

Following the Coalition? Testing the Impact of Coalitions on Policy Preferences in Germany

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Abstract

Ultimately, electoral democracy is about governments doing what citizens want. However, considerable evidence shows that parties influence citizens' preferences. Most studies on party influence rely on experimental designs which present participants with parties' positions. The disadvantage of this approach is that many citizens are already aware of those positions, thus underestimating party influence. Meanwhile, few studies assess reactions to real changes in party positions, which avoids this limitation. In response, we break new ground by assessing the impact of changes in coalition governments, which lead to changes in party positions that are partly exogenous to elite and mass preferences, on partisans' preferences. Using panel data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), we leverage the changing coalitions led by the Christian Democrats in Germany in recent years. We find that coalitions influence partisans' policy preferences. Our findings have significant implications for how we think about democratic representation in multi-party contexts.

Keywords: Parties; Public Opinion; Party Cues; Representation; Coalitions; Germany

1 Introduction

Elections are a key mechanism by which citizens get government to do what they want (Powell, 2000). According to conventional models of political representation, citizens select parties on the basis of their policy preferences. In turn, government parties adopt popular policies in order to maximize their vote shares (e.g. Downs, 1957). However, in recent years, considerable evidence has accumulated that, rather than signaling their preferences to political elites, citizens “follow” parties. When an issue becomes salient and/or when partisans learn their party’s policy positions on a particular issue, partisans adopt that position as their own (Lenz, 2012). Recently, scholars have explained this phenomenon by partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). Partisans adopt their party’s positions to show their support for it.

Most existing scholarship exploring this phenomenon has been experimental. Studies beginning with Cohen (2003) have shown that people’s policy preferences are closer to their party’s positions when they read cues from them. However, few studies on party cue effects have shown that citizens respond to changes in party positions in the real world (For a rare exception, see Slothuus, 2010). Situations in which parties change positions may be the most interesting situation in which to consider party cue effects. Citizens often already know their party’s position and, therefore, experiments may underestimate the effects of cues (Slothuus, 2016).

Finding situations in which parties shift positions for reasons that are independent of their partisans’ preferences is difficult. As Downs (1957) argued, parties have a strong incentive to keep the same positions over time. However, parties are often forced to change positions in multi-party contexts in which coalition governments are common. When parties join coalitions, they are frequently forced to compromise their policy positions. Moreover, recent evidence has shown that citizens are aware of coalition compromises (Adams, Ezrow and Wlezien, 2016; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). Partisans may learn that their party has new policy positions and change their own positions. Consequently, when parties are forced to change their positions, their partisans may in turn change their policy preferences.

There is another way coalitions could influence partisans’ preferences. When one party forms a

coalition with another, the former signals that its new partner is acceptable. Given prior evidence that parties influence attitudes (e.g. Bullock, 2011; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013), parties may influence their partisans' feelings about coalition partners and, in turn, partisans may adopt the new partner's policy positions.

Exploring whether coalitions influence citizens' policy preferences informs the long-running debate about policy representation. Lenz (2012) suggests, if voters follow parties rather than lead them, it is difficult for them to get government to realize their preferences. Moreover, assessments of the quality of representation in contexts of coalition government must consider that the policy preferences whose implementation they assess are partly endogenous to party positions. Many studies have assessed the congruence between citizens' policy preferences and government positions (e.g. Blais and Bodet, 2006; Huber and Powell, 1994; Golder and Lloyd, 2014). If citizens change their preferences in response to government formation, congruence may be achieved by changes in preferences by citizens, not merely by changes in government.

We focus on recent changes in coalition governments in Germany under Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) as well as its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). We focus on Germany because it is a parliamentary system with proportion representation and has had multi-party government since its postwar constitution was adopted in 1949. It can thus be seen as a typical case of coalition government (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). More interestingly for our study are the changes in coalitions that have taken place since 2005. Since then, Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Union (CDU), as well as its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), have twice changed coalition partners. Three of the four Merkel governments have been "grand coalitions" between the CDU, the CSU, and the Social Democratic Party (the SPD, 2005-2009, 2013-2017, and 2018-present), while the other was a centre-right administration with the liberal Free Democratic Party (2009-2013). Germany thus provides a compelling case to test the effects of changes in coalitions on citizens' preferences. We leverage the transitions between this centre-right coalition and Merkel's grand coalitions to study the effects of changes in coalitions on the policy preferences of the coalition parties' partisans. Partisan motivated reasoning leads us to expect that changes in coalitions lead to changes in partisans' policy preferences.

We use panel data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). It allows us to track

the same voters over time and assess whether they shifted their perceptions of their parties' positions, their attitudes towards other parties, as well as their policy preferences when new coalitions were formed. More concretely, these data allow us to assess voters' reaction to Angela Merkel's replacement of her first grand coalition with the SPD from 2005 to 2009 with a centre-right coalition with the FDP in 2009 and her subsequent replacement of that coalition with a second grand coalition in 2013 (2013-2017). On important policy dimensions, the FDP and the CDU/CSU, on the one hand, and the SPD, on the other hand, have strikingly distinct positions. We expect these coalitions to have changed the perceptions that partisans of the coalition partners have of their parties' policy positions, to have changed their attitudes towards the new and old coalition partners, and, most importantly, and to have changed their policy preferences on dimensions on which the old and new coalition partners have contrasting positions. Our results provide strong support for most of these expectations.

Our paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we review the literature on partisan motivated reasoning and on citizens' behavior in coalition contexts before laying out our expectations. The next section then outlines our research strategy. We then present our analyses. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for the broader literature on the impact of coalitions on democratic representation.

2 Party Cues, Coalitions and Policy Preferences

Scholars of political behavior have long argued that citizens' policy preferences are at least partly dependent on their orientations toward parties. According to one perspective, when citizens make decisions, they use parties as heuristics to make up for low levels of political knowledge (Downs, 1957; Kam, 2005). Others argue that citizens identify with parties and seek to show support for their parties by adopting political attitudes that are consistent with their positions (Belknap and Campbell, 1952; Campbell et al., 1960). Recently, several authors have combined earlier theory about party identification with the theory of motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; Lodge and Taber, 2013). These authors have called partisans' tendency to adopt their parties' position to show support for them partisan motivated reasoning (Bolsen, Druckman and Cook, 2014; Druckman, Peterson and

Slothuus, 2013; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014).

