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Voters and coalition governments

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Coalition governments are the norm in parliamentary democracies. Yet, despite the predominance of this type of government, political scientists have only recently started to investigate how voters approach elections when a coalition government is the likely outcome. Such elections present additional uncertainty and complexity for voters compared with elections in plurality systems, where party choice translates more directly into a choice of government. These factors have led to the assumption that strategic voting is unlikely to occur in systems that produce coalition governments. In this introductory article to the special issue on *Voters and Coalition Governments*, we consider whether voters have the capacity to anticipate specific coalition outcomes and propose a framework for understanding the conditions that lead to strategic voting in both plurality and proportional systems.

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1. Introduction

Coalition governments are the norm in parliamentary democracies. Yet, despite the predominance of this type of government, political scientists have only recently started to investigate how voters approach elections when a coalition government is the likely outcome.² Such elections present additional uncertainty and complexity for voters compared with elections in plurality systems, where party choice translates more directly into a choice of government. Voters may be aware that coalition formation is an intermediary step between vote decision and government formation (Downs, 1957), yet making any predictions of likely governments is often rather difficult. Even when polling information is available, it is not always clear which coalition is likely to form after an election. Moreover, in most electoral systems, voters

can only cast their vote for an individual party, not for a specific coalition. The instrumental goal of voting a specific government in office can thus become a highly challenging task because a vote for a particular party and its policy will never directly result in a government, but at best secure a party's membership in a coalition along with other parties with different policy agendas.

This raises several important – and largely unexplored – questions concerning voters and coalition governments. First, can voters make sense of coalition governments? In other words, do they have the capacity to anticipate specific coalition outcomes? Second, do coalition considerations affect voter choice? If voters have preferences for particular combinations of parties, do they cast their vote in a way that maximizes the probability that their preferred coalition will be formed after the election? Finally, how do voters perceive coalition governments? Do they prefer the consensual, less adversarial style or policy-making associated with coalitions, or do they feel unable to hold coalition governments to account for their actions? These questions guide the study of voters and coalition governments in this special issue.

Given the regular occurrence of coalition governments in parliamentary systems, we would expect voters not only

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² Coalition governments are those where more than one party holds executive power. By executive power, we mean the main offices of the executive which include the Prime Minister and his or her cabinet.

to be aware of such arrangements but also to take coalition preferences into account when they vote. Rather surprisingly, the political science literature has only recently begun to explore this question. Evidence from laboratory experiments suggests that voters are able to use relevant information to cast a vote in accordance with coalition preferences (Meffert and Gschwend, 2007; McCuen and Morton, 2010). Moreover, recent studies using survey data have also shown that coalition preferences and expectations matter for some voters in certain contexts (Pappi and Thurner, 2002; Aldrich et al., 2004; Blais et al., 2006; Gschwend, 2007; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009).

This evidence thus gives good reason to further explore the role of coalition preferences and perceptions in elections. While the recent studies on voters and coalition government provide important insights, almost all of this literature has focused on single elections or countries, and few have developed a more general framework for understanding how voters respond to coalition governments. To make an attempt to fill this gap in the literature, the articles in this special issue address the question of how voters approach elections with coalition government outcomes using a variety of different data sources and methods, combining case studies with large-N statistical analysis, observational and experimental data. It represents the first set of articles entirely dedicated to the study of voters and coalition governments.

As a starting point for this study of voters and coalition governments, this introductory article addresses the question of when and how voters take coalition preferences into account when they vote. We begin by examining the nature and frequency of coalition governments. Building on the literature on strategic voting, we then present a theoretical framework for understanding how coalition preferences affect vote choice. The extant literature has argued that strategic voting in proportional (PR) systems is either rare or only occurs when district magnitude or thresholds put parties at risk of being left out of parliament. Yet, in this article we make the distinction between seat-maximizing strategic voting, which is concerned with wasted votes, and policy-maximizing strategic voting, which is concerned with government policies. We argue that it is rational for future-oriented voters in proportional systems to engage in policy-maximizing strategic voting in order to increase the likelihood of electing the preferred coalition government. The article concludes by presenting an overview of the remaining papers in this special issue.

