

Coalition Preferences in Multiparty Systems

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Abstract

Coalition preferences in multiparty systems have received increasing attention in recent years, both as an additional political preference that can explain vote decisions above and beyond party preferences, and even as a superordinate political identity. In this paper, we use survey data from the 2006 Austrian and the 2009 German election campaigns to investigate the structure and accessibility of party and coalition preferences as well as the extent to which coalition preferences can be explained by party preferences and other affective and cognitive factors such as candidates, ideology, and issue positions. The evidence suggests that coalitions are indeed more than simple averages of the member parties, but that questions about most coalitions are associated with longer response times than similar questions about parties and candidates. Coalition preferences are only partially predicted by party preferences and other political preferences, with considerable variation between existing and real coalitions on the one hand and hypothetical and abstract coalitions on the other hand. The former are retrieved faster and can be explained better with existing political preferences, something that largely fails for the latter preferences. Overall, coalition preferences emerge as a fairly independent factor in multiparty systems.

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Coalition preferences in multiparty systems have received increasing attention in recent years, both as an additional political preference that can explain vote decisions above and beyond party preferences, and even as a superordinate political identity. Because most multiparty systems are governed by coalitions, it is perfectly reasonable for voters to take coalitions into account when casting a ballot, even if the actual vote is still for a specific party and not a coalition. In this paper, we use data from nationally representative surveys conducted before the 2006 Austrian and the 2009 German general elections to assess the structure of party and coalition preferences, to compare the accessibility of party, coalition, and candidate preferences, and to investigate the extent to which coalition preferences can be predicted by party preferences and other affective and cognitive explanatory factors such as candidates, ideology preferences, and issue positions.

The Puzzle: Coalition Preferences and Vote Decisions

Despite the prevalence of coalition governments in Western parliamentary democracies, the role of coalition preferences in electoral behavior has received surprisingly little attention. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have shown that coalition preferences do matter and that they predict vote intentions above and beyond party preferences and other common control variables. There is supportive evidence from different countries such as Austria (Meffert and Gschwend 2010, Pappi 2007), Belgium (Gschwend and Hooghe 2008), Israel (Blais et al. 2006, Bargsted and Kedar 2009), New Zealand (Bowler, Karp, and Donovan 2010), The Netherlands (Bäck and Rosema 2008, Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2003), and in comparative perspective (Duch, May, and Armstrong 2010). These studies demonstrate the predictive value of coalition preferences but they do not address very basic questions about the origin and nature of coalition preferences themselves. If these preferences are merely a function of existing party preferences, their additional explanatory value would be very limited. However, if they are a fairly independent or even a unique factor, even dominating party preferences as a superordinate identification, they would be a valuable addition to theoretical explanations and predictive models of voting behavior in multiparty systems.

Three Explanations of Coalition Preferences

The literature offers three possible explanations of coalition preferences that assign strong, moderate, or only a very weak role to coalition preferences. These explanations treat coalition

preferences either as a genuine and powerful superordinate political identity, as an additional political preference above and beyond party preferences, or merely as a weak, hypothetical construct that does not matter for most voters. We discuss each view in turn.

Strong Version: Coalitions as a Superordinate Political Identity

González et al. (2008) recently argued in favor of a very strong role of coalition identifications by treating them as a superordinate identity that even predicts party preferences. The authors draw on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986) and data from Chile to make a compelling case that coalitions *can* constitute a genuine social identity. If true, the powerful protective mechanisms of social identity theory would operate for political identities as well. Voters would engage in motivational processes favoring the in-group (preferred parties and coalitions) while derogating the out-group (opposed parties and coalitions). As powerful political identities, they would provide the party system with a stable structure. "...[S]ocial identity explanations may explain why political coalitions survive, even when the instrumental value associated with a coalition is low" (González et al. 2008: 94). The authors end their argument with a speculative but bold prediction: "[P]olitical coalitions are effective in reducing conflict and promoting political stability in a multiparty system,"(p. 115) reinforcing the bonds among the supporters of coalition parties while drawing sharper distinctions with parties in any opposing coalitions.

The whole argument is well taken but rests on the assumption that coalitions are salient entities that provide a strong identification for voters. In a political system such as Chile where coalitions are very salient, stable, and enduring, and effectively form two salient and opposing blocks, more or less substituting for a two-party system, coalitions might very well take precedence over parties. The same would apply to recent elections in Italy where coalitions appeared as choices on the ballot. In these cases, coalitions may very well play a powerful and superordinate role, inducing powerful identifications and intercoalition competition and rivalry. In most multiparty democracies, however, it is rather doubtful that coalitions are so salient because voters cast their ballot for individual parties that may or may not form certain coalitions after elections. The argument is much more plausible for real coalitions, that is, governing coalitions that currently exist or have recently constituted a government.

Before subscribing to such a strong claim, more systematic evidence is necessary. Fortunately, the question which identity is more important—party or coalition—can easily be

settled with data. A salient identity should be readily accessible. Thus, if coalition identities dominate, voters should recall them faster than party identities and other salient political preferences such as candidate evaluations. We would also expect that coalition preferences are strongly related to party preferences – positively with member parties and negatively with parties outside the coalition. At least for highly salient coalitions, such as an incumbent governing coalition, preferences should indeed be highly accessible.

Moderate Version: Coalitions as Additional Political Preferences

The identification argument is rather problematic. First, a political identification implies a very strong psychological commitment that seems not very plausible for the often rather abstract concept of coalitions. And second, even the established concept of party identification (PID), a long-term identification with a single party, tends to be difficult to apply to multiparty systems. In two-party systems, the concept of PID has been successfully used to explain various kinds of political behaviors (Bartels 2002). But the concept does not translate very well to much more complex multiparty systems with many parties and potential coalitions that cannot be reduced to a single unidimensional identification scale. For this reason, the concept of preferences is more flexible and much more useful because it can reflect both a clear ordering of party or coalition preferences but also accommodate preference ties, and it imposes no priority of parties over coalitions or vice versa. Such preferences are not necessarily fundamental long-term identifications but rather reflect the short-term political preferences in an upcoming election. These preferences might be based on affective social identifications or, in a Downsian world of rational political behavior (Downs 1957), they might be based on ideology or underlying policy preferences. In either case, they assume that the party and coalition preferences of voters can be located in some multidimensional political space and sometimes even ordered on a unidimensional preference scale. This requires the assumption, of course, that voters possess both party and coalition preferences, and that they can be compared with each other.

