness' of the opposition; and (iii) the goals of the opposition. The other differences he identified – (iv) the site of the encounter between opposition and government; (v) the distinctiveness or identifiability of the opposition; and (vi) the strategies of the opposition – seem to be heavily dependent on the first two factors.

Dahl's first two factors are arguably the most important in his analysis. The first factor, concentration, encompasses several elements: (i) the internal cohesion, or discipline, of parliamentary political parties; (ii) the extent to which parliamentary representation is concentrated

into two or fragmented among several political parties or, in Rae's (1968) terms, the 'fractionalization' of the parliamentary party system; and (iii) the extent to which constitutional arrangements (especially, bicameral-unicameral legislature, federal-unitary government, presidential-parliamentary government) separate or consolidate governmental power. The second factor, competitiveness, which Dahl admits is not completely independent of the first, refers to the extent to which parties compete rather than cooperate in electoral politics and in government. In Dahl's account, the most important aspect seems to be the extent to which parties monopolize, rather than share, power in the legislature. So this factor could alternatively be described as the extent of power sharing. The two factors are dimensional and can be used together to differentiate forms of opposition and associated forms of regime – as in the examples given in Figure 1. In the top right-hand quadrant in Figure 1 is located the Westminster conception of opposition. In the Westminster model, there are two major parties, both highly unified, one of which is normally in control of a majority in the lower house of parliament. This majority confers a monopoly of power because at Westminster, especially prior to recent House of Lords reforms and devolution, the House of Lords by law and convention has a limited role in legislation and government is unitary rather than federal. In this context, opposition has two notable characteristics: it is concentrated in a single, disciplined party; and it has no power (Johnson 1997). The 'ins' and the 'outs' are strongly differentiated, with the opposition very much an *alternative* government, or government-in-waiting, powerless but aspiring to monopolize power following the next general election.

In the other quadrants, opposition is more diffuse or less distinct, because it either lacks a single focal point or it is less differentiated from government, in the latter case especially because it contributes to a greater or lesser extent to the shaping of legislation. The bottom right-hand quadrant points up an ambiguity in the description of competitiveness above. Two parties may compete for executive power yet share legislative power, as in

the US where ‘divided government’ in recent decades has meant that a president of one partisan stripe is frequently forced to bargain over legislation with a congressional majority controlled by the other party. Along with divided government, the growing cohesion of parties in the US over recent decades has made opposition more identifiable and power sharing possibly a more visible, and certainly a more acrimonious, feature of the system of government (see Owens & Loomis 2006, 276–80). While it is legislative not executive power which is shared in the US, it is possible, if unlikely except in very unusual circumstances, for parties in a predominantly two-party system to share executive as well as legislative power, as was the case in the UK during the two world wars. Opposition under these circumstances is either negligible or almost indistinguishable from government.

Figure 5: Examples of Democratic Regimes Differentiated by Concentration of Opposition and Extent of Power Sharing among Parties

		Concentration of Opposition	
		Low	High
Extent of Power sharing	Low	Strong Presidentialism with a Fragmented Party System (e.g. mid 20th C Chile)	Westminster Model (e.g. postwar UK or NZ)
	High	European Consensus Democracy (e.g. Switzerland)	Government of National Unity (e.g. wartime UK); Divided Government in US Presidentialism

Something similar is true for certain cases in the bottom left-hand quadrant. For instance, in the Grand Coalition following the 2013 election in Germany, the coalition parties comprised around 80 per cent of the representatives in the Bundestag, and in Switzerland governing coalitions regularly encompass parties representing a similar proportion of the National Council. In these multi-party systems, such outcomes are the product of normal politics, unlike the grand coalitions produced by crises in the UK. This quadrant also includes cases of minority government in multi-party systems, such as those which have occurred frequently in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Italy, Portugal and Finland and which have resulted in opposition parties having a substantial impact on government policy (Gallagher, Laver & Mair 2006, 388–91). Lastly, the top left-hand quadrant represents a situation where, as in the Westminster model, the executive monopolizes governmental power and the opposition is powerless but, unlike Westminster, the opposition is too fragmented to present itself as an alternative government, or to provide support for an alternative government. The example given is Chile in the middle decades of the 20th century where presidential control of cabinet and over the legislative process was strong and partisanship was fragmented and dominated by local allegiances (see Shugart and Carey 1992, 155–56, 179–83).