2. The nature and frequency of coalition governments

Data collected across 479 governments in 17 West European countries over a sixty year period indicate that coalition governments are the norm. Indeed as Fig. 1 reveals, there is a growing trend in the last twenty years for executive power to be shared between two or more parties. With the exception of a single three year period in the late 1950s, in at least half the cases, two or more parties shared power in government. In comparison, in about a third of the cases, a single party held executive power. In most of these cases, a single party has governed with a minority of the seats in the legislature. The frequency of

coalition government does not appear to be entirely unique to Western Europe. Currently, seventeen out of the thirty OECD member states are governed by multiparty coalition governments.³ Across a more diverse set of countries, coalitions are even more common occurring about 65 percent of the time (Armstrong and Duch, 2010; see also Vowles, 2010).

Table 1 summarizes the data by countries. Coalition governments are a regular occurrence in Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and Iceland. Some of these cases are characterized by broadly shared power, as in the case of Austria which has a history of “grand coalitions” with the government holding on average 72 percent of the seats. In Belgium and the Netherlands, governments typically share power with more than three parties on average which are typically more inclusive than necessary (i.e. a “surplus majority”). In comparison, coalitions in Germany are more likely the result of minimum winning coalitions comprised of the fewest number of parties to needed to hold a majority of seats.

Single-party minority governments are common in Spain, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. While single majority governments have occurred in 11 of the 17 countries at least once in the past sixty years, they are only a common feature in the United Kingdom, which has had a single party majority government in all but one of the last 23 governments and to a lesser extent Greece. Britain’s first-past-the-post electoral system can be credited with helping to produce a manufactured majority. Similarly, with Greece, a system of “reinforced PR” provides a bonus to the largest party to promote stability thereby ensuring single majority governments.

3. Sincere versus strategic voting

A general assumption in the existing literature is that sincere voting is the norm in parliamentary systems with proportional electoral systems (Duverger, 1954; Cox, 1997). That is, voters simply vote for their preferred candidate or party. In contrast, single-member plurality systems (henceforth referred to as plurality systems) sometimes present voters with institutional incentives to vote *strategically*. Voters are said to vote strategically when they rationally decide to vote for a party or candidate other than their overall favourite (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1972; Cox and Shugart, 1996; Cox, 1997; Alvarez and Nagler, 2000). Strategic voting – also known as tactical or sophisticated voting – assumes that voters with an instrumental motivation will vote for a party other than their most preferred party if the former has a better chance of influencing government formation. For example, a voter might be willing to vote for her second most preferred party if her favourite party is unlikely to win and if there is a close contest between the second and third ranked party. Duverger (1954) argued that this type of voting behaviour

³ Current OECD members with coalition governments are Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Sweden and Switzerland.

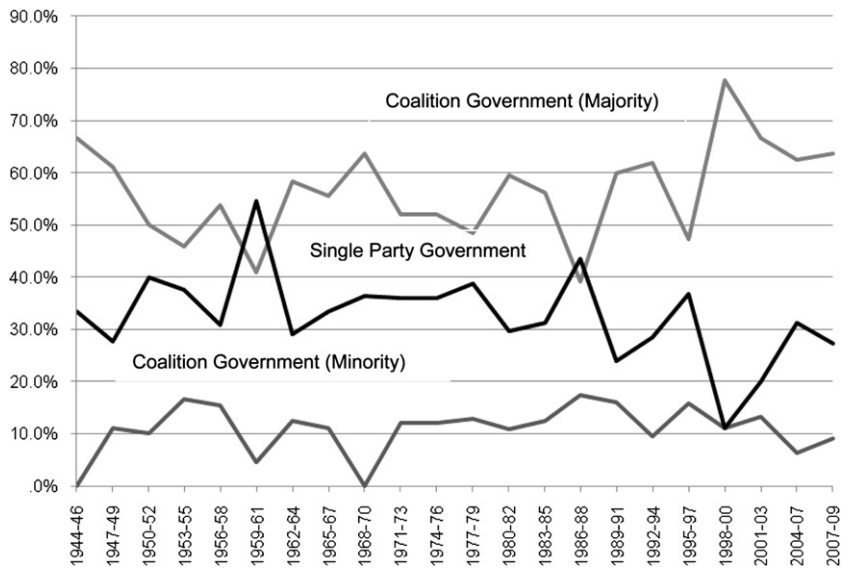


Fig. 1. Frequency of Coalition and Single Party Governments in 17 West European Democracies (1944–2009). Source: Strøm et al., 2008; updated by the authors.

