



# The comparative study of governments and ministers: Jean Blondel's legacy

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## Abstract

Jean Blondel's academic impact in the field of comparative governments was enormous, but difficult to measure. Over the past 60 years, his publications have fuelled the work of several generations of colleagues around the world. In this short essay, we first introduce his most influential publications. Second, we introduce the empirical findings of major comparative studies which stand 'on the shoulders' of his research on governments and ministers in parliamentary democracies. Overall, we state that Jean Blondel's comparative research was not designed to leave behind an enduring theory of his own. Instead, he was more interested in looking for more unexpected measurable facts and merge them into generalizations about the future of cabinet governments and political leaders.

**Keywords** Jean Blondel · Comparative governments · Parliamentary democracies · Profession

## An introductory note

Jean Blondel strongly believed that governments are the core of all politics. He therefore studied lifelong the interaction between governments, political parties and political leaders. In doing so, he was never really interested in a priori theories but in an inductive approach that called for classification and generalization in the field. Although he consciously did not develop an own theory, his approach was close to the theory of 'historical-(neo)institutionalism' even before this theory

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This article is co-authored by a senior and a junior scholar who were introduced by Jean Blondel on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday at the University of Siena. Since that time, both scholars have closely worked together in the field of comparative governments and ministers.

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was introduced as an explanatory approach in the 1980s. Historical institutionalism focuses on the interaction between the genesis and the working of political institutions on the one hand and the behaviour of political actors within these institutions on the other. Blondel applied this approach in basically all of his publications on party governments. Methodologically, he followed a descriptive comparative approach by systematically collecting empirical data on governments and political leaders in both democracies and autocracies, and in as many countries as possible.

Jean Blondel's academic impact in the field of comparative governments was enormous, but difficult to measure. Over the past 60 years, his publications have fuelled the work of several generations of colleagues around the world. In this short essay, we first introduce his most influential publications. Second, we introduce the empirical findings of major comparative studies which stand 'on the shoulders' of his research on governments and political leaders in parliamentary democracies.

## **Governments and ministers: approaches by Jean Blondel**

Jean Blondel's scholarly contribution covered a broad set of questions regarding the structure and the organization of governments, the functioning of political parties within these governments and the role of political leaders in the process of government decision-making. His first most influential and widely recognized monograph, *An Introduction to Comparative Government* (1969, 2nd edition 1990), systematically examined the general conditions which led to the functioning of different types of political systems, and more detailed factors, which account for the characteristics of political structures, whether groups, parties, governments, assemblies or bureaucracies.

The novel feature of this book was its comparative approach including countries with different political regimes. Blondel collected and analysed information on governments in 138 countries around the world. He treated each country as a unit and compared these countries systematically by using general concepts and statistical methods rather than applying the country-by-country descriptive approach. This quantitative-comparative approach helped him to identify similarities and differences across the countries and thereby develop 'inductive laws' or—as he called it—'major generalizations' about the functioning of governments around the world. This book belonged to the standard literature of many comparative politics classes in the USA and in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s.

In his later work, Blondel applied the comparative government 'world approach' in three major monographs published within five years. First, he examined the *World Leaders* (1980), including the different types of chief executives, their leadership structure and their pathways to the Presidents' or Prime Ministers' offices. In his second book, he compared *The Organization of Governments* (1982) by analysing the development, the structure, the composition and the policy-making of modern government. The third publication in this series examined *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World* (1985), including their social background, routes to office and duration in ministers' offices. These three books have initiated a new thinking in comparative government which moved away from analysing country specific



idiosyncrasies to a systematic comparative investigation of similarities and differences in the functioning of governments and leaders around the world.

Although this comparative ‘world approach’ with its simple statistical methods was original, it was also provocative in the discipline. For one, colleagues have criticized that comparative (worldwide) generalizations about the functioning of government institutions are impossible to state for different political regimes such as democratic and authoritarian types. Furthermore, Blondel’s general assumptions and findings were considered as being too static since he did not observe or discuss changes that took place in the government structures and the leaders’ profiles over time.

In his later academic life, starting in the mid-1980s at the European University Institute, Jean Blondel therefore changed his research strategy. He moved away from the ‘world approach’ and focused his comparative research on the nature of party government and ministers in European countries. Moreover, instead of working alone on his books (as in the past), he looked out for a team of young researchers who were willing and prepared to follow his idea of collecting data on governments and ministers in Western, Southern, and—since the early 1990s—Central Eastern Europe. Between 1985 and 2007, Jean Blondel co-edited seven major books on governments and ministers in Europe with a team of around 50 country specialists.

