

The Way we Were: How Histories of Co-Governance Alleviate Partisan Hostility

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ABSTRACT: Comparative politics scholars argue that consensual democratic institutions encourage power-sharing that promotes ‘kinder, gentler’ politics. We uncover one reason why this is the case: elite inter-party cooperation in consensual systems is associated with reduced inter-party hostility in the mass public. This is because governing parties’ supporters feel much more warmly towards their coalition partner(s) than we can explain based on policy agreement alone. Moreover, these warm affective evaluations linger long after the coalition itself has dissolved. We substantiate our arguments via analyses of CSES survey data from 19 western democracies between 1996-2017, showing that current and past co-governance is associated with substantially warmer inter-party affective evaluations. This implies that electoral systems which encourage coalition governance may defuse partisan hostility.

Concerns over resentment and dislike across party lines have become ubiquitous in Western democracies. The potential negative implications of partisan hostility were exposed in the United States during the divisive 2020 election campaign and the subsequent violent insurrection at the US Capitol—and more broadly with democratic backsliding (Orhan 2021). It is no surprise that in President Biden’s inauguration speech he implored Americans to “show respect to one another” and reminded his nation that “politics need not be a raging fire destroying everything in its path.”

Scholars extensively analyze the causes and consequences of American partisan resentment, distrust, and dislike, commonly labeled affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019; Lelkes 2018). Increasingly, this phenomenon is also studied comparatively (Harteveld 2021a, Harteveld 2021b, Reiljan 2020, Wagner 2020). Perhaps surprisingly for those concerned with Americans’ partisan resentment, comparative research suggests that the American public is not an outlier in the intensity of its affective polarization (Lauka et al. 2018; Wagner 2020). And while American research emphasizes the psychological mechanisms driving partisan resentment (Levendusky 2018), comparative scholarship extends this discussion to analyze its structural underpinnings (Gidron et al. 2020; Reiljan 2020).

Electoral institutions stand out as one structural feature closely associated with mass publics’ emotional political climates. In a foundational work of comparative institutionalism, Lijphart (2012) argues that proportional representation voting systems, and the coalition governments these systems encourage, prompt kinder, gentler, politics. To enact policy, and even to form a government, political elites representing different groups must cooperate and share power. Recent work suggests an important role for electoral systems in structuring how

voters think about politics. In an experimental study leveraging multiple election studies and a survey experiment, Bassan-Nygate and Weiss (2021) find that while heightened electoral competition stokes partisan hostility, cooperation between parties promotes tolerance across party lines. Fischer et al. (2021) use a clever experimental design to show that voters, even those whose side loses in an election, are less negative towards the other side under a proportional electoral system. Focusing on the other side of the institutional spectrum, Drutman (2020) argues that two-party, winner-take-all electoral systems—which often concentrate power in the hands of a single party—incite more confrontational and emotionally charged party competition than proportional systems. Taylor et al (2014) point to the strictness of the two-party system in the United States as a factor contributing to gridlock and heightened polarization.

We build on these important contributions and investigate one mechanism connecting electoral systems to variations in partisan resentment in mass publics: that of governing coalitions between parties. We argue, first, that citizens feel more warmly towards parties that co-govern with their preferred party, independent of these coalition partners' policy stances – that is, the experience of co-governing by itself prompts warm out-party evaluations toward coalition partners. Second, we argue that the affective consequences of co-governance endure, warming partisans' feelings towards former coalition partners for years after the coalition itself has ended. We evaluate these arguments by analyzing data from 77 election surveys across 19 Western democracies since the mid-1990s, which we merge with data on governing coalitions. Our analyses substantiate our theoretical arguments, uncovering the powerful and long-lasting affective relationships associated with governing coalitions. Our long-term temporal

perspective extends important experimental research on the consequences of co-governance (Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2021).

Our findings advance a growing literature on coalition-related heuristics (Fortunato and Stevenson 2019). As we discuss below, there is evidence that citizens rely on coalition membership to infer parties' ideological positions (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013). Our findings suggest that coalition heuristics also function as a perceptual screen that colors partisans' emotional evaluations of other parties. In particular, partisans warmly evaluate their coalition partners both during the actual period of co-governance, and for many years afterwards.

More broadly, our findings contribute to the emerging comparative polarization literature. Comparativists have long analyzed how electoral rules shape ideological polarization (Ezrow 2008; Dow 2011), and we extend this discussion to address affective polarization. Americanists have recently discussed the potential benefits of adopting more proportional electoral rules (Drutman 2020; Rodden 2019), and we hope our study advances this debate through its comparative, long-term perspective. Our results also inform reform-oriented debates about implications of the United States (or states and cities within it) moving away from its strict two-party system (Santucci 2020). While most research addresses the *drivers* of affective polarization and partisan hostility, our findings suggest a *potential remedy*, namely electoral institutions that motivate cooperative coalition governments.

The role of the past: why current and past co-governance enhances out-party affect

Scholars emphasize many factors that influence cross-party hostility and distrust, including economic conditions (Stewart et al. 2020), elite policy disputes (Rogowski 2018), government performance (Reiljan 2020), partisan media (Levendusky 2013), and the overlap of

citizens' partisan and social identities (Mason 2018, Hartevelde 2021b). Electoral systems and the power-sharing arrangements commonly found in more proportional systems are another factor which may influence affective polarization. In cross-national analyses, Somer and McCoy (2019, 261) find that "the most extreme cases of polarization among our countries emerge in contexts of majoritarian electoral systems that produce a disproportionate representation for the majority or plurality party."

Famously, Lijphart (2012) argues that more consensual political systems which motivate power sharing across different levels of government, lead to 'kinder, gentler' politics which defuse societal divisions. Lijphart advocates an intricate system of power sharing between societal opponents at multiple levels of government, and his work has influenced the design of institutions intended to alleviate conflict in highly fractured societies. While few Western democracies feature fully consociational institutions, many employ proportional representation (PR) electoral systems which motivate power sharing since no single party is likely to win a governing majority. Consistent with Lijphart's theoretical arguments, Gidron et al. (2020, Table 7) show that the publics in Western countries with more proportional electoral systems display less intense dislike of partisan opponents. However, these authors' country-level analyses do not parse out the mechanisms behind this pattern.

