

Party Preferences Precede Coalition Preferences: A Response Time Analysis

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Abstract

The prevalence of coalition governments in Western democracies would suggest that voters take coalitions into account when casting a ballot. But for a long time, the role of coalition preferences has received surprisingly little attention. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have shown that coalition preferences do indeed matter and predict electoral behavior above and beyond party preferences. The fundamental assumption in this literature is still that party preferences take precedent over coalition preferences. We test this assumption for the first time leveraging available process data that measures respondents' time to respond to survey items. The results indicate that respondents indeed need longer to report their preferences for coalitions compared to parties. But existing coalitions are retrieved faster than hypothetical coalitions, more or less equivalent to party preferences. While this evidence is consistent with the commonly hold assumption in the literature it implies that parties can send coalition signals that make certain coalition considerations more salient in a voter' decision-making process.

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Introduction

Traditionally, the literature on voting behavior argues that voters develop preferences for political objects such as parties and candidates and vote according to those preferences. However, most of the time no single party will gain a majority of seats in parliament. Downs (1957: 145) pointed out that voters in multiparty systems use elections “purely as means of selecting governments”. In his theory, coalitions are yet another political object voters form preferences about. Downs (1957: 149-50) argues that in order to vote rationally in such situations, voters need to determine how likely certain coalitions form and how much voters prefer those coalitions. Even though he is fairly pessimistic that voters can actually do that, an increasing number of studies have shown that voters form coalition preferences. There is supportive evidence from different countries such as Austria (Meffert and Gschwend 2010; Pappi 2007; Plescia and Aichholzer 2017), Belgium (Gschwend and Hooghe 2008), Germany (Bytzek et al. 2011; Debus and Müller 2014; Gschwend 2007; Huber 2014), Israel (Blais et al. 2006; Bargsted and Kedar 2009), New Zealand (Bowler et al. 2010), Spain (Falcó-Gimeno 2012), the Netherlands (Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2012), Sweden (Bahnsen et al. 2020; Fredén 2017), and in comparative perspective (Duch et al. 2010). The common finding is that coalition preferences matter. They are not merely a function of existing party preferences but predict electoral behavior above and beyond party preferences. Thus, the current consensus in the literature is that coalition preferences are a valuable addition to theoretical explanations of voting behavior in multiparty systems.

All those studies so far assume that party preferences precede coalition preferences. For the first time we put this assumption to a test using a response times analysis. Following research in social psychology (Fazio et al. 1982; Fazio 1995) we argue that shorter response latency reflects a higher accessibility of the respective attitude from memory—a stronger

linkage in voters' memory between coalitions and parties as political objects and their associated evaluations, the party and coalition preferences. Thus, if respondents are faster to report preferences for parties than for coalitions, party preferences are more accessible which strongly implies that they precede coalition preferences. We show evidence supporting this fundamental assumption in voting behavior research leveraging all studies we are aware of that include response time measures of party and coalition preferences (as well as candidate preferences).

Two Conceptualizations of Coalition Preferences

The literature offers essentially two possible conceptualizations that assign either a strong or a moderate to weak role to coalition preferences. In the strong version, coalition preferences are treated as a genuine and possibly superordinate political identity. González et al. (2008) propose that coalition identifications are a superordinate social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979) that even predicts one of the core explanatory factors in electoral behavior, party preferences. This argument is plausible but rests on the assumption that coalitions are salient political objects that facilitate the formation of a strong identification among voters. A salient identity should be readily accessible. If coalition identities dominate, voters should recall them *faster* than party identities and other salient political preferences such as candidate evaluations. Thus, coalitions might very well take precedence over parties under such circumstances. In most multiparty democracies, however, it is rather doubtful that coalitions are so salient because voters cast their ballot for individual parties that may or may not form specific coalitions after the next election. The argument is much more plausible for real coalitions, that is, governing coalitions that currently exist or had formed a government in the not too distant past. Preferences for such coalitions should be more accessible and recalled faster.

Alternatively, coalition preferences can be conceptualized as an additional political preference above and beyond party preferences. The strength of their role depends on how easily they can be retrieved from memory. Starting with a political identification, which implies a very strong psychological commitment, it does not seem to be a very plausible conceptualization given that most coalitions are hypothetical and abstract objects for voters. In a moderately sized multiparty system, an impossible number of dozens to hundreds of coalitions are mathematically possible but very few have a realistic chance to ever form.