Findings that parties influence preferences became much more convincing when the research design used in such studies was greatly improved. Beginning with (Cohen, 2003), scholars began to use experimental data to show that party positions influence citizens' preferences. When participants are shown their party's position on a policy issue, and often the other major party's position (in the American context) as well, they adjust their opinions in the direction of their party's position. Countless experimental studies have documented the party cue phenomenon in the United States (Bullock, 2011; Druckman, Peterson and Slothuus, 2013) and elsewhere (Bullock, 2011; Guntermann, 2017).

While party cue effects are pervasive, there is a key limitation to the study of the influence of parties: studies may find weak or nonexistent party cue effects if citizens are already aware of party positions (Slothuus, 2016). Given that citizens have frequently been exposed to party cues before an experiment, a more fruitful approach to studying party influence may be to observe real-world changes in party positions. Existing studies of such changes are rare (Slothuus, 2010) because changes in party positions are uncommon (Downs, 1957) and the necessary panel data to study the effects of such changes are almost never available. We consider one type of context in which parties are forced to change their positions. In multi-party contexts, parties frequently are forced to form coalition governments in order to command a majority in the legislature. A number of motivations have been ascribed to parties when seeking to form coalitions (Martin and Stevenson, 2001). While similarity in policy preferences is one factor that has been associated with coalition formation (Axelrod, 1970; de Swaan, 1973), another is simply forming the smallest coalition possible in order to maximize a party's control of government offices (Gamson, 1961; Riker, 1962). Thus, parties frequently form coalitions for reasons that have nothing to do with policy.

However, coalitions have major implications for policy. Coalitions lead to policy compromise (Martin and Vanberg, 2014) and citizens are aware of such compromises (Adams, Ezrow and Wlezien, 2016; Fortunato and Stevenson, 2013). Consequently, coalitions induce parties to change positions at least partly for reasons that have nothing to do with their own policy preferences or with citizens' preferences and citizens are aware of these changes. Partisan motivated reasoning would lead us to expect that citizens then follow these changes.

There are two ways that coalitions may influence people's policy preferences. First, they may lead citizens to change their perceptions of their party's positions. However, coalitions should only lead to important changes in perceptions of positions if the new partner has positions that sharply contrast with those of the previous partner (or with the party in question itself). Second, coalitions should change partisans' attitudes towards parties' old and new coalition partners. By coalescing, parties signal that other parties are acceptable. Partisans of coalition parties should thus become more favorable towards their parties' new coalition partner and less favorable towards their old partner, when their party no longer signals its acceptability. In turn, they should become more supportive of their new partners' policies and less supportive of their old partner's policies. This second mechanism also requires that there be an important contrast between the policy positions of the new partner and the old partner or at least between the new partner and the party in question. We consider their positions to be contrasting when the two coalition partners are on opposite sides of a policy dimension relative to the party that remains in government.

Our strongest expectation is among partisans of parties that remain in government over time but change their coalition partners. When such a party changes its coalition partner, we expect its partisans to shift their perceptions of the party's policy positions in the direction of the new partner and away from its old partner as long as the partners are on opposite sides of the party that remains in government on the policy dimension in question. We also expect them to become more positive about the new coalition partner and more negative about the old partner. Finally, we expect them to adjust their own preferences in the direction of the new partner. More concretely, when the CDU/CSU changed their coalition partner from the SPD to the FDP in 2009, we expect CDU/CSU partisans to have observed a shift to the right by their party, to have become more positive about the FDP and more negative about the SPD. Finally, we expect Christian Democratic partisans themselves to have shifted to the right because of these two mechanisms.

We also expect changes among parties that enter or leave coalitions. When a party enters a coalition with a party on the other side of a policy divide, its partisans should perceive that it shifts towards the centre. Conversely, when a party leaves a coalition with a party on the other side of a dimension, its partisans should perceive a movement away from the centre. They should also become more positive about the new coalition partner and more negative about the old partner.

Moreover, we expect partisans of a party that enters a coalition to adjust their policy preferences in the direction of the positions of their new partner. Partisans of a party that leaves a coalition should move their policy preferences away from their old partner.

Concretely, when the SPD entered the second grand coalition with the CDU and CSU in 2013, we expect its partisans to have shifted their perceptions of its positions to the right on policy dimensions on which it has contrasting positions with the CDU. We also expect them to have become more positive about the CDU and to have shifted their policy preferences in the direction of the CDU's positions. Furthermore, when the Social Democrats left government with the CDU and CSU in 2009, we expect their partisans to have shifted their perceptions of its positions to the left, to have become less positive about the CDU, and to have moved their own positions to the left.

We do not expect such changes on policy dimensions on which the CDU and SPD have similar positions because coalition participation does not signal a change in what the parties consider acceptable on that dimension. That is notably the case on immigration and European integration on which both the CDU and the SPD have positions that are favorable to newcomers and a stronger role in Europe.

We do not expect partisans of the FDP to have shifted their perceptions of their party's positions when it joined the coalition with the CDU and CSU 2009 or when it left it in 2013 because the FDP and the CDU/CSU do not have strongly contrasting positions on major policy dimensions. We do expect FDP partisans to have become more positive about the CDU in 2009 and less positive about that party in 2013, but, because the two parties do not have contrasting positions on most issues, we do not expect either transition to have influenced their partisans' preferences. As a result, we also do not expect FDP partisans to have adjusted their policy preferences when their party entered or left government.

Table 1 sums up our expectations of reactions by each partisan group to the coalition changes we consider in this paper.

Coalition Change	Reaction by	Perceived Change	Party Ratings	Preferences
CDU replaces SPD with FDP in 2009	CDU/CSU partisans	CDU to the right	Like FDP More Like SPD Less	Move to the right
	SPD partisans FDP partisans	SPD to the left No change by FDP	Like CDU less Like CDU more	Move to the left No change
CDU replaces FDP with SPD in 2013	CDU/CSU partisans	CDU to the left	Like SPD more Like FDP Less	Move to the left
	FDP partisans SPD partisans	No change by FDP SPD to the right	Like CDU less Like CDU more	No change Move to the right

Table 1: Expectations

When should coalitions influence partisans’ preferences? We argue that the answer depends on whether parties that form government express clear preferences about the coalition they want to form before the election. In other words, parties frequently send out coalition signals. In some elections, they clearly state with which party (or parties) they intend to form a coalition (or with which they do not want to form a coalition). In others, they either express no or ambiguous coalition signals.

When parties express clear coalition preferences, we expect the effects of coalition formation to start at the beginning of the election campaign. When parties do not send out coalition signals or send out ambiguous signals, we expect the effects of coalitions to occur at the time the coalition is formed.

