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What Electoral Outcomes Foster Electoral Consent and Dissent?

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Abstract

Losers' consent is a key indicator of democratic vitality. In a functioning democracy, citizens should accept electoral outcomes regardless of which party wins. Contrasting with previous studies on the topic, we, in this article, directly measure the types of electoral outcomes to which over 5,000 German adults, representative of the national population, are willing to consent/dissent. We find that respondents are more likely to accept, and less likely to protest, outcomes in which their preferred party performs well, and their most disliked party performs poorly. Meanwhile, structural features of the outcomes, such as the number of parties in government or whether the Chancellor comes from the party with the most seats, have little to no effect. These results support the idea that partisanship is the main driver of electoral consent/dissent, and that negative preferences have a unique explanatory power in this respect.

Keywords

elections; Germany; losers' consent; protest; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

Electoral consent is fundamental to the proper functioning of democracy. For democratic regimes to endure, all actors, from political elites to ordinary citizens, must remain committed to core democratic principles (Claassen, 2020; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011; Svolik, 2015). Central among these principles is acceptance of electoral outcomes: those who lose elections must consent to their defeat and recognize the legitimacy of the elected parliament and government (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005; Dahl, 1989; Nadeau & Blais, 1993). In principle, this legitimacy should not be contingent on partisanship but should instead depend on whether elections are conducted freely and fairly, irrespective of who wins or loses (Birch, 2011; Esaiasson et al.,

2019). Diffuse support for democracy thus acts as a reservoir that must be sufficiently robust to absorb destabilizing shocks, such as deep socio-economic crises (Easton, 1975). When this reservoir erodes, the risk of democratic backsliding increases. The attack on the Capitol perpetrated by Trump's supporters in the United States in January 2022 and the one perpetrated by Bolsonaro's supporters in Brazil in 2023 illustrate this danger: supporters of some losing incumbents seem to be able to mobilize their partisans to challenge the electoral outcome, which strongly threatened democratic stability (Cohen et al., 2023).

Scholars interested in citizens' consent and dissent have traditionally looked at answers to survey questions about satisfaction with democracy and the "gap" in democratic satisfaction between electoral winners and losers (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022). Although these studies have greatly advanced our understanding of the topic, they nevertheless rely on an indirect measurement of consent. Citizens may be dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country without necessarily being willing to contest electoral outcomes. Besides, the term "satisfaction with democracy" is multifaceted, meaning the answers to this question tap into various sets of beliefs that do not necessarily factor into a single latent trait (Canache et al., 2001).

In view of these challenges, we rely in this article on a direct measurement consisting of presenting a set of plausible electoral outcomes to citizens before asking whether they would accept these outcomes and whether they would participate in a protest contesting them. Based on a large original survey from Germany, we find that acceptance levels are relatively low and that a substantial number of outcomes (23%) would trigger a protest. We then examine the types of electoral outcomes that foster consent or dissent. Respondents are more likely to consent when their preferred party performs well, particularly if this party plays a central role in the governing coalition. These findings corroborate previous work showing that supporters of losing parties are more likely to question the integrity of the electoral process and to believe that there may have been fraud (Beaulieu, 2014; Edelson et al., 2017; Mochtak et al., 2021). However, negative partisanship emerges as an important other driver: the performance of the most disliked party is an even more powerful predictor of acceptance and protest likelihood. By contrast, the structural features of electoral outcomes, such as the number of parties in government and parliament or whether the chancellor comes from the party with the most seats, have little to no impact. Taken together, these findings indicate that partisanship is the main driver of electoral consent and dissent, with negative partisanship playing a strong role in this respect.

In the remainder of the article, we begin by presenting, given its originality, our new direct measure of electoral consent/dissent. We then review the literature on the topic and the hypotheses built around it, presenting the variables used to operationalize the concepts underlying these hypotheses. Finally, we present the results before concluding.

2. A Direct Measure of Electoral Consent

We study citizen electoral consent and dissent in the context of a multi-party system where no party has a majority of seats in parliament, leading to the formation of a majority coalition government. This situation is typical in established democracies. We examine the case of Germany, which has always had majority coalition governments since the Second World War. Although Germany uses a mixed-member electoral system, the compensatory nature of the list tier makes it a proportional system, like most established democracies (Bormann & Golder, 2022). Except for the parties that do not reach the 5% vote threshold, all

parties receive a seat share proportional to their vote share. It thus constitutes a case study that offers reasonable boundaries for generalization across a broader set of countries.

We conducted our survey in March 2024 with 5,370 respondents recruited by the company Dynata. This sample is made representative of the German adult population using socio-demographic quotas: age, gender, region (hard quotas), and education (soft quota). Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File presents descriptive statistics for our sample and compares them with the most recent census data for the target population. The survey took on average seven and a half minutes to complete. At the core was our survey instrument to capture electoral consent and dissent. We showed a fictitious yet plausible outcome of a Bundestag election to respondents before asking how they would react to it. We repeated this operation five times, which is well below the threshold where the answers start becoming meaningless due to fatigue and satisficing (Bansak et al., 2018). Given that the core question was repeated five times, the number of observations in our study is 26,850. However, due to a bug in the survey platform, 0.41% of these observations are unusable. We thus have a $N = 26,740$.