The concept of preferences is more useful because it can reflect both a clear ordering but also account for multiple preference ties, and it imposes no priority of parties over coalitions or vice versa. This view requires the assumption that voters possess both party and coalition preferences and that they can be compared with each other. If parties and coalitions are considered as symbolic evaluation objects, parties have a clear advantage. They are, after all, a real, physical object, represented by candidates, organizations, messages, and salient symbols. Coalitions, on the other hand, are mostly hypothetical constructs that do not exist, except for a currently existing or fairly recent one. In addition, if coalitions are not readily available evaluation objects, voters will have to retrieve the relevant party preferences from memory first and integrate them in a coalition preference, a time-consuming process. Especially if coalitions do not fit a simple partisan block logic, voters should have difficulties (relatively speaking) expressing evaluative judgments. If this view is correct, voters will require *more* time to state coalition preferences. This argument follows the traditional view that party preferences have primacy and are the most important political preferences that influence other political attitudes such as coalition preferences. If, however, coalitions are salient constructs because voters already had time to form an informed

opinion about, voters should have no problem to quickly retrieve such evaluations from memory. Such coalitions should have *equivalent* responses times compared to parties.

Both versions conceptualize coalition preferences quite differently but are not always clearly distinct. Fortunately, the question about the primacy of such political objects—party or coalition—can be settled with data as they imply different observable implications for how much time respondents need to report their preferences for parties and coalitions. The subsequent analyses draw separately on data from two moderate multiparty systems, Austria and Germany.

Research Design

In order provide a test of the underlying assumption in the literature that party preferences precede coalition preferences we need to identify surveys that not only measure both party and coalition preferences but also provide process data that captures the response times to these survey items. We identified two pre-election studies that fulfill those data requirements, a pre-election study from 2006 in Austria and a RCS study of the 2009 German National Election Study (GLES). Both studies include comparable 11-point ratings to measure preferences for the three most relevant political objects: parties, candidates, and coalitions.¹

Response times are one type of non-reactive paradata in surveys that provide insights into behavioral response patterns of respondents when taking the survey. Response latencies in surveys are routinely used to measure attentiveness (Read et al. 2022), cheating (Marquis 2021), the accessibility or strength of attitudes (e.g., Grant et al. 2010, Huckfeldt et al. 1999; Mayerl and Faas 2018, Meyer & Schoen, 2014; Mulligan et al 2003), and to identify different modes of information processing (e.g., Burdein et al. 2006, Petersen et al. 2011). Generally,

¹ In Appendix A, we report in more detail the political context in which these two elections were held. Moreover, we also describe in Appendix B more comprehensively the data collection of both studies, how the latency measures were implemented, and how we code the relevant variables.

research concludes that stronger, more accessible and stable, or less ambivalent attitudes are more predictive of future behavior (e.g., Fazio and Williams 1986, Huckfeldt et al. 1999, Huckfeldt and Sprague 2000, Newby-Clark et al. 2002). We take the log of the raw latency as our dependent variable after following the convention of removing all response times longer than three standard deviations above the mean (e.g., Mayerl 2013, Mulligan et al 2003).

Response time measurement is fairly noisy because it depends on characteristics of the interview situation, the measurement instrument itself, as well as the respondents and their particular mental process while taking the survey (e.g., Mayerl 2013, Mulligan et al 2003). However, these factors are assumed to have a similar impact across responses to different items for the same respondent. Thus, controlling for same kind of baseline speed of the respondent and, thus, looking at the relative difference between the raw response latency and the baseline speed for each respondent should purge most of the measurement error inherent in those raw latencies. We used response latencies to questions that were distributed across the interview to construct a baseline speed measure. In Austria, these are campaign interest, importance of the election outcome, government performance, and attention to polls. In Germany, these are turnout, most important problem, policy position (socioeconomic dimension or nuclear energy), party bias of the daily newspaper, party bias of the first public television channel (ARD) and the voting decision of the first discussion partner. We take the average log of these response times as a respondent's baseline speed.

In order to compare response times for rating the different political objects of each respondent we stack the data. A respondent who provided a complete set of ratings contributed 20 measurements to the Austrian data set and 7 measurements to the German

data set.² The key independent variables are dichotomous indicators that identify coalition and candidate ratings, treating party ratings as the baseline category. Furthermore, we include a dummy to indicate the incumbent coalition in both countries (ÖVP-BZÖ in Austria, CDU/CSU-SPD in Germany). These coalitions should be more salient than hypothetical coalitions and consequently more accessible in memory.