One potential path forward is to analyze the role of governing coalitions, which are much more common in PR systems. There are reasons to expect partisans of governing parties to display particularly warm feelings towards their coalition partners. First, citizens tend to infer that co-governing parties share more similar ideologies than is implied by the statements in their election manifestos (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013), which may enhance partisans'

affect towards co-governing out-parties whom they perceive as sharing their own policy views. Second, partisans observe their party's coalition partner(s) joining their own party to defend the government's performance from opposition parties' attacks (and from media criticism), both in terms of policy but also in defending governing ministers' character-based qualities such as competence and integrity. This public spectacle of their own party's elites extolling the character of its coalition partner(s) plausibly bolsters partisans' evaluations of these coalition partners' character traits, prompting warmer affective evaluations. Finally, work in social psychology suggests that coalition members may develop a sense of shared fate (Brewer 2002; Gaertner et al. 1999), reflected in super-ordinate identity that pits coalition members (us) against opposition members (them). This re-categorization of political identities can be expected to improve partisans' evaluations of their coalition partners, who are now perceived as part of their in-group. Drawing on this theoretical logic, Bassan-Nygate and Weiss show that coalition signals indeed improve affective evaluations between co-governing partners (2022, 292). These considerations motivate our first hypothesis:

H1 (The current co-governance hypothesis): Partisans of co-governing parties evaluate their coalition partners more warmly, controlling for the parties' objective policy differences.

Why the 'affective bonus' from co-governance may endure long after the coalition ends

While the current co-governance hypothesis (H1) is theoretically interesting, its impact on overall levels of cross-party hostility may be modest because only a small proportion of the parties in most party systems typically co-govern at any given time. For instance, Gidron et al. (2020) analyze 20 western party systems across the period 1996-2017, and find that only 8% of

the pairs of parties in the analyses were currently co-governing.¹ In most systems a large majority of party pairs do not currently co-govern, even in fractured systems, so that current coalition arrangements seem unlikely to drive the large affective consequences of electoral system proportionality documented in previous empirical studies (Somer and McCoy 2018).

What if, however, the affective consequences of governing coalitions endure long after the coalition itself has expired, so that the supporters of parties with previous co-governing experience maintain disproportionately warm feelings towards their previous coalition partners? In this case the cumulative impact of a country's history of governing coalitions could substantially defuse mass-level cross-party hostility, given that – as we document below – most western party systems feature more instances of party pairs that have previously co-governed, compared to pairs of currently co-governing parties.

We see several reasons to expect previous governing coalitions to exert long-term affective consequences. Consider first Fiorina's (1981) conception of party identification as a 'running tally' of citizens' cumulative evaluations of parties' current and past policies and performance, that can encompass events spanning several decades. Two examples are the long-term effects of the US Republican Party's association with the Great Depression, which

¹ While this percentage may appear surprisingly low, consider a system with six parties A, B, C, D, E, F, where parties A, B are in the cabinet and the others in opposition. Here there are 15 distinct pairs of parties (AB, AC, AD, AE, AF, BC, BD, BE, BF, CD, CE, CF, DE, DF, FG), yet only the AB pair currently co-governs. And if parties A, B, C co-govern while D, E, F remain in opposition, then only three of the 15 party pairs (AB, SC, BC) are currently co-governing.

damaged the party's reputation up to the 1960s (Stokes 1963), and the French Communists' association with the French Resistance during WWII, which burnished the party's public image for decades thereafter (Converse and Pierce, 1986). In this regard, the positive affect partisans develop towards coalition partners during periods of co-governance, when the parties cooperate to develop a legislative agenda and also to publicly support each other in the face of criticisms from opposition parties (and the media), may contribute to the long-term 'running tally' of these partisans' out-party evaluations, that endure long after the coalition ends.

Second, and related, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) show that past co-governance influences citizens' current perceptions of party policies. That is, citizens perceive parties that previously co-governed as sharing more similar ideologies than are implied by the parties' currently stated policy positions. This perceptual distortion should prompt partisans to over-estimate the degree of policy affinity between their own party and its past (and current) coalition partners, driving warmer cross-party evaluations.

Third, past co-governance may influence party elites' current public interactions with former coalition partners, with implications for citizens' party evaluations. In particular, opposition party elites may seek to maintain cooperative relationships with their former coalition partners, in order to 'signal' a future willingness to co-govern (Fredén 2016, Bowler et al. 2010; Blais et al. 2006). Such cooperative signals may extend beyond expressions of shared policy views to include public displays of consulting with the other party's elites, issuing joint criticisms of the current government's performance, and publicly praising the former partner's competence and integrity while eschewing public criticisms of its shortcomings. Adams et al. (2020) document that citizens perceive and respond to media reports of these types of elite-

level interactions, particularly around the times of national elections. And, we might expect partisans to take ‘affective cues’ from their own party’s elites when these elites express solidarity with and approval of their previous coalition partners (see, e.g., Zaller 1992; Lenz 2012). For instance, Huddy and Yair (2021) show that warmer elite cues across the ideological divide in the context of the American Senate diffuse affective polarization. These arguments prompt our second hypothesis:

H2 (Past co-governance hypothesis): Controlling for policy differences and for current coalition arrangements, partisans evaluate their former governing coalition partners more warmly.

District Magnitude, Cabinet Histories, and Political Hostility: A Cross-National Overview

While the current and past co-governance hypotheses (H1 and H2) pertain to individual-level processes, they have an important aggregate-level implication, namely that political systems that promote extensive power-sharing between parties will tend to defuse cross-party hostility. As we noted earlier, proportional representation (PR) voting systems tend to motivate coalition governments, since single parties rarely win a governing majority. Hence we might expect the publics in more proportional systems to express less cross-party hostility – provided, that is, that more proportional systems actually feature substantially more power-sharing between parties. Here we present preliminary, aggregate-level, comparisons across 20 western publics that support these two points.

