

## Strategic coalition voting: Evidence from Austria

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### A B S T R A C T

#### Keywords:

Strategic voting  
Coalitions  
Electoral expectations  
Rational choice  
Proportional representation

Strategic coalition voting assumes that voters cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that a preferred coalition will be formed after the election. We identify three decision contexts that provide incentives for strategic coalition voting: (1) a rental vote of a major party supporter in favor of a preferred junior coalition partner perceived as uncertain to pass a minimum vote threshold, (2) avoiding a wasted vote for the preferred small party that is not expected to pass the minimum vote threshold, and (3) explicit strategic coalition voting to influence the composition and/or portfolio of the next coalition government. The results based on a nationally representative survey conducted before the 2006 Austrian general election generally support these hypotheses.

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### 1. Introduction

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

If coalition governments are a fact of life, voters should not only be aware of it but likely take coalition preferences into account at the ballot box, at least if the political and institutional context of an election provides the

appropriate incentives. Rather surprisingly, previous research has barely begun to address this question. Recent work by Blais and colleagues (Aldrich et al., 2004; Blais et al., 2006), Gschwend (2007), and Bargsted and Kedar (2009) strongly suggests that coalition preferences and expectations matter for particular subgroups of voters.

After reviewing recent theory and evidence about strategic coalition voting, we use data collected before the 2006 Austrian national election to identify relevant subgroups of voters and test whether the effect of coalition preferences is conditional on expectations about the electoral success of parties and coalitions.

### 2. Strategic voting and coalition governments

In seminal works by authors such as Downs (1957) and Cox (1997), rational and in particular strategic voting in multi-party systems with coalition governments has been treated with a lot of skepticism because decision scenarios can very quickly become extraordinarily complex. With each additional party, the number of theoretically possible coalitions increases exponentially. A voter would have to form expectations not only about the strength of the parties but also about the likelihood that various combinations of parties might agree to form a coalition after the election.

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While not denying the complexity of the decision task, it is (or should be) less than an insurmountable challenge for most voters, for a number of reasons. First, parties often announce – and the media cover – positive and negative coalition signals during the campaign (Gschwend, 2007; Meffert and Gschwend, 2007, 2009), giving voters some guidance about which coalition governments are possible and/or likely. Second, voters as members of the polity (paraphrasing Lewis-Beck and Skalaban, 1989) will have considerable experience with and knowledge about parties and previous coalition governments which should help to reduce the complexity of the decision task to a more limited set of realistic options. Third, voters might have clear preferences about which parties should form a coalition and would have to focus only on the electoral chances of the relevant parties. In short, voters might very well cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that a preferred coalition will be formed after the election. Accordingly, we define strategic coalition voting as a vote for a party other than the most preferred party in order to elect the most preferred among all viable coalition governments.

Previous research, as far as it exists, shows promise. Starting with the fundamental question whether voters are not only able to form rational expectations about coalition governments but also successfully use them to maximize expected utility, evidence from economic experiments by Meffert and Gschwend (2007) and McCuen and Morton (2010) suggests that voters are indeed able to use poll and other relevant information to cast optimal votes, at least under the ideal conditions of a laboratory experiment.

But support comes from survey research as well, even if most previous research with direct relevance shares a striking commonality: It uses Israel's polarized multi-party system as the setting. Blais et al. (2006) use data from the 2003 Israeli national election to demonstrate that coalition preferences have an impact above and beyond the typical predictors of voting behavior such as preferences for parties, candidates, and ideology. In fact, the authors find that about one in ten voters passes a series of stringent conditions, that is, that they have only one preferred party, only one preferred coalition, and voted for one of the parties in the preferred coalition (other than the most preferred party). The authors only address coalition preferences, not expectations about electoral viability in their study. In an earlier analysis (Aldrich et al., 2004), the authors find that expectations did not affect the vote intentions of supporters of right-religious parties, but that they mattered for vote intentions for the moderate Shinui party which was expected to facilitate a secular coalition. The effect of expectations was operationalized and tested as a main effect, or in the case of Shinui, as a single dichotomous variable capturing both a coalition preference and its electoral viability. As a consequence, this limited operationalization fails to fully test any conditional or interactive effect of coalition preferences and expectations.

Bargsted and Kedar (2009) explicitly introduce expectations into their model for the 2006 Israeli election and argue that voters on the left or right who expect an unfavorable right- or left-leaning coalition to win will be more likely to desert their preferred party and rather vote for the

most moderate party in the expected coalition – essentially to prevent the worst. Ideologically extreme voters, on the other hand, are not thought to be susceptible to such instrumental strategic considerations and rather express their preferences sincerely. Theoretically, the argument assumes a unidimensional political space, something that might not always be given or relevant for coalition formation. Most important, Bargsted and Kedar (2009) include individual expectations in their model and demonstrate their effect on vote decisions. This operationalization, however, does not match the final logical conclusion of their argument. If we accept that the effect of coalition preferences depends on the expectation of their electoral success, the argument assumes an interaction effect. The authors report an unsuccessful test of such interaction effects and argue that their estimation procedure (conditional logistic regression model) already captures nonlinear effects. Thus, the hypothesized interaction effect requires a more conclusive test with additional data.

Israel is certainly not the only country with coalition governments. Other studies on strategic voting in multi-party systems using proportional representation and coalition preferences matter. For Germany, Pappi and Thurner (2002) as well as Gschwend (2007) show that various forms of coalition-related voting behavior exist though only Gschwend (2007) finds support for a threshold insurance strategy. In the latter case, supporters of major parties sometimes vote for the preferred small coalition partner if the latter is in danger of falling below a minimum vote threshold (often called a “rental” vote or *Leihstimme*).