would only occur in plurality systems, whereas voters in proportional systems would not face any incentives to vote strategically, because votes turn into seats more or less continuously under PR. Since strategic voting would reduce the election chances of smaller parties, this led Duverger to predict that plurality systems would tend toward two-partyism, whereas PR systems would put no constraint on the number of parties in the system.

Later work has challenged Duverger's view that strategic voting will not occur under proportional representation systems. The general argument has been that systems with low district magnitude (few seats awarded in each district) also create incentives for voters to vote strategically, since the

transfer of votes into seats is less proportional and hence voters may be concerned about wasted votes (Leys, 1959; Sartori, 1968; Cox and Shugart, 1996; Cox, 1997). Indeed, Cox and Shugart (1996) and Cox (1997) show that district magnitudes of five and below create incentives for strategic voting. Cox (1997) also considers another type of strategic voting in PR systems, namely the “threshold insurance policy” vote, aimed at preventing a prospective coalition partner from falling below a critical threshold (Cox, 1997; 197). The German mixed system is often used as an example of how thresholds in PR systems create incentives for strategic voting. In Germany, the five percent threshold necessary for parties to gain representation may motivate voters to cast

Table 1
Governments in 17 West European Countries (1944–2009).

	Single Minority	Single Majority	Coalition Minority	Minimum Winning Coalition	Surplus Coalition	Cabinet Seat Share	Largest Party Seat Share	Number of Cabinet Parties	<i>n</i>
Austria	3.8%	15.4%		65.4%	15.4%	72.7	45.5	1.9	26
Belgium	5.1%	7.7%	5.1%	35.9%	46.2%	62.1	31.8	3.5	39
Denmark	40.0%		48.6%	11.4%		40.1	36.1	2.0	35
Finland	8.5%		12.8%	19.1%	44.7%	56.5	26.9	3.5	47
France	19.2%	15.4%	7.7%	26.9%	30.8%	59.8	46.7	2.1	26
Germany	10.3%	3.4%		65.5%	20.7%	57.1	46.8	2.1	29
Greece	7.1%	71.4%		7.1%	7.1%	58.3	53.4	1.2	14
Iceland	13.8%		3.4%	69.0%	13.8%	56.3	36.9	2.2	29
Ireland	24.0%	24.0%	20.0%	32.0%		51.3	48.5	1.8	25
Italy	25.5%		16.4%	18.2%	38.2%	52.4	39.2	3.1	55
Luxembourg				83.3%	16.7%	69.6	41.1	2.1	18
Netherlands			11.5%	38.5%	50.0%	61.2	30.8	3.2	26
Norway	41.4%	20.7%	20.7%	17.2%		45.9	45.2	1.9	29
Portugal	22.2%	16.7%		44.4%	16.7%	52.0	42.7	1.8	18
Spain	66.7%	16.7%		16.7%		48.8	48.8	1.0	12
Sweden	64.3%	7.1%	7.1%	21.4%		46.8	46.0	1.5	28
United Kingdom	4.3%	95.7%				54.9	54.9	1.0	23
Total	20.3%	13.2%	11.1%	32.4%	21.3%	55.2	40.6	2.3	479

Source: Strøm et al., 2008; updated by the authors.

a strategic vote to help a potential coalition partner cross the threshold (Gschwend, 2007). The most common example is that of voters on the centre right, who might prefer the large Christian Democratic party, the CDU/CSU, but instead vote for the smaller liberal party, the FDP, to assure a centre-right coalition between the CDU/CSU and the FDP.⁴

