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# Government alternation and proximity voting: how policy change opportunities shape electoral behaviour

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## ABSTRACT

A landmark finding in recent research on electoral behaviour is that voters anticipate the postelection bargaining process among potential members of the governing coalition, and that these anticipated policy agreements inform their vote choice. In this article, this finding is qualified by arguing, and then showing empirically, that when the expected policy change after the elections is marginal or non-existent, *ceteris paribus*, 'simple' proximity voting should prevail. The argument is tested by using two different but complementary research strategies applied to an individual-level data set constructed from electoral surveys in 28 countries over a 20-year period, and two recent national surveys in which respondents were directly asked to predict the potential coalition government after the elections. Both strategies provide support for the hypothesis and have important implications for the understanding of the consequences of government alternation on voting behaviour and political representation more broadly.

**KEYWORDS** Government alternation; proximity voting; compromise; proportional systems; veto players theory

A landmark finding in recent research on electoral behaviour is that voters (or at least some of them) do not ignore the inter-party bargaining made necessary by the parliamentary institutional design. In her influential studies, Kedar (2006, 2009) finds that, where the chances for parties to govern alone are very low and parties need to form coalition governments, voters are unlikely simply to vote for the party whose electoral platform is perceived as the most proximate to their policy preferences. Instead, they are likely to focus also on the policies that will ultimately be adopted by the coalition government and in turn support parties that will move

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the whole government towards their preferred policy position. Similarly, others suggest that voters anticipate the postelection bargaining negotiated among potential members of the governing coalition and that these anticipated policy agreements inform vote choice (Blais *et al.* 2006; Duch *et al.* 2010). According to these contributions the effect of the issue or ideological proximity on the individual voting decision does not disappear but it is negatively affected by the existence of government coalitions.

In this article, we qualify this argument by demonstrating that, as the institutional and political constraints on policy change increase, the low chance of government alternation will 'free' voters from taking into account the postelection bargaining process. Put simply, we argue that a postelection-oriented voting behaviour does not make much sense when the expected government coalition is very similar to the current one, and, consequently, the expected policy change after the elections is marginal or non-existent. This intuition is based on the assumption that, at least for a portion of the electorate, the understanding of the government's decision-making is in line with the main finding of the comparative politics literature, i.e. that all government parties are supposed to veto proposals that negatively affect their policy utility (Tsebelis 1995, 2002). This being so, voters' incentives to cast a policy direct vote will be of a different order when elections are expected to bring policy change via government alternation than when they are not. In the latter case voting one party instead of another is not expected to affect significantly the policy outcome after the election and the vote decision will be driven mostly by the ideological (or issue) proximity of the favourite party. This implies that we should record the highest strength of proximity party voting<sup>1</sup> in contexts where policy change after the elections is unlikely.

We tested this argument by using two different but complementary research strategies. The first strategy was based upon a two-stage approach, which enabled us to take full advantage of the individual- and contextual-level information. To this end, we used an individual-level data set constructed from national election surveys conducted in 28 countries over a 20-year period merging all modules from the Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES). This dataset enabled us to test our main argument by leveraging on a large variation of country-level government alternation. The second strategy was based upon only two country-elections but in which respondents were directly asked to predict the potential coalition governments after the elections. Using this information, we were able to construct the government alternation variable at the individual level. Both strategies provided support for our hypothesis.

This article makes two important contributions to the literature on electoral behaviour. First, it shows that the strength of proximity voting

is significantly influenced by the expected policy change that elections are likely to bring about. This is an important qualification for the issue voting literature; and it is also so for party strategies given that it indicates that there are limitations to the extent to which parties can benefit from any policy re-positioning during elections. Indeed, if it is true that voters consider inter-party bargaining after the election when casting their vote, then party ideological re-positioning during election campaigns is only credible in the eyes of the voters when they expect government alternation.

Second, our claim is that the strength of proximity voting is not a stable feature of countries characterised by coalition governments compared to those with single party majorities; instead, the strength of proximity voting is better explained by considering the features of specific elections in the countries characterised by coalition government. Where government alternation is not feasible, parties are still different in terms of issue or ideological positions but voting for one party instead of another will not make a significant difference in terms of policy outcomes. Therefore given voters' inclination to simplify political thinking (Zaller 1992), they are expected to mostly prefer their closest party rather than engaging in post-electoral strategic calculations. In terms of strategic voting, our argument implies that important is not only party strength in terms of seats after the elections, but also the effect of party participation in the government on the overall level of policy change, since the latter really matters for strategic voters concerned with policy outcomes.

In terms of political representation more broadly, our findings implies the existence of a trade-off between party *reliability* and party *responsibility* (Downs 1957b: 103–104). When government alternation is unlikely voters can easily anticipate what will happen and the electoral platforms that promise a change are not credible. Parties are reliable but not responsible and voters know that their vote is unlikely to be very consequential. When, on the contrary, government alternation is a concrete possibility, then the promises of change are credible but the uncertainty about policy outcomes increases. In such a situation, parties are responsible but their platform less reliable. An increased sense of effectiveness can induce voters to vote strategically.

In what follows, we first review the main conclusions from the policy-based voting literature. We then state our main theoretical argument and discuss it via an applied example. Thereafter, we test the argument empirically by using extensive contextual variation and individual-level data. We conclude by summarising the findings of this study and discussing possible future investigations.

## (Non) proximity voting and power sharing

In Downs' (1957a) empirical model with two parties, voters choose one party over the others according to the relative ideological distance between them and all the parties (Hinich and Munger 1994). Voters are more likely to support political parties whose ideological position is closer to their ideal position. As the party's position further deviates from a voter's ideal position, the voter receives less utility from voting for that party. As already recognised by Downs (1957b), however, only in this hypothetical world of two candidates or parties with binding platforms is the policy outcome identical to the winner's policy platform. Multiparty systems with coalition governments are likely to complicate voters' ideological calculations. Especially in multiparty government, never if ever, can parties alone direct policy changes. Political outcomes are almost always a function of the specific political institutions and constitutional rules-of-the-game in place (Hammond 1996; Hammond and Miller 1987).

