

The executive trump card: government-initiated votes of confidence in parliamentary democracies

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Scholars have traditionally considered government-initiated votes of confidence a powerful tool that parliamentary executives can leverage to achieve policy and electoral goals. Yet, these votes remain a relatively understudied procedure, partly because theoretical efforts at making better sense of their use have not been matched by efforts at gathering comparative evidence vis-à-vis their employment. I draw upon new data from 14 parliamentary democracies (1945–2021) to propose a more clear-cut definition and classification of government-initiated votes of confidence, with the goal of refining our understanding of how they are employed in practice. I review the institutional rules (type of vote, initiating power, decision rule, consequences of failure), present some figures on the use of the procedure and cases of failure by country, and distinguish four applications and the related benefits/costs. Two scenarios in which executives can exploit this instrument to facilitate the emergence of or foster cohesion in legislative majorities are identified (“majority-making” and “whipping/cohesive” confidence), as well as two additional ways in which this mechanism can aid executives (“signaling” and “technical” confidence).

Keywords: votes of confidence; executive power; legislatures; parliamentarism; coalition governance.

Received 16 October 2024; revised 19 May 2025; accepted 26 May 2025

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1. Introduction

“Article 49.3 was included in the Constitution to *deal with situations where there is no parliamentary majority*. Everyone had one, except me. So I was the only legitimate [user].”

“All of my colleagues, including Manuel Valls now, have come to use the 49.3 to *brutalize or intimidate their own majority*.”

(Former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard
RT France, 26 May 2016)¹

In this 2016 interview, former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard discusses the use of Article 49.3, which allows the government to make the passing of specific bills an issue of confidence before the National Assembly. While referring to the same procedure —the vote of confidence procedure— he describes two distinct situations in which French prime ministers have resorted to this instrument. In his case, he says, Article 49.3 was employed to deal with the *lack* of a parliamentary majority. Between May 1988 and May 1991, Rocard was indeed the leader of two single-party minority cabinets (Rozenberg 2022), calling a total of 29 votes of confidence. In Manuel Valls’ case, he maintains, Article 49.3 was instead employed to “brutalize or intimidate” the *existing* parliamentary majority. Unlike Rocard, Prime Minister Valls led three surplus majority coalition cabinets between April 2014 and December 2016 (Guinaudeau and Persico 2021), calling a total of eight votes of confidence.

Votes of confidence are a powerful tool afforded to governments in parliamentary democracies. They allow the invoking agent to tie cabinet survival to the endorsement of a particular statement or passing of legislative proposals and, in doing so, raise the stakes of voting down the incumbent. Scholars have highlighted multiple benefits that the vote of confidence procedure can yield for the executive, from exercising control over the agenda-setting process and preventing or reversing defeats to influencing the timing of elections (e.g. Huber 1996b; Diermeier and Feddersen 1998; Döring and Hönninge 2006). These votes have often been used for highly salient and sometimes controversial matters. For example, French Prime Minister Michel Debré made all three readings of the bill establishing the nuclear deterrence program an issue of confidence in 1960. The proposal became law in December despite being rejected twice in the Senate. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder called a vote of confidence to obtain the green light from the

¹“Michel Rocard: «Manuel Valls s’est servi du 49.3 pour brutaliser ou intimider sa propre majorité»” (RT France, 26 May 2016). <https://francais.rt.com/entretiens/21200-michel-rocard-manuel-valls-493-brutaliser-intimider-propre-majorite>. Last accessed: 9 June 2025.

Bundestag for Germany to join the war in Afghanistan in November 2001. Italy's accession to the NATO Alliance in 1949 was approved by resorting to this instrument. As stated by Baron (1998), "a majority confidence procedure initiated by the government *results in government stability*" (602).

Notwithstanding their particularly consequential nature, government-initiated votes of confidence remain a relatively understudied procedure. This is partly because there is surprisingly little to no comparative empirical evidence regarding their use. Hazan and Rasch (2022) recently pointed out that: "Strikingly, scholars have paid far less attention to unpacking the core institution of parliamentary systems of government—the *confidence relationship*" (455).² In this article, I begin to address this gap by proposing a more clear-cut definition and classification of votes of confidence called by the government, drawing upon new data from 14 parliamentary democracies (Australia, Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, United Kingdom) observed between 1945 (or the year of democratization) and 2021.³ The selection of this sample of countries is based on three criteria: (1) The existence of a confidence relationship between the cabinet and parliament, (2) the presence of procedures that enable the government to question confidence, and (3) data availability and reliability. The goal is to refine our understanding of how leaders exploit this tool *in practice*, learning from a comparative observation of instances in which the executive raised the question of confidence. Therefore, restricting the sample to democracies for which a complete chronology of government-initiated votes of confidence could be compiled is paramount.

My approach is to examine the attributes and properties of government-initiated votes of confidence and map out their applications by comparing and contrasting different cases (Sartori 1970; Collier *et al.*, 2012) so as to define them and classify them.⁴ As it will become clear from the data presented below, the extent to which the procedure is employed varies from country to country, but two

²Although this is generally true of *government-initiated* votes of confidence, as I point out in the next section, votes of investiture and votes of no-confidence have received a good deal of scholarly attention in the last decade.

³Data source: Bromo (2024).

⁴Six of the 14 countries included in this study (Bulgaria, France, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia) are considered "semi-presidential" systems (Elgie 2011). I analyze these 14 countries together because, while they vary in the way the head of state is selected, they are identical in the sense that cabinets can only stay in power as long as they are *tolerated* by a legislative majority (Ström 2000), where a cabinet is tolerated as long as confidence is not withdrawn. In all these regimes, the government-initiated vote of confidence represents an explicit "test" of whether parliament (still) tolerates the incumbent. All other differences between parliamentary and semi-presidential systems, primarily pertaining to the powers of the president, are open for debate, but the literature demonstrates that the way parliamentary regimes function is not significantly affected by the mode of presidential selection (e.g. Tavits 2008).

reign supreme: Italy and France. Still, government-initiated votes of confidence are worth studying from a cross-national perspective for at least two reasons. First, there is the *potential* for the incumbent to call a vote of confidence at any time in *all* these countries. In other words, while governments in some countries might not necessarily have a “habit” of calling votes of confidence (e.g. Australia, Spain), it does not mean they cannot be called. It is a prerogative afforded to the executive, whether it is used or not. Second, even where this tool is not used as often, when it is used, it can have incredibly profound electoral and policy consequences, as illustrated by some of the examples mentioned throughout the article.

