

Is an Election about Choosing a Government?

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Abstract

The paper examines whether in a PR (or mixed) system voters take into account which coalition government could be formed after the election. The analysis is based on an Internet survey conducted just before and after the North Rhine Westphalia election held in May 2010. We show that some voters in the North Rhine Westphalia election do consider the potential government coalitions when they decide which party to support. We first determine whether some Die Linke supporters decided not to vote for that party because they thought that there is no point voting for a party that has no chance being in government. We find little support for that hypothesis. But we show that views about the possible coalitions proved to be crucial for those who were ambivalent about the parties or who had contradictory preferences about the parties and the coalitions. While most people just voted for the party that they preferred, a minority did pay attention to the type of government that was likely to be formed after the election.

In a legislative election voters are invited to express their support for a particular candidate or party. In a mixed system such as the one that is examined in this paper, voters have two votes, one for a candidate in a local district and one for a party (list) in the whole polity. This second party list vote is of interest here.

The list votes determine how many seats each party obtains. Once this is known, the process of forming the government starts. Sometimes one party may have won a majority of the seats and it forms a single-party majority government. Sometime two parties that had announced during the campaign their intention to form a coalition together have a majority of the seats, and they then proceed to constituting a coalition government. Sometime things are not clear, and parties have to conduct a series of discussions in order to determine who will be (and who will not be) in government.

Whatever the process, the ultimate purpose of a legislative election in a parliamentary system is to elect legislators and to form a government. The question that we address in this paper is whether (some) voters take into account this second function of an election when they decide which party list to support.

How and why would a voter take into account government formation in her vote decision? We examine two possibilities. The first and simpler is that the voter rules out supporting a party that has no chance of being in government. This would be consistent with the two stage voting model proposed by de Vries and Rosema (2010, 12) : « The underlying idea is that voters may, like consumers do when they have to make choices, decide in two stages. In the first stage they form a consideration set, which corresponds with all parties they perceive as viable choice options. In the second stage they make their choice within this set. » In other words, some voters just do not consider voting for a party that will definitely not be in government.

The second possibility is that some people prefer some potential coalitions over others and that these preferences lead them to vote differently. Suppose that there are four parties running in the election : A, B, C, and D. Suppose that my preference order is B/C/D/A. Suppose also that parties A and B have announced their intention to form a coalition government, and that C and D have done similarly. If I prefer the CD coalition to the AB one, I may well decide to vote for my second choice, party C. Blais et al. (2006) show that such preferences about potential coalitions affect vote choice in Israeli elections.

Our task is to determine whether there is empirical evidence of « voting for government » in the recent North Rhine Westphalia election that was held in May 2010. We use as benchmark an « expressive » voting model in which people simply vote for the party that they like the most.¹ Our goal is to find out whether considerations about which parties could form the government also weigh in when people decide which party to support.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first provide information about the North Rhine Westphalia election, the parties, the electoral system, and the potential coalitions that could be formed after the election. We then present the survey. We finally test the two ideas laid out above: that some voters ruled out voting for parties with no chance of being in government or voted partly on the basis of how much they liked or disliked certain potential coalitions.

The 2010 North Rhine Westphalia Election

The election was conducted on a mixed compensatory system with voters having two votes, one for a local candidate in their constituency and one for a party list. There were 128 local constituency seats and 53 compensatory list seats. The CDU came in first with less than 6000 votes more than the SPD. Both parties respectively obtained about 35% of the list vote and 67 seats. This was the worst result for CDU since 1950 and the worst

¹ Some people may like or dislike a party because they perceive it to be competent (incompetent) and able (unable) to govern. In this sense, they take into account government formation in their party preferences. We are unable to sort out such considerations in this study. We take party preferences as given and we examine how « government » considerations come into play given these preferences.

since 1954 for SPD. The Greens got 12% of the vote and 23 seats, the FDP 7% of the vote and 13 seats, and Die Linke 6% of the vote and 11 seats.

