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# Political time in public bureaucracies: Explaining variation of structural duration in European governments

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## Abstract

Structural duration conveys stability but also resilience in central government and is therefore a key issue in the debate on the structure and organization of government. This paper discusses three core variants of structural duration to study the explanatory relevance of politics. We compare these durations across ministerial units in four European democracies (Germany, France, The Netherlands, and Norway) from 1980 to 2013, totaling over 17,000 units. Our empirical analyses show that cabinets' ideological turnover and extremism are the most significant predictors of all variants of duration, whereas polarization in parliament as well as new prime ministers without office experience yield the predicted significant negative effects for most models. We discuss these findings and avenues for future research that acknowledge the definition and measures for structural change as well as temporal aspects of the empirical phenomenon more explicitly.

## Evidence for practice

- Researchers argue that structural changes inside government organizations are shaped by politics that unfold after general elections but also throughout legislative periods.
- This empirical study innovates by assessing structural change explicitly and comparing three core variants of structural duration that take the variety of structural changes into account, over more than three decades and across four European central governments.
- The findings show the importance of polarization in parliament and cabinets ideological profiles, which extends our current views focusing on the relevance of party competition and coalition governance.

## INTRODUCTION

Time is essential for studying the structure and organization of government, although it is mostly treated as an implicit aspect of the phenomenon. Early studies started off with analyzing patterns of structural change in government *over time*, identifying distinct periods of stronger and weaker structural change. They described these longitudinal swings as “moods of integration,” during which governments regard the public sector as a whole, versus “moods of diversity,” when new types of organizational entities are established and comprehensive administrative reform efforts are made (Hood, 1973, 1978;

Jacobson, 1964; Wettenhall, 1968; Willson, 1955). Later, scholars addressed time by studying structural *duration*, arguing that government structures are “immortal” (Kaufman, 1976). Empirical research revisiting this claim, however, showed how the definition and assessment of termination shapes the findings on the duration of government structures and hence, government structures are terminated more regularly than suggested (Boin et al., 2010; Greasley & Hanretty, 2016; Hardiman & MacCarthaigh, 2017; Holmgren, 2018; Kuipers et al., 2018; Lewis, 2002, 2003; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2009; see also Lim, 2021). These scholars reiterated the importance of administrative reforms based on governments' agendas

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(e.g., Bertelli & Andrew Sinclair, 2015, 2018; James, 2003; James et al., 2016; cf. Talbot & Johnson, 2007; see also Mortensen & Green-Pedersen, 2015). They also highlighted the relevance of political determinants (Götz et al., 2018; Pollitt, 1984; Ryu et al., 2020; Sieberer et al., 2019). More recently, scholars turned toward the change of formal structures inside ministerial departments and demonstrated that such political determinants also matter for these levels of government organizations (Fleischer et al., 2023; Kuipers et al., 2021; Yesilkagit et al., 2022).

In addition, the scholarly debate on structural change in government made several methodological advancements in assessing structures and structural change. When organizational studies deemed their measures as unfit for government organizations as these organizations were regarded as too homogenous (Pugh et al., 1963; Pugh & Hinings, 1976), public administration scholars introduced alternative “bureaumatic” measures to study formal structures in government (Hood et al., 1981). Other scholars established a typology of *structural change* of these organizations (Roness, 1979, 1982, 1992; cf. Rolland et al., 1998; Rolland & Roness, 2011; cf. MacCarthaigh & Roness, 2012). Lately, this has been further advanced into a novel typology of *structural transitions*, to allow more flexible empirical research into when and how government structures change (Carroll et al., 2020). As the field also moved toward cross-country comparisons, the array of political determinants studied is ever growing, while the core research interest—the duration of government structures—largely remained the same, although with some variation on how to define and determine termination (see Kuipers et al., 2018). This may be partly related to empirical methods, particularly event-history analyses, that are widely employed to establish causal relations on *when* government structures change. Some research also takes stronger into account *how* they change and thus examines the competing risks of different types of structural change (Yesilkagit, 2020).

Our paper follows up on this debate and studies the implications of various definitions and measurements of structural duration in government, thereby providing more nuance to both *when and how* government structures change. We aim to analyze how politics matters for different variants of structural duration and thereby also shed light into a methodological aspect of the scholarly debate that is oftentimes neglected, namely whether structural change is assessed explicitly or rather attributed by proxy. Building upon existing work, we ascertain whether the polarization in parliament as well as the short- and long-term ideological turnover in cabinets and new prime ministers’ office experience matter for either variant of duration.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. We first introduce the key theoretical arguments explaining how political determinants shape the structural duration in government organizations. Subsequently, we present our data and method, starting with a brief

description of key methodological advancements in the empirical research on the structure and organization of government. Our data combines the *SOG-PRO dataset* (for France, Germany, and the Netherlands) and a recoded version of the *NSAD dataset* for Norway and thus reports on structural change inside the ministerial departments of these four countries from 1980 to 2013.<sup>1</sup> For our empirical analyses, we employ Cox mixed effects models to show that political determinants influence structural duration inside ministerial departments and therefore matter beyond the reallocation and redesign of ministerial portfolios after general elections. Furthermore, our explicit assessment of different types of structural durations based on different structural transitions allows to reflect upon why political determinants yield different levels of explanatory relevance. Put differently, empirical research into structural change in government needs stronger attention for its underlying definitions of change and its measures—and benefits from an explicit assessment rather than implicit attributions. Hence, we conclude with a discussion on avenues for future and more time-sensitive research in the scholarly debate on the structure and organization of government.

## THEORIZING THE DURATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES IN GOVERNMENT

The duration of government structures is a prevalent theme in the wider scholarly debate on the structure and organization of government. Whereas many scholars have put attention to explanations for the timing of structural change, thus establishing *when* government structures change to ascertain duration, a growing strand of the debate is more explicitly interested in *how* government structures change, thus highlighting the various meanings of termination (Kuipers et al., 2018; cf. Adam et al., 2007). According to Kuipers et al. (2018), two major views on termination can be distinguished in the existing literature, a *political control view* that acknowledges a variety of types of structural changes that dissolve structures in government in different ways and an *institutional legacy view* that follows a dichotomous understanding of termination and regards only a full dissolution of government structures as termination. Whereas the political control view emphasizes how structural changes express explicit political choices aiming to control the public sector, the institutional legacy view stresses bureaucratic agency and regards only the birth and death of a public sector organization as strong political choices, whereas the plethora of other structural changes occurring throughout its lifetime are mere adaptations, also upon its own initiative, in order to survive (cf. Dommert & Skelcher, 2014).

However, we also aim to theorize further why and how politics may shape termination differently.

Following the notion of structural transitions (Carroll et al., 2020), we distinguish change events according to the number of units involved before and after the event. Many structural change events inside government organizations include one unit only, such as the change of a unit's denomination or its horizontal and vertical position inside the hierarchical bureaucracy. These “singular changes” signal acts of political control over the specific unit and yet, political agency may vary. Whereas some of these interventions into the existing bureaucratic structure may be overtly political, others may follow primarily upon the unit's own initiative. Given that singular changes may also vary in their effects for a unit's formal resources and authority, it is impossible to ascertain a priori when and which of these changes express more or less political agency—with the exception of full terminations that can be regarded as the most extreme case of political choices over bureaucratic structures. Yet, all these singular changes terminate the “organizational identity” of a unit that links its functional authority with its structural features (cf. Weber, 1922).

In contrast, “plural changes” involve several units, either more units before the event than afterwards, that is, mergers and absorptions, or less units before than after the event, that is, splits and secessions. These plural changes alter the organizational identity of the units involved as they reallocate resources and yet, this may be more beneficial for some units than others. Whereas mergers end the discrete execution of tasks by the new unit's predecessors, absorptions bring this detriment only for the unit that is getting absorbed. In both events, however, the newly merged or continuing unit enlarges in resources and authority. Similarly, a split brings discrete authority rather equally to all now separated units, whereas a secession offers a similar outcome only for the unit that has been carved out of an existing one. And yet, both events also end the larger resources and authority of the preceding unit.

Therefore, we submit three core variants of duration that are informed by the types of structural transitions starting and ending this duration (see Table 1): The “shortest duration” takes all (singular and plural) changes into account and therefore provides the most stringent assessment of termination, for which both political and bureaucratic agency may be relevant. In contrast, the longest duration recognizes only full terminations and thus takes the most selective view by focusing only on structural transitions that terminate a unit altogether, which is also regarded as the strongest case of political agency exercising political control. In between, “authority duration” considers only changes that reduce a unit's discrete functional authority, that is, if units experience the singular change of downgrading it inside the formal hierarchy or if they are absorbed or they lose a distinct formal part in a secession. In comparison, structural transitions involving plural changes as well as those shifting authority are rather burdensome for politicians and likely to raise both

**TABLE 1** Typology of structural duration types.

	Definition	Examples
Shortest duration	Duration ends at any structural change event	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministerial unit is renamed</li> <li>Ministerial unit is moved to another level (vertical) or to another branch or ministry (horizontal)</li> <li>Ministerial unit is transformed (from line to staff or ministerial unit to agency)</li> </ul>
Longest duration	Duration ends at termination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministerial unit is fully disseminated</li> <li>Ministerial unit is absorbed fully<sup>a</sup></li> <li>Ministerial unit is split equally<sup>a</sup> into several new ministerial units</li> </ul>
Authority duration	Duration ends at structural change event reducing its functional authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministerial unit is moved to a level down (vertical)</li> <li>Ministerial unit is absorbed</li> <li>Ministerial unit loses a part via a secession.</li> </ul>

<sup>a</sup>The identification of being a smaller part carved out from an existing ministerial unit as well as being split equally into new ministerial units is informed by the number and formal denominations of the ministerial units prior and after the change event, as well as of subordinated ministerial units if applicable.

support and resistance among officials, not the least as they also alter individual bureaucratic career prospects. As a consequence, we expect that these three variants of structural duration come with different patterns of political control and corresponding relevance of political determinants.

