

# 11

## Gathering Counter-Factual Evidence: An Experimental Study on Voters' Responses to Pre-Electoral Coalitions

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### 11.1 Introduction

One of the main advantages of experimental research in the social sciences is that this method allows us to develop counter-factual evidence. While traditional research methods are dependent on real-life circumstances, experimental research in principle allows for a maximum of variance with regard to theoretically relevant variables. Research questions that normally cannot be addressed using traditional techniques can be handled in this manner. An obvious example might be the research of the consequences of pre-electoral coalitions (PECs) between two or more political parties. While this phenomenon is quite widespread (Golder, 2006), empirical research tends to be scarce. Most of the research is focused on coalition formation after the elections, and only few studies investigate coalition formation prior to elections. In particular, empirical research on voters' reactions to such pre-electoral coalitions is lacking. One of the reasons for this lack of knowledge might be that these reactions are difficult to assess in a valid manner. Ideally, we would have to know how voters would vote if the parties entering the cartel were to run independently from one another. Obviously, this is impossible to realize in real-life conditions and therefore we have to resort to experimental research. In this chapter, we report on experimental research, trying to achieve a better understanding of the factors that determine the success or the failure of pre-electoral cartels.

In 2003, Belgium introduced an electoral threshold for the first time, threatening the further existence of various small parties. As a reaction, some of these minor parties entered a pre-electoral cartel with some of the major parties. While apparently some of these PECs succeeded, others did not seem to lead to any electoral gain (Hooghe, Maddens and Noppe, 2006).

The determinants of voting for pre-electoral coalitions were investigated in an experimental manner by Gschwend and Hooghe (2008). The aim of that article was to investigate how voters decide whether or not to follow their initially preferred party into a pre-electoral coalition. This kind of question almost inevitably calls for experimental research, since at the election ballot voters only receive one opportunity to express their electoral preference. In this chapter, we will focus on the way an experimental design can be used to develop this kind of study. Before going into a number of (methodological) decisions that have been made when designing and implementing the experiment, we will briefly summarize the theoretical model underlying this research.

## 11.2 Pre-electoral coalitions

The formation of pre-electoral coalitions (PEC) is widespread. Golder (2005) lists a total of 134 elections in advanced industrial democracies, held between 1946 and 1998, in which at least one pre-electoral coalition participated. The formation of a pre-electoral coalition is found to be fostered by several institutional incentives (Golder, 2006). A disproportional electoral system provides a strong incentive to political parties to join hands. Parties are also more likely to cooperate if the party system is ideologically polarized, when the expected governing coalition is large and when the potential coalition partner is of a similar size. Finally, a PEC is generally formed between ideologically compatible political parties (Golder, 2006; Allern and Aylott, 2009).

While there is some research available on why parties enter a pre-electoral coalition, less is known about whether and when these coalitions are electorally successful. It is possible that the coalition partners would have gained the same number of votes if they had contested the election independently. It is also possible that the coalition attracts fewer votes, as potential voters desert the coalition given that they feel that their interests are not sufficiently represented by the new coalition. Theoretical expectations on voters' behavior in case of the establishment of a PEC are scarce. In line with the logic put forward by Cox (1997: 272) it can be hypothesized that voters follow a seat-maximizing logic, and therefore, that they remain loyal to the initially preferred party. In addition, it can be assumed that most voters should be seen as cognitive misers with regard to politics, that they will not re-evaluate the new choice-set of options available to them and that they will remain loyal to the coalition. In sum, it is often assumed that voters will generally follow their preferred party into the pre-electoral coalition (Popkin, 1991).

Nevertheless, Gschwend and Hooghe (2008) identify five conditions under which voters will be more likely to deviate from this baseline prediction. The first hypothesis states that if the ideological distance between the

preferred party and its coalition partner is too large, voters are likely to desert the PEC. Given that a lack of ideological congruence is likely to result in many policy concessions, voters tend to desert and to support a third political party.