From a psychological perspective, both parties and coalitions can be conceptualized as evaluative objects that can either be related to each other or remain fairly independent. If parties and coalitions are considered as symbolic evaluation objects, parties would appear to have a clear advantage. They are, after all, a real, physical object, represented by candidates, organizations, messages, and salient symbols. Coalitions, on the other hand, are mostly hypothetical constructs that do not exist, except for currently existing coalitions or coalitions that have been formed in

the recent past. Consequently, coalition preferences are for the most part based on abstract constructs. Coalition preferences might merely reflect an evaluative average of the member party preferences. In addition, if coalitions are not readily available evaluation objects, voters will have to retrieve the relevant party preferences from memory and integrate them in a coalition preference. Such preferences would be more time-consuming to construct. If, however, coalitions are salient constructs that voters already had time to form an opinion on and to develop an informed preference for, they should have no problem quickly retrieving such an evaluation from memory.

Alternatively and from a rational choice perspective, party and coalition preferences can be conceptualized in the context of a spatial model (Downs 1957, Austen-Smith and Banks 1988, Linhart 2007, Schofield and Sened 2005). Here, parties and voters are assumed to have locations, or ideal points, in a one-, two-, or n-dimensional space, and that the distances of voters to parties and coalitions reflect a preference ordering. The necessary assumption is that voters are familiar with their own location as well as the locations of parties and coalitions. For parties, this should not be a problem. During campaigns, voters receive information about party positions, and party platforms with detailed information are available as well. For coalitions, this is not so easy. The location of coalitions is much more ambiguous as they represent, for the most part, hypothetical constructs. From a rational perspective, the coalition location would most likely reflect a compromise or midpoint between the coalition partners, weighted by the electoral strength of the coalition member parties. With backward induction, a sophisticated voter would be able to start with plausible and likely coalitions and determine his or her best vote decision given the likely outcomes (Bytzek et al. 2012, Linhart 2007). This, of course, is problematic. Such decision making processes make considerable (unreasonable) demands on voters' political knowledge and inferential ability. But more important, coalition preferences are essentially a function of the member parties, not an independent factor (though, in fairness, voters might primarily have coalition preferences from which they derive party preferences that guide their vote decision).

In party systems with a tradition of coalition governments, different coalitions have been formed over time and/or are discussed during political campaigns. Thus, voters might very well have an idea about likely coalitions after an election (Armstrong and Duch 2010), and they might even have formed some preliminary judgments. Evidence in favor of independent coalition preferences would require that they are not just averages of party preferences but rather take

distinct locations in a policy or evaluative space, and at minimum that that are readily retrievable from memory. If this view is correct, we should expect coalition preferences to be related not only to party preferences, but to a wider range of factors such as candidate and issue preferences and other performance-related judgments. Because coalition preferences would be unique preferences above and beyond other political preferences, only part of the variance would be explained by the latter factors.

Weak Version: Coalitions as Remote and Abstract Categories

The final version essentially follows an argument already mentioned above, that most coalitions are abstract and remote categories, and develops it to its logical conclusion. Voters should only have meaningful and readily available judgments about existing and real coalitions, but not about hypothetical constructs. The latter have to be constructed and derived from existing (party) preferences, a time consuming process. Especially if coalitions do not fit a simple partisan block schema, voters should have difficulties (relatively speaking) providing evaluative judgments. If this view is correct, voters will not only require more time to express coalition preferences, but these coalition preferences will be rather difficult to predict. In this view, party preferences have primacy and are the most important political preferences that influence other political attitudes such as coalition preferences. From this perspective, the question is merely how independent coalition preferences are of party preferences and other explanatory factors, if at all.

The three versions treat coalition preferences quite differently and are not always clearly distinct. The only way to assess these explanations, however, is to use data that provides evidence about similarity and differences of party and coalition preferences, and how they are related with each other and to other political preferences. To do so, the subsequent analysis draws on data from two moderate multiparty systems, Austria and Germany. For both countries, some contextual information will facilitate the interpretation of the results.

Parties and Coalitions in Austria and Germany

The Austrian data comes from a pre-election survey conducted before the 2006 general election for a new *Nationalrat* (see Müller 2008 for a detailed summary). Six parties played a central role in this campaign, starting with the two major parties in Austria, the governing conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the oppositional Social Democrats (SPÖ). Two additional small but well established parties were the nationalist and populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the

environmental Greens (Die Grünen). Finally, two more recently established parties were the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) and the Liste Martin (Martin). The BZÖ, however, was only founded in the spring of 2006 by former members of the FPÖ, including all FPÖ ministers of the coalition government with the ÖVP, and most FPÖ members in parliament. As a consequence, the BZÖ replaced the FPÖ as the junior coalition partner of the ÖVP at that time. The Liste Martin, on the other hand, 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 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%-minimum vote threshold, the outcome of the election was fairly open and Austrian voters 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 while both the Greens and the SPÖ were seen as possible partners. The SPÖ also refrained from making 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 (e.g., Debus 2007: 57). 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 either ÖVP or SPÖ with the Greens as junior partner. This ambiguous context provides an excellent opportunity to investigate the coalition preferences of voters.

The German data comes from two different data sets, both collected during the 2009 election campaign for a new *Bundestag*. The six relevant parties included the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), the left-of-center Social Democrats (SPD), as well as three smaller parties, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), the environmental Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and the Left Party (Left). The incumbent government was a grand coalition of

the two large parties CDU and SPD because neither of the two traditional German coalitions, CDU-FDP on the right and SPD-Greens on the left, received sufficient electoral support in the previous election. As a consequence of declining support for the large parties and higher electoral volatility, the number of plausible coalitions in Germany has increased, even including three-party coalitions (Bytzek et al. 2012).

In the 2009 campaign, the incumbent grand coalition preempted a highly polarized election campaign as both two large parties were part of the government and might be forced to continue their coalition after the election. The 2009 campaign developed as a contest between a renewed grand coalition, an outcome favored by the SPD, and a CDU-FDP coalition, an outcome explicitly favored by both CDU and FDP. The possibility of a SPD-Greens coalition, while desirable from the perspective of the two parties, was never seen as a likely outcome. The only party entirely ruled out from participation in any coalition at the national level was the Left Party. The FDP also ruled out, repeatedly and explicitly, participating in a three-party coalition with SPD and Greens (in Germany often called a “traffic light” coalition due to the colors associated with the parties). In short, the number of plausible coalitions has increased in Germany, but the expected outcome of the 2009 German election was essentially reduced to two options, both including the CDU.

Data and Methods

The Austrian pre-election survey includes interviews of a nationally representative sample of 1501 respondents and of an additional and smaller sample of 450 respondents in the state Carinthia. The survey was conducted by phone during the three weeks preceding the election on October 1 (September 18-30). 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 in the election or were 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”). A similar question was asked about the leading candidates of the six parties. The survey also included questions about political predispositions and sociodemographic characteristics.

During data collection, the response times were measured by interviewers and reflect the time interval from the end of the question to the beginning of the answer by the respondent. The

response time measures have a number of limitations. First, they were only measured in the rather large interval of seconds. Second, they were only collected for political questions, not sociodemographic characteristics. Finally, measurement started only in the last week of the campaign and they are thus not available for all respondents. As a consequence, we combine the Austria and Carinthia sample in order to use all available data, even if it limits the generalizability of the results.