A number of other characteristics identified by Dahl are a product of the two factors, concentration and competitiveness, discussed so far. The distinctiveness or identifiability of the opposition, Dahl’s fifth difference, is clearly affected by both factors. The more power is

dispersed in the ways described above, the less clearly delineated and capable of coordinated action will be the opposition. The less power is shared, or the more competitive the parties, the more sharply defined will be the government-opposition divide. Dahl's fourth difference, the site of the encounter between opposition and government, is similarly derivative. Where parliamentary majorities are all-powerful and highly stable and where elections typically create single-party majorities, the primary 'site' or focus of politics will tend to be the electorate rather than the legislature. In Dahl's words, in these circumstances, the legislature is not 'a site for genuine encounters so much as it is a forum from which to influence the next election' (1966, 339). Ironically, it is in just such circumstances, as in the Westminster model, that parliamentary opposition is likely to be a prominent feature of the political system. On the other hand, where elections are less decisive and parliamentary majorities are formed from multiple parties and may shift in their composition over time – and where, as consequence, governing and oppositional roles may be less starkly differentiated – more attention will be paid to strategies and negotiation within the legislature. The dispersion of power between multiple legislative chambers also has the potential to direct attention to the legislature, making it a primary political site. For completeness, it is worth noting, as Dahl does, that where power is shared between the national legislature and other entities in the political system – as in presidential, or federal, or corporatist systems – other forums and relationships will also tend to become important sites of political contest.

The strategies of the opposition, Dahl's sixth difference, refer to the means employed to affect the conduct of government. Dahl sketches a range of strategies which may be described in terms of their aims: to win exclusive control of executive government; to be part of a coalition government (that is, to adopt a strategy of executive brokerage); to seek influence through forums outside national or regional legislatures, such as corporatist arrangements for interest intermediation; to cope with a crisis by cooperating with actors who would normally be rivals (e.g. to enter a government of national unity); and to disrupt governmental institutions as part of a revolutionary strategy (perhaps more relevant to developed democracies in the days of strong European communist parties but also somewhat applicable to recent protest movements in Europe in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis). To these may be added a strategy less clearly identified by Dahl, that of legislative brokerage, whereby a party seeks to use its position in the legislature to influence policy without having a share of executive power. This is, of course, a standard strategy in US legislatures but is also relevant elsewhere. It describes the dominant strategy of the Australian Democrats, the Greens and other small players in Australian parliaments in recent decades. Choice of strategy, again, is clearly shaped by Dahl's factors of concentration and competitiveness, especially the former. Where legislative parties are large and few in number and there are no external incentives to share power, they will tend to adopt a strategy of exclusive control. In a multiparty system where legislative strength is fairly evenly dispersed, strategies of executive and legislative brokerage will come to the fore. Legislative brokerage without executive brokerage will often be the result of a party lacking what Sartori (1976, 122–23) has called 'coalition potential', a quality which may reflect its relative size but also the compatibility of its goals with those of other parties. Constitutional factors are also an important influence on choice of strategy. In a presidential system, the option of executive brokerage will not be open to parties in the legislature, whereas it will be a primary strategy for many parties in systems of parliamentary government.

The other of Dahl's factors referred to at the outset is the goals of opposition. Dahl (341) identifies four sorts of change that oppositions might seek to bring about (or resist): changes in the personnel of government; changes in specific policies; changes in the political system; and changes in the socioeconomic structure. Oppositions will have a different character depending on the particular mixture of these generic motives that animate them. Especially significant for Dahl is the distinction between those focused on changing social and political structures and those focused on policy and personnel alone. However, Dahl noted that a number of socialist parties, the main radical element in post-war liberal democracies, had relinquished their interest in structural opposition and come to focus mainly on the first two areas. This shift is even more apparent nearly half a century on from Dahl's vantage point and would seem to have greatly reduced the importance of structural goals in differentiating oppositions in advanced democracies. However, goals have an intimate connection with strategies, as noted above, and in this way may help create important differences between oppositions.

AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

What follows is a suggested six-factor framework for the comparative study of opposition. The focus is restricted to systems of parliamentary government in advanced, or mature, democracies. Further, attention is directed at the primary factors differentiating oppositions, keeping in mind that there are important secondary factors of the types dealt with above which are effects of the former. The six factors are explained below and their importance discussed and illustrated with observations on Australian oppositions. The three primary factors identified above in Dahl's analysis are dealt with first. The **concentration** (Dahl), or 'cohesion' (Blondel 1997), of opposition determines whether opposition will be associated with a single parliamentary group or dispersed among a number of groups and individuals. The drivers of concentration are as identified by Dahl. However, in developed parliamentary regimes, party discipline is uniformly strong and hence unlikely to be a major cause of differences between jurisdictions. The degree of fragmentation or fractionalization of the parliamentary party system is likely to be much more important in producing differences in the concentration of opposition. Whether a parliament is bicameral or unicameral, and the strength of bicameralism where it is present, will also be important given the variability of parliamentary systems in this regard. Finally, parliamentary federations also diffuse opposition across levels of government, a feature which needs to be taken into account in international comparisons of opposition.

In general, concentration matters because it determines the number and relative importance of opposition actors and their strategies. In turn, these things determine the predictability of parliamentary processes and thus the extent to which the legislature versus the electoral contest will be the chief focus of politics. Australian jurisdictions have typically had a greater number of significant parliamentary actors than envisaged by the Westminster model. This is due, first, to the presence of a separate National Party (formerly the Country Party) in a majority of Australian jurisdictions over nearly a century, especially where this party has exhibited significant independence from the Liberal Party, as in Queensland until the creation of the Liberal National Party in 2008 and in Western Australia

(WA) and Victoria for substantial periods. Its holding of a strategic bloc of votes in lower houses, which determine the formation of government, has encouraged the National Party mostly to adopt executive brokerage as its primary strategy and form coalition governments with the Liberal Party and its predecessors in several states and at the national level on many occasions. The stability of the relationship between the Liberals and Nationals, built on these foundations, has led commentators to describe this partnership simplistically as constituting a *de facto* single party. But this neglects the contingent nature of the relationship and the tensions it embodies, which have seen it frequently tested and indeed break down on a number of occasions across several Australian jurisdictions.³ Secondly, occasional control of the balance of power in lower houses of Australian parliaments by independents or, in the case of Tasmania in recent years, the Greens, is also a significant source of the dispersion of power in Australian parliaments. The Tasmanian Greens (since 2010) and particular independents (Rory McEwan in South Australia (SA) in 2002 and Elizabeth Constable in Western Australia in 2008) have recently been able to negotiate positions in the executive. But, due to their fluctuating parliamentary power and the reluctance of major parties to share executive power, minor parties and independents have mostly resigned themselves to a strategy of legislative brokerage and, in some cases, to seeking procedural change to facilitate greater roles for themselves in the parliament (Bowe 2009). Thirdly, in jurisdictions with upper houses (the Commonwealth and all states except Queensland), these institutions have probably made the most consistent contribution to diffusing opposition. In particular, Australian mainland upper houses, which are elected by PR, have provided opportunities for parties unrepresented in lower houses to have a parliamentary presence, often an influential presence due to their holding the balance of power in those chambers over recent decades. Together these three manifestations of power diffusion in Australian parliaments have made the Westminster image of opposition significantly less applicable to Australia, even if public commentary continues to focus quite strongly on the major opposition party and on the electoral contest at the next election rather than parliamentary tactics and alliances.

