Coalition signals as cues for party and coalition preferences

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Abstract

Coalition signals can offer crucial information to voters during political campaigns. In multiparty systems, they reduce the number of theoretically possible coalitions to a much smaller set of plausible and likely coalitions. Strategic voters who care more about the formation of the next coalition government than supporting the preferred party might, for example, defect from the preferred party in favor of another party that might produce a more desirable coalition government. For other voters, coalition signals might merely elicit affective responses which can shift the vote. In this study, we investigate whether and how different coalition signals affect vote intentions and activate different party and coalition preferences. We report the results of a nationally representative survey experiment conducted before the 2006 Austrian General Election. Respondents encountered four vignettes with hypothetical coalitions, each followed by the standard vote intention question. The results indicate that voters are responsive to coalition signals, and especially voters with two preferred parties tend to change their vote intentions. Finally, a more detailed look at Green Party voters suggests that individual party and coalition preferences help to explain the direction of these changes.

There is no shortage of research on election campaigns in multiparty systems with coalition governments, but one arguably crucial aspect is surprisingly missing: the nature, role, and effects of coalition signals by parties. Coalition signals are defined as any official or unofficial pre-electoral statement by parties, party members, or other political actors about the coalitions that might or might not be formed after the next election. For voters, coalition signals can be a crucial piece of information about the likely nature of the next government. Supporting evidence, however, is largely lacking so far.

It is not difficult to identify electoral scenarios when coalition signals should matter. Coalition governments are a common outcome of elections in multiparty systems, even if voters can only cast a ballot for an individual party and not a specific coalition. As a consequence, voters may face difficult dilemmas. For example, if the preferred party intends to form a coalition with a disliked party, a voter might consider defecting from the preferred party and rather voting for a party that prevents this coalition from happening—or abstain altogether from voting. A similar situation might occur if the preferred party is not expected to play any role during the formation of the next government (e.g. Bargsted and Kedar 2009). Then a vote for a party in contention for the next government might make a lot more sense. The same applies to a voter who cares about the weight (electoral strength) of the different parties within the likely next coalition, irrespective of whether or not the preferred party is part of this coalition. In short, a voter who cares not only about supporting the preferred party but about the formation of the next coalition government and its future policies must take coalition formation into account. So much is clear from recent research (e.g. Aldrich et al. 2004, Blais et al. 2006, Meffert and Gschwend 2010). If this assumption is correct, information about plausible and likely coalitions should be of great importance to voters. In fact, the importance increases with the number of parties and an exponentially increasing number of theoretically possible coalitions. Thus, any information that reduces the complexity of this decision task can help the voter.

In practice, the task is not as difficult as it might appear at first. Most voters as "members of the polity" (Lewis-Beck and Skalaban 1989) should be familiar with the political history and the political parties of a country, making some coalitions more plausible and likely while immediately ruling out other options. But for more accurate speculations about government formation after the next election, voters need more current and pertinent information. Direct coalition signals by parties are the most

obvious source of such information. Such signals might announce a preferred coalition partner or rule out specific parties as unacceptable. If voters take such (credible) signals into account, they might vary or adjust their vote intentions depending on the expected coalitions.

In this paper, the focus is on the potential electoral effects of different coalition signals. After a short review of relevant theories of voting behavior and some recent evidence, we report the results of a nationally representative survey conducted before the 2006 Austrian General Election that included a survey experiment with four different vignettes about potential coalitions after the election. Respondents were confronted with four hypothetical scenarios in which specific coalitions were announced, each followed by a vote intention questions.

Coalition Signals and Strategic Voting in Multiparty Systems

Theoretically, it is useful to distinguish between rational/instrumental and affective/expressive decision making when considering the role of coalition signals. In particular the rational perspective requires a more thorough discussion, starting with the concept of strategic voting.

In first-past-the-post systems, a strategic voter is typically defined as someone who casts a vote for a party other than the most preferred party because the former has a better chance of winning (Cox 1997, Fischer 2004). According to the theory of strategic voting, a strategic vote requires an instrumental motivation and rational expectations about the outcome of the next election. By definition, it is insincere.

In multiparty systems, strategic voting would appear to be a hopelessly complex endeavor. First, the literature on electoral systems has long argued that under proportional representation (PR) many if not all the incentives for strategic voting are absent. The underlying hypothesized mechanism is known as Duverger's (1954) "psychological effect." Voters are systematically drawn away from their most preferred (smaller) parties because they realize that supporting a marginal party is equivalent to wasting their vote in a particular electoral system. But more recently, several studies have offered evidence that strategic voting not only makes sense in PR systems but have offered supporting evidence as well (Blais et al. 2006, Bargsted and Kedar 2009, Hobolt and Karp 2010, Meffert and Gschwend 2010). These studies

suggest that voters not only defect from marginal parties but have a variety of reasons to cast a strategic vote.

Second, it is not clear what "winning" actually means in multiparty systems with coalition governments. Party A might be considered a winner of an election because it can double its vote share or because it has gained a few seats in parliament for the first time. But what if we only care about how to best influence government formation? Would party A still be considered a winner even if we would know that this party will not become a member of the new coalition government? Party B, on the other hand, might actually lose some seats but nevertheless be considered a winner because it will lead the new coalition government. Perceptions and judgments of winning and losing are thus closely tied to individual preferences for parties and policies.