Figure 1 displays the relationship between electoral system proportionality (the horizontal axis) and a country-level measure of partisans’ expressed dislike of political opponents (the vertical axis), across 20 western publics. We measure proportionality by using

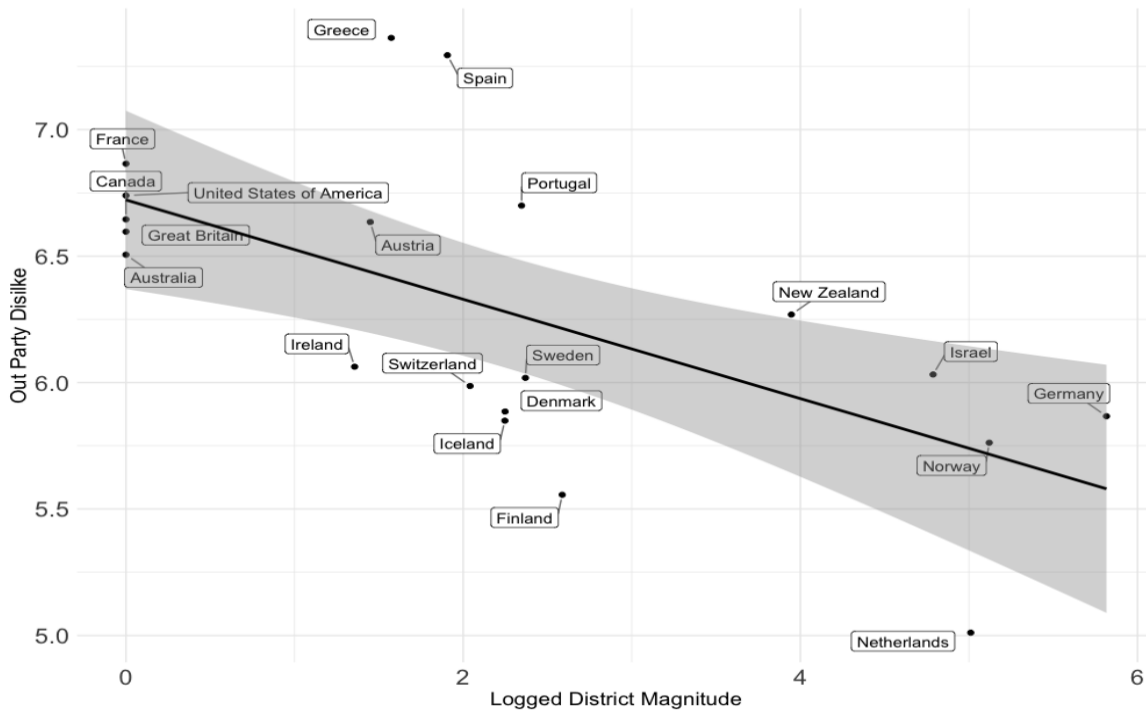
the average district magnitude for each country (Bormann and Golder, 2013). As is standard in the electoral systems literature, the average district magnitude “is logged to capture the intuition that the marginal effect of a unit change in district magnitude is smaller as magnitude increases” (Brambor et al. 2007, 316; see also Golder 2003). The district magnitude measure in Bormann and Golder (2013) substantially understates the magnitude of mixed-member proportional electoral systems, coding them as having a district magnitude of 1. However, in these systems the proportionality is determined by the party vote, rather than the district vote. For this reason, we use the number of seats awarded in the second tier, or party vote, to determine their district magnitude.

We measure aggregate-level out-party dislike using the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) surveys, taking the vote-share weighted average thermometer score (on a 0-10 scale where 10 denotes maximum dislike) that self-identified partisan respondents in the country awarded to out-parties, averaged across all country-election CSES surveys from these 20 countries between 1996 and 2017, 81 surveys in all.² (Section S1 in the supplementary appendix lists the CSES surveys and political parties included in these analyses.) Figure 1 displays a strong negative relationship between out-party dislike and proportionality: The countries with single-member districts (Australia, Canada, France, the UK, and the US) all

² The question is: “I’d like to know what you think about each of our political parties. After I read the name of a political party, please rate it on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you strongly dislike that party and 10 means that you strongly like that party.” For these analyses we have reversed the scale end points, so that 10 denotes maximum dislike.

display mean out-party dislike scores between 6.5 and 7.0 (where higher values denote more intense dislike), while the publics in the most proportional systems (Germany, The Netherlands, and Norway) all display mean out-party dislike levels between 5.0 and 6.0. The correlation between countries' (logged) district magnitude and their out-party dislike levels is -0.62 ($p < .01$), i.e., in these aggregate-level, cross-national comparisons, out-party dislike significantly diminishes as proportionality increases.

Figure 1. The Relationship between Voting System Proportionality and Out-Party Dislike, Across 20 Western Democracies



Notes. The vertical axis in the figure displays the country-level mean thermometer ratings that self-identified partisan survey respondents assigned to out-parties (weighted by out-party vote share), based on analyses of Comparative Study of Electoral Systems survey data across the period 1996-2017. (Section S1 in the supplementary appendix lists the CSES surveys included in these analyses.) The thermometer scale values are reversed so that higher numbers denote colder out-party evaluations. The horizontal axis displays the logged district magnitude of the country's electoral system (Bormann and Golder, 2013). Countries using a Mixed-Electoral system take the district magnitude of their upper house.

Electoral system proportionality and the incidence of cross-party power-sharing

The positive cross-national relationship between proportionality and warmer cross-party evaluations is consistent with our hypothesis, provided that parties in more proportional systems in fact develop significantly denser networks of current and former coalition partners, compared to the parties in less proportional systems. For a stylized example, consider the US Democratic Party. It is situated in a strictly winner take all electoral system. In a legislative election, it can either win a majority or lose and become the sole opposition party against the Republican majority. This creates a zero-sum politics (Drutman 2020). There is no history of power sharing in the United States, and as the post-civil rights realignment has led to stronger partisan ideological sorting there is little bipartisan cooperation on important legislative issues (Noel 2012, Lee 2015).

On the other hand, consider the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), one of the country's main center-right parties. The Netherlands has a highly proportional electoral system with a very low representation threshold. No Dutch government since 1897 has comprised a single party, and the norm is cabinets with several parties. Take, for example, the 2010 Dutch election. Leading into that election, the CDA was the governing party, in coalition with the Christian Union. Prior to that, the CDA had governed in a grand coalition with the Christian Union and the center-left Labour Party. This CDA-Christian Union-Labour coalition shows how cabinets in more proportional electoral systems can span the left-right divide. Before the 2006 election, the CDA had been in a coalition with the right-liberal VVD (initially also supported by

the centrist D66). And after the 2002 election, the CDA briefly co-governed with the VVD and the List Pim Fortuyn, an idiosyncratic anti-immigrant populist-right party.