The 2009 and 2013 elections represent these different situations. In 2009, both the CDU/CSU and FDP had made it clear that their preferred outcome was governing together (Decker and Best, 2010; Krewel, Schmitt-Beck and Wolsing, 2011). Survey respondents took notice. In wave 5 (about three weeks before the election), GLES asked respondents which coalition they thought was most likely to be formed and 60.7% answered CDU/CSU-FDP. In 2013, the coalition situation was much less clear. While the FDP expressed a strong preference for forming a government with the CDU and CSU, the CDU did not commit to such a coalition and discussed a CDU-SPD coalition as an alternative option (Gschwend, Stoetzer and Zittlau, 2016). Consequently, we focus on assessing changes at different points in time in each year. In 2009, we consider effects of coalitions from the beginning of the campaign to the moment the coalition was formed, while, in 2013, we only consider changes that occurred following coalition formation (i.e. after the election).

3 Case Selection, Background, and Research Strategy

3.1 Case Selection and Background

Given that Germany is a multi-party democracy with proportional representation and where coalitions are the norm, it bears all the hallmarks of a typical case of coalition government (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) and is thus an ideal context to test our expectations about the effects of coalitions on policy preferences. Germany is particularly interesting because, in recent years, it has experienced very different coalitions. Chancellor Angela Merkel has formed both centrist grand coalitions and a center-right coalition. From 2005 to 2009, her Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU) formed a centrist coalition with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). From 2009 to 2013, they then formed a center-right government with the center-right Free Democratic Party (FDP). Finally, since 2013, the CDU/CSU have been in grand coalitions with the SPD.

The CDU and CSU have been in government consistently throughout this period. However, they changed coalition partners twice. Moreover, the coalition partners were on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum as well as on other policy dimensions. The German case under Merkel thus provides us with an exceptional context to study changes in policy preferences caused by coalitions.

3.2 Data and Modeling Strategy

Our data come from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) study. We use data from the short-term panel component of the GLES for the 2009 and 2013 elections. We graphically present data from all available waves and test changes using waves 1 and 7 in 2009 and 6, 7, 10, and 11 in 2013 (depending on when questions about the dimensions in question were asked).¹

In both cases, respondents were interviewed repeatedly during the election year and they were re-interviewed the year of the subsequent election year (2013 and 2017, respectively). In all cases, we consider the policy preferences before and after the coalition was formed of respondents who identified with each coalition party prior to coalition formation (or before the campaign began when

¹Tables S1 and S2 in the Supplementary Appendix show the waves of each study, their dates and the questions we use from each.

coalition signals are present).

We use change-score models of perceptions of party positions (Finkel, 1995). In our first set of models, our dependent variable is the difference between the preference of an individual before coalition formation and the preference of the same respondent following coalition formation. Our primary independent variables of interest are dummies indicating that a respondent identifies with a party that was in a coalition during the period covered by our study (that is, identifies with the CDU, CSU, SPD, or FDP), with respondents having an identification with each party coded 1 and those who do not coded 0. In our change-score models, we also include standard controls used in the study of German voting behavior, namely a respondent’s age, gender, and whether they reside in East Germany or not.

Our models do not control for lagged dependent variables because the traditional conception of partisanship assumes it is mostly fixed and unlikely to change over time (Campbell et al., 1960). Consequently, it is likely to be mostly uninfluenced by lagged policy views. Moreover, given the prior literature on party cue effects, it is reasonable to expect prior policy views to be influenced by partisanship, and, therefore, lagged policy preferences would constitute a “bad” control (Angrist and Pischke, 2008). We assume that if parties had not changed their coalition partner (i.e., if there had been no treatment), policy preferences would move in parallel rather than regressing to the mean. Thus a change score model is more appropriate than a model with a lagged dependent variable (Morgan and Winship, 2007).

4 Results: Does coalition membership lead partisans to change their perceptions of party positions?

Figure 1 shows perceptions of the CDU and the SPD’s ideological positions by their partisans in 2009 and figure 2 shows analogous perceptions in 2013. As in all analyses in this paper, we hold partisanship constant by assessing party affiliation using identification measured before the parties announced the coalition that would be formed (wave 1 in 2009 and wave 7 in 2013).

As there were no surveys with ideological perception questions conducted between election years

and to make the figures more legible, we separate them by year. We include 95% confidence intervals for the values at the time points we compare. Recall that, in 2009, we expect CDU/CSU partisans to perceive a movement to the right by the CDU and SPD partisans to perceive a movement to the left by their party when it was clear that the CDU and CSU would form a coalition with the FDP. The perception of the change by the CDU by CDU/CSU partisans is significant ($p=0.04$, all tests reported in this section are single-tailed paired t-tests). However, we found no evidence that SPD partisans saw their party as significantly moving to the left in 2009 ($p=0.79$).

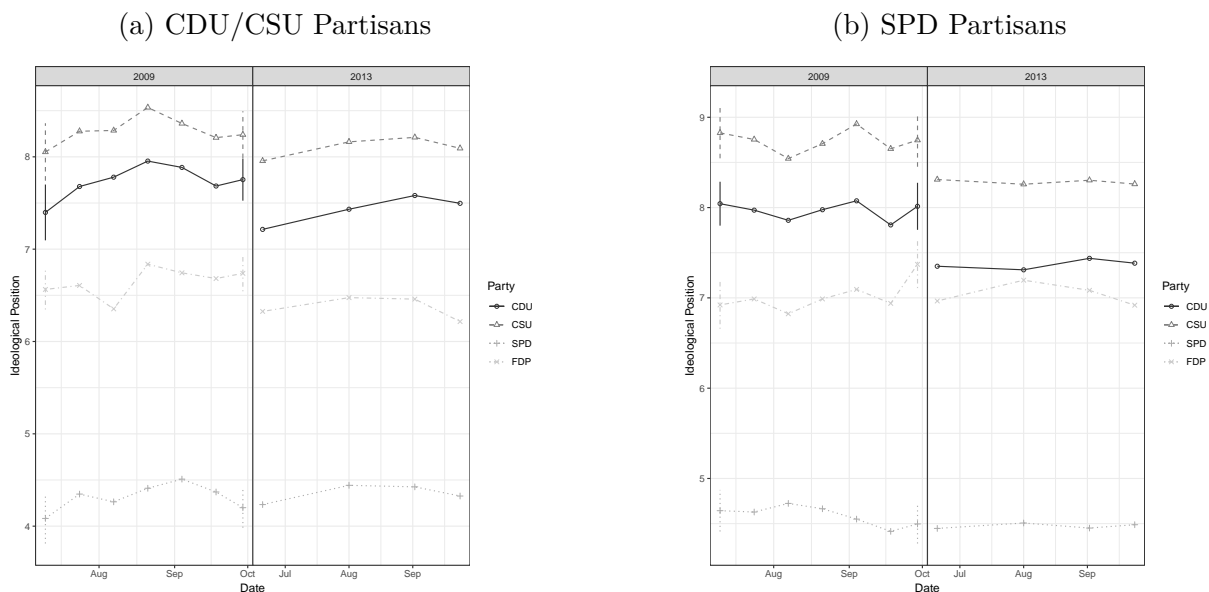


Figure 1: Perceptions of Ideological Positions by Partisans Over Time (2009)

Note: these graphs show perceptions of parties' ideological positions over time among respondents who identified as partisans of each party in the first wave of the 2009-2013 panel (July 2009).