The theory of strategic voting assumes that voters cast their ballot in order to maximize their expected utility based on their party preferences and their expectations about the outcome of the next election (Cox 1997). With coalition governments, strategic voters must not only form expectations about the likelihood that parties win representation in parliament but also consider which coalitions are viable and likely. Based on these expectations, they can decide how to vote in order to best influence government formation, if only to influence the weight of each party in an almost certain coalition (see Meffert and Gschwend 2007a, 2010). Given the complexity of the decision task, it is likely that voters use simple heuristics such as coalition signals by parties to simplify the decision task. Especially coalition signals should help voters to narrow down the large number of theoretically possible coalitions to the relevant few.

From an affective/expressive perspective, the decision process might in fact much more straightforward. Coalition signals can be considered as informational cues or "merely" prime preexisting preferences. By mentioning and associating specific parties as coalition partners, with or without the preferred party, coalition signals can activate voters' affective reactions to these parties which might help or hurt the preferred party depending on the valence of these evaluations. In short, coalition signals are, from this perspective, a simple cue that elicits affective reactions which potentially important electoral consequences.

Methodologically, strategic voting is typically studied with survey data from particular elections. The challenge to determine the *effect* of coalition signals on

voting behavior based on a single election is obvious. It simply does not provide much variation in terms of coalition signals and other relevant factors such as polls. These factors tend to be fairly stable and consistent before elections, and every voter will receive more or less the same information. Consequently, it is not possible to determine with any confidence whether a strategic voter would have decided differently if parties had offered different coalition signals (or the polls had been different). One strategy to address this lack of variance, at least to a certain degree, is the use of an experimental design. It allows the creation of theoretically relevant decision scenarios by manipulating coalition signals and testing their effect on voters.

Previous Research on the Electoral Effects of Coalition Signals

The existing literature does not provide much guidance in this respect because coalition signals have not received much attention. Three studies offer some guidance, even if they do not entirely address the specific research question of the current study. Gschwend and Hooghe (2008) compared the effects of a *party ballot* and a *coalition ballot* (with pre-electoral coalitions of two or more parties) in a within-participants design in an online survey experiment in Belgium. The findings suggest that the different ballots did indeed lead to changes in vote intentions. Most notably, voters who did not like the coalition partner were more likely to defect from the coalition. In addition, supporters of small parties where more likely than supporters of large parties to defect in the coalition ballot condition, that is, refuse to follow their party leaders' commitment to a specific coalition. Other but less important reasons for defections were the ideological distance of the coalition parties (their ideological congruency) and the effect of party candidates. While the study clearly supports the notion that coalitions affect vote intentions, coalitions were operationalized as an institutionalized ballot choice. This is quite different from a coalition signal that is merely communicated during a campaign.

Irwin and van Holsteyn (2003), on the other hand, operationalized coalition signals as part of vignettes in a representative pre-election survey in the Netherlands. These vignettes presented respondents with hypothetical but plausible results of opinion polls and their consequences for the formation of the next coalition government, both in terms of numerical possibility and the expressed willingness of parties to form these coalitions (equivalent to coalition signals). Each respondent

encountered the same four vignettes toward the end of the survey, and each vignette was followed by a vote intention question which allowed a comparison to the original vote intention. It should be noted that Dutch coalition governments usually consist of coalitions with at least three parties, making such information particularly valuable.

The results of this study suggest that, first of all, vignettes appear to help some voters to even develop an initial vote intention. The share of respondents with a vote intention increased from 80 to 90 percent after receiving one of the vignettes. It is not possible to attribute this effect directly to the vignettes or to a more general learning or information effect while responding to the survey questions. Nevertheless, this *activation effect* is one possible and plausible reaction to coalition vignettes.

The results further suggest that supporters of small parties were most affected by these vignettes with coalition signals. If the preferred small party was a member of the next coalition, voters were more likely to support the preferred party. But if the small party was not in the coalition, supporters of small parties were more likely to defect (compared to supporters of large parties). This suggests that small party supporters are more likely to engage in strategic voting behavior.

The study provides, similar to the previous one, support for the effect of coalition signals. These vignettes, however, combined poll results with coalition signals. As a consequence, the effects of coalition signals cannot be isolated from poll results, leaving the question of distinct coalition signal effects open.

A third study by Meffert and Gschwend (2007b) tested the effects of coalition signals as part of a laboratory experiment embedded in two actual state election campaigns in Germany. While polls were also manipulated, this manipulation was separate and independent of the coalition signal manipulation. Coalition signals and polls were imbedded in an information board task that allowed participants to select and read campaign information. The coalition signal manipulation either explicitly mentioned a coalition (conditionally on and targeted toward the most preferred large and small party of each participant) or did not mention coalitions at all. The results suggest that these coalition signals did increase the likelihood of defection from the preferred party, but that these defections could not be explained as purely rational strategic voting. Because the manipulated coalition signals were conditional on the party preferences of each participant, it is not possible to generalize the effects across all voters.

In summary, these three studies suggest that coalition signals matter, in particular for small party supporters. But none of these studies tests coalition signals as an independent and separate effect for all respondents in a representative survey. This study is intended to fill this gap.

