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## The Belgian Parliamentary Regime 1830-2014

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2019

*Document Version:*  
Other version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Davidsson, S. (2019). *The Belgian Parliamentary Regime 1830-2014*. (pp. 1-37). (STANCE Working Paper Series; Vol. 2019, No. 10). Department of Political Science, Lund University.

*Total number of authors:*

1

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State-Making and the Origins of Global Order  
in the Long Nineteenth Century and Beyond

The Belgian Parliamentary Regime 1830-2014

Simon Davidsson

Working Paper Series, 2019:10  
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# The Belgian Parliamentary Regime 1830-2014\*

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\* This working paper is an illustration from a larger project aiming at identifying the long-run trajectories toward parliamentarism in different European countries and explaining the differences in these trajectories. Please e-mail [simon.davidsson@svet.lu.se](mailto:simon.davidsson@svet.lu.se) for any thoughts, comments, or suggestions.

## Abstract

Parliamentarism is an important political institution that determines how executive power is controlled, and a key part of many representative democracies. In this paper, I explicitly define parliamentarism as a system where the government is dependent on the tolerance of the parliament for its survival, but not on the tolerance of any body other than parliament. I argue that these are the necessary and sufficient conditions to consider a regime parliamentary. This definition opens up for an investigation of parliamentary systems in time and space, and I test its usefulness on the case of Belgium 1830-2014. I show that the Belgian parliamentary regime has been characterized by breaks, where the monarch has neutralized the parliamentary principle and at some points in time undermined the relationship between parliament and government. In contrast to prior politico-historical comparative research, I further show that, although parliamentarism was inscribed in the Belgian constitution in 1831, the current uninterrupted Belgian parliamentary regime does not go further back in time than the 1950s. The investigation shows that my definition yields new insights and a viable empirical strategy. I include a suggestion for why Belgian parliamentarism only existed for short periods before the second World War, and why Belgium is now experiencing its longest parliamentary spell.

## I. Introduction

This paper develops a definition of parliamentarianism that is attuned to a historical struggle that many West European countries have gone through as part of what in hindsight can be called their paths to democracy, but a struggle that was important in its own right. I start by discussing my conceptualization of parliamentarianism as a form of regime where the cabinet is responsible to parliament *only*. Using my conceptualization, I trace the changes in parliamentarianism in Belgium from 1830 until 2014, based on both contemporary and older mainly historical literature. The empirical exercise serves two purposes simultaneously. The main aim is to show how parliamentarianism has developed over time in the case of Belgium. The empirical analysis also shows how to understand interactions between parliament, government, and other actors, an understanding that guide my coding of specific events that pertain to the core feature of parliamentarianism. I end with some thoughts on explanations for the development.

## II. Parliamentary Rule and Comparative Historical Research

Parliamentarianism is a way to structure the relationship between legislature, government, and the citizenry, and it determines how executive power is to be distributed, and where the ability to revoke this power rests. The struggle over parliamentarianism as it played out in many West European countries thus determined who was to have a final say over the fate of governments (besides the governments themselves). Generally put, was it to be parliament, or the head of state, or both? This question was posed in the form of a tug-of-war between different actors in different West European countries. The tug-of-war would often last for decades and sometimes for over a century. When the lasting outcome has shown to be that parliament gained a monopoly over this final say over the fate of governments, the outcome is called parliamentarianism. The empirical exploration here concerns the tug-of-war over parliamentarianism in Belgium since the inception of the modern Belgian state in 1830-1831.



The core of parliamentarianism as a regime is that the government is responsible to parliament only. This means that the only body whose confidence or tolerance a government is in need of (possibly besides the cabinet itself) is the national parliament. The very *sine qua non* of a parliamentary regime is that the parliament determines the survival of a government, and that it may terminate a government for any reason, political, juridical, or what not (cf. Waldron 2016). This also subsumes government formation under government termination, since a government that would be terminated immediately would be very unlikely to form (I empirically suggest that this holds in the Belgian case). The only precondition that must be met for this definition to be meaningful is the existence of a parliament, possibly with territorial sovereignty. If there is no parliament, there is simply no scope for exploring the relationship between parliament, government, and other actors.<sup>1</sup>

A minimal definition of parliamentarianism like the one above is common in the comparative literature on political regimes (e.g. Cheibub et al 1996, Cheibub 2007, Gerring et al 2009, Lijphart 1992, Lijphart 2008, Lijphart 2012, Shugart and Carey 1992, Shugart 1999, Stepan and Skach 1993). It is also common in the comparative literature on parliamentary democracy, which focuses democratic parliamentary regimes in the post-WWII period (e.g. Bergman and Strom 2013, Döring 1995, Laver and Shepsle 1996, Przeworski et al 2000, Strom et al 2003). In this literature, scholars discuss several aspects of parliamentary regimes quite broadly. This includes, once again, legislative capacity, the room of maneuver of individual members of parliaments and monitoring devices, as well as rules for forming governments or dissolving parliament, and constraints put on parliamentary governments by institutions such as the judiciary and the European Union. Actual practices and interactions become the object of study to assess the workings of parliamentarianism. However, it should be noted that all these attributes of parliaments become relevant to understand a parliamentary regime only once it meets the defining criteria of such a regime, namely that the government is responsible to parliament.

Turning to the historically minded literature (von Beyme 2000, Kreuzer 2003, Stjernquist 1996, Verney 1992/1959), the

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason, any government changes during the exile years will be discounted in this paper.

conceptualization of parliamentarianism tend to be thick one. Parliamentary development is often discussed in broader terms, which include legislative capacity, forms for and possibilities of monitoring parliament (e.g. a vote of no confidence procedure and parliamentary questions), and the role of political parties. It also includes criteria that are missing in some countries that are nonetheless considered parliamentary (e.g. the dissolution institute), or that confuse parliamentarianism with some form parliamentary democracy (e.g. the notion that ministers should be elected politicians and not appointed technocrats or that the electorate only has an indirect say in government formation). It is then taken to include not only what parliamentarianism is, but also what makes it function well (e.g. opposition parties who are loyal to the system) and what its historical roots in a specific country are. The British development often provides an ideal type against which other cases are normatively assessed, a point of reference that risks biasing conclusions (cf. Kreuzer 2003). Two exceptions who apply a comparative-historical perspective without using Great Britain as template are Bartolini (2000) and Przeworski et al (2012), which I come back to below.