Each outcome consisted of a distribution of parliamentary seats among the seven main national parties in Germany that stood a chance of passing the 5% vote threshold and hence gaining parliamentary seats at the time of the survey. These parties were: the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Alliance 90/The Greens, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), The Left, and the Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW). The outcomes also included these parties' cabinet seats, and an indication of which of them holds the Chancellorship. We decided to include information about both parliament and government in an effort to present a realistic electoral outcome with which respondents are familiar (for example, one that looks like an outcome they could have seen in a newspaper). However, we did not show the vote shares of other parties, as we did not want to overburden respondents with too much information. In the context of Germany, seat shares and vote shares are very similar for all parties that pass the electoral threshold. However, we acknowledge that the results might have been different if we had included vote shares in the vignettes. Indeed, vote results are mechanical translations of the popular will and may therefore carry more legitimacy in the eyes of voters than other indicators, particularly the composition of governing coalitions, which more directly reflect party politics.

Figure 1 presents an example of such an electoral outcome, as it appears on the respondents' screens. We opted for a textual description of the electoral outcome rather than a visual one. While visual representations are generally easier to process, they would create practical difficulties given the very large number of possible outcome combinations. They would also make it challenging to convey three distinct pieces of information—parliamentary seats, cabinet seats, and the Chancellorship—within a single figure.

The three pieces of information (parliamentary seat share, cabinet seats, and Chancellorship) are randomly generated by the computer for each respondent. We put several constraints on this random generation so that the electoral outcomes look plausible. First, the parties receive a random number of parliamentary seats based on their aggregated vote intentions from the last five national polls, adjusted by ±10 percentage points, ensuring no negative percentages and a total of 100%. Due to Germany's 5% vote threshold, no party can receive a seat share between 1% and 4%. This means that the number of parties with parliamentary seats varies from outcome to outcome. The government is formed by randomly selecting parties that together

Imagine an election produces the following German Bundestag:

- CDU/CSU: 39% of seats
- AfD: 20% of seats
- SPD: 7% of seats
- Greens: 18% of seats
- FDP: 6% of seats
- BSW: 5% of seats
- The Left: 5% of seats

After the election, there is a governing coalition between the CDU and the Greens:

- CDU/CSU: 68% of cabinet seats
- Greens: 32% of cabinet seats

The CDU/CSU has the Chancellorship.

Figure 1. Example of the survey vignette with the electoral outcome.

hold at least 51% of parliamentary seats, with any unnecessary parties being excluded to avoid an oversized government, which is the least frequent type of government in democracies (Clark et al., 2009). Cabinet seats are allocated proportionally to the number of parliamentary seats each party holds, following Gamson's law, and must total 100%. The Chancellorship is given to the party with the most parliamentary seats within the government, or randomly in case of a tie.

The advantage of random generation in this context is that it allows us to cover a wide range of potential electoral outcomes. On the respondents' screens appeared 72 different combinations of coalitions, 49% of which had the CDU/CSU as senior partner and Chancellor. Importantly, although the seat distribution is made realistic, any combination of parties, including those far apart ideologically, can form a coalition together as soon as they jointly have at least 51%. A variable capturing the ideological polarization of the government accounts for this in our analysis.

After each electoral outcome, we asked respondents how (un)acceptable they would personally find it on a scale from 0 (*not acceptable at all*) to 10 (*completely acceptable*). The question wording used to measure our dependent variables can be found in Appendix 2 of the Supplementary File (in English and German). The term "accept" is a synonym of "consent" according to the Cambridge dictionary, and arguably one that is more widely used and understood in the population. For example, in the first electoral debate between the two 2024 US presidential candidates, the journalist Bash asks Trump whether he will *accept* the result of the election if he loses. The literature on the topic also makes the link between consent and acceptance. C. J. Anderson et al. (2005, p. 5) argue that "if democratic procedures are to continue in the long run, then the losers must [...] *accept* the decision of the election." The link is even more clearly established in Nadeau and Blais (1993) with the title "[A]ccepting the Election Outcome: The Effect of Participation on Losers' Consent."

Because the term "accept" does not capture a behavior and might be interpreted in slightly different ways by different respondents, we also asked them how likely they would be to participate in a protest contesting the electoral outcome on a scale from 0 (*very unlikely*) to 10 (*very likely*). Importantly, we did not ask respondents

about their willingness to participate in a protest contesting the electoral outcome if they already said they accepted the outcome (five or above on the 0–10 scale). This second question would have been redundant. Instead, we assigned a value of 0 to the *protest* variable for all respondents who gave an answer of five or above to the *accept* question. Additionally, we used an 11-point scale for both indicators of consent/dissent to obtain a fine-grained measure, as we anticipated that very few respondents would be willing to make a forced choice between accepting/not accepting an electoral outcome and protesting/not protesting it. Moreover, the existence of a midpoint is central for us, as it allows us to distinguish those who are more consenting than dissenting. Note that these questions did not elicit the motivations of those dissenting from the electoral outcome. We acknowledge that, for some respondents, these motivations may be aligned with democratic values, such as protesting a government perceived as dangerous to democracy. Yet the consequences of not accepting such an outcome and contesting it may undermine democratic functioning. For example, a protest, even if it begins as a genuinely peaceful demonstration, may escalate into a riot due to the presence of a handful of ill-intentioned individuals.