The strategic voting literature (Cox 1997; see Gschwend and Meffert 2017 for a recent review), as well as a recent expanding body of literature on electoral behaviour have integrated the rules-of-the-game (e.g. Kedar 2005, 2009) and the outcome of elections (e.g. Duch *et al.* 2010; Indridason 2011) into the voting function. This is a parsimonious yet comprehensive addition to the theory of decision-making among voters, and shows that voting behaviour is also based on voters' expectations of policy outcomes rather than being solely determined by their ideological proximity to parties.

According to the *coalition directed voting approach* (Duch *et al.* 2010), voters anticipate the postelection bargains negotiated among potential members of the governing coalition, and these anticipated policy agreements inform their vote choice. According to the *compensational voting approach* (Bargsted and Kedar 2009), the more the institutional environment involves power sharing, the more parties' policies – that is, the platforms that parties present to voters during the election campaigns – are likely to 'be watered down' (Kedar 2009).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in these circumstances, citizens vote to *compensate* for the inter-party bargaining made necessary by the parliamentary institutional design after the elections and with the goal of shifting the policy position of governing coalitions closer to their ideal points. By contrast, voters tend to support their ideologically closest party where less policy compromise is expected from parties after the elections. In line with this argument, where government coalitions are the norm and much of politics takes place *after* votes are converted into seats, as in the consensual democracies, the empirical evidence shows that citizens vote also in an instrumentally

rational fashion, supporting an ideological non-proximate party if that party, after considering the positions and the expected political weights of the other potential coalition partners, would bring about a policy position (or outcome) closer to voters' ideal points. By contrast, voters would tend to support their most ideologically proximate party when, as in the majoritarian democracies, less policy compromise is expected from parties after the elections.

While this literature makes a major contribution to the study of how the political and institutional context affects voting behaviour, it has overlooked under which conditions policy change can take place and consequently strategic voting reasoning for voters is reasonable. In this respect, we argue, the possibility of government alternation plays a crucial role.

To quote Bartolini, the possibility of alternation can be defined as 'the possibility for an incumbent government to be ousted and replaced or otherwise modified in its composition as a result of changes in voters' choices' (2000: 52). The beneficial effect of government alternation for the accountability of democratic regimes is generally acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Dahl 1971; Przeworski 1991; Sartori 1976). One of the prime features that distinguishes consolidated democracies from 'electoral authoritarianism' is that in the former elections are always an instrument of choice (Morse 2012) that enables voters to overthrow the current government, thereby guaranteeing accountability. Yet, in this respect, elections in consolidated democracies do not always have the same 'importance'. Only in some elections the occurrence of alternation is a concrete possibility (see also Pellegata 2012). The role of government alternation on voting behaviour across consolidated democracies is far less investigated. The aim of this article is to allow government alternation to play a role in the decision-making calculus of voters.

## **The impact of government alternation on proximity voting**

The crux of our argument is that, in line with the theory of law making proposed in the comparative politics literature, the position of the status quo (SQ) is relevant for policy outcomes after the elections, and if it is true that voters are policy oriented they will not ignore it. Moreover, differently from Kedar's compensational voting approach we assume that only government parties are considered by voters as policy makers. As such, voters will take the probability of government alternation directly into consideration.<sup>3</sup>

Our argument is based upon the seminal work of Grofman (1985) and the insights of the veto player theory (Angelova *et al.* 2018; Tsebelis 2002). As recognised among others by Grofman (1985), when elected, governments will only partially be able to move policy away from the SQ position towards their bliss point. When the legislative SQ is trapped

in the government's Pareto set (i.e. a one-dimensional policy space where an imaginary ideological line connects all government parties), according to the veto player theory, no change (or only marginal change) is possible because any shift of the SQ in any direction will be vetoed by a government party regardless of its size.<sup>4</sup> The SQ is likely to be within the government's Pareto set when the expected government is very similar to the current one; or, in other words, when the level of government alternation is low (Zucchini 2011).<sup>5</sup> The position of the SQ is likely to play a crucial role in voting choice: only when government alternation is a concrete possibility, voters will forego the utility derived from voting for the most proximate party.<sup>6</sup> In fact, when government alternation is unlikely, citizens cannot rely upon their vote to shift the final policy equilibrium inside the government coalition and they will vote for the closest party in terms of ideology or issue position.<sup>7</sup> We do not also exclude that the prolonged stickiness of the SQ caused by the lack of government alternation can induce some voters to vote on the base of non-policy factors. Nevertheless, we argue that the policy-oriented voters that support the most proximate party in absence of government alternation, will be willing to abandon that party only when government alternation is a concrete possibility. In the latter case a bargaining among the government parties to change the SQ will be possible and we argue that voters will then vote for the party most able to get the policy closest to voters' ideal points.<sup>8</sup>

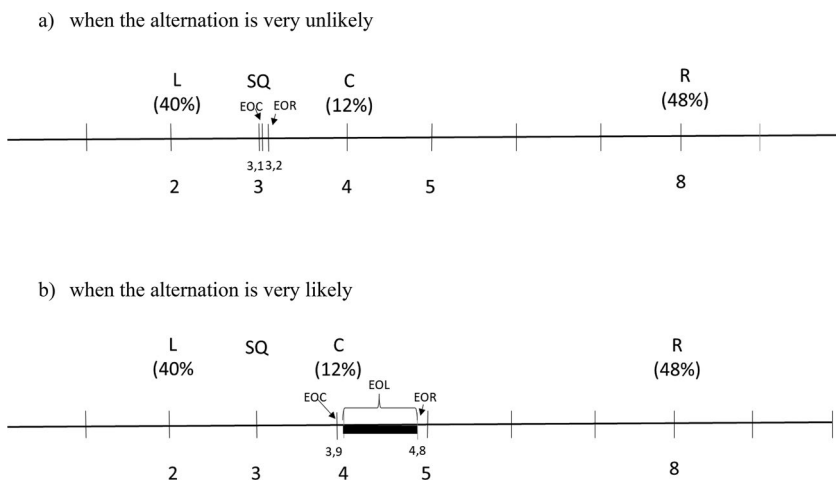
Let us assume a party system comprising three parties whose electoral platforms are distributed along a left-right continuum respectively party left (L), C (center) and R (right). For the sake of simplicity, our spatial illustration depicts only the utility deriving from closeness to the expected policy outcomes. Nevertheless, we assume that the utility generated by closeness to the ideological position is always larger than zero ( $e_i > 0$ ). The extreme left is 1 on the ideological continuum; and the extreme right is 11. Party L's position is at 2, Party C's position is at 4, and party R's position is at 8. According to the opinion polls, in the next election Party L will have 40% of legislative seats, C 12%, and R 48%. The SQ is located at 3 and the current government coalition formed by L and C is expected to be confirmed after the elections with a 90% probability. The only other possible (but unlikely) coalition will be formed by C and R.

