



Voter perceptions of coalition policy positions in multiparty systems



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ABSTRACT

A growing body of research shows how voters consider coalition formation and policy compromises at the post-electoral stage when making vote choices. Yet, we know surprisingly little about how voters perceive policy positions of coalition governments. Using new survey data from the Austrian National Election Study (AUTNES), we study voter perceptions of coalition policy platforms. We find that voters do in general have reasonable expectations of the coalitions' policy positions. However, partisan beliefs and uncertainty affect how voters perceive coalition positions: in addition to projection biases similar to those for individual party placements, partisans of coalition parties tend to align the position of the coalition with their own party's policy position, especially for those coalitions they prefer the most. In contrast, there is no consistent effect of political knowledge on the voters' uncertainty when evaluating coalition policy positions.

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In recent years, political science research has increasingly directed its attention towards coalitions as an integral part of the decision-making calculus of voters. Voters cast their votes with policy outcomes in mind and when doing so, they take into account the institutional setting in which parties operate (Kedar, 2005, 2009). Analyses of electoral behaviour in mixed-member proportional systems demonstrate that voters consider coalitions in order to reduce the risk of wasted votes (Gschwend, 2007; Bowler et al., 2010) and similar mechanisms have been observed for systems of proportional representation (Blais et al., 2006; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009). In these contexts, voters consider not only the programmatic offer of parties but also coalition formation processes and coalition bargaining (Duch et al., 2010; Indridason, 2011). In particular, voters take the (expected) policy position of coalition governments into account when making their vote choice (Kedar, 2005, 2009; Duch et al., 2010; Indridason, 2011).

Yet, we know surprisingly little about how voters perceive policy positions of coalitions. Most models of coalition-directed vote choice use an average of respondents' placements of the constituent parties, often weighted by some measure of party size, to estimate each voter's coalition placement. This approach relies on the assumption, originally made by Downs (1957), that voters perceive policy outcomes of coalition governments as a

compromise between the government parties' policy proposals. Yet, there is no clear empirical evidence that voters use such simple heuristics (e.g., the average of government party policy positions) in forming expectations about coalition policy platforms. Recent evidence from Bowler et al. (2014) suggests that voters differ substantially in their perceptions of coalition policy platforms and, more importantly, that their perceptions differ from the average of the perceived party policy positions. This suggests that voter perceptions of coalition policy positions are more than the 'sum of their parts'.

In this article, we study voter perceptions of coalition policy positions. Based on previous research on perceptual bias and uncertainty in party policy positions, we examine the role of partisan beliefs and information costs on perceptions of coalition policy platforms. Coalition governments are based on the labels of the constituent parties, providing voters with clues and heuristics to estimate their positions. Thus, we expect partisan affiliation to affect perceptions of coalition positions. Furthermore, we hypothesize that coalition perceptions are driven by those parties for which a voter's priming is strongest. Thus, party supporters of the constituent parties tend to align the position of the coalition with their own party's policy position, especially for those coalitions they support. Finally, we expect that political knowledge reduces the voters' uncertainty when gauging coalition policy.

We employ direct measures of perceived coalition positions using the 2013 pre-election survey of the *Austrian National Election Study* (AUTNES; Kritzing et al., 2014). We find that voters do

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indeed have reasonable perceptions of coalition policy platforms: many respondents are able to locate coalitions on a left–right scale and the variation in these placements is similar to that for individual parties. Yet, there is also considerable variation across voters in how they perceive policy positions of political actors. We use a perception model of policy positions originally developed in the context of US Senate races (Franklin, 1991) to study the impact of perceptual bias and uncertainty on perceptions of party and coalition policy positions. The results of our analysis suggest that party and coalition preferences affect how voters perceive coalition policy positions. While we find strong support for perceptual biases for coalition policy positions, there is no consistent empirical evidence that political knowledge lowers the voters' uncertainty when evaluating coalition policy positions.

These findings add to our understanding of voter perceptions of post-electoral politics and bargaining outcomes; in particular, we show that voter perceptions of coalitions are more complex than simple heuristics such as averages of party policy platforms would suggest. Recent research (Bowler et al., 2014) shows that voter perceptions of coalitions vary according to beliefs concerning the parties' electoral success, their bargaining power, and the party leaders' qualities. We extend these arguments by introducing partisan bias and information costs as explanatory factors for why voter perceptions of coalition policy platforms differ. Both factors have been shown to affect voter perceptions of party policy positions, and in effect vote choices (e.g. Calvo et al., 2014; Tomz and van Houweling, 2009; Somer-Topcu, forthcoming). The findings presented here suggest that similar effects adhere to outcome-centric spatial models where voters consider the policy platforms of coalition governments. Our findings also highlight that party supporters tend to be rather optimistic regarding their party's influence in a coalition government, especially if they strongly prefer that coalition. This suggests a difference between the voters' perceived and the actual representation under specific coalition governments.