In 2013, we expect CDU/CSU partisans to have perceived a movement to the left by the CDU following the formation of the second grand coalition. We also expect Social Democratic partisans to perceive a movement to the right by their party. Figure 2 shows that Christian Democrats perceived a significant shift to the left by their party in 2013 ($p=0.00$). It also shows that SPD partisans perceived a shift to the right by their party ($p=0.00$).

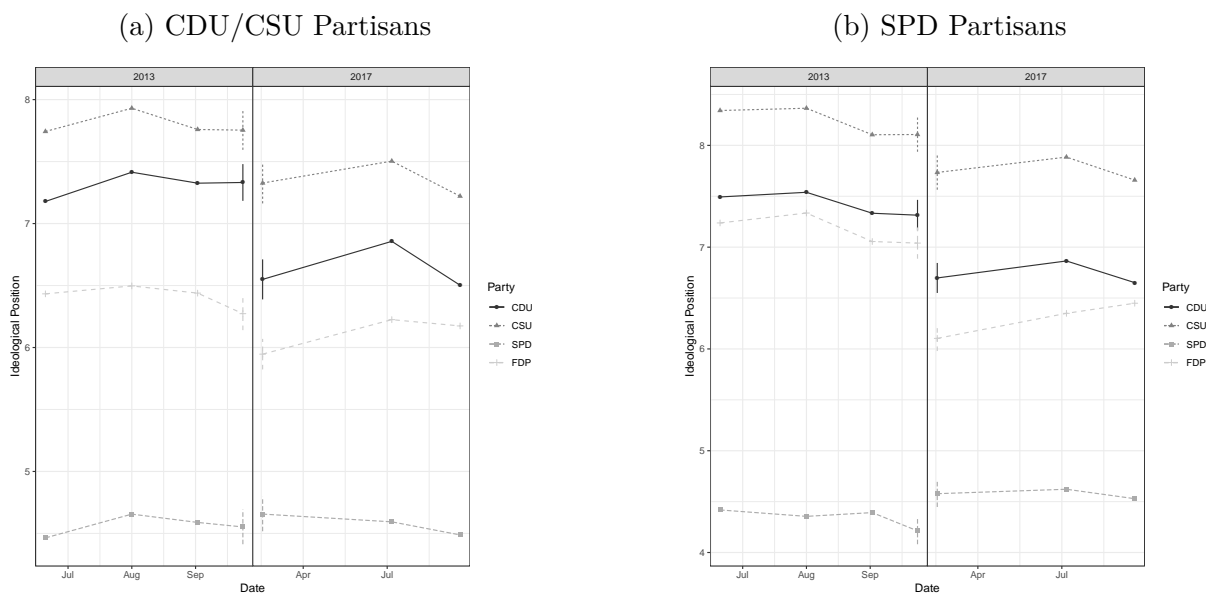


Figure 2: Perceptions of Ideological Positions by partisans Over Time (2013)

Note: these graphs show perceptions of parties' ideological positions over time among respondents who identified as partisans of each party in the seventh wave of the 2013-2017 panel (October-November 2013).

We also consider perceptions of changes of the FDP's ideological position by its partisans. As expected, we did not find significant changes in perceptions of its left-right position towards the CDU in 2009 or away from that party in 2013.² In sum, as expected, we found that CDU/CSU partisans perceived a shift by their party to the left in 2009 and to the right in 2013. We also found that SPD partisans perceived a shift by their party to the right in 2013 but not to the left in 2009. In sum, in three of four cases of a party forming a coalition with a party with contrasting positions, partisans adjusted their perceptions of their parties' positions following coalition formation.

5 Results: Does Coalition Formation Influence Partisans' Attitudes Towards Coalition Partners?

The second way we expect coalition agreements to affect partisans' preferences is by influencing how they feel about their incoming and outgoing coalition partners. We expect partisans to become more favorable towards parties with which their parties enter coalition agreements and less favorable towards parties with which they leave coalitions. Here, the expectation is that changes among

²Results for the FDP are in the Supplementary Appendix (Section S2)

partisans were greater than changes among non-partisans. In other words, we adopt a differences-in-differences design. While all partisan groups may move in a particular direction due to changes that influence all of them, following implies that a given partisan group changes more than others.

To test our expectations about the effect of coalitions on attitudes towards coalition partners, we run regressions of changes in ratings of each of the parties that participated in coalitions during this period on dummy variables indicating identification with each of these parties. These dummies allow us to compare changes among those identifiers to citizens who identify with a party that was not involved in coalitions during this period or who simply do not have a party identification. We assume that this comparison group is unaffected by coalition formation.

Table 2 shows regression results for 2009. Columns are labeled with the name of the party being evaluated. We can see that, as expected, CDU/CSU partisans became significantly more positive about their new coalition partner in 2009, the FDP, and more negative about their old partner, the SPD, than other partisans. However, neither FDP nor SPD identifiers changed their attitudes towards the CDU significantly more than other respondents.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	CDU	FDP	SPD
Intercept	-0.19 (0.26)	0.16 (0.30)	0.18 (0.28)
CDU/CSU Identifier	-0.12 (0.19)	0.76* (0.21)	-0.59* (0.20)
FDP Identifier	0.26 (0.29)	-0.23 (0.33)	-0.27 (0.31)
SPD Identifier	-0.29 (0.19)	-0.33 (0.21)	-0.73* (0.20)
Age	0.00 (0.01)	-0.01* (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Female	-0.04 (0.15)	0.05 (0.17)	-0.46* (0.16)
East Germany	0.09 (0.26)	0.11 (0.29)	-0.05 (0.28)
<i>N</i>	697	691	696
<i>R</i> ²	0.01	0.04	0.03
adj. <i>R</i> ²	-0.00	0.03	0.03
Resid. sd	1.91	2.18	2.06

Standard errors in parentheses

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Models of Changes in Party Ratings (2009)

Table 3 shows the results for 2013. We can see that CDU/CSU partisans became more positive about their new coalition partner, the SPD, but did not significantly lower their evaluations of their former partner, the FDP (although they strongly lowered their ratings of that party before the coalition was formed. See Figure S3(b) in the Supplementary Appendix). As expected, SPD identifiers became more favorable towards the CDU between 2013 and 2017. Moreover, FDP partisans did not become significantly more negative about the CDU at this time. In short, there is some evidence that partisans change their ratings of coalition partners to reflect changes in coalitions. That is particularly the case with CDU/CSU partisans, who moved their preferences in the expected direction most of the time.