The Election Context: Coalitions in Austria 2006

A short outline of the 2006 Austrian election campaign will provide some context and highlight how this election facilitated research on the effects of coalition signals (for more details about the election, see Müller [2008]). In 2006, the incumbent coalition of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the small Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) was neither popular nor likely to get a new mandate. The polls still suggested that the ÖVP would stay ahead of the Social Democrats (SPÖ) by a few percentage points. The Austrian parties sent out only few and mixed coalition signals that created considerable uncertainty about the next government. The ÖVP as the predicted winner of the election refrained from explicit or official coalition signals. It only ruled out a coalition with the populist and far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). Plausible coalition partners were either the small Green Party or the SPÖ, both moderate left-of-center parties. The SPÖ also refrained from making explicit and official coalition statements but clearly saw Green Party and ÖVP as possible coalition partners while ruling out the two nationalist far-right parties FPÖ and BZÖ. The Greens explicitly campaigned without a coalition statement and tried to keep equal distance to both ÖVP and SPÖ. The Social Democrats, however, were seen as the favored coalition partner (e.g., Debus 2007: 57). The FPÖ ruled out any participation in a coalition government while the BZÖ would consider a coalition with ÖVP and SPÖ.[1] In short, the three most likely election outcomes included a grand coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ (which de facto had a certain majority of seats) or a coalition of one of the large parties ÖVP and SPÖ with the Greens as junior partner. This ambiguous situation provided an excellent opportunity to investigate the effects of different coalition signals on vote intentions.

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[1] Another small and new party, the *Liste Martin*, played a minor role as well. Because it is not further relevant for the subsequent analyses, it is not further discussed.

Coalition Signals as Survey Vignettes

Following Irwin and van Holsteyn (2003), coalition signals can be embedded as an experimental manipulation in a representative population survey. Coalition signals are very well suited for this purpose because they merely require that survey respondents are exposed to them before asking about the vote intention under the given scenario. The implementation of coalition signals in the 2006 Austrian pre-election survey is fairly straightforward. Participants were exposed to four different vignettes presenting hypothetical coalition announcements by Austrian parties. To be plausible, these signals had to focus on parties that voters would accept as plausible coalitions, primarily in terms of expected electoral party strengths and to a lesser degree in terms of the likelihood that these parties could and would form such a coalition. Consequently, the vignettes created four sharply contrasting scenarios with hypothetical coalitions that in each case mixed and matched one of the two major Austrian parties, ÖVP and SPÖ, with one of the two smaller parties that were expected to perform well to very well in the upcoming election, the (moderate) Green Party and the (extremist) FPÖ. Both small parties had explicitly expressed no coalition preference in favor of one of the large parties, and the FPÖ was even fairly explicit in ruling out any participation in the next government. This real world context facilitated the implementation of manipulated coalition signals.

A real election campaign as background and decision context poses the acute risk that real events interfere with the manipulations, for example if a party suddenly makes a new and unexpected coalition announcement. Unlike laboratory experiments with fictitious decision tasks, a survey setting offers no control over such contextual factors that might undermine the manipulated messages. Consequently, the coalition signals were phrased explicitly and transparently as hypothetical statements in order to work even in a changed setting—which, in fact, did not happen.

These vignettes were presented shortly after asking the standard question about vote intention. They were introduced by the statement that "most parties have not made a clear announcement about possible coalitions after the election" and followed by four vignettes, in randomized order:

"For which party would you vote if the Greens would clearly reject a coalition with the SPÖ and announce the intention to form a coalition with the ÖVP?"

"For which party would you vote if the Greens would clearly reject a coalition with the ÖVP and announce the intention to form a coalition with the SPÖ?"

"For which party would you vote if the FPÖ would drop its intention to not participate in any coalition and rather announce the intention to form a coalition with the ÖVP?"

"For which party would you vote if the FPÖ would drop its intention to not participate in any coalition and rather announce the intention to form a coalition with the SPÖ?"

The responses to each vignette were recorded on the same party list that was used for the standard vote intention question. This allows a within-respondent comparison of changes in vote intentions.

The pre-election survey interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1501 respondents and an additional and smaller sample of 450 respondents in the state Carinthia. Both are combined in the analyses reported below. The survey was conducted by phone during the three weeks preceding the election on October 1 (September 18-30, 2006). The survey asked respondents to not only rate the six main parties and whether each party should be part of the next government, respondents also rated seven specific coalitions that either had a realistic chance of reaching a majority in the elections 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"). The changes of respondents' initial vote intentions after each vignette are the key dependent variable.

Results

Stability and Change in Vote Intentions in Response to Coalition Vignettes

The first question is fairly simple and offers an initial overview: Did the exposure to different coalition signals affect the vote intentions of Austrian voters? Table 1 summarizes the reaction of Austrian respondents to the four different

vignettes. Comparing the initial vote intention with the vote intention expressed after each vignette, respondents who did not change their vote intention were classified as stable same party voters or stable nonvoters (the latter including both explicit nonvoters as well as those who "don't know" which party to choose). Those who changed their vote intention were distinguished according to whether they defected to a different party ("other party"), developed a previously absent vote intention ("mobilization"), or became a nonvoter ("demobilization"). The table reports the changes for all respondents combined as well as for the supporters of Green Party, ÖVP, and SPÖ. A party supporter is defined as a respondent who rates a given party higher than all other parties (on an 11-point rating scale). Because the number of supporters for the other small parties is too small for a meaningful analysis, they are not reported separately.