Before we turn to the discussion of other possible types of strategic voting in PR systems, we should first establish whether we actually observe strategic behaviour in these systems. If most voters do in fact cast sincere votes in PR systems then there is little scope for strategic voting. On the other hand, if votes are cast that are inconsistent with party preference we would then have reason to believe that voters may be behaving strategically. We can estimate the level of sincere voting across electoral systems with data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). The CSES relies on a common module of questions administered in post-election studies across a wide and diverse number of countries. We define sincere voting as cases where a respondent expresses a preference for a single party and reports voting for that party in the lower house. To measure party preference, we rely on a series of items that measure evaluations of up to six parties employing a ten-point scale ranging from 'strongly like' to 'strongly dislike'. Using this series of party evaluations, the preferred party can be identified as the party that is most positively evaluated by the respondent.⁵ In the mixed systems with dual ballots, we use the PR vote for corrective systems and the SMD vote for systems that are not corrective.⁶

These cross-national data suggest that there is scope for strategic voting in proportional representation systems at least to the same extent as found in plurality systems. As can be seen in Table 2, in all but three of 32 countries, at least eight out of ten citizens cast a vote for the party they most preferred. While the countries with the highest proportion of sincere voters tend to be those in PR systems, the degree of sincere voting in some plurality systems, such as Britain, is also high with more than nine in ten voters casting a sincere vote. One would have expected to see a lower proportion casting sincere votes given the amount of scholarly interest on tactical voting in Britain (Heath et al., 1991; Evans, 1994;

Heath and Evans, 1994; Evans et al., 1998; Fisher, 2001). In the other plurality systems, the proportion casting sincere votes is somewhat lower. On average, nearly 20 percent of the voters in single member district systems with single party government cast a vote for a party that was not their first preference. In comparison, across the PR systems, the figure is 15 percent. When looking at the composition of the incumbent government, there is virtually no difference in the rate of sincere voting; voters are just as likely to vote for their party preference when single party governments or broad coalitions are in power. Of course, it is not clear from these results why there is a discrepancy between party preference and choice. Obviously there can be a number of reasons why voters may deviate from their preferred party. Nevertheless the results do raise the possibility of strategic voting as a potential factor and challenge the notion that such behaviour is only found in plurality systems.

If strategic voting is a feature of PR systems, are voters merely trying to avoid casting a wasted vote or are they motivated to influence coalition government formation? Most of the literature that has examined strategic voting has focused on the translations of votes into seats rather than on policy outcomes. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that voters also care about policy outcomes, rather than merely the composition of the legislature (Downs, 1957; Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988). Given this assumption, we can distinguish between two types of strategic voting. The first type of strategic voting is concerned with *seat maximizing*. This type of strategic voting has been the focus of most of the extant literature. As discussed above, the basic idea of seat-maximizing is that voters will vote for a more competitive party, rather than their most preferred party, to avoid wasting their vote. The second type of strategic voting is concerned with *policy maximizing*. The basic logic is that voters will vote for a less-preferred party to influence the formation of a government that will implement the most-preferred policies. Seat-maximizing strategic voting is thus concerned with voter considerations regarding the votes-to-seats stage, whereas policy-maximizing strategic voting is concerned with considerations regarding the seats-to-policy stage (see Austen-Smith and Banks, 1988; Bargsted and Kedar, 2009). In plurality systems, the distinction between seat-maximizing and policy-maximizing strategic voting will often be irrelevant, since the outcome that voters seek to influence are single-party governments. Hence, by seeking to maximize the likelihood of a certain party winning a majority of seats, voters are simultaneously seeking to maximize the likelihood of a certain government policy. This leads us to examine under what circumstances we would expect to observe seat-maximizing and policy-maximizing strategic voting, and what type of policy-maximizing voting we may expect.

4. Retrospective versus prospective voting

One reason why the existing literature has focused on seat-maximizing strategic voting is that most of the political behaviour literature has focused on two-party or two-candidate elections in the United States and to a lesser extent three-party races in the British plurality system.

⁴ Parties can also cross the threshold by winning a constituency seat which may also encourage large party supporters to cast a vote for a small party candidate to help the party cross the threshold. Small parties have been competitive in New Zealand, which modelled its electoral system after Germany, providing voters in these constituencies with incentives to vote strategically (Karp, 2009, 45; see also Karp et al., 2002).