The question of coalition voting is closely related, if not mostly identical, to strategic voting (Cox, 1997; Fisher, 2004). Strategic voting has been documented for a number of parliamentary democracies with multi-party systems (not all with coalition governments), including Germany (Bawn, 1999; Gschwend, 2004; Pappi and Thurner, 2002), Great Britain (Alvarez and Nagler, 2000; Franklin et al., 1994; Lanoue and Bowler, 1992; Niemi et al., 1992), The Netherlands (Irwin and Van Holsteyn, 2002, 2003), Canada (Blais et al., 2001, 2005; Lanoue and Bowler, 1998), and New Zealand (Karp et al., 2002). Both strategic and coalition voting assume that voters with an instrumental motivation will vote for a party other than the most preferred party if the former has a better chance to influence government formation. Even if a voter prefers a coalition to an individual party, the simple fact that he or she cannot directly – sincerely or “expressively” – vote for a coalition requires tactical or strategic behavior.

### 3. When and how do expectations matter?

Influencing the formation of the next government is the ultimate goal of strategic voting. But it is useful to distinguish between strategic voting decisions that are directed towards the representation of a particular small party in parliament, an obvious requirement for joining any government, and strategies towards the composition of the coalition government (see also Hobolt and Karp's discussion of policy-maximizing strategic voting in the

introduction to this Special Issue). In the case of small parties, the threat of minimum vote thresholds that must be passed to qualify for seats can create uncertainty about the representation of that party and provide supporters of the larger coalition partner with an incentive to cast a strategic rental vote for the small party and desired coalition partner. This is also referred to as ‘threshold insurance policy’ (Hobolt and Karp, 2010). While anecdotal evidence exists (e.g., Blais and Massicotte, 1996; Cox, 1997; Pappi and Thurner, 2002; Roberts, 1988), no systematic evidence has been found for this type of behavior yet with the exception of Germany (Gschwend, 2007).

If it is certain that a small party will not be represented in the next legislature, then supporters of that party have an incentive to avoid a wasted vote for their preferred party and should rather vote for the party that is expected to produce the most preferred among the viable coalition governments. Only if the representation of a small party is certain, voters have no representation-based incentive for strategic voting.

A second set of incentives is based on the expected composition of the next government. As long as the most preferred coalition is expected to get a majority, coalition preferences should not offer additional incentives for strategic voting. Nevertheless, party or policy preferences still might lead voters to try to affect the weight of the individual coalition members (portfolio strategy; e.g. Cox, 1997). If the most preferred coalition is not expected to get a majority, a strategic vote for a party in the expected but less preferred coalition might move the policy position of that coalition closer to the voter’s own policy position (coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009; Hobolt and Karp, 2010). If a voter is entirely uncertain about which coalition will get a majority, coalition preferences are rather unlikely to affect vote decisions. In this case, party preferences should dominate the vote decision.

Finally, it is quite likely that for some coalitions, in particular a grand coalition of the two largest parties with a certain majority, expectations are rather meaningless. Only decision contexts that offer real alternative choices allow voters to form meaningful expectations about electoral outcomes which in turn should moderate the influence of coalition preferences on strategic vote decisions. Thus, it is necessary to determine *a priori* particular subsets of voters who should have an incentive to cast a strategic vote in favor of a coalition.

#### **4. Identifying opportunities for strategic voting: the 2006 Austrian national election**

The study of strategic voting, with or without coalitions, faces methodological and practical challenges. First, only a small number of voters will usually find themselves in a situation that provides the appropriate incentives and opportunities for strategic and/or coalition voting (e.g. Alvarez et al., 2006). Second, adequate and specific measures of party and coalition preferences are missing in the available data, not to mention expectations about electoral outcomes. Third, the number of voters who cast a clearly identifiable strategic or coalition vote (which by definition must be insincere and instrumental) is very

small. This makes any systematic analysis and assessment of strategic voting very difficult. Our study was designed to address at least the lack of detailed and appropriate measures for preferences and expectations.

The setting of the study is the 2006 Austrian national election for a new *Nationalrat* (see Müller, 2008 for a detailed summary). At the beginning of the campaign, six parties, four old and two fairly new parties, had reasonable chances of obtaining seats in the next parliament, including the two large parties that have dominated Austrian politics for more than fifty years, the governing conservative People’s Party (ÖVP) and the oppositional Social Democrats (SPÖ). The two smaller and established parties included the nationalist and populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the environmental Greens (Die Grünen). Both were expected to draw considerable support, with an election result in the double-digits either possible or likely. The two remaining small parties had been established not very long before the election. The first, the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), was founded in the spring of 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. According to the polls, the BZÖ had rather slim chances of passing the minimum vote threshold of 4%. The second new party or list, “Liste Dr. Martin,” was primarily a one-man show by an independent member of the European Parliament who hoped to repeat his very successful run in the 2004 European election (mostly as a protest against the established parties). The polls gave him a reasonable chance of passing the minimum threshold.

The incumbent coalition of ÖVP and BZÖ was neither popular nor likely to get a new mandate, but the polls still suggested that the ÖVP would stay ahead of the SPÖ by a few percentage points. With two parties close to the 4% minimum vote threshold, the outcome of the election was fairly open and a strategic Austrian voter faced a difficult choice. The parties contributed to this uncertainty by sending out only few and mixed coalition signals. The ÖVP as the likely winner refrained from explicit or official coalition signals. It only ruled out a coalition with the FPÖ, but both the Greens and the SPÖ were seen as possible partners. The SPÖ also refrained from 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: p. 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 ÖVP or SPÖ with the Greens as junior partner. This situation provides a good opportunity to investigate the effect of voters’ coalition preferences and expectations and their effect on vote intentions.