I start by reviewing the institutional rules governing government-initiated votes of confidence (type of vote, initiating power, decision rule, and consequences of failure). I then present some figures on the use of the vote of confidence procedure and cases of failure by country and distinguish four applications and the related benefits and costs, allowing us to make sense of and contextualize the situations described by Michel Rocard in the opening quotes. The classification highlights four scenarios in which executives have typically resorted to this instrument: “Majority-making” and “whipping/cohesive” confidence to facilitate the emergence of or foster cohesion in legislative majorities and “signaling” and “technical” confidence as two additional ways in which this mechanism can aid the incumbent.

This article seeks to contribute to the literature on executive power in confidence-based systems by shedding some light on this powerful “trump card” afforded to parliamentary governments and how it can be leveraged to further political goals, calling attention to previously overlooked or understudied facets of the procedure and bringing in comparative evidence. This is useful for potentially building new theories or honing extant ones as key variables and features of votes of confidence are identified. Finally, the “crisis” of contemporary parliaments (e.g. [Judge and Leston-Bandeira 2024](#)) warrants a thorough understanding of the functioning and consequences of the vote of confidence procedure as an “executive legislative prerogative” with the potential to undermine representation and impact democratic stability ([Kofß 2020](#)).

The manuscript proceeds as follows: In the next section, I review confidence procedures and the institutional rules of government-initiated votes of confidence. In the following section, I discuss applications, benefits, and costs of these votes. I conclude by pointing out some avenues for future research.

2. Parliamentary governments and confidence procedures

The fundamental idea of parliamentarism is that governments survive as long as they are supported, or at least tolerated, by a majority of MPs ([Strøm 2000](#)). In British parlance, the government must “command the confidence” of parliament.

This does not imply that incumbents must control a majority of seats in the legislature to be able to rule. What they must have is a *working* majority, that is, a majority of legislators who might (but need not) be affiliated with the party or parties that formally constitute the executive and are willing to back the government in *confidence* and *supply* (budget) votes.⁵ By law or convention, a government normally resigns when confidence is officially withdrawn, meaning that a working majority that endorses its policies has ceased to exist. A government might likewise resign after *perceiving* a lack of confidence. Traditionally, this is the case when parliament rejects a spending proposal.

The *confidence principle*, the idea that a working majority must tolerate the office-holder at all times, binds and defines the relationship between the executive and the legislature in parliamentary regimes. This principle is the quintessence of votes of confidence. It emerged in the context of a power struggle between monarchs and elected assemblies, culminating in a shift of accountability of the cabinet from the former to the latter. While the modern notion of parliamentary confidence has been more or less acknowledged since at least the late 1700s and was fully articulated by the time Walter Bagehot published *The English Constitution* (1867), the corresponding institutions were not codified until after WWII (Cheibub and Rasch 2022). In Westminster systems, confidence institutions remain mostly a constitutional convention.⁶ These institutions are defined as the ensemble of procedures that allow the user to raise the question of confidence. These procedures fall within three categories: (1) the vote of investiture, (2) the vote of no-confidence, and (3) the government-initiated vote of confidence. Much has been written in the last decade on votes of investiture (Cheibub, Martin and Rasch 2015; Rasch *et al.*, 2015; Cheibub, Martin and Rasch 2021; Louwerse 2024) and votes of no-confidence (Williams 2016; Lento and Hazan 2022; Fleming, González-Bustamante and Schleiter 2024; Rubabshi-Shitrit and Hasson 2022; Tuttnauer and Hazan 2024) and the institutional variation within these two categories. Less attention has been paid to the third category, the *government-initiated vote of confidence* (recent exceptions include Spater 2021; Cheibub and Rasch 2022; and Schleiter and Evans 2022), which is the focus of this article.

⁵Minority cabinets, particularly those Bale and Bergman (2006) refer to as “contract minority government,” i.e. “a case in which the cabinet has an explicit written contract with one or more parties that remain outside the cabinet” (424), which, by definition, do not control a majority of seats in parliament, illustrate this idea particularly well. A minority government survives as long as one or more *external* parties, i.e. parties not officially part of the executive, provide confidence and supply votes. Similar considerations apply to the case of parties tolerating a technocratic (or non-partisan) cabinet (Emanuele *et al.* 2023).

⁶See Galligan and Brenton (2015) on constitutional conventions in Westminster systems; See also Bromo (2023) on confidence procedures in the UK case.