Our first hypothesis is rather novel in the current scholarly debate on the relevance of politics for structural change in government as it moves away from the cabinet and the executive and instead highlights parliament. Already in the early 1960s, Jacobson's (1964) seminal study of the historical beginnings of the Norwegian Agricultural Authority concluded that government organizations reflect societal dynamics, similar to later research on the relevance of government agendas for government structures that are, at least partly, driven by societal demands (Hammond, 1986; Mortensen & Green-Pedersen, 2015; cf. Lichtmanegger, 2019). Instead of theorizing an effect via governments prioritizing policy issues or committing to electoral pledges, Dahl Jacobson referred this relevance of societal dynamics to parliament as a key arena shaping governmental action, arguing that value conflicts in society are present and expressed within a legislature and thus shape how parliament controls the permanent bureaucracy. Eventually, this (non-)polarization in parliament would lead to the “contraction” and “detraction” of government structures, as parliament

constrains or provides political executives with leeway on structures respectively. Although the importance of this polarization for government structures may be further mitigated by executive-legislative relations, we expect it to matter for all types of structural duration—as political agency should respond as much to these societal dynamics as potential bureaucratic agency. Thus,

**H1.** Stronger polarization in parliament reduces structural duration in government.

Our next two hypotheses follow the dominant theoretical approach in understanding structural change in government, that is, the theory of the politics of structural choice (Moe, 1995, 1989; cf. Bendor & Hammond, 2010). Its basic assumption is that political executives aim to hardwire their policy preferences into government structures. Accordingly, presidents are primarily motivated by political uncertainty over the *future* and what their potentially adversarial successors may do with their policies, and thus enshrine these policy preferences into government structures. This view, highlighting the differences between predecessors and successors in office, is also very prominent in the comparative politics debate on portfolio reallocation and portfolio redesign. These studies focus on the direct aftermath of general elections as the key period during which parties form new governments and seek to accomplish their office and policy preferences (Strøm, 1990)—and thus engage in structural changes in government in order to hardwire these structures to their policy needs while also keeping government structures that do not need realignment. Recent scholars advanced this study of post-electoral portfolio changes by assessing the timing and scope of the formal codifications of reallocations in policy functions across portfolios after elections (Sieberer et al., 2019), thereby specifying office preferences further and maintaining the core assumption that post-electoral structural hardwiring is pertinent for the full legislative period.

In contrast, others have advanced a theoretical distinction whereby parliamentary executives are driven by uncertainty over the *present* of executive politics, shaped by party competition in coalition governments (Fleischer et al., 2023; cf. Moe & Caldwell, 1994). This competition may be particularly prominent in the process of government formation and thus after general elections, but it is also present throughout legislative periods. It follows that structural hardwiring during legislative periods is not only relevant in the rare events of cabinet reshuffles but also and particularly for all those structural changes that cabinet ministers approve as part of their individual ministerial responsibility throughout their tenure in office. From this perspective, it is not only about predecessors versus successors but may also extend to coalition parties in government that hold different ministerial posts and thus engage in structural choices to manifest their (government) policy preferences or at least safeguard success for

their own ministerial units in executive politics. Overall, structural choice politics highlights the relevance of ideological turnover and cohesion in cabinets, in the short-term, as the direct cabinet turnover, but also in the long-term, as the ideological extremism of cabinets compared to predecessors.

This relevance of ideological profiles also relates to scholarly research into governmental policy agendas and their effects on structural change at the level of ministerial departments and delegated agencies (Mortensen & Green-Pedersen, 2015; Tosun, 2018), which lately also aimed for ascertaining the correspondence of policy authority inside ministerial departments and governments' legislative output (Klüser, 2022; Klüser & Breunig, 2022). However, all this empirical research takes a strong emphasis on post-electoral formal structures and thus assumes that governments' agendas are enshrined into government organizations as part of government formation processes, and then shape how ministerial departments formulate government policies for the following legislative term. Highlighting this particular period of governing neglects any larger shifts in government structures that occur in between elections, oftentimes triggered by scandals and accomplished as cabinet reshuffles, as well as smaller structural alterations during legislative periods that still yield considerable effects on government policy formulation—as executive structures determine how policy authority is exercised (Egeberg, 1999; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

Accordingly, ideological turnover of cabinets matters in the short-term, related to its immediate predecessors, but also in the long-term, in comparison to all predecessors. Both ideological turnover and extremism may be of similar importance for the shortest duration with its potential mix of political and bureaucratic agency. They also matter for the longest duration as the terminations of structures are the strongest expression of political agency as well as authority duration, which requires considerations on behalf of political executives engaging in political control. Hence,

**H2.** Stronger ideological cabinet turnover reduces structural duration of government structures.

**H3.** Stronger ideological extremism in cabinet reduces structural duration in government.

Furthermore, cabinet turnover is very likely to be accompanied by the arrival of a new head of government, and yet, we do examine this explanatory feature separately, following a theoretical and an empirical rationale. In theoretical terms, the arrival of a new head of government comes with adjustments in cabinet governance and the underlying bureaucratic process between and within ministries. Although many parliamentary systems follow the notion of *primus inter pares*, the head of government is

also regarded to act as final arbitrator in cases of conflict, which often expresses a nonalignment of policy preferences between ministries (O'Malley, 2007; Rose, 1991; cf. Peters et al., 2011). Hence, new heads of government may trigger structural responses by cabinet ministers regarding their ministries' inner structures in order to prepare or manage potential conflicts over policy and turf.

In empirical terms, an advancement of the theoretical argument is necessary as in some parliamentary systems, prime ministers get "resurrected" rather regularly, most notably in Scandinavian countries. In such instances, prime ministers govern for a full term, are defeated in a general election, and return as prime ministers in subsequent terms.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is empirically relevant to consider the head of government's office experience explicitly, as this is the theoretically relevant mechanism. We assume that the new head of government triggers structural responses as part of the government formation processes, implementing a new portfolio allocation, but also generates structural changes as a strategy of cabinet ministers to deal with the new modes of cabinet governance. This effect is particularly likely for new prime ministers without prior office experience and may be similar for all variants of structural duration, although it may be most relevant for longest and authority duration that entails more severe alterations of pre-existing structures. Thus,

**H4.** A new prime minister without prior office experience reduces structural duration in government.

We compare ministerial units over time and across ministerial departments in four European democracies. We do not formulate a priori expectations regarding any country differences and instead assume that the aforementioned political determinants shape organizational duration in all countries similarly. However, we are aware of country differences of political contexts, especially with regard to executive-legislative relations and acknowledge these in our analyses (see below).

## DATA AND METHOD

Studies on structural change in government are based on primary sources issued by governments that range from formal codifications, such as agency statutes or laws and decrees, to state almanacs, government yearbooks, directories, and organizational charts. However, studies differ in which information they retrieve from these sources. Formal codifications are used to ascertain their timing, most notably on the (re-)allocation of policy authority across and between ministerial departments (Bäck et al., 2011; Batista, 2018; Oppermann & Brummer, 2019; Sieberer et al., 2019). Accordingly, structural change is attributed by proxy instead of assessing

it explicitly, partly because the outcome of the government formation process is the key research interest—and thus the codifications or statutes are relevant for their existence and not for the variation or types of structural change that they also may document in full. In contrast, almanacs, government directories, or organizational charts allow scholars to assess the nature and scope of structural change by comparing the documentation over time. This strand of research was in large part initiated by Paul G. Roness (Reness, 1979, 1982, 1992, cf. Rolland & Roness, 2011, 2012), who introduced a typology of structural change events according to whether organizational structures are created, maintained, or terminated. Recently, this typology has been advanced further by studying structural transitions that take the number of units before and after change events into account (Carroll et al., 2020). This *transitional* understanding of structural change allows a more flexible empirical assessment, without an a priori judgment on whether a distinct structural change event constitutes a creation, maintenance, or termination. Accordingly, different research interests can be accomplished, such as studying all or highlighting only particular structural transitions in government (Fleischer et al., 2023; Yesilkagit et al., 2022) or analyzing the risk for organizations facing different structural transitions (Yesilkagit, 2020). Put differently, these further assessments of the official documentation on government structures over time allow to establish structural change explicitly and enable more nuanced empirical analyses that consider complete legislative periods during which political control vis-à-vis the permanent bureaucracy may be exercised in structural transitions.