	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	CDU	FDP	SPD
Intercept	0.01 (0.20)	0.67* (0.20)	-0.24 (0.21)
CDU/CSU Identifier	-1.11* (0.13)	-0.01 (0.13)	1.25* (0.14)
FDP Identifier	-0.40 (0.34)	-0.23 (0.33)	0.83* (0.35)
SPD Identifier	0.59* (0.12)	0.45* (0.12)	-0.48* (0.13)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Female	-0.30* (0.10)	0.04 (0.10)	0.20 (0.11)
East Germany	-0.30* (0.12)	0.33* (0.12)	0.05 (0.13)
N	2187	2175	2171
adj. R^2	0.06	0.01	0.06

Standard errors in parentheses

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 3: Models of Changes in Party Ratings (2013)

6 Results: Following on the Left-Right Dimension

As explained above, we expect coalition agreements under Angela Merkel to have influenced citizens' ideological positions because the CDU/CSU's coalition partners, the FDP and SPD, were on opposite sides of each other on that dimension. When the CDU changed coalition partners from the SPD to

the FDP in 2009, we expect Christian Democratic partisans to have moved to the right. Conversely, when the CDU moved back to a coalition with the SPD in 2013, its supporters should have moved to the left. We also expect SPD partisans to have moved to the left when the SPD left its coalition with CDU/CSU in 2009 and to the right when the Social Democrats entered a new coalition with the CDU/CSU in 2013.

To assess these expectations, Figures 3(a) and 3(b) plots out mean ideological self-placements by partisans of parties that were in coalitions during the time period covered by this paper in 2009 and 2013-2017. They show ideology over time among respondents who indicated that they identified with each party at the beginning of the panel (July 2009) for the 2009-2013 graph and right before coalition formation for the 2013-2017 graph (September-October 2013). As above, we show confidence intervals at the time points that we compare in analyses. Readers should recall that we consider changes during the election year in 2009 and between 2013 and 2017 for 2013 because the coalition that would be formed was clear before the election in 2009 but not in 2013. We can see that, as expected, CDU/CSU partisans moved to the right in 2009 and to the left in 2013. Conversely, SPD partisans moved to the left in 2009 and to the right in 2013.

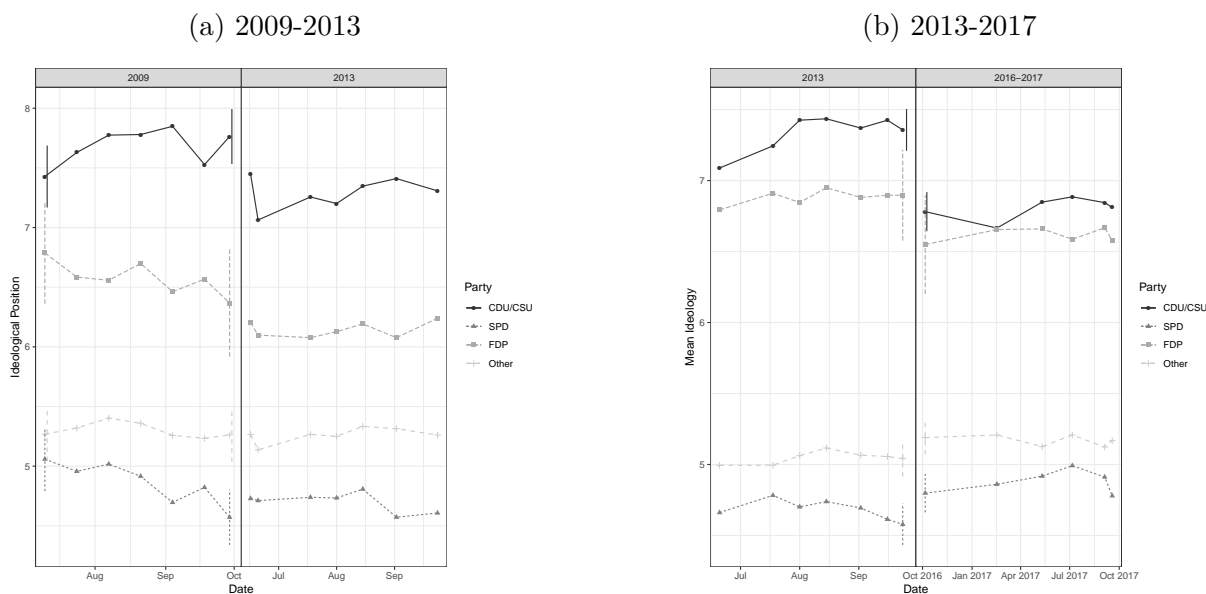


Figure 3: Mean Ideological Self-Placements by Partisan Group Over Time

We regress changes in ideological self-placements on partisanship dummies and controls. In subsequent models we also add variables corresponding to the two mechanisms we propose. We also

add a possible alternative explanatory variable, attitudes towards Angela Merkel. Results are in Tables 4 and 5.

Model 7 in Table 4 simply compares changes in ideological positions among identifiers of each of the main coalition parties to respondents who do not identify with these parties. As expected, we can see that CDU/CSU identifiers significantly moved to the right in 2009, while those who identified with the SPD significantly moved to the left more than other respondents. FDP identifiers, as expected, did not change their ideological positions any more than other respondents.