The first striking result from Table 1 is the fact that about a third of the respondents do change their vote intention in response to the vignettes with coalition signals. Less than one in ten respondents actually switches to a different party, but about 15 percent of the respondents are now able to express a vote intention while about 10 percent decide to abstain. The majority of respondents keeps the initial vote intention (about 50%) or the decision to abstain (nearly 20%). Overall, the coalition vignettes introduce considerable movement, with a net mobilization effect (at least when the Green Party is mentioned in the signal). This mobilization effect is similar but weaker than the effect found by Irwin and van Holsteyn (2003) for Dutch voters.

The same basic pattern also holds for the supporters of Green Party, ÖVP, and SPÖ. The second striking finding is a negative reaction among these voters toward any mention of the extremist FPÖ. The two vignettes with the FPÖ produce the highest demobilization rates among these respondents, no matter whether or not the preferred party is involved in the coalition. This effect suggests a strong negative affective reaction toward the party rather than a careful strategic reassessment of the vote intention.

Two other patterns are notable as well. Among Green Party supporters, a coalition of the Green Party with the conservative ÖVP creates the highest rate of change, both in terms of defections to other parties and the mobilization effect. The ÖVP-Green Party coalition clearly polarizes the Green supporters. For SPÖ supporters, however, it is the coalition with the far-right FPÖ that leads to both a high defection (14%) and demobilization rate (15%). A potential coalition, or more

accurately, a simple association with a party strongly disliked among the supporters leads to a sharp drop of support.

Overall, the coalition signals seem to induce a considerable reassessment of vote intentions among Austrian voters. The strongest effects are the mobilization and demobilization of supporters, but a non-trivial share of respondents claim to defect to a different party.[2] These results suggest that coalition signals matter and lead to more affective-expressive than rational-strategic reassessments of vote intentions among voters.[3]

Predicting Vote Intention Changes of Party Supporters in Response to Coalition Vignettes

Can these general reactions to coalition signals be predicted? It would seem obvious that party preferences should play a major role how voters react to coalition signals. Those who have strong and clear party preferences should be less inclined to change their vote intentions and rather continue to support their preferred party. Voters with more than one party preference or preference ties, however, should be more sensitive to coalition signals. Their vote intentions should be more susceptible to new information that helps to determine the next coalition government. This argument, of course, is only reasonable for a very limited number of tied parties. Voters with multiparty ties arguably do not really possess clear party preferences that would guide vote intentions. Instead, these voters should be much more likely to abstain altogether from voting.

These fairly straightforward predictions can be tested by regressing the five categories discussed above on respondents' party preferences and the number of tied parties. Party preferences were operationalized in two ways. First, they are operationalized as dichotomous indicators coded "1" if a respondent rates one of the parties higher than all the other parties on an 11-point rating scale. Consequently, each respondent can only have a single preferred party, if at all. Second, party preferences were operationalized as a dichotomous indicator coded "1" whenever a party was rated highest for up to two parties. Consequently, respondents can have up to two

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[2] Additional analyses of the (randomized) vignette sequence do not show any order effects and are thus not reported.

[3] In order to show that these effects are more than a chance result, Table A1 reports the results of a similar survey experiment before the 2009 German general election. In this online access panel, the vignette effects are even stronger.

party preferences. As reported elsewhere (Meffert and Gschwend 2010), more than 15 percent of all respondents in the Austrian survey have a two-party tie. To control for the effect of multiple party ties, a count of the tied parties was included in the model as well.

Besides these variables of interest, a number of important control variables are included in the model, for example to differentiate voters from nonvoters etc. These controls include political motivations (coalition voters[4], political interest, importance of the election, attention to polls, ideological extremity, factual political knowledge), two current performance items (government performance, economic expectations), as well as key sociodemographic characteristics (high education, age, sex, church attendance, labor union membership).

Table 2 summarizes the responses to the coalition vignettes for respondents for the two types of party preferences. The table lists the predicted percentage point changes that supporters of specific parties fall in one of the five response categories while holding all other variables constant at their mean or typical values.[5] The results show a fairly clear pattern of results. Respondents with unique party preferences are more likely to stick with their initial vote intention ("same party"). This result holds across all four vignettes and for all party preferences, with one exception. The most frequent change of the small number of BZÖ supporters is to lose their vote intention, or demobilize, in response to the vignettes. After all, none of these coalitions would appear to be beneficial to the BZÖ.

Allowing for two-party ties, however, changes this picture. The most common response is now that the intention to stick with the initial preferences declines considerably. In many cases, the second most common response is a mobilization effect, that is, the vignettes seem to help those without an initial vote intention to make up their mind. This finding is further supported by similar effects for coalition voters and the number of tied parties. In each case, the probability of mobilization in response to the vignettes increases – but so does the continuous lack of a vote intention as well (not reported in the table).

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[4] Coalition voter is a dichotomous indicator for respondents who rate a coalition higher than party (on equivalent 11-point rating scales).
[5] The full (multi-page) tables of the multinomial logistic regression models are not reported in this paper but are available upon request from the authors.

Finally, the table does not indicate salient coalition-signal specific effects for supporters of different parties. The rather simplistic classification of responses in the five categories cannot capture the specific directional changes of vote intentions for supporters of the various parties. Given the large number of parties, the actual individual structure of party preferences as well as the number of possible directional changes is enormously high. A different solution is required.