Two co-edited volumes on European cabinet governments, *Cabinets in Western Europe* (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1988, 2nd edition 1997) and *Cabinets in Eastern Europe* (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 2001), were conceptualized as ‘country surveys’ based on a common framework for comparing the origins, structures, composition and activities of cabinet governments in Europe. These books provided a first impression of similarities and dissimilarities in the ‘internal fabric’ of 29 cabinet governments in Western and Central Eastern Europe. Both volumes concluded that there is no model of ‘good’ cabinet government (such as the Westminster model). Instead, with the gradual establishment of more complex government structures throughout all countries in Western and Central Eastern Europe, the management of politics in the centre of government becomes more diverse, for example with the existence of various party coalitions, more powerful prime ministers and different profiles of ministers (e.g. ‘amateurs’ or ‘specialists’). This diversity has naturally led to alternative ‘types’ of cabinet governments that have implemented different structures for streamlining cabinet decision-making effectively and efficiently.

To understand the internal characteristics of these cabinet decision-making structures was the main goal of the following two comparative books that Jean Blondel and his team published: *Governing Together* (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993) and *Governing New Democracies* (Blondel et al. 2007). The first book covered 12 Western European countries and the second volume examined cabinet decision-making in 10 Central Eastern European new liberal democracies. Both books were designed genuinely comparative in that they analysed national cabinets in 22 countries on the basis of a common framework and a set of identical interviews with former cabinet ministers in these countries. These volumes were also comparative in that each chapter was devoted to a particular aspect of the life of the national cabinets, such as the rules under which these operate, the part played by the parties, the role of individual ministers, the prime ministers and



the civil servants and, above all, the extent to which the single-party or coalition structure of government affected the decision-making process. The idea behind this ‘individual survey approach’ was to have ministers, who personally participated in the cabinet decision-making, evaluate the character of these processes. These ‘expert interviews’ may have a personal bias in the evaluation of cabinet structures. Yet, they have shown that the nature of cabinet government has not just emerged all over Europe, but that it has been a great success in the development of liberal democracies in the second half of the twentieth century.

Another two co-edited books built on the previous volumes and examined the functioning of party governments in Europe. In *Party and Government* (Blondel and Cotta 1996), the authors of the single country chapters undertook a survey on the relationship between governments and their supporting political parties on three levels: appointments, policy-making and patronage. By systematically observing the party–government relation in each of nine Western European countries (plus the USA and India), the authors empirically proved that there is no one way relationship between governments and their supporting parties. On the contrary, there is considerable power of one over the other: sometimes the party dominates, sometimes the government does so. A second book in this series examined *The Nature of Party Government* (Blondel and Cotta 2000) under comparative perspective. It focussed on eight parliamentary systems in Western Europe for which detailed empirical data were collected (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK). The book showed how major political conflicts between governments are influenced by their supporting political parties that consider themselves as representatives, who wish to shape the way governments operate. On the basis of a systematic comparative approach analysing the empirical relationship between parties and governments on three levels (appointments, policy-making and patronage), the authors confirmed the major findings of the case studies in their first book. That is, governments are not just passive recipients of party inputs, nor mere arenas for the struggle between parties, but also actors in their own right with a vested interest in controlling those who seek to control them.

One book by Jean Blondel and his colleagues, *The Profession of Government Minister in Western Europe* (Blondel and Thiébault 1991) received particular attention among scholars in the field of political elites. This book explored the careers of 2112 cabinet ministers in 14 Western countries from the end of World War II to the end of 1984. It is based on a coherent data set about the socio-demographic background as well as the political pathways to cabinet. It also examined the career itself, its duration but also its interruptions. Finally, the authors looked at the reasons why ministers leave office and in what they do after office. Overall, the authors found that the career of ministers in governments are constrained by the conditions that the form of government imposes. The size, the duration and the political composition of cabinet governments in Europe have, for instance, provided opportunities to combine political representation, managerial talent as well as specialist skills or expert knowledge among cabinet ministers.

Blondel’s pioneering systematic comparative research is now standard in our discipline. It had an enormous effect on the academic training of thousands of



undergraduate and graduate students around the world and evidently stimulated lots of further research in the field.

## **Governments and ministers: Blondel's impact on further research**

The described seminal publications by Jean Blondel have had a major impact on further research projects in the area of cabinet governance and the study of executive elites. In the following paragraphs, we shall subsequently look into these studies.

