

# 21. The party politics of policy endurance: parliamentary settlements in Norway, 1980–2021

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## INTRODUCTION

Important discourses of positivity in practices of public governance tend to focus on the executive branch, i.e., the performance of public organizations (Douglas et al., 2021: 444). This chapter moves the scope of positive public administration by connecting it to legislative performance and the role of party politics. It studies parliamentary settlements, defined here as *single-issue oversized majorities formed to engineer reforms that can endure a change of government*. When successful, this legislative praxis maximizes the ability to achieve lasting compromises, and thus ostensibly secure the endurance of public interest reforms. It can therefore be considered a praxis wherein political parties engage in collective action and the production of a common good (Ostrom, 2000).

Norwegian governments have for decades used parliamentary settlements (*stortingsforlik*) to reach across-the-aisle compromises on economic issues of structural importance, contested ethical issues, and responses to societal crises (Grønlie, 2017). In enabling robust policy responses to fundamental reform challenges such as tax and pension reforms, the settlement praxis has increased predictability and stabilized the planning horizon for citizens and businesses. It has also enabled civil servants to incrementally improve public policies, instead of having to prepare to tear up the script after a change of government. In deep policy controversies (Schon and Rein, 1993), for example on religious and immigration matters, the settlement praxis of engineering political compromise has moreover served to take the sting out of potentially debilitating conflicts and facilitated a more inclusive society. In times of national crisis – the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to major security threats – parliamentary settlements have helped shore up support for government crisis man-

agement strategies and have harnessed action from the citizenry. One could argue, therefore, that parliamentary settlements have enabled successful public governance: a careful process that has produced policies that have proven to be both programmatically and politically effective (cf., De la Porte et al., 2022).

“Parliamentary settlement” is not an established scientific construct. It is an attempt to capture an informal institution in Norwegian legislative politics. That said, Norwegian political actors frequently speak of and take pride in parliamentary settlements. As one illustration, two-time Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik wrote in his autobiography:

in certain major matters of far-reaching importance for the future [...] experience has shown that it has been necessary and desirable to build broad settlements between the Labour Party, the centrist parties, and the Conservative Party for the solutions to be politically sustainable under changing governments. (Bondevik, 2006: 193–194; authors’ translation)

The chapter describes Norway’s parliamentary settlement praxis as it has evolved over more than 40 years, between 1980 and 2021. We study the content and frequency of parliamentary settlements under governments of varying colors and parliamentary strength. We also investigate how invested political parties are in parliamentary settlements, by asking if settlement parties vote unequivocally in favor of the compromise solution, or if they signal their primary policies to the electorate. The answer has implications for how effectively parliamentary settlements silence partisan debates and “depoliticize” the problems at hand.

We also study whether parliamentary settlements do in fact produce reforms that “stick” – that is, endure over time, surviving changes of government – or if the compromises are short-lived and prone to be reversed or amended into oblivion (cf., Patashnik, 2003; Luetjens, 2023). The answer has implications for whether parliamentary settlements should be considered an instrumental or a symbolic practice. We also discuss if the parliamentary settlement praxis itself is sustained or if it is buckling under the international trend of norms of compromise losing ground to short-termist, winner-take-all political expediency (Aucoin, 2012).

Before systematically studying parliamentary settlements, the chapter situates this institution in relation to existing scholarship on legislative agreements and compromises in democratic systems. Additionally, as an empirical overture, parliamentary settlements are situated in relation to voting patterns and cross-bloc alignment in Norway’s parliament. In the concluding section, the chapter assesses the balance of advantages and disadvantages of parliamentary settlements from a democratic perspective.

## THINKING ABOUT PARLIAMENTARY SETTLEMENTS

Parliamentary settlements are a specific type of legislative agreement, that is, politically binding agreements to vote together on a particular bill or legislative package. Variants of legislative agreements exist in numerous contexts, for example, in the USA (Krehbiel, 1986), Denmark (Christiansen, 2008; Klemmensen, 2005), the Netherlands (Green-Pedersen, 2003) and the EU (Blauberger and Weiss, 2013).

In the parliamentary settlement variant, political parties compromise by deviating from their respective positions on a singular issue, with the governing parties deviating further than what would be necessary to achieve a simple majority. Their being limited to singular issues means that parliamentary settlements are distinct from vote-trading legislative agreements, wherein parties trade support on different issues, thus constructing a political connection between substantially unrelated proposals (Shepsle and Weingast, 1981).

Building on the definition above, the basic claim made in this chapter is that Norwegian parties compromise and make parliamentary settlements to construct cross-aisle oversized majorities to enhance the endurance of socially valuable outcomes. The four key terms here – cross-aisle oversized majorities; compromise; socially valuable outcomes; and endurance – invite us to engage with different literatures.

As a starting point, consider that legislative scholarship has established that oversized majorities and cross-partisan voting are rare; governing parties are incentivized to minimize the number of votes needed to secure the passage of legislative proposals. Reducing the number of interests that need to be accommodated gives the government greater control over policy and over the perks that can be had once in office (Riker, 1962). Furthermore, political parties usually seek to create voting coalitions with parties that have similar policy preferences (Hix and Noury, 2016: 249). Negotiating ad hoc issue-specific coalitions with the opposition has transaction costs, and it can damage the government's prospects of keeping their governing coalition together (De Swaan, 1973).