The effect of these indicators is further controlled by a number of relevant factors. First, accessibility of the ratings might be affected by the strength or *extremity* of the evaluation. Consequently, the model includes both the *rating* itself (assuming that more favorable or preferred attitude objects are retrieved faster) as well as the folded scale to capture the extremity of the rating (assuming that more extreme ratings are retrieved faster than moderate and/or ambivalent ratings).

Besides the ratings themselves, two individual differences were expected to facilitate the retrieval of ratings, political interest and political knowledge. *Political interest* was operationalized as an index based on four variables (political interest in general, interest in election campaign, vote intention/turnout intention, and importance of election outcome; $\alpha=.66$ in Austria, $\alpha=.77$ in Germany). *Knowledge* is an index of two dichotomous items in Austria (knowledge of the correct unemployment rate and the correct minimum vote threshold for seats in parliament). In Germany, similar items were not available for the whole survey period and were substituted by a four-point formal education scale.

In order to account for the increasing intensity and visibility of the campaign when approaching election day—higher salience should facilitate faster accessibility from memory—we control for the *campaign day* when the interview was conducted. In addition

² No response times were available for non-political questions in either survey. On average we realize about 19 (6) measurements per respondent in the Austrian (German) data.

to adjusting for individual differences in responding to survey questions, we adjust for the *overall duration* of the interview (in minutes). Finally, we include a *question order* variable to capture the increasing response speed given that the ratings have not been randomized.

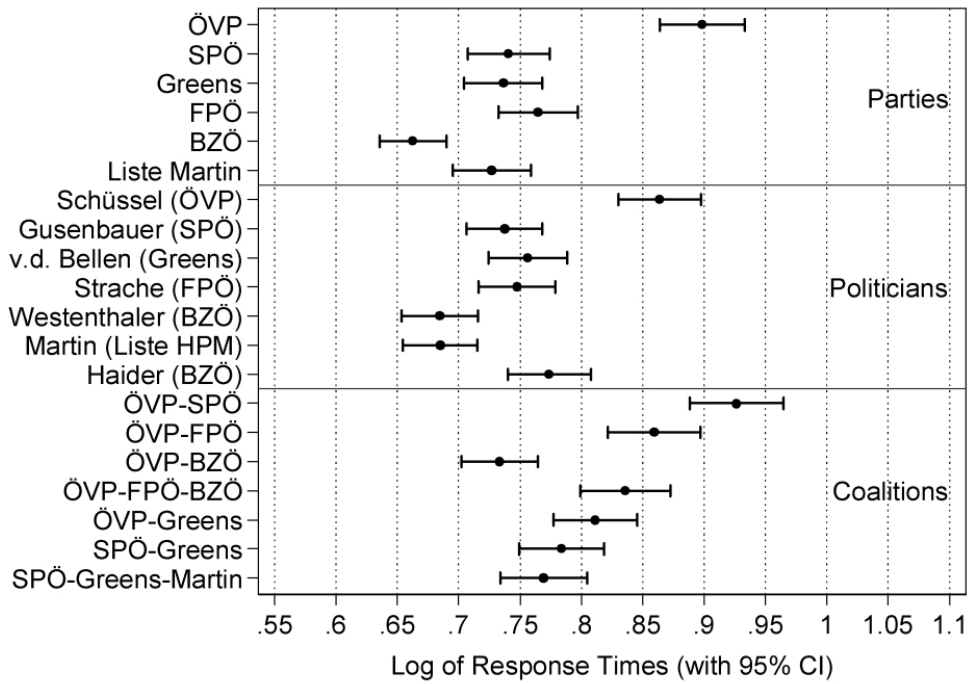
Parties, Candidates, and Coalitions: A Response Time Analysis

The primacy of party, candidate, or coalition preferences can be analyzed by looking at the accessibility of those preferences using response time measures. Figure 1 gives an initial descriptive summary and overview of the response times for party, coalition, and candidate ratings. The averages are based on the natural log of the response times, after removing all response times longer than three standard deviations above the mean (Mulligan et al. 2003). The parties, coalitions, and candidates are listed in the order in which they were asked. Thus, the first response (such as the ÖVP rating for Austria) took the longest but the ratings sped up as interviewers continued with the party list.³ The first impression suggests that the expression of coalition preferences took somewhat longer than the party preferences. This is most obvious for Austria where coalitions were asked later during the interview. Only a single coalition, the incumbent coalition of ÖVP and BZÖ, is a clearly visible exception in Austria. Respondents were able to evaluate this coalition (on average) as fast as they evaluated individual parties.