Figure 2 reports the distribution of the two electoral consent/dissent variables. In each instance, this distribution is bimodal with the two extreme values, 0 and 10, being largely over-represented, indicating that respondents have strong opinions on the question. For acceptability, a plurality of respondents chose 0 (around 29%), whereas only 9% chose 10. In fact, a majority of electoral outcomes are not accepted, with 55% being evaluated below the midpoint. The distribution of the likelihood to protest variable shows that many of them are not willing to put this lack of acceptance into action, as 56% are at 0 on this variable. Yet there are still 23% of electoral outcomes against which Germans are willing to protest, i.e., they choose a response above the midpoint of the scale. For 13% of them, they even chose the maximum category 10. This is thus a substantial threat to electoral consent in the country. The correlation between the acceptability and
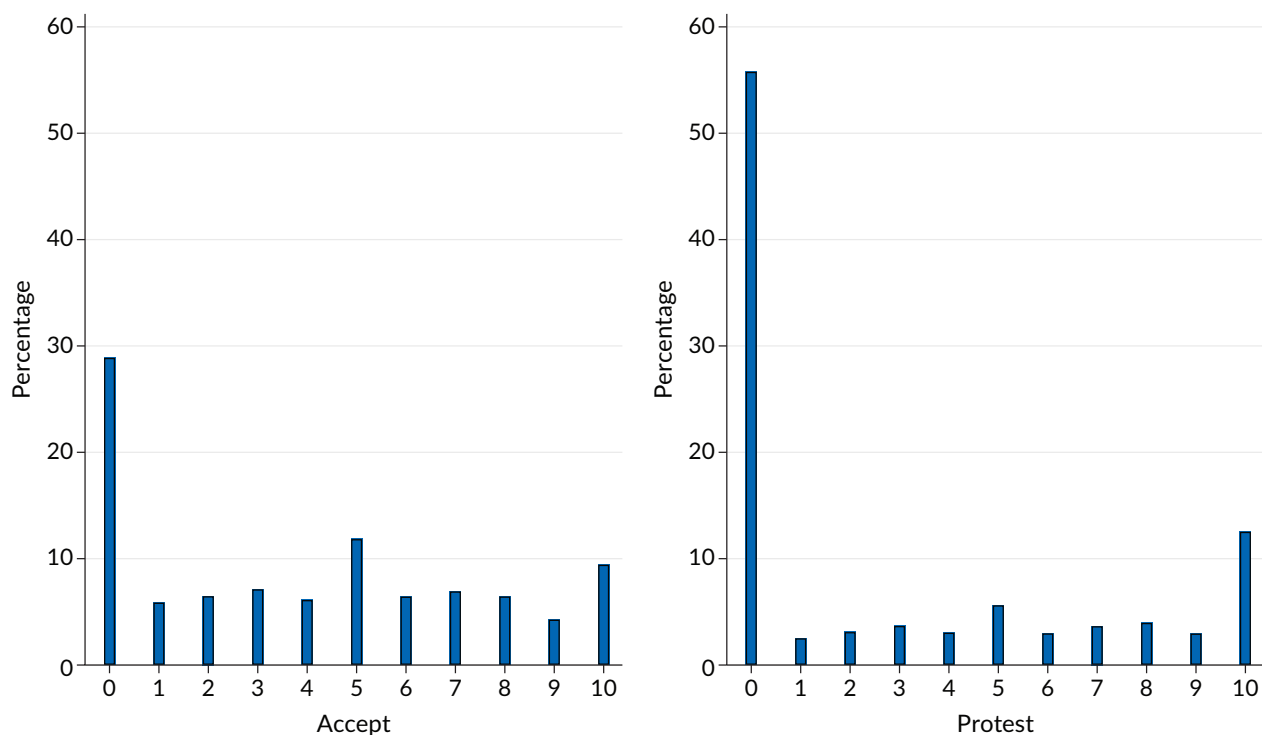

Figure 2. Distribution of electoral consent/dissent among respondents. Note: Means are 3.96 (accept) and 2.88 (protest). Standard deviations are 3.46 (accept) and 3.80 (protest).

likelihood to protest variables is −0.67, indicating that those who accept an outcome are also those who are least likely to participate in a protest contesting it. Note that this correlation is inflated by the fact that we assigned a value of 0 to the likelihood to protest variable for respondents who answered five or more to the acceptability question. Yet the correlation is still −0.26 when we only consider respondents who gave an answer to the acceptability question below five and who were thus asked both questions.

As a further exploration of the data, we examine differences between partisan groups (see Section 3 on how we identified the most liked and disliked party of each respondent). Those who are most accepting of the electoral outcome and least likely to protest against it are supporters of the AfD (average acceptance = 4.68, average likelihood of protest = 2.40), followed by CDU/CSU supporters (average acceptance = 4.17, average likelihood of protest = 2.71). At the other extreme, supporters of The Left are the least accepting (average = 3.25), while Greens supporters are the most likely to protest (average = 3.62). These differences between supporters are expected, given that not all of them are equally likely to be part of the governing coalition as constructed in the vignettes. However, the differences remain relatively small, less than 1.50 points on both indicators of consent and dissent. These descriptive statistics also show that acceptance and protest are not driven solely by supporters of a single party.