My definition resembles the current definitions in the comparative regimes and parliamentary democracy literatures, in that it is minimal and focuses on the requisite that the government may be terminated by the parliament if the parliament no longer tolerates it. The seemingly anodyne addition of the word *only* in my definition is important, however, since if government is to be tolerated by some other body also, parliament is no longer the supreme principal, and the relationship of accountability between cabinet and parliament may be undermined. A body other than parliament may either terminate the government although parliament has not manifested a lack of confidence in it, or prevent parliament from terminating it. Both of these events have happened in the case of Belgium, where the other body historically is the Belgian monarch.

I thus argue that government responsibility to parliament only, what I call parliamentary responsibility or parliamentary rule, is a necessary and sufficient condition for parliamentarianism. Only when this relation of parliamentary rule is enacted in practice, is it of importance to explore how the relationship is sustained or characterized by different forms of monitoring devices such as

parliamentary questions and committees of inquiry. Moreover, responsibility is more important than legislative capacity of parliaments, since parliamentary responsibility allows parliaments to indirectly control legislation, while legislative capacity without parliamentary rule would risk to undermine the policy-making authority of parliaments. My definition opens up for the study of a historical tug-of-war of sorts, where parliament is not the sole principal of the cabinet. It thus allows me to trace the development of the very requisite of parliamentarianism. Of course, although the definition is tuned to historical processes, it can also serve to classify regimes of today.

Previous research on Belgian parliamentarianism dates the start of its parliamentary regime either to 1831 when parliamentary responsibility was adopted in the new constitution.<sup>2</sup> (von Beyme 2000, cf. von Beyme 1989, Bartolini 2000, Scarrow 2006, Ziblatt 2017) or to the first time when the Belgian monarch accepts the formation of a government that should be against his own interest (Przeworski et al 2012). This happened in 1847, when the electoral results forced king Leopold I to turn to a purely liberal party government. Since Bartolini and Przeworski and his co-authors both take rather minimal definitions and apply them in a comparative-historical manner, I discuss them here to position myself. If the discussion is concerned with dating the adoption of parliamentary responsibility in Belgium, this is not because dating its adoption is my prime interest, but because it provides a good way of contrasting approaches.

Bartolini (2000) focuses on resistance against parliamentary rule as a way for elites to block the working class from getting increased influence. Drawing on secondary sources, he discusses the development in West European countries and classify Belgium as an uncontroversial case. It is stated that responsibility to parliament in Belgium was adopted in 1831, and that the monarch and the unelected upper chamber never challenged the sovereignty of parliament. I argue below that this is plain wrong.

Przeworski et al (2012) approach parliamentary rule from the side of constitutions, discussing parliamentarianism in all countries in the

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<sup>2</sup> It is of importance to note that the Belgian constitution of 1831 allowed for government responsibility to parliament *and* monarch. As in many other countries, the relationship of responsibility was left open in the sense that the government should enjoy the confidence or tolerance of parliament, but it was up to the monarch to determine if this was case. For this reason, the term *responsible government* should not be used to designate parliamentarianism.

world who are or where monarchies at some point the last 200 years. That is, their discussion revolves around their point that constitutions in general provide poor empirical material for assessing when a country really adopts a parliamentary regime. Since the written constitution provides too little information about parliamentary practice, they turn to a discussion of unwritten norms. They argue that parliamentarianism can be said to be adopted when the monarch loses elections (in the sense that the pro-royal party loses elections) and accepts a government in tune with the composition of parliament, but against his own interest. They thus introduce the alternation rule of (Przeworski et al 2000), i.e. that an alternation in power against the immediate interest or wishes of the losing power-holder must be observed in order to determine the nature of a regime. As they themselves recognize, this rule does not guarantee that the norm of parliamentary rule is observable. This is because the emphasis on observables clash with the fact that an alternation at one point does not guarantee an alternation at another hypothetical point (cf. Svobik 2012, 24), and because the successful adoption of a norm can only be observed if it is unsuccessfully challenged. Also drawing on secondary sources, they still date the adoption of parliamentary rule in Belgium to 1847, as mentioned above.

Finally, the Belgian historical and political literature seems not to have had an analytical approach to the question of parliamentary rule in its own right. Indeed, the oft-d work by Gilissen (1958), who conclude that Belgian parliamentarianism has functioned normally since 1833, when Leopold I intervened and dissolved the chambers to get out of a parliamentary deadlock, may still be accepted as common knowledge.

### III. Methodology

I choose not to approach the history of parliamentarianism from the perspective of constitutions and norms, mainly for the same reasons that made Przeworski and his co-authors so pessimistic about this strategy. If a norm exists but is never challenged, we will hardly know that it exists. If it exists and is challenged successfully, we will not know if it existed but was too weak or if it did not exist at all. And in

all cases it will be difficult to make inference about one point in time to another. Instead, I approach the subject in a way similar to that of researchers on post-WWII parliamentary democracy, namely by studying behavior and interaction between parliament, government and other bodies that my definition of parliamentarianism suggest are important. This makes it possible to depict the development of Belgium into a parliamentary regime by studying how successful and unsuccessful government terminations by the parliament or other bodies play out over time.

I thus trace the trajectory of parliamentarianism in Belgium by looking at four possible types of events, events that quite importantly all have occurred at some point in Belgian parliamentary history. I explain below how I make use of these four categories. They are the following:

- Parliament successfully terminates the government.
- A body other than parliament attempts to terminate the government but this is frustrated.
- Parliament attempts to terminate the government but this is frustrated by a body other than parliament.
- A body other than parliament successfully terminates the government.

To be specific, it is the last two categories that contradict parliamentarianism.

In order to pan for these events I use secondary literature, and I follow recent recommendations in the methodological literature on how to use such literature (Lustick 1996, Møller 2016, Møller and Skaaning 2018, Thies 2002). In particular, I prefer recent historical works, prefer works of historians to works of other social scientists, use multiple authors, pay attention to how relevant concepts in the literature are compatible with mine, approach the secondary sources as data points without assuming that they are independent of each other, and try to develop a good knowledge of the case at hand. At some points, I break the rules, however. For instance, some older literature (e.g. Boulger 1909, Boulger 1925) is more concerned with recounting the fates of individual kings and ministers, which is thankful from my perspective. Furthermore, the best account of Belgian parliamentarianism in the Interwar period is provided by a

social scientist in (Höjer 1946). Finally, for the post-war period, I rely heavily on the political scientists (Dumont 2001).