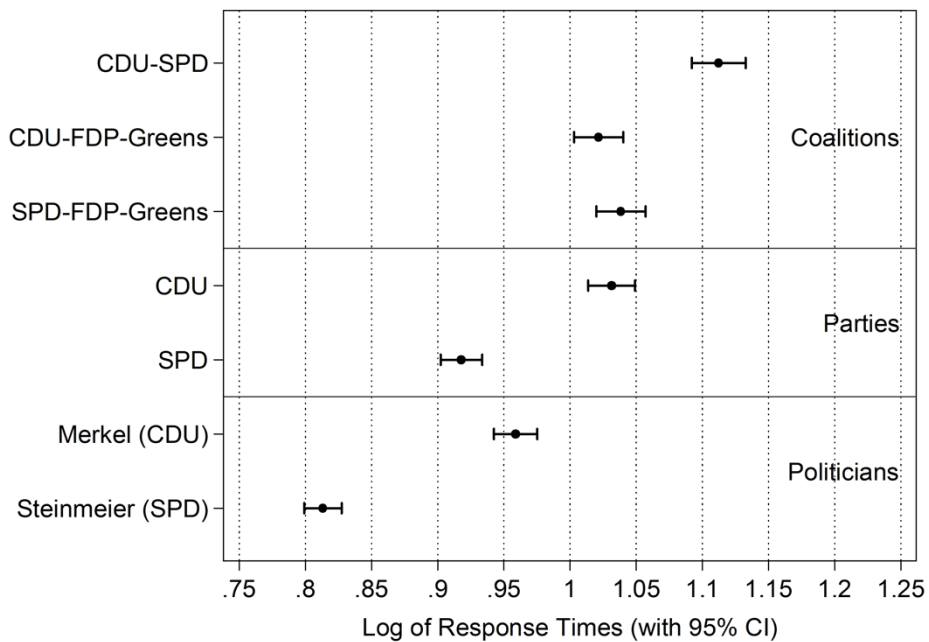
³ A randomized order of items would have been more appropriate for the current analyses, but this desirable feature was not implemented in any of the present data sets.

Figure 1: Average Response Times of Party, Politician, and Coalition Ratings

A) Austria



B) Germany



Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (RCS)

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

For a more systematic assessment, we turn to a multilevel regression model. The results of the random-effects GLS regression models confirm most of the expectations and are remarkably consistent for both countries (Table 1), with one exception. Political interest has no effect on response times in Austria. Most important are the longer response times for coalition preferences. Even though the Austrian coalition ratings were asked after the party preferences, participants still required more time to express an evaluation of these (mostly) hypothetical constructs. In both countries, the clear exception are the existing incumbent coalitions. In Austria, the effect of the incumbent indicator essentially reverses the coalition indicator effect, putting the incumbent coalition on par with the party ratings. In Germany, coalition preferences also require longer response times than party or candidate ratings. The result here is less surprising because coalition preferences were asked first, but the result corresponds very closely with the Austrian data.

Table 1: Response Time Models for Party, Coalition, and Candidate Ratings

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

Source: Austria 2006, GLES 2009 (RCS)

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

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

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

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

Candidate preference is the only indicator with opposite effects for Austria and Germany. In Austria, candidate preferences actually took longer to express than party preferences. In Germany, candidate preferences took significantly less time than party preferences. This difference can be attributed to the fact that the German candidates were the two highly salient chancellor candidates of the two major parties while the Austrian candidates also include less salient leaders of the smaller parties.

Among the control variables, both the positivity of the evaluations as well as the extremity of the evaluations had significant effects on response times, but in different directions. More extreme evaluations, whether positive or negative, facilitate retrieval by making evaluations more accessible. The rating itself, however, predicts longer response times with more positive evaluations. Negative evaluations are retrieved faster. This effect, however, is much smaller than the extremity effect.

Unlike political interest, respondents with a higher political knowledge score (or formal education) were able to rate parties, coalitions, and candidates faster. The remaining control variables performed as expected. Campaign day was significant only in Germany which can be attributed to the much longer field period of the German rolling cross-sectional survey. The baseline response speed and interview duration both affected individual response times positively while the question order indicates decreasing response times for later items.