The vote of investiture, where required, represents a test of confidence in the context of the government formation process. Once the government formation process is complete, assembly members still have the opportunity to challenge government tenure when they so desire through the vote of no-confidence. But, crucially, the executive too can question parliamentary confidence at will. While a vote of no-confidence (almost certainly initiated by the opposition) seeks to *withdraw* confidence in the cabinet, a government-initiated vote does the opposite: It asks legislators to *affirm* or *reaffirm* their trust in the office-holder and its agenda. The mechanism takes different names based on the context (e.g. “*Engagement de responsabilité du Gouvernement*” in France [the Article 49.3 mentioned above], “*Questione di fiducia*” in Italy, “*Kabinetsspørsmål*” in Norway, etc.). I universally refer to this procedural device as the *vote of confidence procedure*. Already existing as a constitutional convention, the procedure first made an official appearance in the 1920 Constitution of Czechoslovakia (Article 77), followed by the French IV Republic in October 1946 (Article 49), and Japan in 1947 (Article 69). Earlier evidence of government-initiated votes of confidence can be found in the French III Republic, the Kingdom of Italy, and 19th-century Norway. For instance, the very first constitutional government of Italy fell after being denied confidence in a vote related to the annexation of Lombardy in 1848.⁷ There is a good deal of variation in the functioning of the procedure across different countries, but many parliamentary constitutions explicitly feature this kind of tool, with some exceptions. In some cases, it features in other legal statutes, such as the standing orders (Ireland) or primary legislation (Italy).⁸ In some countries, the vote only exists by convention (e.g. Norway) (see Table 1, Huber 1996b; and Bergman et al. 2003). In what follows, I examine this variation in the context of the 14 countries covered in this article. I look at four dimensions: (1) Type of vote, (2) initiating power, (3) decision rule, i.e. the majority required for the government to win the vote, and (4) consequences of failure. These are consistent with the dimensions identified by the existing literature on votes of confidence and related parliamentary procedures (Huber 1996b; Laver and Schofield 1998; Bergman et al. 2003; Franchino and Høyland 2009; Evans and Schleiter 2020; Cheibub and Rasch 2022; Schleiter and Evans 2022).

⁷Before the vote, the Justice Minister had stated: “I resoundingly declare, *this is a cabinet question*” (Italian Chamber of Deputies Debate 5 July 1848); Although not explicitly contemplated in the 1919 Constitution, there are at least two cases of chancellors calling a vote of confidence in the Weimar Republic as well (Wirth in 1922 and Stresemann in 1923).

⁸Government-initiated votes of confidence are also codified in some sub-national constitutions (e.g. the State of Brandenburg in Germany).

Table 1 Vote of confidence procedure by country

Country	Source of authority	Type of vote	Initiating power	Decision rule	Failure consequences
Australia	Convention			Simple majority*	
Bulgaria	Constitution (112); Standing orders (106)	Both	Cabinet collectively	Simple majority	Resignation
Czechia	Constitution (44, 71); Standing orders (83, 85, 96)	Both	Cabinet collectively	Simple majority	Resignation, dissolution**
France	Constitution (49); Standing orders (152, 155)	Both	PM with cabinet approval	No automatic vote***	Resignation
Germany	Constitution (68); Standing orders (98)		PM unilaterally	Absolute majority	Resignation,** dissolution**
Ireland	Convention; Standing orders (68, 80, 83)			Simple majority	
Italy	Convention; Standing orders (39, 54, 87, 115, 116, 154); Primary legislation (No. 400/1988)	Both	Cabinet collectively	Simple majority	Resignation
Japan	Constitution (69); Standing orders (28, 47)			Simple majority	Resignation**
Norway	Convention			Simple majority	
Poland	Constitution (160); Standing orders (112, 117, 169)	Simple	PM unilaterally	Simple majority	Resignation
Portugal	Constitution (192, 193) Standing orders (19, 62, 87, 217-220)	Both	Cabinet collectively	Simple majority	Resignation
Slovenia	Constitution (117); Standing orders (21, 64, 257-260)	Both	PM unilaterally	Absolute majority	Resignation,** dissolution**
Spain	Constitution (112); Standing orders (85, 173, 174)	Simple	PM with cabinet approval	Simple majority	Resignation
United Kingdom	Convention			Simple majority	

Empty cells = not regulated or unclear.

*According to Huber (1996b), "Simple majority of those voting PM's motion carries unless a majority of the legislature's members vote No" (271).

**Under particular circumstances specified in the constitution or other legal texts.

***Deemed as passed unless an absolute majority carries a censure motion.

Type of vote

We can distinguish two types of votes of confidence called by the executive: Votes on motions that directly inquire into whether the legislature has confidence in the cabinet, hereafter referred to as “*simple* votes of confidence,” or the introduction of bills or resolutions to which an issue of confidence is unambiguously attached, hereafter referred to as “*conjunct* (or *joint*) votes of confidence.”⁹ These types of votes of confidence share two characteristics. First, they are not mandated by the constitution but employed by the incumbent on a *voluntary* basis. Second, once the vote of confidence takes place, governments are typically legally required to leave office if they lose the vote, though this is not always an automatic occurrence. They normally differ in the motion’s wording: The former (simple) introduces a straightforward statement that unequivocally asks the question of confidence. For example, the motion tabled by Irish Taoiseach Enda Kenny in February 2017 asked MPs to endorse: “*That Dáil Éireann reaffirms its confidence in the Government.*”¹⁰ The latter (conjunct) can be any other bill or resolution, including those concerning the government’s program, whose approval is made an issue of confidence by the prime minister (or an individual minister) *some time* before the vote. Procedurally, this can be done either by putting forward an actual motion or by designating the vote on the matter under consideration as a vote of confidence. For instance, British PM Edward Heath made a vote on the statement “*That the bill be now read a second time*” an issue of confidence when the House of Commons was reviewing the European Communities bill in 1972.¹¹ This last scenario is the norm in France and Italy, where an executive member or the speaker lets MPs know that the vote of confidence procedure is being invoked before or during a plenary meeting.

The frequency of each type (simple vs. conjunct) depends on a country’s constitutional design and customs. The 1958 French Constitution, for example, contemplates both (Article 49), but engagements of government responsibility for specific bills are more than twice as common as those regarding general statements. In other countries, such as Portugal and Spain, simple motions are the primary or even the sole type of vote of confidence that is or can be called (see Table 1). Another aspect of the vote of confidence is how far ahead parliament is notified, which is context-dependent. For instance, the Slovenian Constitution prescribes a window of 48 hours between the announcement of a vote of confidence and the vote itself (Article 177).¹²

⁹From the German expression “*verbundener Vertrauensantrag*,” Cheibub and Rasch (2022) make the same distinction when discussing the vote of confidence procedure (486).

¹⁰Irish Dáil Éireann Debate 15 February 2017.

¹¹UK House of Commons Debate 17 February 1972.