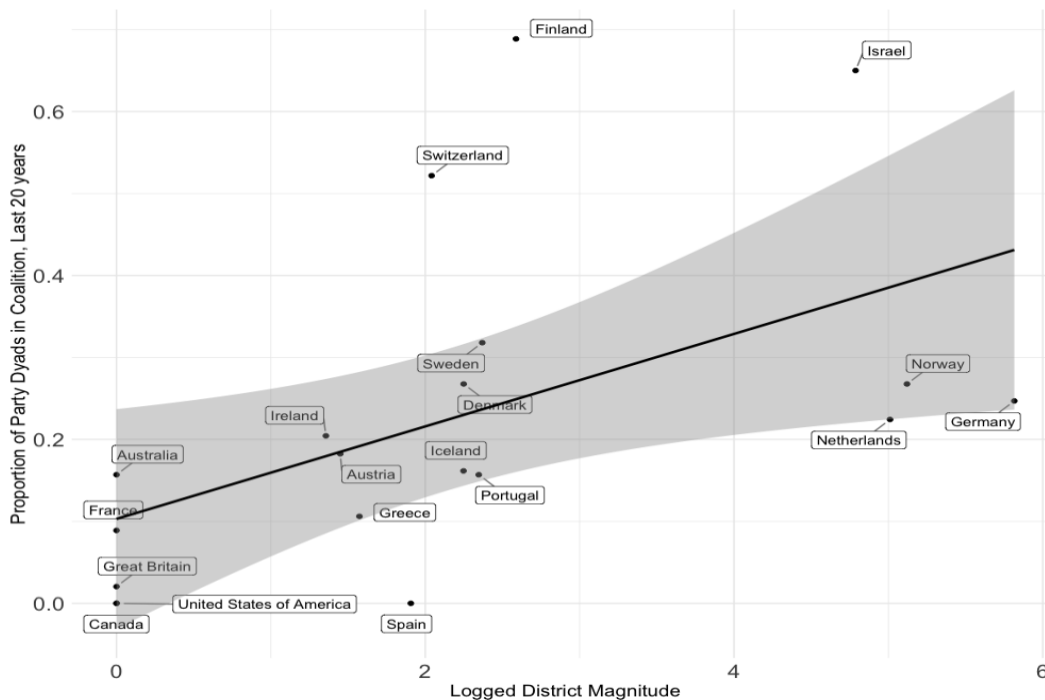
To put it in stark terms, 0% of American party pairs have a history of co-governance, whereas at the time of the 2010 election the Dutch CDA was currently co-governing with the Christian Union and had prior co-governance experience with the Labour Party, the VVD, D66, and List Pim Fortuyn – overall, the CDA’s current and former coalition partners captured over 60% of the 2010 votes that did not go to the CDA. And note that this example is not unique. In Germany, which features a proportional system but with a higher threshold than the Netherlands, the dominant parties of the center-left and center-right, the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats, have forged a “Grand Coalition” on multiple occasions over the past 20 years, and both parties have also co-governed with smaller parties during this period, the Christian Democrats with the Free Democrats, the Social Democrats with the Greens. (And, the new “traffic light coalition” government formed following the 2021 parliamentary elections features the Social Democrats in cabinet with both the Free Democrats and the Greens.)

Figure 2 displays the relationship between electoral system proportionality (the horizontal axis) and a party-system level measure of the incidence of co-governance (the vertical axis). This co-governance measure is defined as the proportion of the pairs of parties in the system that had governed together at some point in the past 20 years, averaged over each election that our data contains for each country. In the 2017 German Bundestag election, for instance, six major parties competed (Die Linke, The Greens, The Social Democrats (SPD), the Christian Democrats (CDU), the Free Democrats (FDP), and the Alternative for Germany), so that there were 15 party pairs, of which three pairs had histories of co-governance over the

past 20 years: The SPD-Green coalition from 1998-2005, the CDU-FDP cabinet from 2009-2013; and, the CDU-SPD cabinets from 2005-2009 and 2013-2017. New Zealand is excluded from Figure 2 because it changed electoral systems from first-past-the-post to mixed-member Proportional Representation in 1996, meaning that past electoral coalitions would have depended in part on the prior electoral arrangement.

Figure 2 displays a strong positive relationship between vote system proportionality and the incidence of (current and past) co-governance in the party system. The countries with highly proportional systems (Germany, The Netherlands, Norway, and Israel) all display dense co-governance networks, while the countries with single-member districts (Australia, Canada, France, the UK, and the US) display much sparser networks.

Figure 2. The Relationship between Voting System Proportionality and Coalition Networks, Across 19 Western Democracies (1996-2017)



Notes. The vertical axis in the figure displays the proportion of party dyads that were together in coalition over the last 20 years. (Section S1 in the appendix lists the CSES surveys and political parties included in these analyses.) The horizontal axis displays the logged district magnitude of the country's electoral system (Bormann and Golder, 2013). Countries using a Mixed-Electoral system take the district magnitude of their upper house.

While Figures 1-2 display suggestive cross-national patterns in line with our hypotheses, the inferences we can draw from cross-national comparisons are limited. First, these figures display aggregate-level relationships while our current and past co-governance hypotheses (H1-H2) pertain to individual-level processes. Second, cross-national comparisons of party thermometer scale ratings may be problematic due to possible between-country differences in respondents' interpretations of this scale, the problem of differential item functioning (Lelkes and Westwood 2017). Third, the countries we analyze differ in many ways beyond their electoral laws and cabinet histories, including their national economies; their media systems; their religious, linguistic, and ethnic cleavages; their democratic histories; and the intensity of elite-level policy disputes. In this regard, the adoption of electoral systems may be endogenous to some of these factors, including the cleavage structures and relative balance of power between societal groups early in the country's democratic period (Boix 1999). The choice of electoral system also likely influences many features of domestic politics beyond the cabinet's composition. To understand if coalition arrangements are associated with lower levels of partisan hostility, we turn to individual-level analyses of the relationships between political parties within countries.

Partisans' Out-Party Evaluations and Cabinet Histories: Individual-Level Analyses

To empirically evaluate our hypotheses, we analyze survey data from 19 polities and 77 elections between 1996 and 2017 taken from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES).³ We analyze every western democracy with at least two available CSES studies, except for the United States because its strict two-party system provides no variation on our key independent variables. The countries analyzed are: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland. We limit our sample to Western democracies for comparability, and because of data availability issues for some of the control variables we introduce below. Section S1 in the supplementary appendix lists the elections and parties in our data set.

As discussed earlier, the CSES includes a 0-10 feeling thermometer scale on which respondents rate each party in their country (footnote 2 above presents the question text). This scale is among the most common measures of party evaluations and affective polarization (Iyengar et al 2019), and correlates with other measures including social distance indicators (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). We reverse the thermometer scale values so that 10 denotes maximum dislike. While it is common to measure affective polarization as the difference between in-party and out-party affective evaluations (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2019), our theoretical expectations say nothing about whether and how coalition status may affect in-party evaluations. We therefore follow recent work on affective polarization that similarly puts the theoretical focus on out-party evaluations, and use out-party dislike as our dependent

³ Replication code and data is available at Horne et al. (2022).

variable (Stecula and Levendusky 2021).⁴ We classify respondents as partisans based on the CSES question about partisan identification.⁵ We analyze party identifiers because our party-dyad level measures of the ideological distances between parties and their coalition history rely on information about both the out-party that the respondent is evaluating and their own party. (Reiljan (2020) discusses the pros and cons of this decision.)