A second major factor from Dahl, **the extent of power sharing**, determines whether opposition is an alternative to, or a participant in, government. The more the opposition is involved in negotiating the content of legislation, the more it shares the function of governing rather than merely criticizing government policy and developing alternatives. In its classic Westminster conception, the opposition is viewed as an alternative executive; it shares with the governing party what Johnson (1997, 495) calls an 'executive outlook', or a primary interest in the attainment and exercise of executive power rather than in the limitation of power or its exercise by the government of the day. Consistent with this characteristic, classic Westminster opposition is also powerless; it seeks to replace the government at the next election but has no capacity to thwart it in the legislature. In this scenario, control over the legislative process is part of the spoils of executive office. The presence of an upper house at Westminster was always a potentially complicating factor. Hence, the idea of the government's legislative 'mandate' was developed to reconcile an upper house possessing a measure of legislative power with the notion of an opposition

3 Costar (2009) includes an account of relationships between the two parties over time in all Australian jurisdictions.

which is a 'government-in-waiting' but which does not seek to exercise power. But as the House of Lords has gained legitimacy, following recent reforms to reduce its hereditary element and introduce a fairer system of partisan representation, the varied forces of opposition in the Lords have sought to cast off the shackles of mandate theory and exert influence over the legislative process (Russell & Sciara 2007). Consequently, opposition in the UK has begun to lose some of its classic Westminster character.

In Australia, bicameralism has historically been stronger than at Westminster, due to its surer constitutional foundations. Moreover, its evolution has seen its strength grow, with democratization of state upper houses and electoral system changes in all mainland upper houses routinely placing opposition parties, singly or in combination, in a position to control the passage of legislation (Stone 2002). In this situation, opposition collectively is far from powerless and, given the democratic credentials of contemporary upper houses, executive government's claim to possess a mandate is not persuasive (Bach 2003, 276–99). Opposition parties with control of upper houses are thus necessarily participants in government since their decisions about government-sponsored legislation are vital to legislative outcomes. However, the main opposition party or bloc in Australia is not often in a position to negotiate the content of legislation with government, or defeat legislation, because government is typically able to broker more congenial outcomes with minor parties and independents in upper houses. In this situation, the main opposition party/ies has the option of opposing with no consequences for legislative outcomes. While this may appear negative or futile, such a role is important for highlighting, with regard to particular legislative measures, technical weaknesses, adverse consequences for particular interests in society, or widespread community anxiety. In all of these circumstances, there is a case for government to pause to reconsider the efficacy of its measure or to explain and justify its proposal more adequately – though, unless the major opposition parties can convince other upper house actors to support its stance, government is unlikely to be responsive. Thus there was a democratic rationale for the position articulated by Tony Abbott when he became Leader of the Opposition in 2009 that the role of the Opposition is, straightforwardly, to oppose. Such an approach also has the political advantage of harnessing disaffection with government to the opposition's cause. However, no Opposition simply opposes everything. Even the Abbott-led Liberal-National Opposition in the 2010–13 Commonwealth Parliament, which had a higher rate of negative voting than the Liberal-National Opposition in the previous parliament (2007–2010) or than Labor Oppositions during the Howard government, supported the great majority of bills. When it can find no fault with legislation or believes opposing would alienate important bodies of support inside and outside parliament, the Opposition sides with government. In 2010–2013 it did this in the Commonwealth Parliament for nearly 80 per cent of bills (PolitiFact Australia 2013).

Occasionally, the main opposition party can importantly affect legislative outcomes in Australia. For instance, the Coalition Opposition in the Senate effectively determined that there would be no price on carbon emissions in 2009–10 and the support of the Labor Opposition in the Western Australian Legislative Council was crucial in bringing about liberalization of shopping hours in Perth, an issue which had divided community opinion for a number of years, in the 2008–2013 parliament. It is on such occasions that Australia's departure from classic Westminster-style opposition is most apparent.

Thirdly, as Dahl emphasized, oppositions differ in their **goals**, or the nature and intensity of their disagreement with government. However, the literature on contemporary parties in mature democracies – emphasizing their ‘catch-all’, ‘electoral-professional’ and ‘cartel’ tendencies – suggests that government-opposition dynamics in such systems have tended in recent decades to be driven much less by differences in socio-economic principle and more by office seeking (e.g. Caul and Gray 2000). Government-opposition rivalry certainly continues to be an important means of bringing about policy change but opposition disagreement with government over policy in contemporary settings often concerns the administration of an existing policy or seeks to exploit a perceived opportunity to mobilize voters whose interests have been neglected or harmed by existing policy. These observations are truest of major opposition parties in parliaments dominated by two parties or party blocs. Smaller opposition parties in such systems or parties in multi-party parliaments are more likely to mobilize particular segments of the electorate on the basis of consistent, major disagreements with major parties based on ideology or particular group interests. Further, as Kaiser (2008) has argued, ideology or ‘policy position’ is important in facilitating or inhibiting co-operation among parties – in the formation of government, in opposition, and between government and particular elements of opposition – in the multiparty parliaments which are increasingly the norm in parliamentary democracies, including those with a Westminster heritage. For instance, Greens support for the minority federal Labor government in Australia between 2010 and 2013 was facilitated by the ideological affinity of the two parties. Thus, despite the marked decline in the intensity of disagreement between major opposition parties and government over goals in developed democracies, party goals remain significant for characterizing and explaining patterns of opposition and government-opposition relations.