¹²There are multiple cases of votes of confidence announced the same day the vote took place. An extreme example is the case of Italian PM Benito Mussolini, who raised the question of confidence

Additionally, the line between the simple and the conjunct vote is not always clear. For example, in the United Kingdom, leaders have exploited “adjournment” motions, a procedural device whose only purpose is to end a meeting, to provoke a confidence debate. The ambiguity here dwells in the fact that—strictly speaking—this is not a “simple” case since no explicit motion raising the question of confidence was tabled, but it effectively functions as one. Harold Wilson survived this kind of expedient in 1976, as did Callaghan the following year.

Initiating power

A vote of confidence can be called by the head of government or the cabinet collectively. Where the procedure is mostly based on constitutional convention (Australia, Ireland, Norway, United Kingdom), this is typically done by the prime minister unilaterally.¹³ The German, Polish, and Slovenian Constitutions officially grant unilateral initiating powers to the PM. The other constitutions that bestow this prerogative on the premier (France, Spain) explicitly require leaders to obtain consensus from cabinet ministers first. In Bulgaria, Czechia, Italy, and Portugal, the cabinet invokes the vote of confidence procedure collectively. In practice, either the prime minister or a designated minister can call a vote of confidence on behalf of the government as a whole. The Japanese Constitution does not specify an invoking actor, though votes of confidence in Japan have been popularly linked to the figure of the prime minister.¹⁴ In some cases, assembly members trigger the actual vote associated with the use of the vote of confidence procedure. Indeed, the question of confidence can be raised for the rejection of a proposal or amendment introduced by the opposition, the rejection (or redaction) of no-confidence and censure proposals, or the approval of motions tabled by backbenchers as opposed to bills or resolutions presented directly by executive members. Regardless of who initiates the vote, the principle of collective ministerial responsibility guarantees that the entire cabinet leaves office if the government is required to resign when confidence is denied.

for a vote related to the 1923 electoral law *seconds* before the vote, despite previously reassuring the assembly that parliamentary confidence would not be questioned (Italian Chamber of Deputies Debate 20 July 1923).

¹³This is not always the case in Norway, where individual ministers have raised the question of confidence on at least eight occasions since 1945.

¹⁴E.g., “Boost for Japan’s beleaguered PM” (*BBC News*, 12 June 2008). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/7449889.stm>. Last accessed: 9 June 2025; See also Masuyama and Nyblade (2004).

Decision rule

Most countries covered in this article present simple majority requirements for votes related to an issue of confidence. The German and Slovenian Constitutions are the only two cases among the 14 countries in my sample that require an absolute majority of legislators to support the government when the question of confidence is raised. France (together with Romania) is an idiosyncratic case because the vote of confidence procedure based on Article 49 does not necessarily trigger a vote in parliament. A bill for which Article 49 is invoked is deemed as passed unless the opposition initiates a “provoked” censure motion within 24 hours of the invocation of the vote of confidence procedure. For the incumbent to be removed (and the bill to be rejected), an absolute majority of representatives must second the censure motion. This happened in December 2024, when an absolute majority in the National Assembly responded to the Social Security budget proposal introduced by the Michel Barnier cabinet through Article 49 by carrying a censure motion, ousting Barnier’s government, and killing the proposal. Hence, in the cases of Germany and Slovenia, the absolute majority requirement represents a *hurdle* for the executive in that it increases the risk of cabinet termination. Conversely, in France, such a requirement works *in favor* of the office-holder because it makes it harder for the opposition to defeat the government. Indeed, the procedure has often been employed by French leaders with slim or shaky majorities in the National Assembly, such that a risky bill tied to a vote of confidence would have to be rejected by an absolute majority of members instead of a simple majority. Finally, some constitutions might include additional requirements, such as a 50% quorum in Poland (Polish Constitution, Article 160).

Consequences of failure

Cabinet resignation usually follows the rejection of a vote of confidence. This happens by convention in countries where the vote of confidence procedure is not codified.¹⁵ Of the 14 countries covered in this article where the procedure is codified in the constitution, an unsuccessful government-initiated vote of confidence does not imply automatic resignation only in Germany, Japan, and Slovenia.¹⁶ In

¹⁵Jennings (1969) notes that “no government since 1832 has failed to regard [confidence motions] as decisive” (495) and that “it must not be thought that a single defeat necessarily demands either resignation or dissolution. Such a result follows only *where the defeat implies loss of confidence*” (493).

¹⁶Article 195 of the Portuguese Constitution states that “the government shall resign upon the failure of any confidence motion.” Before 1982, this was not explicitly stated (Ministério Público, https://www.pgdlisboa.pt/leis/lei_mostra_articulado.php?ficha=1&artigo_id=&nid=4&pagina=1&tabela=leis&nversao=&so_miolo=, last accessed: 9 June 2025).

Germany, the chancellor can hold a second vote on an issue of confidence if voted down in the lower house. If confidence is denied twice, a proposal can still be deemed to have become law unless blocked by the upper house ("legislative emergency," German Constitution, Article 81). Alternatively, the chancellor can submit a dissolution request to the Federal President within 21 days. On four occasions (1972, 1982, 2005, 2024), the head of government leveraged this feature of the procedure by facilitating the rejection of a vote of confidence to secure early elections (Döring and Hönnige 2006; Heckötter and Spielmann 2006; van Ooyen 2006; Bromo 2025).¹⁷ Article 69 of the Japanese Constitution states that "if the House of Representatives rejects a confidence resolution, the cabinet shall resign en masse, unless the House of Representatives is dissolved within 10 days." In Slovenia, the legislature must elect a new prime minister or reaffirm confidence in the outgoing one in a new vote within 30 days (Slovenian Constitution, Article 117).