Transition Probabilities of Green Party Voters: The Role of Party and Coalition Preferences

In order to make more detailed but systematic assessment possible, the perspective shifts from all party supporters to relevant subgroups of voters and the theoretically relevant transitions, or in other words, to respondents with vote intentions for a specific party. Green Party voters are the most interesting group, not only because previous studies suggest that small party supporters are the most affected group by coalition signals but also because the Austrian Green party had explicitly refrained from expressing a coalition preference in 2006. The Greens kept the option for a coalition with either large party open. However, it is important to keep in mind that a majority of Green Party supporters and voters had a preference for a coalition with the SPÖ.

To capture the changes in vote intentions of Green Party voters in response to the different vignettes, Table 3 classifies these vote transitions as stable, unchanged Green Party vote intentions, defections to the SPÖ, defections to any other party, or as abstention (including "don't know" answers). As expected, the least amount of change happens in response to the Green Party-SPÖ coalition signal, the preferred outcome for most Green voters. Nearly 80 percent do not change their intention. In contrast, a Green Party-ÖVP coalition signal leads to considerable changes, with only two thirds of Green Party voters keeping their original vote intention. About 14 percent intend to defect to the SPÖ, 6 percent choose another party, and 13 percent rather want to abstain. This result suggests that a coalition signal considered unfavorable by many supporters of a party can have considerable negative consequences for the vote intentions of these supporters.

Green Party voters are also affected by the FPÖ-SPÖ vignette. If the preferred coalition partner is suddenly associated with a highly disliked party, about 17 percent of Green party voters rather prefer to abstain from voting (though it should be noted

that nearly as many do so in response to the entirely unrelated FPÖ-ÖVP vignette as well).

These transitions of vote intentions of Green Party voters can be investigated in more detail in order to identify the specific motivations. The first and straightforward expectation is that a higher or stronger party preference for the Green Party should lower the likelihood of defection. A final and rather strategic motive for voting Green is the preference that the Green Party should join the next government. Such a preference should always benefit the Green Party but become particularly important if the coalition signal announces a coalition that excludes the Green Party. The other effects, however, are less straightforward and depend on voters' preferences for the two potential coalition partners, SPÖ and ÖVP. More specifically, the expectations for the party ratings of ÖVP and SPÖ as well as the coalition signals with each of these two parties should be conditional on the particular coalition signal. If the signal announces a coalition with a preferred party or coalition, a Green Party voter should feel reaffirmed in his or her vote intention for the Greens and rather abstain from defection of abstention. If, however, the signal announces a disliked coalition, Green Party voters should become more likely to defect to the other and preferred coalition partner. This conditional effect captures the essential logic of strategic coalition voting, whether for explicitly strategic reasons or because of simple affective reactions.

These expectations are tested in a multivariate model (see Hilligus 2007). The four transition categories of Green Party voters happen to provide a (barely) sufficient minimum number of voters in each category to facilitate a multivariate analysis. The vote intention transitions are predicted by three sets of variables, party preferences for Green Party, ÖVP, and SPÖ, coalition preferences for the Green Party with ÖVP and SPÖ, and government participation of the Greens (all measured on an 11-point rating scale ranging from -5 to +5). All ratings are included with their original scale except the Green Party rating. The latter is operationalized differently to take the greater complexity of multiparty systems into account. It represents the strength of the Green Party preference compared to the other parties, that is, the evaluative distance of the Green Party rating to the party (or parties) rated second highest. It distinguishes the Green Party preference clearly from the other party ratings.

The six variables are regressed on the four possible vote intention transitions after each vignette. The unchanged vote intention for the Green Party is used as the

baseline category in the multinomial logistic regression models (reported fully in Table A2 in the Appendix). The estimated coefficients indicate the likelihood of defecting to SPÖ, any other party, or abstention for the six independent variables, respectively. To facilitate the interpretation of the logistic regression coefficients, Table 4 reports the predicted changes in probabilities of voting for Green Party, SPÖ, any other party, or abstention as each independent variable varies from its minimum to maximum value (while holding the other variables constant at their mean). It should be noted and kept in mind that the predicted probabilities are (again) reported as percentage point changes and represent the maximum possible effect for each variable.

As expected, the Green Party rating distance as well as the preference for the Green Party in the next government exert consistent positive effects on a stable Green Party vote intention and work against the defection to other parties or abstention. These effects are fairly consistent across all vignettes and require no detailed discussion. The effects of the two large party and coalition ratings, however, are of major interest.

In response to the Green Party-SPÖ vignette, de facto the preferred scenario of most Green party voters, the four preferences show the predicted pattern. Green voters who prefer the ÖVP become more likely to defect from the Greens (-29), mostly in favor of abstaining (+22). Those who prefer a Green Party-ÖVP coalition are also more likely to defect from the Greens (-8) in favor of another party (+8), most likely the ÖVP. Green voters who prefer the SPÖ, on the other hand, become significantly less likely to defect to another party (-10) and rather stick with the Greens (+17). The rating of the Green Party-SPÖ coalition has no additional effect, most likely due to the fact that this was the expected outcome even without the vignette.

