



Voters and coalition governments

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Coalition governments are the norm in parliamentary democracies. Yet, despite the predominance of this type of government, political scientists have only recently started to investigate how voters approach elections when a coalition government is the likely outcome. Such elections present additional uncertainty and complexity for voters compared with elections in plurality systems, where party choice translates more directly into a choice of government. These factors have led to the assumption that strategic voting is unlikely to occur in systems that produce coalition governments. In this introductory article to the special issue on *Voters and Coalition Governments*, we consider whether voters have the capacity to anticipate specific coalition outcomes and propose a framework for understanding the conditions that lead to strategic voting in both plurality and proportional systems.

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1. Introduction

Coalition governments are the norm in parliamentary democracies. Yet, despite the predominance of this type of government, political scientists have only recently started to investigate how voters approach elections when a coalition government is the likely outcome.² Such elections present additional uncertainty and complexity for voters compared with elections in plurality systems, where party choice translates more directly into a choice of government. Voters may be aware that coalition formation is an intermediary step between vote decision and government formation (Downs, 1957), yet making any predictions of likely governments is often rather difficult. Even when polling information is available, it is not always clear which coalition is likely to form after an election. Moreover, in most electoral systems, voters

can only cast their vote for an individual party, not for a specific coalition. The instrumental goal of voting a specific government in office can thus become a highly challenging task because a vote for a particular party and its policy will never directly result in a government, but at best secure a party's membership in a coalition along with other parties with different policy agendas.

This raises several important – and largely unexplored – questions concerning voters and coalition governments. First, can voters make sense of coalition governments? In other words, do they have the capacity to anticipate specific coalition outcomes? Second, do coalition considerations affect voter choice? If voters have preferences for particular combinations of parties, do they cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that their preferred coalition will be formed after the election? Finally, how do voters perceive coalition governments? Do they prefer the consensual, less adversarial style or policy-making associated with coalitions, or do they feel unable to hold coalition governments to account for their actions? These questions guide the study of voters and coalition governments in this special issue.

Given the regular occurrence of coalition governments in parliamentary systems, we would expect voters not only

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² Coalition governments are those where more than one party holds executive power. By executive power, we mean the main offices of the executive which include the Prime Minister and his or her cabinet.

to be aware of such arrangements but also to take coalition preferences into account when they vote. Rather surprisingly, the political science literature has only recently begun to explore this question. Evidence from laboratory experiments suggests that voters are able to use relevant information to cast a vote in accordance with coalition preferences (Meffert and Gschwend, 2007; McCuen and Morton, 2010). Moreover, recent studies using survey data have also shown that coalition preferences and expectations matter for some voters in certain contexts (Pappi and Thurner, 2002; Aldrich et al., 2004; Blais et al., 2006; Gschwend, 2007; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009).

This evidence thus gives good reason to further explore the role of coalition preferences and perceptions in elections. While the recent studies on voters and coalition government provide important insights, almost all of this literature has focused on single elections or countries, and few have developed a more general framework for understanding how voters respond to coalition governments. To make an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, the articles in this special issue address the question of how voters approach elections with coalition government outcomes using a variety of different data sources and methods, combining case studies with large-N statistical analysis, observational and experimental data. It represents the first set of articles entirely dedicated to the study of voters and coalition governments.

As a starting point for this study of voters and coalition governments, this introductory article addresses the question of when and how voters take coalition preferences into account when they vote. We begin by examining the nature and frequency of coalition governments. Building on the literature on strategic voting, we then present a theoretical framework for understanding how coalition preferences affect vote choice. The extant literature has argued that strategic voting in proportional (PR) systems is either rare or only occurs when district magnitude or thresholds put parties at risk of being left out of parliament. Yet, in this article we make the distinction between seat-maximizing strategic voting, which is concerned with wasted votes, and policy-maximizing strategic voting, which is concerned with government policies. We argue that it is rational for future-oriented voters in proportional systems to engage in policy-maximizing strategic voting in order to increase the likelihood of electing the preferred coalition government. The article concludes by presenting an overview of the remaining papers in this special issue.

2. The nature and frequency of coalition governments

Data collected across 479 governments in 17 West European countries over a sixty year period indicate that coalition governments are the norm. Indeed as Fig. 1 reveals, there is a growing trend in the last twenty years for executive power to be shared between two or more parties. With the exception of a single three year period in the late 1950s, in at least half the cases, two or more parties shared power in government. In comparison, in about a third of the cases, a single party held executive power. In most of these cases, a single party has governed with a minority of the seats in the legislature. The frequency of

coalition government does not appear to be entirely unique to Western Europe. Currently, seventeen out of the thirty OECD member states are governed by multiparty coalition governments.³ Across a more diverse set of countries, coalitions are even more common occurring about 65 percent of the time (Armstrong and Duch, 2010; see also Vowles, 2010).

Table 1 summarizes the data by countries. Coalition governments are a regular occurrence in Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and Iceland. Some of these cases are characterized by broadly shared power, as in the case of Austria which has a history of “grand coalitions” with the government holding on average 72 percent of the seats. In Belgium and the Netherlands, governments typically share power with more than three parties on average which are typically more inclusive than necessary (i.e. a “surplus majority”). In comparison, coalitions in Germany are more likely the result of minimum winning coalitions comprised of the fewest number of parties to needed to hold a majority of seats.

Single-party minority governments are common in Spain, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. While single majority governments have occurred in 11 of the 17 countries at least once in the past sixty years, they are only a common feature in the United Kingdom, which has had a single party majority government in all but one of the last 23 governments and to a lesser extent Greece. Britain’s first-past-the-post electoral system can be credited with helping to produce a manufactured majority. Similarly, with Greece, a system of “reinforced PR” provides a bonus to the largest party to promote stability thereby ensuring single majority governments.

3. Sincere versus strategic voting

A general assumption in the existing literature is that sincere voting is the norm in parliamentary systems with proportional electoral systems (Duverger, 1954; Cox, 1997). That is, voters simply vote for their preferred candidate or party. In contrast, single-member plurality systems (henceforth referred to as plurality systems) sometimes present voters with institutional incentives to vote *strategically*. Voters are said to vote strategically when they rationally decide to vote for a party or candidate other than their overall favourite (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1972; Cox and Shugart, 1996; Cox, 1997; Alvarez and Nagler, 2000). Strategic voting – also known as tactical or sophisticated voting – assumes that voters with an instrumental motivation will vote for a party other than their most preferred party if the former has a better chance of influencing government formation. For example, a voter might be willing to vote for her second most preferred party if her favourite party is unlikely to win and if there is a close contest between the second and third ranked party. Duverger (1954) argued that this type of voting behaviour

³ Current OECD members with coalition governments are Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and Switzerland.

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