What is important for our argument is not only that these coalitions have different chances of taking place, but also the nature of their expected outcomes once they are formed. In fact, while it is clear that the confirmation of a government LC would make no change to the SQ, the outcome of a 'new' government CR is uncertain and it is included in a subset of the *winset* of the previous status quo SQ.<sup>9</sup> As the current status quo is 3, the set of alternatives to which both C and R can agree because

they are a Pareto improvement for both fall within the range 4-5.<sup>10</sup> Any other policy will be suboptimal for both parties or against the interest of at least one of them; therefore, it is unlikely to succeed. The policy in this winset of the status quo that will be approved depends on the relative bargaining power of the government actors C and R. Such bargaining power depends on many circumstances not easily predictable in advance by voters. Voters are supposed to achieve 4 (weighted for the probability of government alternation) if they vote C, 5 (weighted for the probability of government alternation) if they vote R, and they will have random expectation between these two extremes (4 and 5) if they vote L.

When the alternation is very unlikely (Figure 1a), the expected utility of the policy outcome does not differ significantly from one party to the other because for all parties the outcome of the status quo SQ (3) is the same and its confirmation is almost certain. In our example, it will be included between 3.1 and 3.2.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, unless the utility that derives from voting for the party closest in terms of ideological position is negligible, we should observe almost only proximity voting because the 'policy' advantage of shifting to a more ideologically distant party is too little.<sup>12</sup> When, on the contrary, government alternation is very likely, the expected policy outcomes may be quite different.

For instance, let us imagine that we reverse the probability of government formation. The incumbent government coalition before the election LC has now only a 10% likelihood of being confirmed and CR has a 90% chance, then the policy outcome associated with voting C



**Figure 1.** Proximity voting when legislative status quo plays a role. (a) When the alternation is very unlikely. (b) When the alternation is very likely. Notes: EOL stands for 'Expected Outcome if voting for L'. EOC stands for 'Expected Outcome if voting for C'. EOR stands for 'Expected Outcome if voting for R'.



will be 3.9 and the policy outcome associated with voting R will be 4.8 (Figure 1b). Some voters ideologically closer to C than R but who prefer 4.8 to 3.9 will vote for R instead of C even when the weight of ideological proximity is not negligible. This behaviour is entirely caused by the high probability of government alternation.

What we have just illustrated in this example is not a ‘total alternation’ as a party (C) is supposed to be member both of the incumbent government before the election and the potential alternative. Of course the logic of our argument will hold even stronger if one considers ‘total alternation’, namely when the new government does not include any of the parties that have been member of the previous government (see Online Appendix A).

It is important to stress that our argument does not require voters to have perfectly accurate expectations or to make complicated calculus about the precise number of seats or government portfolios that each party will receive after the elections. Voters have at their disposal relatively simple pieces of information that they can use to infer the probability of government alternation. As discussed in Gschwend and Meffert (2017), voters can rely on the results of previous elections to have a rough idea of the electoral landscape ‘such as which parties are large and small, how competitive or close the election might be, or who the winners and losers are expected to be’ (2017: 344). And while the electoral history heuristic help voters to infer which governments are typically formed in their countries (Armstrong and Duch 2010), opinion polls before the elections provide voters with an additional heuristic to form expectations about patterns of government formation that election.

Hence, we test the following hypothesis: *The less likely is government alternation, the higher the propensity to cast a proximity vote.*

### **First empirical strategy: aggregate-level variation**

In order to test our hypothesis, we employ two empirical strategies. The first strategy is based upon a two-stage approach, which allows us to take full advantage of contextual-level variation in government alternation. The second empirical strategy draws on the individual-level information of a smaller dataset, by virtue of which, however, we have direct access to the single voter perception of government alternation. We start by discussing the first strategy.

#### **Data and methods**

For this first empirical strategy, we rely upon survey data from Modules 1, 2, and 3 and 4 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES); for two countries only, Italy and United Kingdom (UK), we derived data

from the respective national election studies due to unavailability of some of the questions we need in the CSES data. In total, the analysis covers elections in 28 countries, or 91 elections over a period of 20 years, as shown in Table 1. Our sample of countries is restricted to the countries rated ‘free’ by Freedom House at the time of the survey, since our hypotheses are based on assumptions concerning government alternation that are often not upheld in non-democratic polities (e.g. Moehler and Lindberg 2009). The individual-level data are coupled with election-level data taken from the ParlGov project.

In line with much research on proximity (Lachat 2011) and policy-directed voting (Duch *et al.* 2010; Kedar 2005), the dependent variable is reported vote choice for a given party. Given that our models have choice-specific information (e.g. proximity voter-party) and several individual-specific variables (e.g. age of the respondent), we employ *Conditional Logit models*. Other types of models like probit or logit models do not allow us to take into account simultaneously all possible voting alternatives while having in the model both choice-specific and individual-specific information.<sup>13</sup> Our model looks like Equation (1) with our main independent variable, PROX, measuring the ideological proximity voter-party. All surveys included in this article ask respondents to place themselves and each of the main parties in their political system on an 11-point left-right ideological scale. The left-right ideological scale is the only ideological measurement available in CSES but despite its limitations, the left-right ideological scale remains one of the main dimensions of political competition in advanced democracies and an important determinant of vote choice in the countries under investigation in this article (Dalton *et al.* 2011; Joesten and Stone 2014). To measure PROX we reverse the distance between the voter and each of the party available in the surveys, so that increasing values of the proximity values signifies lower distance between each voter and each party.

