

Political knowledge and populist attitudes influence voter preferences for government formation

*Government formation in multiparty systems requires election losers to concede victory to the winners and, more often than not, winners to compromise to form a coalition government. Why will some voters concede victory to the winning party but others won't? And what influences their openness to other parties during coalition talks? Looking at evidence from Austria, a multiparty system at the heart of Europe, **Carolina Plescia** and **Jakob-Moritz Eberl** find that, even after controlling for party preferences and ideology, political knowledge and populist attitudes are essential in explaining voters' willingness or unwillingness to accept these fundamental prerequisites of coalition bargaining and political compromise.*



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Elections in multiparty democracies are usually followed by discussion among parties that, despite having diverging preferences, must compromise over a common coalition agreement to form a government. Despite this being an established norm and one of the cornerstones of pluralist democracies, because coalitions involve compromises they may be condemned – at least by some – as undemocratic.

In a [paper just published in Party Politics](#), we studied voters' preferences during the two main steps of coalition formation *after* election results are announced, namely the choice of which party should lead government formation and the choice of potential coalition partners. To this end, we used panel data from the parliamentary election in Austria in 2017 provided by the [Austrian National Election Study](#) (AUTNES). The same voters were interviewed right before and after election day and asked about their preferences over the two main steps of government formation. The main aim was to determine whether the knowledge of consolidated norms such as those related to government formation would increase voters' likelihood of accepting political compromise after the election and whether populist attitudes, instead, would do the opposite. Austria was a particularly apt case study since the party system now includes two populist parties on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum (Freedom Party on the right, and List Pilz on the left), with the Freedom Party (FPÖ) also being the third strongest party in parliament.

The results indicate first of all that voters accept the norm that the party with the most votes should lead the next government: even if the People's Party (ÖVP) had an electoral lead of only 5% over the second-ranked party on election day, more than 82% of the respondents agreed that it should lead the government formation. This is remarkable if one considers that only 31% of the people had this preference a week before the election and suggests that election results do matter. Second, our findings indicate that voters with high political knowledge are particularly likely to switch their preference for which party should lead government formation to the largest party once the election results are in. On the contrary, voters with higher populist attitudes seem less inclined to accept this established norm and tend instead to stick with their favoured party as their preferred option for government formation. Populist attitudes here include an opposition to 'the elite' and professional politicians, a belief in the sovereignty of the people and in the Manichean division between 'good' and 'evil'.

In terms of coalition talks, the findings suggest that only 16% of voters are open to coalition talks with *all* parties. Furthermore, it is mainly voters with high political knowledge that tend to be more inclusive in their coalition preferences and hence tend to exclude fewer parties from coalition talks. Populist voters, on the other hand, tend to have more exclusive preferences and to exclude a higher number of parties from upcoming coalition talks.

In our analyses, we further show that the effects persist even when controlling for well-known correlates of populism such as ideological extremism, authoritarianism or satisfaction with democracy. But most importantly, we show that the effects of both knowledge and populism still hold even after excluding the voters of the most populist party in Austria (i.e., the FPÖ) from our analysis, which is indicative of the fact that our findings are rather independent from ideology and that they may be present both on the left and the right of the ideological spectrum.

More broadly speaking, our results highlights a fundamental challenge our democracies face today between respecting venerable conventions – such as conceding victory to the winning party and being open to talking to opponents – while also acknowledging the need to respond to citizens' increasing calls for a break from 'politics as usual'. At the core of this challenge will be those voters that have been characterised as having 'uncompromising mindsets'. Whether and how parties respond to these voters is fundamentally important for continued perceptions of trust in and legitimacy of political institutions and norms that are the building blocks of modern, liberal and pluralist democracies.

This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on their recent article published in Party Politics, "[Not my government!](#)" [The role of norms and populist attitudes on voter preferences for government formation after the election](#)'.

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