Comparative studies also show that government and opposition parties are more likely to vote together under minority cabinets and when the ideology of the cabinet is centrist (Louwerse et al., 2017; Hix and Noury, 2016). The political business cycle (Nordhaus, 1975) can also affect the frequency of cross-bloc voting (Alesina et al., 1992). Proximity to elections increases the opposition's incentive to highlight the shortfalls of the government's proposals, rather than sharing responsibility for them, especially when governments are electorally vulnerable (Schultz, 1995; Immergut and Abou-Chadi, 2014).

Parliamentary settlements are thus a relatively rare phenomenon in legislative politics, one designed not only to secure enactment but also to give the policy an optimal chance of surviving a change in government. To lengthen the odds of future policy reversals, a compromise of this sort should include the party most likely to hold the prime minister position at the next changing of the guard, typically the largest party on the opposite bloc. To effectively fortify against reversals, a cross-bloc political compromise should be explicit and publicly known to ‘lock in’ the party elites and hedge against possible cheating. Sometimes compromises like parliamentary settlements are reached in the pre-legislative phase during parliamentary committee proceedings and mentioned explicitly in committee protocols (Grønlie, 2017); other times, and in Denmark predominantly so, cross-bloc compromises are reached in informal meetings between government ministers and opposition legislators (Christiansen and Jensen, 2021).

Political parties engaging in cross-aisle compromise is not only a matter of strategic aims; institutions, values, and culture are also in play. Consociational democracy and corporatism are keywords for scholarly literatures that highlight this. Consociationalism describes political governance geared toward securing compromise and stability across ethnic and religious divides (Daalder, 1974; Lijphart, 1984); corporatism describes the regulation of class conflict (Schmitter, 1974; Katzenstein, 1985). Both literatures emphasize the prioritizing of stability over flexibility and adjustment: Consociationalism secures stability through proportional representation and rigid constitutions; corporatism through veto-conferring mechanisms. Both literatures also emphasize the role of elites, specifically elites being able to share power and compromise on what are, and how to reach, overarching societal goals.

Consider, moreover, regulation theory – a literature that focuses squarely on the attainment and endurance of socially valuable outcomes (Majone, 1997; Miller, 2000; Flinders and Buller, 2006). Its key question is how regulation can strike a balance between the public interest and the interests of the private sector in the provision of public goods (Christensen, 2010: 1). That a policy distributes benefits to some broad constituency is part of Patashnik’s (2003) definition of the public interest; other definitions typically include terms like the general interest, socially valuable outcomes, and rational execution of government duties.

Regulation theory’s concern for longevity stems from the notion that the public interest is a precarious thing. The public choice assumption is that regulatory policy will be exposed to distributive struggles where concentrated producer interests, through lobbying, trump dispersed consumer interests, resulting in “regulatory capture” (Stigler, 1971). This pessimism about what can be achieved through regulation makes “reforms that stick” an interesting concept. The “stick” literature investigates the fate of general interest reforms

in the face of evolving alliances, structures, and perceptions (Patashnik, 2003; Luetjens, 2023).

Credible commitment theory shifts the attention away from lobbying and regulatory agencies to the democratic arena and the short termism of elected officials – politicians who are willing to sacrifice good (regulatory) policy for electoral gains (Christensen, 2010). To solve the problem of short-termism, credible commitment theory proposes to either create strong decision rules or delegate decision making authority to autonomous agencies with clear mandates and professional expertise. Hence, there is an ambiguity to the way politicians are viewed. In day-to-day politics they are assumed to be short-termist, but at the same time, they are assumed to be able to tie themselves to the mast and conduct meta-policy that is aligned with the long-term public interest.

This conditional view of democratically elected agents' ability to take a long-term view dovetails with our own research interest and underlying assumption: Politicians and political parties have the ability to discriminate between, on the one hand, the mass of issues which are appropriately fought out on the minimum-winner arena following ordinary government-opposition voting dynamics, and on the other hand, the small subset of issues that deserve broad, cross-aisle compromises. The parliamentary settlement institution facilitates the latter; parliamentary settlements are, as we have already indicated, typically made over issues where predictability for business, citizens (and technocrats) is deemed to be crucial, and on issues where it is particularly important to avoid debilitating conflicts.