We address the political determinants of such a transitional structural change of government in four European countries, France, Germany, Netherlands, and Norway, between 1980 and 2013. These four countries differ in their political contexts, with regards to party competition and executive-legislative relations as well as their administrative traditions. Whereas France is a semi-presidential system with executive-legislative relations that are shaped by congruence or divergence in parties holding the president office versus the parliamentary majority (Guinaudeau & Persico, 2021), the other three countries are parliamentary systems, yet the number of parties in parliament and government differ, with the Netherlands being regularly governed by multi-party coalitions, Germany having two parties in office for the period of analysis and Norway that also experiences minority governments. Furthermore, France follows the Napoleonic administrative tradition, whereas Germany and the Netherlands are regarded as Germanic, and Norway is characterized by the Nordic tradition (Painter & Guy Peters, 2010; cf. Meyer-Sahling & Yesilkagit, 2011). All four countries practice a strong notion of individual ministerial responsibility whereby cabinet ministers are accountable for their ministerial

portfolios and thus for the structural changes that happen inside their ministerial departments.

The period of analysis started in 1980 when many Western governments began to reform their public sector by injecting private sector tools and instruments, heralded under the New Public Management paradigm (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). We opted for selecting the two top levels of ministerial units for our comparative analysis that share similar proximity to the political leadership. These two levels guide, supervise, and conduct government policy preparation as well as coordinate between ministerial units, thereby also arbitrating within and across ministries.

Our data on French, German, and Dutch ministerial units are taken from the *SOG-PRO dataset*, our data on Norwegian units are from the *NSAD dataset*, we recoded the latter following the *SOG-PRO* codebook (Carroll et al., 2020). These datasets are based on government documents, including state almanacs, government yearbooks, and organizational and task allocation charts. The original comparative dataset entails all structural transitions that occurred to ministerial units inside ministerial departments between 1980 and 2013. These structural transitions mark the beginning and the end of an “organizational phase,” that is the existence of a particular ministerial unit with a distinct organizational identity. Given the flexibility of this transitional approach to organizational termination (and thus duration), we can then estimate different variants of duration, depending upon whether and which transitions are regarded as starting a new organizational phase (or ending a pre-existing organizational phase).

As noted above, we distinguish three theoretically relevant variants: The shortest duration takes all structural transitions into account and therefore identifies the shortest organizational phases. These transitions will include

instances of singular changes, such as changing a unit’s formal denomination or its horizontal and vertical position inside the bureaucratic hierarchy. However, they also cover plural changes that involve more than one unit, until it discontinues to exist. In contrast, the longest duration only regards structural transitions that express a pure termination, thus assessing the longest organizational phase. In between, authority duration considers only those structural transitions that end the functional authority of a given ministerial unit, which happens when a unit experiences a singular change of downgrading in its vertical level or if it is absorbed or loses a distinct part in a secession. As a result, we have three variants of structural duration as our dependent variables, totaling 13,716, 6637, and 7857 organizational phases in our comparative datasets (see Table 1). We stratified these three comparative datasets into panel structures, whereby each organizational phase gets an observation for each year of its shortest, longest, and authority duration, totaling 76,736, 69,494, and 65,232 organizational phases (see Table 2).

Our independent variables are taken from various existing sources. We obtained the scores for parliamentary polarization from *ParlGov* (Döring & Manow, 2021), assessing the share of seats in parliament held by cabinets’ parties for each election and standardized this measure. For the ideological turnover of cabinets, we created a seat-share weighted party ideology average per cabinet based upon the party ideology scores from the *Comparative Manifesto Project* (CMP, Volkens et al., 2021), calculated the absolute difference between the preceding and incoming cabinet and standardized this measure. For cabinet extremism, we assessed how ideologically extreme a cabinet is in comparison to all cabinets in office during the period of analysis, based upon the aforementioned cabinet ideology scores. Lastly, the new head of government information is also

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics.

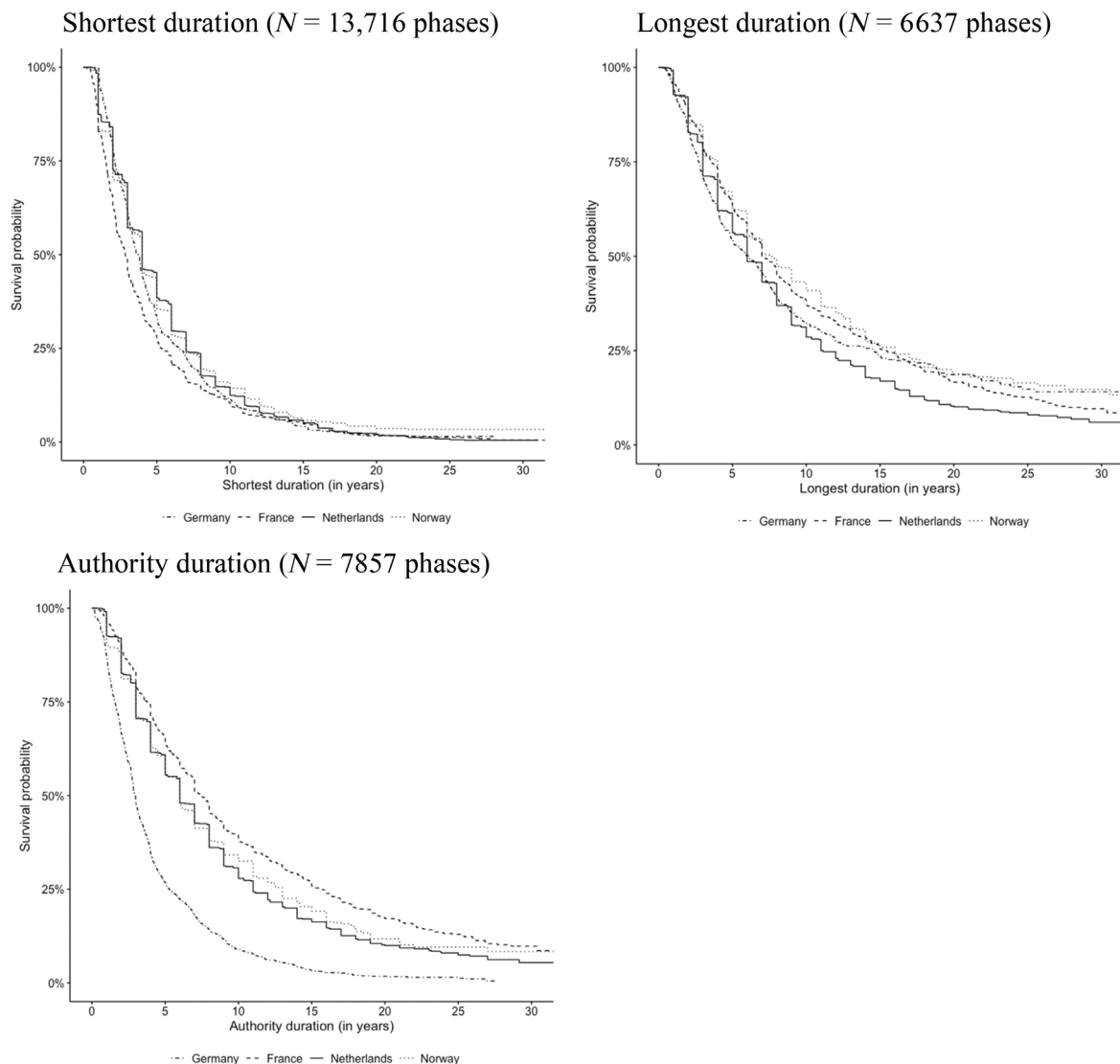
	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Organizational phases (in years)					
Shortest duration	13,716	0.01	34.00	4.80	5.01
Longest duration	6637	0.16	34.00	9.77	9.13
Authority duration	7857	0.04	34.00	7.50	7.95
Covariates (shortest duration)					
Polarization in parliament	13,716	0.28	0.54	0.41	0.06
Cabinet’s ideological turnover	13,716	−1.06	2.54	0.00	1.00
Cabinet’s extreme ideology	13,716	−0.10	4.72	1.85	1.08
New PM’s office experience	13,716	0.00	1.00	0.06	0.23
Controls (shortest duration)					
GDP per capita	13,716	−0.87	4.67	0.00	1.00
Cabinet’s tenure	13,716	0.04	4.58	1.40	0.95
Unit’s level	13,716	1.00	2.00	1.71	0.45

taken from *ParlGov* (Döring & Manow, 2021), we created a dummy variable indicating whether the panel-year marks a new prime minister in office without previous office experience or not.

For our controls, we follow other empirical analyses of structural change, which have studied ministerial portfolios (Götz et al., 2018; Ryu et al., 2020; Sieberer et al., 2019), delegated agencies (Holmgren, 2018; James et al., 2016), or ministerial units (Kuipers et al., 2021), and included the country's GDP per capita to capture overall economic conditions. As governments may face an economic downturn and budgetary constraints, they may be more likely to reorganize the machinery of government in order to achieve efficiency gains, expecting that reorganized government structures can be more efficient. We took the variable from the *V-DEM project* (Coppedge et al., 2021) and

standardized it. Furthermore, we control for cabinet tenure, based upon the timespan between elections and a new head of government in office, we neglected caretaker governments (Lijphart, 1984). Lastly, we included the formal vertical level of the ministerial unit to control for its proximity to the political leadership.