The German surveys come from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) and include the pre-election cross-sectional survey (CS) with 2173 face-to-face interviews of a nationally representative sample (using CAPI, conducted August 10-September 26) and the pre-election rolling cross-section survey (RCS) with 6008 phone interviews (using CATI, conducted July 29-September 26). Similar to the Austrian survey, respondents rated parties, coalitions, and candidates on equivalent 11-point rating scales, ranging from -5 (“have a very negative view of .../not a desirable coalition”) to +5 (“have a very positive view of .../a very desirable coalition”). Because the cross-sectional survey includes a more complete list of coalitions and additional control variables, it is used for the analyses of the coalition preferences themselves. Response time measurements, however, are only available in the rolling cross section survey.

The response latencies were measured by interviewers and again reflect the time interval from the end of the question to the beginning of the answer by the respondent. The interviewer additionally indicated whether the response time measurement was valid or invalid. A response time was not measured correctly if, for example, a respondent already answered a question before it was completely read. All response time measurements declared as invalid were excluded from the analyses. The German response time measurement is based on more precise time intervals (measured in milliseconds), but it also comes with a major limitation. They were only collected for a very limited set of political questions including two parties, two candidates, and three coalitions. No response time measures are available for sociodemographic characteristics.

Results

Party and Coalition Preferences: Descriptive Assessment and Spatial Configuration

The first and very basic question is whether respondents have not only party preferences but also clear and meaningful coalition preferences. To assess this question, Table 1 summarizes

the distribution of both party and coalition preferences of Austrian and German voters. We distinguish respondents with unique preferences, that is, a single party or coalition is rated highest, from those with two or more rating ties. We further distinguish respondents with two-party or coalition ties from those who are indifferent (three or more parties/coalitions ranked highest), and those who are alienated (only negative ratings). The results show that a vast majority of respondents has not only fairly clear party preferences but that coalition preferences follow a very similar pattern. In Austria, 76.1% prefer a single party and 68.0% a single coalition, followed by two-party ties (15.7%) or two-coalition ties (19.3%). Only very few respondents are indifferent, alienated, or did not provide any answers. The only exception is the Liste Martin who was less known and could not be rated by more than 20% of the respondents. For Germany, the results are very similar, with marginally less single party preferences (71.8%) and somewhat more indifferent and alienated voters (14% combined). Both Austrian and German respondents were clearly able to provide ratings for all major parties and coalitions, suggesting well-developed political preferences. It should also be noted that 29% of respondents (with non-missing ratings) in Austria and 37% in Germany rated a coalition higher than a party. At least for some respondents, coalition preferences appear to be more than simple averages of the member party ratings.

More important than the mere ability to rate coalitions is how coalition preferences compare to party preferences, and more specifically, whether coalitions more or less align with party preferences. We used multidimensional scaling to place the five parties and six coalitions in Austria (Liste Martin was not included due to the large number of missing values) and six parties (treating CDU and CSU separately) and seven coalitions in Germany in a two-dimensional space based on the Euclidian distances between the average attitude objects ratings. The solutions provide two readily interpretable dimensions for Austria but a more complex pattern for Germany.

For Austria (Figure 1-A), the first dimension separates the two populist right-wing parties FPÖ and BZÖ as well as all coalitions that include them from all the other parties. The second dimension reflects the traditional left-right dimension, with Greens and SPÖ on the left and ÖVP on the right. Notable are the locations of the coalitions. In two cases, the grand coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ as well as the coalition of ÖVP with the Greens, the coalitions are located approximately midway between the two member parties, reflecting some kind of party average.

Very different, however, is the location of the SPÖ-Green Party coalition. This coalition is not midway between the two parties but moves further out to the “left” on the second dimension. Thus, two moderately left parties combine to a more extreme coalition. In the case of the ÖVP, any coalition with either or both of the two right-wing parties leads to a placement more or less identical with the location of the two small extremist parties. At least in the perception of the Austrian respondents, it is not the ÖVP which dominates these coalitions, but it is the association with the extreme small parties that dominate the view of these options. The latter two cases suggest that coalition preferences are more than just party averages.¹

For Germany (Figure 1-B), the picture is less clear. The first dimension appears to separate the small and large parties and, to a lesser extent, coalitions including small parties from the grand coalition. The second dimension reflects again the traditional left-right dimension. The placement of the coalitions suggests again a difference between more realistic and more hypothetical coalitions. The realistic coalitions (CDU/CSU-FDP, SPD-Greens, and CDU/CSU-SPD) reflect either traditional coalition patterns or the incumbent grand coalition and reflect more extreme ratings than those for the constituent parties (not counting the obvious outlier, the Left Party). The other and hypothetical coalitions are located more towards the center of the evaluative space, more or less as averages of the constituent parties. Similar to Austria, some coalition preferences seem to reflect more polarized political choices than those of the individual parties. Finally, it should be noted that the two solutions in Figure 1 represent the average party and coalition evaluations across the whole sample that might very well differ for subgroups such as supporters of specific parties.

Parties, Candidates, and Coalitions: A Response Time Analysis

The primacy of party, candidate, or coalition preferences can be analyzed by looking at the accessibility of those preferences using response time measures. Figure 2 gives an initial descriptive summary and overview of the response times for party, coalition, and candidate ratings. The averages are based on the natural log of the response times, after removing all response times longer than three standard deviations above the mean (Mulligan et al. 2003). The

¹ A similar solution and presentation that also includes the leading politicians of each party is given by Pappi (2007: 450).

parties, coalitions, and candidates are listed in the order in which they were asked. Thus, the first response (such as the ÖVP rating for Austria) took longest but the ratings sped up as interviewers went over the party list.² The first impression suggests that the expression of coalition preferences took somewhat longer than for party preferences. This is most obvious for Austria where coalitions were asked later during the interview. Only a single coalition, the incumbent coalition of ÖVP and BZÖ, is a clearly visible exception in Austria. Respondents were able to evaluate this coalition (on average) as fast as they evaluated individual parties.

For a more systematic assessment, we turn to a multivariate regression model. The data was stacked for the analyses, that is, the response time for each individual party, coalition, or candidate rating constitutes a separate case. A respondent who provided a complete set of ratings contributed 20 measurements to the Austrian data set and 7 measurements to the German data set. The key independent variables are the dichotomous indicators for coalition and candidate ratings, using party ratings as baseline. The effect of these indicators is further controlled by a series of other relevant factors. First, accessibility of the ratings might be affected by the strength or extremity of the evaluation. Consequently, the model includes both the rating itself (assuming that more favorable attitude objects are retrieved faster) as well as the folded scale to capture the extremity of the rating (assuming that more extreme ratings are retrieved faster than moderate and/or ambivalent ratings).