⁵ The CSES also asks respondents whether they think of themselves as being close to any political party and if so to identify that party (additional parties are coded only if the respondent volunteers). This measure is analogous to the traditional party identification measure associated with the University of Michigan electoral school. The problem with this measure is that a majority of respondents in the sample claim not to be close to any party. In comparison, 74 percent of the sample evaluate one party more highly than another. About 22 percent of the sample evaluated more than one party equally, while just 4 percent said that they were unaware or did not know about any of the parties (see Karp and Banducci, 2008).

⁶ Mexico has a single ballot system where voters cast a single vote for both types of representatives. The single votes for district candidates are then aggregated for distribution of the party list seats. For this reason it is best characterized as a majoritarian system.

Table 2

Sincere voting in the lower house by country and system.

Country	System	Year	Coalition Size (Incumbent Gov)	Sincere Voting %
Italy	PR	(2006)	5	96.3
Sweden	PR	(2002)	1	94.2
Czech Republic	PR	(2002)	1	93.3
Romania	PR	(2004)	1	92.1
Norway	PR	(2001)	3	91.8
Iceland	PR	(2003)	2	91.8
Bulgaria	PR	(2001)	1	91.0
Britain	Plurality	(2005)	1	90.5
Netherlands	PR	(2002)	3	90.1
Spain	PR	(2004)	1	89.7
Hungary	Mixed Corrective (PR vote)	(2002)	3	89.3
Belgium	PR	(2003)	6	88.8
Portugal	PR	(2005)	2	87.2
New Zealand	Mixed Corrective (PR vote)	(2002)	2	86.9
Israel	PR	(2003)	3	86.2
Australia	Alternative Vote	(2004)	2	86.2
Finland	PR	(2003)	5	85.5
Switzerland	PR	(2003)	4	84.9
Mexico	Mixed (single ballot)	(2003)	2	84.5
USA	Plurality	(2004)	1	84.3
Portugal	PR	(2002)	1	84.2
Poland	PR	(2001)	2	83.6
Slovenia	PR	(2004)	3	83.6
Canada	Plurality	(2004)	1	82.9
Albania	Mixed Non-Corrective (SMD vote)	(2005)	4	82.5
Denmark	PR	(2001)	4	81.5
Korea	Mixed Non-Corrective (SMD vote)	(2004)	1	81.3
Ireland	PR	(2002)	2	81.3
Germany	Mixed Corrective (PR vote)	(2002)	2	80.7
Taiwan	Mixed Non-Corrective (SMD vote)	(2001)	1	67.0
Peru	PR	(2006)	1	62.0
Chile	PR	(2005)	4	57.9
SMD vote				
Single party incumbent government (average)				80.5
Coalition incumbent government (average)				83.9
PR vote				
Single party incumbent government (average)				83.5
Coalition incumbent government (average)				85.4

Sincere voting is estimated as the proportion of those with a single preference who cast their vote for the party they most preferred. Source: CSES Module 2.

Another important reason is that the dominant approach to elections has seen them as inherently a sanctioning device in which voters reward or punish incumbents on the basis of past performance and thereby induce elected officials to be responsive to public preferences (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981; Manin, 1997; Powell, 2000). According to this 'sanctioning' approach, vote choices are retrospective in nature, as the famous quote from V.O. Key (1966: 61) implies: 'Voters may reject what they have known; or they may approve what they have known. They are not likely to be attracted in great numbers by promises that are novel or unknown'.