In Westminster systems, it is also common for the prime minister to threaten to dissolve parliament in the event of a negative outcome during a confidence debate. For instance, in a debate on a confidence motion related to the Maastricht Treaty in 1993, British PM John Major declared: "At the conclusion of this debate, either the government will have won the vote of confidence and we can proceed with our policy, or we shall have lost and I shall seek a dissolution of parliament."¹⁸ In two cases (Czechia and Slovenia), the constitution explicitly enables the head of state to dissolve the legislature after confidence withdrawal.¹⁹ Prime ministers can, of course, always implicitly or explicitly threaten to resign or, where allowed, dissolve parliament, as they occasionally do (Cox 1987; Becher and Christiansen 2015). However, as credible as they might be, these threats do not carry any legally binding consequences for the incumbent, unlike a formal vote of confidence.

While governments are, on average, relatively successful in passing the legislative proposals they introduce, they might occasionally leave office after experiencing a defeat on important bills, particularly those related to spending.²⁰ For

¹⁷However, the right of dissolution lapses as soon as the Bundestag elects another Federal Chancellor by the vote of a majority of its members (German Constitution, Article 68).

¹⁸UK House of Commons Debate 23 July 1993; For example, in both cases of failed government-initiated votes of confidence in Ireland (November 1982 and November 1992), a general election immediately followed the defeat.

¹⁹In Italy, the head of state retains unilateral discretion over parliamentary dissolution. In 2008, the assembly was dissolved in the aftermath of a failed vote of confidence called by the government. In the only other post-WWII instance of failure (1998), a new prime minister was appointed instead.

²⁰The average success rate of executive bills (regardless of whether they are attached to a vote of confidence) in the countries considered in this article is, based on the available data from Saiegh (2009), 82.27%.

example, Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez resigned when the Cortes Generales struck down the annual state budget in 2019. Some divisions can be, therefore, *treated* as an issue of confidence without the cabinet expressly calling a vote of confidence.²¹ These can be considered *de facto* votes of confidence, namely votes whose outcome is revealing of the executive's parliamentary capacity to act. However, they differ fundamentally from the confidence procedures leaders have at their disposal in that they usually do not bear any legally binding consequences for the incumbent. In other words, when office-holders *formally* raise the question of confidence, they are shackling their very existence to the matter under consideration, making it known to legislators that the outcome of the vote of confidence is definitive. In this case, the vote of confidence is a *de jure* one because its repercussions in the event of rejection are (1) predetermined and (2) inescapable.

The country-specific characteristics of the vote of confidence procedure are summarized in Table 1.²² In nearly all bicameral parliamentary systems, confidence issues are a prerogative of the lower chamber. Two exceptions are Italy and Romania, where both chambers invest newly-formed cabinets and vote on issues of confidence. Singular is the case of Italian Premier Romano Prodi, who lost a government-initiated vote of confidence in the Senate on 24 January 2008, the only case of confidence withdrawal brought about by an upper chamber I identified.²³ In the next section, I map out the different applications, benefits, and costs of votes of confidence.

3. Government-initiated votes of confidence: applications, benefits, and costs

Government-initiated votes of confidence are, as compellingly described by Carl Schmitt, “A weapon within the government such that *the means of dependence is transformed into an instrument of autonomy*” (2017: 340). On the one hand, parliamentary cabinets depend on the confidence relationship with the assembly to carry out their business. On the other hand, they can leverage this very dependence to achieve specific goals through the vote of confidence procedure, enabling

²¹Other examples include Francesco Cossiga in Italy in 1980 and Garret FitzGerald in Ireland in 1982, both resigning due to failure to pass the annual budget without invoking the vote of confidence procedure.

²²A detailed list of legal provisions is available in the Appendix.

²³Italian executives can raise the question of confidence in either chamber, not necessarily both. However, it is customary to present the same issue of confidence twice. In Romania, the incumbent can “engage government responsibility” before both chambers sitting a joint session (Romanian Constitution, Article 114).

the incumbent to “preserve” itself (Baron 1998) and counterbalance the no-confidence prerogatives of MPs (Laver 2008). Of 432 post-WWII cabinets identified in the 14 countries covered in this article, 152 raised the question of confidence at least once throughout their lifespan ($\approx 35\%$), and 14 failed (as of 2021). In Table 2, I break down the use of government-initiated votes of confidence in the lower house by country, type of vote, and cases of failure, i.e. cases where the government was voted down upon calling a vote of confidence.

There is a lot of variation across countries in terms of the extent to which incumbents rely on this procedure. As anticipated, the two democracies that most clearly stick out are France and Italy, which, together, account for over 80% of the votes of confidence that took place between 1945 and 2021 in the 14 countries included in my analysis. In the French case, this instrument is meant to “artificially ensure’ executive decisiveness in the absence of coherent partisan majorities in the National Assembly” (Huber 1996a: 2) in a context where a “strong” president coexists with a cabinet that must retain the confidence of parliament, with the possibility of divided government (see Elgie 2001). In the Italian case, scholars have been talking about the “normalization” of the vote of confidence as an ordinary mechanism for the government to pass primary legislation (Razza 2016), where this tool carries desirable procedural advantages related, mainly, to

Table 2 Government-initiated votes of confidence, 1945–2021

Country	Conjunct	Simple	Total	Failed
Australia	0	2	2	0
Bulgaria	0	3	3	1
Czechia	1	3	4	0
France (V Republic)	89	40	129	0
Germany	1	4	5	3
Ireland	1	25	26	2
Italy	323	42	365	2*
Japan	0	2	2	0
Norway	16	7	23	3
Poland	0	6	6	0
Portugal	1	10	11	1
Slovenia	0	4	4	2
Spain	0	2	2	0
United Kingdom	4	7	11	0
Total	436	157	593	14
Total (Excluding France and Italy)	24	75	99	12

*Including one in the upper house.

expediting the legislative process and restricting the possibility of amending executive bills in a context of unstable cabinets (e.g. [Cioffi-Revilla 1984](#)).

The countries where the procedure has been invoked the least amount of times are Australia (Whitlam in 1975), Japan (Miyazawa in 1992 and Fukuda in 2008), and Spain (Suárez in 1980 and González in 1990). Conjunct votes prevail overall due to their unmatched employment rate in Italy.