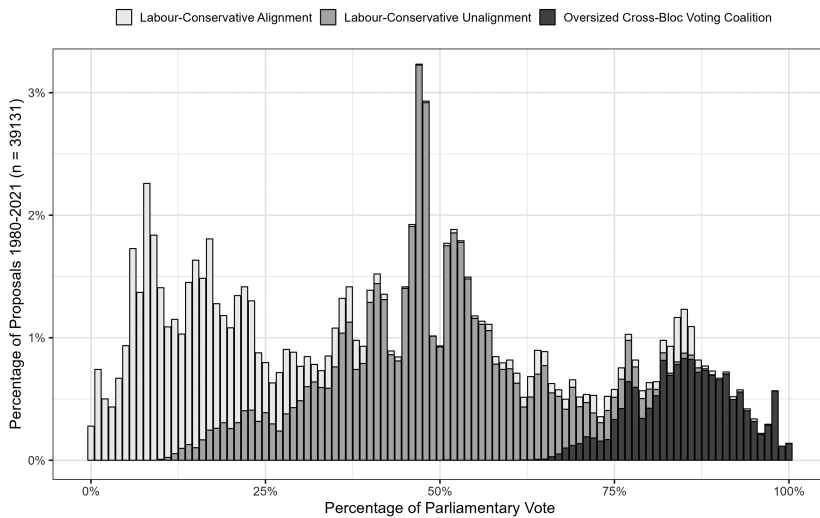
## OBSERVING PARLIAMENTARY SETTLEMENTS

We start by reviewing the voting patterns in the Norwegian parliament. For context, note that Norway's political system is characterized by negative parliamentarism, no power of dissolution (fixed elections every four years), and a proportional election system that results in a comparatively high number of effective parties. Multiparty and minority cabinets are frequent, and the left–right axis dominates government formation. Party discipline is strong; the members of parliament almost invariably vote in accordance with the party line and governing parties can generally rely on their MPs supporting the government's legislative proposals (Heidar, 2005). The parliament has only one chamber. To pass, legislative proposals must receive the support of a simple majority of present MPs; constitutional amendments require a two-thirds absolute majority.

Most proposals are put before parliament by the government; for example, budget proposals and proposals for new or amended laws. Individual MPs can also make proposals; for example, moving motions criticizing the government

or asking the government to follow a particular course of action. Such proposals are often voted down.

Figure 21.1 provides an overview of the 39,131 proposals the Norwegian parliament processed by roll call votes over the 40-year period from the 1980–81 to the 2020–21 session.<sup>1</sup> The proposals are ordered by the percentage of the parliamentary votes received, with the ones receiving few votes to the left and those receiving many votes to the right. The distribution in s 21.1 has two peaks: one at 5–15 percent of the vote, typically proposals supported by a single party, and one at 40–60 percent, which are minimal-losing and minimal-winning voting coalitions.



*Notes:* Gray marks cases of Labour-Conservative disagreement (Labour’s median MP voted for and the Conservative’s median MP voted against a proposal or vice-versa). White marks cases where the two parties (i.e., their median MPs) were aligned for or against a proposal. Black marks cases of voting coalitions that included Labour, the Conservatives, and any other parties in government and that would have been passed even if the main opposition party (the Conservatives or Labour) voted against the proposal (thus “oversized”).

*Source:* Author.

*Figure 21.1 Parliamentary proposals by the percentage of the votes received (1980–2021)*

## Cross-bloc Voting Coalitions

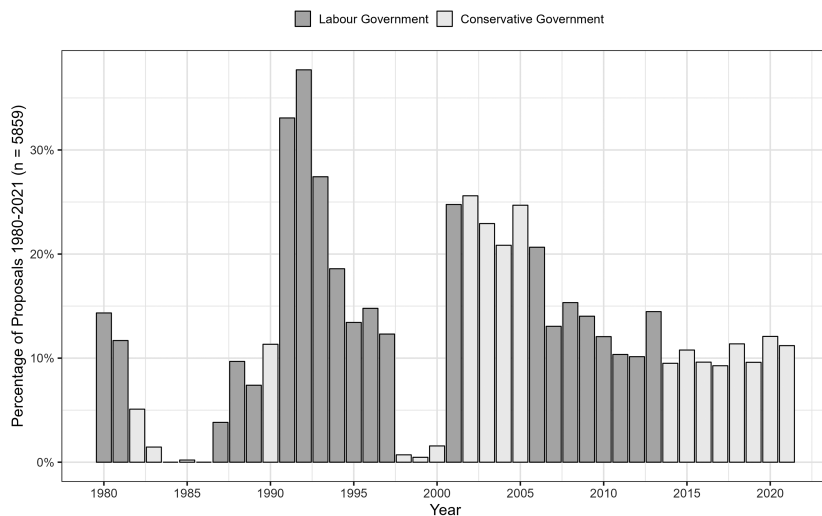
To study cross-bloc alignment in legislative voting in Norway, we investigate alignment between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. These parties have dominated their respective blocs of the political system since the 1930s and have never been in government together; they have alternated in holding office and invariably been each other's leading opposition in the parliament. With reference to Figure 21.1, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party were aligned in 51 percent of proposals; they agreed to reject a proposal more often than they agreed to support a proposal. Nonetheless, in as many as 19 percent of the proposals that were passed by roll call vote between 1980 and 2021, the main opposition party voted with the government. Labour-Conservative alignments cluster at the tail ends of the distribution in Figure 21.1. Proposals with support just above the 50 percent threshold are mostly gray, reflecting that minimum-winning voting coalitions, unsurprisingly, usually do not contain the opposition.

Cross-bloc voting coalitions do occur, though, and they come in two versions. The least common type, making up one fifth of all cross-bloc voting coalitions ( $n=1,445$ ), are cross-bloc *minimum-winning* voting coalitions, that is, proposals that would *not* have been passed without the votes of the main opposition party. The more common version, making up the remaining four fifths of the cases ( $n=5,859$ ), are proposals that would have been passed also *without* the main opposition party's votes (marked black). These are cross-bloc *oversized* voting coalitions, which we will now examine more closely. Later, we use enriched data to identify the subset of cross-bloc oversized voting coalitions that are *parliamentary settlements*, that is, cases where co-voting is the result of a compromise, not just agreement from the start.