We control for respondent’s party preferences, i.e. PREF, by using a scale that ranges from ‘dislike the party very much’ (=0) to ‘like the party very much’ (=10) and  $W$ , which represents a set of individual-level variables important to explain vote choice. Specifically, we include in Equation (1) age (in years), gender (dummy variable with 1 =female) and education (scale from 0 to 4), since these are the only variables that we have available for all countries.<sup>14</sup>

$$y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 \text{PROX}_{ij} + \beta_1 \text{PREF}_{ij} + \beta_j W_i + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

Most important for our study’s hypothesis is the variation across countries in the size of the proximity voting coefficient. In other words, in line with our hypothesis, we expect the size of  $\beta_1$  in Equation (1) to

**Table 1.** List of countries and elections included in the empirical analysis.

Country	Election	Country	Election	Country	Election
Australia	1996	Germany	2013	Norway	2013
Australia	2004	Greece	2009	Poland	1997
Australia	2007	Hungary	1998	Poland	2001
Australia	2013	Hungary	2002	Poland	2005
Austria	2008	Iceland	1999	Poland	2007
Austria	2013	Iceland	2003	Poland	2011
Belgium	1999	Iceland	2007	Portugal	2002
Belgium	2003	Iceland	2009	Portugal	2005
Bulgaria	2001	Iceland	2013	Portugal	2009
Bulgaria	2014	Ireland	2002	Portugal	2015
Canada	1997	Ireland	2007	Romania	1996
Canada	2004	Ireland	2011	Romania	2004
Canada	2008	Israel	2003	Slovakia	2010
Canada	2011	Israel	2006	Slovenia	1996
Croatia	2007	Israel	2013	Slovenia	2004
Czech Republic	1996	Italy <sup>a</sup>	2001	Slovenia	2008
Czech Republic	2002	Italy	2006	Slovenia	2011
Czech Republic	2006	Italy	2008	Spain	1996
Czech Republic	2010	Italy	2013	Spain	2000
Czech Republic	2013	Netherlands	1998	Spain	2004
Denmark	1998	Netherlands	2002	Spain	2008
Denmark	2001	Netherlands	2006	Sweden	1998
Denmark	2007	Netherlands	2010	Sweden	2002
Estonia	2011	New Zealand	1996	Sweden	2006
Finland	2003	New Zealand	2002	Sweden	2014
Finland	2007	New Zealand	2008	UK <sup>b</sup>	1997
Finland	2011	New Zealand	2011	UK	2005
Germany	1998	Norway	1997	UK	2010
Germany	2002	Norway	2001	UK	2015
Germany	2005	Norway	2005		
Germany	2009	Norway	2009		

Notes: All legislative elections in bicameral systems refer to the lower chamber.

<sup>a</sup>Data for Italy come from Italian National Election Study (ITANES).

<sup>b</sup>Data for United Kingdom come from British Election Study (BES).

vary as a function of the probability of government alternation, i.e. ALT, in that country. With  $k$  designating the countries, the context-level model can be specified as:

$$\beta_{1k} = \gamma_{10} + \gamma_{11}ALT_{1k} + \gamma_{12}v_k + v_{1k} \quad (2)$$

To measure ALT we rely on the work of Martin and Stevenson (2001). Their empirical model of coalition formation essentially forecasts the probability that any potential government (including a one-party government) will form as a function of a series of political context-specific variables that the theory suggests are important for shaping government outcomes. These variables are the majority status of the potential government, the number of parties in the potential government, whether it contains the largest party, the extent of ideological division in the potential government, and the extent of ideological division in the potential

majority opposition (for minority potential coalitions only). It also considers the presence of antisystem parties in the potential government, whether it would contain the median party on a left–right dimension, whether the system would have an investiture vote (interacted with majority status of the potential government), whether the potential government would contain the incumbent prime minister, whether there would be a pro- or anti-coalition pact before the election, and whether the potential government would be the incumbent government.

We build these political context specific variables (all constructed as described in Martin and Stevenson 2001) for all election-years included in our sample. We then use them to produce ‘out of sample’ forecasts of the probability that each possible coalition that could have formed would in fact have formed. In other words, each possible party/ies combination would receive a probability ranging from 0 to 1. In about 55% of the cases the party/ies combination with the highest predicted probabilities actually formed the government after the election.<sup>15</sup> We use the Martin and Stevenson model to determine the scores obtained by the government that was incumbent before the election: the larger this score, the less likely government alternation would be. We used in our empirical models the reverse of this measure, ALT variable, that ranges from 0 to 1 and represents how plausible was government alternation for that specific election.

In Equation (2)  $\theta$  represents control variables. A powerful factor likely to have an impact on proximity voting is the type of electoral system. Proximity voting should be stronger in proportional systems. The idea is that with majority systems the voter can be induced to sacrifice his/her first preference for a party that, although farther away, manages, unlike the one most preferred, to exceed the threshold of representation.<sup>16</sup> In proportional systems, since the threshold of representation is lower, it is much more likely that the first preference will exceed the threshold of representation, so that proximity voting is more likely (see also Lachat 2011). Therefore, we control for a variable contained in the CSES dataset that takes 1 when the elections are run using proportional rules (including mixed systems like Germany’s) and 0 otherwise. In addition, proximate considerations make much more sense in the case of single-party majority governments; much more post-election bargaining is in fact expected under coalition governments. We hence control for whether or not the government with the highest probabilities predicted by the Martin and Stevenson model is a coalition. Finally, pre-electoral coalitions are likely to reduce the uncertainty of the future government policy outcome and hence increase proximity voting. In this case the bargaining has already taken place before the elections and a vote purposely given to affect the policy outcome after elections makes

less sense. Therefore, we introduce a control variable that is equal to 1 when there is a pre-electoral coalition and 0 otherwise.

