



## Strange bedfellows: Coalition makeup and perceptions of democratic performance among electoral winners



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### ABSTRACT

We argue that the partisan makeup of governing coalitions affects perceptions of democratic performance among those who voted for a government party. We introduce ambivalence toward the governing parties as the mechanism that drives this relationship, and we argue that such ambivalence, which occurs when favorability ratings of the parties vary, will be more common where the parties are more ideologically diverse. After advancing our theory, we test our expectations with post-election survey data from several countries. Evidence demonstrates that coalition ambivalence is greater where governing parties are ideologically divergent, and, even when controlling for this ideological divergence, ambivalence leads to more negative perceptions of democratic performance, bringing the attitudes of electoral winners closer to those of individuals who did not vote for a party in government.

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Much scholarly work is devoted to the understanding of how political institutions affect perceptions of democratic performance (e.g., Aarts and Thomassen, 2008; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Bernauer and Vatter, 2012; Lijphart, 2012). While considerable progress has been made by this literature, comparatively less work assesses how circumstantial features of institutions affect attitudes. Here we focus on coalition governments in parliamentary democracies, which form with regularity.<sup>1</sup> Coalition governments shape attitudes in the public (e.g., Karp and Bowler, 2001; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011), and the relative ideologies of coalition partners are politically important: as compared to ideologically similar coalitions, ideologically diverse coalitions are less likely to form (Axelrod, 1970; Martin and Stevenson, 2001) and are less likely to change policy (Tsebelis, 2002). Using these insights as our departure point, we seek to understand how the diversity of coalition partners shapes perceptions of democratic performance. In doing so, we build on the literature on electoral winners and losers, and we make use of a concept that has become increasingly important in the political psychology literature: attitudinal ambivalence.

Winning an election generates positive perceptions of democratic performance (e.g., Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Henderson, 2008; Singh et al., 2011). The mechanisms thought to drive this relationship are both policy-based and psychological. Regarding the former, as per Anderson et al. (2005, 3), “Winning an election means getting a greater share of preferred policies.” Regarding the latter, winning brings about positive emotions, while losing tends to foment anger, sullenness, and disillusionment (23–26). Not all election winners are equal, however, and extant research shows that the size of the victory, the ideological distance between the voter and the resulting government, and the nature of the vote decision (e.g., strategic or sincere) further condition the relationship between electoral victory and perceptions of democracy (cf. Campbell 2015; Curini et al., 2012; Holmberg, 1999; Howell and Justwan, 2013; Singh, 2014). Singh et al. (2012) further demonstrate that the participation of one's party in a resulting coalition is what matters most for evaluations of democratic performance, as opposed to the percentage of seats won or improvement over the previous election result.

We consider further the link between the makeup of the resulting coalition and perceptions of democratic performance among those who voted for one of the coalition parties—electoral winners. In particular, we consider ambivalence toward the governing parties. Ambivalence exists when an individual has internalized “competing considerations relevant to evaluating an

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<sup>1</sup> For example, nearly sixty percent of governments formed in Western European parliamentary democracies between 1945 and 1998 were coalitions (Müller and Strom, 2000).

attitude object” (Lavine, 2001, 915). We argue that citizens who strongly favor one of the parties and have unfavorable feelings toward another are ambivalent toward the coalition. Because the ideological positioning of the parties influences evaluations (e.g., Clark and Leiter, 2014; Vegetti, 2014), we expect that coalitions made up of ideologically divergent parties, or “strange bedfellows,” are more likely to engender ambivalence. Notwithstanding this relationship, we next argue that coalition ambivalence has an independent effect on democratic attitudes: consistent with evidence demonstrating that ambivalence weakens and destabilizes attitudes (e.g., Cacioppo et al., 1997; Holbrook et al., 2001; McGraw et al., 2003), we put forth a theory that argues ambivalent electoral winners will express more negative perceptions of democratic performance and the democratic process than their less ambivalent counterparts, making their perceptions of more similar to those of electoral losers.

To test our hypotheses, we examine post-election survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. We find that ambivalence is highest in elections where the resulting government parties are ideologically divergent. Further, evidence from our analyses suggests that coalition ambivalence—even when controlling for the ideological positioning of parties within the coalition—substantially decreases satisfaction with democracy and damages attitudes toward its processes. As a result, the attitudes of ambivalent electoral winners begin to look like those of individuals who voted against the governing parties. Thus, ideological dispersion in coalitions not only affects government formation, effectiveness, and survival, but, via coalition ambivalence, it also shapes perceptions of democratic performance in the public. Our results are robust to a series of alternative model specifications. We conclude by summarizing our findings and discussing their implications.