The second hypothesis states that voters of smaller parties are more likely to opt out than voters of large coalition partners. In line with Martin and Vanberg (2003), the authors expect that the smaller political party will have to make more concessions than the larger partner. Smaller parties will experience an uphill struggle if they want to incorporate their views into the joint platform, and therefore small-party supporters will feel less represented and they are more likely to opt out of the PEC.

Third, in line with low information rationality models, the authors hypothesize that the likeability heuristic plays a role in the decision to follow the preferred party into the PEC. The more the voter dislikes the coalition partner, the more likely he/she is to opt out of the PEC. While dislike can be related to ideological position, this is not necessarily the case. The personality of major candidates or their historical experiences might also be a reason for disliking a political party, even if the party is ideologically related (Lavine and Gschwend, 2007).

Fourth, the effect of candidates is taken into account (Wattenberg, 1991). If a voter's most-liked candidate belongs to the preferred party or its coalition partner, the voter is likely to stay loyal, while this is not the case if the most-liked candidate belongs to a different party that is not involved in the pre-electoral coalition.

Finally, it is argued that voters need to 're-adjust their mental map of the political space' after the establishment of a PEC. This leads to the fifth hypothesis stating that the longer a pre-electoral coalition exists, the smaller the likelihood voters will desert their preferred party.

### **11.3 Research on voter reactions to pre-electoral coalitions**

Since pre-electoral coalitions have emerged in several countries, researchers can tackle the research question by means of observational data. This dependence on real-life observations, however, limits the possibility of testing the predictive power of the theoretically relevant independent variables. In practice, most PECs are formed between ideologically related political parties, and therefore it is rendered impossible to test whether ideological congruence is indeed crucial to understand voters' reactions, since ideological distance basically will be a constant factor.

An additional problem with observational data is that voters cannot cast two votes simultaneously; they cannot vote on their initially preferred party and on the PEC at the same time. There is no possibility to ascertain what would have been the election result if the parties had not joined forces. One could compare the election results of the parties at the previous election

with the results of the PEC at the next election, but inevitably there is a time lag. In the context of high voter volatility, it is not unlikely that one or both parties would have gained or lost seats anyhow without the PEC. Finally, it is also difficult to obtain reliable information on the reasons for following or deserting the PEC, as voters do not motivate their vote.

Therefore, a web-based survey-experiment was designed to tackle the main research question of how voters react to the presence of a pre-electoral coalition. Participants in the experiment were presented with two election ballots: one with all political parties individually listed (party vote condition), and one with the pre-electoral coalitions and other parties (coalition vote condition) that appeared on the ballots in the 2004 regional elections in Belgium. These two questions were embedded in a broader survey. Among the other questions asked were questions on the ideological position of the different political parties, likes and dislikes of the different political parties, the party of one's favorite candidate and so on.

The advantage of the experiment is that more information is available on the covariates (reasons to follow or desert the PEC) than in observational data. Moreover, there is no need to wait for observational opportunities and all kinds of combinations of political parties in a pre-electoral coalition can be presented to the participants. The experimental design allows us to develop a whole range of likely and unlikely coalitions, thus building stronger support for the theoretical model that predicts the likelihood that one will follow one's initial preferred party into a coalition. Variance in the independent variable can be expanded, thus allowing for a more reliable estimate.

This experiment was embedded in a larger web-based survey. In principle, surveys can also be conducted face-to-face, by telephone or by post. Web-based formats, however, have one major advantage given the current research question: Participants cannot refer back to their initial vote. Participants were confronted with separate screens for every question, with a sufficient number of questions between the first (party vote condition) and the second ballot (coalition vote condition). When confronted with the second ballot, there was no possibility of returning to the previous question. This is a crucial advantage if we ask participants to make two independent judgments: If they have an opportunity to check their initial choice (which is inevitable in postal surveys, and which cannot always be prevented in face-to-face circumstances), it is more likely that they will present a coherent choice in the two options that are presented.