We begin by comparing voters' perceived party and coalition policy positions using data from the AUTNES pre-election survey. We then derive expectations of how voters perceive policy platforms of coalition governments and present a statistical model for voter perceptions accounting for bias and uncertainty effects. Next, we turn to our data to test these expectations and conclude with a discussion on the broader implications of this analysis.

1. Voter perceptions of parties and coalition governments

Spatial ideological dimensions structure the political arena and serve as a medium to differentiate political actors along lines of conflict (e.g., Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989). The left-right scheme has proved a meaningful concept to organise the diversity of positions taken by Western European parties on policy issues (Dalton, 2013). In the context of issue preferences of the electorate, the left-right orientation has therefore been referred to as a super issue 'that encapsulates, impacts upon, and constrains a host of more specific political preferences and orientations' (Van der Eijk et al., 2005: 166).

Given that votes are cast for parties, not coalitions, respondents are usually asked to rank parties on a left–right scale. Over the last ten years, however, an emerging literature has focused on how voters take post-electoral compromises and policy-making into account when choosing between parties (e.g. Kedar, 2005; Blais et al., 2006; Gschwend, 2007; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009; Kedar, 2009; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010; Bowler et al., 2010; Meffert and Gschwend, 2012). Given the lack of data on perceived coalition policy positions, voter perceptions of coalitions are usually

modelled as averages of party policy positions.¹

The 2013 AUTNES pre-election survey (Kritzinger et al., 2014) is one of the few surveys where voters are explicitly asked about their perceptions of coalition policy platforms. Specifically, respondents were first asked to place parties on an ideological scale ranging from 0 ('left') to 10 ('right'). They were subsequently asked to place four coalition governments on the same scale.² This allows us to compare voters' perceptions of parties and coalition governments. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in two waves (winter 2012; spring 2013) before the national election in September 2013. The Austrian party system contains two classic mainstream parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the People's Party (ÖVP), as well as the Greens and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) as niche parties. Several coalition options were being discussed before the 2013 election. Respondents were asked to place four potential two-party coalition governments. Three of these coalitions (ÖVP-SPÖ, SPÖ-FPÖ, ÖVP-FPÖ) have governed at some point in the post-war period, while there are several SPÖ-Greens coalition governments at the regional level. In the context of the Austrian party system, they thus represent viable options for future governments.³

Table 1 shows the average perceptions of party and coalition policy positions, two measures for variability in voter placements, and the share of 'don't know' responses. Dispersion in voters' judgments is indicated using the standard deviation and Van der Eijk's (2001) measure of perceptual agreement, where higher values indicate more agreement. For voter perceptions of coalition governments, we also show the share of respondents who locate coalitions in between the two parties' perceived policy positions.

Table 1 suggests that voters are capable of placing parties and coalition governments in a one-dimensional policy space. The mean perceived party positions range from the Greens on the left, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the People's Party (ÖVP) as centre-left and centre-right parties to the FPÖ at the right end of the spectrum. About two thirds (65.7 per cent) of the respondents rank the parties this way from left to right.

The mean perceived coalition policy positions reflect the common wisdom of coalition politics: The SPÖ-Greens coalition is perceived as the left-most coalition option, while an ÖVP-FPÖ government is a coalition closest to the right end of the policy scale. The SPÖ-ÖVP and SPÖ-FPÖ coalitions are perceived as policy platforms close to the centre of the policy space. About 43 per cent of the respondents rank the coalition governments in this order (i.e. $SPÖ-Greens \leq SPÖ-ÖVP \leq SPÖ-FPÖ \leq ÖVP-FPÖ$). While this estimate is lower than that for individual parties, most respondents (ranging from 59 to 68 per cent) rank coalition policy platforms in-between the constituent parties' perceived policy positions.

In addition, the variability in voter placements for coalition policy positions is also similar to that for party positions. In fact, the incumbent SPÖ-ÖVP coalition has the highest agreement score and none of the coalition government scores is substantially lower than for individual party placements. The share of 'don't know' responses for coalition governments is also similar to that for individual parties. About one in ten survey respondents is unable or unwilling to locate coalitions on the left–right scale. The only

¹ Similarly, the (seat-weighted) average of coalition parties is often used to indicate a coalition's policy position and to assess the ideological congruence between (multiparty) governments and the median citizen (e.g. Powell, 2000; McDonald et al., 2004; Golder and Stramski, 2010).

² The question was phrased as follows: 'Where would you place the following potential coalitions on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means "left" and 10 means "right"? You can use the values in between to give a more precise answer.'

³ Three additional parties (Team Stronach, NEOS, and BZÖ) are not included in the coalition governments discussed below, and we refrain from discussing them in greater detail.

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