The main sources that I use are the following Bartelous (1983), Boulger (1909), Boulger (1925), Dumont et al (2001), Dumoulin (2006), Gerard (2006), Höjer (1946), Stengers (1992), Van den Wijngaert and Dujardin (2006), Witte et al (2009) as well as the Belgian La Biographie Nationale and the website [www.unionisme.be](http://www.unionisme.be). Other sources include Barthelemy (1912), Cook (2002), Delwit (2009), Dumont (2005), Gilissen (1958), Kossmann (1978) and Mabilie (1986), which do not discuss the interplay within government, parliament and other bodies to any great extent.

A main challenge is that governments are not always counted in the same way in the different sources. This makes it hard to determine whether a specific instance should be judged as a termination or not. For example, in some recounts the pre-WWII Spaak government fell in February 1939, while it fell in April in others. The February-April period is then counted as without government, or with a transitional Spaak government headed by Pierlot. This is important, since according to some sources, king Leopold III dissolved the chamber in March or April against the will of the government (and without there being any suggestion that parliament had had the chance to say if it tolerated it or not), which was trying to reconstitute itself after having formally fallen in February when its liberal party ministers abandoned it. This is my interpretation of this sequence of events, and it thus an instance where a body other than parliament successfully terminates the government. The fact that there is reason to believe that the government was moribund does not change this. In order to deal with difficult cases as the one above, I use my definition of parliamentarianism and the four categories enumerated above in combination with (Riker 1957), who stresses the importance of partitioning sequences of events into as carefully delineated constituent parts as possible. This approach is useful, not least because it helps determining where the impulse to terminate a government comes from. In many cases, the government falls apart or resigns from reasons that does not contradict parliamentarianism (the ministers disagree, say). If the monarch steps in and encourages the government to remain in office, it does not contradict parliamentary rule.

## IV. Parliamentary Development in Belgium

In this section, I first introduce the Belgian case. I will refer to this brief introduction when discussing possible explanations for the development that I describe. I then discuss how I understand *bodies than parliament*, different ways of counting governments, and the power of dissolution. This is followed by a discussion of instances of events according with and contradicting the parliamentary principle that government is to be responsible to parliament only, which serves both to theorize the logic of parliamentarianism and make my coding transparent. I then present graphs that visualize the development, and discuss what these graphs convey. The crucial point here is that even though an event either contradicts or does not contradict parliamentary rule, over time there can be more or less of any given type of event.

### Introductory Remarks

In 1831, following a secession from the absolutist Netherlands, Belgium was declared an independent parliamentary, constitutional monarchy. The constitution was first drafted by a constituent assembly, after which the offer of the crown went to Leopold of Saxe-Coburg<sup>3</sup>, who allegedly complained that the constitution left the monarch with very little to do. It is noteworthy that the new parliamentary regime was the affair of an elite within an elite. The bourgeoisie, the landed gentry, and the clergy sought to steer clear both of absolute monarchy and of popular democracy. The lower middle class and even wealthy capitalists were to a large extent kept out of the constitution-making process. This position of the lower middle class would also be reflected in the actual constitution, in that voting rights was reserved for one percent of the population. Consequently, revolutionary republicans and the lower middle class ended up feeling betrayed by the rest of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the clergy got to maintain control over religious matters and charity and education was kept from the state. Much because of Belgium's uncertain international position in the following one or two decades, members of parliament did not form

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<sup>3</sup> A first offer to the French duke of Nemours was turned down at an early stage, and at a later point seemingly judged unwise for international reasons. Proponents of a Republic were kept marginalized throughout the process.

delineated groups with obvious leaders and parties with clear programs did not exist before 1845. Instead, most members joined under the flag of unionism against the external threat of The Netherlands. In the absence of parties, the doings, speakings, judgements and workings of individual parliamentarians or unofficial, temporary group leaders characterized parliament. The main system-opposing group, the counter-revolutionary Orangeists who wanted Belgium to reunite with The Netherlands under absolutist rule, consistently kept out of both chambers (Witte et al 2009, 25-36). Finally, the absence of modern parties makes it impossible to use party proportions in parliament to assess what color the government should be of without confusing parliamentary rule with party discipline. Up until the Interwar period, there are many instances of party members voting against their own governments even on votes of confidence, or governments resigning not because they lost the majority, but because their majority becomes too small given the lack of party discipline.

### Bodies Other Than Parliament

I should say something about what bodies other than parliament are. In principle, they could be anything. What matters is that they send a signal to the government that triggers a response. However, bodies or actors other than parliament that will appear in European history are ones that may have some kind of institutionally regulated relationship to both legislature and government, such as the head of state, the judiciary, foreign powers, and perhaps political parties. I will not deem, say, the financial market or the media to have sent signals that make me label them other actors. Granted, a government may very well resign because of adverse reactions from the financial market, for instance. But in such a case, I understand the reaction of the financial market as an external shock (cf. Laver & Shepsle 1998), and hold that the government resigned for internal reasons.

In the Belgian case, other bodies refer to the monarch. I still keep this more general wording since, in theory, other bodies could be for example the judiciary, a foreign power, or a party. I try to make my line of reasoning clearer here. There are instances where governments resign due to disagreements over foreign policy. In particular, such disagreements may arise between the king and the cabinet due to the reactions of foreign powers. But then, it is the king, and not the foreign powers that may bring the government down.



Similarly, in the Interwar period, governments resign due to adverse reactions by the financial market when trying to deal with the economic crises (e.g. Pouillet-Vanderveelde in 1926, Theunis in 1935). Saying that the financial market brought the government down (by manifesting its lack of confidence in it) would be stretching it too far. Instead, I estimate that the government resign for internal reasons. There are also instances where the government resigns when the prime minister becomes the object of legal investigation (van Zeeland in 1937, Leterme in 2008), but a possible signal that the government should resign in both cases run through parliament, who opens its own investigations, while the prime minister simultaneously interprets his situation as untenable, although he has not (yet) been asked to step down by anyone.

One other political actor remains. Throughout large parts of Belgian history (at least well into the 1950s), Belgian political parties seem to lack clear leaders, at least in the sense that the party leader is also the natural prime minister candidate, and different prominent figures are potential heads of government. What if the prime minister is revoked by the party he (the Belgian prime minister just like the monarch is always as he) belongs to, or a coalition party revokes its ministers, without going through parliament, thus not letting parliament manifest its confidence in the government. Would this contradict parliamentarianism, even in cases when it could be inferred that parliament as a body would have lost confidence in the government? As it happens, due to lack of formal party leaders who are also the sole prime minister candidates, party disagreements often bring governments down. However, there are rarely indications that these governments were not terminated by ministers resigning according to their own will or (fractions of) parties voting them down in parliament. The exceptions are in 1950 and 1952, when the Conservative prime ministers Duvieusart and Pholien seem to have been judged ill-suited by the party leader (Delwit 2009, Stengers 1992). For now, these instances are coded as parliamentary (and one may take them as resignations for reasons internal to the government), but I underline that this interpretation is up for discussion.