Besides the ratings themselves, two individual differences were expected to facilitate the retrieval of ratings, political interest and political knowledge. Both variables were operationalized as indexes, interest based on four variables (political interest in general, interest in election campaign, vote intention/turnout intention, and importance of election outcome; $\alpha=.66$ in Austria, $\alpha=.77$ in Germany) and knowledge based on two dichotomous variables for Austria (knowledge of the correct unemployment rate and the correct minimum vote threshold for seats in parliament). Because no equivalent knowledge items were available in the German data set, the measure was substituted by a four-point education scale.

Two contextual variables indicate the incumbent coalition, ÖVP-BZÖ in Austria and CDU/CSU-SPD in Germany, as well as the campaign day. Both should facilitate the retrieval of

² A randomized order of items would have been more appropriate for the current analyses, but this desirable feature was not implemented in the present surveys.

rating from memory, either because the incumbent coalition is more salient than other, hypothetical coalitions or because the intensity and visibility of the campaign will increase approaching the election day.

Finally, three variables were included to control for methodological artifacts. First, the baseline response speed captures individual differences in responding to survey questions. Because no response times for non-political questions were available in both surveys, the baseline is based on several questions distributed across the interview (in Austria, campaign interest, importance of election outcome, government performance, and attention to polls; in Germany, vote intention, most important issue, position on taxes vs. benefits or nuclear energy, political bias of daily newspaper, political bias of TV news on ARD, vote decision of first discussion partner). The baseline is the average log of these response times, respectively. A second control variable with the similar purpose of capturing individual differences in response speed is the overall duration of the interview (in minutes). Finally, a question order variable captures the increasing response speed within a set of similar items, that is, the party, candidate, and coalition ratings.

The results of the random effects GLS regression models confirm most of the expectations (Table 2). Political interest is one of the exceptions by having no effect on response times in Austria. The key finding, of course, are the longer response times for coalition ratings. Even though coalition ratings were asked after the party preferences in Austria, participants still required more time to express an evaluation of these (mostly) hypothetical constructs. The exception is the only real and existing incumbent coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ. The effect of the dichotomous incumbent indicator essentially reverses the dichotomous coalition indicator effect, putting the incumbent coalition on par with the party ratings. In Germany, coalition preferences also require longer response times than party and candidate ratings. The result here is less surprising because coalition preferences were asked first, but the result corresponds very closely with the Austrian results.

Candidate preference is the only indicator with different effects for Austria and Germany. In Austria, candidate preferences actually took longer to express than party preferences. In Germany, on the other hand, candidate preferences took significantly less time than party preferences. The reason for this difference is not clear.

Among the control variables, both the positivity of the evaluation as well as the extremity of the evaluation had significant effects on response times, but in different directions. Evaluative extremity facilitates retrieval. More extreme evaluations, whether positive or negative, are more accessible. The rating itself, however, predicts longer response times with more positive evaluations. Negatively evaluated coalitions are rated faster. This effect, however, is much smaller than the extremity effect.

Unlike political interest, respondents with a higher level of political knowledge (or education) were able to rate parties, coalitions, and candidates faster. An interaction effect of knowledge with coalitions was tested but not supported. The incumbent coalition in both countries was rated faster than the other coalitions.

The remaining control variables performed as expected. Campaign day was significant only in Germany which most likely reflects the much longer field period of the German survey. The baseline response speed and interview duration both affected individual response times positively while the question order indicates decreasing response times for subsequent items.

Overall, the response time analysis answers the question about primacy of parties or coalitions very clearly. For both Austrian and German voters, party preferences are more accessible than coalition preferences. At best, the incumbent coalition is rated as fast as parties, but there is not the slightest evidence that coalition preferences precede party preferences. For Austria and Germany, the claim of coalition identifications as superordinate political identities can be ruled out.

Predicting Coalition Preferences: Parties, Affect, and Ideology

Even if coalition preferences do not precede party preferences, the initial MDS analyses suggested that they are more than just averages of party preferences. Other factors might explain coalition preferences as well. We test five sets of plausible explanatory factors. First, party preferences should obviously matter a great deal because they constitute the coalition members. It is reasonable to assume that not only the preferences for the parties in a given coalition matter but also the preferences for parties outside the coalition. For example, a voter might consider the exclusion of a disliked party from government highly desirable, leading to a higher evaluation of any coalition that might accomplish this goal. In short, all party preferences could matter in the evaluation of specific coalitions. The party preferences were operationalized by their rating

scales, with the exception of Martin in Austria. To avoid dropping many cases due to missing ratings, the Martin preference was operationalized as a dichotomous indicator coded “1” if Martin had the highest rating among all Austrian parties (and “0” otherwise).

Second, the leading candidates of the parties might play an important role as well. In Austrian election campaigns, the leading candidates have a high degree of visibility. For example, they square off in a series of pairwise television debates, providing a lot of visibility and identifiable leadership for the parties. In Germany, the leading candidates also play a highly visible role in the campaigns, appearing prominently on election posters. Following the operationalization of the party preferences, all leading candidates (without the less known Martin in Austria but both leaders of the Left Party in Germany) were included in the models.

The third set of explanatory variables represents ideology and specific policy preferences. The survey allows us to operationalize three to four predictor variables, each reflecting the self-placement of a respondent on a given scale. The scales represent the classic left-right dimension as well as two to three political issues that played a major role during the respective election campaign. In Austria, these were immigration (quick residency permits vs. immediate deportation of illegal immigrants) and the economy (taxes vs. spending). Austrian parties were perceived as sharply different on the former but fairly similar on the latter issue (see Pappi 2007 for details).³ In Germany, the issues include welfare (lower taxes with less government spending on health, education, and social benefits vs. more government spending with higher taxes), immigration (relaxed laws vs. tougher laws), and nuclear power (building more nuclear power stations vs. closing down existing nuclear power stations).

A fourth set of variables reflects retrospective evaluations of government performance and the economy. The satisfaction with the incumbent government was measured on a four-point scale in Austria and an 11-point scale in Germany, and the economic evaluations were based on the perceived economic development (better or worse) since the last election on a five-point scale.

³ A better operationalization would be based on individually perceived distances between self and party placements on these issues. However, respondents provided only issue placements for parties but not coalitions.

The fifth and final set of predictors reflects common socioeconomic variables that have been found to predict party preferences, in particular age (in years), sex (male), high level of education, catholic denomination, regular church attendance, and labor union membership. Except age, all variables were operationalized as dichotomous indicators.