We employ event history models and acknowledge that the data are hierarchically clustered, that is, ministerial units are nested within one particular Western European country. Hence, we run Cox mixed effects models to account for within-cluster homogeneity in outcomes (using the *coxme* package in R, Therneau, 2022). We opted for the gamma distribution of the shared frailty terms that distributes the cluster-specific random effects as the logarithms of independent, identically distributed gamma random variables, having variance  $\theta$  (Austin, 2017).



**FIGURE 1** Survival probability by duration type (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).

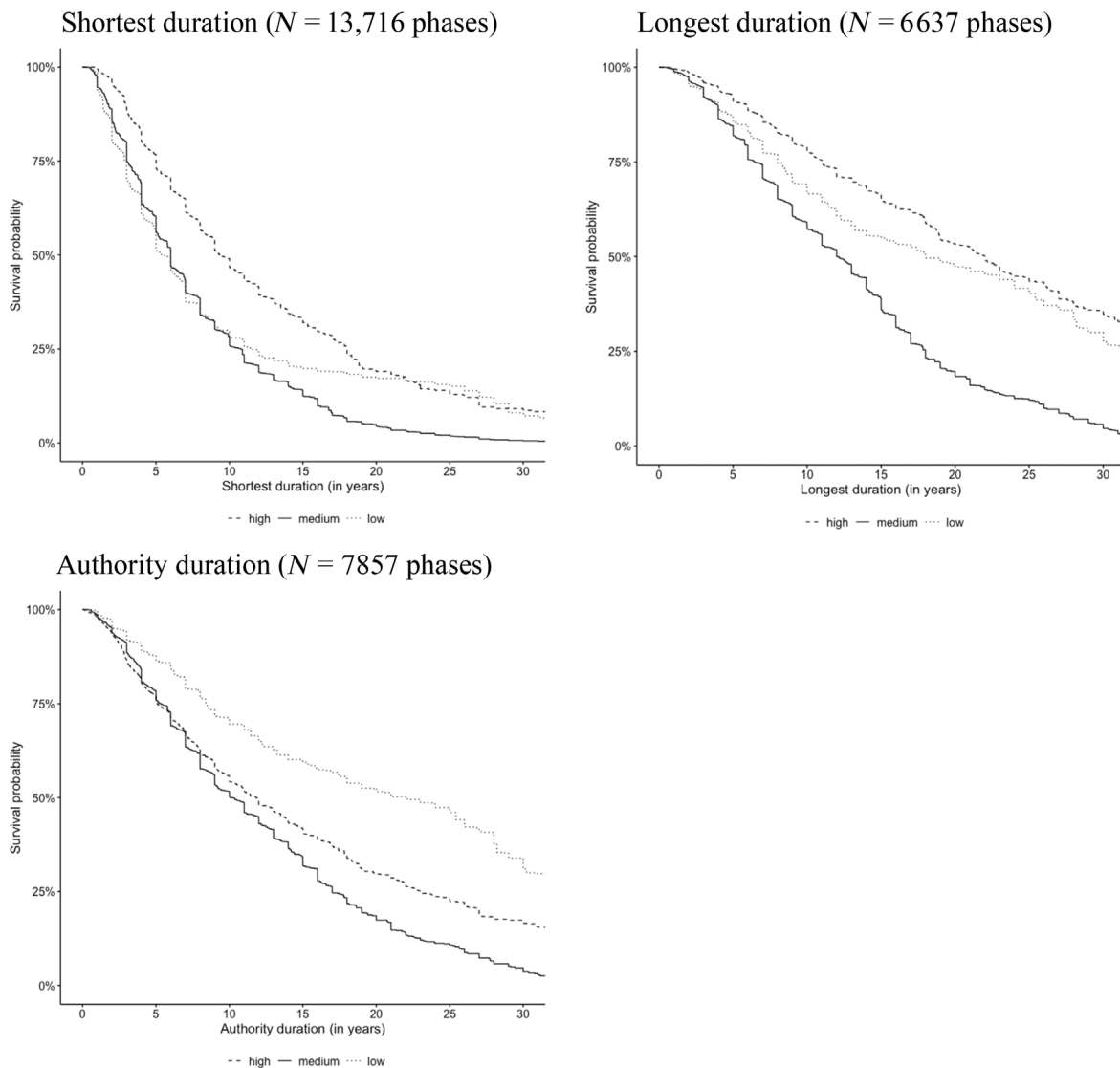


## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

A comparison between the three different variants of duration shows rather similar patterns across countries (see Figure 1). However, the patterns for shortest and longest duration are more similar across countries than the patterns for authority duration. Instead, the authority duration patterns show that German ministerial units live shorter with their discrete functional authority than their counterparts in France and the Netherlands, while Norwegian ministerial units live longest in their once given authority. Moreover, the survival curves for shortest versus longest duration do not differ very much in terms of steepness but they differ in the overall share of ministerial units surviving over time, echoing that the most frequent structural transitions of ministerial units are related to singular changes to units themselves, especially the formal

change of their denomination (see Yesilkagit et al., 2022). We, therefore, confirm existing research that the definition and operationalization of structural change matters for the patterns of organizational termination in government organizations (Adam et al., 2007; Kuipers et al., 2018). Put differently, if one follows the dichotomous understanding according to an institutional legacy view of termination and thus defines duration in its longest variant, one detects a different variation across countries than if one takes a more nuanced view to emphasize political control by assessing different change events and corresponding structural transitions, leading to the shortest or the authority duration of ministerial units.

Our Cox mixed effects models test the relevance of each of the four explanatory variables for the different variants of structural duration, separately as well as in full (see Tables A1–A3, Figures A2–A4). These models reveal

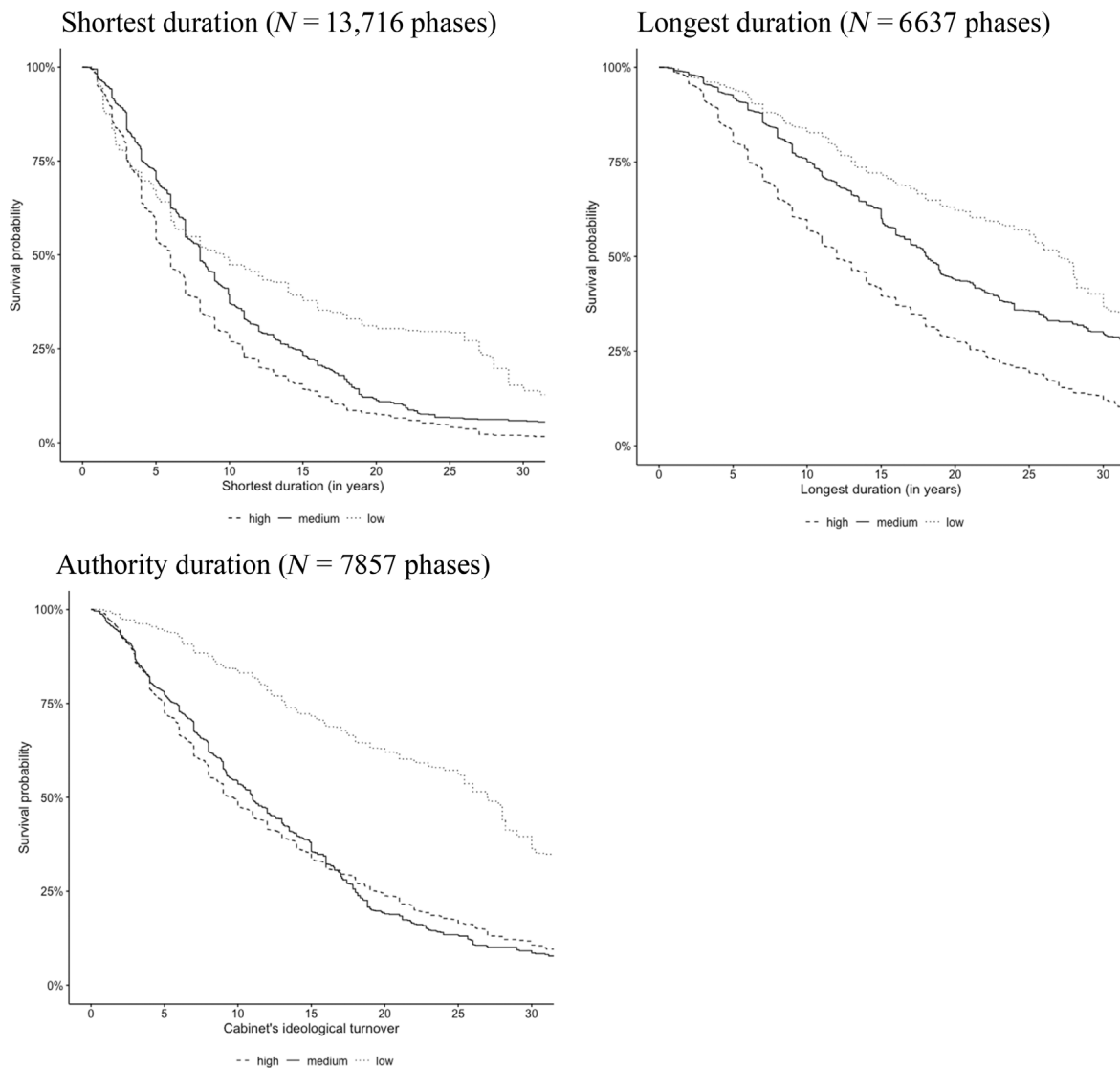


**FIGURE 2** Survival probability by binned parliamentary polarization (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).

that the coefficients for all political determinants show their expected direction for the single models (see Table 2). First, polarization in parliament has the expected negative and highly significant effect on all variants of structural duration. This shows that the expected consequences of parliament's polarization materialize regardless which type of structural change event a ministerial unit is facing, although the scope of the effect is largest if one considers only structural transitions with consequences for a ministerial unit's functional authority. Yet, in the final model, the effect takes a positive direction. A closer inspection of the hazard curves for this covariate shows how medium and highly polarized parliaments increase the risk of ending a ministerial unit's shortest and authority duration (see Figure 2). These empirical dynamics may indicate that the polarization among parliamentary parties is less suitable for explaining the full termination

of units as it is for understanding why governments alter their apparatus via different structural changes (shortest duration) and why they may adjust unit's functional authority (authority duration).