Model 8 adds variables assessing our first mechanism, changes in perceived ideological positions. Applying the conventional approach to causal mediation developed by Baron and Kenny (1986), we should observe that coefficients weaken as mediators are added. Because we expect mediating variables to impact different partisan groups in different ways (partisans should be influenced by changes in their party's position), we interact each variable with the relevant party identification dummies. After adding each mediator variable, the main effects of the party identification dummies thus reflect the effects that are not mediated by the variable in question. In Table 4, we can see that when we add changes in perceptions of the parties' positions, the coefficients on the CDU/CSU and SPD dummies lose their significance (Model 7). Model 9 adds changes in attitudes towards coalition partners instead of changes in perceptions of party positions. We can see that the coefficients on the CDU/CSU and SPD party identification dummies again fail to reach conventional significance levels. Model 10 adds both sets of mediators and we can see that the coefficients on the two relevant party identification dummies become even weaker. Thus, the following effects we found in 2009 are due to a combination of changes in perceptions of party positions due to coalitions and to changes in ratings of coalition partners.

Model 11 tests a rival explanation, which is that Germans were merely reacting to Merkel rather than to changes in coalitions. It adds evaluations of Merkel (on a like/dislike scale from -5 to +5) from the same wave as party identification (wave 1 in 2009). If attitudes towards Merkel account for our findings, we would expect those who like her more to move in the same direction as the coalition, while those who dislike her would move in the opposite direction. We can see that the Merkel rating variable has a weak non-significant coefficient. The coefficient on the CDU/CSU identifier dummy does weaken and become non-significant. However, that on the SPD identification dummy becomes

somewhat stronger. Thus, there is little evidence that Germans were simply reacting to Merkel rather than to the coalition itself.

	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Intercept	0.41 (0.22)	0.30 (0.23)	0.51* (0.22)	0.42 (0.23)	0.43 (0.23)
CDU/CSU Identifier	0.39* (0.16)	0.27 (0.16)	0.30 (0.16)	0.21 (0.16)	0.32 (0.18)
FDP Identifier	-0.11 (0.25)	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.16 (0.24)	-0.17 (0.24)	-0.15 (0.25)
SPD Identifier	-0.39* (0.16)	-0.29 (0.16)	-0.29 (0.16)	-0.22 (0.16)	-0.42* (0.16)
Age	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.02* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Female	0.19 (0.13)	0.10 (0.13)	0.16 (0.13)	0.09 (0.13)	0.17 (0.13)
East Germany	0.08 (0.22)	0.14 (0.22)	0.09 (0.22)	0.12 (0.22)	0.08 (0.22)
Perceived Ideology Change CDU		0.07 (0.05)		0.07 (0.05)	
Perceived Ideology Change FDP		0.03 (0.05)		0.02 (0.05)	
Perceived Ideology Change SPD		-0.02 (0.04)		-0.02 (0.04)	
CDU ID*Perceived Ideology Change CDU		0.40* (0.08)		0.40* (0.08)	
FDP ID*Perceived Ideology Change FDP		0.56* (0.13)		0.45* (0.14)	
SPD ID*Perceived Ideology Change SPD		0.27* (0.10)		0.24* (0.10)	
Change in Rating of the SPD			-0.04 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)	
Change in Rating of the FDP			0.03 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	
Change in Rating of the CDU			0.07 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	
CDU ID*Change in Rating of the SPD			-0.09 (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)	
CDU ID*Change in Rating of the FDP			0.05 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	
SPD ID*Change in Rating of the CDU			0.17* (0.08)	0.19* (0.08)	
FDP ID*Change in Rating of the CDU			0.43* (0.13)		
FDP ID*Change in Rating of the CDU				0.29* (0.13)	
Prior Merkel Rating					0.01 (0.02)
<i>N</i>	612	532	602	525	609
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.17	0.09	0.20	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 4: Models of Following on the Left-Right Dimension in 2009

Table 5 shows the results for 2013. Model 12 shows that CDU/CSU identifiers moved to the left between 2013 and 2016 more than other respondents. FDP partisans moved in the same direction as the CDU. We discuss this anomaly below. SPD identifiers did not move significantly more in a rightward direction than other respondents. We thus focus on assessing the role of each of the mechanisms on the effect of coalitions on CDU/CSU identifiers. Models 13 and 14, respectively, include perceived changes in parties' positions and changes in ratings of the parties. Including each set of variables lowers the coefficient on the CDU/CSU dummy. However, it remains significant. Only when including both (Model 15), do we see a major reduction in the size of that coefficient, which then becomes insignificant. Thus, both mechanisms account for the shift by CDU/CSU partisans.

Model 16 allows us to assess whether feelings about Merkel account for the shift by CDU/CSU partisans. We include Merkel ratings from the same wave as party identification (wave 7, September-October 2013). Merkel evaluations have a significantly negative relationship with changes in ideological self-placements and including Merkel ratings lowers the coefficient on the CDU/CSU identification dummy but not as much as either including changes in perceived ideological positions or changes in ratings of coalition partners.³ Thus, while attitudes towards Merkel account for part of the shift by CDU/CSU identifiers, they do not account for all of it.

³Note that when we include both sets of mediation variables as well as ratings of Merkel, the coefficient on the CDU/CSU identification dummy drops to -0.11, not shown

	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14	Model 15	Model 16
Intercept	-0.05 (0.16)	-0.22 (0.17)	-0.19 (0.16)	-0.40* (0.17)	-0.13 (0.16)
CDU/CSU Identifier	-0.75* (0.10)	-0.48* (0.12)	-0.44* (0.13)	-0.22 (0.13)	-0.54* (0.13)
FDP Identifier	-0.58* (0.26)	-0.30 (0.26)	-0.43 (0.27)	-0.02 (0.28)	-0.44 (0.26)
SPD Identifier	0.05 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.05 (0.10)	-0.18 (0.11)	0.04 (0.10)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Female	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.00 (0.09)	-0.05 (0.08)
East Germany	0.12 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)	0.10 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.10)	0.14 (0.10)
Perceived Ideology Change CDU		-0.05 (0.03)		-0.04 (0.03)	
Perceived Ideology Change FDP		-0.05 (0.02)		-0.03 (0.02)	
Perceived Ideology Change SPD		-0.06* (0.03)		-0.06* (0.03)	
CDU*Perceived Ideology Change CDU		0.30* (0.05)		0.31* (0.05)	
FDP*Perceived Ideology Change FDP		0.38* (0.15)		0.46* (0.15)	
SPD*Perceived Ideology Change SPD		0.43* (0.06)		0.42* (0.06)	
Change in Rating of the FDP			0.08* (0.02)	0.08* (0.02)	
Change in Rating of the SPD			-0.14* (0.02)	-0.13* (0.02)	
Change in Rating of the CDU			0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	
CDU ID*Change in Rating of the FDP			-0.11* (0.04)	-0.12* (0.04)	
CDU ID*Change in Rating of the SPD			0.10* (0.04)	0.12* (0.05)	
FDP ID*Change in Rating of the CDU			-0.02 (0.13)	0.09 (0.12)	
SPD ID*Change in Rating of the CDU			-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)	
Prior Rating of Merkel					-0.05* (0.02)
<i>N</i>	1885	1439	1842	1413	1879
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.03	0.09	0.06	0.12	0.04

Standard errors in parentheses

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Models of Following on the Left-Right Dimension in 2013

We have found that CDU/CSU partisans adjusted their ideological positions in the direction of their coalition partners in 2009 and 2013. As expected, they moved in the direction of the new partner which was on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. SPD partisans only significantly shifted their positions in the direction of their coalition partner in 2009. We next consider following on specific policy dimensions on which we can consider how partisans react to changes in coalition partners that are either located on opposite sides of a policy dimension or on the same side.