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

## 5. Data and methods

Our data comes from a pre-election survey that interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1501 respondents and an additional and smaller sample of 450 respondents in the state Carinthia. The survey was conducted by phone during the three weeks (September 18–30) preceding the election on October 1, 2006. Given the interest in voters' expectations and coalition preferences, respondents were asked to rate not only the six main parties but also seven specific coalitions that either had a realistic chance of reaching a majority 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”). The leading candidate of each party was rated on a similar scale as well. The survey measured respondents' expectations about coalitions by asking respondents about the likelihood that a given coalition would have a majority to form a government after the election, using a 4-point scale ranging from “certainly not” over “rather uncertain” and “certain” to “very certain.” For the small parties, respondents indicated their likelihood that the parties would receive sufficient votes to obtain seats in parliament using again the 4-point certainty scale. The key dependent variable is the respondents' vote intention for the upcoming election.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Party preferences and vote intentions

In a first step, we determine the respondents' party preferences. We use the party ratings to assign each participant dichotomous party-preference indicators. Unlike the familiar party identification question that can identify only a single party, party ratings provide more complete information about the party preferences of the respondents, including those respondents who do not have a long-term party identification and those who prefer more than one party. Table 1 summarizes the party preferences of the respondents in two ways. In the first column, respondents are assigned a unique party preference if they evaluate a single party higher than all the other parties. Respondents with these unique party preferences are differentiated from those with multiple preferences, in particular those who give two parties the highest rating, those who are indifferent (three or more parties ranked highest), and those who are alienated (only negative ratings). This classification shows that three-quarters of the respondents have a unique party preference, but it excludes

**Table 1**  
Party preferences.

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

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

Source: Pre-election study (nationally representative sample) of 2006 Austrian national election.

a considerable number of voters with two-party ties. Given that our interest is in the effect of coalition preferences, it would be questionable to exclude voters with dual party preferences. If we consider both parties in a two-party tie as valid party preferences, we can assign party preferences to more than 90% of our sample. Consequently, the party preferences in the subsequent analyses allow for two-party ties and thus are not unique for some of the respondents. The second entry in Table 1 shows the distribution of these “multiple” party preferences.

The consequences of these two classifications can be shown by comparing the vote intentions for the different partisan groups. Table 2 differentiates the vote intentions into “sincere” votes for the most preferred party (or one of two parties), “insincere” votes for a different party, or no vote intention for those who planned to abstain or had not made up their mind. The sincere and insincere vote

**Table 2**  
Sincere, insincere, and no vote intentions by party preference.

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

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

Source: Pre-election Study (nationally representative sample) of the 2006 Austrian national election.

**Table 3**

Vote intention by party evaluations, candidate evaluations, and coalition preferences (likely voters with vote intentions).

	ÖVP/FPÖ	SPÖ/FPÖ	Green/FPÖ	BZÖ/FPÖ	Martin/FPÖ
<b>Party evaluations</b>					
ÖVP Party	0.78*** (0.18)	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.05 (0.16)	0.29 (0.21)	0.35 (0.25)
SPÖ Party	-0.73*** (0.16)	0.45*** (0.14)	-0.90*** (0.18)	-0.14 (0.24)	-0.79*** (0.25)
Green Party	0.18 (0.14)	0.05 (0.12)	1.42*** (0.21)	0.17 (0.21)	0.13 (0.21)
FPÖ Party	-0.94*** (0.14)	-0.51*** (0.11)	-0.66*** (0.15)	-1.16*** (0.24)	-0.55*** (0.18)
BZÖ Party	0.19 (0.17)	0.05 (0.15)	0.09 (0.19)	1.46*** (0.31)	0.28 (0.25)
Martin List	0.24 (0.19)	0.05 (0.16)	0.29 (0.19)	-0.39 (0.27)	0.74** (0.35)
<b>Candidate evaluations</b>					
ÖVP candidate	0.66*** (0.16)	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.21)	-0.40* (0.24)
SPÖ Candidate	0.09 (0.14)	0.23** (0.12)	0.12 (0.14)	-0.21 (0.19)	0.05 (0.23)
Green candidate	-0.27** (0.14)	-0.13 (0.12)	0.09 (0.16)	-0.23 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.21)
FPÖ candidate	-0.26** (0.13)	-0.17* (0.10)	-0.30** (0.15)	0.09 (0.23)	-0.30 (0.21)
BZÖ candidate	0.04 (0.17)	0.02 (0.14)	0.08 (0.20)	0.25 (0.27)	-0.26 (0.29)
Martin candidate	-0.23 (0.18)	-0.06 (0.16)	-0.17 (0.19)	0.29 (0.27)	0.68* (0.38)
<b>Coalition preferences</b>					
ÖVP–SPÖ	0.05 (0.10)	0.16** (0.08)	-0.09 (0.10)	-0.22 (0.16)	0.35* (0.18)
ÖVP–FPÖ	0.42*** (0.13)	0.05 (0.10)	0.30** (0.15)	0.19 (0.20)	0.17 (0.19)
ÖVP–BZÖ	0.07 (0.15)	0.00 (0.15)	0.15 (0.18)	0.29 (0.22)	0.25 (0.28)
ÖVP–FPÖ–BZÖ	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.47*** (0.17)	0.09 (0.17)	-0.34 (0.23)
ÖVP–Green	0.24* (0.12)	-0.07 (0.11)	0.27* (0.14)	0.18 (0.18)	-0.04 (0.19)
SPÖ–Green	-0.24** (0.12)	0.06 (0.11)	0.00 (0.12)	0.05 (0.17)	-0.13 (0.23)
SPÖ–Green–Martin	-0.08 (0.13)	0.10 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.39 (0.25)	0.15 (0.18)
Constant	-1.57 (1.42)	-0.45 (1.07)	-2.35 (1.60)	-6.29** (2.64)	-3.86* (2.10)
N				929	
log likelihood				-310.24	

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

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ 

Source: pre-election Study of the 2006 Austrian national election including the over-sample of Carinthia.

intentions are very similar for both party preference classifications, but the number of respondents without a vote intention increases if the multiple preferences measure is used (with the exception of Martin supporters). Substantively, the results show that the supporters of the two large parties ÖVP and SPÖ were least likely to cast insincere votes. However, more ÖVP supporters were unsure about their vote or planned to abstain, foreshadowing the ÖVP loss to the SPÖ in the election. SPÖ supporters were obviously better motivated to turn out. Supporters of small parties were more likely to cast insincere or strategic votes, in particular the supporters of FPÖ, BZÖ, and Martin. However, these parties were also least likely to join the next government – or parliament, for that matter. Supporters of the Greens fell somewhat in the middle. About one in 10 planned to vote insincerely.