We also examine differences between groups depending on which party they dislike the most. The two parties most commonly disliked in our data are the AfD (53% of respondents)—especially among Greens supporters (84%)—and the Greens (27%)—especially among AfD supporters (69%). These two parties thus represent major opposing camps. The other parties are much less polarizing, with the proportion of haters not exceeding 6%. For this reason, Figure 3 shows the average level of consent and dissent among supporters of the AfD and the Greens when their main opponent is presented as being in government in the vignettes or not. The figure shows that Greens supporters react strongly to the presence of the AfD in government: their acceptance level decreases from 5.52 to 2.46, and their likelihood of protest increases by
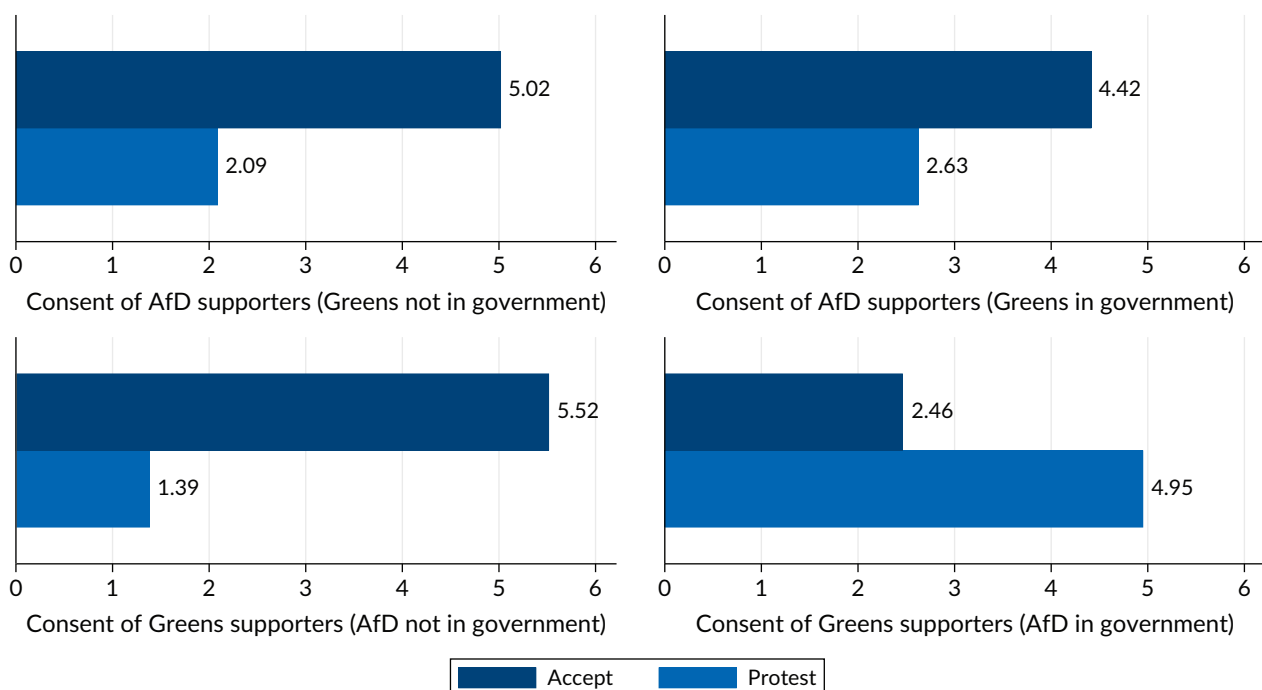
Figure 3. Electoral consent/dissent among AfD and Greens supporters.

1.39 to 4.95. Interestingly, AfD supporters show a similar pattern, but to a much lesser extent: their acceptance level decreases from 5.02 to 4.42 when the Greens are in government, and their likelihood of protest increases from 2.09 to 2.63. These results suggest that negative preferences against certain parties drive electoral consent and dissent. In the following sections, we present hypotheses and analyses that formalize these intuitions more systematically.

3. Hypotheses and Variables

In this article, we test two sets of pre-registered hypotheses (see https://osf.io/j26wp, sub-projects 1 and 2). The first examines the extent to which electoral consent and dissent are shaped by partisan preferences and the performance of the various parties in the vignette. The second assesses whether these attitudes vary with the structural characteristics of the electoral outcome, such as the number of parties in government or whether the chancellor comes from the party that won the largest share of parliamentary seats.

Following the literature on the winner–loser gap in satisfaction with democracy (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Nadeau et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2012), we expect electoral consent and dissent to be influenced by partisan preferences. This literature shows that citizens' democratic evaluations are shaped by the performance of their preferred party. The more seats this party secures in parliament and in government, the more satisfied its supporters are, and the more acceptable they find the election outcome. This greater acceptance stems from political representation: the victory of one's preferred party increases the likelihood that one's policy preferences will be realized (Ezrow & Xezonakis, 2011). Additionally, winning boosts satisfaction with democracy because it validates supporters' political identity and reinforces their confidence in the democratic process (Beaudonnet et al., 2014; Singh, 2014). Consequently, the better one's preferred party performs in an election, at both parliamentary and governmental levels, the more willing citizens should be to accept the electoral outcome and the less likely they should be to engage in protest contesting it (C. J. Anderson & Mendes, 2006).

