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Voting for Coalitions? The Role of Coalition Preferences and Expectations in Voting Behavior

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Abstract

Coalition governments are the norm in many countries, even though voters can only cast their vote for an individual party, not a specific coalition. Some voters might nevertheless cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that a preferred coalition will be formed after the election. In the paper, we investigate the effect of coalition preferences and expectations on vote decisions, above and beyond the preferences for specific parties. We focus in particular on voters' ability to form differentiated expectations about possible coalitions, the likelihood of a majority and the likelihood that the parties will be able to agree on a coalition. We report the results of a nationally representative survey conducted before the 2006 Austrian General Election. We collected detailed information about respondents' party and coalition preferences and expectations about the electoral outcomes. Green Party voters are used to demonstrate that the effect of coalition preferences depends on whether or not voters expect a coalition to succeed.

Voting for Coalitions?

The Role of Coalition Preferences and Expectations in Voting Behavior

Coalition governments are the norm in many countries with multi-party systems. Voters, however, can only cast their ballot for an individual party or candidate, not a specific coalition. Voters are certainly aware that coalition formation is an additional and intermediary step between vote decision and government formation, making any predictions of likely governments rather difficult (Downs 1957). The instrumental goal of voting a specific government in office quickly becomes a highly challenging task because a vote for a specific party and its policy will never directly result in a government but at best secure a party's membership in a coalition, along with a "compromised" policy mix that the coalition parties will eventually agree on.

If coalition governments are a fact of life, voters should not only be aware of it but likely take coalition preferences into account at the ballot box, at least if the political and institutional context of an election provides the appropriate incentives. Rather surprisingly, previous research has barely begun to address this question. Recent work by Blais and colleagues (Aldrich et al. 2004, Blais et al. 2006) and Bargsted and Kedar (2007) strongly suggests that coalition preferences and expectations matter for particular subgroups of voters.

The first goal of this paper is rather modest and aims to replicate the earlier work by demonstrating that coalition preferences matter above and beyond the preferences for specific parties. The second goal of the paper is more ambitious. To maximize expected utility, voters have to form expectations about the electoral performance of the parties in the upcoming election. In the case of coalitions, voters will have to assess not only whether a specific coalition is likely to reach a majority but also whether parties are willing and able to form a coalition. This question would be simple enough but encounters a few additional complications. The literature on voters' ability to forecast the electoral strength of parties suggests that voters' forecasts of electoral outcomes are far from objective and rather heavily influenced by existing political preferences. Thus, the paper will first assess the extent to which political preferences shape voters expectations about likely coalitions while differentiating between coalition preferences, assessments of electoral strength (majority of seats), and assessments of how likely it is that two or more parties will agree to form a coalition. In a final step, we identify a subgroup of voters for whom coalition preferences and expectations could or should have made a difference and demonstrate that the effect of

coalition preferences is conditional on expectations about the electoral success of the coalition.

Review

In seminal works by authors such as Downs (1957) and Cox (1997), rational and in particular strategic voting in multi-party systems with coalition governments has been treated with a lot of skepticism because decision scenarios can very quickly become extraordinarily complex. With each additional party, the number of theoretically possible coalitions increases exponentially, and a voter would have to form expectations not only about the strength of the various parties but also about the likelihood that parties might agree to form specific coalitions after the election. While not denying the complexity of the decision task, it is (or should be) less than an insurmountable challenge for most voters, for a number of reasons. First, parties often announce—and the media cover—positive and negative coalition signals during the campaign, giving voters some guidance about which coalition governments are possible and/or likely (Meffert and Gschwend 2007). Second, voters as members of the polity (paraphrasing Lewis-Beck and Skalaban [1989]) will have considerable experience with and knowledge about parties and previous coalition governments which should help to reduce the complexity of the decision task to a more limited set of realistic options. Third, voters might have clear preferences about which parties should form a coalition and would have to focus only on the electoral chances of the relevant parties. In short, voters might very well cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that a preferred coalition will be formed after the election.

Previous research, as far as it exists, shows promise. Starting with the fundamental question whether voters are at all able to form rational expectations about coalition governments, evidence from economic experiments by McCuen and Morton (2002) and Meffert and Gschwend (2007) suggests that voters are indeed able to use poll and other relevant information to cast optimal votes, at least under the ideal conditions of a laboratory experiment.

But support comes from survey research as well, even if previous research with direct relevance shares a striking commonality: it uses Israel's polarized multi-party system as the setting. Blais and colleagues (2006) use data from the 2003 Israeli national election to demonstrate that coalition preferences have an impact above and beyond the typical predictors of voting behavior such as preferences for parties, candidates, and ideology. In fact, the

authors find that about one in ten voters passes a series of stringent conditions, that is, that they have only one preferred party, only one preferred coalition, and voted for one of the parties in the preferred coalition (other than the most preferred party). The authors only address coalition preferences, not expectations about electoral viability in their study. In an earlier analysis (Aldrich et al. 2004), the authors find that expectations did not affect the vote intentions of supporters of right-religious parties, but that they mattered for vote intentions for the moderate Shinui party, which was expected to facilitate a secular coalition. The effect of expectations was operationalized and tested as a main effect, or in the case of Shinui, as a single dichotomous variable capturing both a coalition preference and its electoral viability. As a consequence, this limited operationalization fails to fully test any conditional or interactive effect of coalition preferences and expectations.

Bargsted and Kedar (2007) explicitly introduce expectations into their model for the 2006 Israeli election and argue that voters on the left or right who expect an unfavorable right- or left-leaning coalition to win will be more likely to desert their preferred party and rather vote for the most moderate party in the expected coalition—essentially to prevent the worst. Ideologically extreme voters, on the other hand, are not thought to be susceptible to such instrumental strategic considerations and rather express their preferences sincerely. Theoretically, the argument assumes a unidimensional political space, something that might not always be given or relevant for coalition formation. Most important, Bargsted and Kedar explicitly introduce expectations into the model and demonstrate that they matter, even if their operationalizations also does not match the final logical conclusion of their argument. If we accept that the effect of a coalition preference depends on the expectation of its electoral success, the argument assumes an interaction effect. The authors only include two main effects (in their defense, the authors estimate their model with a conditional logistic regression model which captures nonlinear effects).