## Government Count and Resignations

I see two main ways of counting governments. One way counts a new government each time the prime minister changes. It is the one that

I will focus on. I do so because it is the approach that travels the furthest back in time and as opposed to counting all ministers it rests the most manageable in terms of data points. Another way counts new governments also with each new election and when the composition of the parties in government changes. This way of counting government is used in Müller and Strom (2000), Rasch et al (2015), and Ström et al (2003) and discussed in Damgaard (1994). It always gives more data points (an additional 60 in the Dutch case), but not necessarily meaningful ones. To regard elections artificially makes a country appear more parliamentary than it might have been. If the incumbent government did not lose elections, and it did not leave office for a reason that contradicts parliamentarianism, this would make the country look more parliamentary than it really is. Some examples from different countries makes the point. Germany under Bismarck and in the Weimar presidential era (from 1930 until parliament lost its independence) are illustrations of this. Furthermore, since the Second World War, especially Belgian and Dutch governments resign when a coalition breaks down and, in the Netherlands, new elections are automatically called (sometimes under a caretaker ministry headed by a new prime minister). Coalitions break down relatively often in these two countries. Thus, this way to count governments would then 1) make countries with more elections and more coalition breakdowns or elections look more parliamentary in a way that may confuse parliamentarianism with electoral habits and party system and 2) does not travel well back in time, before parties that can form recognizable coalitions exist.

I thus focus on head of governments to count governments, and focus on head of government resignations or terminations. Granted, it is not always clear who the head of government is, but this has not been a real problem. Sources rarely, if ever, disagree on who the cabinet leader was. In some cases, there are two leading ministers (like de Theux and Malou), and it is easy to count both. When it comes to resignations, I mainly count those that lead to a new de facto prime minister/government. The exception is when the prime minister resigns, followed by formation attempts that fail, and the former prime minister finally returns. An example is when the Belgian Lebeau-Rogier government was defeated by parliament in 1833 and resigned, but no other government could be formed, and king Leopold I ended up calling the government back (only to terminate it himself the year after).

## A Note on the Power of Dissolution

Before turning to a more substantial discussion of my coding rules, I must say something about the power to dissolve parliament. This is in some sense the equivalent of a vote of no confidence, in the sense that with a vote of no confidence, parliament disbands the government, while by dissolving parliament (sometimes following a vote of confidence), the government disbands parliament. The motivation for this institution is that it allows the government to see if it is parliament or the government that is in agreement with the electorate (von Sydow 1997). My view on the dissolution power is the following. While it does not exist in all parliamentary regimes (e.g. Norway), I do not deem that its mere usage contradicts parliamentary rule. Specifically, if the dissolution is suggested by or initiated by the government, it does not contradict parliamentarianism. It does contradict parliamentarianism if the irresponsible part of the executive, i.e. the monarch, initiates it according to his own will. Of course, all this only holds if the dissolution power exists at all. Furthermore, if the dissolution follows from the constitution, as after a constitutional revision, this does not contradict parliamentarianism neither.

In the 1830-1831 constitution, the power of dissolution was assigned to the king, who could use it according to his own head. He did not always use it in accordance with his own head of government, however. Actually, the dissolution power is at times a main source of political dispute, as when Rogier refuses to form a government against he is guaranteed the right to dissolve parliament as he sees wise. Leopold I first refuses, and later, after some failed governments, accepts this (Boulger 1909, 298). The same thing happened in 1864, when Rogier required the right to dissolve parliament by the king (Stengers 1992, 82). These are historical exceptions, however. In practice, it seems that the dissolution power rests with the head of government with certainty no earlier than the 1960s (Stengers 1992, 86-89).

## Parliamentary Events

Here, I discuss the assignment of different events to one of the four categories above. Starting with instances where the *parliament successfully terminates* the government, this is seemingly straightforward. Either the cabinet is defeated on a matter of

confidence (what is a matter of confidence is determined by the cabinet) or the composition of parliament changes (often after elections) in such a way as to signal to the government that it should step down. Note that if a government steps down because of elections, and the king returns a similar government, as when Van de Weyer succeeds Nothomb<sup>4</sup> in 1846, but parliament accepts this, it remains parliamentary. Coincidentally, the Van de Weyer government fell apart due to internal disagreements and liberals refused to cooperate with the succeeding de Theux cabinet, instead expecting to take over after the 1847 elections, which returned a liberal majority so large that Leopold I had to turn to the liberal leaders who had campaigned on a liberal party program. This is the event that marks the adoption of parliamentary rule in (Przeworski et al 2012).

Secondly, there are a few instances when a body other than parliament attempts to terminate the government but this is frustrated according to the principle of parliamentary rule. These instances are arguably crucial, if we are to infer from them that a norm was unsuccessfully challenged. The first clear instance is in 1940, in the face of the second World War, when Leopold III finally asks Pierlot to resign. The Pierlot government refuses, denounces the king, and exiles itself while Leopold stays in Belgium (Delwit 2009, Stengers 1992). This is a decisive break in Belgian modern history that would have repercussions throughout the 1940s. The other instance is in 1960, when Badouin asks Eyskens to resign but he refuses. Instead, Eyskens asks Badouin to use his constitutional prerogative and formally revoke him, which Badouin does not dare to do (Stengers 1992, 71). The Eyskens government resigns one year later, after having been defeated in elections.