To sum up, we first estimate the individual-level models separately for each country using a conditional logit model as specified in Equation (1). Then, the resulting  $\beta_1$  coefficients are used as dependent variable for a context-level model as specified in Equation (2). The second-stage model is estimated using weighted least-squares regressions, which enable us to account for differences across contexts in the standard deviations of the coefficients in the first stage. The weights are calculated using the method described in Lewis and Linzer (2005). A longer discussion and justification of this two-stage approach is available in Online Appendix D.

### **Empirical findings**

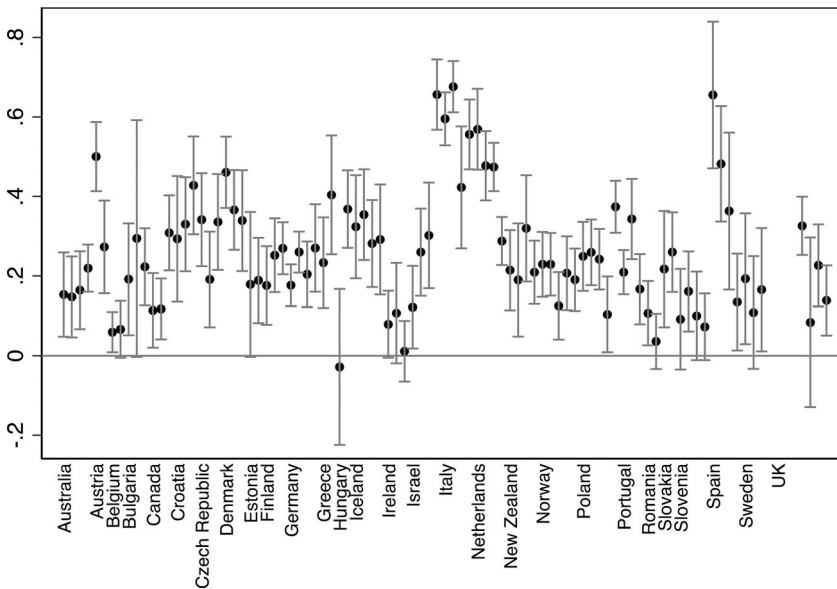
In [Figure 2](#) we plot the estimates of the proximity coefficient in Equation (1) ( $\beta_1$ ) for each country-election namely the plain conditional logit coefficients.<sup>17</sup> The vertical lines show the 95% confidence intervals for the estimated proximity coefficients. The estimates can be conceived as the ‘weight’ of ideological proximity on vote choice for a party (see also Duch and Stevenson 2005). [Figure 2](#) shows that the estimated weight is significantly positive in most of the countries: that is, the smaller the ideological distance from a party, the more likely the voters are to vote for that party. [Figure 2](#) also shows considerable variation among countries and within countries from one election to another. There are countries like Australia or Sweden where the weights remain rather similar across elections. Take Australia for example, in 1996 the weight of proximity voting was 0.15, very similar to 2004 ( $\beta_1 = 0.14$ ), 2007 ( $\beta_1 = 0.16$ ) and 2013 ( $\beta_1 = 0.22$ ). The exponentiated coefficient of proximity is 1.16 for 1996, which means that we expect to see about a 16% increase in the odds of voting for a party, for a one-unit increase in the proximity variable (this value is 15% in 2004, 17% in 2007 and 25% in 2013). However, in most countries the proximity weight changes considerably between elections. What accounts for this variation across countries and across elections?

[Table 2](#) reports the estimated parameters and standard errors resulting from the second-step equation (Equation (2)). Recall that in the second-stage, the unit of analysis is a country-election. The effect of the probability of government alternation on the size of the weight of proximity voting is negative and significant ( $p < .01$ ). As the score of government alternation increases by one unit, the predicted size of the weight of the proximity voting decreases by almost 0.11 point. This means that going from no alternation (i.e. government alternation = 0) to full

possible alternation (i.e. government alternation = 1) decreases the impact of proximity on choosing a party by about 12%. Given that our proximity variable ranges from about 0 to about 1 (see Figure 2), 0.11 point is a rather small but substantial effect as shown in Table 2. The results suggest that, in line with our hypothesis, the less government alternation is likely, the higher is the propensity to cast a proximity vote. In Figure 3, we graphically present the marginal effects of government alternation on weight of ideological proximity ( $\beta_{1k}$ ).

We included in our model three control variables that, as stated previously, the existing literature has shown to be consistently related to proximity voting. The dummy variable for proportional rules is positive and significant. The findings in Table 2 indicate that while the possibility of a coalition government after the election tends to decrease the weight of proximity voting (as expected), the coefficient does not reach a conventional level of statistical significance. Similarly, the coefficient of pre-electoral coalitions is not statically different from 0.

Besides the above results, we also performed several important robustness checks in order to address alternative explanations of our findings. Specifically, dropping PREF – a particularly powerful determinant of vote choice – from our models does not change the substantive conclusions (see Online Appendix C). Also, the same results hold if we run the



**Figure 2.** The weight of ideological proximity ( $\beta_{1k}$ ) on vote choice across country-elections.

**Table 2.** The impact of government alternation on the size of proximity weight.

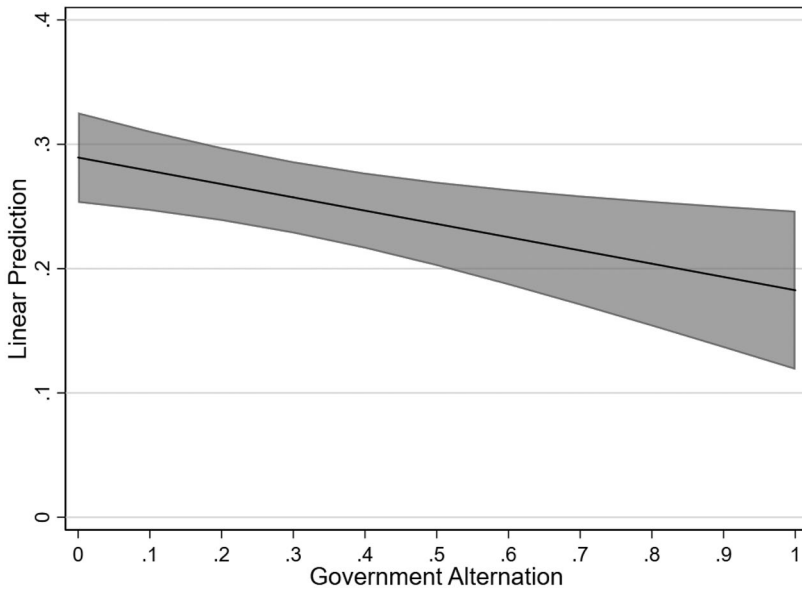
Dependent variable: size of proximity voting	Coeff.	Std. err.
Government alternation	-0.107**	(0.040)
Proportional (1 = yes)	0.143**	(0.050)
Coalition government expected (1 = yes)	-0.003	(0.038)
PEC (1 = yes)	0.038	(0.031)
Constant	0.146**	(0.045)
<i>N</i>	91	
Adj R-sq	0.110	
Log Likelihood	53.241	
AIC	-96.483	