Israel is certainly not the only country with coalition governments. Other studies on strategic voting in multi-party systems using proportional representation and coalition governments further support the notion that coalition preferences matter. For Germany, both Pappi and Thurner (2002) and Gschwend (2007) show that various forms of coalition-related voting behavior exists, though only Gschwend (2007) finds support for a threshold insurance strategy. Supporters of large parties sometimes vote for the preferred small coalition partner if the latter is in danger of falling below a minimum vote threshold.

The question of coalition voting is closely related, if not mostly identical, to strategic voting (Cox 1997, Fisher 2004). The latter has been documented for a number of

parliamentary democracies with multi-party systems (not all with coalition governments), including Germany (Bawn 1999; Pappi & Thurner 2002), Great Britain (Alvarez & Nagler 2000, Franklin, Niemi, & Whitten 1994, Lanoue & Bowler 1992, Niemi, Whitten & Franklin 1992, 1993), The Netherlands (Irwin & Van Holsteyn 2002, 2003), Canada (Blais et al. 2001, Blais et al. 2005, Lanoue & Bowler 1998), and New Zealand (Karp et al. 2002). Strategic and coalition voting assumes that voters with an instrumental motivation will vote for a party other than the most preferred party if the former has a better chance to influence government formation. Even if a voter prefers a coalition more than an individual party, the simple fact that he or she cannot directly—sincerely or “expressively”—vote for a coalition requires tactical or strategic behavior.

Given their commonalities, it is not surprising that the study of strategic and coalition voting face similar methodological and practical challenges. First, only a small number of voters will usually find themselves in a situation that provides the appropriate incentives and opportunities for strategic and/or coalition voting (e.g. Alvarez, Boehmke, & Nagler 2006). Second, the available data often misses adequate and specific measures of party and coalition preferences, not to mention expectations about electoral outcomes. Third, the number of voters who cast a clearly identifiable strategic or coalition vote (which must be insincere and instrumental) is very small. A systematic analysis and assessment of strategic voting is usually very difficult. Our study was designed to address at least the lack of complete and appropriate measures for preferences and expectations.

Rational vs. Rationalized Expectations

Measuring coalition expectations can easily fix the problem of missing measures, but it also leads to another substantive challenge. Rational expectations about electoral outcomes for parties and coalitions are crucial for strategic voting. The literature often acknowledges but rarely deals with the inconvenient truth of wishful thinking. Political expectations are strongly shaped or distorted by existing political preferences (Abramson et al. 1992, Babad 1995, Babad, Hills & O’Diskroll 1992, Bartels 1985, 1987, Blais & Turgeon 2004, Dolan & Holbrook 2001, Gimpel & Harvey 1997, Granberg & Brent 1983, Johnston et al. 1992, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet 1944, Lewis-Beck & Skalaban 1989, Mutz 1998, Schoen 1999, 2000). Voters tend to overestimate the chances of preferred parties while underestimating the chances of disliked parties. To be sure, the literature cited above certainly suggests that most voters form expectations using objective external information sources such as polls and media reports and have a reasonable idea about the electoral strength of the

parties. The fine-tuning of the expectations, however, is often subject to preference-driven projections.

Given the lack of previous evidence for wishful thinking and coalition expectations, we will investigate the extent to which party preferences shape the perception of electoral success in more detail.

The Election Context

The setting of our study is the 2006 Austrian national election for a new *Nationalrat*. At the beginning of the campaign, six parties, four “old” and two fairly “new” parties, had reasonable chances of obtaining seats in the next parliament. These included the two large parties that have dominated Austrian politics for more than fifty years, the governing conservative People’s Party (ÖVP) and the oppositional Social Democrats (SPÖ). The two smaller and established parties included the nationalist and populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the environmental Greens (Die Grünen). Both were expected to draw considerable support, with an election result in the double-digits either possible or likely. The two remaining small parties had been established not very long before the election. The first, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), was founded in the spring of 2005 by former members of the FPÖ, including all FPÖ ministers in the coalition government with the ÖVP and most FPÖ members of parliament. As a consequence, the BZÖ replaced the FPÖ as the junior coalition partner of the ÖVP at that time. According to the polls, the BZÖ had rather slim chances of passing the minimum vote threshold of 4%. The second new party or list, “Liste Dr. Martin,” was primarily a one-man show by an independent member of the European Parliament who hoped to repeat his very successful run in the 2004 European election (mostly as a protest against the established parties). The polls gave him a reasonable chance of passing the minimum threshold.

The incumbent coalition of ÖVP and BZÖ was neither popular nor likely to get a new mandate, but the polls still suggested that the ÖVP would stay ahead of the SPÖ by a few percentage points. With two parties close to the 4% threshold, the outcome of the election was fairly open and a strategic Austrian voter faced a difficult choice. The parties contributed to this uncertainty by sending out only few and mixed coalition signals. The ÖVP as the likely winner refrained from explicit or official coalition signals. It only ruled out a coalition with the FPÖ but both the Greens and the SPÖ were seen as possible partners. The SPÖ also refrained from explicit and official statements but saw Greens and ÖVP as possible coalition

partners, clearly ruling out the two nationalist, far-right parties FPÖ and BZÖ. The attitudes toward Martin, a former member of the SPÖ, remained ambiguous but rather negative. The Greens explicitly campaigned without a coalition statement and tried to keep equal distance to both ÖVP and SPÖ, though the Social Democrats were seen as the slightly favored partner. The FPÖ ruled out any participation in a coalition government while BZÖ and Martin would both consider a coalition with ÖVP and SPÖ. In short, the three most likely outcomes included a grand coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ (which would have a certain majority of seats) or a coalition of ÖVP or SPÖ with the Greens as junior partner. This situation provides a good opportunity to investigate the effect of voters' coalition preferences and expectations and their effect on vote intentions.