If voters are seen to be making retrospective judgments in elections, then it is not surprising that political scientists have ignored, or been sceptical about, the possibility that voters decide strategically on the basis of their preferences about coalition formation. The very notion of policy-maximizing strategic voting is inherently future-oriented, or prospective, as it is concerned with the expected utility derived from the policies of a potential coalition government. Yet, the idea that voters are future-

oriented is not new, and can be found already in Downs' seminal work (1957), according to which voters compare the policy platforms of competing candidates and choose the candidates with policy positions expected to maximize their utility. Other scholars have argued that elections are primarily about 'selecting' candidates rather than 'sanctioning' incumbents. According to this view, voters see elections as opportunities to choose a good political representative, i.e. one with personal characteristics such as integrity, shared preferences, experience and skill (Fearon, 1999; Besley, 2005; Duch and Stevenson, 2008). Whereas the sanctioning model is seen as retrospective in nature, the selection or competency model is future-oriented. Austen-Smith and Banks (1988) go further to argue that voters are ultimately interested in policy outcomes, not policy promises. This suggests voters take into account the policy-making process, including government formation, when choosing a candidate or a party.

The notion of policy-maximizing strategic voting, however, raises a further question about whether, and how, voters are able to form rational expectations about coalition

governments. This question is addressed by [Armstrong and Duch, 2010](#), as they examine the historical regularities in the composition of coalition governments to assess the information available to voters when they cast their vote. The next question is whether voters use these rational expectations about coalition formation to maximize expected utilities. This is one of the key issues examined by [Marsh, 2010](#); [Meffert and Gschwend, 2010](#) and [Bowler et al., 2010](#)).

Fig. 2 illustrates our expectations about voting behaviour across systems depending on whether voters are retrospective or future-oriented. If vote choices are primarily based on retrospective evaluations, then we will see mainly sincere voting in proportional systems, where the electoral incentives for seat-maximizing strategic voting are lower than in plurality systems. While we expect more seat-maximizing strategic voting in plurality systems, sincere voting will nevertheless be far more common, since most voters will be able to vote for their preferred candidate without fearing a “wasted vote”. In addition, even when voters are motivated by strategic considerations these considerations may not necessarily prove decisive. Many voters may vote for their preferred party because they perceive that party to be viable even when they are not ([Blais et al., 2009](#)). In addition, when incentives do exist, not all voters will respond in a similar manner ([Fisher, 2001](#)). Importantly, the decision to vote strategically will depend on a number of factors, such as political sophistication (e.g. strategic voting should increase with the knowledge about the rankings of parties in the polls) and the relative strength of preferences for different parties (e.g. strategic voting should increase with the relative strength of preference for the second favourite party over the least preferred party).

In plurality systems with single party governments, voters are also better able to hold governments to account for their past performance, whereas PR systems with coalition governments tend to blur the lines of responsibility (see [Fisher and Hobolt, 2010](#); [Vowles, 2010](#)). In contrast, to

the extent that voters are future-oriented, we would expect strategic voting in both plurality and proportional systems. In plurality systems, seat-maximizing strategies will tend to optimize policy output as well, to the extent that the party with the most seats will rule as a single-party government. In proportional systems, however, strategic voting will primarily focus on policy-maximizing strategies; that is influencing the likelihood of a coalition government that will implement a policy programme which maximizes utility. As [Austen-Smith and Banks \(1988: 407\)](#) note, “... each individual will cast his or her vote to promote the final policy outcome he or she most prefers (...). In a multiparty election with proportional representation, in which individuals cast at most one vote, sincere voting is typically not rational”.

The concept of policy-maximizing strategic voting is thus concerned with casting the vote for a party other than the favourite party in order to maximize the chances of electing a coalition with the preferred policies. We can distinguish between three different types of policy-maximizing strategic voting in PR systems (see [Fig. 2](#), bottom right). The first type is the *threshold insurance policy*, already mentioned above, where voters opt for a minor coalition partner over their preferred party to increase likelihood of preferred coalition ([Cox, 1997: 197](#)). In studies of German elections, [Gschwend \(2007\)](#) and [Shikano et al. \(2009\)](#) examined this type strategic voting and show that some German voters strategically vote for a small would-be coalition partner rather than a larger preferred party, if they perceive the smaller party to be in danger of not passing the threshold.