Overall, the response time analysis answers the question about primacy of parties or coalitions very clearly. For Austrian and German voters, party preferences are generally more accessible than coalition preferences. At best, the incumbent coalition was rated as fast as parties, making this coalition preference equivalent to typical party preference. There is absolutely no evidence that coalition preferences precede party preferences. For Austria and Germany, the claim of coalition identifications as superordinate political identities can be ruled out.

Conclusion

There is an often implicit but fundamental assumption in the literature about voting behavior in multi-party systems, namely that party preferences take precedent over coalition preferences. We test this assumption for the first time by leveraging available process data that measures the response time to relevant survey items. We utilize two pre-election studies that fulfilled these data requirements. The results indicate that in general respondents need more time to report their preferences for coalitions than for parties. This evidence supports the fundamental assumption in the literature. The argument by González et al. (2008) that coalition preferences are a superordinate category can be safely ruled out for the elections we analyzed here, and probably for most other multiparty systems. A limitation of this study is, however, that our findings are based on studies of only two countries, Austria and Germany, but both conducted under rather typical multiparty elections.

Nevertheless, not all coalitions are the same. Existing coalitions are consistently retrieved faster than hypothetical coalitions. This also fits with an emerging line of research on the determinants of coalition preferences and that they depend on political elites' actions (Guntermann and Blais 2020; Debus and Müller 2014) and how elites talk about coalitions

(Eberl and Plescia 2018; Bowler et al 2022). This suggests that only existing and real coalitions with considerable presence in the media become a salient evaluation object that is comparable to parties. That this can happen has also been shown for some elections in Sweden (Hagevi 2015). In times of party dealignment where the number of citizens with a party identification is decreasing, coalition (bloc) preferences might develop into a political identity that works against centrifugal forces and stabilizes a given party system. Such a coalition preference should then be considered as superordinate social identity rather than an additional political preference. They can be retrieved faster, potentially even faster than party preferences. Consequently, voters should then use such a coalition identity to express and reaffirm this political identity rather than utilizing it more instrumentally to vote their most preferred coalition into government (Huber 2014). Somewhat ironically, this would also support Downs' (1957) original theory rather than his skepticism about how voters deal with all that uncertainty surrounding government formation. They would just deduce their vote choice from their coalition identity without necessarily anticipating the government formation process.

Our results not only help to better understand voting behavior in multi-party systems but also have implications for party strategies. Political elites might be motivated to send coalition signals that make certain coalition considerations more salient in a voter's decision-making process (Gschwend et al. 2017; Bahnsen et al. 2020; Bowler et al. 2022), and if they do, to potentially change voters' standing decisions (Bytzek et al., 2011, Falcó-Gimeno and Muñoz 2017; Meffert and Gschwend 2011). Moreover, such signals reduce the number of relevant coalitions to a reasonable number and make it easier for voters to hold the incumbent coalition government accountable. Bahnsen et al (2024) show that voters dislike uncertain coalition outcomes and might vote for a party that makes a less preferred coalition

more likely instead. Coalition preferences can facilitate voters' evaluation of existing or alternative coalition governments and can function as the missing link to solve the accountability puzzle in systems where voters cannot choose their party-governments directly.

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Appendix: Party Preferences precede Coalition Preferences: A Response Time Analysis

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A. Political Context in Austria and Germany

The Austrian data comes from a pre-election survey conducted before the 2006 general election for a new *Nationalrat* (see Müller 2008 for a detailed summary). Six parties played a central role in this campaign, starting with the two major parties in Austria, the governing conservative People's Party (ÖVP) and the oppositional Social Democrats (SPÖ). Two additional small but well-established parties were the nationalist and populist Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the environmental Greens (Die Grünen). Finally, two more recent parties were the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) and the Liste Dr. Martin (Liste Martin). The 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. Consequently, the BZÖ effectively replaced the FPÖ as the junior coalition partner of the ÖVP at that time. The *Liste Martin*, on the other hand, was primarily a one-man show by an independent member of the European Parliament who hoped to repeat his very successful run in the 2004 European election, mostly as a protest against the established parties.