## 1. The character of governments and coalition ambivalence

An individual who has internalized competing arguments toward some object and consequently experiences evaluative conflict is ambivalent (Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Feldman and Zaller, 1992; Thompson et al., 1995). Previous research shows individuals may be ambivalent toward political objects ranging from the more abstract, such as political institutions (McGraw and Bartels, 2005) or one's country in general (Citrin and Luks, 2005), to the more concrete, such as specific policies (Alvarez and Brehm, 1995; Craig et al., 2002) and candidates (Lavine, 2001; Rudolph, 2011; Yoo, 2010).

Known individual-level precursors of ambivalence include the strength of partisanship, knowledge, and cognitive style (Rudolph and Popp, 2007). Context is known to matter as well: for example, competitive election environments (Keele and Wolak, 2008) and heterogeneous social networks (Huckfeldt et al., 2004) increase ambivalence toward political parties. Adding to these contextual explanations, we argue that coalition government fosters ambivalence.

Coalitions can create ambivalence by forcing supporters of a governing party to simultaneously consider two or more political parties when evaluating the government. Most voters will have different evaluations of different members of the coalition, and if an individual's evaluations of the coalition parties are considerably different—if one party is greatly preferred over the other(s)—she will be ambivalent about the coalition. In such a situation a voter will rightfully view the coalition partner(s) as different, and this will be reflected in her ratings of the parties. Thus, ambivalence should be greater following an election where a coalition of ideologically divergent parties has formed. While this expectation has not been examined across countries, in the U.S., elite polarization is shown to influence ambivalence in the American public (Thornton,

2013). From this we put forth our first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** Among those who supported a governing party, where the ideologies of coalition parties are more divergent, ambivalence will be greater.

## 2. Coalition ambivalence and perceptions of democratic performance

Extant literature demonstrates that voting for a governing party generates positive evaluations of democracy (e.g., Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Blais and Gélinau, 2007; Henderson, 2008; Singh et al., 2011, 2012), and much of this positive link is thought to stem from the psychological benefits of victory (Anderson et al., 2005; Singh, 2014). Recognizing that attitudes toward the governing coalition can shape one's views of public institutions and political outcomes (e.g., Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995; Karp and Bowler, 2001; Tilley and Hobolt, 2011), we further consider how one particular psychological process—attitudinal ambivalence toward the governing coalition—conditions the impact of electoral victory on perceptions of democratic performance.

In general, attitudinal ambivalence can influence the accessibility (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 2000), certainty (Tetlock, 1986; McGraw et al., 2003; Meffert et al., 2004), extremity (Meffert et al., 2004), and stability (Alvarez and Brehm, 2002; Rudolph, 2005) of attitudes. While the vast majority of research on partisan ambivalence is from the U.S., considerable evidence indicates it has important behavioral and attitudinal consequences, including affecting patterns in voting intentions (Mutz, 2002; Nir, 2005) and vote choice (Mutz, 2002; Nir and Druckman, 2008; Mulligan, 2011; Thornton, 2014). In a comparative study of the impact of ambivalence on engagement in the U.S. and the U.K., Johnson (2014) demonstrates the importance of examining the concept in different contexts.

Most relevant to our argument is evidence that ambivalence can subsequently lead to negative evaluations. This is the case because, in some circumstances, negative evaluations can have a larger influence on one's subsequent evaluations than comparably extreme positive evaluations (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Holbrook et al., 2001). McGraw et al. (2003), in a study of attitudes toward Congressional candidates in the U.S., demonstrate that ambivalence leads to a decline in evaluations. Following from this, we argue that ambivalence toward the coalition parties will lead to a decrease in satisfaction with democracy as a political system and will lead to negative evaluations of the democratic process. This expectation implies that the attitudinal effects of ambivalence extend beyond orientations toward its source, in this case, the coalition government.

How does ambivalence toward the coalition lead to a decline in support for the democratic system beyond negative evaluations of a specific government? First, coalition ambivalence will erode perceptions of democratic performance by lessening an individual's perception that her vote matters to the political process—that her vote is externally efficacious (cf. Niemi et al., 1991; Chamberlain, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Citizens expect their vote to carry some weight in a democracy, and, with coalition governments, no supporter of any of the governing parties will see her chosen party's platform fully implemented due to the bargaining and compromise that characterizes the policymaking process. One's vote for a governing party

<sup>2</sup> Contrast this with *internal* efficacy, which is what an individual feels about her ability to comprehend and take part in the political process (Niemi et al., 1991; Chamberlain, 2012).

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