In an era of growing polarization, negative partisanship has become increasingly prevalent (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016; Caruana et al., 2015), especially given the human tendency to be more sensitive to negative information (Fournier et al., 2020). Citizens' electoral consent is therefore also likely to be affected by the performance of their most disliked party. An outcome in which this party gains substantial representation in parliament or government is likely to be perceived as a threat to their political values and preferences, or maybe even the regime as a whole, thereby reducing their acceptance of the outcome and increasing their likelihood of protesting against it. However, we expect the performance of the most liked party to remain a stronger determinant than that of the most disliked party, as positive partisanship still tends to be a better predictor of a range of political attitudes, including vote choice, than negative partisanship (C. D. Anderson et al., 2022; Ridge, 2022).

A further question concerns how to measure party performance. Evidence suggests that, in evaluating electoral outcomes, citizens tend to prioritize information about the government (Blais et al., 2023), as they consider the parties forming the governing coalitions to be the true "winners" of the election (Plescia, 2019; Stiers et al., 2018). We keep an agnostic approach by testing multiple indicators of performance. We, therefore, formulate the first set of four "partisan" hypotheses as follows:

H1A: The more seats their most liked (most disliked) party has in parliament, the more (less) acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1B: The more seats their most liked (most disliked) party has in government, the more (less) acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1C: Electoral outcomes in which their most liked (most disliked) party has the Chancellorship are more (less) acceptable and the less (more) likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

H1D: Respondent's acceptance of an electoral outcome and the likelihood to participate in a protest contesting it depend more on the performance of their most liked party than on that of their most disliked party.

To identify the most liked and most disliked parties, we use 0–10 party-liking scales for each of the seven parties included in the electoral outcomes. These questions are asked prior to the vignettes and the consent/dissent questions, along with a follow-up question to break any ties. Approximately 3% of the sample is excluded from this analysis due to *don't know* responses to all seven party-liking questions.

We formulate five additional hypotheses regarding the structural characteristics of the electoral outcomes presented in the vignettes. The rationale behind these hypotheses is that citizens are more likely to be satisfied with some political systems because of specific features they find more desirable than others, for example, because they believe that a government with only a few parties is more efficient, or that a parliament in which more parties are represented is fairer. Therefore, we expect citizens to be more likely to consent to electoral outcomes generated by rules that reflect their structural preferences regarding what political systems ought to be (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Blais et al., 2023). Firstly, we expect citizens to be less willing to consent to an outcome with a larger number of parties in government, as they may perceive such governments as less stable, less efficient, and more prone to difficulties in reaching compromises (Powell & Whitten, 1993; Vowles, 2010). By contrast, we anticipate these citizens to view a higher number of parties in parliament more positively, assuming that greater party diversity leads to broader representation of social groups and political preferences in the decision-making process (Lijphart, 1999). Our indicator is the effective number of parties, which we apply separately to the government and to the parliamentary seat share to define our first two "structural" hypotheses.

Secondly, we expect consent to be higher when the party with the largest parliamentary seat share is in government than when this party is in the opposition. The intuition is that respondents find the electoral outcome more legitimate when the party that has "won" the election in terms of parliamentary seats is part of the coalition that is governing the country, and has thus, by virtue of Gamson's law, the Chancellorship. There is indeed a common belief in the public that the party with the most seats is the legitimate winner of the election (Gattermann et al., 2022; Plescia, 2019), which is also echoed by the media coverage of elections (Glasgow et al., 2011). To capture this, we create a dummy variable that takes the value 1 when the party with the most seats in parliament is in the governing coalition, and 0 otherwise.

Thirdly, we also expect citizens not to consent to electoral outcomes in which the coalition government is ideologically incohesive, as they assume it will be unstable and inefficient. This is the same reason why we predict that people are more reluctant to accept larger coalitions. The more partners there are and the more diversified these partners are, the more difficult it is to reach an agreement on the policies to adopt. To measure the ideological range of the governing coalition, we rely on the left–right positioning of the various German parties according to the latest wave of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Jolly et al., 2022). We then construct an indicator of polarization between governing parties, using the formula proposed by Dalton (2008), which consists of taking the average distance of all parties to the center of gravity of the group, weighted by the number of cabinet seats of each party.

Fourthly, we believe that citizens are risk-averse and react negatively to an uncertain political world where they perceive that an unfamiliar governing coalition could lead to turbulent times or even system collapse. Furthermore, there might be a psychological mechanism of voters preferring the status quo just for the cognitive comfort that it provides (Blais et al., 2021). We thus expect that respondents will be more inclined to consent to electoral outcomes with which they are familiar. To calculate familiarity, we rely on ParlGov data that list the parties that have been included in all German governments for more than a century (Döring et al., 2022). For each combination of parties appearing in the scenarios, we calculate the number of years it has been in government since 1990 (i.e., date of German reunification) divided by the total number of years over the period (= 34 years). Following this, we formulate five additional hypotheses:

> H2A: The larger the effective number of parties in government, the less acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the more likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

> H2B: The larger the effective number of parties in parliament, the more acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

> H2C: Respondents are more accepting of an electoral outcome and less likely to participate in a protest contesting it when the party with the largest parliamentary seat share is in government than when this party is in the opposition.