Thirdly, when it comes to instances where *parliament attempts to terminate the government but this is frustrated by a body other than parliament*, these demand quite a lot from the actors. Not only must parliament want to terminate a government and the monarch want to keep it, but the former must deem it viable to try and the latter must deem it viable to resist. This requires rather strong differences in opinion. Two instances illustrate the logic. In 1833, parliament was tired of the Goblet cabinet (Bartelous 1983) and voted down. The

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<sup>4</sup> There are signs of hard liberal resistance to the Nothomb government in the 1841-1845 period (Gilissen 1958) but no signs of outright attempts to oust it.

prime minister wishes to resign, but no other government can be formed. The cabinet is maintained but voted down again. The king thus dissolves parliament (after which the Belgian parliamentary regime has functioned normally according to Gilissen (1958, 114, 144), seemingly on the advice of one of the cabinet members. I have coded this as parliamentary, since the government did step down before returning. In 1924, however, parliament defeats the Theunis cabinet on a matter of confidence and it resigns. Albert I refuses to accept the resignation or to dissolve the chambers. Instead, a similar cabinet headed by Theunis is returned with the same program as before (Höjer 1946, 138-142). This the only clear instance of a failed parliamentary termination. That the subsequent Theunis government got the confidence of parliament in its investiture vote changes nothing. It only shows that the king won the fight. To be clear, the difference is that in 1833, the government stepped down and the formation of another government was tried, while in 1924, the government persisted.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, note that if the government promises to resign after elections but does not, this is not a failed parliamentary termination unless there is a sign of parliament actually trying to terminate the government (this happened with de Brouckère in 1854-1855, he subsequently resigned on an adverse vote). The same goes for the multiple resignations for cabinet-internal reasons (disagreements within or between governing parties), even when the government pretexts some minor adverse vote where the matter of confidence was not at hand, and where the king intervenes and persuades the government to persist. These are not instances where parliament tries to oust the government and the king blocks the attempt.

Lastly, instances when *a body other than parliament successfully terminates the government* are multiple, and they occur long after the 1831-1847 period suggested by (Przeworski et al 2012). While the first four Belgian cabinet resignations (all in 1831) are motivated by constitutional or personal reasons (poor health), the literature quite consistently suggests a couple of government terminations that contradict the parliamentary logic right after that. In 1832, de Muelenaere resigned due to a conflict of policy with the king, and in

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<sup>5</sup> The only clear source for this is Gilissen (1958), but it is not contradicted anywhere, so I see no reason not to take it seriously.

1834, the Lebeau-Rogier government does the same, pretexting some minor matter (Boulger 1909, Bartelous 1983, Witte et al 2009). The same thing happened in 1841, when the king refuted the demand of the Lebeau government that the Senate be dissolved (Bartelous 1983, Stengers 1992). In 1871 and 1884, Leopold II asked the respective Conservative chief of cabinets to let go of some of their ministers. In both cases, the prime ministers refused and the governments resigned collectively (Mabille 1986, Bartelous 1983). Interestingly, these resignations made the Conservatives very angry, but they still agreed on returning new leaders to office out of fear that government power would go to the liberals. In 1899, Leopold II had the chief of cabinet de Smet de Naeyer propose an electoral reform he did not believe in, and he resigned (Barthélemy 1912, Ahmed 2013). In 1911 and 1918, Albert I brought down two subsequent governments by letting their chiefs understand that he did no longer have confidence in them. In both instances, the cabinet leaders were also challenged by their own parties, but many sources suggest that the king was instrumental in bringing them down, and no source contradicts this (Mabille 1986, Wijngaert 2006, Bartelous 1983, Gerard 2006, Stengers 1992). The same thing happened with Renkin in 1932, albeit more subtly, in a way that was not clear until new material was made available in the 1980s (Bartelous 1983). There is then the 1939-1940 governments of Spaak and Pierlot. In 1939 Witte et al 2009 (188) suggest that the Spaak government was brought down due to a conflict between the king and the ministry. All other sources cite a conflict within government, and I have coded the resignation as not contradicting parliamentarianism. In 1940, the king dissolves the chamber against the will of the government (which some sources seem to label as headed by Pierlot), thus terminating it and bringing all attempts at a reformation to an end. I have coded this as contradicting parliamentarianism. Finally, in 1950, the regent Charles dissolves the chamber against the will of the government, and thus terminates it. This is coded as contradicting parliamentarianism based on an unambiguous and detailed account in Van den Wijngaert and Dujardin (2006, 143) that I have not found in other sources, but which is never contradicted.

There are several indications that the monarch disliked the government or its head, without actually trying to dismiss him. For instance, Leopold I seems to have disliked Rogier and Leopold II disliked Frère-Orban, and even the Conservative leader Beernaert at

first. At one point, Frère-Orban offered the king to step down, but the king said no, since no other government could have been formed. Similarly, in late 1939, Leopold III wrote a letter to Pierlot where he asked him to resign, but he never sent it (Stengers 1992, 69). (He would formally ask Pierlot to step down in 1940, however.) These indications do never amount to any failed attempts, and thus they provide no data points.

Rests one instance, where both parliament and king seem to have lost confidence in the government, and acted against it more or less simultaneously. This concerns the Rogier government in 1852, and I have decided to label this termination parliamentary. It is hard to tell if king Leopold I would have been able to bring Rogier down on his own, and I prefer to tread on the right side of error. Admittedly, this way of reasoning is influenced by the preference for downwards bias in explanatory studies, and it is not clear that the same reasoning should be directly imported to descriptive inference.

## V. Graphical Displays

In order to convey the Belgian parliamentary trajectory I use graphical displays. The graphs are constructed in this way. Events are coded binarily as either contradicting parliamentary rule or not contradicting it (i.e. zero or one). Among the events not contradicting parliamentary rule, events that belong to the first two categories in section 4 are coded as in direct agreement with parliamentary rule. Figure 1 display the ratio of unparliamentary events to total events for each country. The ten last events are added to form a score, with the last of the ten events getting half the weight, thus giving the process an arbitrary memory. In Figure 2, the ratio of the ratio of unparliamentary to parliamentary events to total events (i.e.  $(\text{unparliamentary events}/\text{parliamentary events})/\text{total events}$ ) for the last ten years. Among total events are such events that I characterize as resignations happening for other reasons. This is an attempt to address the worry that different degrees of governmental stability in itself may affect parliamentarianism. It will serve especially for cross-country comparison. It can be seen that the general picture and trends do not differ, but that the trajectories are somewhat attenuated as the effect of unparliamentary events are diluted. For all





or Beernaert did. Parties increasingly dominate parliament after 1847, although they were quite lacking in cohesion (I remind that Rogier resigned in the 1864, not because he had lost his majority but because his majority was too little, given lack of party cohesion). When parties have one leader who is the given chief of cabinet candidate, different fractions of a party cannot be played out against each other, as when Leopold II makes the Conservative Malou resign and the Conservatives replace him with Beerneart, or when Albert I makes the Catholic Renkin resign and replaces him with the Catholic de Brouckère. Note that parliaments dominated by parties dominated by clear leaders will constrain the king both when it comes to government formation and government termination.<sup>6</sup>

The idea the king will lose his influence in practice when parliaments are dominated by parties who in turn are dominated by a clear leader also takes into account the fact that what was against the wishes of Leopold I and Albert I, and perhaps also Leopold II was not as much a liberal party government as party government at all! This insight provides nuance to the assumption of (Przeworski et al 2012) that monarchs ally with Conservative forces. It is true that all kings between 1847, when parties start emerging, and 1945 seem to have preferred Conservative cabinets (Stengers 1992, Witte et al 2009). However, this is subject to how the king regards the individual characteristics of the chief of cabinet, as when Leopold II preferred to maintain the Liberal Rogier in 1864 because he felt that the Conservative leaders lacked determinacy that would allow them to form a cabinet to replace Rogier. Still, regardless royal preferences for specific persons, the preference against party politics seems consistent until Leopold III resigns the throne, and especially Leopold I preferred unionism above all (Boulger 1909, Witte et al 2009).