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



**Figure 3.** The effect of government alternation on weight of ideological proximity ( $\beta_{1k}$ ). Notes: Based on Table 2. All other covariates fixed at their mean value.

models substituting the dummy variable of proportionality with a more detailed measure of disproportionality such as Gallagher's index of disproportionality. Since, our hypothesis should work especially well in countries with coalition governments, we re-ran our models considering only countries with an expected coalition government ( $N=72$ ) in our sample, confirming the results presented in the article. These additional models are presented in Online Appendix E.

## Second empirical strategy: individual-level variation

While CSES data are an invaluable source of comparative evidence, they are limited in that they do not provide information on voter-level expectations. In other words, in the previous analysis, government alternation represents country-level variation and we worked on the assumption that all voters' expectations match the reality of the country in which they live, and that, consequently, there are no differences among voters in terms of expected government alternation. To address this limitation of the CSES data, we test our expectation using election studies in which survey respondents are asked *directly* about government alternation. In other words, besides asking respondents to rate parties in terms of preferences and position them on an 11-point left-right ideological scale as the CSES data do, these national-election studies also ask respondents in the pre-election wave to assess the likelihood that the incumbent coalition would again assume office after the elections. Hence, these data allow us to measure voter expectations about government alternation directly at the voter level in the pre-election wave; vote choice is measured in the post-electoral wave so that one can substantiate causal inference better. This provides a further test for our hypothesis and 'validates' the conclusion derived using the CSES data.

### **Data and methods**

In the pre-election survey of the Austrian National Election Study Pre- and Post Panel Study 2013 (Kritzinger *et al.* 2017), as well as in the pre-election survey of the Rolling Cross-Section Campaign Survey German Election Study 2013 (Roßteutscher *et al.* 2019), respondents were asked 'How likely do you think it is that the following parties will form a coalition after the election?'. The likelihood ranges from 'not at all likely', to 'very likely' with two intermediate answers in Austria and three in Germany.

The results of the 2013 Austrian national election were not certain beforehand, and the parties contributed to this uncertainty by sending voters very few 'coalition signals' (Dolezal and Zeglovits 2014). Eventually, the two mainstream parties, the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the People's Party (ÖVP), were forced again into the formation of a government due to the lack of viable alternatives. Among our respondents, about 41% said that the incumbent coalition was very likely, 49% said likely, 8% deemed it unlikely, and a little over 2% said that the incumbent coalition was very unlikely. In Germany, during the entire campaign leading to the 2013 elections, it was clear that the incumbent Chancellor Angela Merkel, leader of the Christian Democrats (CDU), would again win the elections (Faas 2015). However, in terms of government coalitions, there



was uncertainty over the outcome of the election. On the one hand, it was unsure whether the Liberals (FDP) would make it into the Parliament by surpassing the 5% electoral threshold. Consequently, the continuation of the then incumbent government between the CDU, her Bavarian sister the CSU and the FDP, was rather uncertain (Faas 2015). Eventually, a (grand) coalition of Christian and Social Democrats (SPD) formed after the elections. Among our respondents, about 63% said that the incumbent coalition was very likely, 21% said it was likely, 8% neither likely nor unlikely, 5% unlikely, and a little over 2% said that the incumbent coalition was very unlikely.

In our empirical models, we harmonise the answers so that perceived likelihood ranges from 0 to 1 in both countries. The government alternation variable in our model measures for each respondent the probability of the incumbent government coalition being confirmed after elections. When the respondent thought that the incumbent government coalition was very unlikely, then s/he implicitly assumed to that government alternation was very likely. We include in our models an interaction term between the proximity variable and the government alternation variable and perform Conditional Logit models by country as we did before. If the proposed theory is correct, we should see a negative and statistically significant coefficient of the interaction  $\text{proximity} \times \text{government alternation}$  on vote choice. In other words, the more that government alternation is perceived as likely, the lower should be the impact of proximity voting on vote choice.

As it was the case in the first empirical strategy, for both countries, vote choice is measured in the post-election survey. Our conditional logit model includes some variables that are choice-specific (i.e. party preferences, proximity and the interaction  $\text{proximity} \times \text{government alternation}$ ); instead some variables are individual-specific, i.e. gender, age, education, political interest and government alternation (not in interaction). An example of a choice specific variable is party preferences that, as before, is measured using the like-dislike question for each of the main parties running for elections. For the individual-specific variables like respondent's age and perceived government alternation, we will obtain party-specific coefficients, the results of which are shown exclusively in the Online Appendix F.