> H2D: The larger the ideological range of parties in government, the less acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the more likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

> H2E: The more familiar the governing coalition, the more acceptable the electoral outcome is, and the less likely respondents are to participate in a protest contesting it.

4. Results

As specified in the pre-analysis plan, we create a dataset in which each line is a dyad of respondent and electoral outcome (N = 26,740). We perform a series of OLS regressions where the dependent variables are our two indicators of consent/dissent, and the independent variables are those that correspond to our hypotheses. The descriptive statistics of the independent variables before standardization can be found in Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File. We also cluster the standard error by respondent. We add the total legislative seat share of the parties in the governing coalition since this variable was deemed influential in the

evaluation of electoral outcomes in the study of Blais et al. (2023). As there are no minority and oversized government in our scenarios, we do not have much variation on this variable, and the results regarding this variable should be interpreted with caution. To facilitate the interpretation of the effect sizes in the regressions, we standardize these independent variables so that the mean is 0 and the standard deviation is 1. This is the "baseline" regression model that is the same for both sets of hypotheses.

We begin by testing the first set of four partisan hypotheses. Figure 4 presents the results, showing the estimates from the baseline regression model alongside those from a series of pre-registered robustness tests. First, we use alternative measures of partisan preferences based on responses to questions about positive vote intention ("If there were an election tomorrow, for which party would you vote?") and negative vote intention ("For which party would you never vote?") instead of the party-liking scales. About 15% of our sample responded *don't know* or *would not vote* to the positive vote intention question, and less than 1% did so for the negative vote intention questions. These are considered missing values in the related analysis. Second, we restrict the sample to the first iteration of the electoral outcome questions, as respondents may experience fatigue after multiple iterations, which may, in turn, negatively affect the quality of their answers. Third, we exclude all outcomes in which the newly created BSW party (formed only a few months before the survey) is in government, as some respondents may not be familiar with it. Fourth, we remove from the sample respondents who have mild preferences in terms of the most liked party, as their weak partisanship levels might lead to a downward bias in the estimates. Specifically, we only keep those for which the most
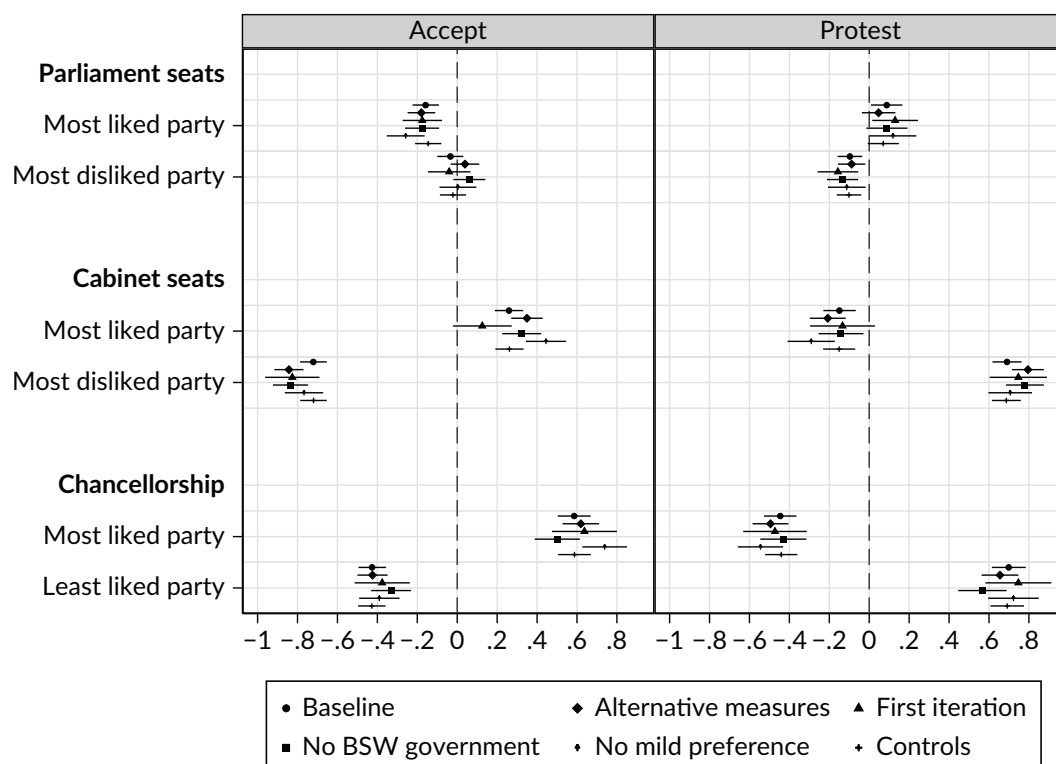
Figure 4. Regression results for partisan hypotheses. Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates from OLS regressions predicting the acceptability of the outcome (left panel) and the likelihood to protest this outcome (right panel), both on 0–10 scales. All independent variables are standardized. Full regression results are in Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

liked party is two points above the second most liked party on the 0–10 party-liking scale. About half of the respondents in our sample exhibit mild political preferences according to this definition. We decided not to apply the same approach to negative partisan preferences, although this was pre-registered in our pre-analysis plan, because 96% of respondents fall into the "mild" category under this definition. Fifth, we re-estimate the regressions including additional individual-level socio-demographic control variables, age, gender, education, and region, to account for potential cofounding effects at this level.