## Oversized Cross-bloc Voting Coalitions

Figure 21.2 organizes the cross-bloc oversized majority votes by year and government, showing their percentage share of the number of proposals voted over by parliament. Oversized cross-bloc majority voting coalitions peaked in the early 1990s under a minority Labour government. Between 2001 and 2021, a period with coalition governments with strong parliamentary support, we see a gradual decline in the frequency of oversized cross-bloc majority voting coalitions.

The likelihood of oversized cross-bloc majority voting coalitions is affected by the government's parliamentary strength and party composition. Analysis of variance using a simple regression model (not reported) shows that cross-bloc oversized voting is 8 percent more likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) under minority governments compared to majority governments (consistent with Louwse et



Source: Author.

*Figure 21.2 Cross-bloc oversized voting coalitions (n=5859) as percentage of proposals voted on (n=39131) by year and government*

al., 2017; Hix and Noury, 2016) and 11 percent more likely ( $p < 0.001$ ) under Labour-led compared to Conservative governments. This suggests that the conservatives agree more often with proposals from the social democrats than the other way round. The model only shows a slight difference of 1.5 percent in the likelihood of cross-bloc oversized voting coalitions between single-party and coalition governments ( $p < 0.1$ ).

The policy areas where cross-bloc oversized majority voting occurs most frequently are politically and economically salient areas that are frequently on the parliament's agenda but not particularly divisive between the right and the left in Norway; for example, international affairs and defense policy. At the low end of frequency, are education policy and health policy, which are more divisive along the left–right divide.

## MECHANISMS FOR PARLIAMENTARY SETTLEMENTS

Recall that parliamentary settlements are single-issue oversized majorities formed with a specific intention, namely *to engineer reforms that can endure*



*a change of government.* Most cross-bloc oversized majority votes do not satisfy this part of the definition of parliamentary settlements; they involve the government and the opposition voting together because they agreed from the start, not because they bargained and compromised to forestall future policy reversals. It therefore requires information beyond voting data to identify the subset of cross-bloc oversized voting coalitions that qualify as parliamentary settlements.

As our ambition is to capture an unregulated but nevertheless institutionalized practice in Norwegian legislative decision making, it is important that the political parties and MPs consider a cross-bloc voting coalition to be a parliamentary settlement. They publicize this kind of political agreement in parliamentary committee protocols, in speeches in the parliamentary debate, or through press releases or media interviews. The government and the opposition thereby signal that the issue in question is of national importance, that they have negotiated, and that a compromise has been reached that should endure even a change of government.

Following up a methodology used in a previous study (Grønlie, 2017), we surveyed administrative officers from the Norwegian parliament, including ones working for parliamentary committees, asking them to identify parliamentary settlements. In addition, we searched in online archives of parliamentary committee protocols and government white papers, memoirs from political leaders, and media archives for mentions of “settlements” (or synonyms).<sup>2</sup>

To reliably delineate the parliamentary settlement phenomenon, we cross-checked all candidate cases identified based on the qualitative data against our list of cases of oversized cross-bloc voting coalitions (n=5,859). To avoid incorporating cases of vote trading, we eliminated all compound proposals, like budget agreements, leaving only single-issue proposals. The result is 21 cases of parliamentary settlements between 1980 and 2021.

To summarize, our method of funneling parliamentary settlements out from other cases of compromises resulted in our identifying cases with the following characteristics: they were passed with the votes (of the median MP) from the Conservatives and Labour and any other parties that were part of the government; they would have been passed even if the main opposition party (the Conservatives or Labour)<sup>3</sup> voted against the proposal; they were considered as parliamentary settlements by the political parties and communicated as such to the public; and they were constrained to a single issue. Table 21.1 provides an overview of the 21 instances of parliamentary settlements we ended up identifying.

Table 21.1 *Parliamentary settlements in Norway, 1980–2021*

Year	Name	Substance	Policy area (CAP)	Minority remarks by main opposition party (% of all remarks)	Minority proposals by main opposition party	Percentage of parliament that voted for the settlement proposals	PM party and Government type (Coal.=Coalition, SP=Single party, Maj.=majority, Min.=minority)	Continued or reversed by the next government
1984	Defense and security policy	Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, nuclear free zone in the Nordics, NATO deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles in Norway	Defense	1 (33%)	1	100%	Cons. (Coal., Maj.)	Continued
1984	Statoil	Revising the organization of the Norwegian state's involvement in the petroleum sector by establishing the state's Direct Financial Interest as a separate entity from the state-owned company Statoil	Energy	8 (100%)	0	100%	Cons. (Coal., Maj.)	Not mentioned
1987	Tax reform I	Incremental reduction in rent tax deduction, and lowering of the tax rate in the highest tax bracket	Macroeconomics	58 (31%)	0	100%	Labour (SP, Min.)	Primarily continued
1990	The Oil Fund	Establishing fund for state earnings from the petroleum sector, rules on fund management and spending	Macroeconomics	0	0	95%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Not mentioned