Simple votes are, however, more frequent in all countries other than Italy, France, and Norway.²⁴

In total, over one-third of governments made use of this tool, very rarely unsuccessfully. In fact, from [Table 2](#), we can see that the success rate is over 97%. Put differently, the failure rate is less than 3%. There are many reasons why these cabinets would tie their survival to an issue of confidence. The different applications of votes of confidence can be grouped into four categories: “Majority-making” confidence, “whipping/cohesive” confidence, “signaling” confidence, and “technical” confidence. As we shall see, each of these can yield different benefits for the invoking agent. In examining such benefits, it is useful to think about the objectives of elected officials in terms of a “policy, office, votes” framework ([Müller and Strøm 1999b](#)). Leaders typically seek to maximize three goals: Control over the perks of political office, their impact on public policy, and racking up electoral support to win elections. However, they often face a trade-off because maximizing one goal might lead to sub-optimal outcomes vis-à-vis the others ([Müller and Strøm 1999a](#)). Thus, we can conceive the vote of confidence procedure as one strategy to address this trade-off. In what follows, I delineate the characteristics of each category and the advantages related to the various applications of the procedure. While these scenarios are discussed individually, they are, of course, not necessarily mutually exclusive. Users of the vote of confidence procedure likely have a mix of motivations for choosing this instrument in the context of strategic interactions between players.

“Majority-making” confidence

Starting from the fact that governments of any type (minority, single-party, coalition) need *legislative* majorities to get things done, we can distinguish two different

²⁴In [Table A1](#) in the [Appendix](#), I further break down the use of government-initiated votes of confidence by regime type (parliamentary vs. semi-presidential) and geographic area (Western Europe/Central and Eastern Europe/Pacific). This shows that, within my sample, the employment of the vote of confidence procedure is much more prevalent in pure parliamentary systems and in Western Europe. This is in part simply due to the time span covered for each country, where Central and Eastern European countries (which also happen to include three of the six semi-presidential systems included in my analysis), democratized in the 1990s; A full list of failed government-initiated votes of confidence is also available in the [Appendix](#) ([Table A2](#)).

scenarios, yielding similar benefits, in which governments might rely on the confidence procedure to ensure that a legislative majority will support their actions. One in which the government needs a legislative majority to *emerge*, which I refer to as the “majority-making” confidence. Majority-making confidence applies specifically to two situations: minority governments (which is one of the situations described in the opening quotes by French PM Michel Rocard) and cases in which the government might control a majority of seats, but higher majority (supermajority) requirements are needed for the executive to win a given vote.

An extraordinary “majority-making” case is that of the Italian cabinet led by Lamberto Dini. Although this cabinet was entirely technocratic, formally controlling no seats in the assembly, the vote of confidence called by the executive in 1995 follows this logic. The incumbent had drafted a controversial package of austerity measures. On March 14, parliament managed to ratify two amendments opposed by the prime minister. The next day, Dini (successfully) invoked the vote of confidence procedure on the passing of his preferred version of the bill, which automatically excluded the amendments already approved by the legislature.²⁵ Elected parties tolerate non-partisan governments to dilute responsibility in times of crisis and elude the risk of being punished by voters (Emanuele et al. 2023). In this situation, votes of confidence can urge parties to tone down positing-taking behavior because forming an alternative executive or going to the polls might be electorally undesirable.

“Whipping/cohesive” confidence

The other, scenario, which I refer to as the “whipping/cohesive” confidence, covers cases where the government (single-party or coalition) has the numbers on paper to get things done but needs to “whip” this majority and create an extra incentive for intra-party or inter-party cohesion to make sure that majority members support the government. Indeed, the aforementioned example of John Major, a single-party (Conservative) cabinet controlling a majority of seats in the House of Commons, shows that PMs might not be able to get legislation through Parliament even if they have the numbers to do so on paper. In Major’s case, the Maastricht Treaty (Protocol on Social Policy) bill, a critical component of his government’s program, was rejected by eight votes on 22 July 1993 and approved by means of a vote of confidence the following day with a majority of 40, sanctioning the ratification of the treaty. In this scenario, a vote of confidence gives the incumbent the opportunity to “preserve policy agreements between the government and its

²⁵This was an unprecedented application of the procedure, which prompted the speaker to seek guidance from the Committee on the Rules of Procedure before moving forward with the vote; Italian Chamber of Deputies Debates 14 March 1995; 15 March 1995.

own deputies” (Huber 1996a: 91) by increasing the costs of killing a legislative proposal.²⁶

When the matter under consideration becomes an issue of confidence, non-compliant assembly members affiliated with the ruling party (or parties) must choose between the proposed bill and losing their status (including committee membership or chairmanship) or potentially their job if a parliamentary dissolution follows confidence withdrawal. In this sense, the vote of confidence procedure acts as a “whip”—perhaps the ultimate whip—to foster party discipline.

Single-party majority cabinets like the one led by John Major are not the norm (e.g. Golder 2010). In fact, governments secure a parliamentary majority as a coalition much more frequently. In the scenario of multi-party governance, a particular policy might also be met with resistance from coalition partners, especially since voters tend to dislike policy compromise among the coalition parties (Fortunato 2021). Then, the bargaining power of individual parties making up the executive largely depends on their likelihood of participating in an alternative government (Kayser, Orlowski and Rehmer 2023). Depending on the type of coalition, a viable compromise is sometimes harder to reach (e.g. Greene 2017). In this case, raising the question of confidence might serve as a tool for the invoking agent to influence or facilitate the negotiations by creating “an incentive for ruling coalitions to vote together on policy issues that might otherwise split them” (Diermeier and Feddersen 1998: 611). A vote of confidence opens up the possibility of coalition termination in the case of a negative outcome. As a result, short-term policy considerations become less important than long-term survival, magnifying the incentives for coalition members to vote “cohesively” (Diermeier and Vlaicu 2011) and providing a “solution” for coalition survival that might not have existed in the presence of disagreement and absence of a vote of confidence. For instance, when the stabilization package proposed by the Nečas government in Czechia, a three-party majority coalition, was defeated by seven votes in September 2012, it was resubmitted as a conjunct vote of confidence to prompt Civic Democrats (ODS) and former Public Affairs (VV) defectors to support the proposal. During the second reading, the Finance Minister stated: “I am old-school and I always counted on the fact that government parties would simply be government parties and that they would support top-priority government bills. But times are clearly moving toward a more advanced level of democracy, and the government must respond to this.”²⁷ In November, the bill was approved with a majority of eight.