Figure 4 shows that both positive and negative partisan preferences are powerful predictors of electoral consent and dissent, particularly when party performance is measured at the government level. The first estimates show that when performance is measured by parliamentary seat shares, the coefficients are small in absolute terms and rarely statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, and when they are, their sign is often in the opposite direction from what was expected. This finding is likely due to the vignette design and the fact that cabinet seat shares are mechanically strongly correlated with parliamentary seat shares. When we estimate a regression with the parliamentary seat shares of the most liked and disliked party alone, without the variables capturing cabinet seat shares of those parties and whether they have Chancellorship, the coefficients take the expected direction, in the sense that the greater the seat share of one's most (dis)liked party, the higher (smaller) the acceptance and lower (higher) likelihood of protesting (statistically significant at $p < .05$). However, these effects become mostly null in the full regression model, which suggests that respondents were more affected by what happens at the government level. Hence, we find only mixed evidence for H1A.

Figure 4 also shows that when cabinet seats of one's most liked party increase by one standard deviation, acceptance increases by 0.4 points, and the likelihood of protesting decreases by 0.3 points. This represents about 10% of the standard deviation of the dependent variables and is statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications but one (the one with the alternative measure of partisan preferences, likely due to the high number of missing values for this variable, see above). To provide a different interpretation, we reproduce the baseline analysis in Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File using raw (unstandardized) independent variables. The results show that when the cabinet seat share of a respondent's most liked party increases from 0% to 50%, acceptance rises by 0.69 points on the 0–10 scale, while the likelihood of protesting decreases by 0.39 points.

Negative preferences are even more powerful predictors: the same increase in the independent variable leads to a decrease of 0.7–0.8 points in acceptance (about 20% of the standard deviation) and an increase in the likelihood of protesting by the same margin. These effects are statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications. In terms of raw values (see Appendix 6 in the Supplementary File), when the cabinet seat share of one's most disliked party increases from 0% to 50%, acceptance decreases by 2.2 points, while the likelihood of protesting increases by 2.1 points. In other words, negative preferences are about twice as powerful as positive preferences in shaping electoral consent and dissent when performance is measured by cabinet seat shares. Equivalence tests show that differences between the two are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

The situation is more mixed for the Chancellorship. Figure 4 shows that an increase of one standard deviation in the variable leads to an increase of about 0.6 points in acceptance for positive partisan preferences, and a decrease of about 0.5 points in the likelihood of protesting (both $p < .05$ across all specifications). These effects are about 0.4 and 0.7 points, respectively, for negative partisan preferences (again $p < .05$ across all

specifications). Appendix 6 of the Supplementary File offers another way to interpret these estimates: when one's favorite party holds the Chancellorship, acceptance increases by about 1.4 points on the 0–10 scale (and the likelihood of protesting decreases by about 1.1 points). Conversely, when one's most disliked party holds the Chancellorship, acceptance decreases by about one full point (and the likelihood of protesting increases by about 1.6 points). Here again, equivalence tests show that differences in performance between the most liked and most disliked parties are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

We thus find strong evidence for both H1B and H1C: partisanship drives electoral consent and dissent when party performance is measured at the government level. We do not, however, find much evidence for H1D, as positive preferences are not stronger predictors than negative ones. In fact, negative preferences tend to matter more than positive ones.

We then continue with results related to the structural hypotheses, starting with the baseline regression model. As announced in the pre-analysis plan, we also perform a series of robustness tests for these hypotheses. First, we re-estimate the same regressions with alternative measures of some of the variables, i.e., the raw number of parties in government and parliament instead of the effective number, the ideological polarization of parties in government using the left–right positioning variable of the latest wave of the Comparative Manifesto Project (Lehmann et al., 2023) instead of the one of the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, and finally using the whole post-World War II period to calculate familiarity with coalition instead of the post-1990 period. Note that this last alternative measure of the variable "familiarity with coalition" was not specified in the pre-analysis plan, but, ex post, it seems like a sensible additional test to us. Second, similarly to the robustness tests for the partisan hypotheses above, we reduce the sample to the first iteration of the vignette questions and then to the electoral outcomes in which the BSW is not in government. Finally, we add the same individual-level socio-demographic control variables.

Figure 5 shows that all estimates of the effects of structural variables are small in absolute terms and never statistically significant at $p < .05$ across all specifications. The variable that comes closest to this threshold is the polarization of governing parties, which decreases acceptance of the electoral outcome and increases the likelihood of protesting against it ($p < .05$ in all but one specification). This finding suggests that respondents prefer cohesive coalitions composed of ideologically aligned parties. The effect, however, is small in absolute terms, at most 0.2 in standardized units, which is lower than all partisan effects (see Figure 4).

Among the other structural variables, Figure 5 shows that only the number of governing parties affects acceptance levels, but not the likelihood of protesting. Respondents seem less favorable toward coalitions composed of many parties. Yet here again, the standardized effect is small, around 0.2 in absolute terms, and only statistically significant at $p < .05$ in four out of five specifications.