### **Cabinet governance**

A few months after Jean Blondel had published the book on *'Governing Together'*, two colleagues organized an ECPR Joint Sessions Workshop on 'Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Government' which resulted in a book publication where experts (several of them had worked in Blondel's team!) were encouraged to systematically describe the legislative–executive interaction in their own countries (Laver and Shepsle 1994). The major additional contribution of this book was its rigorous and theoretically oriented analysis of cabinet decision-making, based on a rational choice approach—that Jean Blondel always rejected to apply in his work for principle reasons (he never believed that politics can be explained 'rationally'). In a following monograph, both authors opened an entirely new door to the comparative study of cabinet governments, by formulating a theoretical model of the strategic interaction among political parties and government ministers in European parliamentary democracies (Laver and Shepsle 1996).

While these empirical studies included coalition systems as well as single-party government systems, a group of young colleagues further developed Blondel's basic idea about governing European parliamentary democracies. Among them was Wolfgang Müller, a former member of Blondel's team in the 1990s. Together with Kaare Strøm and Torbjörn Bergman, he initiated a long-lasting project on coalition governance in Western Europe. The first publication in this series updated the empirical knowledge of Blondel's books on cabinet governments by introducing the special mechanisms of coalition governance in Western European parliamentary democracies on a country-by-country basis (Müller and Strøm 2000). A second book stressed the democratic delegation and accountability process in Western European parliamentary democracies, again applying the comparative country-by-country approach (Strøm et al. 2003). In a third book, the authors provided a comprehensive, systematic comparative analysis of coalition politics in Western Europe over the post-1945 period, guided by a 'principal agent'-based theoretical approach. This book championed a dynamic model using bargaining and transaction costs theory to understand the 'life cycle' of parliamentary politics (Strøm et al. 2008). A major discussion of this work has been about the institutional and behavioural mechanisms of mutual control that parties establish and the reasons behind party choices. In this regard, a key distinction has been made between mechanisms activated at the formation stage (ex ante mechanisms) and those activated during the life of government



(*ex post* mechanisms). Coalition partners can use control mechanisms in the executive arena, in parliament or within specific extra-parliamentary arenas (Strøm et al. 2010). Since the early 2000s, the study of cabinet decision-making in coalition governments has been further evolved for Western as well as Central Eastern European countries (Bergman et al. 2019; Bergman et al. 2021).

Other empirical studies in this field of research have shown that particularly effective mechanisms for ‘good governance’ include coalition agreements (Klüver et al. 2023; Moury 2013), the sharing of policy responsibilities (Shpaizman and Cavari 2023), cabinet committees (Ie 2022) and parliamentary committees (Martin and Vanberg 2011). Moreover, scholars have shown that the presence of party leaders in cabinet decision-making makes the externalization of inter-party conflict management less likely (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008).

Overall, the ‘growing interest in coalition *governance* as opposed to coalition *governments*’ has been, ‘[p]erhaps the most important substantive development in the field over the past [two] decades or so’ (emphases in the original) (Laver 2012: 113).

## Executive elites

If Blondel’s legacy in the study of government institutions has been significant, his impact on the research about ministerial and prime ministerial careers has been tremendous. His monograph on *Government Ministers in the Contemporary World* (1985) as well as the edited volume *The Profession of Government Minister in Western Europe* (Blondel and Thiébaud 1991) marked a milestone in the field.

The structure and the content of these two books have guided the work of several international scholars in the field of cabinet elites.

Overall, (prime) ministerial studies have embraced four sub-fields: the socio-demographic background, the selection and deselection, the durability and performance in office and the post-executive careers. In all these sub-fields, a particular declension has concerned the gendered character of the careers of the ministers and prime ministers (Müller-Rommel et al. 2020).

Scholars who have investigated the *socio-demographic background* of ministers have been most interested in evaluating the representative gaps among executive elites and explaining their political effects. These studies have basically confirmed the descriptive findings of Blondel’s pioneer works: relative to the rest of the population, ministers and heads of government enjoy higher levels of education and occupational status (Bovens and Wille 2017; Müller-Rommel et al. 2022). Moreover, most government personnel are male, although the number of women has increased over time (Krook and O’Brien 2012). Thus, the majority of all studies state that, ‘the chances of reaching a political office [...] are not spread equally across various strata of society’ (Jahr and Edinger 2015: 16).

One significant theoretical advancement of Blondel’s research has been achieved in the study of the *selection and deselection* of cabinet members (Dowding and Dumont 2009, 2015). As already stated by Blondel, authors found that the most important explanatory factor for getting selected as cabinet minister are political and



professional experiences prior to entering office. Based on rational choice theories of democratic delegation, scholars argued that all else being equal, ‘party principals’ tend to select those politicians with more experience, using their career in party politics as a litmus test to assess their reliability as ‘party agents’ (Samuels and Shugart 2010).