The Green Party-ÖVP vignette, on the other hand, leads to sharply different and opposite effects. Green voters who prefer the ÖVP are now more likely to stick with the Greens (+17) while those who prefer the SPÖ are more likely to defect (-17). Even more striking are the effects of the two coalition preferences. Those who prefer an ÖVP-Green Party coalition are decidedly more likely to stick with the Greens (+34) and less likely to defect to the SPÖ (-37). Those who prefer the SPÖ-Green Party coalition are more likely to defect from Green Party (-14) in favor of the SPÖ (+15). Last but not least, the striking decline of abstention (-26) among those who prefer the Green Party, which happens only in response to this particular vignette,

suggests that only true supporters of the Green Party remained with the preferred party while those who had a close second choice—more likely than not the SPÖ—became much more likely to abstain. The two coalition vignettes with the Green Party lead to the expected conditional pattern of responses.

The reactions of Green Party voters in response to the two other, only indirectly relevant vignettes with the FPÖ also exhibit logically consistent effects. The FPÖ-SPÖ vignette associates the preferred coalition partner for most Green voters with a severely disliked coalition partner. As a consequence, those who strongly prefer the Greens over all the other parties become less likely to defect to the SPÖ (-32). This also applies to Green Party voters with a preference for the SPÖ. They become less likely to defect to the SPÖ (-18) and rather stick with the Greens (+22). And those who want the Greens to become a member of the next coalition government are much more likely to vote for the Greens (+62) than to abstain (-26) or defect to another party (-34). In these cases, the "wrong" coalition signal has a very high reinforcement effect on Green Party voters.

A similar effect can be observed in response to the FPÖ-ÖVP vignette. Green Party voters who want the Greens to become a member of the next coalition government are again much more likely to vote for the Greens (+58) than to defect to the SPÖ (-16) or some other party (-7) or to abstain (-35). Because the coalition in this vignette is least relevant for Green Party voters, the other effects are much weaker. A final and not predicted effect of this vignette is a strengthening of the vote intention for the Green party among those who prefer the SPÖ (+12), making a defection to another party, most likely the ÖVP, less likely (-17). It might reflect the desire to vote in favor of a Green Party-SPÖ coalition, the main alternative to the thoroughly disliked FPÖ-ÖVP coalition in the signal. The specific rating of this coalition, however, has no significant effects.

In summary, the results suggest that the coalition signal vignettes activate or prime different party and coalition preferences of Green Party voters. The effects exhibit complex but predictable interactions of coalition signals with party and coalition preferences that either strengthen the vote intention or make a defection more likely. Coalition signals, so much is certain, can lead to consequential shifts in vote intentions.

Discussion

The paper has investigated the effects of coalition signals on vote intentions in multiparty systems with coalition governments. By presenting a series of manipulated but plausible coalition signals to respondents in a nationally representative pre-election survey before the 2006 Austrian national election, it was possible to show that voters react to coalition signals in various ways, mobilizing or demobilizing party supporters or prompting their defections to other parties. The detailed analysis of Green Party voters further suggests that coalition signals activate party and coalition preferences and lead to complex but predictable patterns of responses.

The present study is the first (as far as we know) to address the unique effects of coalition signals on vote intentions by manipulating the coalition signals independently and separately from any other factor such as poll results. It is a first step to address this surprising gap in the existing literature.

At the same time, the study and analysis has a number of limitations. First, the coalition signals were clearly hypothetical, making any prediction of real world impact highly tentative. It is more or less impossible to manipulate the actual coalition signals of real parties, especially when conducting a nationally representative survey. Thus, it will be possible but difficult to improve on the present operationalization of coalition signals. Needless to say, the specific and unique context of the 2006 election imposes limits on the generalizability as well.

A second limitation of the current analysis is the lack of a clear distinction between expressive and rational decision making. It will be necessary to better measure and operationalize the two different motivations in order to conduct a more conclusive test. As such, the current analysis is work in progress.

Finally, the study suffers from a problem that haunts all research of voting decisions in multiparty systems: the number of voters for most small parties is so small that a more detailed, systematic analysis of their decision behavior is not possible (in this case, even despite the respectable sample size of 1950 respondents.

The study has very clear theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, coalition signals require more attention. Because voters appear to take coalition signals into account when making a vote decision, models of voting behavior in multiparty system must take these factors into account. This is necessary to better understand and explain the decision making of voters. As more research on the nature and role of coalition signals is done, it will be necessary to pay more attention to

additional factors such as the differential effects of positive and negative coalition signals as well as different sources of coalition signals.

Future research must better measure coalition signals during political campaigns. Coalition signals are not always explicitly expressed but rather communicated implicitly, based on the expectations and experiences of the electorate. In short, a lot of work remains to be done.

For parties, these results suggest that the expression of coalition signals, whether officially or unofficially, can have real electoral consequences. They require careful thought about the consequences, whether a signal will benefit or hurt the party, or even affect a third party not included in the signal. Parties want to make sure that they have a *net* benefit from the gains and losses after specific signals.

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Table 1: Stability and Change in Vote Intentions in Response to Coalition Vignettes in Austria 2006

Vote Intention	Greens & SPÖ	Greens & ÖVP	FPÖ & SPÖ	FPÖ & ÖVP
Stability				
No Vote Intention	17.7	17.0	19.2	17.9
Same Party	50.0	48.3	45.0	47.3
Change				
Other Party	8.7	9.3	9.9	8.8
Mobilization	14.5	15.2	13.1	14.3
Demobilization	9.1	10.2	12.9	11.7

Data: Austrian Election Study 2006, N=1951.