## 6.2. Establishing a baseline: the effect of coalition preferences

After these preliminary assessments, we first address a very basic question: Do coalition preferences matter? We test the effect of coalition preferences by regressing the vote intention of likely voters for one of the six relevant parties on party evaluations, candidate evaluations, and coalition preferences using the whole sample. Party ratings were used as a substitute for dichotomous party preference indicators as some of the coefficients cannot be estimated with the latter (due to lack of variance or an insufficient number of respondents for some preference combinations). The results, however, are fairly equivalent. Candidate evaluations are included because the leading candidates of the parties played a prominent and highly visible role

during the campaign, most notably in a series of pair-wise television debates in the weeks preceding the election. The model is estimated with a multinomial logistic regression without restricting the effects of the party-specific variables on the respective party. Attitudes toward a party, candidate, or coalition might very well cross party lines. For example, a dislike of a left-of-center coalition of SPÖ and Greens might increase the likelihood of endorsing a right-of-center party.<sup>2</sup> The vote intention for the FPÖ is used as the comparison category.

The results in Table 3 show that party ratings (or preferences) are generally the strongest predictors, in particular for the preferred party. The effects of the party ratings also suggest some polarization between the FPÖ and all other parties – even among the supporters of the two far right parties. They do have a clear dislike for each other. The more respondents like the FPÖ, the less likely they are to vote for any other party (and vice versa).

The candidate effects are more modest, with the exception of the incumbent chancellor Schüssel (ÖVP). Turning to the coalition preferences, the number of significant effects is small but suggests some polarization with respect to the two far right parties and the Greens. For the former, the respondents favoring a coalition of ÖVP and FPÖ (which was ruled out by both parties) were more likely to cast a strategic vote for the ÖVP instead of the FPÖ. And those (few) favoring a right-of-center “unity” coalition of ÖVP, FPÖ, and BZÖ were less likely to vote for the Greens

<sup>2</sup> Pappi (2007) employs a more restrictive modeling strategy by a priori excluding the possibility of cross-party effects.

than the FPÖ. Most importantly, however, the results of this analysis suggest that specific coalition preferences have a direct, unconditional effect above and beyond party and candidate ratings on the decisions to vote for particular parties.

### 6.3. Expectations and strategic coalition voting

So far, the analyses have focused on the overall effects of coalition preferences across the whole sample without considering voters' expectations about election outcomes and the particular decision contexts that should provide explicit incentives for strategic voting among subgroups of voters. A meaningful test whether voters engage in strategic voting is only possible if voters face a consequential decision context in which real alternative choices are available (Alvarez et al., 2006). The 2006 Austrian election offers three specific decision contexts in which strategic coalition voting should be likely, (1) a *rental vote* of a major party supporter in favor of an endangered junior coalition partner to secure the latter's representation in parliament, (2) *avoiding a wasted vote* for the preferred small party that is not expected to pass the minimum vote threshold, and (3) explicit strategic coalition voting to influence the *composition* and/or portfolio of the next government by casting a vote for a party that makes a preferred coalition more likely.

#### 6.3.1. Rental vote strategy

The first strategy assumes that supporters of large parties who favor a coalition with a small party might consider strengthening the endangered small coalition partner. Hobolt and Karp (2010) refer to this as the 'insurance threshold policy' type of strategic voting. In the 2006 election, however, both large parties were in a tight race for the first place, providing their supporters with no real incentive to desert their preferred party. An exception is the state of Carinthia with a strikingly different decision context. At the state level, the BZÖ is a large party and thus had a realistic chance to win at least one regional seat which would allow the party to bypass (or exempt it from) the national minimum vote threshold and obtain seats in parliament (Müller, 2005: p. 402). Given this decision context, ÖVP supporters in Carinthia had an (albeit small) incentive to cast a rental vote for the BZÖ if they preferred this party as junior coalition partner and were uncertain about its electoral chances. Thus, the subsequent analysis is based on all ÖVP supporters in Carinthia ( $n = 189$ ).

ÖVP supporters in Carinthia should be more likely to cast a vote for their potential junior coalition partner if they were uncertain about the electoral prospects of the BZÖ. We operationalize 'uncertain' respondents as a dummy and code them as '1' if they think that it is "rather uncertain" that the BZÖ is getting into parliament or do not report an answer. These are respondents who are neither absolutely certain that the BZÖ will be represented in parliament nor absolutely certain that the BZÖ will gain representation in any event. Moreover, uncertain ÖVP supporters should be all the more likely to deviate from their most preferred party and cast a rental vote for the potential junior coalition partner the more they prefer a ÖVP-BZÖ coalition. We test

**Table 4**

Vote intentions of ÖVP supporters in Carinthia, by Party, candidate, and coalition preferences and expectations.