There are several other factors not highlighted by Dahl which are arguably significant for characterizing and differentiating oppositions. One such, the fourth factor in the framework presented in this article, is the nature and extent of the **institutionalization** of opposition. Institutionalization involves formal recognition of opposition office holders, often including special arrangements for their placement in the parliament, additional salary and staff, and procedural entitlements in the parliament. This has been a gradual process, with variations in nature and rate of change between jurisdictions. In general, the process has begun with the recognition of a Leader of the Opposition (as early as the 1820s in the UK), followed, often with a substantial lag, by modest resources for the Leader, and subsequent expansions in the number of opposition party offices attracting special resources and in the quantum of resources. Regarding procedure, the Leader is accorded preference in asking questions in parliament, calling for censure, urgency or like debates, and in other ways which vary between legislatures. For instance, in some parliaments the Leader of the Opposition chooses the chair of the important Public Accounts Committee, as in India, or at least the chair is conventionally a senior member of the opposition, as in the United Kingdom, whereas in Australia that position is controlled by the governing party. Institutionalization extends beyond the parliament and includes such things as confidential briefings for the opposition on developments in foreign affairs and on prominent domestic issues such as national disasters. Where it has progressed furthest, institutionalization strongly accentuates the character of opposition as an alternative government. Since around 1970, a major development has been the emergence of a shadow cabinet or ministry, a

set of spokespersons each with responsibility to criticize government and develop policy alternatives in a designated subject area. In late 2013, for instance, the Western Australian Barnett Liberal-National coalition government comprising 25 ministers and parliamentary secretaries was shadowed by the Labor alternative of 32 shadow ministers and parliamentary secretaries. At the federal level of Australian government, the Labor opposition had 46 shadow ministers and parliamentary secretaries arrayed against the Abbott Coalition government of 42 individuals (30 ministers and 12 parliamentary secretaries). Commencing in 2012, the federal shadow ministry was further institutionalized through its receipt of additional remuneration (25 per cent of the base salary of a member of parliament). This is a development which can be expected to spread to other parliaments around Australia.

Like ministries, Australian shadow ministries have typically expanded at a greater rate than the size of the parliament. When a shadow ministry first appeared in Western Australia in 1974, ministers and shadow ministers together comprised around 27 per cent of the parliament; by late 2013 that proportion had more than doubled to 60 per cent. Even in the much larger federal parliament the proportion in late 2013 was around 40 per cent. This means that a substantial and growing portion of parliament's membership is absorbed in the contest between alternative executives, reinforcing the well-established executive orientation of modern Australian parliaments, a characteristic they share to a greater or lesser extent with their counterparts elsewhere. Relatedly, the development further weakens the already tenuous distinctions in Australia between government and governing party and opposition party and opposition front bench – distinctions which remain very much alive in large parliaments such as Westminster.