Second, cabinets' ideological turnover yields the expected negative effect and is highly significant across all variants of structural duration. The scope of this effect is larger for longest duration, which indicates that new cabinets departing in ideological terms from their predecessors may enshrine their policy agenda rather than altering them in various ways or reallocating their functional authority. Again, the comparison of hazard curves illustrates these dynamics (see Figure 3) and adds that ministerial units' authority duration is least shaped by cabinets that are ideologically closest to their predecessor.



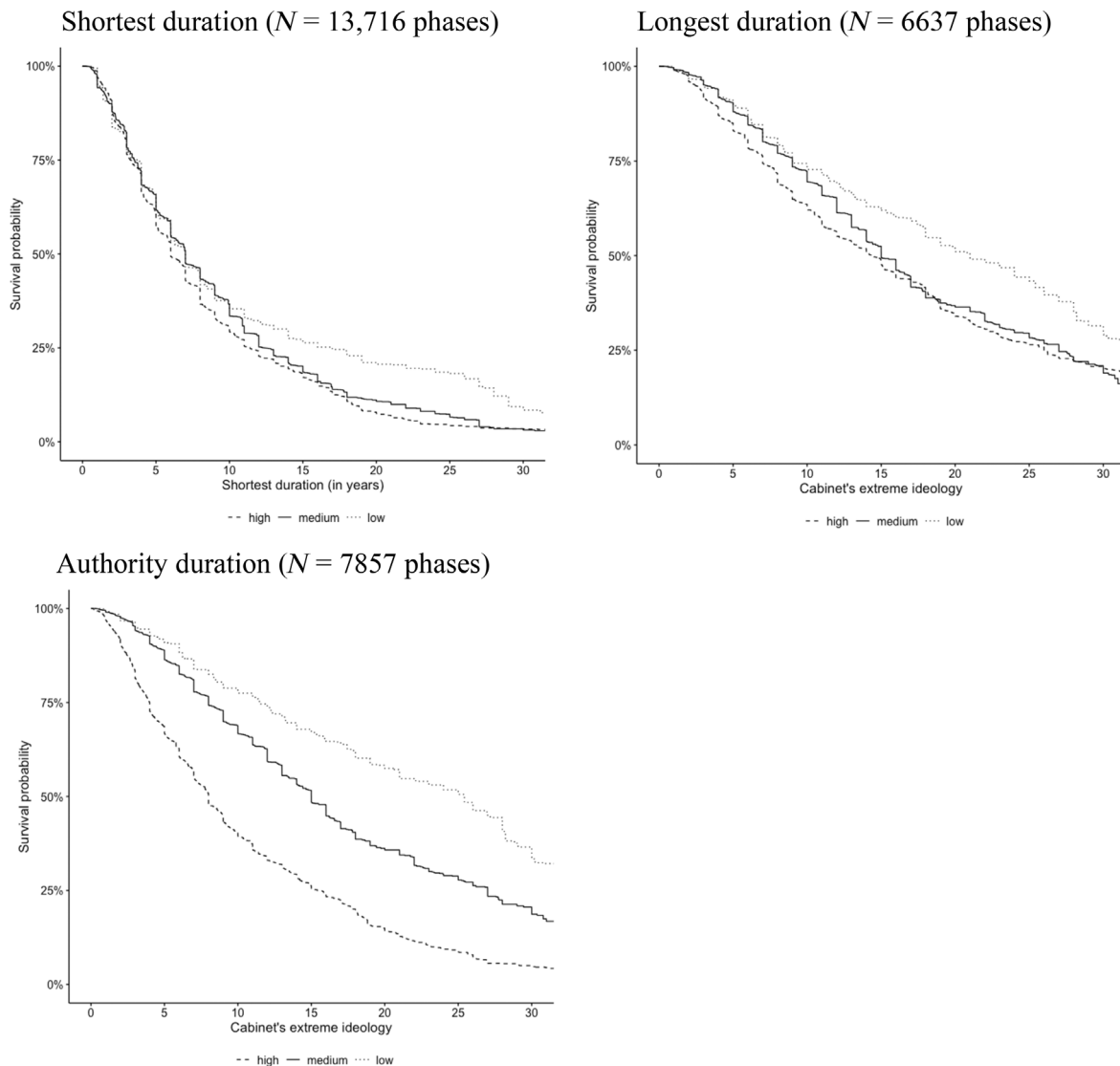
**FIGURE 3** Survival probability by binned cabinet's ideological turnover (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).

Third, the ideological extremism in cabinet yields the expected negative and significant effect on all variants of structural duration. In comparison, the scope of the effect is largest for authority duration, indicating that cabinets that are most extreme compared to all predecessors tend to shape more strongly the ending of ministerial unit's functional authority and resources rather than other means for structural change or full termination. The hazard curves show the largest differences again for the risk generated by cabinets' extreme ideology on authority duration, that is, extremist cabinets shorten this duration, whereas non-extremist cabinets lengthen it considerably (Figure 4).

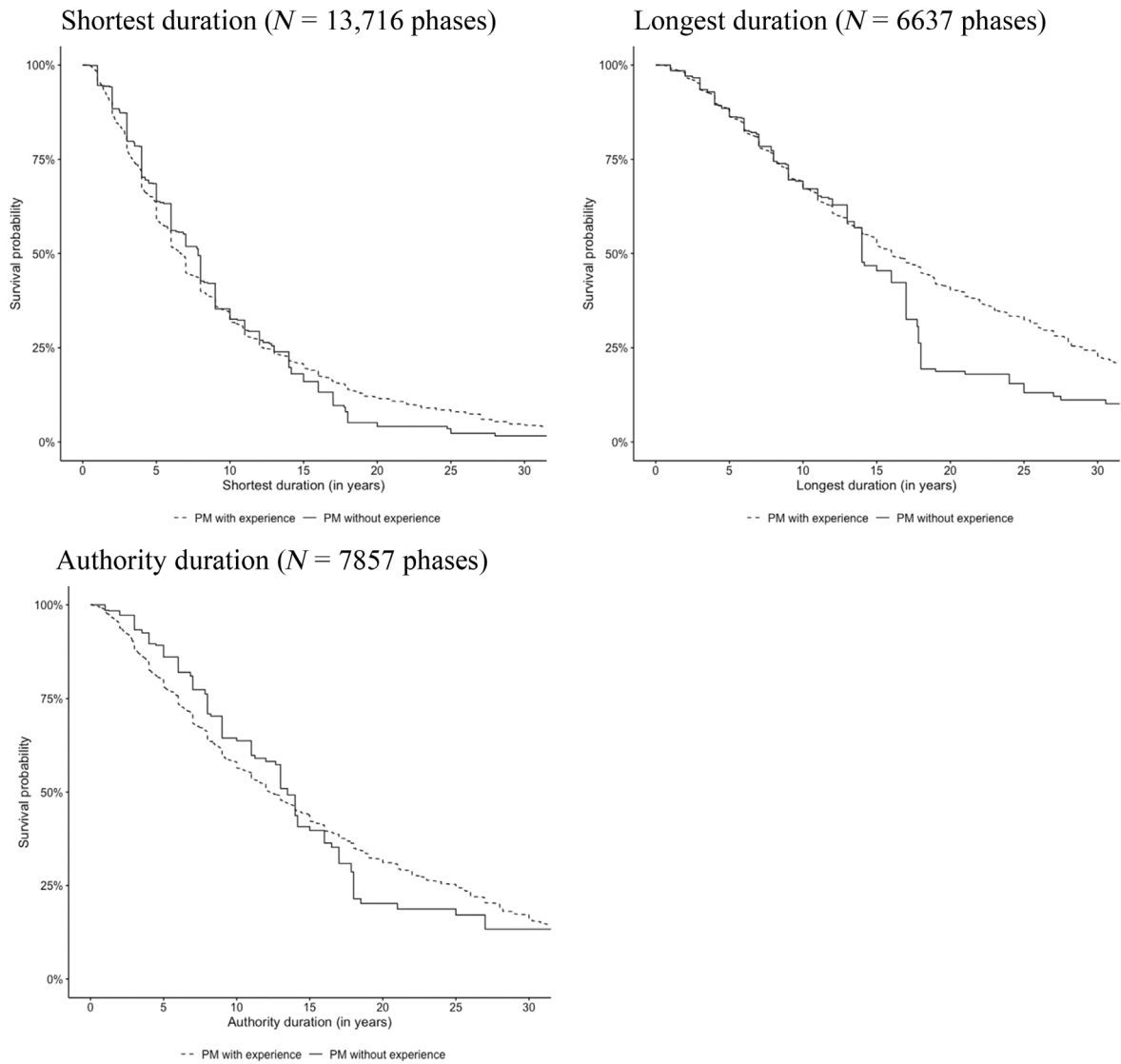
Lastly, the new head of government without prior office experience shows negative effects on all three duration variants. New prime ministers therefore shape structural duration, yet further investigation into the

relevance of office experience is warranted. This sheds also light into who exercises political control in structural change, whereas new heads of government without office experience may particularly trigger structural responses by cabinet ministers upon taking office, this influence may weaken or disappear throughout legislative periods. In coalition government, this effect may also differ for cabinet ministers who are and who are not members of the new prime minister's party. The comparison of hazard curves for this covariate shows differences between shortest duration on the one hand and longest and authority duration on the other (see Figure 5).