Furthermore, survey experiments can be conducted both in a laboratory setting as in real life conditions. The advantage of laboratory conditions is that it allows for a full control of all relevant variables. A major disadvantage, however, is that most social science departments normally will not have access to laboratories that are fully equipped for this kind of research, as they are usually only present in psychology departments. In some way,

this can be seen mainly as a start-up problem. As experimental research is rapidly gaining ground in some of the social sciences, it is quite likely that in the future, social science departments, too, will invest in the presence of a fully equipped laboratory setting. As long as this is not present, however, it limits the opportunities available for social scientists to use fully all the possibilities for experimental research. In this case, laboratory settings would have other disadvantages, as circumstances could be seen as artificial, and as participants might worry about the anonymity of their voting preference. Therefore, we opted for an experimental study in which participants could simply answer the survey wherever they had a computer available.

#### **11.4 Recruitment of participants: Students as a convenience sample**

The experiment was conducted with first-year university students in Belgium, shortly after the introduction of the PECs in the country. The experiment was conducted during the first weeks the students were enrolled at the university. While it is customary to recruit freshmen at the university for all kinds of experiments, the Belgian setting offers some specific characteristics. By law, Belgian universities are generally not allowed to conduct entrance exams, resulting in a broader recruitment pattern compared to universities in other industrialized countries. While this in itself does not offer any guarantee of the possibility for generalizing any research findings, it does mean that Belgian university students will be less remote from the population average than it is the case in other countries with a more selective university system. A test with political knowledge questions, for example, shows that first-year students in general do not have all that much information about the Belgian or international political system. Evidently, students were not taught about electoral behavior before the experiment was conducted, and they received all necessary information about this experiment after they had participated in it.

Within political science, it is not customary that students receive credits for participating in this kind of research, as it is the case in most psychology departments. Participation is thus voluntary, although it has to be acknowledged that professors have some leverage they can use to convince students to participate. The fact that participation is not compulsory means that the experiment itself cannot be too long or cumbersome, and that the questions have to be related in some way or another to the interest of the students. In practice, the most motivating factor is that students know the results of the experiments will also be used in the course, and that, as a result of this, the quality of the course can be further improved. There was also no subject pool available from which students could be recruited, as experimental research is still less common in political

science. The advantage of this situation is that in contrast to economics and psychology students, political science students are less familiar with experimental research, so the risk that their answers would be biased or affected by repeated measurements was less. It has to be noted, however, that political science researchers will be confronted here with a disadvantage, compared with psychology or social psychology departments, where students and administrations are much more familiar with this kind of research design.

Every student enrolled in an introductory course on political science received an email with the request to participate in the study. Only about a quarter of all these students actually were pursuing a degree in political science, since most of them were enrolled in other programmes (communication science, law, sociology, philosophy, area studies and so on). The email also contained a unique access code that could only be used once. All questions had to be answered in a correct manner before the survey was labelled 'completed'. Students whose access code had not been used received a reminder after a week.

This unique identification code allowed us to track whether or not the participant had already taken part. The use of such a code has a drawback, since in principle the participant could be identified, and it is in principle possible to track his or her answering pattern. This dilemma, however, is not unique to web-based surveys. In any other form of survey in which reminders are being used (and in practice these are always necessary to ensure a sufficiently high response rate), some form of coded information has to be kept about who has already participated and who has not. This information, however, also endangers the anonymity of the answers. In practice, however, this possibility did not receive all that much attention from the potential participants, and no questions or remarks on this topic were received. All information that could potentially be used to identify the answers was of course deleted from the final dataset, which thus rendered them fully anonymous.

Recruiting university students for a web-based survey might entail a heightened risk of social desirability, as they know that in principle the professor responsible for their course might gain access to their answers. There is no empirical evidence, however, that this risk might lead to strong effects. Before 2004, this annual survey was conducted with a traditional pencil and paper form, and students could simply drop their ballot paper in a large box. This kind of survey was completely anonymous, and even for technically nonsophisticated participants, it was completely clear that nobody could ever gain access to their personal vote. When switching from the paper to the web method, there was no change at all for the score for the extreme right party 'Vlaams Belang'. From general population surveys we know that it is extremely difficult to arrive at a reliable estimate of the number of extreme right voters, as voters for this party are

either less likely to respond to population surveys or fail to divulge their electoral preference in a sincere manner. The fact that the percentage of Vlaams Belang voters did not decline when the procedure was switched from paper to web-based, therefore allows us to assume that the use of web surveys does not entail any special risk with regard to social desirability of answers.