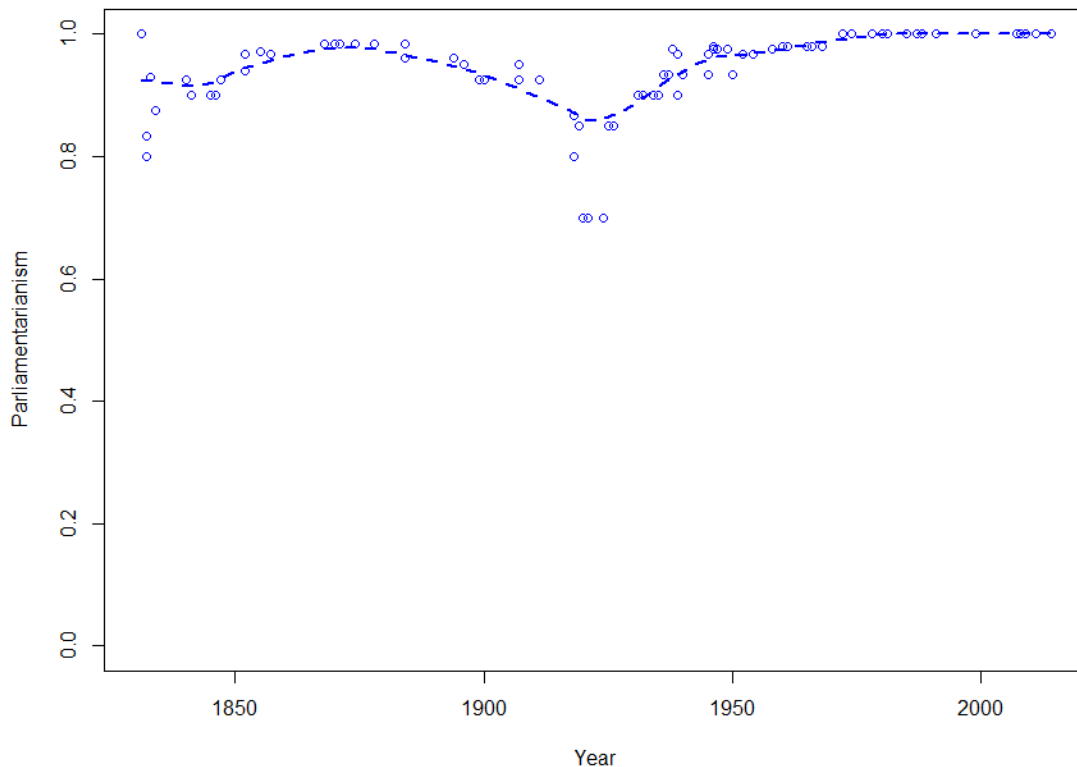
Both the data and the depiction of the trajectories are still at a preliminary stage. Still, the question of what the graphs show at a deeper conceptual level suggests itself. There may be a few ways forward here, in terms both of method and interpretation. One is to apply a dependent risks model within a survival analysis framework

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<sup>6</sup> The existence of many parties that compete over more than one policy dimension may also increase the room of maneuver for other actors, as can be shown in the Interwar period. After the Second World War, monarchical interventions seems to have been discredited to the point that the door to this room of maneuver, however big, has been closed.

(Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 2004, Ch. 10). The trajectories could be reinterpreted as the change in probability that parliament or bodies other than parliament attempts to or successfully does terminate a government, i.e. that the fundamentals of parliamentarianism are upheld or contradicted. Another is to apply a Bayesian learning model (cf. Breen 1999), where the trajectories would display some actor(s)'s beliefs about who may or may not terminate a government. These interpretations should be anchored in the theoretical relationships between actors, structures and institutional change that, once again, are beyond the scope here.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2. Belgian parliamentarianism, ratio**



The question if any existing datasets could be used to capture parliamentarianism may suggest itself. Unfortunately, there seems to be no dataset that code the interactions between parliament, government, and bodies other than parliament that may intervene

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<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say that the study of interactions probably puts possibly self-reinforcing structures somewhat in the background. Actors gain in analytical importance. As the balance of power between different actors change, this makes change easier to understand (cf. Congleton 2011, Mahoney 2010).

directly in the parliamentary relationship, and for a long period of time at that. The Historical V-Dem dataset comes closest, in that it includes expert survey questions on the ability of both the legislature and bodies other than the legislature to dismiss the head of government. I bind the responses to these questions between 0 and 1, and combine them in a multiplicative or minimum value index, a method of indexation that reflects the argument that these are necessary and sufficient conditions (cf. Goertz 2006).<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, in the specific case of Belgium, the V-Dem data starts in the year 1900, so a just comparison with my presentations above is difficult. Suffice it to say that the V-Dem data seem to capture other things than I do (see Figure 3), and that the two sharp drops they register may be a part of, but not the entire story, of how parliamentarianism was contradicted up until the 1950s.