It should be noted that the polls, while not far off, missed the election outcome. The ÖVP (34.3%) lost more than expected support and finished behind the SPÖ (35.3%). Greens (11.0%) and FPÖ (11.0%) did perform very well, and the BZÖ (4.1%) managed to just pass the minimum threshold. Martin (2.8%) fell far short of the minimum vote threshold. Because neither Greens nor FPÖ had enough seats to form a government with either SPÖ or ÖVP, the latter two eventually agreed on a grand coalition.

Data and Methods

Our data comes from a pre-election survey that interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1501 respondents by phone during the three weeks (September 18-30) preceding the election on October 1. Given the interest in voters' expectations and coalition preferences, respondents were asked to rate not only the six main parties but also seven specific coalitions that either had a realistic chance of reaching a majority after the elections or that was discussed during the campaign. The 11-point rating scale for parties and coalitions ranged from -5 ("don't like the party/prefer the coalition at all") to +5 ("like the party very much/absolutely prefer the coalition"). The leading candidate of each party was rated on a similar scale as well. The survey asked two separate questions to measure the expectations about coalitions. First, it asked respondents about the likelihood that a given coalition would have a majority to form a government after the election, using a 4-point scale ranging from "certainly not" over "rather uncertain" and "certain" to "very certain." The second question asked respondents about the likelihood that the parties would be able to agree on a coalition (assuming they had a majority), using the same 4-point certainty scale. The key dependent variable is the vote intention of the respondents for the upcoming election.

Results

Party Preferences and Vote Intentions

In a first step, we determine the party preferences of the respondents. We use the party ratings to assign participants dichotomous party-preference indicators. Unlike the familiar party identification question that can identify only a single party, the party ratings provide more complete information about the party preferences of the respondents, including those respondents who do not have a long-term party identification and those who prefer more than one party. Table 1 summarizes the party preferences of the respondents in two ways. For the first column, respondents are assigned a unique party preference if they evaluate a single party higher than all the other parties. Respondents with these unique party preferences are differentiated from those with multiple preferences, in particular those who give two parties the highest rating, those who are indifferent (three or more parties ranked highest), and those who are alienated (only negative ratings). This classification shows that two-thirds of the respondents have a unique party preference, but it excludes a considerable number of voters who have a two-party tie. Because our interest is in the effect of coalition preferences, it would be questionable to exclude voters with dual party preferences. If we consider both parties in a two-party tie as valid party preferences, we can assign party preferences to more than 90% of our sample. Consequently, the party preferences in the subsequent analyses allow for two-party ties and thus are not unique for some of the respondents. The second entry in Table 1 shows the distribution of these “multiple” party preferences.

The consequences of these two classifications can be shown by comparing the vote intentions for the different partisan groups. Table 2 differentiates the vote intentions into “sincere” votes for the most preferred party (or one of two parties), “insincere” votes of a different party, or no vote intention for those who planned to abstain or had not made up their mind. The sincere and insincere vote intentions are very similar for both party preference classifications, but the number of respondents without a vote intention increases if the multiple preferences measure is used (with the exception of Martin supporters). Substantively, the results show that the supporters of the two large parties ÖVP and SPÖ were least likely to cast insincere votes. However, more ÖVP supporters were unsure about their vote or planned to abstain, foreshadowing the ÖVP loss to the SPÖ in the election. SPÖ supporters were obviously better motivated to turn out. Supporters of small parties were more likely to cast insincere or strategic votes, in particular the supporters of FPÖ, BZÖ, and Martin. However,

these parties were also least likely to join the next government—or parliament, for that matter. Supporters of the Greens fell somewhat in the middle. About one in ten green voters voted insincerely

Coalition Preferences

Next, we analyze the extent to which respondents' party preferences affect their coalition preferences as well as the preferences for single party governments by ÖVP and SPÖ. The results of the regressions in Table 3 show that party preferences shape the coalition preferences to varying degrees, but that they can explain at most a third of the variance. Coalition preferences are clearly not just a function of party preferences.¹ Substantively, the results help to characterize the pattern of coalition preference before the election. Most notably, the coalition with the highest average rating (and the only positive constant) is the grand coalition of ÖVP and SPÖ. While this is partly due to the fact that the two large parties also have the highest number of supporters in the sample, driving up the average evaluation, the popularity of this coalition goes much further. In fact, party preferences explain the least amount of variance in comparison to the other coalition preferences. Even supporters of the Greens and the BZÖ, who rate the grand coalition significantly lower (after all, these parties would lose their chance to join the government), are on average only less than one scale point more negative. Furthermore, supporters of ÖVP and SPÖ rate this coalition higher than their respective single party governments or any other coalition. Clearly, the grand coalition was the government to beat.

After the grand coalition, there are two “second” choices, both involving the Green Party and either ÖVP or SPÖ. The average evaluations of these two coalitions are close to neutral and strongly preferred by supporters of the respective coalition parties, but strongly opposed by the excluded large party and the nationalist FPÖ.

Overall, it is hardly surprising that voters tend to rate any coalition which includes a preferred party as higher and those that are politically undesirable as more negative. Only supporters of Martin are an exception because, for the most part, they appear to lack clear coalition preferences.

¹ Including additional political preferences (issues, ideology), socioeconomic indicators (e.g. membership in labor union), and other demographics (e.g. sex) certainly improves the model fit to some degree. Because these effects are not of further importance for the purpose of this paper, they are not included in the analyses reported here.