We construct our measures of co-governance using data from ParlGov. For each party, we create a dummy variable, [*Parties currently co-govern (t)*], indicating if the out-party being evaluated co-governed with the respondent's preferred party (the in-party) at the time *t* of the current CSES election survey. We create a similar measure for joint opposition status, [*Parties both in opposition (t)*], since pairs of opposition parties – like co-governing parties – may refrain from publicly criticizing each other, reserving their attacks for the parties currently in government. To measure past coalition status, we create three additional dummy variables. The first, [*Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)*], equals 1 if the out-party the respondent

⁴ Levendusky and Stecula (2021, 27), for instance, write that because their theoretical argument focuses on out-party evaluations, they “measure affective polarization by looking at ratings of the other party, rather than by examining the difference between same-party and out-party ratings, as some scholars do.”

⁵ Respondents were asked “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party? If so, which one?” Respondents who said no were asked “Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than the others?” We code as party supporters both those who feel close and those who feel a little closer to the relevant party.

evaluates had co-governed with the respondent's preferred party within the past 10 years but was not currently co-governing. The second variable, [*Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)*], equals 1 if the parties were not currently co-governing and last co-governed between 10 and 15 years ago. The third, [*Parties last co-governed 15-20 years ago (t)*], equals 1 if the parties were not currently co-governing and last co-governed between 15-20 years ago.

We include these separate past co-governance variables to evaluate whether the affective consequences of previous co-governance diminish over time. We utilize five-year time frames as most coalition formation happens in the immediate aftermath of the election, and a standard election cycle is 4-5 years across most cases in the data. We do not include a variable for time 0-5 because our [*Parties currently co-govern (t)*] variable indicates whether two parties are in coalition *immediately prior* to the election, so that there are few cases in which a party pair would have been in coalition at some point over the preceding 5 years but would not be in coalition at the time of the current election. Because coalition duration tends to last the length of an electoral cycle, we do not include shorter time frames than 5 years, and we display in the appendix that results are robust to including instead a longer 10-year time frame.

To control for the ideological and policy distances between the respondent's preferred party and the out-party they evaluate, we rely on measures developed by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP). We include a control for Left-Right ideological distance, [*Left-Right distance between parties (t)*], and in alternative analyses we control for party distances along economic and cultural dimensions, as recent research suggests the rising importance of the

cultural dimension in determining partisan affect (Gidron et. al 2021).⁶ All party position scales range between -100 and +100, so that the distance measures can range from zero (the parties have identical positions) to +200 (the parties are on opposite ends of the scales). In constructing our elite economic and cultural distance measures, we follow the CMP coding scheme. Section S2 in the supplementary appendix reviews the construction of these measures, including the list of issues included in each. We standardize the party distance variables to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.0. Below we present robustness checks that control for parties' previous ideological and policy positions, because voter perceptions may be influenced by past, as well as present, party positions.

Research also suggests that hostility between radical right parties and mainstream parties is more intense than can be explained by policy disputes, perhaps because of the taboo placed on the radical right by mainstream elites (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2018; Helbling and Junkunz 2020). Radical right parties are also unlikely to be included in coalition governments because of a *cordon sanitaire* informally enforced by the mainstream parties (van Spanje and

⁶ We do not estimate a model that includes left-right ideological distance in the same specification with economic and cultural distance, since the left-right index is a composite of the economic and cultural scales. (The correlation between the Left-Right and economic distance variables is 0.69 and the correlation between Left-Right and cultural distances is 0.79, whereas the correlation between the economic and cultural distance variable values is only 0.29.) Thus, it would not be clear how to interpret the coefficient for left-right ideological distance while holding constant economic and cultural distances.

van der Brug 2007), although recently some mainstream parties appear more willing to govern with – and thus legitimize – radical right parties (Valentim 2021), We include a dummy variable, [*Out-party is radical right*], to denote a radical right out-party, as defined by the party family classifications included in the Comparative Manifesto Project codebook.⁷

In contrast to previous comparative research that analyzes affective polarization at the country level (Reiljan 2020), we study out-party dislike at the individual level, with each respondent rating all of the out-parties in their country. By combining data from 77 CSES election surveys, we analyze 76,187 partisan respondents' feeling thermometer ratings of 148 distinct political parties. (Section S1 in the supplementary appendix lists these parties.). Because our data on coalition history and policy distance is constructed at the party-dyad level, we create a stacked dataset in which each row includes a survey respondent's thermometer rating of a given out party (the dependent variable), the coalition history and ideological/policy distances between the in-party and out-party in the dyad, and the measure of whether the out-party is radical right. Our dataset contains 346,713 rows, where on average each respondent

⁷ Research by Gidron et al (2021) also finds that radical right partisans exact an affective penalty on other parties. We do not control for this effect in our model because, as discussed below, our models are estimated at the individual level and control for individual fixed effects, which will capture radical right partisans' tendencies to disproportionately penalize other parties, if such an effect exists. In Section S3 in the supplementary appendix, we report estimates for specifications that control for in-party radical right status in a model not including individual fixed effects and find that our substantive conclusions are unchanged.

rates about four out-parties. Because our data set contains multiple observations of the same respondent, and there is likely variation in the latent scale that different respondents use to evaluate parties, we include individual fixed effects. These respondent fixed effects address issues of differential item functioning (Lelkes and Westwood 2017), both cross-nationally and between different respondents in the same country.