Year	Name	Substance	Policy area (CAP)	Minority remarks by main opposition party (% of all remarks)	Minority proposals by main opposition party	Percentage of parliament that voted for the settlement proposals	PM party and Government Type (Coal.=Coalition, SP=Single party, Maj.=majority, Min.=minority)	Continued or reversed by the next government
1991	Tax reform II	Lower tax rates, removal or reduction of multiple tax deduction mechanisms, dual system for income tax (capital and employment income)	Macroeconomics	461 (45%)	4	90%	Labour (SP Min.)	Primarily continued
2001	Petroleum	Partial privatization of Statoil	Energy	0	0	75%	Labour (SP Min.)	Continued
2003	Kindergarten	Kindergarten for all children, equal treatment of public and private kindergartens, price cap on kindergarten fees	Social Welfare	2 (50%)	1	100%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Not mentioned
2003	Supervisory agencies	Relocation (decentralization) of eight state supervisory agencies	Government Operations	34 (46%)	0	77%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Primarily continued
2004	Education reform	Compromise on the use of the "new Norwegian" written standard in primary education	Education	85 (37%)	6	81%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Continued
2004	Predatory animals I	Established zones and stock limits for wolf, bear, lynx, and wolverine	Environment	1 (2%)	0	87%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Continued

Year	Name	Substance	Policy area (CAP)	Minority remarks by main opposition party (% of all remarks)	Minority proposals by main opposition party	Percentage of parliament that voted for the settlement proposals	PM party and Government Type (Coal.=Coalition, SP.=Single party, Maj.=majority, Min.=minority)	Continued or reversed by the next government
2007	Pension reform	Principles for an economically sustainable pension system, flexible pension age	Social Welfare	8 (7%)	0	77%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Continued
2008	Climate policy I	Pollution reduction targets and attribution of costs before 2020	Environment	4 (5%)	0	100%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Continued
2008	Purpose of public education	Changed the public education law to be religion neutral, while keeping Christian cultural aspects	Education	0	0	100%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Primarily continued
2008	Separation of Church and state	Constitutional change reorganizing the Norwegian Church as an organization outside of the Norwegian government administration	Civil Rights	14 (18%)	1	100%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Continued
2011	Predatory animals II	Changes to bear stock limits, clarifications of parts of the 2004 settlement, continuation	Environment	NA	0	100%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Continued
2012	Climate policy II	Pollution reduction targets, goals, and attribution of costs before 2020, long term targets, continuation of 2008 settlement	Environment	0	0	88%	Labour (Coal., Maj.)	Continued

Year	Name	Substance	Policy area (CAP)	Minority remarks by main opposition party (% of all remarks)	Minority proposals by main opposition party	Percentage of parliament that voted for the settlement proposals	PM party and Government type (Coal.=Coalition, SP=Single party, Maj.=majority, Min.=minority)	Continued or reversed by the next government
2015	Police reform	Reduction in number of police districts, increased focus on core tasks	Law and Crime	131 (64%)	12	78%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Primarily reversed
2016	Tax reform III	Lower wealth tax, lower minimum income and corporate tax, introduction of a financial activity tax, transparency of corporate ownership register	Macroeconomics	5 (7%)	0	98%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Primarily continued
2016	Integration reform	Better cooperation and clearer lines between immigration sector institutions and local actors, better communication of rights and responsibilities to migrants	Immigration	NA	0	99%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Not mentioned

Year	Name	Substance	Policy area (CAP)	Minority remarks by main opposition party (% of all remarks)	Minority proposals by main opposition party	Percentage of parliament that voted for the settlement proposals	PM party and Government Type (Coal.=Coalition, SP.=Single party, Maj.=majority, Min.=minority)	Continued or reversed by the next government
2016	Predatory animals III	Changes to wolf zones, and wolf stock limit (lower limit and less area), continuation	Environment	0	0	93%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Primarily continued
2020	Petroleum tax breaks	Changes in the petroleum tax law, tax breaks for 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19 pandemic impacts on sector	Macroeconomics	1 (3%)	3	92%	Cons. (Coal., Min.)	Not mentioned

Source: Authors.

## WHERE DO SETTLEMENTS ORIGINATE AND WHAT TOPICS DO THEY COVER?

In most cases, the proposals were introduced to the parliament by the government – through a white paper (n=13), a draft resolution (n=1), or a bill (n=5). These settlements were reached through deliberation in standing parliamentary committees. In two cases (predatory animals 2011; integration reform 2016), the proposals were introduced by individual MPs, with compromises having been negotiated outside the parliamentary institutions prior to the proposals' introduction in the parliament.