Effect of Coalition Preferences

After these preliminary assessments, we turn to the first main question: do coalition preferences matter? We test the effect of coalition preferences by regressing the vote intention of likely voters for one of the six relevant parties on party evaluations, candidate evaluations, and coalition preferences. Party ratings were used as substitute for dichotomous party preference indicators because some of the coefficients cannot be estimated with the latter (due to lack of variance or an insufficient number of respondents for some preference combinations). The results, however, are fairly equivalent. Candidate evaluations are included because the leading candidates of the parties played a prominent and highly visible role during the campaign, most notably in a series of pair-wise television debates in the weeks before the election. The model is estimated with a multinomial logistic regression without restricting the effects of the party-specific variables on the respective party. Attitudes toward a party, candidate, or coalition might very well cross party lines. For example, a dislike of a left-of-center coalition of SPÖ and Greens might increase the likelihood of endorsing a right-of-center party. The vote intention for the FPÖ is used as the comparison category.²

The results in Table 4 show that party ratings (or preferences) are generally the strongest predictors, in particular for the preferred party. The effects of the party ratings also suggest some polarization among the two large parties and the Greens as well as between the two far right parties. A higher rating of one of the large parties makes a vote for other large party and the Greens less likely. Respondents seem to have fairly clear preferences among the three main contenders for the governing coalition. The second polarization is visible among supporters of the two far right parties. Not only do they have a clear dislike for each other—the more they like one party, the less likely are they to vote for the other—they also have a markedly different attitude toward the ÖVP. While supporters of the FPÖ are less likely to vote for the main incumbent party, supporters of the BZÖ are more likely to choose the senior coalition partner.

The candidate effects are more modest, with the exception of the incumbent chancellor Schüssel. His evaluation is strongly associated with the likelihood of voting for the ÖVP. Surprisingly, his evaluation is also positively linked, though much weaker, with a vote intention for the SPÖ. This effect nearly matches the effect of the chancellor candidate of the SPÖ, Gusenbauer. With respect to the three main contenders, and further supporting the notion of well defined preferences among these parties, a higher evaluation of the Green

² A Hausman test indicates no violations of the IIA assumption.

candidate lowers the likelihood of voting for either ÖVP or SPÖ, though it does not increase the likelihood of voting for the Greens.

Turning to the coalition preferences, the number of (nearly) significant effects is small but further confirms the observed polarization with respect to the two far right parties and the Greens. For the former, those favoring a coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ (which was ruled out by both parties) were more likely to cast a strategic vote for the ÖVP. And those (few) favoring a right-of-center “unity” coalition of ÖVP, FPÖ, and BZÖ were less likely to vote for the Greens.

The attitude towards a coalition of Greens and the ÖVP has a strong effect, increasing the likelihood of a vote intention for both parties, but in particular the Greens. The effect of the attitude toward a coalition of SPÖ and Greens shows a similar pattern, but fails standard levels of significance. Overall, the results suggest that specific coalition preferences have a direct, unconditional effect above and beyond party and candidate ratings.

Expectations about Coalitions

The previous model suggests that coalition preferences matter, but it did not take into account how likely voters consider each coalition to be. From the perspective of a rational voter, coalition preferences should mostly matter if a given coalition has a chance to succeed. Given the lack of previous research on this topic, we report the expectations in more detail. Respondents were asked to provide two estimates, the likelihood that each coalition would have a majority in the new parliament, and the likelihood that each coalition would actually be able to agree on this coalition (assuming they had a majority). Because projection effects are a likely source of variation in these predictions, we report the overall percentage of respondents who saw each coalition as “certain” or “absolutely certain” and for those with party preferences separately. To determine whether party preferences lead to significant over- or underestimations, a separate logistic regression was conducted. The stars in Tables 5 and 6 indicate for each partisan group whether their assessment was significantly different from the average.

The results suggest that, at least overall, respondents had a highly differentiated picture of the coalition chances, but that political preferences did come into play in particular when the preferred party was concerned. The grand coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ, by far the most popular coalition option, is given the highest chance to succeed. Over 85% of the respondents believed that it would have a majority (because this majority was virtually certain, one could question the judgment of the remaining 15%), but more important, 73%

also believed that the parties would be able to agree on such a coalition, with SPÖ supporters (76.5%) most convinced by its success. No matter the party preference, the excellent chances of the grand coalition were widely shared.

Respondents gave only two other coalitions, ÖVP or SPÖ with the Greens, a reasonable chance of success. In both cases, the expectations are subject to distinct projection effects. Both coalitions were expected by more than half of the respondents to have a certain majority, with the ÖVP-led coalition given a slightly higher chance of success (59.8%) than the SPÖ-led coalition (55.6%). When it comes to actually agreeing on a coalition, the SPÖ-led coalition (74.4%) was given a clear advantage over the ÖVP-led coalition (64.0%). Supporters of ÖVP and SPÖ overestimated the likelihood of both majority and agreement if they were part of the coalition and discounted the likelihood if the other party were to lead the coalition (though not all differences are significant). Green Party supporters show strong and consistent projection effects, giving both majority and agreement significantly higher chances of success. In fact, they gave an agreement with the SPÖ an 85.2% chance of success. Only supporters of the two far-right parties FPÖ and BZÖ had lower expectations about the two coalitions involving the Greens.

Supporters of FPÖ and BZÖ also showed the two strongest projection effects. Nearly half of the FPÖ supporters saw a majority for ÖVP and FPÖ as certain (46.3%), about a third higher than the average. They were topped by BZÖ supporters, who gave an ÖVP-BZÖ majority a 30% chance of success, more than double the average. They were also fairly certain that the parties would be able to agree on continuing the governing coalition (64.6%), a perception not reciprocated by ÖVP supporters (37.5%).