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for the variables in our models. Respondents' out-party thermometer ratings average about 6, where 10 denotes maximum dislike and zero denotes maximum liking. The within-respondent standard deviation is 2.16, indicating considerable variation in partisans' ratings of different out-parties. It is this variation we seek to explain. 10% of the party pairs in our study were co-governing at the time of the current election survey, and another 10% were not current coalition partners but had co-governed within the past 10 years. Only 3% of party pairs most recently co-governed between 10 and 15 years prior to the election in question, and 3% also most recently co-governed 15-20 years before the current election. To the extent that current and past co-governance warms partisans' out-party evaluations, these party pairs with co-governance histories can be expected to defuse overall levels of out-party dislike in mass publics. 37% of the party pairs in our study were both currently in opposition, while 7% of the out-parties being evaluated were radical right.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 346,713)

| | Mean Value | Minimum Value | Maximum Value | Standard Deviation |
|---|------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------|
| <i>Out-party dislike (t)</i> | 6.12 | 0 | 10 | 2.16 |
| <i>Parties currently co-govern (t)</i> | 0.10 | 0 | 1 | - |
| <i>Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)</i> | 0.10 | 0 | 1 | - |
| <i>Parties last co-governed within 10-15 years</i> | 0.03 | 0 | 1 | |
| <i>Parties last co-governed 15-20 years ago (t)</i> | 0.03 | 0 | 1 | - |
| <i>Parties currently both in opposition (t)</i> | 0.37 | 0 | 1 | - |
| <i>Out-party is radical right</i> | 0.07 | 0 | 1 | - |
| <i>Left-Right distance between parties (t)</i> | 0 | -1.27 | 4.14 | 1 |
| <i>Cultural distance between parties (t)</i> | 0 | -1.22 | 4.89 | 1 |
| <i>Economic distance between parties (t)</i> | 0 | -1.16 | 5.22 | 1 |

Notes: The table presents descriptive statistics for the variables in our analyses of partisans' expressed dislike of out-parties. The out-party dislike variable displays the *within respondent* standard deviation, as our analyses rely on within respondent variations in affect. Ideological and policy variables are standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. The variable definitions are given in the text. Section S1 in the appendix lists the countries, elections, and parties in our data set.

Empirical strategy and results

To clarify the link between our estimation strategy and the theory developed above, we follow Lundberg et al. (2021) in defining a theoretical estimand. Our descriptive claims are two-fold. Firstly, we expect that partisans will express lower hostility towards out-parties that are currently co-governing with their in-party. Secondly, we expect that the warmth generated by these coalition arrangements lingers, as partisans remember the past cooperation between their party and the focal out-party. The population of interest is partisans (that is, survey

respondents who identify as supporters of a certain party). Because we lack randomization of the treatment of coalition status and are unaware of any exogenous changes to electoral institutions or party systems, our goal is limited to establishing an association. The primary barrier to identification is selection into coalition status, as political parties chose, constrained by the ability to reach a majority of seats and the willingness of other potential coalition partners, which parties to ally with. While we do not claim to establish any causal relations (for causal evidence on coalitions and partisan affect, see Bassan-Nygate and Weiss 2021), in order to attempt to lessen the impact of selection, we include measures of the ideological distance between pairs of parties, as parties who are closer ideologically are more likely to form coalitions – and more likely to be evaluated warmly. Secondly, we include a specification in Section S3 of the supplementary appendix with party fixed effects to address selection into treatment.

We first evaluate each hypothesis with a reduced OLS model which estimates the relationship between coalition status and out-party dislike, and then with models which include the control variables. We estimate models using Left-Right distance, and then separately estimate models using the cultural and economic distances between the parties. The models we display in the main text utilize individual fixed effects. Hence the form of the equation is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{ij} = & \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Parties Currently Co – Govern}_j \\
 & + \beta_2 \text{Parties last co – governed within 10 years}_j \\
 & + \beta_3 \text{Parties Last co – governed between 10 – 15 years ago}_j \\
 & + \beta_4 \text{Parties last co – governed between 15 – 20 years ago}_j \\
 & + \beta_5 \text{Controls}_j + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{ij}
 \end{aligned}$$

where γ_i is the vector of individual fixed effects. In Section S3 in the supplementary appendix, we display specifications with country-year, country, and party level fixed effects, and we continue to find evidence that the warmth of past coalitions lingers long after the coalition arrangement has ended.

The coefficient estimates on our independent variables denote the expected difference between the respondent's thermometer rating of the focal out-party and their mean rating of all the out-parties they evaluate. Because higher party thermometer numbers denote more intense dislike, positive values on the dependent variable indicate that the respondent dislikes the focal out-party more intensely than their average out-party dislike. We cluster our standard errors at the country level. Determining the correct level to cluster the standard errors can be difficult in observational research. Because our hypotheses rely on the long-term impacts of variables within the same country, the "treatment" is arguably assigned at the country-level, and thus we follow the advice of Abadie et al (2017). In the supplementary appendix, we also display results with standard errors clustered at the level of the individual (see Section S10) and the country-year (see Section S3). Table 2 displays our parameter estimates, for a reduced-form model that includes only coalition arrangements (column 1); then for a model that additionally controls for party Left-Right distance and for radical right out-party status (column 2); finally, for a model that includes separate controls for party distances on the economic and cultural dimensions (column 3).

The parameter estimates support our hypotheses that, controlling for policy differences, partisans of co-governing parties evaluate their current coalition partners more warmly (the current co-governance hypothesis, H1), and that partisans also evaluate former coalition

partners more warmly (the past co-governance hypothesis, H2). With respect to H1, our estimate on the [*Parties currently co-govern (t)*] variable is approximately -1.0 ($p < .01$) in the models that include control variables (columns 2-3 in Table 2). This denotes that currently governing parties' partisans tend to award an 'affective bonus' of about one point on the 0-10 thermometer scale to their coalition partners compared to the ratings they assign to opposition parties, in analyses that control for policy differences and for radical right out-party status. This estimated 'current co-governance bonus' is about half of the within-respondent standard deviation ($SD = 2.16$) for the out-party dislike measure.

Our estimates on the [*Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)*] variable and the [*Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)*] variable also substantiate the past co-governance hypothesis (H2), that partisans tend to evaluate their former coalition partners more warmly, all else equal. In the models with controls (columns 2-3 in Table 2), the estimate on the [*Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)*] variable is approximately 0.75 ($p < .01$), denoting that partisans award an 'affective bonus' of about 0.75 thermometer points to former coalition partners from the past decade, even though the parties are not currently co-governing. The magnitude of this estimate is nearly as large as the estimate on current co-governance (which is about 1.0 thermometer units).

We also find significant estimates from even more distant periods of co-governance: the estimate on the [*Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)*] variable is in the range of 0.65-0.70 ($p < .05$) for the models with controls (columns 2-3), denoting that partisans tend to award a bonus of 0.65-0.70 thermometer points to out-parties with which their in-party last co-governed 10-15 years ago, all else equal. This estimate suggests that the affective

consequences of co-governance are durable. Parties that last co-governed 15-20 years prior do not receive a statistically significant affective bonus from partisans of their former coalition partners, once we control for ideological/policy differences, although the estimated effects are in the expected direction and do not differ at statistically significant levels from the estimated effects of more recent instances of co-governance. In any event, our analyses suggest that the affective consequences of co-governance linger for up to 15 years after the coalition has ended, which supports the past co-governance hypothesis (H2)

We also estimate that opposition parties' partisans award an affective bonus to other opposition parties compared to governing parties (the residual category): the coefficient on the [*Parties currently both in opposition (t)*] variable is in the range of -0.4 to -0.5 ($p < .01$) for each model, denoting that co-opposition status confers an affective bonus of 0.4 to 0.5 thermometer units, all else equal.