	Other/ÖVP	BZÖ/ÖVP
Party evaluation (ÖVP)	-5.68*** (1.50)	-0.85 (4.70)
Coalition preference (ÖVP-BZÖ Coalition)	0.14 (0.82)	4.00** (1.88)
Expectation (BZÖ uncertain = 1)	0.72 (0.55)	-13.88** (6.62)
Coalition preference × Expectation	-2.05** (1.03)	14.35* (7.61)
Candidate differential	-2.20*** (0.67)	-4.21*** (1.61)
Constant	5.97*** (1.43)	-2.44 (3.72)
log likelihood	-126.80	
N	189	

Note: entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients, with robust standard errors in parentheses, based on all ÖVP supporters in Carinthia. The vote intention for the ÖVP is the comparison category.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Source: pre-election Study of the 2006 Austrian national election including the over-sample of Carinthia.

this hypothesis by regressing the vote intentions of ÖVP supporters in Carinthia on their preference for the ÖVP-BZÖ coalition, their expectation about the prospects of the BZÖ gaining representation in parliament, and the respective interaction effect while controlling for the ÖVP evaluation. The model must account for an additional complication. The BZÖ as a party cannot be separated from its prominent party leader(s) who dominate and publicly represent the party. Thus, any vote for the BZÖ might reflect a candidate preference for the party leader instead of strategic considerations such as a rental vote for a junior coalition partner. In order to control for candidate effects we generate a candidate differential by subtracting the thermometer ratings (recoded to the unit interval) of the BZÖ candidate from the one of the ÖVP candidate and include it in the model. We summarize the estimation results in Table 4. Because the base category for comparison is the vote intention for the ÖVP, we expect a positive interaction effect of preferences and expectations for the decision between ÖVP and BZÖ.

The results support this hypothesis as the estimates in the right column show. Supporters of the ÖVP in Carinthia who were uncertain about the prospects of the BZÖ were more likely to desert their most preferred party, the ÖVP, and cast a strategic rental vote for the BZÖ, even if the party evaluation for the ÖVP is controlled for. The evidence is consistent with the idea that ÖVP supporters tried to help the BZÖ to win a regional seat and circumvent the minimal vote threshold on the national level. Furthermore, ÖVP supporters who ranked the ÖVP-BZÖ coalition very high were generally more likely to cast a vote for the BZÖ independently of their expectations about the prospects of the BZÖ. Nevertheless, the results also indicate that voters who evaluate the respective candidates differently were more likely to vote for the party of the more preferred candidate.

To what extent affect these expectations individual vote choice decisions? We focus on ÖVP supporters who were either uncertain or not uncertain about the electoral chances of the BZÖ. The effect of those expectations becomes apparent by comparing the predicted probabilities of a BZÖ vote across the entire range of ÖVP-BZÖ

coalition preferences of typical ÖVP supporters in Carinthia. We hold the party preference variable constant at the sample mean and set the candidate differential variable to zero. Fig. 1 shows the predicted probabilities of a strategic rental vote for the BZÖ depending on the strength of the respective coalition preference. As predicted, supporters of the large party (ÖVP) are more likely to cast a rental vote for the small coalition partner (BZÖ) if the electoral chances of the latter are seen as uncertain and with an increasing preference for such a coalition. ÖVP supporters uncertain about the electoral chances of the BZÖ are almost always more likely to vote for the BZÖ than supporters who are not uncertain about their small coalition partner. Only large party supporters who prefer this coalition even more than their own party are an exception. For these voters, the expectations about the electoral prospects of the potential coalition partner fail to exert the expected effect. These voters seem to vote strategically for the small coalition partner no matter how uncertain the electoral expectations of the BZÖ. However, this pattern can still be seen as consistent with a portfolio strategy, that is, coalition supporters trying to affect the weight of the individual coalition members within the coalition.

These results generally confirm our expectations and underline the important role of coalition preferences and expectations for voting behavior. While rental votes represent the observable outcome of a particular individual-level strategy, it has clear implications for the aggregate-level as well. The rental vote strategy specifically favors small parties that are a preferred coalition partner as opposed to large parties. Contrary to what the conventional wisdom would suggest about the effects of strategic voting in PR systems, small parties might very well be the beneficiaries of strategic voting.

### 6.3.2. Wasted vote strategy

Following the wasted vote logic of the strategic voting literature leads us to our second subgroup with a potential incentive for strategic voting. Given the dismal chances of their respective parties, supporters of the far-right BZÖ as well as supporters of Martin had a clear incentive to desert their preferred parties and cast a vote for another party that had a realistic chance of joining the government. However, the low number of such party supporters – even if we add the subsample of Carinthia to the nationwide representative sample of eligible Austrian voters (as we do for the following analysis) – allows only a systematic assessment of BZÖ supporters ( $n = 102$ ). BZÖ supporters who consider a sincere vote to be wasted are expected to be more likely to cast a strategic vote for the ÖVP, the current coalition partner and a likely member of the next government. The higher an ÖVP–BZÖ coalition is rated, the stronger this effect should become. As in the previous case of rental votes, the particular nature of the BZÖ suggests that vote decisions might be driven by candidate preferences instead of strategic considerations. As a consequence, the hypothesis is tested by regressing the vote intention of all BZÖ supporters in the full sample (including the over-sample of Carinthia) on BZÖ party evaluations, the candidate differential (as operationalized previously), coalition preferences, the expectation that the BZÖ will not be represented

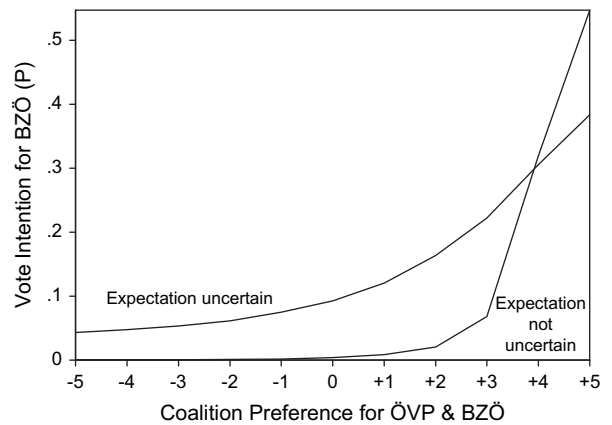


Fig. 1. Effect of coalition preferences and expectations on vote intentions of ÖVP supporters in Carinthia (rental votes). Note: simulated vote intentions based on MNL regression model in Table 4.

in parliament, and its respective interaction effect. The expectation that the BZÖ will not be represented in parliament was again operationalized as a dummy scored '1' if a respondent reported to be 'rather uncertain' or thought that the BZÖ would 'certainly not' be represented (and '0' otherwise). Table 5 summarizes the estimation results.