It should be noted that projection effects do not always mean an overestimation of the chances of a coalition with the preferred party and an underestimation of all other coalitions. Notable exceptions from this pattern are the significantly lower than average expectations of ÖVP supporters that ÖVP and FPÖ would be able to agree on a coalition (29.6%), or Green Party supporters who gave right-of-center coalitions a higher chance of reaching a majority (42.4% for ÖVP-FPÖ-BZÖ) or saw them as more likely to agree on a coalition (47.2% for ÖVP-BZÖ). In short, ÖVP supporters underestimated an undesirable coalition while Green Party supporters overestimated undesirable coalitions. Projection effects do not follow a universal pattern but can be highly context dependent.

Coalition Preferences, Coalition Expectations, and Vote Intentions: The Case of the Green Party Supporters

In a final step, we investigate whether the coalition expectations moderate the effect of coalition preferences on vote intentions. A meaningful test is only possible if voters face a decision context in which real alternative choices are available (Alvarez, Boehmke, and Nagler 2006). And for some alternatives, most notably the popular option of a grand coalition, the expectations are rather meaningless because a majority is virtually certain. One way to approach this question is to determine which supporters would have an incentive for strategic voting in favor of a coalition. Among supporters of the two large parties, those favoring a coalition with the Greens might consider strengthening the small coalition partner. However, because both large parties were in a tight race for the first place, supporters of the two large parties did not have a real incentive for insincere votes, something that was already confirmed in Table 2 (though supporters of the ÖVP were more uncertain about their decision or planned to abstain). Following the “wasted vote” logic of the strategic voting literature, supporters of the two far-right parties FPÖ and BZÖ as well as supporters of Martin had a clear incentive to desert their party and cast a vote for another party that had a realistic chance of joining the government, given their own dismal chances. However, the low number of respondents with such party preferences prevents a systematic assessment of a coalition preference effect. This leaves Green Party supporters who constitute a fairly large number and who show a more distinct pattern in their voting intentions. In addition, the coalition expectations of Green Party supporters showed some variance, opening a window of opportunity to investigate their impact.

How could coalition expectations affect supporters of the Green Party? Two effects seem plausible. First, if a majority for a coalition is certain or at least not considered to be in danger, a stronger coalition preference should motivate or activate supporters of the small party to support the preferred party. For example, a supporter of the Greens who considers a preferred coalition with the SPÖ as likely should vote for the Green Party to strengthen its position in the coalition. Those who do not like this coalition should rather abstain from voting or vote for any other party to try to prevent the unfavorable outcome.

If a voter considers a majority for the preferred coalition as uncertain, he or she should have no reason to take the coalition preference into account and rather support and strengthen the preferred party. There is one exception, however. Following the wasted vote argument of the strategic voting literature, those who prefer an (uncertain) coalition as much or even more than the preferred party might be willing to desert the preferred party and rather vote for the

preferred coalition partner with the better chances of joining the next government. For example, a supporter of the Green Party who prefers a coalition with the SPÖ as much or even more than the Greens might be tempted to vote for the SPÖ.

These hypotheses are tested by regressing the vote intentions of Green Party supporters on the relevant party and coalition preferences along with an interaction effect of coalition preferences and expectations. The base category of the dependent variable is a vote intention for the preferred Green Party. The other three categories represent vote intentions for SPÖ, ÖVP, or no or other vote intentions such as abstention, a vote for an entirely different (protest) party, or an inability to decide (it should be noted that the number of Green Party supporters with a vote intention for the ÖVP is precariously small). The independent variables include ratings of Greens, SPÖ, and ÖVP. Each rating should positively affect the vote intention in favor of the evaluated party. The preferences for all three coalitions are included as a main effect. For the two coalitions with the Greens, the expectation that each coalition is *uncertain* to reach a majority is operationalized as a dichotomous indicator (ignoring the likelihood of an agreement because Green Party supporters were overwhelmingly certain that the parties would be able to agree on a coalition in case of a majority). To capture the conditional effects of the coalition preferences, interaction terms of preferences and expectations are included as well. The model is estimated with a multinomial logistic regression.³

The results in Table 7 support the hypotheses for SPÖ and no or other vote intention, but largely fail for the ÖVP. To ease the interpretation, the interaction effects are simulated and presented in Figure 1 (no or other vote intention) and Figure 2 (SPÖ vote intention). Figure 1 shows that a coalition preference for the SPÖ has a very strong effect on supporters of the Green Party, but only if a majority is certain. Those who strongly dislike this coalition are most likely to abstain from voting, while those who prefer this coalition become much more likely to support the preferred party. However, if a majority for a coalition with the SPÖ is uncertain, voters strongly support the preferred Green party and are much less likely to abstain. They are hardly influenced by the coalition preference, except for a marginal trend that those who highly prefer a coalition with the SPÖ would rather abstain than vote if the majority is uncertain.

The effects for a SPÖ vote intention are similar, though the likelihood of such an insincere vote is necessarily much smaller (Figure 2). As long as a majority for this coalition is certain, a stronger preference for a coalition with the SPÖ again increases the likelihood of

³ A Hausman test indicates no violations of the IIA assumption.

a Green Party vote. However, if voters doubt the success of this coalition, the effect of the coalition preference mostly disappears and voters become strongly committed to the preferred party, with less than 5% considering a vote for the SPÖ. Only if they have a very strong preference for a coalition between SPÖ and Greens, the likelihood of a strategic vote for the SPÖ more than doubles. The effect of the coalition preference again depends on the perceived electoral chances of the coalition.

There are no equivalent effects for an ÖVP vote intention, most likely because of the small number of respondents who had such an intention. Only a high rating of the ÖVP and/or a (relatively) low rating of the Green Party can predict a vote intention for the ÖVP. Finally, a preference for a grand coalition does not have very strong effects on supporters of the Green Party, but those in favor of this coalition are more likely to vote for the SPÖ.