Finally, our model estimates substantiate that out-party evaluations respond to ideological/policy distances between parties, and that partisans intensely dislike radical right out-parties beyond what we predict based on policy distance and coalition arrangements. The estimate on the [*Left-Right distance between parties (t)*] variable in column 2, +0.68 ($p < .01$), denotes that a one standard deviation increase in the measured Left-Right distance between the respondent's preferred party and the out-party (about 18 units on the CMP RILE scale) increases predicted out-party dislike by 0.68 thermometer units, controlling for coalition arrangements and for the out-party's radical right status. The estimate on the [*Out-party is radical right*] variable is approximately +1.4 ($p < .01$) in both columns 2-3 of Table 2, substantiating that partisans penalize radical right parties severely beyond what we would

predict based on policy distance and coalition arrangements. Notably, this ‘radical right affective penalty’ persists in the model that controls for economic and cultural differences (column 3), even though the radical right is largely defined by its extreme positions on cultural issues such as immigration and multiculturalism, which are included in our cultural distance measure. (This variable measure is described in Section S2 of the supplementary appendix.)

Table 2. Predicted Affect Evaluation Bonus of Coalition Arrangements on Out-Party Dislike (N=346,713)

| DV: OUT PARTY DISLIKE | Coalition Arrangements Only (1) | Left-Right Distance (2) | Economic And Cultural Distances (3) |
|---|--|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Parties co-govern at time of election (t)</i> | -1.25*** (0.38) | -1.02*** (0.26) | -0.87** (0.34) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)</i> | -1.27*** (0.28) | -0.75*** (0.22) | -0.76*** (0.25) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)</i> | -1.28*** (0.39) | -0.65* (0.32) | -0.71* (0.34) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed 15-20 years ago (t)</i> | -0.47** (0.18) | -0.13 (0.28) | -0.28 (0.21) |
| <i>Parties currently both in opposition (t)</i> | -0.27* (.16) | -0.41** (0.14) | -0.45** (0.16) |
| <i>Left-Right distance between parties (t)</i> | | 0.67*** (0.06) | |
| <i>Economic distance between parties (t)</i> | | | 0.47*** (.06) |
| <i>Cultural distance between parties (t)</i> | | | 0.36*** (.09) |
| <i>Out-party is radical right</i> | | 1.40*** (0.27) | 1.37*** (0.28) |
| Individual-level fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| R^2 | 0.16 | 0.23 | 0.22 |

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Notes: The dependent variable in these models, [*Out-party dislike (t)*], denotes the thermometer rating that the respondent assigned to the focal out-party, where higher values indicate more intense dislike. The ideological and policy distance variables (Left-Right, economic distance, and cultural distance) are standardized with a mean 0 and standard deviation of 1. Models are OLS regression models with standard errors are clustered at the survey level.

Robustness Checks: Controlling for Parties' Past Policy Positions and Party Fixed Effects

We present several robustness checks. We first analyze the possibility that partisans' out-party evaluations respond to policy distances based on parties' current and previous election manifestos. We conducted these analyses for two reasons. First, previous research identifies time lags before citizens react to parties' announced positions (e.g., Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009). Second, and related, citizens' lagged responses raise the possibility that the association we estimate between past co-governance and warmer current out-party evaluations is driven by parties' lagged policy positions, not by the coalition itself. Suppose, for instance, that a party pair A, B previously co-governed, and that this coalition was facilitated because in that earlier time period the parties shared similar policy viewpoints – more similar than their current positions. In this case the supporters of parties A, B may evaluate their former coalition partner more warmly than we would predict based on the parties' current positions, because partisans also weigh the parties' lagged positions.

To address this issue, we re-estimated our models using an alternative measure of ideological/policy distance, in which we averaged each party's position based on the CMP coding of its published manifestos from the preceding 10 years, including the current election cycle. This measure captures the party's long-term position, and controls for the possibility that

party evaluations respond to parties' current and lagged positions.⁸ Table 3 reports the parameter estimates on these models, which continue to support our hypotheses: We again estimate an association between current and previous co-governance, on the one hand, and warmer out-party evaluations on the other. The coefficients for parties who are currently co-governing or who have co-governed in the past ten years remain large and significant in both models ($p < .01$), which continues to support the current and past co-governance hypotheses (H1 and H2), while the coefficient on the [*Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)*] variable also remains large and significant in the model with controls for economic and cultural policy distances (column 2), although it (barely) falls out of significance in the model controlling for Left-Right distance (column 1). And, the coefficient on the [*Parties last co-governed 15-20 years ago (t)*] variable is insignificant (though in the expected direction) in both models. With respect to the duration of the affective consequences of previous coalitions, we expect that these associations decline over time, and the duration is likely heterogenous as not all coalitions are

⁸ Alternatively, we could use survey respondents' perceptions of parties' positions. However as discussed in our hypothesis development, Fortunato and Stevenson (2013) show that past coalition arrangements affect citizens' perceptions of parties' current ideological proximity, which is a plausible mechanism for the results we report – one where past co-governance can be seen as causing partisans' warmer evaluations of previous coalition partners. Moreover, research on 'assimilation/contrast effects' finds that citizens place parties they like for other reasons closer to their own self-placements (Merrill et al. 2002), which suggests that perceived party proximity is endogenous to the party evaluations we seek to explain.

created equal, nor do they end similarly – some succeed, some fail and some end acrimoniously. We are agnostic on the precise duration of coalition histories but find strong evidence that past coalitions have durable impacts that slowly decline over time.