The incumbent coalition of ÖVP and BZÖ was neither popular nor likely to get a new mandate, but the polls still suggested that the ÖVP would stay ahead of the SPÖ by a few percentage points. With two parties close to the 4%-minimum vote threshold, the outcome of the election was fairly open. The parties contributed to this uncertainty by sending out only few and mixed coalition signals. The ÖVP as the likely winner refrained from explicit or official coalition signals. It only ruled out a coalition with the FPÖ while both the Greens and the SPÖ were seen as possible partners. The SPÖ also refrained from making explicit and

official statements but saw Greens and ÖVP as possible coalition partners, clearly ruling out the two nationalist far-right parties FPÖ and BZÖ. The attitudes toward Martin, a former member of the SPÖ, remained ambiguous but rather negative. The Greens explicitly campaigned without a coalition statement and tried to keep equal distance to both ÖVP and SPÖ, though the Social Democrats were seen as the slightly favored partner (e.g., Debus 2007: 57). The FPÖ ruled out any participation in a coalition government while BZÖ and Martin would both consider a coalition with ÖVP and SPÖ. In short, the three most likely outcomes included a grand coalition between ÖVP and SPÖ (which would have a certain majority of seats) or a coalition of ÖVP or SPÖ with the Greens as junior partner. This ambiguous context provides an excellent opportunity to investigate the coalition preferences of voters.

The German data was collected during the 2009 election campaign for a new *Bundestag*. The six relevant parties included the right-of-center Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), the left-of-center Social Democrats (SPD), as well as three smaller parties, the liberal Free Democrats (FDP), the Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen), and the Left Party (Left). The incumbent government was a grand coalition of the two large parties CDU/CSU and SPD because neither of the two traditional German coalitions, CDU and FDP on the right and SPD and Greens on the left, received sufficient electoral support in the previous election. The declining support for the large parties and higher electoral volatility has increased the number of plausible coalitions in Germany, even including three-party coalitions (Bytzek et al. 2011). In the 2009 campaign, the incumbent grand coalition preempted a highly polarized election campaign as both large parties were part of the government and might have no other choice than to continue their coalition after the election.

The likely outcome of the 2009 campaign developed as a contest between a continuing grand coalition, an outcome favored by the SPD, and a CDU-FDP coalition, an outcome explicitly favored by both CDU and FDP. The possibility of a SPD-Green Party coalition, while desirable from the perspective of the two parties, was never considered to be a likely outcome. The only party entirely ruled out from participation in any coalition at the national level was the Left Party. The FDP also ruled out, repeatedly and explicitly, participating in a three-party coalition with SPD and Greens. In short, the number of plausible coalitions has increased in Germany, but the expected outcome of the 2009 German election was essentially reduced to two options, both including the CDU/CSU.

B. Data and Measurement

The 2006 pre-election in Austria survey 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 in the three weeks preceding the election on October 1 (September 18-30). Respondents were asked to rate not only the six main parties but also seven specific coalitions that either had a realistic chance of reaching a majority of seats or were discussed during the campaign. The 11-point rating scales for parties, coalitions, and candidates ranged from -5 ("don't like the party/prefer the coalition at all") to +5 ("like the party very much/absolutely prefer the coalition"). A similar question was asked about the leading candidates of the six parties. The survey also included questions about common political predispositions and sociodemographic characteristics.

During data collection, the response times were measured by interviewers and reflect the time interval from the end of the question to the beginning of the answer by the respondent. The response time measures have three important limitations. First, they were only measured in the rather large interval of seconds. Second, they were only collected for

political questions, not sociodemographic characteristics. Finally, measurement started only in the last week of the campaign. Thus, they are not available for all respondents. As a consequence, we combine the Austria and Carinthia sample in order to use all available data (even if it limits the generalizability of the results).

The German surveys come from the 2009 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), specifically from the pre-election rolling cross-sectional survey (RCS) with 6008 phone interviews (using CATI, conducted July 29-September 26). Similar to the Austrian survey, respondents rated parties, coalitions, and candidates on equivalent 11-point rating scales, ranging from -5 (“have a very negative view of .../not a desirable coalition”) to +5 (“have a very positive view of .../a very desirable coalition”).

The response latencies were measured by interviewers and again reflect the time interval from the end of the question to the beginning of the answer by the respondent. Interviewers additionally indicated whether a response time measurement was valid or invalid. A response time measurement was not measured correctly if, for example, a respondent already answered a question before it was completely read. All measurements classified as invalid were excluded from the analyses. The German response times were measured in milliseconds, but also have one major limitation. They were only collected for a very limited set of political questions (including two parties, two candidates, and three coalitions) and not for sociodemographic characteristics.