The second type of policy-maximizing strategic voting has been referred to as *coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting* ([Bargsted and Kedar, 2009](#)). This type of strategic voting occurs when voters perceive that their preferred party as unlikely to participate in the coalition, they desert it in favour of the most preferred among those they perceive as viable coalition partners. As discussed above, the Duvergerian argument is that voters vote strategically out of

	Retrospective voting	Prospective voting
Plurality systems	<i>Evaluation of the performance of the incumbent government.</i> - Strategic vote to punish incumbents - Sincere voting based on past performance	<i>Evaluation of competing party policy platforms</i> - Seat-maximizing strategic voting to influence outcome - Sincere voting based on policy promises
Proportional systems	<i>Evaluation of the performance of the incumbent government.</i> - Sincere voting based on past performance (compromised because the lines of responsibility are blurred)	<i>Evaluation of competing coalition policy platforms</i> - Policy-maximizing strategic voting (1) threshold insurance policy; (2) coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting; (3) balancing strategy based on final policies - Sincere voting based on policy promises

Fig. 2. Sincere and strategic voting.

a concern that their preferred party is not viable. Following this, the logic of ‘coalition-targeted Duvergerian’ voting assumes that parties desert their party because it is not a viable coalition partner. A recent study by Bargsted and Kedar (2009) has examined this type of strategic voting in the context of the 2006 Israeli elections and has demonstrated that voter choice reflects considerations about the likely composition of the government. The authors show that when Israeli voters perceive it unlikely for their most preferred party to participate in the coalition, they often desert it and instead endorse the lesser of evils among those they perceive as viable coalition partners.

The third category of policy-maximizing coalition voting can be referred to as the *balancing strategy*. Voters select a party other than the most preferred party in order to move the coalition policies closer to their own preferred positions. Since voters are aware that the policy positions of their preferred party will be watered down by the internal bargaining in a coalition, outcome-oriented vote choice may lead them to endorse coalition partners whose positions differ from their own views, but which will pull policy in their direction (Kedar, 2005a, 2005b). Cox (1997: 196–7) discusses the possibility of voters engaging in ‘strategic balancing’ between different elected bodies, but does not extend this to coalition formation. Austen-Smith and Banks (1988) present the first formalized model of strategic voting for balancing purposes in PR systems. Their model shows that it is not rational for future-oriented voters in PR systems to vote sincerely (for their preferred party platform). Instead, voters use ‘balancing’ considerations to allocate power between coalition partners in order to optimize expected utility from policy outcomes.

5. Overview of special issue

The papers in the special issue address not only the question of whether coalition considerations shape vote choices, but also the broader questions of whether voters have sufficient knowledge to anticipate the coalition formation process, to what extent coalition governments allow voters to hold the incumbent to account and how citizens perceive coalition governments.

A critical assumption underpinning the argument that policy-maximizing strategic voting takes place, and hence that coalition preferences influence voting behaviour, is that voters are in fact able to anticipate the post-election coalition formation process. Downs (1957) pointed out that this may be too complex a task for voters and concluded that ‘most voters do not vote as though elections were government-selection mechanisms’ (Downs, 1957: 300). However, as mentioned above, more recent studies have reached less pessimistic conclusions. Armstrong and Duch, 2010 provide the most rigorous test of this assumption to date. Using data on the make up of governments covering 34 countries across a 50 year period, they find that coalition outcomes exhibit high levels of continuity. Typically only two large parties alternate in and out of the Prime Ministership, with the incumbent Prime Ministerial party being returned to office about 60 percent of the time. Overall the effective number of coalition parties is between three and four which means that voters can therefore

anticipate that some permutation of these parties will form a coalition government after an election. Meffert and Gschwend (2010) also argue that although there may be many theoretically possible coalitions in a multi party system such as Austria, only few have a realistic chance of success. Voters thus face a less complex task than what has previously been assumed.

But even if voters anticipate election outcomes, it is not certain that they use this information strategically in elections. As discussed above, when voters vote strategically in proportional, multi-member districts elections it is not primarily a question of avoiding “wasted votes”, but also about influencing the coalition formation process. This latter, and more complex, aspect of strategic voting is the primary focus of three of the articles in this special issue. These articles examine how and to what extent coalition considerations influence vote choices. McCuen and Morton (2010) use experiments to test whether voters in proportional systems engage in strategic voting. They provide an experimental test of the Austen-Smith and Banks (1988) model of strategic voting for balancing purposes. Their findings show that voters do vote strategically to affect the post-election coalition formation process.