### ***Empirical findings***

So, one may ask, is the effect of proximity on voting choice larger when perceived government alternation is lower? [Table 3](#) shows that this is the case in both the countries considered. More in detail, in Austria the

coefficient of the proximity variable is  $b=0.202$  ( $SE = .059$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when government alternation is perceived as very unlikely; when government alternation is perceived as very likely this effect decreases to  $-0.064$  effectively turning slightly negative (i.e.  $0.202+(-0.266)$ ). In Germany, the coefficient of the proximity variable is  $b=0.208$  ( $SE = .019$ ,  $p < .001$ ) when government alternation is perceived as very unlikely; when government alternation is perceived as very likely this effect decreases  $0.029$ , although it remains positive in Germany. Interpreting the effect of interaction variables is not easy within a Conditional Logit framework since each choice – in our case each party – has a separate constant. However, we can evaluate the marginal effect on vote choice for each party exerted by an increase in perceived government alternation, keeping proximity constant. An increase in alternation reduces the probability of choosing the most proximate alternative, and this decline is distributed across all parties although not homogeneously. Specifically, in Austria choosing one of the largest parties, either the SPÖ or the ÖVP when they are the most proximate parties, declines by about 6 percentage points when government alternation rises from its lowest value (very unlikely =0) to its maximum value (very likely = 1); choosing the FPÖ or the Greens declines by about 3 percentage points, and choosing the NEOS declines by about 1 percentage point. In Germany, choosing the CDU or the SPD if any of this is the most proximate party declines by about 4 percentage points; choosing the FDP declines by less than 1 percentage point; choice of the Greens declines by about 2 percentage points; and that for the Die Linke does so by about 0.5 percentage point for a unit increase in government alternation. These effects are statistically significant.<sup>18</sup>

Even if the interaction for ‘Proximity X Simple alternation’ in [Table 3](#) is marginally significant, nevertheless the results offer strong support for the theory. Besides a series of individual-specific features, like gender, age, education, political interest and government alternation, we also control for party preferences. [Table 3](#) shows that party preferences have a consistent and substantial positive effect on vote choices across all models. As for the previously discussed models, by controlling for party preferences we are able to check the effect of proximity and government alternation on vote choice ‘net’ of the influence of a particularly strong determinant of vote choice whose meaning is not completely detached from the party proximity itself. In other words, what deserves to be emphasised is that, even after controlling for party preferences and proximity, alternation continues to play a role in explaining vote choice. Dropping party preferences from our models in fact makes the effects of the proximity variable and that of the interaction proximity  $\times$  government alternation on vote choice much larger. These additional results

**Table 3.** The impact of government alternation on the size of proximity weight at the individual-level.

	Austria		Germany	
	(Model 1)	(Model 2)	(Model 3)	(Model 4)
Party preferences	0.390*** (0.030)	0.390*** (0.030)	0.780*** (0.021)	0.780*** (0.021)
Proximity	0.136** (0.042)	0.202*** (0.059)	0.189*** (0.017)	0.208*** (0.019)
Proximity × Simple alternation		-0.266 (0.159)		-0.179* (0.082)
Party specific coefficients	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N observations</i>	2550	2550	17655	17655
<i>N individuals</i>	510	510	3531	3531
Log likelihood	-509.426	-506.789	-2.8e + 03	-2.8e + 03
AIC	1062.851	1067.578	5583.536	5586.626

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

are presented in Online Appendix G. We discuss the results of these empirical models further in the next section where we also address their broader relevance.

## Discussion and conclusion

Parties in government usually have to compromise in order to accommodate the policy platforms of other parties. According to the insights of compensational and coalition-directed voting that we have subsided into a so-called ‘policy-directed voting approach’ in this article, voters often vote to off-set this watering-down tendency of consensual systems by supporting more distant parties in order to shift the final government equilibrium closer to their ideal point. According to these theories, voters anticipate the post-election bargains negotiated among potential members of the governing coalition, and these anticipated policy agreements inform their voting choices (Blais *et al.* 2006; Duch *et al.* 2010; Kedar 2005).

In this article, we have provided an important qualification to this argument by first arguing, and then showing empirically, that when the perceived probability of government alternation is very small or null, voters have no incentive to engage in the costly decision of abandoning their most proximate party. On the contrary, non-proximity voting will prevail when the government alternation is considered very likely. Our intuition is based on the insights of the comparative politics literature (Tsebelis 1995, 2002), which maintains that government parties veto proposals that negatively affect their policy utility, so that elections are not always expected to produce a change in the status quo. The possibility of changing the status quo, which is much more likely when

government alternation is a concrete possibility, will have a significant impact on vote choice: in fact, only when elections are likely to bring about changes to the current policies will oriented voters engage in the costly decision of abandoning the most proximate party to engage in a strategic type of voting like that proposed by the coalition-directed or the compensational-voting theories.

In order to test this argument empirically, we used two very different strategies that enabled us to leverage on both cross-country and cross-voter variation in expected government alternation. The balance of evidence presented in the article lends overall support to our hypothesis that the possibility of government alternation reduces proximity voting. We argue that the findings of this article have important implications for the understanding of voting behaviour, party strategies and democratic elections.

First, the article has highlighted the importance of expectations in political behaviour, including the electoral one. Outcome-driven voting makes more sense for voters if they expect a new political scenario after the elections, i.e. full or partial government alternation that will allow policy change. Our model clarifies how important it is that the final outcome of the policy, following the alternation, be uncertain and, so to speak, within certain boundaries disputed between the parties of the new government. This uncertainty motivates the voter to vote by looking at the outcome and not at the ideological closeness. When policy change is possible, then voters may support a different party even if their ideological position has not changed. An actual change in voting behaviour requires an expectation of policy change. The promise of change ultimately produces change as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. When, on the contrary, there is no perception of likely change then voting behaviour can be largely explained according to the ideological position of the voters.

Second, the role we suppose expectation of government alternation plays on voting behaviour has direct and autonomous implications on electoral stability. The voting behaviour of some voters, when government alternation is considered very likely, is different from the voting behaviour in the following elections, once alternation has already taken place, even if no change in parties' and voters' policy positions has taken place meanwhile. Indeed if, after alternation, the same government coalition is expected to be re-confirmed, voters are going to vote mainly based on ideological proximity since the status quo can no longer be easily changed. For some of them, the change of criterion implies a change in the vote content without a change of political preferences. Therefore while the expectation of government alternation during an electoral campaign can imply vote changes at the individual level at least for two

successive elections, long periods without expected government alternation induce stable voting behaviour always based on ideological proximity.

