



Coalitions in the news: How saliency and tone in news coverage influence voters' preferences and expectations about coalitions

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ABSTRACT

Past research has shown that media coverage during election campaigns influences citizen preferences and expectations about parties and political candidates. Very little is known, however, about the effect of media coverage on post-electoral coalition preferences and expectations. This is surprising, given that speculations about post-electoral coalition building are an essential part of election campaigns in all multiparty systems. This paper investigates the consequences that coalitions' media saliency and tone have on voter preferences and expectations about these potential coalitions. Using media and panel data from the 2013 German and Austrian election campaigns, we find that media coverage has substantial effects on voter perceptions although the effects differ in strength between the two countries. These findings have important implications for our understanding of media effects, voter expectations and campaign strategies.

1. Introduction

Coalition governments are closely connected to elections under multiparty systems and represent one of the most important topics discussed during election campaigns in these systems (e.g., [Hobolt and Karp, 2010](#)). Recent studies have shown that coalition preferences and expectations influence voting behaviour and, as such, can have important consequences for election outcomes (e.g., [Bargsted and Kedar, 2009](#); [Blais et al., 2006](#); [Bowler et al., 2010](#)).

Motivated by these findings, research has started investigating how citizens form preferences on post-election coalition governments ([Debus and Müller, 2014](#); [Falcó-Gimeno, 2012](#)). Two recently published studies ([Nyhuis and Plescia, 2017](#); [Plescia and Aichholzer, 2017](#)) found that citizens' evaluations of coalitions enjoy a certain degree of independence from other objects of vote choice, including their constituent parties. A few attempts have also been made to explain post-electoral coalition expectations: in this regard, existing studies focused on the effect of party preferences and published opinion polls on voter expectations (e.g., [Faas et al., 2008](#); [Meffert and Gschwend, 2011](#)). To date however, the existing literature has largely overlooked the possible effect that media coverage can have on attitudes towards coalition governments. This lack of research is surprising, as most voters receive their impression of coalitions primarily from mass media ([Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002](#)), and electoral preferences and expectations are likely to be contingent upon media coverage ([Van der Meer, Hakhverdian &](#)

[Aaldering, 2016](#)). In fact, media coverage in the run-up to the election affects voters' preferences and expectations of the election outcome and may even impact their vote choice ([Faas et al., 2008](#)). Existing research has found conspicuous effects of saliency and tone cues in media coverage on preferences and support for parties (e.g., [Brettschneider, 2005](#); [Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aaldering, 2016](#); [Geiß and Schäfer, 2017](#)), but very little is known about the consequences of such cues on voter preferences for, or expectations about post-election coalition outcomes ([Strömbäck, 2012](#); [Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002](#)).

Against this background, this study represents the first attempt to examine the effect of media coverage on *preferences* as well as *expectations* over *post-electoral coalition governments*. The current study contributes to the existing literature in several important ways. First, we focus on a political object, i.e., coalition governments that have only received scant attention in the existing literature on public opinion and media effects. This is surprising since discussions about future coalition governments are an integral part of any campaign in multiparty systems ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2011](#)), and because media influence on coalition preferences and expectations can potentially be pervasive given that coalitions are a much more abstract construct compared to parties, which “are a real, physical entity, represented by candidates, organizations, messages and salient symbols” ([Meffert and Gschwend, 2012, p.4](#)).

Second, while most prior studies have considered only the effect of pre-election opinion polls on electoral expectations ([Faas et al., 2008](#);

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Meffert et al., 2011), we go beyond a focus on opinion polls and consider all cues in media coverage that are directly related to prospective coalitions. This is important because, although polls are an integral part of election coverage, they are not the only cues voters receive during election campaigns (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002).

Third, we focus on two main traits of the journalistic product, namely saliency and tone simultaneously as done by a few existing studies on party preferences (Hopmann et al., 2010), vote choice (Geiß and Schäfer, 2017; Geers and Bos, 2016) and candidate preferences (Eberl, Wagner & Boomgaarden, 2017b).

Last but not least, this study combines panel data with a comparative approach, which allows us to reduce, albeit not eliminate, the selection bias and causality issue, thereby strengthening our causal claim on how media coverage affects coalition expectations. Specifically, we rely on data from the German and Austrian parliamentary election campaigns of 2013, combining online panel surveys with media coverage of the most important newspapers in both countries. As such, this paper provides the first comparative study of the effect of media coverage on citizen expectations, tying the literature on media effects closely together with that on voter expectations, which have largely remained isolated from one another.

We find that even after controlling for structural differences across outlets and coalitions as well as individual-level differences, media coverage has substantial effects on voters' coalition preferences and expectations. The saliency and tone of media coverage have a somewhat stronger effect on coalition expectations compared to coalition preferences, in which case individual-level party predispositions appear to play a larger role. We also find important differences across the two countries when it comes to both media coverage and its effects.