The polls published during the campaign put CDU slightly ahead of SPD, the Greens slightly above 10% of the vote, and FDP and Die Linke slightly over the 5% threshold required to have representation in the *Landtag*. CDU and FDP formed the incumbent government and had indicated their willingness to continue together, though they appeared very unlikely to have enough support to do so. On the left, SPD and the Greens had announced their intention to form a coalition but it was not clear whether they would have enough seats to form a majority government (they came out one seat short). Die Linke had stated that it would not be part of government and all other parties had said that they did not want to make a deal with them (but some negotiations between Die Linke and the SPD and Green did take place after the election). Exploratory talks to form a grand coalition between CDU and SPD as well as talks to start negotiations about a SPD/FDP/Green coalition failed. Finally, two months after the election a SPD/Green minority coalition government was formed.

In short, voters were exposed during the campaign to information about the coalitions that could be formed after the election. They had been told in particular that Die Linke was an unlikely partner in any coalition government. And there had been a long tradition of coalition governments at the Land level as well as at the federal level.

The Survey

The study comprises an Internet campaign survey conducted by Harris/Decima between April 29 and May 8 (the day before the election), with 1016 respondents and a post-election wave, conducted between May 10 and May 17, with 809 of the campaign respondents. A stratified quota based sampling approach was used, the quotas being established for age, gender, and education. The data set is weighted so as to reflect the actual vote distribution.²

The main dependent variable in our analyses is vote choice reported in the post-election wave. The vote distribution is: 35% for CDU and SPD, 12% for the Greens, 7% for FDP, 6% for Die Linke and for other parties. In the analyses presented below, we consider only those who voted, and only those who voted for one of the five main parties in the multivariate analyses, since the survey does not include ratings of small parties, which are used as control variables (see below).

There are two main independent variables. The first is what we call the « No point» variable. This corresponds to responses to an agree/disagree statement that « there is no point voting for a party that has no chance being in government »; 37% agreed with

² Quotas had been established for age, gender, and education, and so the sample is quite representative of the electorate with respect to these three characteristics. The un-weighted sample underestimates support for CDU and overestimates support for SPD, Die Linke, and other parties.

the statement and 59% disagreed.³ The hypothesis to be tested is that those who agreed with the statement were less inclined to vote for Die Linke, the party that seemed very unlikely to be part of any government, according to its own public discourse as well as that of the other parties.

The second main independent variable concerns preferences over potential coalitions. Survey respondents were asked to indicate how much they like or dislike, on a 0 to 10 scale, eight potential government coalitions that could be formed after the election. Table 1 shows the mean rating given to each coalition. The best liked coalition, with a mean score of 5, is SPD with the Greens, the coalition that eventually formed after the election. There are three coalitions with a mean slightly above 4, all involving the CDU, with either the SPD or the FDP. Finally, « unorthodox » coalitions, involving three parties or the CDU with the Greens, received low scores, the mean being around 3 on the 0 to 10 scale.

The main control variable is preferences among the parties, measured on a 0 to 10 like/dislike scale. This corresponds to our « expressive voting » benchmark model according to which the propensity to vote for a party increases the more one likes a party and dislikes the others. Table 2 presents mean ratings for the five main parties. SPD is the best liked party with a mean rating close to 6, the CDU and the Greens have a mean score close to 5, the FDP has an average of 4, and Die Linke is clearly the most disliked option.

Is There a Point Voting for a Party that will not be in Government?

As indicated above, 37% agreed with the statement that there is no point voting for a party that has no chance being in government. The question is whether such a belief had an independent impact on vote choice. Before addressing that question, we need to clarify who was more or less likely to agree with the statement.

We examine potential correlates of this belief. We are particularly concerned with projection effects. It may well be that responses to this question simply reflect party preferences, that is, those who like parties that are likely to be in government are prone to agree with the statement while those who like parties unlikely to be part of the government tend to dismiss the argument.

We performed a logit estimation with the dependent variable agreement with the statement, and the independent variables the ratings given to each party, plus gender, age, and education. The results are presented in Table 3. Most of the variables prove to be non significant (thus yielding a pseudo R2 of .03). The exceptions are gender, and Die Linke rating. Men are slightly more likely to agree with the statement while those who like Die Linke are more inclined to disagree. There is thus some projection effect, as those who like the party that was very unlikely to be part of the cabinet are indeed less prone to believe that voting for a party that has no chance being in government is a

³ All the figures and the analyses reported in the paper exclude abstainers.

wasted vote. The projection effect is modest, however. The probability of agreeing with the statement decreases by 10 percentage points when someone gives the party a score of 10 (compared to someone who gives a score of 5) Note that those who liked the other parties were not more inclined to agree.