7 Following on Specific Policy Dimensions

The previous section considered whether partisans adjust their overall left-right positions in response to changes in coalitions. Do they also shift their preferences on more specific policy questions? We now consider preferences in five policy areas: a taxation and spending scale, a climate change scale, an immigration scale, an immigrant integration scale, and a European integration scale. On the first two scales, the SPD and FDP have clearly contrasting positions. Perceptions of these are available in the 2013-2017 study (see Section S5 of Supplementary Appendix).⁴ We, therefore, expect changes in coalitions to have influenced CDU/CSU partisans' preferences. On these two dimensions, the SPD and the CDU/CSU also have contrasting positions. We, thus, expect the 2013 grand coalition to have influenced SPD partisans' preferences on them.⁵ On the other three dimensions, the parties have similar positions. We, consequently, do not expect any changes by partisan groups on them.

As with ideological self-placements, we assess following by regressing changes in self-placements on partisanship dummies and controls. We first consider movement on the taxation and spending scale. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 means they want higher taxes and higher government spending and 7 means they want lower taxes and less government spending.⁶ As with the left-right dimension, the SPD has been on the opposite side of this dimension from the FDP (and from the CDU/CSU) throughout the period covered by this

⁴Note that the same questions were asked in the 2009-2013 study. However, the GLES ran split-sample scale experiments making it impossible to compare responses over time.

⁵Note that it is difficult to test differences in perceptions of party positions between the period before the coalition was formed and the period after it was formed because the GLES asked respondents about their CDU/CSU together for the earlier period and the CDU and CSU separately after that. In the model below, changes in perceptions of CDU's positions are based on comparisons of the position of the CDU/CSU before the coalition was formed to the position of the CDU after it was formed.

⁶Note that we re-scaled this scale to make higher values correspond to more right-wing positions.

study. Thus, we should expect coalition formation to influence the preferences of CDU/CSU and SPD partisans on this issue. The results of Model 17 in Table 6 show that CDU/CSU Identifiers moved to the left on this dimension after the coalition was formed in 2013.⁷ However, SPD identifiers did not significantly move to the right.

Respondents were asked about another issue on which the SPD has a position that sharply contrasted with that of the CDU, CSU, and FDP: climate change. The 1 to 7 scale assessed how much priority respondents attributed to fighting climate change and promoting the economy. Higher values indicate a greater priority for the economy. The expectations and results are the same as on the taxes and spending scale. Once again, CDU/CSU partisans moved to the left on this dimension, but SPD identifiers did not.

The other three issue scales are dimensions on which the CDU/CSU and its 2009-2013 and 2013-2017 partners have similar positions. The GLES asked respondents how open they want Germany to be to immigrants on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 means they want to facilitate immigration the most and 7 that they want to restrict it to the most. On this issue, the median GLES respondent placed the CDU/CSU, the FDP, and the SPD at 4. Given the similarity in positions on this issue, there is no reason to expect the 2013 coalition to have led any of the partisan groups to change their attitudes.

Respondents were also asked to place themselves on a related immigrant integration scale ranging from 1 to 7, where 1 means that foreigners should be able to live according to their own culture and 7 means that foreigners should fully adapt to German culture.⁸ We do not have data on parties' positions on this dimension or on respondents' perceptions of those positions. However, it is safe to assume that positions are similar to those on openness to immigration.

The fifth dimension is about European integration. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 means they want to promote European integration the most and 7 that they want to promote it the least. According to the last wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) carried out prior to the 2013 election (2010), the CDU, SPD, and FDP had essentially

⁷Note that we compare waves 7 and 10 in models of spending, climate, and immigration preferences. In models of integration and European integration preferences, we compare waves 6 and 10.

⁸Note that, as with the tax and spending dimension presented above, we changed the scale so that higher values represent more right-wing positions.

identical positions on European integration (around 6 on the CHES' scale from 1 to 7, where 7 indicates the strongest level of support) (Bakker et al., 2015).

As we can see, results confirm our expectations. Old and new coalition partners have similar positions on these dimensions and none of the partisan groups shifted their preferences at this time.

	Model 17	Model 18	Model 19	Model 20	Model 21
	Spending	Climate	Immigration	Integration	Europe
Intercept	0.07 (0.13)	-0.52*** (0.13)	-0.23 [†] (0.13)	-0.21 [†] (0.11)	-0.36* (0.15)
CDU/CSU Identifier	-0.42*** (0.08)	-0.26** (0.08)	0.04 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.07)	0.05 (0.10)
SPD Identifier	0.03 (0.08)	0.04 (0.08)	0.00 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.02 (0.09)
FDP Identifier	-0.32 (0.21)	-0.31 (0.21)	0.24 (0.22)	0.07 (0.17)	0.08 (0.23)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.05 (0.06)	0.18** (0.06)	-0.10 (0.07)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.11 (0.07)
East Germany	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.06 (0.07)	0.11 (0.09)
<i>N</i>	2191	2186	2178	2077	2081
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.00

Standard errors in parentheses

[†] significant at $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 6: Models of Following on Specific Policy Dimensions

We next assess the mechanisms behind the findings for the tax and spending and the climate change scales by adding mediator variables along with their interaction terms with the party identification dummies, as we did above for ideology. As we can see in Table 7, when adding each type of variable, we weaken the coefficient on the CDU/CSU identification dummy somewhat in the taxes and spending models. It remains significant though. When we control for both mediators, however, the coefficient loses its significance and drops by half in magnitude. Thus, both mediators account for the influence of coalitions on taxes and spending preferences. We can also see that each mediator weakens the coefficient on the CDU/CSU identification dummy in the climate change models as well as leave it insignificant. Both together weaken the coefficient considerably. Thus, once again, both mediators account for the influence of coalitions on climate change preferences.