The results support the hypothesis with regard to the role of expectations for the decision between a strategic ÖVP vote and a sincere BZÖ vote. If BZÖ supporters did not expect their party to be represented in parliament, they were indeed more likely to desert their party in favor of a strategic vote for the ÖVP or another party including abstention. By closely inspecting the estimated size of the coefficients, this result holds no matter how strongly the respective ÖVP–BZÖ coalition was favored. Furthermore, the significant negative interaction term suggests that the effect of expectations is in some sense counterbalanced by a strong coalition preference for ÖVP–BZÖ.

What is the substantive implication of these results for voting behavior? In order to make the relationship between

Table 5

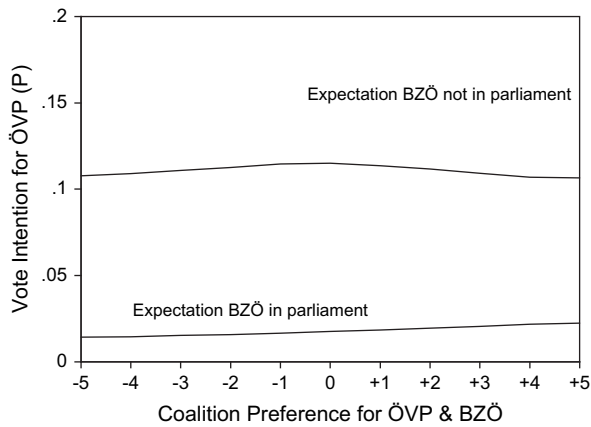
Vote intentions of BZÖ supporters, by party, candidate, and coalition preferences and expectations.

	Other/BZÖ	ÖVP/BZÖ
Party evaluation (BZÖ)	–3.57** (1.49)	–6.51** (2.97)
Coalition preference (ÖVP–BZÖ Coalition)	–0.73* (0.43)	0.18 (0.50)
Expectation (BZÖ not in parliament = 1)	1.19** (0.57)	2.76** (1.21)
Coalition preference × expectation	–1.06 (0.70)	–1.84* (0.99)
Candidate differential	0.82 (0.65)	3.80** (1.49)
Constant	3.01** (1.27)	1.30 (2.63)
log likelihood	–64.65	
N	102	

Note: entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses, based on all BZÖ supporters. The vote intention for the BZÖ is the comparison category.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Source: pre-election Study of the 2006 Austrian national election including the over-sample of Carinthia.



**Fig. 2.** Effect of coalition preferences and expectations on ÖVP vote intentions of BZÖ supporters (avoiding wasted votes). Note: simulated vote intentions based on MNL regression model in Table 5.

expectations and coalition preferences more transparent, Fig. 2 shows the probability of casting a strategic vote for the ÖVP across all possible preference values for an ÖVP–BZÖ coalition and separately for those who did and did not expect the BZÖ to gain representation. The simulations are based on a typical small party supporter with the party preference variable held constant at the sample mean and the candidate differential variable set to zero. As predicted, voters who do not expect the BZÖ to gain seats in parliament are more likely to defect to the ÖVP. The corresponding line is consistently located above the line for hypothetical BZÖ supporters who expect their party to re-enter parliament. Because both lines are fairly flat, the interaction of coalition preferences and expectations does not exhibit a substantively remarkable effect. In addition, the probabilities of an ÖVP vote are fairly low, even lower than the probabilities of voting for another party or abstention (not shown). We can therefore conclude that while expectations do increase the likelihood of an ÖVP vote, expectations alone are not sufficient to make such

a vote the most likely outcome for the average BZÖ supporter.

### 6.3.3. Coalition composition strategy

In addition to coalition voting strategies related to representation-based incentives such as rental votes and strategic attempts to try to avoid a wasted vote, there are also strategies that directly try to influence the composition of the next government. This is the ‘balancing strategy’, described by Hobolt and Karp and McCuen and Morton in this special issue. This leads us to our third subgroup, Green Party supporters who were split in their coalition preferences for one of the two major parties, SPÖ or ÖVP. Green Party supporters constitute a fairly large group ( $n = 336$ ) and exhibit a more distinct pattern in their voting intentions. Because their coalition expectations show variance as well, it provides a window of opportunity to investigate the direct impact of coalition preferences and expectations.

How could coalition expectations affect supporters of the Green Party? It was quite reasonable to expect that the Green Party might find itself in a position to form a coalition with either one of the two major parties. Thus, the expectation that either coalition will (not) have a majority of seats should matter for the vote decision of Green Party supporters. If the majority for a coalition is seen as uncertain, Green Party supporters should become more likely to cast a strategic vote for the preferred large coalition partner as their coalition preference increases (making this defection less costly). We therefore expect that the likelihood of a strategic vote for the larger coalition partner increases with the respective coalition preference. If a coalition with the Green Party would not reach a majority, a grand coalition consisting of the two large parties SPÖ and ÖVP was the most obvious alternative. As a consequence, Green Party supporters’ intent on influencing the composition of the government could cast a strategic vote to affect the weight of the individual coalition members within the grand coalition (*portfolio strategy*). A strategic vote for the large coalition partner of their preferred coalition does

**Table 6**

Vote intentions of Green supporters, by party preferences, coalition preferences, and expectations.