In sum, the selected political determinants matter significantly—across all three variants of structural duration. A comparison of the hazard ratios shows some interesting differences. The polarization in parliament induces the highest risk on authority duration, whereas cabinets'



**FIGURE 4** Survival probability by binned cabinet's extreme ideology (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).



**FIGURE 5** Survival probability by new PM's office experience (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).

ideological turnover yields the strongest hazard for shortest duration (single model) and longest duration (full model). The other two political covariates, cabinets' extreme ideology and the new prime ministers' lacking office experience induce the highest risk on shortest duration. These patterns indicate that shortest duration is strongly shaped by cabinets' short- and long-term ideological profiles, whereas authority duration is particularly influenced by parliamentary polarization. In other words, cabinets coming into office engage in all sorts of structural choices to rearrange their government apparatus—due to their short- and long-term ideological profiles—whereas the explicit reduction of functional authority occurs particularly often with a polarized parliament.

In all models, our controls show significant effects, a country's GDP and the ministerial unit's level have positive and cabinet's tenure has negative coefficients. The

size of the variance of the country-specific random effects shows that all models yield some variance between countries, whereby French ministerial units are across all models diminished in their hazards, except for the first and final model on authority duration, whereas Norwegian ministerial units are across all models intensified in their hazards, except for the single models on cabinets' extreme ideology for all three variants of duration.

## CONCLUSION

This article studies the politics involved in structural duration within ministerial departments in Western Europe and revealed that cabinets' ideological profiles in the short- and the long-term are the most robust predictors for different variants of structural duration across

countries and over time, also in light of other political determinants that have been discussed in the scholarly literature so far. Accordingly, we show that governments' more radical ideological profiles in the short-term (as cabinet turnover) or long-term (as cabinet extremism) as well as new prime ministers without office experience explain structural duration and therefore structural stability and resilience of government organizations. This is a crucial result, given recent debates on democratic backsliding and the demise of democratic institutions (see Mechkova et al., 2017). However, also the ideological continuum represented in parliament contributes significantly to more frequent structural alterations of the inner structures in central government—with implications for the exercise of functional authority by the permanent bureaucracy.

Furthermore, the distinction of different variants of structural duration offers a more nuanced view on *how* political control is exercised via structural change inside government organizations. Although the coefficients to estimate the relevance of our political determinants do not vary in their significance levels neither direction across the three variants of duration, smaller variations in hazard ratios and the illustration of Kaplan–Meier estimates indicate relevant differences that warrant further attention by future research.

Furthermore, our research shows that an explicit assessment of the variety of structural transitions happening below the level of ministerial portfolios offers a more nuanced understanding of structural change in government. Hence, it allows not only to estimate *whether* (and *when*) government structures change but also *how*. Future research may continue this line of inquiry and extend our empirical knowledge on *how much* structural change is happening and thereby taking a stronger view on the scope of change.

Similarly, our findings may motivate future research into the relevance of time for understanding the structure and organization of government more explicitly. In theoretical terms, further advancements can be formulated that stress the subjective time of political (and bureaucratic) actors involved in structural change. It is not far-fetched to imagine that ministers with long-term office experiences and their retirement in sight engage in structural change differently than their counterparts without much office experiences and a future career ahead. In methodological terms, event-history analyses already paved the way for acknowledging time more explicitly and yet, the methodological advancements employed in other disciplines have not been fully exhausted in public policy and administration research yet.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The *Structure and Organization of Government Project* (SOG-PRO) is a comparative research agenda that follows a joint codebook to assess structural transitions in government and has been applied to France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom from 1980 onwards ([www.sog-pro.eu](http://www.sog-pro.eu)) as well as secretariats of international organizations in the UN system (Fleischer & Buzogány, 2022). The *Norwegian State Administration Database* (NSAD) covers structural changes inside the Norwegian state administration since 1947, its data coding started in the 1970s (Rones, 1979) and it is available online (<https://forvaltningsdatabasen.sikt.no/>); we recoded this data following the SOG-PRO codebook.

<sup>2</sup> In Norway such a return of previous prime ministers happened regularly until the end of the 2000s, in Finland and Sweden they occurred up to the early 1980s and mid-1990s, respectively, whereas Denmark experienced the most recent return in 2015, although after a longer break, as the last returning PM before that came into office in the late 1970s.

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**APPENDIX A**

The dataset that we use in this paper is a version of the Structure and Organization of Government Dataset that the SOG-PRO research team has collected with the support of an Open Area Plus Grant, which was funded by the national science commissions of the Netherlands, Germany, and France. In addition, we recoded an existing Norwegian State Administration dataset. The cross-country dataset contains observations of central government-level administrative reorganizations within France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway between 1980 and 2013. The main sources of the data collected are the civil service yearbooks or almanacs and organizational charts of these countries.

**Organizational phases**

The unit of analysis is an organizational unit within a central government department. Each line in the dataset represents a single unit, the start and end dates of the unit, and the events by which the unit started and through which it was ended. A unit with a start and end date constitutes a single organizational phase. A unit whose organizational phase has not ended on 31 December 2013 is right-censored. The dataset has a multi-year panel data structure of the years 1980–2013. Organizational units have a line for each year of their phase. For example, an organizational that has a start event in 1995 and an end event in 2008 appears with 13 lines in the dataset.

**Transition events**

The dataset records the start and end events that mark the beginning and ending of an organizational phase. Following Rolland and Roness (2011) and Hogwood and Guy

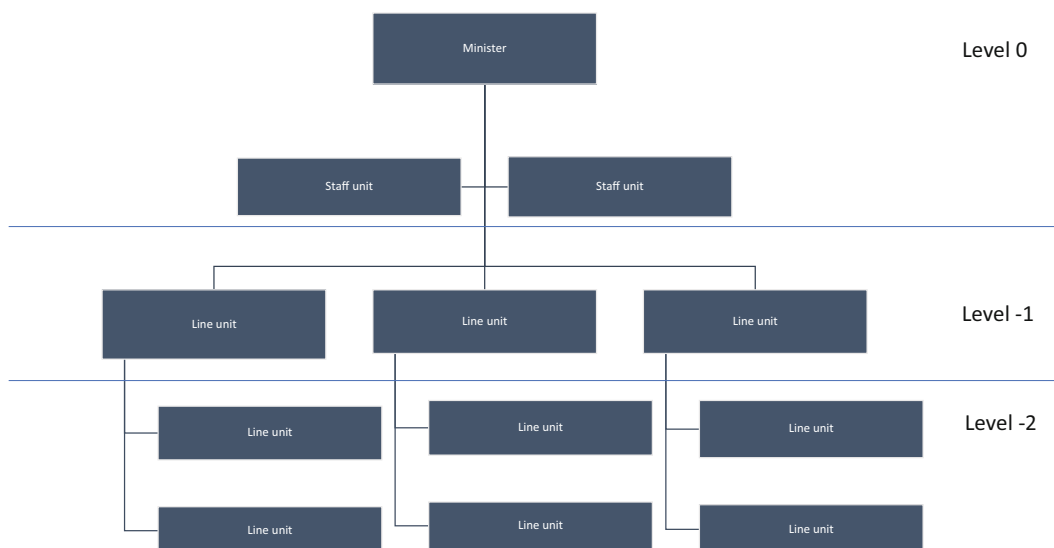
Peters (1988) our coding scheme captures events beyond the dichotomy of “birth” and “death.” Next to events that purely create or terminate a unit, our classification of transition events accounts for events that do preserve parts of units. Successions, mergers or absorptions, splits or secessions, and complex reorganizations are transition events where parts of existing units survive the event as parts of them are reconstituted during one of these events. For a full discussion of the different types of transition events, how they are distinguished from each other, as well as the descriptions of their coding, please see Carroll et al. (2020).

**Ministerial units**

The organogram below shows the ministerial units that we coded, distinguished as staff versus line units. Line units reside under the direct hierarchy of a “directorat generale” (France), “Abteilung” (Germany), “directoraat-generaal” (Netherlands), and “avdeling” (Norway) and are tasked with policy mandates. Staff units are units entrusted with generic tasks, for example, communication, legal services, finance, or personnel, or directly attached to the secretariat of the minister. Staff units are depicted here at level 0, but they were often also found at level -1, serving as staff units for individual directorates.