There are two other noteworthy consequences of the rise of the shadow ministry. First, just as an expanding parliamentary executive, and a governing parliamentary party the members of which all see themselves as part of the government, assist the head of government to maintain authority and discipline in his/her party, the burgeoning alternative executive gives the Leader of the Opposition some modest patronage power (to the extent that the leader determines shadow positions), which is strengthened where shadow positions attract remuneration. Secondly, an array of opposition spokespersons for particular areas of governmental activity probably facilitates the development of an extra-parliamentary dimension to the contest between government and opposition. Australian parliaments typically sit for no more than 60 or 70 days across 20 odd weeks of the year, but the Opposition front bench is permanently available to participate in public debate, the leader and shadow ministers being called upon by, or calling, the media to provide a response to every significant policy decision taken by the government. The degree of institutionalization would seem to be related to the level of concentration of opposition in the legislature; where opposition is highly concentrated, there is a high degree of predictability about the partisan composition of government over time and this arguably leads to what Reid and Forrest (1989, 51) describe as a 'community of interest in formalizing mutually convenient arrangements' among the small number of parties with the prospect of executive office. In Westminster-derived parliaments, institutionalization typically began before mass parties but it was the development of disciplined political parties which did most to give institutional substance to the notion of the opposition. Where concentration produced by party discipline was combined with

concentration of partisanship to produce two-sided competition for power in the parliament, institutionalization of opposition was able to develop to its fullest extent. The lower houses of Australian parliaments have typically provided such conditions.

A fifth key factor distinguishing oppositions is **size**. The number of parliamentary representatives of the opposition relative to those of the governing party, is likely to affect the authority it brings to its parliamentary roles. A large opposition, one that is similar in size to the governing party/ies, should be a strong opposition, with a sense of its moral authority to challenge government forcefully and, given the closeness of the contest for power, a strong incentive to do so. On the other hand, a small opposition, especially if this is a long term characteristic of a political system, weakens the government's sense that it is under challenge and that it needs, as a result, to remain responsive to public concerns expressed by the parliamentary opposition. These propositions would seem to apply whether opposition is concentrated or dispersed.⁴ In Australia, where opposition, especially in lower houses, tends to be relatively concentrated, a large opposition heightens the sense of two-sided competition for executive and legislative power. An opposition's ability to project itself as a government-in-waiting will be stronger the more credible the electoral threat it poses to the governing party and this will tend to be related to its parliamentary strength. In Westminster-derived systems of parliamentary government, where power is typically concentrated in the leadership of a majority party in the legislature, a persistently small opposition represents the removal of one of the few institutional checks on government. The tendency to overbearing government in such circumstances is exacerbated where opposition parties do not have the potential to check government through a second chamber. The contrasting scenarios just outlined are exemplified in Australia by the experiences of Queensland and Western Australia. Western Australia has been a jurisdiction of large oppositions. The mean and median shares of lower house seats controlled by the opposition since World War II (from the 1947 election to the 2013 election) are 42.8 per cent and 43.1 per cent. On only four occasions in 21 elections did the opposition fall below 40 per cent of the seats (leaving it more than about six seats short of a majority), and it fell below 36 per cent (more than about eight seats short) only twice. These statistics demonstrate the prominence and stability of opposition as a feature of Western Australia's political system. Such opposition poses a real (electoral) threat to government, making it more likely that government will see the need to justify the actions it takes. In comparison, Queensland opposition has been much smaller and weaker, with mean and median opposition shares of the single chamber parliament at 31.7 per cent and 32.1 per cent. In 24 elections from 1947 to 2012, the opposition share of the seats fell below 40 per cent (more than 7 to 9 seats short of a majority) on 21 occasions and below 36 per cent (more than 10–13 seats short) on 16 occasions. Government would seem to be more able to safely ignore these small Queensland oppositions, with potential consequences for the probity and openness of public administration. Weak opposition in Queensland is compounded by the absence of a second

4 None of the above contradicts Kaiser's (2008, 35) proposition that 'the policy influence of [particular] opposition parties does not necessarily depend on their strength in terms of seats but more on a combination of institutional opportunities and policy positions relative to other parties.'

parliamentary chamber, through which opposition actors have exerted significant influence on government in all other Australian states and at the Commonwealth level.

A sixth and, in the current framework, final important characteristic of opposition as a component of a political system is the regularity with which – and, in multiparty systems, the extent to which – it replaces the government. The systemic benefits of opposition are arguably most fully realized when **alternation**, or replacement of executive personnel by members of the opposition, occurs with some regularity, since a credible threat of removal from office is a powerful incentive for sustained governmental attention to the public interest. Regular replacement of governments is not a guarantee of probity in government, as illustrated by well-chronicled maladministration in Western Australia in the 1980s (see Stone 1997). However, long periods of incumbency plausibly raise the risk of extensive maladministration or corruption. Thus the unbroken participation in government of the Christian Democrats in Italy between 1946 and 1994 or, within Australia, the National Party in Queensland between 1957 and 1989 was strongly associated with extensive governmental impropriety. A more recent example is the scandal-ridden last years of New South Wales (NSW) Labor's 16 years in office ending in 2011.