Discussion and Conclusion

Together with previous work by Blais and colleagues (Aldrich et al. 2004, Blais et al. 2006) and Bargsted and Kedar (2007), it is safe to conclude that coalition preferences matter for voters in multi-party systems. The evidence presented here suggests that voting for coalitions is not a task of insurmountable complexity but in the realm of the possible. One obvious reason is the fact that of all theoretically possible coalitions among the competitive parties only very few have a realistic chance of success. Most will be irrelevant because they either do not have sufficient electoral support or because they are unlikely to agree on a coalition. Given this dramatically reduced complexity, coalition voting becomes a realistic proposition.

The evidence about coalition expectations suggests that, at least in the aggregate, voters have a fairly sophisticated understanding of the likelihood of various coalitions, and that they can differentiate between expectations about majorities and the likelihood of agreements between the parties. At the same time, voters clearly engage in wishful thinking, though mostly for specific coalitions, in particular if the preferred party or some truly disliked party are involved.

These analyses are only a first step to determine the role of coalition preference and expectations for vote decisions. In fact, we still do not know the answers to some very basic questions, for example how party and coalition preference are related. In our study, about a third of the respondents actually rated a coalition higher than the most preferred party. Are

these voters primarily coalition voters for whom a party preference comes only second? A lot of work remains to be done.

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Table 1: Party Preferences

	Unique Preferences		Multiple Preferences	
	N	%	N	%
Single Party	1150	76.6	---	---
<i>ÖVP</i>	444	29.6	573	38.2
<i>SPÖ</i>	330	22.0	474	31.6
<i>Greens</i>	246	16.4	353	23.5
<i>FPÖ</i>	69	4.6	115	7.7
<i>BZÖ</i>	22	1.5	51	3.4
<i>Martin</i>	39	2.6	62	4.1
Two-Party Ties	232	15.5	---	---
Indifferent	67	4.5	---	---
Alienated	31	2.1	---	---
Missing	21	1.4	---	---
Total	1501		1501	

Note: A unique preference is assigned if a single party has the highest rating. Multiple preferences are assigned to up to two parties with highest rating. Indifferent respondents have multiple ties and alienated respondents have only negative ratings.

Table 2: Sincere, Insincere, and No Vote Intentions by Party Preference

	<i>ÖVP</i>	<i>SPÖ</i>	<i>Greens</i>	<i>FPÖ</i>	<i>BZÖ</i>	<i>Martin</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
<i>Unique Preferences</i>						
Sincere Vote Intention	70.5	77.6	69.9	68.1	54.6	30.8
Insincere Vote Intention	4.1	4.2	11.0	17.4	22.7	20.5
Abstention/Don't Know	25.5	18.2	19.1	14.5	22.7	48.7
(N)	(444)	(330)	(246)	(69)	(22)	(39)
<i>Multiple Preferences</i>						
Sincere Vote Intention	63.4	71.1	65.2	60.0	51.0	35.5
Insincere Vote Intention	4.2	5.1	9.6	14.8	21.6	17.7
Abstention/Don't Know	32.5	23.8	25.2	25.2	27.5	46.8
(N)	(573)	(474)	(353)	(115)	(51)	(62)

Note: Party preference represents the top-rated party (multiple preferences allow for two-party ties). A sincere vote intention is for (one of) the top-rated parties, and an insincere vote intention is for a party other than a top-rated party.

Table 3: The Effect of Party Preferences on Preferences for Single Party and Coalition Governments

	ÖVP (Single Party)	SPÖ (Single Party)	ÖVP & SPÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ	ÖVP & BZÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ & BZÖ	ÖVP & Greens	SPÖ & Greens	SPÖ & Greens & Martin
ÖVP	3.09** (.21)	-1.28** (.23)	.66* (.21)	.85** (.20)	1.29** (.18)	.73** (.18)	1.54** (.20)	-1.57** (.21)	-1.47** (.21)
SPÖ	-1.44** (.21)	2.31** (.22)	1.20** (.20)	-.82** (.19)	-1.07** (.18)	-.44 ⁺ (.18)	-.074** (.20)	2.19** (.20)	1.46** (.21)
Greens	-.90** (.22)	-.29 (.24)	-.84** (.22)	-1.45** (.21)	-1.29** (.19)	-1.14** (.19)	1.95** (.22)	2.29** (.22)	1.65** (.22)
FPÖ	-.34 (.32)	-.62 (.34)	-.18 (.31)	2.83** (.29)	.51 (.27)	1.88** (.27)	-1.28** (.30)	-1.50** (.31)	-.81* (.31)
BZÖ	-.21 (.44)	-1.62** (.47)	-.85 ⁺ (.43)	-.06 (.40)	2.93** (.37)	2.02** (.37)	-.52 (.42)	-1.17* (.42)	-1.05 ⁺ (.42)
Martin	-.58 (.41)	-.51 (.43)	.05 (.40)	.64 (.38)	-.48 (.35)	.18 (.35)	-.28 (.39)	-.51 (.39)	1.40** (.40)
Const.	-2.05** (.20)	-1.18** (.22)	0.87** (.20)	-2.00** (.19)	-2.52** (.18)	-3.00** (.18)	-0.64* (.20)	-0.46 ⁺ (.20)	-1.40** (.20)
Adj. R ²	.31	.18	.06	.18	.21	.13	.16	.31	.21
N	1459	1460	1449	1448	1441	1439	1453	1452	1402

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent variables measure the degree to which respondents prefer a given government coalition on an 11-point rating scale, ranging from -5 ("not at all") to +5 ("absolutely"). Party preferences are dichotomous indicators of the top-rated party, or up to two parties in the case of a two-party tie.