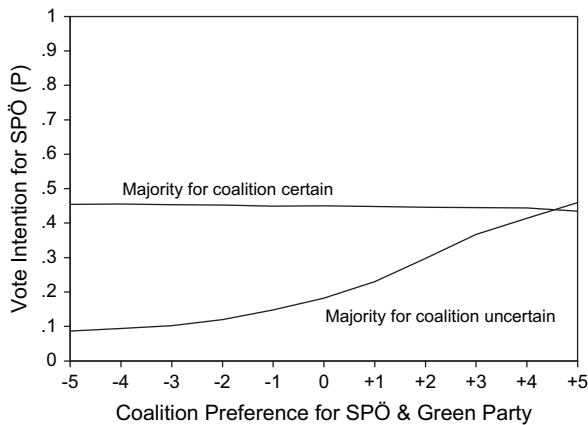
	SPÖ/Green	ÖVP/Green	Other/Green
Green Party	–10.55*** (3.34)	–9.48 (7.30)	–6.58*** (1.44)
ÖVP Party	1.05 (0.97)	10.79 (8.92)	1.01 (0.70)
SPÖ Party	9.22*** (3.42)	–0.80 (1.45)	0.15 (0.80)
ÖVP–SPÖ Coalition	1.73* (0.98)	1.92 (1.71)	1.03 (0.66)
<i>SPÖ–Green Party Coalition</i>			
Preference	–2.03** (0.90)	–0.08 (2.53)	–2.42*** (0.73)
Expectation (majority uncertain = 1)	–5.47*** (1.87)	1.82 (2.11)	–2.53*** (0.87)
Preference × Expectation	5.80** (2.27)	–2.96 (3.42)	2.93** (1.17)
<i>ÖVP–Green Party Coalition</i>			
Preference	–4.62*** (1.18)	7.45** (3.62)	–1.71** (0.85)
Expectation (majority uncertain = 1)	0.75 (0.91)	8.58** (3.74)	0.90 (0.87)
Preference × expectation	0.63 (1.70)	–9.62** (4.27)	–0.92 (1.39)
Constant	3.88** (1.51)	–9.34** (4.76)	6.64*** (1.37)
N		336	
log likelihood		–258.36	

Note: entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses, based on all Green supporters. The vote intention for the Green Party is the comparison category.

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Source: pre-election Study of the 2006 Austrian national election.





**Fig. 3.** Effect of coalition preferences and expectations on SPÖ vote intentions of green supporters. Note: simulated percentages based on MNL regression model in Table 6.

strengthen this party versus the other large party in a grand coalition. In short, uncertainty about the electoral chances of the preferred coalition might motivate Green Party supporters to behave strategically by deserting their preferred party in favor of the less preferred large party (i.e., the SPÖ) in order to directly influence the composition of the likely but less preferred (grand) coalition government. The more a Green Party supporter prefers the coalition with the SPÖ, the stronger should this incentive for a strategic vote become.

If a majority for the preferred coalition is certain or at least not considered to be in danger, coalition preferences should neither increase nor decrease the incentive to cast a strategic vote for the respective large coalition partner. Party preferences as well as preferences for the grand coalition – the only coalition with a virtually certain majority – should dominate the vote decision. These hypotheses are tested by regressing the vote intentions of Green Party supporters on the relevant party and coalition preferences along with an interaction effect of coalition preferences and expectations. The base category of the dependent variable is a vote intention for the preferred Green Party. The other three categories represent vote intentions for SPÖ, ÖVP, and no or other vote intentions such as abstention, a vote for an entirely different (protest) party, or the inability to decide (it should be noted that the number of Green Party supporters with a vote intention for the ÖVP in our sample is precariously small). The independent variables include the ratings of Greens, SPÖ, and ÖVP, each expected to have a positive effect on the vote intention for the evaluated party. The preferences for all three coalitions are included as main effects as well. For the two coalitions with the Greens, the expectation that each coalition is ‘uncertain’ to reach a majority is operationalized as a dichotomous indicator. To capture the conditional effects of the coalition preferences, interaction terms of preferences and expectations are included as well. The model is again estimated with a multinomial logistic regression.

The results in Table 6 support our expectations with respect to vote intentions for the SPÖ. Higher ratings of

Greens and SPÖ are associated with an increasing probability of voting for those parties, respectively. Higher Green Party ratings also lower the likelihood of abstention or a vote for another party. As predicted by the portfolio strategy, those who rate a grand coalition of ÖVP and SPÖ higher are more likely to cast a strategic vote for the SPÖ. However, we do not find equivalent results of party and grand coalition preferences for the decision to cast a strategic vote for the ÖVP. With less than four percent of all Green Party supporters in this subsample intending to vote for the ÖVP, the results are not reliable and the predicted substantive impact rather marginal.

Our main focus is on the conditional impact of coalition preferences, depending on the expectation that a majority for a potential coalition is uncertain. To ease the interpretation of the impact of expectations and coalition preferences on vote intentions, the interaction effects are simulated and presented in Fig. 3. It shows the predicted probability of a strategic vote intention for the SPÖ across all possible ratings of a SPÖ–Green Party coalition and separately for those who expect that a majority for this coalition is certain and those who see it as uncertain. The simulation is based on a typical Green Party supporter, with most other variables held constant at the sample mean. Because the focus is on Green Party supporters with a preference for a coalition with the SPÖ, the ÖVP–Green Party coalition rating is set to the minimum value and the expectation for this coalition to ‘uncertain.’