We thus find little evidence supporting any of the structural hypotheses. Respondents are not more likely to consent to electoral outcomes where the number of parliamentary parties is large (H2A), where the largest party in seat share has Chancellorship (H2C), or where they have some familiarity with the governing coalition (H2E). We find only mild evidence that they are somewhat affected by the polarization of governing parties (H2D) and their number (H2B), but these effects are clearly weaker than the partisan ones.
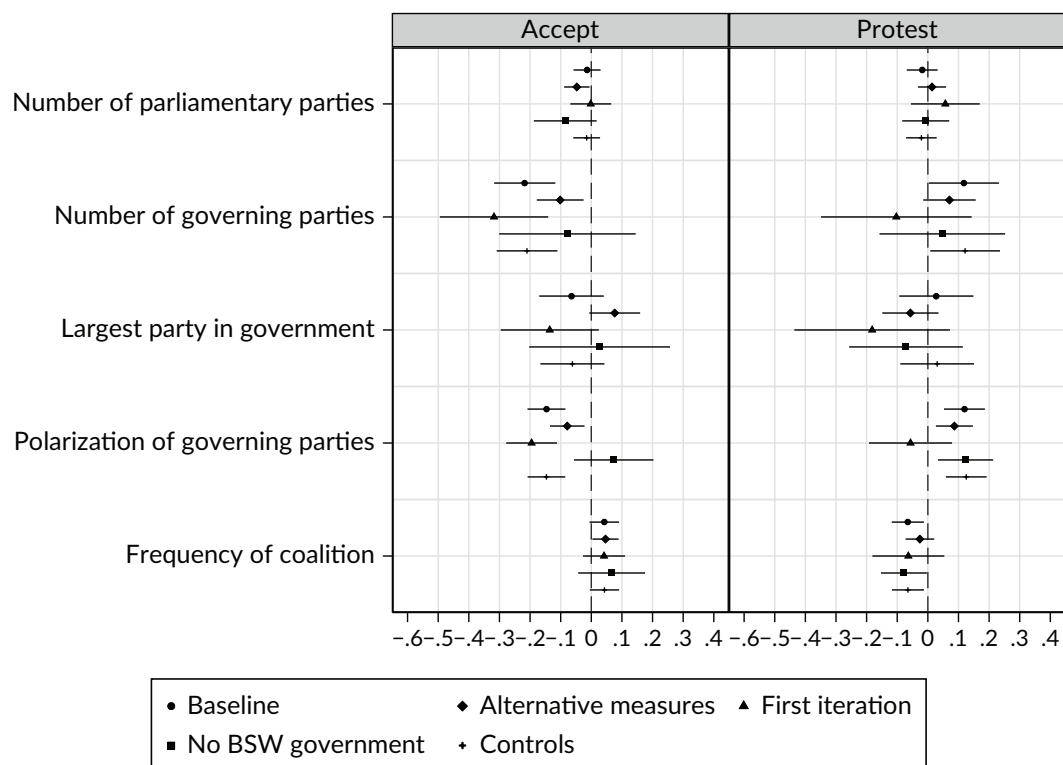
Figure 5. Regression results for structural hypotheses. Notes: Entries are coefficient estimates from OLS regressions predicting the acceptability of the outcome (left panel) and the likelihood to protest this outcome (right panel), both on 0–10 scales. All independent variables are standardized. Full regression results are in Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered by respondent.

5. Conclusion

Although electoral consent is vital for democracy (C. J. Anderson et al., 2005), the empirical literature has so far approached it indirectly, most often by examining the gap in satisfaction with democracy between electoral winners and losers (C. J. Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Kern & Kölln, 2022; Singh et al., 2012). We propose a direct measurement instrument that can be applied in various countries: generating plausible electoral outcomes and asking respondents whether they consent to them. Using a representative sample of over 5,000 German citizens, we find that a substantial portion of electoral outcomes are deemed unacceptable and that a significant minority (23%) would incite protest actions. This important finding highlights the need for future research to study electoral consent directly.

We have examined which kinds of electoral outcomes foster citizen consent. We tested partisan hypotheses, according to which the performance of the most liked and disliked party affects citizens' electoral consent and dissent, and structural hypotheses, according to which the nature of the electoral outcome, such as the number of parties in government or whether the largest party holds the Chancellorship, affects such consent/dissent. The results are clear: partisan considerations outweigh structural features of electoral outcomes. What matters most for citizens' willingness to accept an electoral outcome and not to protest against it is whether the parties they like (dislike) perform well (poorly), especially when this performance is measured at the government level.

Importantly, we find that negative partisanship emerges as at least as powerful as positive partisanship, and often more so, in shaping electoral consent and dissent. In an era of affective polarization, the fortunes of the party one dislikes seem to matter even more than those of the party one favors. This has important implications for interpreting recent political events such as those in the United States and Brazil. Despite the differences between the political systems of these countries and that of Germany, particularly the presidential nature of the government and the resulting high degree of personification of politics where some candidates sometimes fuel affective polarization by using an aggressive and hostile rhetoric (Clayton et al., 2021), our results suggest that the supporters of Trump and Bolsonaro who gathered in front of their respective parliament after their favorite candidate lost the election may have been mobilized not only by loyalty to their preferred leader but equally or even more so by hostility toward the other side. These dynamics may thus reflect a broader, and potentially destabilizing, pattern in contemporary democracies.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The replication material, including data, is available on https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XOCRVU

LLMs Disclosure

The authors used LLMs to format the list of references in accordance with the journal's citation style.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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