**Coding process and intercoder reliability**

The dataset was assembled under an Open Area Plus scheme and was funded by the national science commissions of the Netherlands, Germany, and France; the recoding of Norway followed that. The Principal Investigators, each representing one of the countries, jointly headed the research project. They were responsible for steering



**FIGURE A1** Stylized form of a ministerial department with staff and line units at levels 0, -1 and -2.



**TABLE A 1** Political determinants and shortest duration of ministerial units ( $N = 13,706$ ).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Polarization in parliament	-0.065*** [0.936] (0.007)				0.211*** [1.235] (0.008)
Cabinet's ideological turnover		-0.203*** [0.816] (0.004)			-0.118*** [0.888] (0.005)
Cabinet's extreme ideology			-0.251*** [0.777] (0.004)		-0.206*** [0.813] (0.005)
New PM's office experience				-0.624*** [0.535] (0.009)	-0.486*** [0.614] (0.011)
GDP per capita	0.408*** [1.505] (0.005)	0.359*** [1.431] (0.004)	0.378*** [1.459] (0.005)	0.362*** [1.437] (0.004)	0.266*** [1.306] (0.006)
Cabinet's tenure	-0.119*** [0.886] (0.004)	-0.056*** [0.944] (0.004)	-0.065*** [0.936] (0.004)	-0.184*** [0.831] (0.004)	-0.108*** [0.896] (0.005)
Unit's level	0.323*** [1.381] (0.008)	0.306*** [1.358] (0.008)	0.331*** [1.391] (0.008)	0.322*** [1.381] (0.008)	0.325*** [1.385] (0.008)
Random effects coefficients (country)					
France	0.235	0.287	0.235	0.329	0.221
Germany	-0.128	-0.041	-0.210	0.093	0.178
Netherlands	0.084	-0.048	-0.101	-0.041	-0.186
Norway	-0.191	-0.198	0.077	-0.382	-0.213
No. observations	76,696	76,696	76,696	76,696	76,696
No. events	74,923	74,923	74,923	74,923	74,923
Penalized AIC	10,509.08	12,866.33	13,043.59	14,436.34	16,884.47

Note: Entries are parameter estimates, their standard errors are in parentheses and hazard ratios are in square brackets. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  
Abbreviation: AIC, Akaike's information criteria.

**TABLE A 2** Political determinants and longest duration of ministerial units ( $N = 6637$ ).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Polarization in parliament	-0.198*** [0.819] (0.011)				0.298*** [1.347] (0.012)
Cabinet's ideological turnover		-0.313*** [0.731] (0.005)			-0.092*** [0.911] (0.007)
Cabinet's extreme ideology			-0.451*** [0.637] (0.005)		-0.387*** [0.679] (0.006)
New PM's office experience				-0.978*** [0.375] (0.011)	-0.788*** [0.454] (0.013)
GDP per capita	0.699*** [2.013] (0.006)	0.627*** [1.872] (0.005)	0.634*** [1.885] (0.005)	0.612*** [1.845] (0.005)	0.518*** [1.678] (0.006)
Cabinet's tenure	-0.042*** [0.958] (0.006)	0.029*** [1.031] (0.005)	0.049*** [1.051] (0.005)	-0.147*** [0.862] (0.005)	-0.062*** [0.939] (0.006)
Unit's level	0.357*** [1.429] (0.008)	0.357*** [1.429] (0.008)	0.334*** [1.396] (0.008)	0.360*** [1.433] (0.008)	0.341*** [1.406] (0.008)
Random effects coefficients (country)					
France	0.321	0.398	0.321	0.433	0.326
Germany	-0.342	-0.092	-0.444	0.230	0.205
Netherlands	0.193	-0.028	-0.086	-0.092	-0.276
Norway	-0.171	-0.277	0.211	-0.571	-0.255
No. observations	69,494	69,494	69,494	69,494	69,494
No. events	67,596	67,596	67,596	67,596	67,596
Penalized AIC	20,265.76	23,350.65	25,936.44	26,920.98	31,287.56

Note: Entries are parameter estimates, their standard errors are in parentheses and hazard ratios are in square brackets. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  
Abbreviation: AIC, Akaike's information criteria.

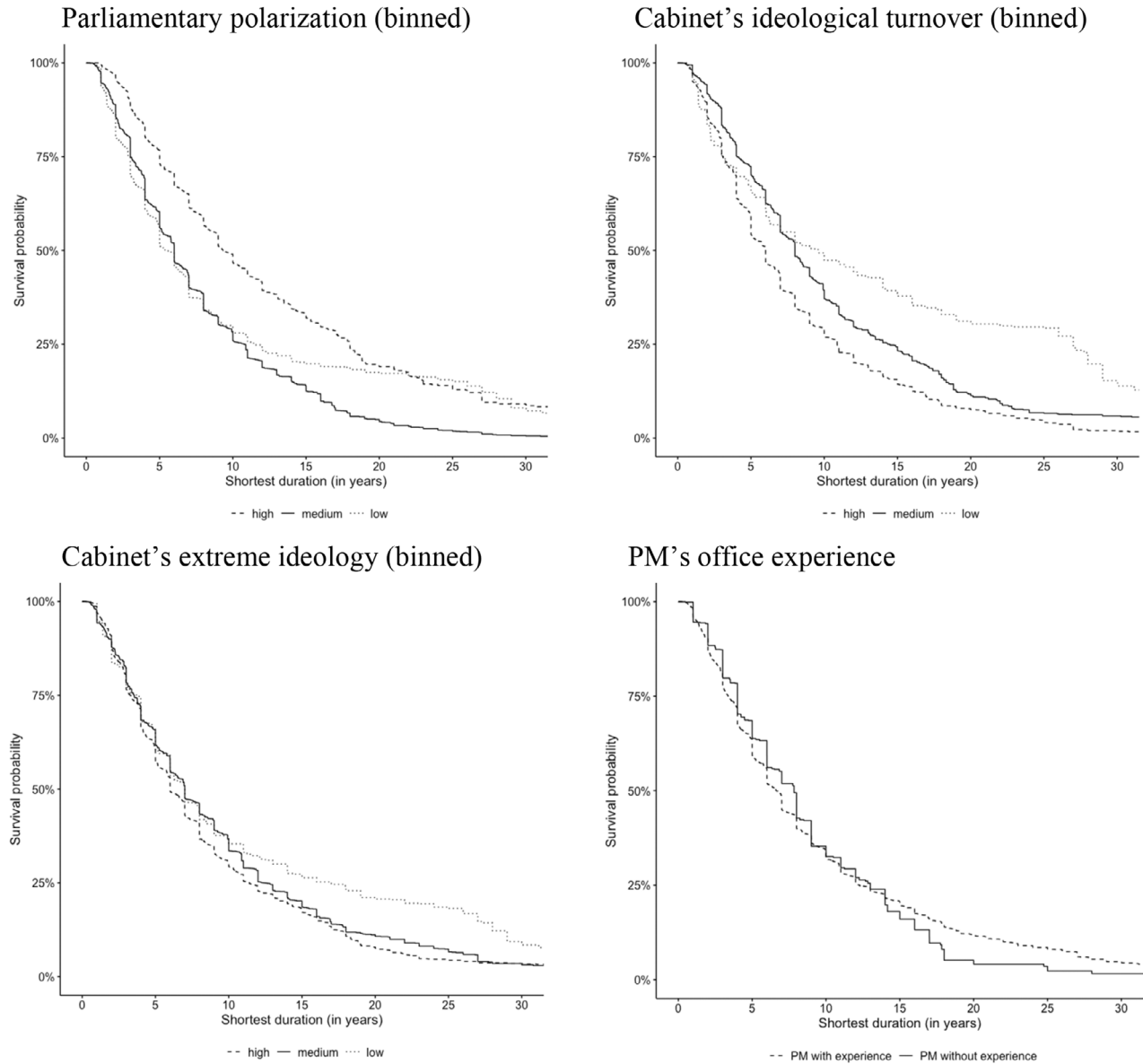
**TABLE A 3** Political determinants and authority duration of ministerial units (N = 7857).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Polarization in parliament	-0.027*** [0.972] (0.009)				0.358*** [1.431] (0.011)
Cabinet's ideological turnover		-0.286*** [0.751] (0.005)			-0.122*** [0.884] (0.008)
Cabinet's extreme ideology			-0.479*** [0.619] (0.006)		-0.425*** [0.653] (0.006)
New PM's office experience				-0.847*** [0.428] (0.011)	-0.622*** [0.536] (0.013)
GDP per capita	0.592*** [1.808] (0.005)	0.552*** [1.737] (0.005)	0.561*** [1.753] (0.005)	0.521*** [1.682] (0.005)	0.411*** [1.508] (0.006)
Cabinet's tenure	-0.021*** [0.978] (0.005)	0.057*** [1.059] (0.005)	0.097*** [1.102] (0.005)	-0.121 [0.886] (0.005)	-0.021*** [0.979] (0.005)
Unit's level	0.455*** [1.576] (0.008)	0.463*** [1.589] (0.008)	0.441*** [1.554] (0.008)	0.452*** [1.572] (0.008)	0.444*** [1.561] (0.008)
Random effects coefficients (country)					
France	-0.113	0.076	0.021	0.117	-0.077
Germany	0.669	0.668	0.305	0.826	0.836
Netherlands	0.029	-0.228	-0.387	-0.263	-0.494
Norway	-0.586	-0.516	0.061	-0.681	-0.264
No. observations	65,232	65,232	65,232	65,232	65,232
No. events	63,625	63,625	63,625	63,625	63,625
Penalized AIC	23,289.75	26,034.06	29,326.81	29,244.37	34,038.95