The simulation in Fig. 3 supports our expectations. As their preference for a SPÖ–Green Party coalition increases, Green party supporters who are uncertain about a majority for this coalition become more likely to defect to the SPÖ. If, however, they consider a majority for this coalition to be certain, coalition preferences do not have any meaningful impact on the probability of casting a strategic vote for the SPÖ.<sup>3</sup> Finally, a similar simulation of a strategic ÖVP vote intention of Green Party supporters who dislike the SPÖ–Green Party coalition and rather prefer an ÖVP–Green Party coalition (not reported here) shows no meaningful substantive results.

In summary, the SPÖ appears to be the main beneficiary of strategic coalition voting by Green Party supporters. If they perceive their preferred coalition as uncertain, they become more likely to cast a strategic vote for the SPÖ. Because the most likely alternative, a grand coalition, had a certain majority, this vote decision might reflect less a coalition composition strategy and rather a portfolio strategy. By voting for the SPÖ, Green Party supporters strengthen the role of the preferred large party in the expected grand coalition. Unlike the rental vote strategy discussed earlier, the coalition composition strategy did favor the large parties in the 2006 Austrian election. But under different election scenarios, it is also possible that

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the absolute value of the simulated probabilities depends to a large extent on the particular scenario, that is, the level at which the other party and coalition ratings are held constant. Because the SPÖ was a close (or even tied) second preference for many Green Party supporters, the defection rate of those considering an SPÖ–Green Party coalition as certain is fairly high. If, however, the SPÖ rating is set to a lower value, this defection rate to the SPÖ will also decrease.

major party supporters might vote strategically for a small party in a likely but less preferred coalition.

## 7. Discussion and conclusion

Coalition governments are a common outcome in multiparty democracies. A voter who wants to maximize the probability that the most preferred coalition will be formed after the election should take the likely electoral outcome into account. Depending on the decision context, such a decision might very well involve a vote for a party other than the most preferred party. Strategic coalition voting can result from a variety of mechanisms, and we provide support for three of them, a rental vote of a major party supporter in favor of a preferred junior coalition partner perceived as uncertain to pass a minimum vote threshold, avoiding a wasted vote for a preferred small party that is not expected to pass the minimum vote threshold, and explicit strategic coalition voting to influence the composition and/or portfolio of the next government by casting a vote for a party that makes the preferred coalition more likely. The results based on a representative pre-election survey in Austria strongly suggest that both electoral expectations and coalition preferences matter for individual vote decisions. We also find some evidence for an interactive effect of both factors.

The results of this study have a number of implications that go beyond the political context of the Austrian 2006 election. Previous research on strategic voting was mainly engaged in estimating the number of strategic voters in specific elections. Given that this research consists mostly of quantitative case studies of voting behavior under majoritarian electoral rules, it was simply assumed that the flow of those strategic votes was towards identifiable contenders for a seat in single-member districts at the cost of electoral support of third or minor parties at the polls. By taking the role of coalitions in post-electoral bargaining processes and voters' expectation thereof more seriously we provide rationales as well as empirical evidence that the electoral rules in PR systems provide more opportunities for strategic voting, rather than less as is commonly assumed.

There are essentially two different types of considerations that might lead voters to cast their vote for a party other than the most preferred party, those based on the representation of small parties and those directed at the composition of the next coalition government. Some voters might care about the potential representation of a small party in parliament. Large party supporters might cast a strategic rental vote to secure the representation of a small but preferred coalition partner in parliament. Supporters of small parties, on the other hand, who do not expect their preferred party to succeed, might try to avoid casting a wasted vote and rather opt for an alternative that could influence government formation in their favor. In addition to representation-based considerations some voters might attempt to directly influence which coalition government is likely to be formed after the election, or if a specific coalition is seen as certain, to at least try to influence the weight of the member parties within this coalition.

Taking into account both coalition preferences and expectations about the electoral outcome allows us to generate finer expectations under what conditions particular types of voters desert their most preferred party and cast a strategic vote for some other party. Together with previous work by Aldrich et al. (2004), Blais et al. (2006), Gschwend (2007), and Bargsted and Kedar (2009), it is safe to conclude that coalition preferences matter for voters in multiparty systems. The evidence presented here suggests that strategic voting for coalitions is not a task of insurmountable complexity but in the realm of the possible. One obvious reason is the fact that of all theoretically possible coalitions among the competitive parties, only very few have a realistic chance of success (see also Armstrong and Duch, 2010). Most will be irrelevant because they either do not have sufficient electoral support or because they are unlikely to agree on a coalition. Given this dramatically reduced complexity, coalition voting becomes a realistic proposition. As the respondents in our study show, voters are able to rate and evaluate potentially relevant coalitions that have realistic chances to form the next government. In fact, more respondents in our sample were able to rate coalitions than report their ideological position or some issue positions.

Finally, the results of our study demonstrate that PR systems with minimum vote thresholds can create strong incentives for large party supporters to cast a strategic rental vote for a small and preferred coalition partner. Our finding of rental votes (that is, ÖVP supporters voting for the BZÖ) corroborates a similar finding by Gschwend (2007) for Germany. This has important implications for the nature of party systems. Strategic voting does not automatically facilitate the development of a stable party system—the fundamental logic of majoritarian systems—because not all strategies favor large parties over marginal parties. Our evidence for strategic coalition voting suggests that small parties can also benefit from strategic voting and thus might facilitate rather than prevent the fragmentation of a party system—something that might be of interest to electoral engineers when drafting new election laws.

These analyses are only a first step to determine the role of coalition preferences and expectations for vote decisions. In fact, we still do not know the answers to some very basic questions, for example how party and coalition preferences are related. In our study, about a third of the respondents actually rated a coalition higher than the most preferred party. Are these voters primarily coalition voters for whom a party preference comes only second? A lot of work remains to be done.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Franz Urban Pappi and Susumu Shikano for helpful suggestions and Marian Bohl and Christel Selzer for excellent research assistance. Financial support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) to the Sonderforschungsbereich 504 (SFB 504) at the University of Mannheim is gratefully acknowledged.

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