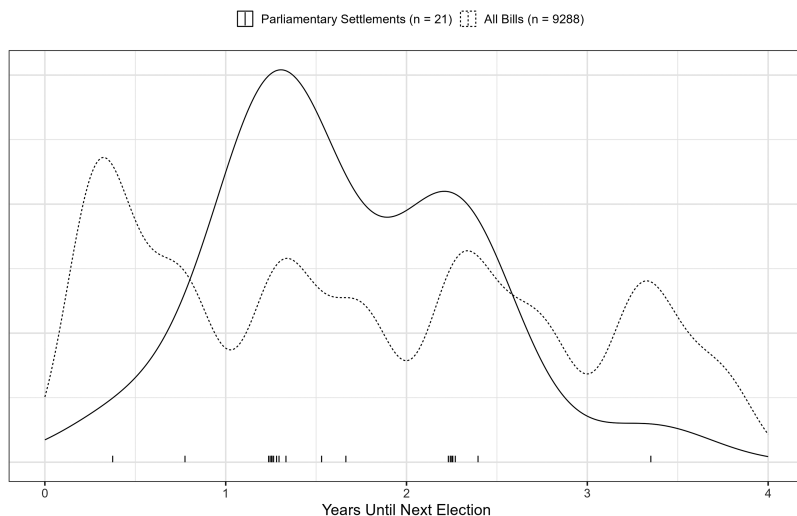
The settlements cover a range of different Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) major topics (Baumgartner et al., 2019), but many concern environmental policy (n=5) and macroeconomics (n=5). It appears that Norway's political system has developed a tradition for making settlements on particularly contested or salient issues within these broader policy areas. Examples of environmental policy are the three settlements on the management of the population of predatory animals and two on managing climate change; similarly, the macroeconomic topic encompasses a series of reforms to the tax system. Furthermore, government involvement in the petroleum sector is highly salient in Norway, hence there have been four settlements covering the energy supply and/or macroeconomic dimensions of petroleum policy.

Two of the parliamentary settlements are related to the government handling of a temporary crisis, namely the 2016 integration reform, which was related to the Syrian refugee crisis, and the 2020 petroleum tax relief, which incentivized petroleum investments during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## WHEN IN POLITICAL TIME ARE SETTLEMENTS NEGOTIATED?

Office-seeking behavior increases with proximity to an election (Alesina et al., 1992). It has been observed that parties change both their fiscal (Fortunato and Loftis, 2018) and policymaking behavior (Schultz, 1995), even when the legislature has staggered membership renewal (Willumsen et al., 2018). As parliamentary settlements constitute policy seeking and not office-seeking behavior, it is no surprise that 90 percent were made with more than one year left until the next election. Figure 21.3 juxtaposes the timing of settlements and all other parliamentary bills within Norway's fixed four-year parliamentary electoral cycle. While ordinary bills peak during the last year of the electoral cycle, settlements peak earlier (mean = 1.67 years until election).

Norway is one of few parliamentary democracies where elections happen at strictly fixed intervals without the possibility of any actor to call early elec-



*Notes:* Vertical lines on the x-axis denote the exact timing of observed settlements; the density curve shows a kernel smoothed estimate of the proportion of observed settlements ( $n=21$ ) and all bills ( $n=9288$ ) within a time interval on the x-axis.

*Source:* Author.

*Figure 21.3* Density curve of the time left until the next election (in years) when parliamentary settlements are made (solid line) and when all bills are voted on (dotted line)

tions (Fortunato and Loftis, 2018). Therefore, the parties know exactly when the next election will take place. This enables the parliamentary settlement, visible in Figure 21.3, as the threshold for cross-bloc cooperation is lower when elections are further away. Conversely, this threshold should be higher in parliamentary systems where opposition parties need to adapt their behavior to the possibility of early or snap elections called by the government when they have an electoral advantage.

This speaks to Louwerse and colleagues' (2017) observation that there is less government-opposition voting in countries with party-bloc alternating government change after elections. We suggest that whereas an entrenched party-bloc system makes cross-the-aisle agreements, such as parliamentary settlements, more difficult to achieve, this obstacle can be overcome when elections are further away and their timing is more certain. However, as the looming shadow of elections draw closer, the party-bloc divide becomes more



salient, polarizing decision making, thus darkening the outlook towards new parliamentary settlements.

### **Settlements by Type of Government**

Conservative-led governments have achieved more parliamentary settlements with their main rival ( $n=12$ ) than Labour-led governments have ( $n=9$ ). While governing, the conservatives have averaged one settlement every 1.7 years and Labour one every 2.7 years. Recall that this differs from cross-bloc voting more generally, which is predominantly driven simply by agreement from the start; cross-bloc voting occurs about twice as often under Labour governments as under conservative governments. We cannot on current evidence explain this discrepancy. It is possible that the conservatives are more willing and able than Labour to negotiate cross-bloc compromises.

The two most extreme parties along the left–right axis, the Socialist Left Party and the Progress Party, have each participated in fewer than half of the settlements. Both participate most frequently when the government is politically “close,” but the Socialists have participated in settlements under a conservative government (e.g., the kindergarten settlement), just as the Progressives have participated in settlements under a Labour government (e.g., the separation of Church and state settlement).

Majority governments have achieved more settlements while governing (one every 1.4 years) than minority governments have (one every 2.3 years). The transaction costs of negotiating settlements are likely highest for minority governments, which will have to reach compromises with more opposition parties than a majority government to achieve a settlement.

### **HOW COMMITTED ARE THE POLITICAL PARTIES?**

As discussed in the next main section, the ultimate test of how invested the main opposition party is in a parliamentary settlement, is whether it continues or reverses the policy after a change of government. However, a party can also signal its level of dedication in the legislative stage: Do settlement parties vote unequivocally in favor of the settlement, or do they vote “disloyally” first, to signal their primary policies to the electorate, and only subsidiarily for the compromise solution? Strictly joint proposals by all settlement parties are most common, occurring in two thirds of the 21 settlements. In the remaining third of the cases, the main opposition party only voted for the settlement proposal after having signaled a deviating primary policy by having minority propositions put forward and then rejected by vote. Labour did this five times and the Conservatives twice while in opposition.