²⁶While Major was visibly shocked when the Maastricht Treaty bill was rejected, he had already discussed and pondered the confidence route in a previous cabinet meeting and was prepared to “go nuclear” (Baker, Gamble and Ludlam 1994) to solve an issue that, according to him, could not “fester any longer.”

²⁷Czech Chamber of Deputies Debate 24 October 2012.

Both the majority-making and whipping/cohesive confidence might also provide additional incentives for MPs to acquiesce to proposals they oppose. Indeed, by employing this instrument, leaders can “throw a lifeline” to legislators: Coerced into supporting a policy they see as unfavorable, backbenchers will be able to claim to their constituents that the alternative to passing the policy was worse: No policy and no cabinet. Cheibub and Rasch (2022) describe this feature of the procedure as a “credible electoral cover” (486). Majority-making and whipping/cohesive votes of confidence are linked to circumstances where office-holders need to put pressure on assembly members by raising the stakes of a given division. The product is a heightened ability of the invoking agent to shape legislative outcomes (preventing or reversing defeats) (Huber 1996b) and potentially obtain concessions from coalition partners (Schleiter and Evans 2022), optimizing the extraction of policy rents (Spater 2021). There are, however, circumstances where the executive does not necessarily need to coerce legislators, and despite controlling (large) majorities, they still turn to the vote of confidence procedure. These applications are the “signaling” confidence and the “technical” confidence, which I discuss next.

“Signaling” confidence

There is evidence that parties occasionally rely on constitutional procedures to “send a signal” to the electorate. For example, opposition members table no-confidence motions, despite the fact that these are almost never carried, to highlight their strength or competence compared to the incumbent (Williams 2011; Fleming, González-Bustamante and Schleiter 2024). When governments are under attack, facing criticism or no-confidence or censure threats (and, therefore, potential backlash), calling a vote of confidence might help them cue *reaffirmed* parliamentary confidence to voters. For instance, Irish Taoiseach Kenny’s 2017 simple motion of confidence mentioned earlier came after a corruption scandal within Ireland’s national police. At the time, as Kenny himself had done twice before (2014, 2015), the leader asked the legislature to express its confidence in the office-holder in a televised debate during prime time. Similarly, when British Premier Anthony Eden faced a censure motion asserting “*That this House deplores the action of Her Majesty’s Government*” during the November 1956 Suez Crisis, he asked MPs to vote on replacing the words “deplores the action” with “*approves of the prompt action*” instead, making this amendment an issue of confidence.²⁸ Additional related examples include the cases of PM Fukuda in Japan in June 2008 and PM Borisov in Bulgaria in January 2011.

²⁸UK House of Commons Debate 1 November 1956.

Raising the question of confidence can likewise function as a channel for the invoking agent to send a message to voters to distance themselves or stand out in relation to coalition partners. For this reason, Huber (1996a) argues that votes of confidence attenuate the inherent tension of coalition cabinets. This tension springs from the fact that coalition members need to cooperate to stay in office but will face each other as adversaries when competing for seats in the next election. Government-initiated votes of confidence allow parties to spotlight their actions to the public in situations where taking credit for policy outcomes might be muddied by the presence of multiple parties within the executive, as confidence issues are typically discussed by the media.

“Technical” confidence

There are also situations where the incumbent calls a vote of confidence neither to ensure discipline and cohesion nor for signaling purposes. I refer to such applications of the vote of confidence procedure as “technical” confidence. This category mainly covers two scenarios. First, PMs can use votes of confidence in lieu of votes of investiture in the absence of investiture requirements, in essence, as a pseudo-investiture. At least 25 French governments spontaneously triggered an initial vote of confidence at the beginning of their tenure between 1958 and 2021. Analogously, in June 1983, Portuguese leader Mário Soares voluntarily raised the question of confidence after his appointment “with the intent to solicit a parliamentary investiture,” when the assembly did not submit any motions to reject the government program (the equivalent of an investiture in Portugal).²⁹ This might offer leaders an occasion to observe and get a sense of the numbers in the legislature or identify potential defectors, as these votes are usually carried out via roll call. Ridolfi (2022) suggests that this might have been one of the original purposes of the procedure, considering that early parliaments used secret voting to protect the independence of legislators from the monarch. This can also be true for countries like Italy, where “intraparty factions [emerged] that used secret voting as a tool to undermine incumbent governments” (Giannetti 2015: 128), in which case the vote of confidence procedure can be exploited (depending on the matter under consideration) to prevent secret voting.³⁰

As anticipated, votes of confidence can also give the executive other highly desirable procedural advantages by expediting the legislative process or enabling the government to choose and modify the wording and content of bills. For

²⁹Portuguese Assembleia da República Debate 25 June 1983.

³⁰“Perché esiste il voto segreto in Parlamento” (*Pagella Politica*, 14 October 2022). <https://pagellapolitica.it/articoli/perche-voto-segreto-parlamento>. Last accessed: 9 June 2025.

example, in Italy, it takes an average of 333 days for ordinary legislation introduced by the executive to be scrutinized and approved by the lower chamber.³¹ Conversely, the vote of confidence procedure requires that a proposal be dismissed or approved after 24 hours. The practice has increasingly consolidated for Italian incumbents to issue (“omnibus”) decrees, containing many heterogeneous provisions, and introduce “maxi- amendments” that can only be approved or rejected *in bulk* as an issue of confidence (Lupo and Piccirilli 2021; Bromo, Gambacciani and Improta 2023). In Czechia, initiating a conjunct vote of confidence automatically sets a three-month deadline for parliament to debate and vote on it (Czech Constitution, Article 44). More generally, in confidence-based political systems, issues of confidence often take precedence over other parliamentary business and opposition initiatives. The German cases mentioned in the previous section, where a vote of confidence was exploited to provoke a dissolution, would also count as technical uses as the chancellor leveraged a characteristic of the procedure (German Constitution, Article 68) to secure an early election. Table 3 presents a summary of the applications and benefits discussed so far.