⁺ p < .05; * p < .01; ** p < .001

Table 4: Vote Intention by Party Evaluations, Candidate Evaluations, and Coalition Preferences (likely voters with vote intentions)

	ÖVP/FPÖ	SPÖ/FPÖ	Greens/FPÖ	BZÖ/FPÖ	Martin/FPÖ
Party Evaluations					
ÖVP Party	.66*** (.14)	-.46*** (.12)	-.34* (.15)	.19 (.17)	.33 (.28)
SPÖ Party	-.44** (.13)	.59*** (.13)	-.74*** (.16)	-.06 (.18)	-.47 ⁺ (.28)
Green Party	-.00 (.12)	.11 (.11)	1.18*** (.17)	.23 (.21)	.24 (.22)
FPÖ Party	-.77*** (.14)	-.58*** (.12)	-.57*** (.14)	-1.06*** (.24)	-.33 (.21)
BZÖ Party	.38** (.14)	.15 (.12)	.01 (.16)	1.62*** (.28)	-.05 (.23)
Martin List	-.21 (.17)	.03 (.15)	.16 (.18)	-.71** (.22)	.86* (.41)
Candidate Evaluations					
ÖVP Candidate	.79*** (.14)	.27* (.12)	.04 (.13)	.23 (.17)	-.15 (.24)
SPÖ Candidate	-.11 (.12)	.23* (.11)	.07 (.13)	-.37* (.18)	-.06 (.22)
Greens Candidate	-.26* (.13)	-.29* (.11)	.05 (.14)	-.26 (.18)	-.15 (.22)
FPÖ Candidate	-.17 (.13)	-.22* (.11)	-.33* (.15)	.03 (.21)	-.38 (.25)
BZÖ Candidate	-.24 ⁺ (.14)	-.01 (.12)	.16 (.16)	-.10 (.22)	-.02 (.24)
Martin Candidate	.12 (.17)	-.10 (.15)	-.12 (.18)	.44 ⁺ (.22)	.77 ⁺ (.41)
Coalition Preferences					
ÖVP-SPÖ	.14 (.10)	.17 ⁺ (.09)	-.02 (.11)	.07 (.16)	.37 ⁺ (.21)
ÖVP-FPÖ	.24* (.11)	.10 (.10)	.17 (.15)	.24 (.20)	-.13 (.24)
ÖVP-BZÖ	.02 (.14)	-.14 (.14)	.11 (.17)	-.01 (.19)	.12 (.31)
ÖVP-FPÖ-BZÖ	-.18 (.12)	-.07 (.12)	-.41** (.16)	.16 (.15)	-.09 (.22)
ÖVP-Greens	.32* (.12)	-.02 (.11)	.44*** (.13)	.03 (.18)	.01 (.20)
SPÖ-Greens	-.05 (.13)	.20 ⁺ (.11)	.25 ⁺ (.13)	.05 (.22)	-.07 (.24)
SPÖ-Greens-Martin	.04 (.12)	.14 (.11)	.04 (.12)	-.40 (.25)	.32 (.20)
Constant	-3.46* (1.40)	-1.05 (1.11)	-2.83 (1.47)	-5.64* (2.76)	-1.88** (3.59)
N	958				
Log likelihood	-320.82				

Note: Entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The vote for the FPÖ is the comparison category.

⁺ p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001

Table 5: Expected Majority

	ÖVP & SPÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ	ÖVP & BZÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ & BZÖ	ÖVP & Greens	SPÖ & Greens	SPÖ & Greens & Martin
Majority certain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All Resp. (n=1501)	85.4	29.3	12.9	36.0	59.8	55.6	44.8
Party Preferences							
ÖVP (n=573)	87.5	28.2	13.8	36.8	61.7	46.0**	36.5**
SPÖ (n=474)	85.2	25.4*	10.6	29.8	54.0	65.6**	47.5
Greens (n=353)	86.5	28.2	11.5	42.4*	74.8**	68.1**	55.6*
FPÖ (n=115)	79.1	46.3**	18.2	42.2	47.7	39.1**	42.6
BZÖ (n=51)	83.7	28.6	30.0**	46.9	34.0**	38.8	28.6*
Martin (n=62)	84.7	32.2	3.4*	33.3	42.4*	45.8	52.6

Note: Entries are percentages of respondents who considered a majority for a given coalition “certain” or “absolutely certain” (excluding respondents with no/don’t know answers). Party preferences are dichotomous indicators of the top-rated party (two parties in case of two-party ties). Significance tests are based on multivariate logistic regressions of the certainty variable on the six party preferences.

* p < .05; ** p < .01

Table 6: Expected Agreement

	ÖVP & SPÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ	ÖVP & BZÖ	ÖVP & FPÖ & BZÖ	ÖVP & Greens	SPÖ & Greens	SPÖ & Greens & Martin
Agreement certain	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All Resp. (n=1501)	72.5	33.2	38.8	19.0	64.0	74.4	41.1
Party Preferences							
ÖVP (n=573)	75.1	29.6*	37.5	14.1**	67.3**	69.0	35.3*
SPÖ (n=474)	76.5*	32.1	34.3	17.4	60.1	80.7*	42.6
Greens (n=353)	66.0	34.1	47.2**	21.6	75.4**	85.2**	44.9
FPÖ (n=115)	73.2	42.1	38.7	28.4	47.7	56.0**	39.0
BZÖ (n=51)	66.0	29.2	64.6**	32.7	52.1	56.3*	46.7
Martin (n=62)	63.8	43.1	32.2	22.4	64.9	65.5	53.6

Note: Entries are percentages of respondents who considered an agreement of the parties to form a coalition “certain” or “absolutely certain” if they had reached a majority (excluding respondents with no/don’t know answers). Party preferences are dichotomous indicators of the top-rated party (two parties in case of two-party ties). Significance tests are based on multivariate logistic regressions of the certainty variable on the six party preferences.