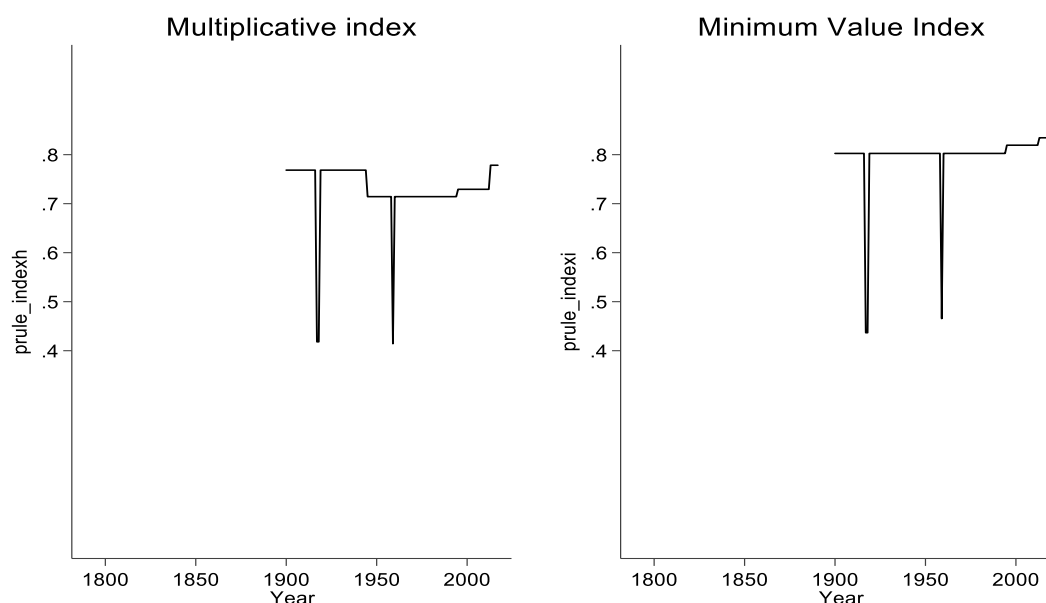
## VI. Other Potentially Important Things

I add a brief reflection here about things that may be missing from the picture, and which could alter the trajectory that I have described. Some potential issues concern legislative capacities that are so important that they may be perceived to affect the very idea of parliamentarianism. Some other issues concern interventions into the relationship between cabinet and parliamentary, i.e. interventions into parliamentary practice more properly conceived. I first discuss legislative capacities, and then the relationship between cabinet and parliament.

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<sup>8</sup> Extending the index with the ability of the head of state to dismiss individual ministers changes nothing.

Figure 3 : The Belgian parliamentary trajectory in V - Dem



An obvious important legislative capacity is the power over the budget. Indeed, it may be the single most important one, not least because the power of the purse gives parliament a way to assert itself against the government and actors such as the head of state. On this issue, no formal change seems to have occurred since 1830-1831. No sources mention any transfer of power over the budget throughout Belgian history, with the exception of the army expenditures, which I discuss promptly. It is true that different kings historically pushed for a certain kind of economic policy, but the power over the budget rested with government and legislature (cf. Witte et al 2009, 150-151), and informal pressure from different actors hardly contradict parliamentarianism in itself, although some may deem it an undemocratic exercise of unevenly distributed influence. In all cases, power over the budget is held quite constant throughout time, and the influence over the budget of the king in particular has if anything followed the general movement I painted. One exception to the influence over the budget concerns defense and military policy, where the king also tried to exercise the budget (cf. Witte et al 2009, 79). For long, international matters were perceived to be changing at such a pace that the more slow-moving parliament was not apt to deal with them. Instead, they should be left to a single agent. Military and defense policy were royal prerogatives (Witte et al 2009, 153), the war

minister was at times personally appointed by the king and responsible to him only (Stengers 1992, 39-42) and royal concern for safety or power over the army even caused conflicts that led to the resignation of some governments. The safest dating of a complete change of the royal prerogative is WWII, when the actions of king Leopold III were discredited by many.

I discern three practices of importance that could alter the picture above, the *dissolution power*, government formation, and the monarch's appointment and dismissal of individual ministers. The dissolution power has already been mentioned as an important feature of Belgian parliamentary life, the control over which seems to rest with the prime minister since the 1960s.

When it comes to *cabinet formation*, the king still exercises influence via his designation of formateurs or informateurs (De Winter and Dumont 2003, 274). This is of course an important task, but it remains that parliament has to formally accept the cabinet, even if it may not be the cabinet that it would have preferred. And when newly-formed governments were disliked by parliament, it quickly and successfully tried to remove them, as with Van de Weyer in 1846, Van de Vyvere in 1925, and even Spaak in 1946. This means that if the king could get his preferred cabinet, as Albert I in the Interwar period often could (Witte et al 2009) this was still subject to the constraint that parliament accepts it. That this constraint might have tightened over time I argue is rather a question of party development than parliamentarianism proper. Thus, given the parliamentary situation broadly conceived (not only the share of seats held by different parties but also the coherence of the parties), government formation was subordinate to government termination (Stengers 1992), just like theory suggests (cf. Sartori 1994, Shugart 2009).<sup>9</sup>

The only instances when the parliament did not accept cabinet, and still failed to oust it, was in 1924. Lastly, when it comes to the existence of investiture votes, votes of confidence and no confidence, these are ways in which the relationship between parliament and

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<sup>9</sup> Especially concerning the Socialists and Liberals in the Interwar period, party congresses also determined government formations by deciding on participation in coalitions. At least once did this block a formation attempt. In 1939, the Socialist party congress was to decide on government participation. The king demanded that the congress does not take place. The formateur, Pierlot, decided not to wait for the Socialist decision, and the Socialists reacted by refusing all government participation, killing the formation attempt (Gerard 2006, 229-231).

cabinet are allowed to play out. I do not deem them a part of parliamentarianism itself. That being said, they all existed in Belgium for a very long time, although their usage may have changed.

The *appointment and dismissal of individual ministers* does enter the analysis through the back-door. First of all, the chief of cabinet or prime minister is an individual minister, and second, invoking collective responsibility, some governments actually resigned because the king either want to revoke or keep a minister against the will of the chief of cabinet (Lebeau-Rogier in 1834, d'Anethan in 1871, Malou in 1884). And I have encountered no instance where the king revoked a minister on his own initiative, leaving the rest of the government intact.

One last worry would concern *unobserved opposition*. By this I mean that for different periods, a parliamentary majority may have wanted to terminate the government, but refrained from trying because it anticipated that it would fail because of the influence of the head of state. Parliament would then have tolerated governments because it recognized its lack of power. My empirical strategy would then risk to overstate the degree of parliamentarianism. I believe that two observations address this issue in the Belgian case. The first observation is that there are successful terminations throughout their parliamentary histories, no matter the monarch in charge, or the strength of one or several parties in parliament. The second observation is that no such silent opposition has left any trace in any of the sources.<sup>10</sup> Thus, to the extent that a silent opposition existed, it seems not to be in the form of a sufficiently cohesive majority. And that some degree of minority (silent) opposition to the government existed at any point in time without even trying to terminate the government does not affect the conclusions about changes in parliamentarianism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> There may be a third argument. At least during the periods where parliamentary rule was strictly an elite affair, many parliamentarians would tolerate a lack of monopoly over government terminations as long as policies did not go too much against their interests. When policies did, elites would react.