The most important question is whether these beliefs affect vote choice. We test this with a simple model where vote choice is related to agreement with the statement, plus how much one likes or dislikes each of the main five parties as well as socio-demographic characteristics. We are particularly interested in determining whether some people refrained from voting for Die Linke because the party would not be in government.

Table 4 presents the multinomial logit estimation, with CDU vote being the reference category. It can be seen that the propensity to vote for a given party rather than the CDU increases as someone likes that party and dislikes the CDU. This is of course hardly surprising. Our main interest is to determine whether, controlling for party preferences, those who share the view that one should be concerned with whether a party could be in government are less prone to vote for Die Linke. We find that, as expected, the coefficient for No Point to be negative with respect to voting for Die Linke. The coefficient is not statistically significant, however.

There is thus insufficient support for the hypothesis that some voters refrained from voting for Die Linke even if they liked the party because they did not want to « waste » their vote on a party that had no chance of being in government.

Do Some People Vote on the Basis of Coalition Preferences?

The second possibility that we examine is that some people decide how to vote not only on the basis of how they feel about the various parties but also partly on the basis of how they feel about the various coalitions. We asked respondents to indicate how much they like or dislike eight potential coalitions that could be formed after the election (see Table 1).

Views about coalitions are not independent of each other. There are strong correlations between the various CDU-led coalitions as well as between the SPD with the CDU on the one hand and the CDU with the SPD on the other hand. Furthermore some of the coalitions were perceived to be very unlikely and so many voters may not have formed clear views about them. We focus on the two most plausible coalitions, those involving SPD with the Greens on the one hand and CDU with FDP on the other hand.⁴

Views about the coalitions are very much dependent on how much one likes or dislikes the parties that are involved in the coalition. This is shown in Table 5. Those who like a party systematically like those coalitions that include their preferred party and dislike those that exclude it. But coalition ratings are not completely determined by party

⁴ Note that the correlation between ratings of these two coalitions (-.22) is relatively modest. We have performed additional analyses with a few more coalitions, and the patterns were similar.

ratings. It is also interesting to note that liking Die Linke leads to more negative evaluations of these two coalitions, which may not be surprising since the party is not part of either coalition. What may be more surprising is that the negative impact is of the same magnitude for the left and right coalitions. Those who liked Die Linke were not less negative about the SPD/Green coalition. Finally, the intercept is much higher in the case of the SPD/Green coalition than for the CDU/FDP one; those who were very negative towards all the parties were inclined to give a slightly higher rating to the former coalition, a signal perhaps that some were just keen to get rid of the CDU/FDP government.

The question is whether those views about the coalitions affect vote choice, over and above preferences about individual parties. To determine whether this is the case we performed a multinomial estimation with vote choice as the dependent variable and party and coalition ratings as the independent variables, plus age, gender, and education.

The results are presented in Table 6, with the CDU vote being the reference category. The results are pretty clear. The more one likes the CDU the less likely she is to vote for any of the other parties, and the more one likes the other parties the more inclined she is to vote for that party rather than CDU. This is not surprising. The question is whether feelings about the coalitions have any independent effect, over and above how one feels about the various parties.

Table 6 shows that those who liked the SPD/Green coalition had an extra incentive to vote for SPD or Green rather than CDU. The same patterns emerge if we use FDP as the reference category. What is interesting, however, is that those who liked the coalition were also more inclined to vote for Die Linke than for CDU (or FDP). There is no evidence that positive ratings of the SPD/Green coalition as such induced some to abandon Die Linke in favor of either SPD or the Greens. Views about the CDU/FDP coalitions do not seem to have any independent impact on vote choice. Table 6 also includes the No Point variable, which again fails to reach conventional statistical levels.

Table 6 indicates that ratings of the two main coalitions had an independent impact on vote choice. We can show more concretely what this implies for specific subsets of voters. We look first at those voters who had a clear preference for one of the four main parties (the CDU and the FDP on the right, and the SPD and the Greens on the left), that is, they rated one of these four parties more positively than all others. 360 individuals meet that condition, about two-thirds of the whole sample. Among these 360 voters, a small minority (31, that is, 6% of the total sample) indicated that they actually preferred a coalition that did not include their preferred party, that is, they either preferred the CDU or the FDP but liked the SPD/Green coalition or they preferred the SPD or the Greens but liked the CDU/FDP coalition. These people with contradictory preferences were clearly a very small group. But it is revealing that among that group, 18 voted for their preferred party and 13 decided to desert the preferred party and vote for a member of the coalition that they liked the best (one individual voted for Die Linke). Among this small “cross-pressured” group views about the coalition appear to count almost as much as views about the parties as such.