* p < .05; ** p < .01

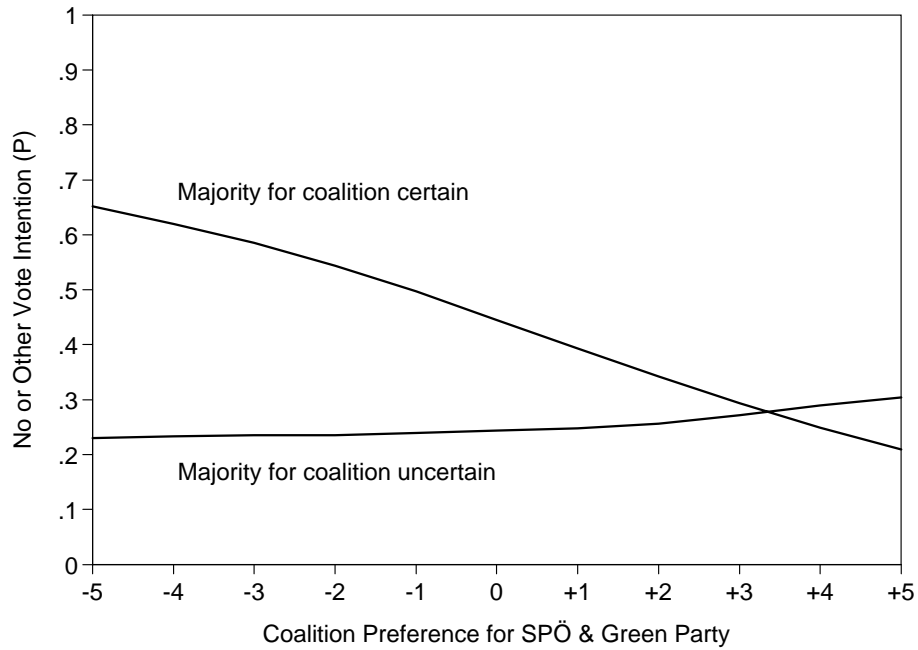
Table 7: Vote Intentions of Green Supporters, by Party Preferences, Coalition Preferences, and Expectations

	SPÖ/Greens	ÖVP/Greens	Other/Greens
Green Party	-1.10*** (.24)	-1.01* (.42)	-.68*** (.13)
ÖVP Party	.08 (.09)	1.12** (.36)	.11 (.07)
SPÖ Party	.94*** (.20)	-.02 (.18)	-.00 (.07)
ÖVP-SPÖ Coalition	.17* (.08)	.15 (.16)	.10 (.06)
<i>SPÖ-Green Party Coalition</i>			
Preference	-.20* (.09)	-.08 (.17)	-.25*** (.07)
Expectation (majority uncertain)	-5.59** (2.00)	2.25 (1.62)	-2.96*** (.90)
Preference X Expectation	.54* (.21)	-.37 (.26)	.31** (.11)
<i>ÖVP-Green Party Coalition</i>			
Preference	-.45*** (.11)	.09 (.24)	-.18* (.08)
Expectation (majority uncertain)	.59 (1.10)	2.14 (2.68)	.84 (.91)
Preference X Expectation	.07 (.17)	-.26 (.31)	-.08 (.13)
Constant	4.72** (1.75)	-2.83 (3.41)	8.04*** (1.35)
N		353	
Log likelihood		-276.14	

Note: Entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The sincere vote intention for the Green party is the comparison category. Model estimated for respondents with a preference for the Green Party.

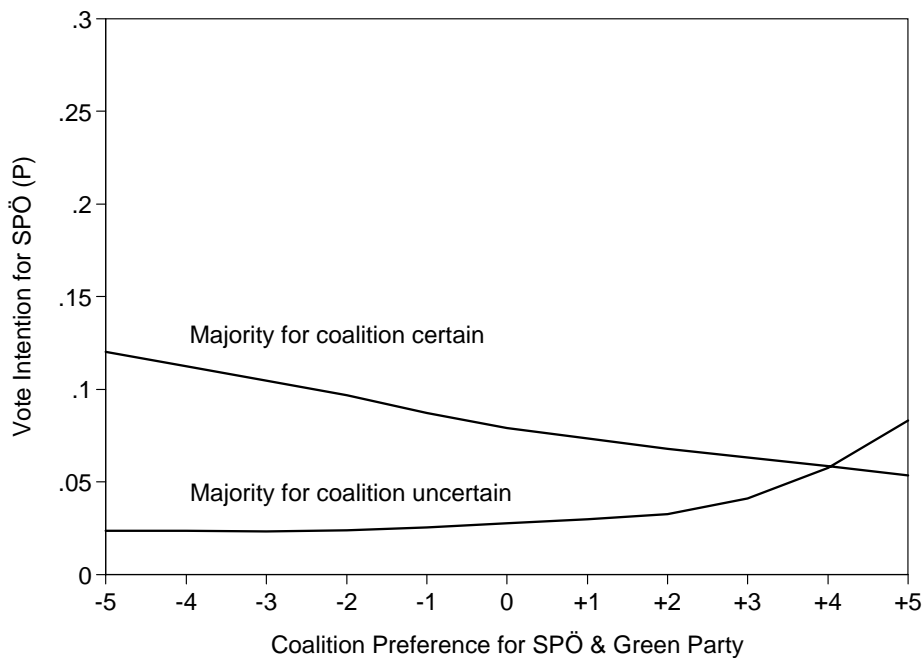
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1: Effect of Coalition Preferences and Expectations on No or Other Vote Intentions of Green Supporters



Note: Simulated percentages based on MNL regression model in Table 7.

Figure 2: Effect of Coalition Preferences and Expectations on SPÖ Vote Intentions of Green Supporters



Note: Simulated percentages based on MNL regression model in Table 7.

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