Note: Entries are column percentages that summarize respondents' changes in vote intentions (relative to the initial vote intention) after receiving four coalition signal vignettes in randomized order. A party supporter is defined as a respondent who rates a single party higher than the other parties on an 11-point rating scale.

Table 2: Predicted Vote Intention Changes of Party Supporters in Response to Coalition Vignettes

A) Greens & ÖVP Coalition Vignette

	Party Preferences									
	ÖVP		SPÖ		Greens		FPÖ		BZÖ	
With ties:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Stability										
No Vote Intention	-2	+3	-3	-4	-4	0	-5	0	-4	+1
Same Party	+22	-12	+24	0	+20	-11	+20	-6	+2	-21
Change										
Other Party	-7	+1	-6	+1	-3	+6	-1	+4	-3	+9
Mobilization	-11	+12	-15	+1	-10	+8	-13	0	-8	+3
Demobilization	-3	-3	-1	+2	-4	-3	-2	+1	+12	+8

B) Greens & SPÖ Coalition Vignette

	Party Preferences									
	ÖVP		SPÖ		Greens		FPÖ		BZÖ	
With ties:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Stability										
No Vote Intention	-2	+4	-5	-2	-4	-2	-6	-1	-5	+3
Same Party	+18	-12	+22	-3	+21	-9	+18	-9	-9	-25
Change										
Other Party	-7	+1	-8	+2	-6	+5	-1	+10	-3	+12
Mobilization	-11	+10	-13	+3	-9	+10	-12	+1	-7	+2
Demobilization	+2	-3	+3	-1	-2	-4	0	-2	+24	+8

C) FPÖ & ÖVP Coalition Vignette

	Party Preferences									
	ÖVP		SPÖ		Greens		FPÖ		BZÖ	
With ties:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Stability										
No Vote Intention	-2	+3	-5	-1	-2	+2	-7	-3	-3	+2
Same Party	+19	-15	+24	-6	+22	-9	+19	-11	+3	-22
Change										
Other Party	-5	+2	-5	+4	-6	+1	+2	+12	+1	+13
Mobilization	-10	+11	-13	+2	-10	+6	-11	+4	-8	+1
Demobilization	-2	-2	-1	+1	-3	0	-3	-1	+6	+5

D) FPÖ & SPÖ Coalition Vignette

	Party Preferences									
	ÖVP		SPÖ		Greens		FPÖ		BZÖ	
With ties:	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Stability										
No Vote Intention	-1	+3	-5	-4	0	+1	-2	0	-6	-1
Same Party	+20	-8	+16	-7	+18	-6	+18	-2	+5	-17
Change										
Other Party	-7	-1	-1	+6	-6	+1	-4	+1	-4	+11
Mobilization	-10	+11	-11	+5	-10	+6	-14	0	-6	+4
Demobilization	-2	-6	+2	0	-2	-2	-1	+1	+11	+3

Note: Entries are predicted percentage point changes (of falling in each category) for supporters of the respective party. Party preferences without ties indicate that a respondent rated a single party highest on the 11-point rating scales. Party preferences with ties indicate that a respondent rated one or two parties highest (allowing for two-party ties). The estimates in each column are based a multinomial logistic regression model (tables available upon request).

Table 3: Vote Intention Transitions of Green Party Voters in Response to Coalition Vignettes

Vote Intention	Greens & SPÖ	Greens & ÖVP	FPÖ & SPÖ	FPÖ & ÖVP
Green Party	78.2	67.5	72.4	73.7
SPÖ	6.2	13.6	6.6	5.4
Other Party	6.2	5.8	4.1	5.4
No Intention	9.5	13.2	16.9	15.6

Note: Entries are column percentages that summarize changes in vote intentions (relative to the initial vote intention) after receiving four coalition signal vignettes in randomized order. Voters are defined by their initial vote intention for a specific party (N=243).

Table 4: Predicted Effects on Green Transition Probabilities

A) Green-SPÖ Coalition Vignette

	Pr(Green)	Pr(SPÖ)	Pr(Other)	Pr(None)
Green Party Distance	**.71***	**-.34***	**-.37***	-.01
ÖVP Rating	**-.29***	.02	.04	**.22***
SPÖ Rating	**.17***	.01	**-.10***	**-.08**
ÖVP-Greens Rating	**-.08***	-.07	**.08***	**.06**
SPÖ-Greens Rating	.01	.01	-.04	.02
Greens in Government	**.44***	-.02	-.11	**-.31***

B) Green-ÖVP Coalition Vignette

	Pr(Green)	Pr(SPÖ)	Pr(Other)	Pr(None)
Green Party Distance	**.87***	**-.21***	**-.39***	**-.26***
ÖVP Rating	**.17***	-.10	-.03	-.04
SPÖ Rating	**-.17***	.08	.05	.05
ÖVP-Greens Rating	**.34***	**-.37***	.00	.02
SPÖ-Greens Rating	**-.14***	**.15***	-.06	.05
Greens in Government	**.54***	-.10	-.03	**-.41***

C) FPÖ-SPÖ Coalition Vignette

	Pr(Green)	Pr(SPÖ)	Pr(Other)	Pr(None)
Green Party Distance	**.37***	**-.32***	.07	-.12
ÖVP Rating	**-.20***	.06	.05	.09
SPÖ Rating	**.22***	**-.18***	.01	-.05
ÖVP-Greens Rating	-.07	-.06	.01	.12
SPÖ-Greens Rating	-.03	.05	-.08	.06
Greens in Government	**.62***	-.02	**-.34***	**-.26***

