Finding common ground: The delicate balance of political compromise in democracy

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29 June 2023

Associate Professor of Political Communication, Mariken A.C.G. van der Velden, explores the complexities of political compromise, including its impact on political representation and citizen support

Political compromise plays a crucial role in representative democracies, especially in multiparty consensus democracies. In such systems, nearly all political decision-making is subject to compromise among political parties. Political theorists have long emphasised the significance of compromise for liberal democracy.

They argue that compromise is essential because it reflects a pluralistic view on partisanship and acknowledges the legitimacy of competing political claims for the common good.

Additionally, compromise signals the recognition that one's own views are partial and temporary. It is seen as a desirable democratic process that aggregates competing views and facilitates the realisation of policy goals.

Challenges associated with political compromise

Political compromises can have a diluting effect: when a party compromises on its principles, it downplays its ideational commitments, which can confuse its electorate. This paradox of compromise presents a conundrum for political parties during coalition negotiations, as they must navigate the tension between policy representation and responsibility.

On the one hand, parties need to maintain their ideological association with their voters, while on the other hand, they have the opportunity to realise their policy goals in office.

Gaining citizens' support

Understanding citizens' perspectives on compromise is key in this context.

Many citizens value the principle of political compromise, despite the rise of populist thought. Observational evidence suggests that citizens tend to support political compromise, and voters are more likely to support a political candidate who explicitly embraces compromise.

However, explicit support may differ from citizens' implicit attitudes towards compromise. Implicit approaches can provide a better understanding of how compromise affects trust in political parties in practice.

In the context of coalition formation, the key question is whether citizens prioritise the virtue of holding unflinching policy commitments or accept concessions to facilitate government participation.

On the one hand, citizens may prefer responsible parties willing to make policy compromises to conclude coalition negotiations successfully. Research shows that winning in elections clearly affects regime support, and citizens tend to be more satisfied with democracy when their preferred party is in government.

They also value coalition participation and consider the composition of future coalitions when voting. On the other hand, citizens may also prefer parties that are firm in their policy commitments, as a clear ideological and programmatic profile sets a party apart from its competitors. Repositioning and compromise can adversely affect electoral success and contribute to a party's demise.

To understand why some people reject compromise, individual-level mechanisms are examined. A significant factor is the 'uncompromising mindset' consisting of principled tenacity and mutual mistrust. Citizens with strongly principled views on the issue and those who adhere to an absolutist worldview are more likely to reject compromise. These individuals perceive compromise as a violation of their core beliefs and principles.

What is the cost of compromise?

In my recent experiment, conducted immediately after the 2021 Bundestag elections in Germany, I shed light on the question, 'what effect does compromise acceptance during these negotiations have on the political reputations of parties?'.

The findings reveal that political compromises come at a cost, eroding voters' trust in the process. The study, which involved 7,562 respondents, demonstrates that voters tend to favour parties that remain steadfast in coalition negotiations, irrespective of the negotiation outcomes. This suggests that voters prioritise 'policy representation' over 'responsibility' during the delicate phase of coalition talks.

These findings align with previous research by Gutmann (2014), supporting the notion that individuals' principled tenacity and mutual trust play a role in accepting compromises. Respondents with high levels of principledness and low social trust tend to show lower support for political compromise. Additionally, compromise acceptance is lower among highly populist citizens but higher among individuals with high political interests and those who consider the issue at hand to be salient.

The study also includes an observational cross-sectional analysis based on a Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data from several West European countries to provide a comprehensive view.

Compromise acceptance and trust in politicians

The analysis confirms the relationship between compromise acceptance and trusts in politicians and satisfaction with democracy in most countries. These findings highlight the broader implications of compromise acceptance on political trust and satisfaction.

Although the study focused on compromises during coalition negotiations in Germany, its findings suggest that compromise rejection was prevalent among voters from various political parties.

However, interestingly, supporters of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the winning party in the elections and likely to lead the new government, did not show a higher likelihood of supporting a steadfast candidate. This indicates that the political context can influence perceptions of party compromise. Therefore, comparative studies examining how voters appraise compromises in the context of coalition negotiations would be valuable.

My study's findings paint a somewhat discouraging image of political representation in European democracies. Affective polarisation increased electoral volatility, and the decline of mainstream parties characterised many democracies worldwide, including those in Europe.

As coalition governments become more diverse, cooperation and compromise among ideologically distinct parties become evermore complex.

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Mariken van der Velden – Political Communication
Mariken van der Velden discusses her work as an Associate Professor of Political Communication in the Department of Communication Science.