Table 3. Analyses Using Average Manifesto Positions over Ten Years (N=346,713)

| DV: OUT PARTY DISLIKE | Left-Right Distance (1) | Economic And Cultural Distances (2) |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Parties co-govern at time of election (t)</i> | -0.81*** (0.25) | -0.81** (0.32) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed within 10 years (t)</i> | -0.65*** (0.20) | -0.75*** (0.24) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed 10-15 years ago (t)</i> | -0.52 (0.32) | -0.77** (0.29) |
| <i>Parties last co-governed 15-20 years ago (t)</i> | -0.25 (0.17) | -0.33* (0.19) |
| <i>Parties currently both in opposition (t)</i> | -0.40** (0.16) | -0.46*** (0.16) |
| <i>Left-Right distance between parties (t) – 10-year average</i> | 0.71*** (0.05) | |
| <i>Economic distance between parties (t) – 10-year average</i> | | 0.51*** (0.07) |
| <i>Cultural distance between parties (t) – 10-year average</i> | | 0.25** (0.11) |
| <i>Out-party is radical right</i> | 1.30*** (0.29) | 1.31*** (0.30) |
| Individual-level fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| R ² | 0.24 | 0.23 |

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

Notes: The dependent variable in these models, [*Out-party dislike (t)*], denotes the thermometer rating that the respondent assigned to the focal out-party, where higher values indicate more intense dislike. The ideological and policy distance variables are standardized with mean 0 and standard deviation 1. Models are OLS regression models with standard errors clustered at the survey level.

Relatedly, observational research on decisions made by political actors, such as party leaders, can raise concerns of selection into treatment. In this case, the concern is that political parties select into coalition arrangements for some reason other than ideological proximity and past coalition history, and that this unobserved factor also contributes to affective warmth between the parties. Or perhaps party elites simply choose to only join coalitions with political parties that their voters already evaluate warmly. One approach to address these selection concerns is to include party fixed effects, for both the respondent's in-party and for the out-party being evaluated. In Section S3 of the supplementary appendix we display such models, which show that our results remain consistent when party fixed effects are introduced. We acknowledge that such a test does not completely rule out the possibility of selection into treatment. Without randomization, the possibility of selection remains a barrier to inference. More experimental work, building on the contributions by Bassan-Nygate and Weiss (2021) and Fischer et al (2021), can help us validate the role of coalitions, although experimental designs to test the long run effect of coalitions may prove challenging.

Finally, concerns about affective polarization have grown in recent years, as research finds that western democracies outside the United States are not immune from the high levels of inter-partisan hostility (Boxell et al 2020). This suggests that the warmth in inter-partisan affect associated with coalition histories has cooled over time. To evaluate this issue, we split our data in the year 2007, right before the onset of the global financial crisis, and estimated the same models on the older (1996-2006) and newer (2007-2017) data. The results reported in

Section S4 of the supplementary appendix suggest that the impact of coalitions has not declined in the highly polarized recent period.

Discussion

Our findings extend a growing literature on the relationship between electoral institutions and the social relations in society. Understanding how institutions shape cross-party resentment and hostility is important, particularly for those interested in electoral system reforms such as the ones gaining momentum in the United States. We argue and empirically show that partisans of currently co-governing parties evaluate each other far more warmly than we would expect based on ideology alone. Then, we show that this affective evaluation bonus extends to parties with past histories of co-governance. Our analyses of 77 CSES election surveys in 19 western publics between 1996-2017 substantiate that coalitions are strongly linked with partisan affective evaluations: partisans of governing parties award a large ‘affective bonus’ to their current coalition partners, beyond that predicted by ideological/policy proximity and the out-party’s radical right status. Equally important, partisans award substantial affective bonuses to previous coalition partners for up to 15 years after the coalition has expired. Coalition arrangements – both past and present – shape the intensity of out-party dislike across western publics.

Our arguments and empirical findings highlight one important (although not necessarily exclusive) mechanism behind Lijphart’s (2012) contention that proportional voting systems promote ‘kinder, gentler’ politics. Our cross-national comparisons substantiate that more proportional systems display much denser networks of (current and past) co-governance than

do disproportional systems, and that proportionality is associated with warmer aggregate levels of out-party evaluations across western publics. Our findings suggest that these two patterns are linked, as proportional representation creates party systems with rich coalition histories, which in turn prompt the warmer cross-party evaluations we observe in more proportional systems. This supports Americanists' arguments about the benefits of a move towards a more proportional electoral system (Drutman 2020, Rodden 2019). Our findings also speak to implications of the United States (or states and cities within it) moving away from its strict two-party system (Santucci 2020).

Our findings also point to how power alternation can warm the political environment in the mass public. Developing a party system with a dense historical network of party co-governance depends not only on the emergence of coalition cabinets per se, but of alternating cabinets over time featuring a diversity of differing coalition arrangements: the greater the variety of the cabinets in a country's political history, the denser the network of co-governing relationships. In this regard, the phenomenon of 'Grand Coalitions' of parties that span the policy divide, such as the German Christian Democrat-Social Democratic cabinet that was in place for much of the past fifteen years, can be expected to warm the political atmosphere: these coalitions create a history of co-governance between parties that do not usually co-govern, and because they typically feature two large parties – one from the left, one from the right – this cabinet history warms the cross-party relationships for a large share of the country's partisans.

Our study suggests several directions for future research. First, our empirical analyses bear on whether co-governance histories influence cross-party evaluations, not why partisans

award a large affective bonus to coalition partners. As outlined in this paper, some possible causal mechanisms include partisans' inferences that (current and past) coalition partners share more similar policies than is implied by their election manifestos; that governing elites strive to maintain harmonious public relationships with their coalition partners, reserving their attacks for the opposition; that party elites also tend to forge cooperative relationships with past coalition partners, in order to enhance opportunities for future co-governance; and, that partisans' 'running tallies' of how previous coalition partners cooperated with their own party during these earlier cabinets warms their current feelings towards these former partners. Note that these alternative causal mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and future research might parse how much each process contributes to improving relations between parties with co-governance histories.

Second, it is plausible that individual-level characteristics condition partisans' responses to governing coalitions. In particular, the partisan's age may condition the impact of past governing coalitions (in particular, whether the partisan was an adult at the time of the earlier coalition), while levels of political sophistication may condition partisans' tendencies to infer party policy proximity from coalition arrangements (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013).

Finally, while we have analyzed the average affective evaluation bonus of co-governance across western democracies, in practice not all coalitions are created equal. Some cabinets 'succeed' in that the co-governing parties work together harmoniously, govern the country with competence and integrity, and achieve positive outcomes in issue areas such as the economy, crime, the environment, and public health. Other cabinets notably 'fail' in that they dissolve early in a flurry of acrimony and public recriminations, and/or they are judged to

have provided incompetent/ineffective governance that is associated with a weak economy, high crime rates, failure to address public health problems, and so on. We suspect that governing coalitions that are perceived as successful, and where the partners part on good terms, generate warmer and more durable cross-party evaluations. This is a promising topic for future research.

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