

Governance beyond the ballot: Norms, populism, and post-election preferences

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In this article, Mariken A.C.G. van der Velden, Professor of Political Communication at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, explores citizens' preferences for government formation

When comparing proportional voting systems with majoritarian ones, scholars often highlight that the former frequently yield inconclusive election outcomes, wherein politicians, rather than voters, determine the composition of the governing parties.

In multiparty democracies, post-election discussions among parties with divergent preferences generally lead to the necessity of compromising on a shared coalition agreement to establish a government. Nevertheless, due to the compromises inherent in coalitions, some critics may label them as undemocratic.

In the present day, both analysts and academics acknowledge prolonged delays in the establishment of coalition governments within Europe. For example, the 2021 Dutch election triggered an unprecedentedly protracted government negotiation process, culminating in a government that collapsed after eighteen months.

Spain, relatively new to national-level coalition governments, experienced failed coalition talks following the 2015 election, resulting in a repeat election in 2016 after months of political deadlock. Concurrently, recent elections have witnessed the growing success of 'populist' challengers like the Alternative for Germany, who prefer an enduring state of 'persistent opposition' rather than participating in government.

Simultaneously, established mainstream parties, such as Italy's Democratic Party, have declined participation in governments alongside their populist counterparts.

Against this backdrop, I discuss citizens' inclinations regarding which party should be entrusted with the mandate to establish the government and which party or parties should be excluded from post-election coalition negotiations and government formation. Limited research has been conducted on citizen preferences concerning coalition government formation or their preferences for specific parties to partake in coalition governments post-election.

Existing studies on public opinion have primarily focused on voters' inclinations toward coalition versus single-party governments before elections and how these preferences influence their voting decisions. While voters might have predispositions for certain government formations before elections, their preferences may shift after the election, influenced by the altered distribution of power.

When the votes are in

What transpires after the ballot counting concludes? As of now, voters' preferences for government formation largely remain unexplored. Below, we formulate new hypotheses to investigate differences in individual preferences concerning government composition post-election.

Building on the aforementioned literature, we specifically analyze how political awareness and populist tendencies might impact (a) preferences for the party with the highest vote share to lead government formation and (b) preferences for collaborating with different parties after the election.

The initial stage of forming a coalition government in multiparty systems involves designating a formateur party to spearhead coalition negotiations and government establishment. Despite variations in constitutional and legal regulations guiding this selection, since 1945, in roughly three out of four non-presidential European democracies, the prime minister comes from the largest party.

In the remaining cases, the formateur role generally falls to the second-largest party. Granting legitimacy to a party for leading government formation may entail voters simultaneously acknowledging the largest party as the formateur and recognizing its victory, even if it isn't their preferred choice. To do so, voters must be familiar with the convention that the largest party typically initiates government formation and must accept this norm.

Regarding the first point, embracing the norm that the largest party guides government formation is likely easier for those well-versed in this norm. When voters possess limited knowledge of political affairs, they are less likely to grasp that the largest party is usually tasked with being the formateur.

In fact, the less acquainted voters are with politics, the less likely they are to be aware of prior patterns of government formation, making them less inclined to internalize the accepted norm that the largest party receives the initial mandate to establish the government.

The voters effect

Accepting the legitimacy of the largest party leading the government might be more challenging for those who challenge established practices and norms. While the definition of populism remains debated, scholars generally agree that populists tend to question

fundamental aspects and institutional structures inherent in pluralist and liberal democracies, including compromise and mediating institutional bodies.

While populist parties often oppose the so-called political ‘establishment’ and core democratic institutions like a free press, populism can also be understood as an individual-level political disposition, notably in the form of an attitude supported by normative and moral justifications for a majoritarian and “authenticist” interpretation of the popular will in political decision-making.

The subsequent step in coalition formation usually entails the formateur party engaging in negotiations with other parties to select coalition partners. Frequently, numerous combinations of parties can constitute majority coalitions, and various coalition options may be viewed as legitimate.

Just as parties hold preferences for preferred coalition partners and ones to avoid, voters might have more or less exclusive preferences concerning government composition. Beyond specific coalition preferences, parties and voters must both be open at this juncture of coalition formation to engage with as many parties as possible, aiming to reach a compromise forming the foundation of an effective coalition.

While arbitrarily excluding potential coalition partners diminishes a party’s bargaining power in forthcoming negotiations, outright rejection of any compromise carries the hefty cost of either an unstable and short-lived minority government or a repetition of elections. Therefore, from both a strategic party perspective and a normative democratic viewpoint, it is desirable for voters to be receptive to coalition agreements with a broad spectrum of parties despite undoubtedly harboring preferences for certain coalitions.

Understanding voter preferences for government formation after elections holds significance for at least two reasons.

Firstly, voter preferences for specific coalitions can impact the outcomes of coalition bargaining, with individuals holding populist attitudes possibly disliking political compromises entirely.

Secondly, the connection between citizens’ preferences and the eventual composition of the government is vital for evaluating the performance of an electoral democracy. Beyond other customary benchmarks, the link between citizen preferences and government formation can influence how citizens perceive the formed government, potentially affecting the legitimacy they attribute to their country’s political institutions.

It’s crucial for voters to perceive the government as a legitimate consequence of election results. If the government’s formation lacks perceived legitimacy, it could have broader implications for trust in political institutions, satisfaction with democracy, and democratic

stability overall. Understanding how voters develop these perceptions and the factors contributing to the escalating polarization in public opinion and the contestation of government formation across Western democracies is of paramount importance.

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