The results suggest that party preferences are indeed the most important predictors of coalition preferences (Table 3). In Austria, party preferences for the coalition member parties always predict coalition preferences without a single exception. And if non-coalition member preferences have significant effects, they are always negative. For example, a high rating of the BZÖ leads to a more negative view of the grand coalition, a high rating of the Greens works consistently against all coalitions that involve right-wing parties, and a high rating of ÖVP or SPÖ works against a coalition of the Greens with the other party, respectively. In Germany, the CDU rating fails to predict the preference for the grand coalition as well as the two coalitions of the CDU that include the Greens. However, the CDU rating is negatively related with any other coalition involving the SPD. Ratings of the SPD, on the other hand, are consistently related to any coalition – positively if the SPD is part of the coalition and negatively if the SPD is excluded. The Green party rating is positively related to all coalitions which include the Green Party, with the exception of the so-called red-red-green coalition of SPD, Left, and Greens. Thus, party preferences predict coalition preferences very consistently and as expected, with a few exceptions in Germany.

Candidates matter as well, also as expected but more narrowly than party preferences. Again, the dominant pattern is a positive impact of the party leaders of the relevant coalition member parties. Especially in Austria, these effects are very consistent except for the leader of the ÖVP and incumbent chancellor Schüssel. In fact, a dislike of Schüssel rather translates into a higher rating of SPÖ-Green Party coalitions (with or without Martin). In Germany, incumbent chancellor Merkel of the CDU is unrelated to the incumbent grand coalition rating or a CDU-Greens coalition. However, Merkel is negatively related to most coalitions led by the SPD. Two other negative relationships stand out. The rating of Westerwelle, leader of the liberal FDP, is negatively related to the SPD-Green Party coalition while the rating of Gysi, a leader of the Left Party, is negatively related to the CDU-FDP coalition rating. Overall, the candidate effects on coalition ratings are more limited than the party effects.

For ideology and issue preferences, clear differences between Austria and Germany emerged. In Austria, ideology and issue positions have hardly any effect. Only a position in favor of more liberal immigration policies translates into more support for the left-of-center SPÖ-Green Party coalitions. In Germany, ideology is significantly related to coalitions with a very clear ideological orientation, the CDU-FDP coalition on the right and the SPD-Greens coalitions (with or without Left Party) on the left. The same applies to the three issue positions. They are consistently related to the CDU-FDP and SPD-Greens. Support for more welfare spending, less restrictive immigration laws, and the closing of nuclear power stations is negatively related to the former and positively related to the latter.

The effects of the remaining variables were rather weak or without much discriminatory power. Retrospective evaluations of government performance in Austria benefit all right-of-center coalitions with the ÖVP, but in particular the incumbent ÖVP-BZÖ coalition. In Germany, due to the incumbent grand coalition, government performance is positively related to virtually all coalitions. The perception of a declining economy helps the SPÖ-Green Party coalition in Austria, while an improving economy seems to benefit SPD-led coalitions in Germany. Sociodemographic indicators have hardly any effect but suggest that older, less educated, and church-going respondents looked more favorably on a grand coalition in Austria. In Germany, both highly educated and church-going respondents were less positive about the grand coalition, while younger people were more favorable toward the rather complex three-party coalitions (that exclude the Left Party).

Overall, the models only explain a modest amount of the variance of coalition preferences (between 18 and 67%), suggesting that other factors not captured in the model play an important role as well. Coalitions that are plausible and represent a clear ideological position (ÖVP-BZÖ and SPÖ-Green Party in Austria, CDU-FDP and SPD-Greens in Germany) are predicted fairly well by the explanatory variables, but unusual and new coalitions that defy clear ideological patterns, including the grand coalition, cannot be predicted very well by these factors. Thus, coalition preferences *can* be predicted by party preferences, but only to a limited degree. The considerable unexplained variance suggests that coalition preferences are a partially independent or even unique factor.

Conclusion

The paper explored the origins and nature of coalition preferences in the multiparty systems of Austria and Germany. The evidence strongly supports the notion that voters have well-developed coalition preferences, or at least are able to form them if asked. In fact, more Austrian respondents were able to provide evaluations of coalitions between established parties than to rate a new and less-known party (Liste Martin).

The response time analysis contributes an important piece to the puzzle. The argument by González et al. (2008) that coalition preferences are a superordinate category can safely be ruled out for Austria and Germany, and probably for most other multiparty systems as well. The response times for hypothetical and abstract coalitions were significantly longer than for real and concrete parties. Coalitions clearly emerge as secondary to parties. The only exception are the incumbent coalitions of ÖVP and BZÖ in Austria and the grand coalition in Germany. This suggests that only if coalitions are an existing and real entity with considerable presence in the media, they become a salient evaluation object that is comparable to parties.

In terms of the origins of coalition preferences, the analysis raises as many questions as it can answer. It is clear that party preferences as well as party leaders play a very important role in the formation of coalition preferences, but they predict only a limited amount of the variance. Ideological and policy-based explanations, on the other hand, show a mixed pattern. They largely fail to explain coalition preferences in Austria but predict preferences for ideologically polarized coalitions in Germany. The latter pattern also emerged from the multidimensional scaling analysis of party and coalition preferences. However, this might in part be a measurement problem. If respondents would be asked specifically about the ideological and policy positions of specific *coalitions*, better proximity measures could be operationalized. However, it is rather doubtful that a better measurement would dramatically increase the explanatory power of these measures. The considerable unexplained variance rather suggests that other factors must play a role as well that we have not captured yet. But most important, it implies that coalition preferences are to a considerable degree independent of party preferences and a unique and necessary predictor of vote decisions.

The challenge to future research is clear. Not only have these findings to be replicated for other countries with multiparty systems, but better explanations about the sources and origins of coalition preferences are necessary.

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Table 1: Distribution of Party and Coalition Preferences

A) Austria (N=1951)			
Parties	%	Coalitions	%
Single Party	76.1	Single Coalition	68.0
<i>ÖVP</i>	28.7	<i>ÖVP-SPÖ</i>	27.1
<i>SPÖ</i>	21.4	<i>ÖVP-FPÖ</i>	4.7
<i>Greens</i>	15.8	<i>ÖVP-BZÖ</i>	4.2
<i>FPÖ</i>	4.4	<i>ÖVP-FPÖ-BZÖ</i>	2.1
<i>BZÖ</i>	3.0	<i>ÖVP-Greens</i>	13.0
<i>Martin</i>	2.8	<i>SPÖ-Greens</i>	14.5
		<i>SPÖ-Greens-Martin</i>	2.5
Two-Party Ties	15.7	Two-Coalition Ties	19.3
Indifferent	4.7	Indifferent	7.3
Alienated	2.1	Alienated	2.8
Missing	1.5	Missing	2.6
Party > Coalition ^a	34.9	Coalition > Party ^a	28.9
B) Germany (N=2173)			
Parties	%	Coalitions	%
Single Party	71.8	Single Coalition	69.1
<i>CDU</i>	15.4	<i>CDU/CSU-SPD</i>	10.3
<i>CSU</i>	3.2	<i>CDU/CSU-FDP</i>	24.7
<i>CDU/CSU^b</i>	6.8	<i>CDU/CSU-Greens</i>	2.5
<i>SPD</i>	14.9	<i>CDU/CSU-FDP-Greens</i>	1.5
<i>FDP</i>	7.8	<i>SPD-Greens</i>	13.3
<i>Greens</i>	10.1	<i>SPD-FDP</i>	2.2
<i>Left Party</i>	13.7	<i>SPD-FDP-Greens</i>	2.1
		<i>SPD-Greens-Left Party</i>	12.6
Two-Party Ties	12.8	Two-Coalition Ties	13.6
Indifferent	8.4	Indifferent	8.2
Alienated	5.6	Alienated	4.2
Missing	1.4	Missing	5.0
Party > Coalition ^c	34.6	Coalition > Party ^c	36.7

Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (CS)

Note: A single preference is assigned if only one party or coalition has the highest rating. Indifferent respondents have multiple-party (three or more) ties and alienated respondents have only negative ratings.

^a Respondents with non-missing preferences only, N=1883.

^b CDU and CSU are regionally split “sister” parties, with the CSU running in a single state (Bavaria) with no CDU representation. Consequently, this particular tie is treated as another “single” party preference and not counted as a genuine “two-party tie”.

^c Respondents with non-missing preferences only, N=2049.

Table 2: Response Time Model for Evaluative Ratings

	Log of Response Times			
	Austria		Germany	
	B	se	b	se
Candidate Preference	.018*	(.007)	-.104***	(.005)
Coalition Preference	.113***	(.008)	.165***	(.007)
Preference Rating	.004***	(.001)	.009***	(.001)
Preference Extremity	-.027***	(.002)	-.034***	(.001)
Political Interest	.010	(.040)	-.039*	(.019)
Knowledge ^a	-.107***	(.024)	-.056***	(.010)
Incumbent Coalition	-.137***	(.014)	-.055***	(.009)
Campaign Day	-.009	(.006)	-.001***	(.000)
Baseline Response Speed	.474***	(.019)	.455***	(.008)
Interview Duration	.003***	(.001)	.004***	(.000)
Question Order ^b	-.021***	(.002)	-.099***	(.004)
Constant	.574***	(.086)	.682***	(.023)
R ²	.21		.27	
Cases	20922		34226	
Respondents	1109		5772	

Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (RCS)

Note: Entries are random-effects GLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable is the natural log of the party, candidate, and coalition rating response times, after removing all response times exceeding three standard deviations above the mean. Cases represent individual party, candidate, and coalition rating response times, and all responses from a single respondent form a cluster (up to 20 ratings for 6 parties, 7 candidates, and 7 coalitions in Austria, and up to 7 ratings for 2 parties, 2 candidates, and 3 coalitions in Germany; not all respondents provided all ratings).

^a In Austria, knowledge is an index of two factual knowledge items. In Germany, the knowledge items are not available for the whole survey period. It was substituted by a four-point education scale.

^b Question order within the party, candidate, or coalition rating block.

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

Table 3a: Explaining Coalition Preferences in Austria

	ÖVP- SPÖ	ÖVP- FPÖ	ÖVP- BZÖ	ÖVP- FPÖ- BZÖ	ÖVP- Greens	SPÖ- Greens	SPÖ- Greens- Martin
Party Preferences							
ÖVP	.15*** (.04)	.13*** (.03)	.14*** (.03)	.09** (.03)	.20*** (.03)	-.12*** (.03)	.01 (.04)
SPÖ	.25*** (.04)	-.05 (.03)	-.07* (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.14*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	.10** (.04)
Greens	-.05 (.04)	-.09** (.03)	-.12*** (.03)	-.07* (.03)	.39*** (.03)	.34*** (.03)	.19*** (.04)
FPÖ	.03 (.04)	.26*** (.03)	-.11*** (.03)	.10** (.03)	-.00 (.03)	-.07* (.03)	-.00 (.04)
BZÖ	-.11** (.04)	-.00 (.03)	.43*** (.03)	.20*** (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	-.03 (.04)
Martin ^a	.49 (.35)	.43 (.31)	-.51 (.27)	-.08 (.29)	.16 (.30)	-.53 (.31)	1.83*** (.35)
Candidates							
Schüssel (ÖVP)	.09* (.04)	.06 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.12*** (.03)	-.09** (.03)	-.18*** (.04)
Gusenbauer (SPÖ)	.19*** (.03)	.01 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.01 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.21*** (.03)	.18*** (.03)
v.d. Bellen (Greens)	-.03 (.04)	-.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.25*** (.03)	.17*** (.03)	.13*** (.04)
Strache (FPÖ)	-.02 (.04)	.26*** (.03)	.02 (.03)	.07* (.03)	.01 (.03)	.09* (.03)	.07 (.04)
Westenthaler (BZÖ)	.01 (.04)	.08* (.03)	.30*** (.03)	.27*** (.03)	-.05 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.04 (.04)
Ideology/Policy							
Ideology	.02 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.05 (.03)	-.00 (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.06 (.03)	-.07 (.04)
Immigration	.01 (.03)	.00 (.03)	-.00 (.02)	-.01 (.02)	.03 (.02)	.10*** (.03)	.09** (.03)
Welfare	-.03 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.04 (.03)	-.06 (.03)
Performance							
Government	.12 (.12)	.31** (.10)	.49*** (.09)	.26** (.10)	.21* (.10)	-.13 (.10)	-.22 (.12)
Economy	-.03 (.08)	-.12 (.07)	-.04 (.06)	-.06 (.07)	.13 (.07)	-.18* (.07)	-.13 (.08)
Demographics							
Age	.01*** (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)
Male	-.07 (.14)	-.20 (.13)	.19 (.11)	-.01 (.12)	-.09 (.12)	-.23 (.13)	-.08 (.14)
High Education	-.54** (.21)	-.10 (.18)	.09 (.16)	-.00 (.17)	.25 (.18)	-.41* (.18)	-.00 (.21)
Catholic	.14 (.16)	.08 (.14)	.01 (.12)	.10 (.13)	.21 (.14)	-.10 (.14)	.12 (.16)
Church	.45* (.20)	.02 (.18)	-.04 (.16)	-.12 (.17)	-.03 (.18)	-.11 (.18)	.06 (.21)
Labor	.02 (.15)	.02 (.13)	.14 (.11)	.01 (.12)	-.16 (.13)	.11 (.13)	-.03 (.15)

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(Table 3a continued)

Constant	-.30 (.42)	-.50 (.37)	-.76* (.32)	-1.18*** (.35)	-1.70*** (.36)	.46 (.37)	-.27 (.43)
Adj. R ²	.19	.40	.55	.39	.46	.55	.33
N	1460	1456	1459	1452	1459	1456	1425

Source: Austria 2006

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

Dependent variables measure the degree to which respondents prefer a given coalition government on an 11-point rating scale, ranging from -5 (“not at all desirable”) to +5 (“absolutely desirable”).