Settlement partners can also signal reluctance about the settlement solution more subtly, by writing minority remarks in the protocols from the parliamentary committees where settlements are negotiated. This is a common practice; it is something opposition parties did on three fourths of the 21 settlements. The outlier observations are the 1991 tax reform, where the Conservative Party made 461 minority remarks and the 2015 police reform, where the Labour Party made 131 remarks in the committee. Only in about one quarter of the settlements that passed through a committee did the main opposition party refrain from making minority remarks, thus signaling unconditional dedication to the parliamentary settlement. Overall, the Labour Party has produced a larger portion of the opposition's minority remarks to settlements (mean = 31 percent) than the Conservative Party (mean = 13 percent). Moreover, when in opposition the Labour Party only refrained from making minority remarks in two out of eleven (the oil fund and predatory animals III) committee-processed settlements (18 percent), while the Conservative Party had no remarks outside those of the majority in three out of eight (petroleum, purpose of education, climate policy II) committee-processed settlements when they were in opposition (37.5 percent).

## ARE SETTLEMENTS ON THE RISE OR IN DECLINE?

That the total number of settlements between 1980 and 2021 is 21 means that, on average, they have occurred about once every two years. Yet, more settlements have occurred in the second half of the observation period, that is, between 2000 and 2021, than between 1980 and 1999 (75 percent and 25 percent, respectively). That pattern belies the oft-voiced impression that partisan polarization has increased during this period. Upon closer inspection and with provisos due to the small number of observations, one can argue that the settlement institution has in fact been in decline from about the time of the 2015 police reform (which was later primarily reversed). The settlements that have been reached since then have in a sense been low-hanging fruit; they have concerned government responses to temporary crises and the continuation of a settlement on predatory animals policy that had originally been negotiated by earlier governments. An aborted attempt in 2021 to negotiate a third instalment of the series of climate policy settlements that was deemed a “political bellyflop” by the leader of the Green Party supports this interpretation (Fjeld et al., 2021).

We cannot on this basis say with certainty that the parliamentary settlement practice is in decline. If it is, though, it would not be entirely surprising. An established and broadly valued informal consensus institution such as parliamentary settlements might well be a promising enabler of successful public policy. Still, its sustainability might be counteracted by meso conditions like

a new political culture and micro conditions like new political parties and leaders (Douglas et al., 2021: 443). Across democratic systems, the imperatives associated with norms and traditions of compromise appear to be losing ground to the imperatives associated with a volatile electorate and a polarized party-political culture, wherein short-term electoral wins and gains are valued higher than successful public policy (Aucoin, 2012).

## PARLIAMENTARY SETTLEMENTS AND POLICY ENDURANCE

As noted earlier, parliamentary settlements are reforms engineered to endure beyond changes of government. That is, their relative endurance is a pivotal success measure above and beyond their immediate programmatic and political impacts (cf., DelaPorte et al., 2022). So, do parliamentary settlements in fact produce policies and reforms that “stick” or are the compromises short-lived, reversed after a change of government? Investigating policy reversals is complicated, with subjectivity involved in deciding on the time frame, the level of change that amounts to a reversal, and the choice of data sources. For the purposes of this chapter, we analyzed the contents of government platforms and prime ministers’ inaugural addresses in parliament; if either state support for a settlement passed under the previous government, we consider it “continued” and in the opposite case, we consider it “reversed.” If the statements are ambiguous, we consider the settlements “primarily continued” or “primarily reversed,” depending on the exact wording, consulting with academic and field experts when necessary.

There were five cases where a settlement was not mentioned in either government platforms or the prime ministers’ inaugural addresses. Our interpretation is that these have also been continued. Otherwise, the government, which is after all led by a party that recently voted for the settlement, would have seen reason to say otherwise.

Using this approach, we judged nine of the 21 settlements to have been continued by the subsequent government, six primarily continued, one primarily reversed, and none entirely reversed. The overall picture is thus that settlements “stick” in the sense that they at least make it over the first critical hurdle, which is a change of government.

The only case of a settlement being “primarily reversed” was the 2015 police reform. This reform was deeply contested at the time of legislation as the minority Conservative government only managed to secure the support of the Labour Party in addition to its usual centrist collaboration partners. Despite eventually voting for the proposal, Labour, as the major opposition party, signaled reluctance about the reform by making numerous critical remarks in

the committee proceedings and by putting alternative policies to vote in the parliament.

Generally, what happens at the legislative stage appears to be a strong predictor of the endurance of a policy decided through a parliamentary settlement. In only three of the 20 enduring settlements, did the main opposition party put an alternative proposal to the vote; 14 had strictly joint proposals by all settlement partners. In the outlier case of the reversal of the 2015 police reform settlement, which the Centre Party voted against, the reversal was made by a minority Labour/Centre Party government that came to power in 2021. The Centre Party had voted against the settlement in 2015, as had the government's collaboration partner, the Socialist Party. This accentuates that: whereas parliamentary settlements are positive institutions that create robust, government turnover enduring policy, they are only as sticky as their negotiated legislative foundations.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT TO MAKE OF PARLIAMENTARY SETTLEMENTS?