Another interesting small group is composed of those who did not have a strict first preference, that is, they gave two or three parties the same highest ratings. We focus on those whose tied highest scores go to parties belonging to different coalitions, that is, those who seem to like equally one or two parties on the left (SPD or the Greens) and one or two parties on the right (CDU or FDP). We have 24 such individuals in our sample, 4% of the total sample. We note that 21 of these 24 individuals with no clear preferences ended up voting for a member of the coalition that they liked the most. Those who are ambivalent about one right wing party and one left wing party can decide which one to support on the basis of whether they prefer the right or the left coalition.

Within those small groups, then, there is support for the hypothesis that people did vote at least partly on the basis of how they felt about the two main coalitions. The two specific groups that we have identified together make up 10% of voters. It is fair to assume that most people just vote for the party that they like the most. But in this election at least, it does appear that a substantial minority did not have a clear preference among the parties and/or had conflicting views about the parties and the coalitions that the parties were involved in, and these people did think about which government they would like to have.

This raises the question of whether those who are more prone to consider which coalition might be formed after the election share some common characteristics. We formulate two specific hypotheses. First, partisans are less likely to entertain such considerations. The assumption here is that partisans have an affective attachment to "their" party, and the election simply provides them with an opportunity to express that attachment. Second, those who follow politics more closely are more inclined to take into account what coalitions might be formed. As indicated above, the media discussed extensively the potential coalitions during the campaign but we would expect the inattentive public to have been little exposed to that information (Zaller 1992).

We constructed a partisan dummy variable that equals 1 for those who indicated that they feel close to a party and a political information scale corresponding to the proportion of correct answers to 19 factual questions (the scale reliability coefficient is .84).

The hypothesis to be tested is that coalition ratings matter more to the better informed and non partisans. We added information and partisanship as well as their interactions with coalition ratings to our model of vote choice. We found no interaction effect between ratings of the SPD/Green coalition and level of information and partisanship.⁵ There is thus no support for the hypothesis that only non partisans or the better informed make their vote choice partly on the basis of how they feel about potential government coalitions.

Conclusion

⁵ We tested separately for interaction effects with information and then with partisanship and we also tested a model incorporating both interactions.

In most PR elections, such as the May 2010 election that was held in North Rhine Westphalia, one can presume that the government that will be formed after the election will be a coalition. Given that the goal of a legislative election in a parliamentary system is not only choosing legislators but also forming a government, the question that we address in this paper is whether voters take into account which coalition could be formed after the election.

We show that indeed some voters in the North Rhine Westphalia election do consider the potential government coalitions when they decide which party to support. More specifically views about the possible coalitions proved to be crucial for those who were ambivalent about the parties or who had contradictory preferences about the parties and the coalitions. While most people just voted for the party that they preferred, a substantial minority paid attention to the type of government that was likely to be formed after the election. We do not find evidence, however, that (some) people desert a party (Die Linke) because that party had no chance of being part of the governing coalition.

Table 1 - MEAN COALITION RATINGS

	Mean Rating	Std. Dev.	N
SPD/Green	5.0	3.5	562
SPD/CDU	4.2	2.9	559
SPD/FDP/Green	2.9	2.5	554
SPD/Green/Linke	2.7	3.1	562
CDU/FDP	4.1	3.6	558
CDU/FDP/Green	3.2	2.9	560
CDU/SPD	4.2	3	559
CDU/Green	3.3	2.8	558

Table 2 - MEAN PARTY RATINGS

	Mean Rating	Std. Dev.	N
CDU	5.1	3.2	573
SPD	5.7	2.9	573
Green	4.8	2.9	573
FDP	3.9	3	572
Die Linke	2.2	2.9	569