Regardless of their motives, invoking agents must consider the costs they might pay if the ascertainment of parliamentary confidence proves to be unsuccessful. The highest and most obvious cost is, of course, cabinet termination. In addition, as argued by Heller (2001), calling a vote of confidence in the case of multi-party executives necessarily requires that “coalition members value the coalition,”

Table 3 Applications and benefits of votes of confidence - Summary

Confidence	Use	Benefits
Majority-making	Facilitate the emergence of a legislative majority	Shape legislative outcomes; Extract policy concessions from coalition partners
Whipping/cohesive	Ensure discipline intra-party and/or inter-party cohesion within the existing majority	
Singaling	Send a signal to voters	Cue reaffirmed parliamentary confidence; Spotlight actions of invoking agent
Technical	Solicit an investiture; Activate procedural advantages	Expedite the legislative process and control wording/content; Secure an early election (Germany)

³¹Based on figures from the 2018–2022 legislative term.

otherwise, “attaching confidence to bills can be problematic, even suicidal” (780–781). In these cases, the different actors must “weigh the policy gains of cooperation with coalition partners against the electoral gains of adopting position-taking strategies” (Huber 1996b: 280). Finally, in terms of the costs that potentially stem from the employment of the vote of confidence procedure, it is worth noting that Becher, Brouard and Guinaudeau (2017) present evidence from France indicating that its applications are associated with a temporary decline in prime minister approval. Becher and Brouard (2022) also present experimental evidence that French voters might dislike the exertion of “constitutional force” when politicians raise the question of confidence.³²

It follows from the fact that the vote of confidence procedure is used *voluntarily* that the decision to call a vote of confidence is the product of strategic calculations on the part of the initiating actor(s), where the potential rewards are weighed against the potential political costs and risks associated with questioning parliamentary confidence. This likely explains why executives hardly ever fail: We almost exclusively observe successful instances where tying cabinet survival to an issue of confidence made strategic sense. Conversely, there are many cases where office-holders have faced hostile surroundings, including major defeats (e.g. Thatcher’s Shops Bill in 1986 Britain), where the procedure was not invoked because a vote of confidence would have probably cost the government its tenure.

4. Conclusion

Government-initiated votes of confidence are a “restrictive” instrument (Huber 1992) in the sense that they restrict the range of options available to legislators to shield unilateral executive action. This is because the formal engagement of government responsibility drastically increases the costs of voting down the incumbent. Unless MPs’ utility vis-à-vis a specific division is such that they would rather withdraw confidence than give in to the government’s demands, the office-holder will usually prevail. Despite their exceptionally momentous and consequential nature, votes of confidence remain a surprisingly understudied procedure. But exactly because of their momentous and consequential nature, it is paramount to gain a better understanding of how they are used in practice. The goal of this article was to refine our understanding of how this restrictive mechanism is exploited by proposing a more clear-cut definition and classification

³²A recent poll conducted by newspaper *Le Figaro* in France indicates that almost 60% of respondents opposed the use of this tool to pass a contentious pension reform (“Le gouvernement doit-il avoir recours à l’article 49-3 pour faire adopter la réforme des retraites?” 13 March 2023. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-gouvernement-doit-il-avoir-recours-a-l-article-49-3-pour-faire-adopter-la-reforme-des-retraites-20230313>. Last accessed: 9 June 2025).

of government-initiated votes of confidence, drawing upon data from 14 parliamentary democracies. Four key dimensions of government-initiated votes of confidence were discussed, with a focus on how they differ across different countries (type of vote, initiating power, decision rule, consequences of failure). Four situations in which executives raise the question of confidence are identified. In the majority-making and whipping/cohesive cases, calling a vote of confidence can help the invoking agent achieve electoral and policy goals by facilitating the creation of legislative majorities that might not have emerged had cabinet survival not been put on the line or by compacting existing majorities that might have otherwise split over a given issue. In signaling and technical cases, calling a vote of confidence can help the incumbent send a signal to voters or gain desirable procedural advantages.

While this article begins to address the gap vis-à-vis government-initiated votes of confidence by calling attention to previously overlooked or understudied facets of the procedure and bringing in comparative evidence, a lot remains to be learned about the vote of confidence procedure. Do votes of confidence initiated by the office-holder have an effect on the survival and stability of cabinets, as proposed by [Baron \(1998\)](#)? This question is particularly intriguing, given that we know that no- no-confidence procedures do have such an effect ([Bergmann, Bäck and Saalfeld 2022](#)). Do votes of confidence impair efficient public good provision, as theorized by [Tergiman \(2015\)](#)? What are the electoral repercussions of these votes? For instance, does raising the question of confidence affect the probability that coalition partners will rule together in successive electoral terms? Do voters react to the employment of this coercive instrument as they do to comparable tools in presidential systems (e.g. [Reeves and Rogowski 2018](#))? Finally—and perhaps most importantly—an empirical study of the determinants of the employment of votes of confidence is in order. Altogether, these questions are important directions for future research to enhance our understanding of applications and implications of the vote of confidence procedure.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

Acknowledgments

For comments on and conversations about this project, I thank José Cheibub, Mallory Compton, Scott Cook, Robert Harmel, Alexander Pacek, Paolo Gambacciani, and the anonymous reviewers. Parts of this manuscript were presented at the EPSA Annual Conference 2022 in Prague, the ECPR (Standing Group on Parliaments) Annual Conference 2022 in Paris, and the APSA Annual Conference 2022 in Montreal. All errors are my own.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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