Our analysis identified 21 settlements over four decades. That the overwhelming majority of these settlements have “stuck” over time is notable because the issues in question were highly contested public interest reforms. Pension and tax reforms, for example, have been the subject of several parliamentary settlements despite their being inherently disputed along the left-right axis. They are also topics where all parts of the political landscape have emphasized the need for predictability for citizens and businesses and the fiscal position of the state. The 1987 and 1991 tax reform settlements are cases in point. The initial settlement cut through the Gordian knot of reducing tax breaks on interest payments which leading politicians had sought to reduce since the late 1970s (Tranøy, 2000). By 1991, the main principles of broadening the tax base and reducing rates were established, becoming mainstays of Norway's tax system ever since.

Other parliamentary settlements relate to the governance challenges presented by the need to secure the state's claims to revenues from the production of oil and gas and to handle the resulting windfall profits. Institutionalizing Statoil and “The State's Direct Financial Interest” were major reforms negotiated through settlements, as was setting up the widely lauded oil fund institution as an account in the Central Bank in 1990 to avoid overheating Norway's economy (Øvald and Tranøy, 2022).

Examples of settlements over contested ethical issues are the separation of Church and state and the reform that secularized the object clause of primary education, both from 2008. The 2003 kindergarten reform secured full kindergarten coverage in response to long-standing demands from feminists

and other equal rights advocates. It was also of great economic importance seeing as it facilitated Norway achieving one of the highest rates of female labor force participation in the Western world (World Bank, 2023). Finally, settlements concerning security policy and pandemic management bookend the 1980–2021 chronology.

Our contention is that the parliamentary settlement institution has been crucial for producing widely valued, but not uncontested, societal outcomes in Norway. But how can we more generally assess the legitimacy of the institution of settlements? One argument is that they increase democratic legitimacy by including the opposition also when not necessary on policy with wide economic and/or value implications for all citizens. Thus, it can be seen as a way of limiting the democratic dilemma of the tyranny of the majority. The settlement praxis can also be a way of securing support and trust for state institutions that involve increased government involvement and intrusion in the life of the citizens (i.e., tax, pension, and public education reforms). These are issue areas that impact the life conditions of all current and future citizens, thus requiring increased democratic legitimacy. In parliamentary settlements this is secured by including opposition parties in the political process when producing wide-ranging policy reforms on issues such as tax, pensions, and education. Arguably this produces societal outcomes that may not be seen as the ideal solution for a slim majority of elected representatives, but rather as an acceptable solution for a larger majority. Hence, the settlement institution, aided by the temporal security of fixed election timing and the resort to oversized majorities that this implies, enables the political system to overcome cycles of competitive politics for short-term decision making and resource allocation.

A possible counter argument concerns the transparency of democratic politics. Some might consider parliamentary settlements a version of backroom politics, that is, elites making secret deals, thus muddying the water for outside observers, and making it difficult for voters to hold politicians accountable by effectively attributing blame and credit for successful and failed policies. In our view, though, the connection to backroom politics is misguided. Practically all parliamentary settlements were negotiated in parliamentary committees, and all were voted over in the plenary. Public protocols thus provide outsider observers and the posterity with accounts of the arguments representatives and parties put forward, including minority remarks and alternative proposals. Regarding accountability the picture is less clear. The more all-compassing the political compromise, the harder it is for citizens to use their votes to reward outcomes they are happy with and punish outcomes they are unhappy with. This concern over accountability is not, however, sufficiently weighty to change our overall conclusion that the institution of parliamentary settlements do indeed contribute to the Norwegian polity's ability to secure "procedurally

and distributively fair processes of tackling societal conflicts; and robust and resilient ways of coping with threats and risks” (Douglas et al., 2021: 442).

## NOTES

1. The number of proposals processed by roll call votes per year varies between 258 and 2,786, with numbers increasing over time due to procedural changes in the late 1980s regarding voting over proposals from MPs and in 1997 regarding voting over budget proposals (Sikt, 2022). Proposals do not equal bills; several proposals are often voted over for singular bills, with initial proposals being rejected before one or multiple proposals receive support from a majority. The 39,131 proposals in Figure 21.1 are nested within 9,288 bills. Note that in displaying only roll call votes, Figure 21.1 hides the fact that unanimous agreement is the single most common outcome, occurring in about one in four decisions in the legislature. From 2010 to 2021 the parliament passed 5,807 of 24,255 proposals (24 percent) by unanimity. Instead of being put to a vote in the plenary, unanimity proposals are either settled in the committees and simply tabled in the plenary chamber, or they are trivial proposals that must be decided in the plenary for procedural reasons.
2. The term settlement (“forlik”) was first used in the 2001 agreement on state involvement in the petroleum sector and state ownership in Statoil. Since then, “settlement” is the term politicians use to describe most cases that satisfy our criteria for parliamentary settlements. In the 1980s and 1990s, politicians referred to cases that fit our criteria as “broad agreements” or “compromise agreements.”
3. For the 1997–2000 Bondevik I government where both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party were out of government, we consider whether the vote would have passed without either one of these parties voting for the proposals.

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