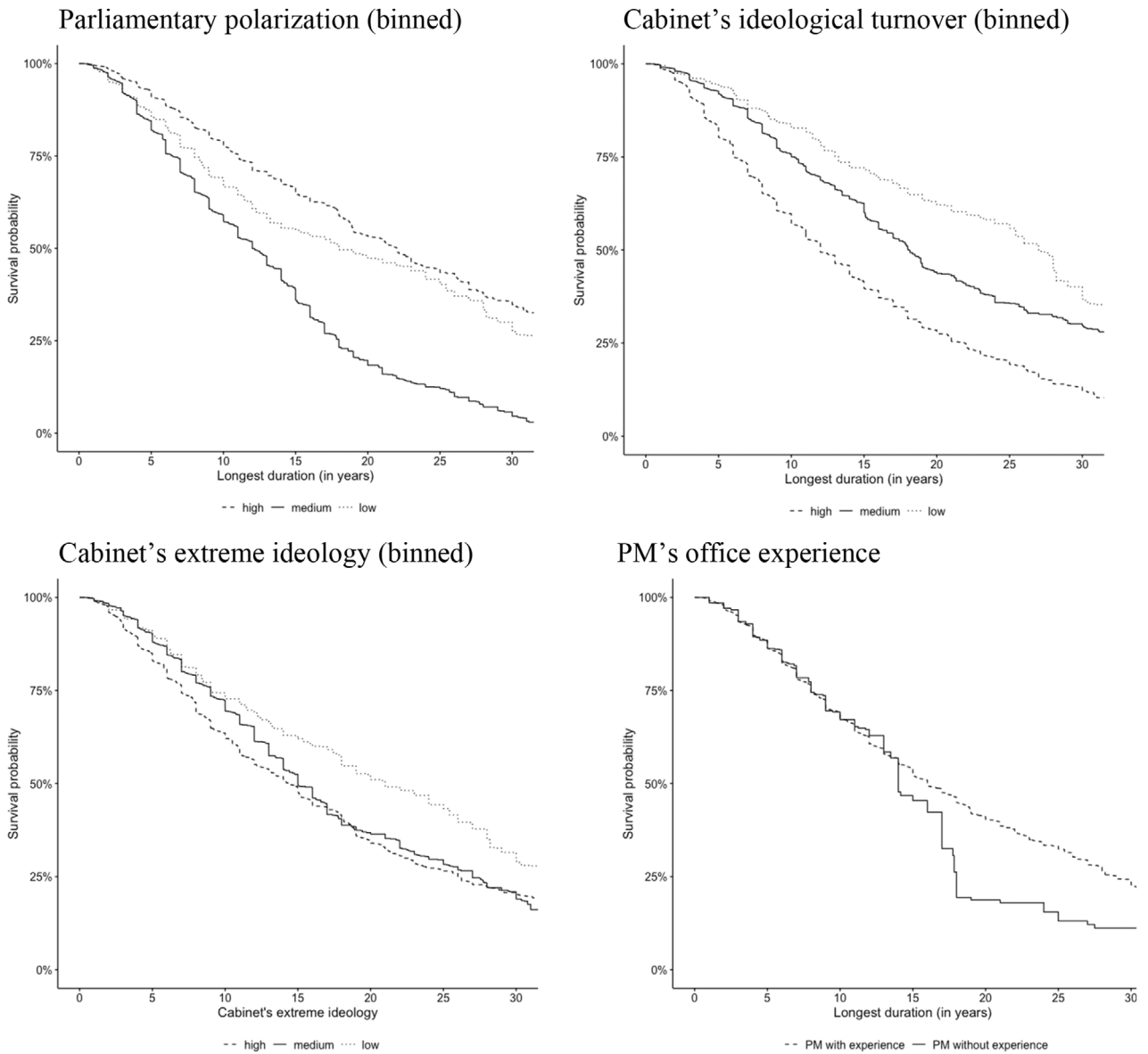
Note: Entries are parameter estimates, their standard errors are in parentheses and hazard ratios are in square brackets. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001. Abbreviation: AIC, Akaike's information criteria.

and overlooking their respective research teams that consisted of three postdocs, two PhD researchers and a research assistant holding a master's degrees. The PIs overlooked the development of the coding scheme, whereas the postdocs managed the data collection and coding process. To ensure a coherent application of the comparative joint coding scheme across coders and countries, all country teams participated in activities strengthening inter-coder reliability, including

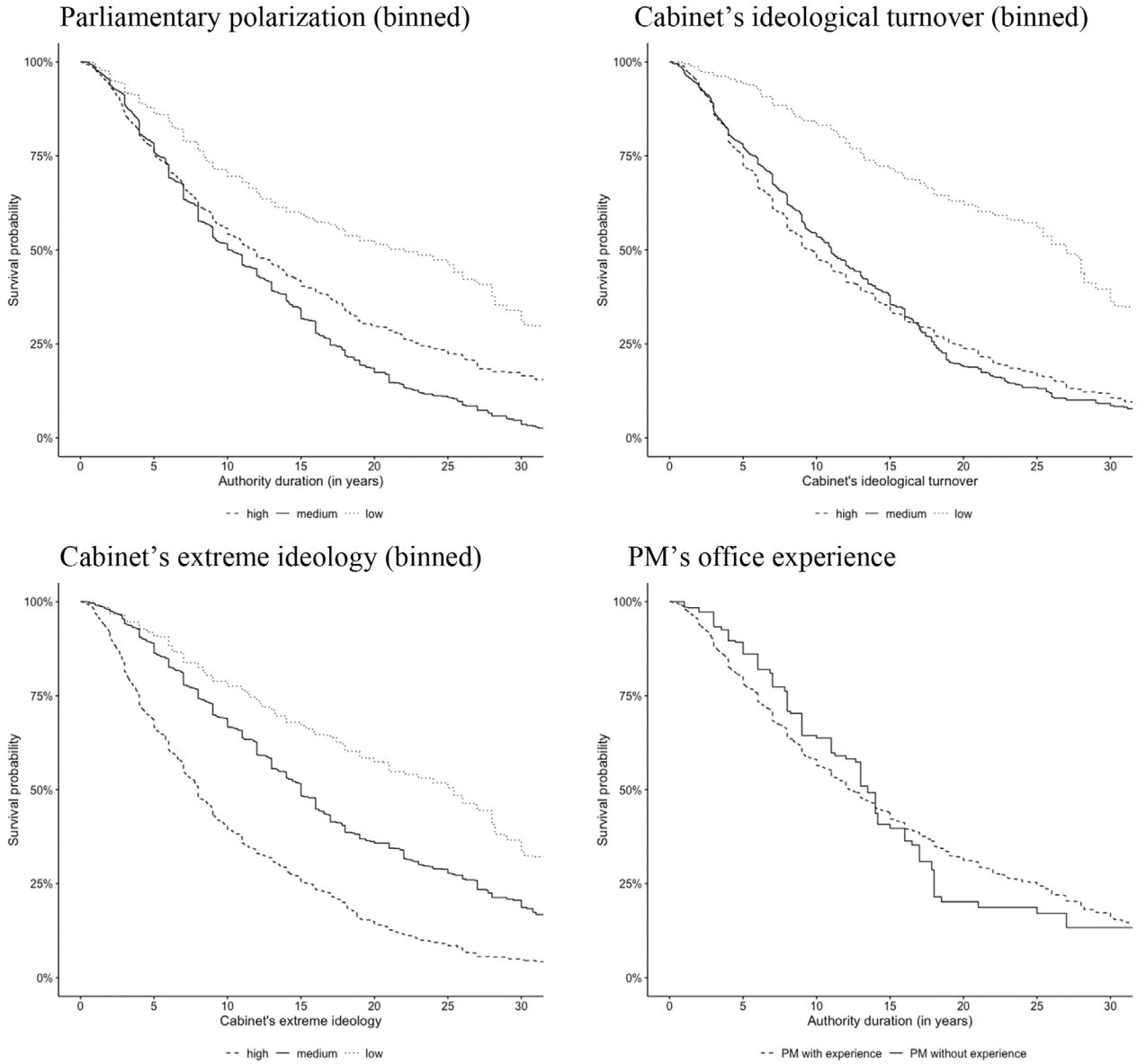
face-to-face meetings and Skype sessions across country teams. These were extensive meetings and took place at least every 3 months. The entire project team convened at least twice a year. At these meetings the most typical and unusual cases from all three countries were discussed and decisions were made about how to interpret the observations. These meetings did enhance the joint understanding and application of the coding rules.



**FIGURE A2** Survival probabilities for shortest duration (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).



**FIGURE A3** Survival probabilities for longest duration (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).



**FIGURE A4** Survival probabilities for authority duration (Kaplan–Meier estimates). Remaining covariates held constant at their mean (continuous variables) or mode (categorical variables).