Recognizing the importance of media coverage for voters' coalition preferences and expectations has consequences on our understanding of party strategy and political competition. To increase their perceived likelihood and, by that, eventually, their actual likelihood of being part of a governing coalition, parties can emphasize certain coalition options during the election campaign by sending clear signals to voters. Such strategies may reduce voters' hardship in deciding upon coalition majorities before the elections and lessen media influence in shaping expectations about post-electoral coalitions.

2. Sources of voter electoral preferences and expectations

The existing research on the determinants of coalition preferences and expectations has usually focused on the two separately.

Starting with preferences for post-electoral coalition governments, the literature has mainly examined the extent to which partisan attachment, ideological proximity and leader preferences influence coalition preferences. On the first aspect, it has been found that coalition preference follows, first of all, from party preference and long-term party identification (Plescia and Aichholzer, 2017). Moving to ideological proximity, in the Downsian framework, voters, parties, and candidates are assumed to hold positions in the ideological space and the utility of voters is determined by the distance between the voter and the political object, that being the party or the candidate (Downs, 1957). The few studies that have looked at sources of coalition preferences, find that the ideological distance between the voter and the overall position of the potential coalition also matters to explain coalition preferences (Falcó-Gimeno, 2012; Debus and Müller, 2014). In addition, attitudes towards the leader of the larger coalition partner (and future prime minister) have been found to bear disproportional influence on coalition preferences when compared to the preferences for the leader of the junior coalition partner. This may have to do with leaders of the main parties enjoying more visibility during the elections (Bowler et al., 2014).

When it comes to the sources of voters' expectations over post-electoral coalitions, the existing literature has made a broad distinction between individual-level and contextual-level sources. The first sources

are, as the term suggests, subject-specific and unlikely to change much over the course of an election. By far the most well-known and most studied form of subjective influence is long-term partisan affiliation. A partisan preference implies a strong directional motivation that favours preferred outcomes over disliked ones (Price, 2000). The so-called “wishful thinking” refers to the process by which citizens overestimate the likelihood of outcomes they prefer (e.g., Meffert et al., 2011, p.805). In other words, coalition expectations follow first of all from party preferences.

The second type of source is context-specific and should be similar across subjects within a specific context, given that it is based on shared, factual information available to all voters in that context. The most common piece of information on parties, candidates, and coalition post-electoral expectations available to voters during an election campaign are opinion polls (Brettschneider, 2005). Polls have become a prevalent feature of media coverage during national campaigns, providing voters with vast opportunities to learn rather sophisticated information about upcoming elections (Meffert et al., 2011). The evidence suggests that polls and media coverage of polls influence coalition preferences and may lead to vote-switching (Geers et al., 2018). They do so in particular, since the higher a coalition's standing is in the polls, the more likely that coalition is perceived by the voters, thus inducing strategic voting (e.g., Faas et al., 2008).

While some studies in this field focus on polls as mere reporting of numeral facts (Faas et al., 2008; Meffert et al., 2011), others acknowledge that polls are reported in the context of news stories, that they may include mediated coalition signals and that they are thus subject to media framing as well (e.g., Meffert and Gschwend, 2011; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aldering, 2016). Nevertheless, Meffert and Gschwend (2011) do find a distinct effect of the mere numerical facts presented in polls that goes beyond additional signals presented in the corresponding journalistic interpretation and presentation of the polls.

3. Media coverage as a source for coalition preferences and expectations: hypotheses

Electoral preferences and expectations are likely to be contingent upon media cues since most voters receive their impression of politics and political actors primarily from mass media (e.g., Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2002; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian & Aldering, 2016). When analysing the effect of media on voter attitudes toward political objects (e.g., candidates, parties or coalitions), two main media cues are of major importance: the *saliency* of, and the *tone* toward a specific political object (Eberl, Boomgaarden & Wagner, 2017a; Geiß and Schäfer, 2017).

Saliency refers to the visibility of political actors in news reporting. Political actors can be more or less salient in the media as they compete for media attention. Such visibility can help voters to gather important information on parties and candidates and may influence subsequent political judgments (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004), especially because voters tend to infer a party's political importance and quality from its media saliency (Miller and Krosnick, 2000). Tone toward a specific political object adds a qualitative aspect to media coverage by considering *how* that political object is covered in the media. The tone of media coverage “is important because it can provide the audience with templates for understanding politics” (Eberl, Boomgaarden & Wagner, 2017a, p.1128). Existing works on valence framing indicate that tone towards an object affects the evaluation of these aspects in public's mind (de Vreese and Boomgaarden, 2003).

Although not yet assessed in the existing literature, we expect media cuing to also be relevant for citizen evaluations and expectations of post-electoral coalitions. It is even possible that media effects are larger for coalitions than for parties and candidates. In fact, while parties, are real entities, represented by candidates, leaders, organizations, etcetera, coalitions are purely hypothetical with no current physical or

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