

Expected utility or learned familiarity? The formation of voters' coalition preferences[☆]

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ABSTRACT

In most modern parliamentary democracies, it is unlikely that single party governments will be formed, meaning that a voter's preferred party presumably has to share cabinet offices and negotiate policy compromises in a coalition government. This raises the question of how voters evaluate potential (coalition) governments, especially since recent studies have shown that coalition preferences influence voting behaviour. In this paper, we combine theories of voting behaviour, government formation and political learning to derive expectations regarding the factors that may impact voters' coalition preferences. We test our hypotheses by analysing survey data from the German federal and state levels. The results of a mixed logit regression analysis support our arguments: Voters' coalition preferences not only depend on the perceived policy distance between the positions of voters and the most distant party within combinations of parties, but also on predominant patterns of government formation.

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1. Introduction

For the first time since 1945, the British government is made up of more than one party. In the general election held in May 2010, neither the Conservatives nor the incumbent Labour Party won a majority of seats in the House of Commons, which led to the forming of a formal coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats based on a policy agreement (see, e.g., Fisher and Wlezien, 2011; Lees, 2011). This fairly recent example shows that even in the United Kingdom, with its

long-standing tradition of two-party competition, coalition governments have become a regular feature of the political process, particularly with regard to the regional level.¹ In general, discussions and speculation regarding the partisan composition of the next government and the likelihood of potential coalitions are a standard element of election campaigns in most parliamentary democracies, in particular in those characterised by a tradition of governing in multi-party cabinets (e.g., Blais et al., 2006; Bäck and Rosema, 2008; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010, 2012). While there are detailed studies on the determinants of government composition, governing in coalitions and the factors that can break up coalition governments (for an overview, see Laver and Schofield, 1998; Müller, 2009; Clark et al., 2013: 457–492), there are very few studies that examine which factors influence the preferences of voters regarding potential coalition governments (see, however, Norpoth, 1980; Garry and Tilley, 2003; Jou, 2010;

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¹ Since devolution, Scotland and Wales have seen various forms of governments other than one-party majorities.

Falcó-Gimeno, 2012). In a recent article, Bargsted and Kedar (2009) show that decisions made by Israeli voters are clearly affected by their expectations regarding the outcome of the government formation process. Studies on voting behaviour in Austria and Germany, countries in which coalition governments are the norm, also demonstrate that voters use available information on pre-electoral pacts between political parties to cast their votes strategically and/or to increase the chance of implementing a (coalition) government that best reflects their own policy preferences (see, e.g., Pappi, 2007; Meffert and Gschwend, 2010).

In this paper we supplement theories of voting behaviour with the literature on coalition formation and party competition and ask why voters prefer some combinations of parties as coalition governments over others. In doing so, we adopt theories on proximity voting and develop a straightforward model of the popularity of potential coalition governments that focuses on their utility in terms of policy distances. We argue that the perceived ideological distance between voters and the party combinations is a decisive element in determining voters' preferences regarding the outcome of the government formation process. However, we also argue that voters' preferences are additionally shaped by the current political context, meaning that the choice set, as the voters perceive it, does not necessarily correspond to the set of all theoretically possible coalitions. Our model therefore incorporates predominant patterns of government formation that voters recognise due to processes of political learning and their knowledge on how coalition politics work in a given political system. We test our expectations by analysing data from nationwide German public opinion surveys and 78 state election studies. The results provide support for our hypotheses: We find that the perceived ideological distance between voters and potential coalitions plays a significant role in determining voters' preferences. We also find that voters prefer potential coalitions that reflect the predominant patterns of government formation in Germany. Furthermore, voters follow the pre-electoral commitments of parties and prefer coalitions that are in line with the patterns of party competition at the national and, thus, decisive level of political decision-making. Our results do however indicate that identifying a reasonable coalition requires some knowledge about the political context: The more respondents are interested in politics, the greater the likelihood that our model is able to correctly predict their preferences.

To derive our hypotheses, we discuss theories of voting behaviour and political learning in the following section. In doing so, we discuss how prevalent patterns of coalition politics might shape voters' perception of reasonable alternatives and, thus, their preferences with regard to the partisan composition of the government. In Section 2, we provide a brief overview of our data and method. The subsequent section descriptively and analytically presents the main findings of our analysis of the coalition preferences of German voters. Finally, in the concluding section, we summarise our findings, discuss open questions and present incentives for further research.

2. Theoretical perspectives regarding the coalition preferences of voters

When voters choose between combinations of parties, the decision-making process is more complex than when they are asked to simply select a single party or candidate at the polls. Instead, voters must consider which potential coalition would increase their utility regarding the likely policy outcomes of that particular government (Downs, 1957; Grofman, 2004). Moreover, they are likely to think about the institutional and cultural norms of government formation before responding to questions regarding their preferences. We therefore consider two sets of factors that underlie voters' coalition preferences. First, we draw on theories of voting behaviour and argue that voters are likely to prefer governments that best reflect their preferences, in particular their ideological viewpoint. The second component for explaining voters' coalition preferences is derived from theories and findings on political learning, political knowledge and empirical regularities. We argue that if there are dominant patterns of government formation in a country – such as a tendency to form 'grand coalitions', as was the case in Austria between 1949 and 1966 (see, e.g., Müller, 2000) – voters are likely to adopt these patterns because they have become part of the ruling 'political culture' (see, e.g., De Winter, 2002). We discuss the proposed explanation in more detail in the following subsections in order to be able to derive several hypotheses that will structure our empirical analysis of the determinants of voters' coalition preferences.

2.1. Ideological distances, proximity voting and coalition preferences

The starting point of our explanation of voters' coalition preferences is a straightforward model setup that builds on the literature on proximity voting (see Downs, 1957; Adams et al., 2005). Falcó-Gimeno (2012) finds, for instance, that Spanish voters' coalition preferences are largely affected by ideological proximity, especially on the left–right axis, whereas preferences on decentralization are much more salient for the supporters of regionalist parties. Following this literature, we argue that voters 'calculate' the anticipated policy positions of potential coalition governments on the basis of, first, the involved parties' policy positions and, second, their anticipated strength. Fig. 1 outlines this argument using a simple example: If pre-election polls indicate that a one-party majority government is highly unlikely in a given party system, it can be assumed that the potential outcomes of the expected coalition formation process will already be discussed before elections are held.

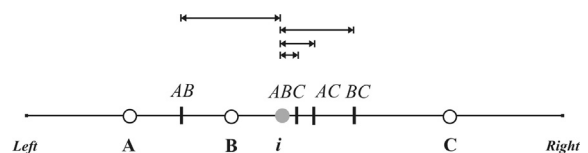


Fig. 1. Ideological positions of voter *i* and parties A, B and C on a general left–right dimension. Source: Own illustration.

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