In practice, response rates were very high and more than 90% of all first-year students participated in the experiment. During three subsequent academic years, the same recruitment procedure was used. In the end, a total of 1255 students participated in three consecutive academic years from 2003 to 2005. These were different groups of students, except perhaps for a very limited number of unsuccessful students that took the same introductory course twice. The various waves of this experiment allowed us to study the dynamics of the entire process of PEC acceptance over time.

### **11.5 Limitations of a student sample**

Since this study is based on an experiment with a very specific student sample, the figures reported in this article are not meant to be representative. While student samples are convenient, it is also clear that findings from this specific group cannot be generalized toward the general population. Students are younger and often have higher levels of political interest, knowledge and skills, especially if they are enrolled in social science courses. The experiment was only conceived to demonstrate causal processes that might occur among voters in response to the formation of pre-electoral coalitions at the polls. Given this exploratory character and the demands imposed on the participants, an experiment among undergraduate students was the most obvious (and in any case the only feasible) option for this research question.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that one has to be extremely careful if one wants to generalize findings from student samples towards the general population, and this care is not always sufficiently present in the studies that are available for the moment. Kam, Wilking and Zechmeister (2007) have already hinted at the fact that student samples might have such specific characteristics that they respond in a different manner to experimental conditions than the general population. As such, the use of student samples for the generalization of conclusions should be avoided, they suggest. Empirical proof for this caution was recently provided by a study conducted by Hooghe, Stolle, Mahéo and Vissers (2010). They investigated the differences in mobilization potential of face-to-face and online campaigns between students and citizens with little education. Approximately 400 participants between 18 and 25 years old participated in the experiments and they were exposed to the same mobilization content. The authors found that face-to-face mobilization

has a larger effect on participants with a lower socio-economic background than on students. Web-based mobilization, on the other hand, was found to be more effective for the students who had a higher socio-economic background. Also with regard to the long-term behavioral effects, the authors found clear differences between the students and the less-educated participants. As such, it can be argued that findings among a student population should not be generalized towards the general population. Student samples, clearly, are not always the ideal population if one wants to arrive at general conclusions.

However, broadening the experimental population entails additional methodological challenges. Hooghe et al. (2010) describe the problems they faced with recruiting and motivating students with a lower socio-economic status (SES) students to participate in their experiments. Due to the distance to and unfamiliarity with the university campus and a general lack of academic orientation, a substantial number of scheduled lower-SES students simply did not show up for the experiment. Moreover, the authors wanted to investigate the long-term effect of the mobilization of the experiment. Extensive efforts had to be made to motivate the lower-SES groups to return an additional questionnaire. Despite all the efforts made, attrition was significantly higher among the lower-SES groups.

From these experiences, the authors formulate some advice for scholars who want to set up experiments beyond the usual student sample. Doing the experiments 'on location' proved to be a fruitful approach. It was easier to convince lower-SES groups to participate if the experiments took place in a setting they were more familiar with than on the university campus. Further, the authors advise the experiment to be short, 'hands on' and explained in a suitable language. Therefore, the experiment needs to be adapted to the target group. However, when one wants to compare different groups (for example, low-SES and high-SES groups), this entails a difficult exercise.

In sum, it is important to be aware of the characteristics of the participants in the experiment. In principle, the experiment on pre-electoral coalitions could have been included in a web-based general population survey, too, but this entails other important disadvantages. Participation in web-based surveys, however, usually is heavily biased towards the higher educated and those with high levels of political interest (Sparrow, 2007). Although in some recent studies, improvements have been suggested to arrive at more representative internet panels, thus far it remains far from clear whether internet panels indeed can be used to conduct representative population studies. The main advantage of relying on a student sample in these circumstances is that we know internet coverage among this group is 100%, so there are no drop outs for technical reasons. The fact that we have direct access to them in a face-to-face manner also allows us to boost response rates among this group. In sum, for this experiment we opted for a highly representative



sample of a specific subgroup of society, rather than for a nonrepresentative sample of the entire population.