Table 3 : VIEWS ON NO POINT ACCORDING TO PARTY RATINGS: A LOGIT ESTIMATION

	Coeff.	S.E
Rating: CDU	0.02	0.04
Rating: SPD	-0.01	0.04
Rating: Green	0.01	0.04
Rating: FDP	0.02	0.04
Rating: Linke	-0.09 **	0.03
Age	0.01	0.01
Education	-0.30	0.38
Male	0.49**	0.18
Constant	-0.98*	0.48
LR chi2(8)		22.87
(p>chi2)		(0.0004)
Pseudo R2		0.03
N		555

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

Table 4 - PARTY CHOICE, PARTY RATINGS AND VIEWS ABOUT NO POINT: A MULTINOMIAL ESTIMATION

	Vote Choice: SPD		Vote Choice: Green		Vote Choice: FDP		Vote Choice: Linke	
	Coeff.	Std.Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.
No Point	-.30	.44	-.23	.49	.06	.49	-.88	.70
Rating: CDU	-1.2***	.14	-1.14***	.15	-1.16***	.16	-1.17***	.18
Rating: SPD	.98***	.14	.06	.15	-.08	.15	.03	.16
Rating: Green	.36**	.12	1.24***	.16	.18	.13	.58***	.18
Rating: FDP	-.36***	.11	-.40 ***	.12	.74***	.16	-.52***	.15
Rating: Linke	.06	.08	.08	.09	-.06	.12	.84***	.14
Age	-.01	.02	-.03	.02	-.04 [#]	.02	.01	.03
Education	-1.4	.91	-.91	.99	.67	1.03	-.48	1.37
Male	1.10*	.46	.62	.51	.41	.53	.27	.70
Constant	1.53	1.18	2.03	1.30	2.33 [#]	1.32	-.05	1.76

Log likelihood -281.51733
 LR chi2(36) 858.69
 (p>chi2) (0.00)
 Pseudo R2 0.60
 N 524

Note: The base category is vote for the CDU. ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, #p<.10

Table 5 - COALITION RATINGS AND PARTY RATINGS: OLS REGRESSIONS

	Coalition Rating: SPD/Green		Coalition Rating: CDU/FDP	
	Coeff.	S.E	Coeff.	S.E
Rating: CDU	-0.14***	0.04	0.48***	0.03
Rating: SPD	0.53***	0.04	-0.09***	0.03
Rating: Green	0.46***	0.04	-0.10***	0.03
Rating: FDP	-0.16***	0.04	0.54***	0.03
Rating: Linke	-0.09**	0.03	-0.09***	0.03
Age	-0.008	0.01	0.011*	0.005
Education	0.24	0.38	0.85**	0.31
Male	0.30	0.18	-0.12	0.15
Constant	1.55***	0.47	0.03	0.39
Adjusted R sq	.64		.77	
N	546		543	

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

Table 6 - VOTE CHOICE, PARTY RATINGS AND COALITION RATINGS: A MULTINOMIAL ESTIMATION

	Vote Choice: SPD		Vote Choice: Green		Vote Choice: FDP		Vote Choice: Linke	
	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.	Coeff.	Std. Err.
Rating: CDU	-1.15***	0.17	-1.09***	0.18	-1.33***	0.22	-1.15***	0.22
Rating: SPD	0.71***	0.16	-0.19	0.18	0.03	0.17	-0.22	0.19
Rating: Green	0.18	0.14	1.01***	0.18	0.26	0.14	0.37	0.20
Rating: FDP	-0.26	0.16	-0.28	0.17	0.67***	0.18	-0.43	0.21
Rating: Linke	0.12	0.09	0.13	0.10	-0.05	0.12	0.89***	0.15
Rating: SPD/Green	0.40**	0.13	0.42**	0.15	-0.20	0.13	0.44*	0.17
Rating: CDU/FDP	-0.08	0.14	-0.09	0.16	0.20	0.17	-0.04	0.23
No point	-0.19	0.49	-0.10	0.54	0.23	0.52	-0.95	0.76
Age	0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03
Education	-1.6	1.01	-1.07	1.08	0.53	1.08	-0.92	1.44
Male	0.89	0.51	0.35	0.56	0.31	0.56	-0.15	0.74
Constant	0.92	1.31	1.19	1.42	2.03	1.38	-0.85	1.85

Log likelihood -263.0854

LR chi2(40) 848.45
(p>chi2) (0.00)

Pseudo R2 0.62

N 508

The base category is vote for the CDU. ***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05

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