D) FPÖ-ÖVP Coalition Vignette

	Pr(Green)	Pr(SPÖ)	Pr(Other)	Pr(None)
Green Party Distance	**.19***	-.12	-.12	.05
ÖVP Rating	-.04	.01	-.05	.08
SPÖ Rating	**.12***	-.04	**-.17***	.09
ÖVP-Greens Rating	-.00	-.12	.08	.04
SPÖ-Greens Rating	.05	-.01	.01	-.04
Greens in Government	**.58***	**-.16***	**-.07***	**-.35***

Note: Entries are the changes in predicted probabilities that a Green Party voter does not change the vote intention (pr(Green)), switches to the Social Democrats (pr(SPÖ)), switches to another party (pr(Other)), or has no vote intention anymore (pr(None)) as each predictor variable goes from its minimum to maximum value. The changes in each row should add up to 0 (except for minor discrepancies due to rounding). A star indicates significant effects at the .10-level or lower. Estimates are based on the multinomial logit regression model reported in Table 4 in the Appendix.

Appendix

Table A1: Stability and Change in Vote Intentions in Response to Coalition Vignettes in Germany 2009

Vote Intention	Greens & CDU	SPD/FDP/Greens	SPD/Greens/Left	FDP & SPD
Stability				
No Vote Intention	7.7	7.8	7.8	7.0
Same Party	48.6	49.0	46.3	48.6
Change				
Other Party	16.0	16.9	16.7	17.9
Mobilization	18.0	18.2	17.8	18.6
Demobilization	9.6	8.1	11.5	7.9

Data: German Longitudinal Election Study 2009 (GLES1004, Pre-Election Online Tracking IV), N=985.

Note: Entries are column percentages that summarize respondents' changes in vote intentions (relative to the initial vote intention) after receiving four coalition signal vignettes in the order listed. A party supporter is defined as a respondent who rates a single party higher than the other parties on an 11-point rating scale.

Vignettes: "For which party would you vote if…

> (A) the Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*) announce the intention to join a coalition led by CDU/CSU?
> (B) SPD and Greens announce the intention to form a coalition with the FDP?
> (C) SPD and Greens announce the intention to form a coalition with the Left Party (*Die Linke*)?
> (D) the FDP announces the intention to join a SPD-led coalition?"

Table A2: Effect of Coalition Vignettes on Green Vote Transition Probabilities

Vote Intention	Greens & SPÖ b / (se)	Greens & ÖVP b / (se)	FPÖ & SPÖ b / (se)	FPÖ & ÖVP b / (se)
SPÖ				
Green Party Distance	-.341*	-.315*	-.254[+]	-.162
	(.158)	(.147)	(.142)	(.149)
ÖVP Rating	.077	-.127	.128	.028
	(.128)	(.097)	(.127)	(.143)
SPÖ Rating	-.007	.115	-.246*	-.118
	(.154)	(.132)	(.123)	(.151)
ÖVP-Green Rating	-.088	-.282**	-.075	-.195
	(.125)	(.093)	(.127)	(.125)
SPÖ-Green Rating	.024	.272*	.104	-.036
	(.119)	(.127)	(.118)	(.115)
Greens in Government	-.102	-.198	-.175	-.309*
	(.160)	(.128)	(.157)	(.139)
Constant	-1.569**	-1.040[+]	-1.231*	-.903[+]
	(.591)	(.562)	(.613)	(.534)
Other				
Green Party Distance	-.423*	-.441*	.122	-.159
	(.192)	(.182)	(.233)	(.158)
ÖVP Rating	.171	-.089	.190	-.108
	(.151)	(.126)	(.199)	(.130)
SPÖ Rating	-.237[+]	.117	.025	-.271*
	(.129)	(.149)	(.188)	(.126)
ÖVP-Green Rating	.360[+]	-.049	.030	.267
	(.202)	(.136)	(.161)	(.171)
SPÖ-Green Rating	-.095	-.074	-.177	.009
	(.104)	(.106)	(.116)	(.115)
Greens in Government	-.241	-.173	-.450***	-.238[+]
	(.150)	(.160)	(.135)	(.142)
Constant	-1.783**	-1.022	-1.445*	-1.981**
	(.690)	(.624)	(.727)	(.745)
None				
Green Party Distance	-.095	-.315*	-.089	.006
	(.187)	(.143)	(.123)	(.135)
ÖVP Rating	.341*	-.063	.090	.059
	(.170)	(.099)	(.093)	(.096)
SPÖ Rating	-.154	.070	-.063	.061
	(.126)	(.117)	(.099)	(.113)
ÖVP-Green Rating	.170	-.033	.107	.034
	(.160)	(.105)	(.100)	(.097)
SPÖ-Green Rating	.035	.075	.051	-.034
	(.106)	(.097)	(.083)	(.079)
Greens in Government	-.290*	-.293**	-.260*	-.267**
	(.115)	(.105)	(.104)	(.098)
Constant	-1.646**	-.390	-.690	-.742
	(.628)	(.484)	(.474)	(.485)
Log Likelihood	-144.66	-195.55	-177.69	-173.24
N	237	237	237	237

Note: Entries are unstandardized multinomial logit coefficients. The baseline category is an (unchanged) vote intention for the Green Party.
[+] p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001