### **11.6 Within-subject design: Problem of repeated measurement**

A within-subject design was chosen for this experiment. The (same) participants were presented with two different electoral ballots, one with all political parties listed and one with the PECs. Therefore, we had information on the participants in two different ‘states of the world’, one in which all parties compete individually, and one in which some pre-electoral coalitions were formed. The advantage of this design is that the characteristics of the participants remain the same for both observations. In a between-subject design, it is possible that some third unobserved variable is responsible for the difference between the two questions, and even when one limits oneself to a very narrowly circumscribed sample like first-year students, it is very difficult to make sure that all possible confounding factors are controlled.

A within-subject design, on the other hand, also entails some risks. A first, obvious risk is that repeated measurements by themselves might have an effect on the answers of the participants. If, for example, one wants to compare the effects of two different election campaign video clips, one cannot ask the same respondents to watch two identical clips, and to pretend that they had not seen the first clip when expressing an electoral preference after the second clip. This kind of influence cannot be ‘undone’, and in these cases a between-subject design is to be recommended.

The fact that this experiment was conducted for three consecutive years also allowed us to refine the research design over the various waves. The initial idea was that the party condition always had to be offered first, and subsequently the coalition condition. The idea was that the image of a political party in some way or another could be contaminated by the knowledge that this party could also be associated with another political party in a pre-electoral coalition. Therefore, it was decided that participants would first reply to the ballot with individual political parties, and subsequently to the ballot with the coalitions. During some preliminary presentations of the results of this experiment, however, it became clear that not everyone was fully convinced of this logic. The basic criticism was that the assumed logic (coalition condition will contaminate party condition, but not the other way around) could be assumed, but that it at least should be proven. Therefore, in the third wave, a new additional test was included in the experiment. Half of the participants received first the party condition, and subsequently the coalition condition; and another half received the questions in reverse order. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two orders. A simple test was sufficient to ascertain that there were no significant differences between the two split samples. Question order, therefore, apparently did not

have an effect on the outcome of the current experiment. The lesson to be gained from this step, however, is that it is extremely difficult to conceive of all possible control variables prior to the experiment. If one is limited to a single-shot experiment (for example, because of funding or because one is dependent on real-life events), this kind of omission might invalidate the entire research design. In this case, we were lucky that the experiment could be repeated, and that therefore adding further controls was still possible during the process.

## 11.7 Results of the experiment

Obviously, the outcome of this kind of experimental research is unpredictable. A somewhat naïve prediction would be that all voters would simply follow their initially preferred party into a coalition. While this kind of observation might be interesting, this would lead to zero variance in our dependent variable, so there would be nothing to explain. The results of the experiment (Table 11.1) – fortunately – confirm the expectation that there is quite some variation on the dependent variable: While apparently a majority of voters follow their party in the pre-electoral coalition, we still find sufficient participants who do not, and who spread out to the other parties. For the analysis, this means we have access both to voters who remain loyal, and to those who opt out of the coalition.

Table 11.1 Results of Party and Coalition Vote Conditions (2003–2005 joint sample)

Party Vote Condition	Coalition Vote Condition						N
	VLD/ Vivant	SP.A/ Spirit	CD&V/ N-VA	Groen!	Vlaams Blok	Others	
VLD	195	11	9	4	2	3	224
Vivant	8	5	1	1	0	5	20
SPA	3	308	9	11	1	2	334
Spirit	3	52	4	0	0	0	59
CD&V	4	21	227	6	0	0	258
N-VA	12	2	71	2	2	2	91
Groen!	3	13	5	178	0	1	200
Vlaams Blok	1	3	6	0	35	0	45
Others	3	3	6	1	0	15	28
N	232	418	332	203	40	28	1255
Percentage	18.5	33.3	25.7	16.2	3.2	2.2	99.1

Results of the experiments; entries are the number of respondents voting for that party, resp. in the party vote condition (rows) and the coalition vote condition (columns). VLD and Vivant: Conservative Liberals; SP.A and Spirit: progressive socialists; CD&V: Christian Democrats; N-VA: Flemish Nationalists; Groen!: Greens; Vlaams Blok: Extreme Right Wing.