Yet, it has also been observed that the declining of party government has cleared the way to an increasing number of party outsiders whose primary ‘political capital’ is often (but not always) policy expertise in specific sectors (Emanuele et al. 2023; Helms 2023; Tavares de Almeida 2022). In this regard, pure technocrats are the most clear-cut cases. Previous studies have shown that they are selected to solve exogenous crises (e.g. financial, pandemic) which especially applies when political parties do not want to bear the costs of governing under difficult circumstances (Alexiadou and Gunaydin 2019; Costa Pinto et al. 2018; Vittori et al. 2023). Other scholars have claimed that the appointment of non-partisan expert ministers is a consequence of the growing heads of government’s autonomy from parties as well as existing semi-presidentialism (Amorim Neto and Strøm, 2006; Bäck et al. 2009). Prime ministers, in turn, have become more likely to enter office after developing leadership skills in parties and international organizations, rather than after spending many years in parliament or cabinet (Müller-Rommel et al. 2022).

Gender has a conditional effect on its own: overall, women have traditionally had lower chances to become a minister or become prime minister, mostly due to specific obstacles along their career paths and the undermining action of party gatekeepers (Claveria 2014). Female prime ministers also have more political experience than men, suggesting that they need to prove to be particularly well prepared to reach the same position in cabinet (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017). Moreover, women tend to receive less prestigious ministerial portfolios, in policy domains that are often defined as ‘feminine’ (Goddard 2019). Finally, the proportion of women ministers who climb the ministerial career ladder is lower than the percentage of men (Kroeber and Hüffelmann 2022).

Not surprisingly, the type and level of experience of cabinet members also have an impact on their individual tenure and performance in office. Blondel tackled this issue only in an embryonic way, due to the difficulty in conceptualizing and measuring ministerial performance. Meanwhile, however, some robust findings have emerged. It is now well known that ministers with higher political experience and those that hold prestigious ministerial portfolios are more likely to last in office or to be reappointed (Bright et al. 2015; Fischer et al. 2012; Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008). Again, however, gender matters in that women are subject to more severe scrutiny and are more subject to early exits from office (Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2017). Moreover, there is convincing evidence that women perform well, for example by creating political consensus within cabinets (Krauss and Kroeber 2021).

It has generally been argued that the accurate selection of well-experienced ministers may help governments to reach several political goals (Helms and Vercesi 2022). For example, a high education of political leaders obviously correlates with economic growth in a country (Besley et al. 2009). Moreover, a minister’s technical expertise affects government spending (Alexiadou 2015; Amorim Neto and Accorsi 2023). Finally, previous experience as party leader makes heads of government



more likely to be successful in controlling their parliamentary majorities and managing cabinet conflicts (Grotz et al. 2021).

So far, only little attention has been paid to post-ministerial careers—a topic that Jean Blondel was very interested in (Blondel 1991: 153–173). Some empirical studies show that ministers tend to remain in politics, although many of them enter in private business which raises concerns about the permeation of politics relative to private interests (Claveria and Verge 2015; Musella 2015, 2020).

## Conclusion: Blondel's legacy and the road ahead

Jean Blondel was one of the most important political scientists in Europe who provided stimulating ideas not only in the field of cabinet government, political parties and ministers (see the other contributions in the volume). Yet, his comparative research approach was not designed to leave behind an enduring theory of his own. Jean was aware of this and asked to look for more unexpected facts, that is to say for an array of data at our disposal, rather than setting up hypotheses in a deductive context (Blondel 1997: 124). He was therefore more interested in 'collecting all data' and merge these data into generalizations about the future of cabinet governments and political leaders. In this sense, he would probably ask for more empirical research in at least three areas:

- (1) *The relationship between the functioning of governments and different types of political leaders.* Can we expect a different management of politics in the centre of government under 'technocrats' vis-à-vis 'political professionals'?
- (2) *The impact of political leaders' personalities on cabinet decision-making.* To what extent do different 'personality traits' and 'personality styles' of ministers and prime ministers outperform established political background characteristics, such as political experience, as explanatory factors for an efficient and effective government performance?
- (3) *The impact of regime types on the performance of government and their leaders.* Do different regime types such as democracy and autocracy demand different governmental settings and career profiles of their political executive personnel?

To what extent these questions will be answered remains in the hands of forthcoming generations in the study of governments and ministers.

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