Two-sided competition for government in Australian jurisdictions for most of the time since around 1910, when the modern party system became established in Australia's parliaments, has produced alternation in office but with differences in frequency between jurisdictions (Moon and Sharman 2003, 250–53). In the period since 1910, numbers of alternations vary from a low of eight in Queensland to a high of 18 in Victoria, with four jurisdictions (WA, NSW, SA, Commonwealth) lying no more than two alternations from the mean (13). Alternations have tended to become more frequent on average, and hence average periods of incumbency have tended to decline, in the past half century or so. But differences between jurisdictions have persisted. Queensland has had only five alternations since WWII and one of these came after only two and a third years of non-Labor government between 1996 and 1998. Between 1989 and 2012 the Labor Party was in government for all but this brief period; following a National Party–Liberal Party coalition and National Party government from 1957 to 1989. New South Wales has also had five alternations, with a long period of Labor government from 1978, interrupted only by seven years of Coalition government between 1988 and 1995. At the other end of the spectrum, Western Australia has had nine alternations since WWII. Periods of incumbency in that State have been two to three electoral cycles, except for the one-term Tonkin Labor government of the early 1970s and the four-term Brand-Court Coalition government between 1959 and 1971. Such a pattern of alternation seems close to ideal, encouraging opposition to strive and government to avoid complacency, allowing major opposition parties to renew their personnel while also retaining some individuals with experience of government, and providing reasonable continuity in government while helping to prevent networks of influence between particular ministers and external interests from becoming entrenched.

CONCLUSION

The article presents a framework for comparing institutional opposition in parliamentary democracies. It began with a review Dahl's pioneering contribution, identifying the main causal factors in his analysis, concentration and competition, and tracing their relationships with his other characteristics. Dahl's key factors, incorporated into a six-factor framework developed in the article, were shown to be useful in distinguishing opposition in Australia. In a number of Australian jurisdictions, opposition is both more dispersed and more involved in power sharing, in particular through the exercise of power in the legislature, than is countenanced by the Westminster conception of opposition, which remains the dominant interpretive frame in Australia. In turn, these characteristics are associated with opposition actors' interest in strategies of legislative brokerage and with the legislature as a significant site for the encounter between opposition and government. However, all of these features of opposition in Australia are primarily, if not exclusively, a product of Australia's strong upper houses, with lower house government-opposition dynamics conforming more closely to the Westminster conception. Because lower houses are where governments are formed, they tend to dominate interpretation of Australian politics, with the distinctive and important politics of upper houses tending to be overshadowed. The third factor in the framework, goals or the intensity of disagreement with government, is also drawn from Dahl. It is suggested that it is now much less important, at least among first world democracies, for differentiating major parties of government and opposition in parliaments dominated by a small number of parties than it was in the mid-20th century. But it remains important as an influence on parliamentary relationships between opposition parties and between particular opposition parties and governing parties. The fourth factor, institutionalization, is probably an indicator of the influence of executive perspectives, and of the degree of common interest among large parties, in legislatures. While procedural privileges for the leadership of the main opposition party may assist in making the opposition more effective in the legislature, institutionalization seems at least as much about giving the opposition the capacity to project itself in the community as the alternative government. It was hypothesized that institutionalization is related to concentration and alternation – with a cartel of dominant parties making provision for their sabbaticals in opposition – but it was also suggested that there may be important differences in the nature and level of institutionalization between systems which are similar in these other respects.

The final two factors, size and alternation, are measures of the systemic impact of opposition. One of the major justifications of opposition is that it enhances the accountability of government. Large oppositions and oppositions which displace, or substantially displace, governments fairly regularly are arguably more conducive, other things being equal, to governmental accountability. Together, it is argued, these six factors identify key differences among oppositions which have major effects on the political systems of which they are part.

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