With regard to the study of voters' reactions to pre-electoral coalitions, researchers usually have to rely on the real-life presence of these coalitions. The theoretical model, however, allows us to predict under what circumstances pre-electoral coalitions will be more or less successful. The problem is that political party elites most likely will only opt for a pre-electoral coalition if they assume that this coalition will be accepted by the potential voters. If one is dependent on real-life conditions, therefore, in practice, voters will only have access to likely coalitions, and not to unlikely coalitions. The experimental design allows us to develop a whole range of likely (and unlikely) coalitions, thus building stronger support for the theoretical model that predicts the likelihood that one will follow one's initially preferred party into a coalition.

The article reports on the 'real-life' cases that were presented to the participants, that is, the three pre-electoral coalitions that were formed: Christian-Democrats and conservative nationalists; Socialists and 'progressive liberals' and Conservative Liberals and a small tax reform party. The analyses showed that most party supporters followed the party cues and followed their initially preferred party in the coalition. It was possible to predict quite accurately which voters were more likely to opt out of the coalition. First of all, smaller party supporters were more likely to desert the coalition. Since it can be assumed that the common platform of the coalition will be dominated mainly by the senior coalition partner, it is indeed quite reasonable to assume that supporters of small parties will feel less fully represented in such a pre-electoral coalition. Second, disliking the coalition partner strongly encourages voters to desert the PECs. It has to be noted that 'disliking' in this case cannot be equated with ideological position. To provide just one obvious example: The Christian-Democratic party in Belgium historically has been the dominant political party, providing most of the country's prime ministers since World War II. The dislike thermometer question showed that there was quite some resentment against this party, purely because of its alleged close affiliation with 'the powers that be'. Even among participants that were ideologically quite close to the Christian-Democrats, this form of resentment was still present. Third, the smaller the ideological distance between the initially preferred party and the coalition partner, the more likely voters would stay loyal. The advantage of this experiment is that we could design pre-electoral coalitions that were ideologically quite distant from one another, and these 'unlikely coalitions' indeed did behave as predicted by the theory. This kind of counter-factual evidence, therefore, strengthens the theoretical status of our observations. Fourth, candidates also matter, and if participants preferred an electoral candidate from outside the PEC, this has a negative impact on their loyalty to the coalition. Finally, the likelihood that voters deserted the coalition decreased every year, and it can be assumed that if pre-electoral coalition becomes more familiar, it becomes easier for voters to remain loyal to them.

It can be argued that first-year students (who are typically age 18 in Belgium) offer an ideal sample to test this kind of time effect. It has been shown that voters are highly volatile during the first couple of times they participate in elections. Older voters might have developed more of a habit to vote for a specific party, and therefore they might be more difficult to persuade to vote for a different party.

At the age of 18, political socialization occurs very rapidly. It has to be remembered that those who participated in the third wave of the experiment were still 16 (10th grade of secondary school) when the first wave was conducted, and most likely they were not exposed regularly to political information at that age. Given this lack of experience, they can be influenced quite directly and rapidly by new information.

### 11.8 Expanding the available options

The experimental design enables us to look at various likely or unlikely pre-electoral coalitions that do not exist in reality and maybe this is the most important added value of this experimental design. First, in the case of unlikely coalitions, this is theoretically relevant. By offering the option to vote for a party in which the two partners have strong ideological differences, we extend the range of the independent variable, thus strengthening our models. Second, the likely coalitions have strong policy relevance. For quite some years, for example, there have been intensive debates about the possibility that Green and Socialist parties would join forces. From an ideological point of view, the distance between both parties is indeed very small, so that, according to the theory, they would be perfect partners to join forces in a cartel. Mostly for strategic and personal reasons, however, such a green/red coalition has never emerged, although there are various examples of successful cooperation at the local level. The experimental approach, here too, allows us to test the occurrence.