Marsh (2010) examines how voters form preferences about coalition arrangements and how voters communicate those preferences under the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system used in Irish elections. STV allows each voter the option of ranking all candidates in order of preference. This enables voters to use their lower preference votes to bolster the chances of a second party that they would like to see form a coalition with their preferred (first choice) party. The evidence shows that the first choices of Irish voters do signal coalition preferences and that some voters may well be acting strategically. When it comes to using the second preference to express a view on coalition partners, the results are more mixed, with only a minority of Irish voters clearly choosing two parties from the same potential coalition.

Meffert and Gschwend (2010) test the strategic voting hypothesis with a pre-election survey from Austria. They find evidence to support different types of policy-maximizing strategic voting, including insurance threshold policy and balancing strategies, which strongly suggest that voters take into account both electoral expectations and coalition preferences when making a decision.

Voters are also ready to abandon their preferred party if they do not anticipate that the party will form part of the governing coalition. Using a rolling cross section design (RCS) to observe campaign dynamics in New Zealand, Bowler et al. (2010) examine how changes in expectations about government formation can affect support for a preferred party. They show that as coalition prospects for a preferred party decrease and a least preferred party increase over the course of a campaign, voters are more likely to vote and more likely to support their second-preference party. Their findings provide further evidence that voters respond to expectations about government formation.

Overall, these articles suggest that voters are willing to engage in strategic voting to optimize the chances of their

preferred coalition taking office. The final set of articles in the special issue considers the more normative question of whether coalition governments hinder or enhance democratic representation. In particular, the articles focus on how voters perceive coalition governments. It is usually assumed that coalition governments are less accountable to voters than single party governments. One particular problem for voters evaluating coalition governments is how to assess whether all parties within a coalition should be held equally responsible for past performance. Conversely, coalition governments tend to facilitate a more consensual, cooperative style of policy-making. Fisher and Hobolt (2010) examine whether voters are less likely to hold coalition governments to account for their performance. This article uses comparative electoral survey data from the CSES project to assess whether and how the composition of coalition governments affects the way in which people use their votes to hold governments to account. Do voters know, and care about, the types of governments they experience – and do they perceive them differently depending on whether they are majority, minority and/or coalition governments? Vowles (2010) also uses CSES data to examine public perceptions of coalition, single party and minority governments. He finds that public perceptions that governments should ‘make a difference’ are weaker under coalition than single-party governments, but this only holds in old democracies.

Carman and Johns (2010) also examine voters’ perceptions of coalitions and ticket-splitting, but in the context of the Scottish case. This case is particularly interesting, because the possibility of coalition government is a relatively recent phenomenon in Scotland which has arisen due to the devolution of power to the Scottish parliament and the use of mixed-member proportional system to elect members of this parliament. Hence, this provides an apposite case study of whether voters can ‘learn to love’ coalition governments. Carman and Johns show that attitudes towards coalition government are primarily determined by an overall view of the kind of policies and politics delivered by coalitions rather than narrow partisan interests. Yet, they also find a clear link between ticket-splitting in Scottish elections and coalition attitudes with some voters splitting their ticket because they would prefer a coalition.

The articles in this special issue thus rely on a range of different methods and data sources to address the central questions of voters’ attitudes and behaviour in elections with coalition outcomes. These include large-N quantitative analysis using macro data on electoral outcomes (Armstrong and Duch), the use of cross-national survey data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (Fisher and Hobolt; Vowles), experimental methods (McCuen and Morton) and survey data from specific cases: Ireland, Austria, New Zealand, and Scotland (Marsh; Mefert and Gschwend; Bowler, Karp and Donovan; Carman and Johns). Taken together, this special issue thus presents the most comprehensive study to date of voters and coalition governments. The findings of the papers clearly indicate that voters do take into account coalition politics when they cast their ballot. This suggests that future models of electoral behaviour should take more seriously

voters’ rational expectations of coalition governments as a factor that may influence vote choice.

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