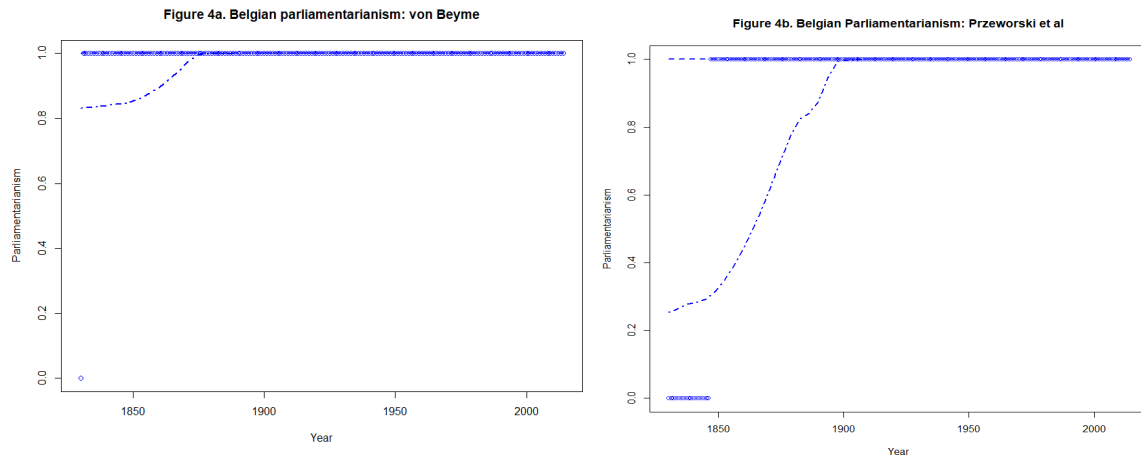
<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it could be noted that silent opposition often came from the king.

## VII Discussion

What do I want the graphs to convey, and what is the take-home concerning the adoption of parliamentary rule in Belgium? Once more, I conceive of the definition that the government is responsible to parliament *only* as a necessary and sufficient condition for parliamentarianism. This means that at any point in time when the measure does not have the value 1 is a point where the regime is not parliamentary. Thus, I do not want to convey that in the year 1900, Belgium was 92% parliamentary, for instance. Over time, however, there can be more or less of these events, which in turn says something about the overall development or change. The topsy-turvy development captured by the spread of the data points up until the 1950s also conveys that parliamentarianism was a matter of (intra-elite) dispute and often implicit struggle for over a hundred years. Furthermore, nothing circumvents the fact that after 1950, the Belgian parliamentary regime stabilizes (unless parties are considered to be a body other than parliament, then the nature of the post 1950-development is an open question). Thus, if the question were “when did Belgium adopt parliamentarianism in practice?” the answer here would be in the 1950s. This is my answer because since then, no event that contradicts the core of parliamentarianism seems to have taken place. If there was also a parliamentary regime in Belgium in previous periods (depending on the memory assigned to the process!), may be left for individual judgement. However, in relative terms, the post-1950 period evidently the most stable.

That the struggle over parliamentary rule was implicit does not change the basic fact that the development of the defining feature of parliamentarianism was a back-and-forth process. This can be shown again by contrasting any figure above with my interpretation of the common knowledge about Belgium in the comparative politico-historical literature. Figure 4 portrays the adoption of parliamentary rule according to von von Beyme (1989), von Beyme (2000), Bartolini (2000), Scarrow (2006) and Przeworski et al (2012). Both figures would convey a unidirectional development, wrongly dated, that would seemingly suggest a more straightforward, one-way process of discrete change that does not reflect Belgian history regardless the details of how this history is graphed. Granted, the process leading up to this structural break could be very complicated, but the graphs

in Figures 4a and 4b and the assignment of a date of adoption in them does not really convey this either. Thus, even though I coded uncertain events as in agreement with parliamentarianism, there is a clear contrast between my conclusions and prior research.



Before ending, I add a brief note on tentative explanations for the Belgian trajectory. I suggest that the strength of parties in parliament and the leadership of those parties are crucial for the long-run parliamentary development. This is explicitly acknowledged by Stengers (1992, 47) and (Witte et al 2009, 35-36, 66-69). What is needed in the immediate term is for parties to dominate parliament and for one leader (or possibly a cohesive group of leaders) to dominate each party. Parties increasingly dominate parliament after 1847, although they remain quite uncohesive (I remind that Rogier resigned in the 1864, not because he had lost his majority but because his majority was too little, given lack of party cohesion). When parties have one leader who is the given chief of cabinet candidate, different fractions of a party cannot be played out against each other, as when Leopold II makes the Conservative Malou resign and the Conservatives replace him with Beerneart out of fear that a liberal government might be called, or when Albert I makes the Catholic Renkin resign and replaces him with the Catholic de Brouckère. Note that parliaments dominated by parties dominated by clear leaders will constrain the king both when it comes to government formation and government termination.



The idea the king will lose his influence in practice when parliaments are dominated by parties who in turn are dominated by a clear leader also takes into account the fact that what was against the wishes of Leopold I and Albert I, and perhaps also Leopold II was not as much a liberal party government as party government at all. This insight provides nuance to the assumption of Przeworski et al (2012) that monarchs ally with Conservative forces. It is true that all kings between 1847, when parties start emerging, and 1945 seem to have preferred Conservative cabinets (Stengers 1992, Witte et al 2009). However, this is subject to how the king regards the individual characteristics of the chief of cabinet, as when Leopold II preferred to maintain the Liberal Rogier in 1864 because he felt that the Conservative leaders lacked determinacy that would allow them to form a cabinet to replace Rogier. But regardless royal preferences for specific persons, the preference against party politics seems consistent until Leopold III resigns the throne, and especially Leopold I preferred unionism above all (Boulger1909, Witte et al 2009).

Finally, as means of raising the gaze, as parliamentary rule is a central piece of Belgian democracy, my approach and depiction convey a more complicated or checkered picture about democratization than has been acknowledged previously, especially in comparative political science. It is more in line with recent research that suggests that European democracies developed in an often rather incremental convulsive manner, where undemocratic pockets of elite influence remained (and still remain) a feature of democracy (Albertus and Menaldo 2018, Boix 2003, Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010, Collier 1999, Ziblatt 2017).

Overall, the above investigation suggests two things. Firstly, my conceptualization of parliamentarianism is rewarding. Secondly, the empirical strategy of studying interactions between key actors is viable. Together, these two things provide a new story about the history of parliamentarianism, here in the case of Belgium.

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