^a The Martin preference is a dichotomous indicator coded 1 for respondents that rated the Liste Martin higher than other party preferences (and 0 otherwise).

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

Table 3b: Explaining Coalition Preferences in Germany

	CDU- SPD	CDU- FDP	SPD- Greens	SPD- FDP	CDU- Greens	SPD- FDP- Greens	CDU- FDP- Greens	SPD- Greens- Left
Party Preferences								
CDU	.05 (.04)	.10** (.04)	-.17*** (.04)	-.15*** (.04)	.05 (.04)	-.19*** (.04)	-.03 (.04)	-.07 (.04)
CSU	-.03 (.04)	.09** (.03)	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.11** (.04)	.04 (.04)	.08* (.04)	-.04 (.03)
SPD	.12** (.04)	-.33*** (.03)	.29*** (.03)	.21*** (.03)	-.12*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	-.17*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)
FDP	-.07 (.04)	.36*** (.03)	-.08* (.03)	.22*** (.03)	-.02 (.04)	.15*** (.04)	.11** (.04)	-.07* (.03)
Greens	-.00 (.04)	-.02 (.03)	.30*** (.03)	.04 (.03)	.22*** (.03)	.14*** (.03)	.16*** (.03)	.05 (.03)
Left Party	-.03 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	-.10*** (.03)	-.07* (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.08** (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.26*** (.03)
Candidates								
Merkel (CDU)	.07 (.04)	.18*** (.03)	-.10** (.03)	-.20*** (.03)	-.00 (.03)	-.14*** (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.16*** (.03)
Guttenberg (CSU)	.00 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.04 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.07* (.03)	-.02 (.03)
Steinmeier (SPD)	.12*** (.04)	.01 (.03)	.15*** (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.04 (.03)	-.03 (.03)	.03 (.03)
Westerwelle (FDP)	-.02 (.04)	.15*** (.03)	-.10** (.03)	.08* (.03)	.07* (.03)	.06 (.04)	.12** (.04)	.00 (.03)
Künast (Greens)	.04 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	.06* (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.06 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.06* (.03)
Lafontaine (Left)	.07* (.03)	-.00 (.03)	.00 (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.02 (.03)	.03 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.08** (.03)
Gysi (Left)	-.03 (.03)	-.10*** (.02)	.04 (.02)	.01 (.03)	-.04 (.03)	.01 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.15*** (.03)
Ideology/Policy								
Left-Right	-.01 (.04)	.15*** (.03)	-.14*** (.03)	.00 (.04)	.01 (.04)	-.02 (.04)	.03 (.04)	-.21*** (.03)
Welfare	.02 (.03)	-.11*** (.02)	.08*** (.02)	.03 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.06* (.02)	.01 (.02)	.13*** (.02)
Immigration	.08*** (.02)	.04* (.02)	-.04* (.02)	-.04 (.02)	.04 (.02)	-.07** (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)
Nuclear Power	-.00 (.03)	-.08*** (.02)	.10*** (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.02 (.02)	.03 (.02)	-.07** (.02)	-.06* (.02)
Performance								
Government	.49*** (.03)	.17*** (.03)	.11*** (.03)	.11*** (.03)	.14*** (.03)	.06* (.03)	.14*** (.03)	.01 (.03)
Economy	-.05 (.07)	.03 (.06)	.19** (.06)	.15* (.07)	.14* (.07)	.07 (.07)	.06 (.07)	.21*** (.06)
Demographics								
Age	-.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.01* (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Male	-.01 (.12)	.03 (.10)	-.12 (.10)	-.03 (.11)	-.02 (.11)	-.10 (.11)	-.03 (.11)	-.17 (.10)

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(Table 3b continued)

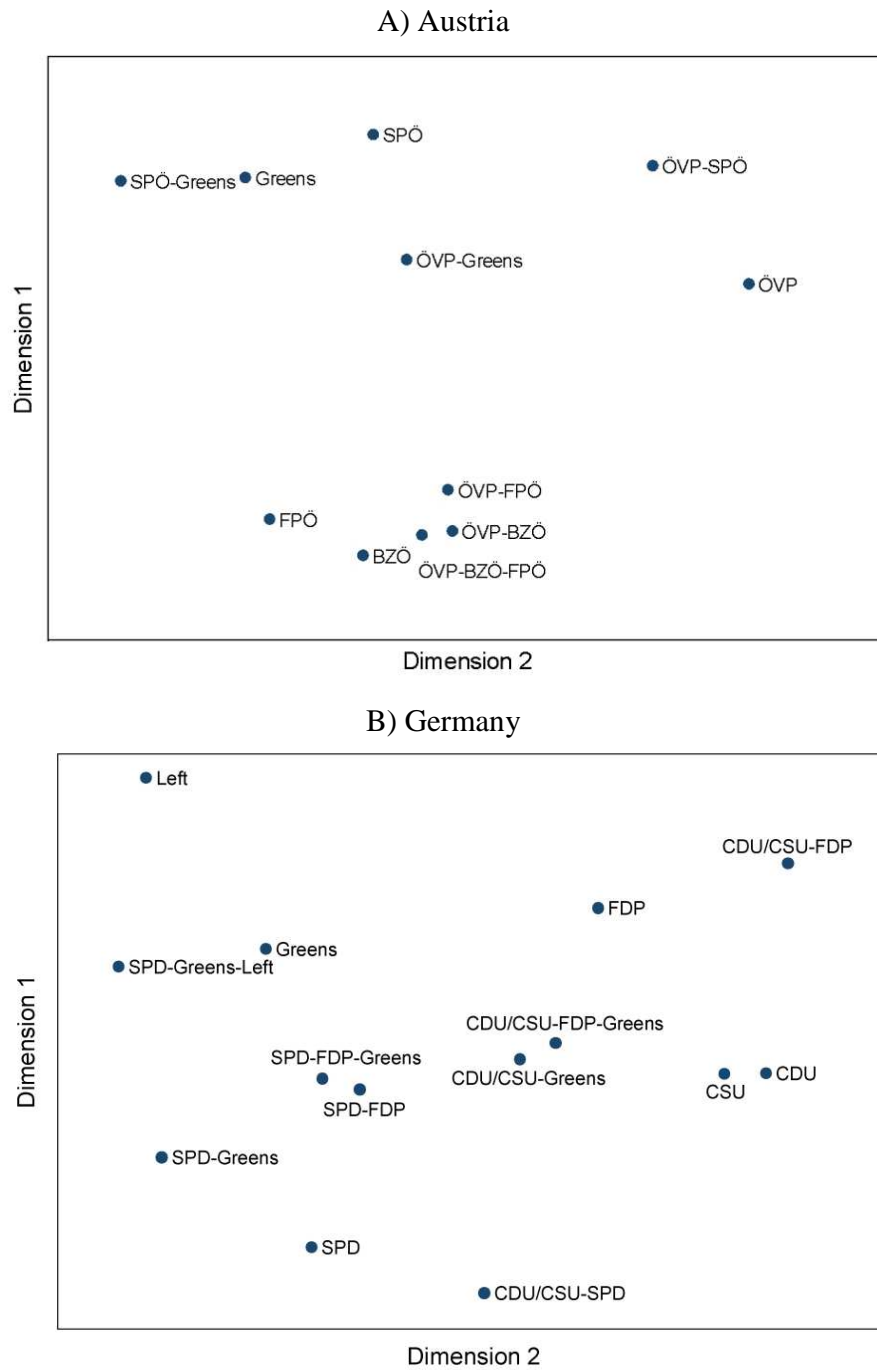
High Education	-.47** (.17)	.15 (.14)	-.26 (.15)	-.28 (.16)	.12 (.16)	-.26 (.16)	.01 (.16)	-.20 (.15)
Catholic	-.11 (.15)	-.01 (.12)	-.17 (.12)	-.04 (.13)	.05 (.14)	.14 (.14)	-.02 (.14)	.11 (.13)
Church	-.09* (.04)	-.05 (.04)	-.05 (.04)	.04 (.04)	.01 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.07 (.04)	-.03 (.04)
Labor	.15 (.18)	-.10 (.14)	.02 (.15)	-.14 (.16)	-.25 (.16)	.08 (.17)	-.31 (.16)	.22 (.15)
Constant	-3.90*** (.47)	-1.46*** (.38)	-.72 (.39)	-1.77*** (.42)	-2.51*** (.42)	-.89* (.44)	-1.68*** (.43)	.27 (.41)
Adj. R ²	.32	.67	.56	.20	.18	.22	.21	.57
N	1581	1578	1582	1571	1575	1560	1545	1577