	Model 22	Model 23	Model 24	Model 25	Model 26	Model 27
	Taxes and Spending			Climate Change		
Intercept	-0.01 (0.18)	0.06 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.18)	-0.41* (0.18)	-0.48* (0.13)	-0.40* (0.18)
CDU/CSU Identifier	-0.33* (0.11)	-0.38* (0.10)	-0.18 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.12)	-0.15 (0.10)	-0.06 (0.14)
FDP Identifier	-0.46 (0.24)	-0.13 (0.22)	-0.15 (0.26)	-0.42 (0.26)	-0.45* (0.22)	-0.63* (0.28)
SPD Identifier	0.08 (0.10)	-0.00 (0.08)	0.07 (0.11)	0.01 (0.11)	-0.01 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.11)
Perceived Position Change CDU	-0.03 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)		-0.01 (0.04)
Perceived Position Change FDP	-0.03 (0.03)		-0.03 (0.03)	-0.06 (0.03)		-0.05 (0.03)
Perceived Position Change SPD	0.06 (0.03)		0.06 (0.03)	0.05 (0.04)		0.05 (0.04)
CDU ID*Perceived Position Change CDU	0.30* (0.07)		0.30* (0.07)	0.19* (0.06)		0.16* (0.06)
FDP ID*Perceived Position Change FDP	0.30 (0.21)		0.33 (0.20)	0.25 (0.18)		0.16 (0.18)
SPD ID*Perceived Position Change SPD	0.03 (0.07)		0.01 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.06)		-0.07 (0.06)
Change Rating FDP		-0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)		-0.04* (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
Change Rating SPD		-0.06* (0.02)	-0.08* (0.02)		-0.03 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)
Change Rating CDU		-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)		0.07* (0.02)	0.08* (0.03)
CDU ID*Change Rating FDP		-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)		-0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.05)
CDU ID*Change Rating SPD		0.06 (0.03)	0.09* (0.05)		0.00 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.05)
FDP ID*Change Rating CDU		0.23* (0.11)	0.19 (0.12)		-0.27* (0.11)	-0.29* (0.11)
SPD ID*Change Rating CDU		0.04 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)		-0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Female	-0.02 (0.09)	0.05 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.20* (0.09)	0.20* (0.06)	0.22* (0.09)
East Germany	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.10 (0.10)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.11)
<i>N</i>	1119	2133	1101	1126	2128	1105
adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.04	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses

* indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

Table 7: Mechanisms Behind Following on Specific Policy Dimensions

8 Discussion

In the analyses above, we saw a major anomaly. FDP identifiers moved along with the CDU after the 2013 election. We also found that SPD partisans did not significantly move to the left in our 2013 election regression models. The explanation for these unexpected findings is that partisans of small parties give favorable ratings to the large parties with which they have been in coalition in the past. As a result, they appear to adjust their preferences in the same direction as that large party's later coalitions. This anomaly appears to be due to a difficulty with analyzing partisanship in countries with multi-party systems, an issue which has received some attention (Holmberg, 1994; Thomassen, 1976). The problem is that more than one party may influence citizens.

FDP partisans liked the CDU almost as much as they liked their own party following the 2013 election (in wave 7, the same wave we use as a baseline in analyses of that election). See Figure S4 in the Supplementary Appendix. The mean rating they gave to the CDU was 1.29 and the mean rating they gave to their own party was 1.60. The difference is not significant ($p=0.197$ using a single-tailed paired t-test). It is unsurprising that FDP partisans follow the CDU when they like that party about as much as their own party.

Why did SPD identifiers not shift their positions more to the right in 2013 than other respondents? The fact that Green identifiers included in the other category also like the Green Party's former partner, the SPD, may account for the lack of a difference between the shift among SPD partisans and the shift among other respondents. Green identifiers had a clear preference for their party but also liked the SPD. The mean rating they gave to to their party was 2.71, while the mean rating they gave to the SPD was 1.00. The difference is significant ($p=0.000$). The fact that Green identifiers also liked the SPD likely accounts for the fact that they moved their ideological self-placements almost as much as SPD respondents after the grand coalition was formed in 2013. Green partisans moved 0.15 points to the right, while SPD partisans moved 0.21 points to the right. The difference is not significant ($p=0.337$, using a single-tailed non-paired t-test). In sum, cases where our results do not correspond to expectations point to limitations in using the concept of partisanship to study elite leadership of public opinion in multi-party contexts.

9 Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered whether coalition formation influences partisan groups' perceptions of their parties' policy positions, whether it influences their attitudes towards coalition partners, and whether it, in turn, shapes their policy preferences. We assess how partisans of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), reacted when they changed coalition partners from the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) to the centre-right Free Democratic Party (FDP) in 2009 and back to the FDP in 2013. We also consider reactions among partisans of the coalition partners. We use German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) data from the 2009 election year as well as for the period between the 2013 and 2017 elections.

We saw that partisans change their perceptions of their parties' positions on the left-right dimension on which the old and new partners have opposing positions. While previous research shows that the overall electorate places coalition partners closer on the ideological dimension than non-coalition parties, we, for the first time, find, using panel data, that partisans adjust their perceptions of their parties' positions in response to coalition formation.

We also find that, coalition formation leads partisans to adjust their attitudes towards new and old coalition partners. They become more positive about their new partners and more negative about their old partners.

Moreover, on dimensions on which the old and new coalition partners have contrasting positions, partisans of the party that stays in government, shift their policy preferences away from the old coalition partner and towards the new partner. We found evidence for such party following on the left-right dimension in 2009 and 2013 and on two specific policy dimensions in 2013. However, evidence that partisans of coalition partners adjust their preferences to coalitions is less clear.

These findings have significant implications for citizens' ability to get government to implement their preferences as well as for the assessment of political systems, especially evaluations of the extent to which policy outputs correspond to citizens' preferences. As Lenz (2012) points out, if parties influence citizens' policy preferences, their ability to influence government policy is compromised.

Moreover, when scholars think about evaluating governments, they often consider whether and

to what extent they represent citizens' policy preferences. An influential strand of research in comparative politics focuses on how close governments are to citizens' positions on policy dimensions notably the left-right ideological dimension (Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000). However, such studies do not consider that governments influence such preferences. Congruence may not only be achieved by government's adapting to citizens' preferences but also by influencing those preferences. Therefore, any evaluation of how close governments are to citizens' preferences should consider that citizens' adapt to governments in addition to governments adapting to citizens' preferences.

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