During the academic year 2007–2008 ( $n = 643$ ) we tested these different coalitions, and indeed this kind of test proved to be crucial for our purpose. First of all, the results of this wave show that the major political parties are indeed well represented in this student sample. Although the electoral strength of the parties in this sample cannot always be directly compared to their electoral results, it is important to note that for all the major parties there are sufficient respondents in the sample to conduct valid tests. First, if we want to test the hypothesis of ideological distance, we need a valid assessment of the left-right placement of the parties. Two methods were applied to arrive at such an assessment. First, we asked students themselves to rate all the parties on such a scale, and second, an expert rating was used. Both measurements, however, correlated very strongly, not only validating the insights gained from the student sample, but also providing us with more confidence in the measurement. As can be observed in [Table 11.2](#),

Table 11.2 Voter Reactions to Likely and Unlikely Coalitions

First Vote	Right Wing			Christian-	
	Socialists	Greens	Populists	Nationalists	Democrats
n	128	61	33	45	187
Average Ideology Party (Left-Right)	3.04	2.60	6.20	6.01	5.04
<b>Coalition Vote Condition: Follows Party in Cartel (proportions)</b>					
Socialists/Greens	0.922	0.852			
CD/Nationalist				0.933	0.882
Greens/Nationalists		0.295		0.400	
Socialists/Populists	0.266		0.212		

Results of likely and unlikely coalition, in the experiment of 2007. N = number of voters in the party vote condition; average score of party on a 0 to 10 left-right scale, and proportion of voters who remain loyal to the coalition for four different coalition conditions.

Socialists and Greens are situated on the left side of the political spectrum, the Christian Democrats are right in the middle, and the Nationalists and Populists are towards the right.

In a first coalition condition, we presented participants with the option to vote for a Green/Socialist cartel. This option was considered as quite realistic, as there indeed had been an intense debate about the strategic (dis-) advantages offered by such a coalition. As can be observed, there is indeed some reason to be optimistic about the chances of such a coalition as 92 per cent of the Socialist voters and 85 per cent of the Green voters would follow in the coalition. As predicted, the loyalty is slightly higher among the senior coalition partner (that is, the Socialist) than among the junior partner (the Greens). Since participants were also asked about their 'disliked' party, we had sufficient information to assess that there was not all that much historical animosity between the electorate of the two parties. In general, and only with regard to predictable voter reaction, our conclusion was that a Socialist/Green coalition could make sense after all.

Second, we presented an existing coalition between Christian-Democrats and Nationalists. Ideological distance between both parties remained limited (.97 on a 0 to 10 scale), and here, too, loyalty is quite high. In contrast to expectations, loyalty was lower (88 per cent) among the senior coalition partner than among the junior coalition partner (93 per cent). Although this runs counter to theoretical expectations, it can be related to the fact that the smaller Flemish Nationalist party acquired a very active and visible role in the coalition, while this was less the case for the more moderate Christian-Democrats. As such, we might hypothesize that the Flemish Nationalists felt more strongly that they could dominate the coalition than just by reading their electoral strength. In fact, since the June 2010 elections, the Flemish

Nationalists in Flanders are indeed the major party, outnumbering the Christian Democrats by more than 11 per cent of the vote.