Source: GLES 2009 (CS)

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables measure the degree to which respondents prefer a given coalition government on an 11-point rating scale, ranging from -5 (“not at all desirable”) to +5 (“very desirable”).

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

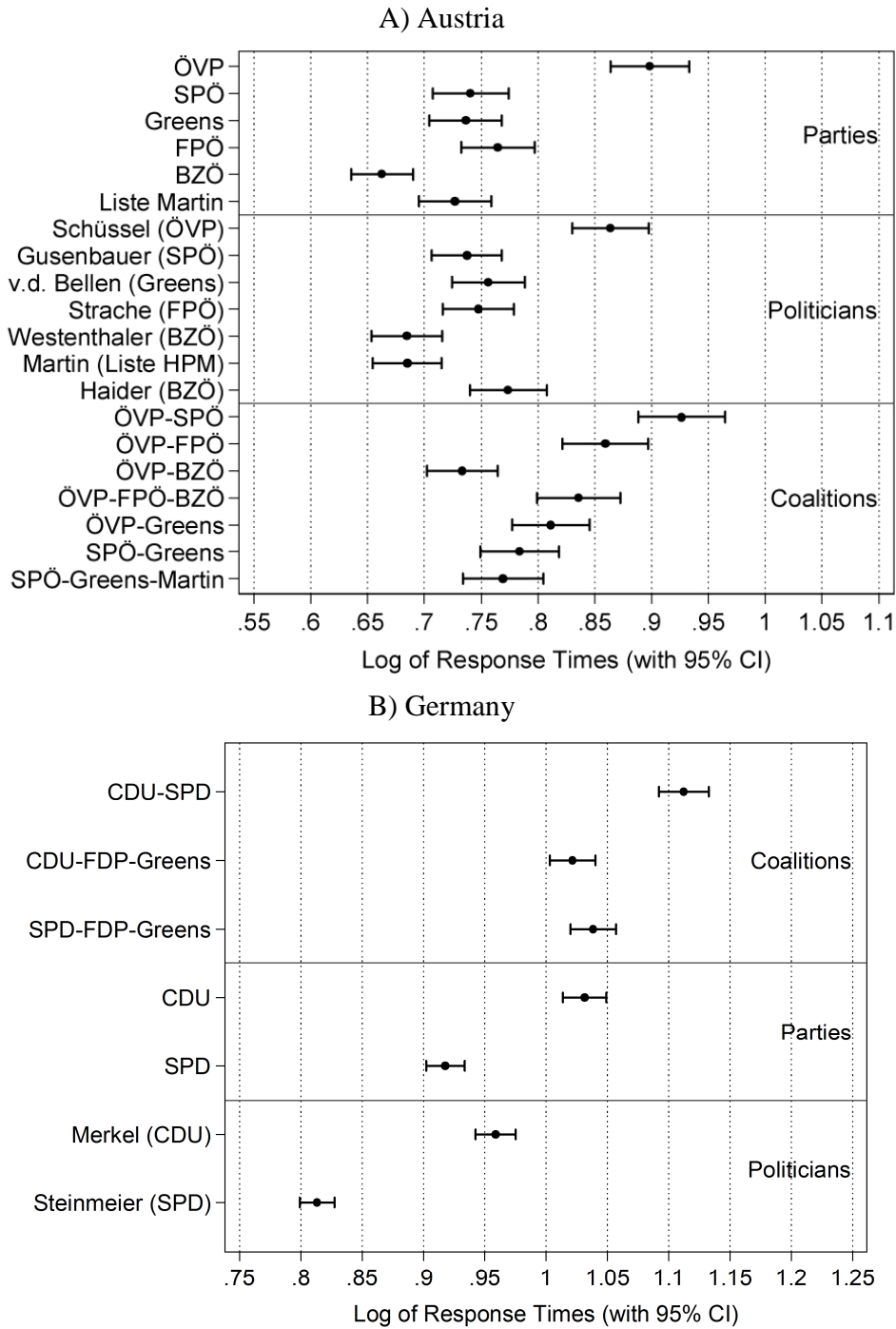
Figure 1: Parties and Coalitions in a Two-Dimensional Evaluative Space



Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (CS)

Note: The spatial placement is based on a classical multidimensional scaling (SPSS PROXSCAL) of the preference ratings of five parties and six coalitions in Austria (N=1790) and six parties and seven coalitions in Germany (N=1735).

Figure 2: Average Response Times of Party, Politician, and Coalition Ratings



Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (RCS)

Note: Dots represent the average natural log of the response times of party, politician, and coalition ratings and spikes represent the 95% confidence intervals. Results based on respondents with response times for all parties and coalition ratings (Austria: N=950, Germany: N=2975). The items are listed in the question order of the surveys.