Third, our argument suggests further research questions about party competition. If expectations of change are so crucial in explaining voting behaviour, then we should expect an important part of the party competition to take place precisely on the plausibility of 'change', i.e. of the government alternation, even more than on the size of the promised change. In this regard, Bawn and Somer-Topcu (2012) showed that during election campaigns, voters tend to discount the positions of parties when they have been in government. This is primarily due to the fact that being in government forces parties to compromise and to accept ideologically unappealing choices (see also Fortunato 2019). Our article has clarified that all party positions should be regarded as less important for vote choice when voters expect government alternation after the elections. Whatever the exact size of expected policy change for voters who are willing to 'leave' their ideologically closest parties, a perceived high probability of change is always a condition to make the choice of 'abandoning' their ideologically closest parties meaningful. Therefore, voter perceptions of change should be among the most important stakes in election campaigns.

Our results do not invalidate the idea behind policy-directed voting. On the contrary, if anything, this article validates the existence of policy-directed voting by showing that power-sharing considerations matter. But we have clarified how these expectations are subject to the perception of government alternation. Ideological positioning in general matters more when elections are not going to bring about policy change. Any possible advantage deriving from policy-directed voting in favour of more extreme parties will fade away where government alternation is unlikely to take place or when voters think that it is unlikely. Indeed, such a voting radicalisation would not bring about any concrete policy change.

We believe it is worth expanding the analysis of the effects of government alternation on voting choice by taking into account the implications for citizens' satisfaction with electoral democracy and their perceptions of the legitimacy of the party system. Future research should also consider the impact of government alternation on turnout. We maintain, in fact, that the possibility of changes in public policy may constitute an essential requisite for people's engagement in politics altogether.

## Notes

1. We consider as the criterion for the proximity voting the closeness of the voter's preferences to the parties' electoral platforms. When proximity

voting prevails voters are supposed to vote for the parties whose promises represent more faithfully their preferences irrespective of the policy consequences of the presence of the parties in the political system. In fact both motivations, the expressive and the policy oriented, can contribute to party choices. As Kedar writes ‘Representation or expression of opinions is only one motivation for choosing one party over another. Voters might also use their vote to shift policy outcomes toward their ideal points’ (Kedar 2005: 188). Put it differently, when policy change is not expected voters will simply vote for their most proximate party, which represents their opinions best.

2. Kedar’s argument is based on Grofman’s (1985) contention that voters discount the parties’ abilities to shift policies away from the status quo.
3. Our argument differs also from the coalition-directed voting theory according to which what matters is the possible role of each party in a government coalition. According to this approach, when voters vote for a party, they will consider the weighted position of each coalition of which the party can be a member, as well as the probability of the party being a member of that coalition. The position of status quo and the probability of government alternation are inconsequential and voters are supposed not to take directly into consideration the probability of each coalition but only the probability of a coalition conditional to the presence of the party (see Duch et al. 2010: 700).
4. The lack of significant policy change does not imply an unrealistic lack of policy making. Very marginal changes are still possible and much of the law making in contemporary democracies aims at preserving rather than substantially changing the status quo.
5. A change of the policy status quo can also take place because of an external shock. However insofar such a shock is unpredictable we assume that the voter cannot anticipate, according to her preferences, which party would be more convenient to vote in order to compensate for this external shock. In other words, the uncertainty introduced by an external shock is assumed to be so radical not to be considered in the calculus of voting.
6. For a theoretical account of the utility coming from expressive voting in a spatial model of electoral behaviour see Brennan and Hamlin (1998).
7. The utility for a generic voter  $i$  is defined as a function of the Euclidean distance that separates her position  $v$  from the parties’ electoral platforms  $x_e$  (proximity component) and from the parties’ expected policy outcomes  $x_o$  (policy component). More formally:  $\Delta V / V$ ; where  $e_i > 0$  and  $o_i > 0$  are respectively the weights at the individual level of the proximity component and of the policy component,  $x_{j_e}$  and  $x_{j_o}$  are the positions of generic party  $j$  when the voter considers respectively the electoral platform and the expected policy outcome. For a complete illustration of the model see Online Appendix A.
8. When there is government alternation, the winset of the status quo is not empty and the distribution of agenda setting power matters. According to the Veto Player theory in a parliamentary democracy the government as a whole is the main agenda setter vis-à-vis the parliament, nevertheless the theory is silent about who in the government is the main agenda setter. We assume that voters believe that the distribution of agenda setting

power inside the government will depend on the seats won during the (last) elections by each government party.

9. The winset represents the set of points in the ideological space that are preferred over the SQ by the veto players (see Tsebelis 1999 for a formal discussion of the winset of SQ).
10. Also the points between 3 and 4 are formally a Pareto improvement for C and R but as they are worse for R than C (4) they are not in the bargaining range.
11. The expected outcomes for C and R are respectively  $EOC = 0.9 \cdot 3 + 0.1 \cdot 4 = 3.1$ ;  $EOR = 0.9 \cdot 3 + 0.1 \cdot 5 = 3.2$ .
12. The best real anecdotal example, where voters face such a policy stability (no government alternation) and show the rationale behind sticking to proximity voting is offered by Austria 2013. In Austria 2013 a continuation of the grand-coalition was largely expected after the elections (Dolezal and Zeglovits 2014).
13. When running conditional logit models data are 'stacked', which means that each individual voter appears in the dataset as many times as the number of parties running for elections. For a detailed explanation of conditional logit models and the data structure when using them please see Long and Freese (2006). We are able to include at least four parties per countries.
14. Online appendix B lists the availability of control variables in each country-election. Note that re-running our models including additional variables when available i.e. external efficacy (scale from 0 to 10), government efficacy (scale from 0 to 10) and knowledge of political matters (scale from 0 to 3) did not change our substantive conclusions (see Online appendix C). We do not dispose of a variable measuring government evaluation for the majority of country-elections included in this article.
15. The prediction rate is 40% in Martin and Stevenson (2001).
16. A threshold of representation is the minimum vote share that might yield a party a seat (under the most favourable circumstances for the party).
17. Online appendix C lists the corresponding 91 odds ratios of these coefficients.
18. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party cannot be included in our analysis because the 2013 German study did not ask respondents a question about this party ideological positioning.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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