The third option was the Greens and Nationalists coalition, and only 30 per cent of Green voters and 40 per cent of Nationalist voters would follow their party in such a coalition. The idea that voters are just cognitive misers with regard to politics, as they would simply follow the clues provided by party elites clearly is not supported by these results. In a fourth coalition, we also allow for a coalition between the Socialists and the right wing populist of the List Dedecker. Here loyalty is only 27 per cent for Socialists and 21 per cent for populists. Ideological distance clearly plays a major role in this decision: The difference between both parties is 3.16 on a 0 to 10 left-right scale. The impact of ideological distance is even further confirmed if we do not just look at the aggregate measurement (the average of the scores of all students assigned to the parties), but also at the individual measurement. Among the voters who remain loyal to the cartel, the perceived ideological distance between Socialists and populists was significantly smaller than among those who deserted this coalition. A second element (and in line with the hypotheses) is that nonideological dislikes also play an important role in the decision to abandon the coalition or to stay loyal to it. The populist party 'List Dedecker' mainly evolved around one person, the former sports coach Jean-Marie Dedecker. His style and personality attracted quite some media attention, but it also generated quite strong feelings among a major part of public opinion. The List Dedecker obtains quite high scores on the 'dislike' scale, especially among voters for the Socialists or the Greens. This personal dislike, too, plays a major role in the decision to abandon an unlikely pre-electoral coalition between Socialists and populists.

What can be learned from this manipulation is that the level of ideological and cognitive sophistication among participants is quite high. As we already discussed, this might be an artifact of the fact that all participants were first-year university students, but even for this group, their level of sophistication is quite remarkable. It would be highly interesting to investigate what kind of reactions we would obtain if the same experiment were conducted among less well educated participants. But in this experiment, participants not only correctly assigned a left-right position that is very much in line with the position assigned by experts, they also actively used this left-right scale in their decision making process about whether or not to stay loyal to a pre-electoral coalition. The idea that voters decide on various capricious grounds to vote for a specific political party is certainly not supported by these data.

The experimental data, therefore, allowed the authors to develop a comprehensive explanation about the likelihood of remaining loyal to a pre-electoral coalition. Coalitions should also be formed between two parties that are ideologically close to one another. They also should be 'direct neighbors' on a left-right scale, as the presence of a third party right between

coalition partners (but not joining the coalition itself) only distracts voters. The process is smoother if coalition partners are roughly of similar size (or at least if the junior partner does not feel minimized in the coalition). Arriving at these conclusions would have been impossible without the counter-factual evidence provided by the experimental design of this study.

## 11.9 Conclusion

Using experimental methods in political science allows for a significant expansion of the kind of research questions that we can tackle successfully. Without experiments, the counter-factual evidence that was discussed in this chapter could never have been assembled. As always, one's research question determines the research method that will have to be used, although it also should be noted that a whole new array of research questions becomes accessible if one can use various research methods and designs. In this case, the participants in the experimental condition showed remarkably high levels of cognitive-based political decision making, and this kind of evidence does not emerge from other forms of political science research. Future research will have to determine whether this is just an effect of the fact that this study was conducted among university students, or whether the same behavioral pattern is also found among other groups of the population.

Two ethical considerations, however, are still in order. First, in this study we relied on first-year students. This practice, of course, is very common in psychology, and in that discipline, it is even considered a very good method of introducing new students to scientific thinking. In political science, this kind of practice is less common. For researchers, this means that start-up costs are higher, as new routines have to be developed. But the practice also raises ethical concerns. Although participation is voluntary, it could be argued that especially first-year students will feel somewhat obligated to participate if their professor asks them to do so. It has to be noted that response rates are usually somewhere between 90 per cent and 95 per cent, so at least a part of the students does not feel that obligated to participate. It is also important to take extreme care that the results of the study are indeed beneficial for the students themselves. In this case, the students did receive an introduction into the analysis of their results a month later, providing them with new insights into the study of electoral behavior. Students can also be motivated to consider participation as a fun experience, and in this case, the student newspaper even devoted an article to the results of these mock elections (including a list of the most disliked politicians). A formal evaluation of the students is also necessary, and the results of this evaluation showed that a vast majority considered the experiment a worthwhile and pleasant experience.

Second, from a strictly ethical point of view, it could be argued that the students involved in the experiment were the victims of deception, since

in reality there is of course no cartel between Socialists and Populists. However, students were completely debriefed about the experiment and they received full reports about its results. Furthermore, the question can be posed whether this really should be seen as a form of deception, given the fact that students well knew that such a coalition did not exist. For all the students involved, it was very clear that this was an invitation to respond to a hypothetical situation, and they clearly responded to it in that manner.

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