Don't Budge!
The Reputational Cost of Political Compromises

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Abstract

How do citizens evaluate political parties' willingness to compromise during coalition negotiations in representative democracies? While previous research has shown that citizens support the principle of political compromise, it remains unclear how parties' compromise acceptance during coalition negotiations affects appraisals of trust and credibility. We use a pre-registered survey-experiment in Germany fielded during the coalition negotiations after the 2021 parliamentary elections (`N=7,562`) to isolate the effect of parties' negotiation position from success or failure in the negotiations. Findings reveal that citizens view parties more positively when they remain steadfast during negotiations. The negative effect of compromise on party evaluations persists regardless of negotiation success, indicating a preference for policy representation over governing responsibility. Highly principled individuals and those with low social trust are found to view compromising parties less favorably. Given the centrality of compromise in representative democracy, our study has important implications for the study of political representation.

Keywords: Political compromise; coalition negotiations; political trust; representative democracy; survey experiment

Introduction

Compromise is a defining characteristic of representative democracy. Particularly in multiparty systems with coalition governments, compromise between two or more political parties is a prerequisite for government formation and lawmaking (Lijphart 1999; Gutmann and Thompson 2014). Citizens' acceptance of political compromises between political parties is therefore pivotal for the perceived legitimacy of representative democracy. The good news is that most citizens seem to support the *principle* of political compromise. Despite the pervasiveness of stealth democratic and populist beliefs among citizens (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Akkerman et al. 2014), the abstract principle of compromise finds broad public support (Harbridge et al. 2014; Wolak 2020; Hjermitslev 2022). Van der Velden (2023) moreover shows that in most European countries 60 percent or more of the voters support the democratic principle of compromise.

Abstract support notwithstanding, the key theoretical and empirical question is: *How do citizens evaluate a party's willingness to compromise during coalition talks against the counterfactual of the party remaining steadfast, which could jeopardize government participation?* While it is easy to embrace the principle of compromise when the stakes are low, citizens' commitment to political compromise is arguably truly put to the test when a party has to decide whether to accept or reject a compromise on a specific, salient issue during coalition negotiations. We put this trade-off to a test by building upon groundbreaking observational work that has shown that compromises in government coalitions diminish a party's programmatic profile or 'brand' which in turn negatively affects their support (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Harbridge et al. 2014; Fortunato and Adams 2015; Fortunato 2019a; Fernandez-Vazquez 2020).

Peter Mair has famously argued that the representative function and the responsive function of political parties often pose contradictory demands on party leadership (Mair 2009; Bardi et al. 2014). While the former prioritizes the party-voter representative linkage, efficient governance is decisive for the latter. We argue that especially during coalition negotiations, parties are faced with this trade off between *policy representation* – by sticking to the programmatic stance on which they campaigned – and *responsibility* – by being prepared to make concessions to their counterparts to facilitate government participation. We see this tension empirically, for instance, after the 2017 Dutch parliamentary elections, the GreenLeft party (*GroenLinks)* was caught between this rock and a hard place. After the party decided to stick to their positions on migration policy, the coalition negotiations faltered – precluding any chance for the party to steer government policy in office (de Vries 2017). While some voters did appreciate the GreenLeft's principled

position, others criticized the party for not up-taking government responsibility.[1]

When evaluating parties' performance during coalition negotiations, citizens must therefore adjudicate between these conflicting virtues of policy representation versus governing responsibility. The key contribution of this study is that we examined how citizens evaluate parties that decide to compromise on their previously communicated positions during coalition negotiations, and whether success in the negotiations affects this relationship. Doing so, we take up the call by Harbridge et al. (2014, p. 350) for research that experimentally manipulates the stakes of political compromise by varying the consequences of uncompromising negotiation positions. To test the hypothesis that political compromise has a negative effect on citizens' appraisals of political parties during coalition negotiations, we leverage an experimental design that allows us to analytically separate a parties' decision to compromise from the outcome of the negotiations. This approach enables us to examine a) the effect of compromise acceptance whilst keeping the negotiation outcome constant and b) examine whether the negotiation outcome affects citizens' evaluations of compromise (see also Fortunato 2021, Ch. 4).

A second contribution of our study is that we study the individual-level mechanisms of compromise acceptance. Gutmann and Thompson (2014) theorize that an *uncompromising mindset* among citizens is facilitated by two individual-level characteristics: (a) *principled tenacity*; and (b) *mutual mistrust*. Principled tenacity refers to an attitude in which one does not forsake their principles at all costs – even when it might be in their interests to do so (see Wolak, 2020, Ch. 3; Ryan, 2017; Arceneaux, 2019). Mutual mistrust towards opponents is characterized by the belief that one's opponents are mainly motivated by a desire to defeat them, rather than finding common ground to mutual benefit (see also Zmerli and Newton 2008). As a direct test of Gutmann and Thompson (2014)'s argument, we examine whether *principledness* and *social trust* affect compromise acceptance.

To test our expectations, we fielded a preregistered survey experiment to `7,562` respondents in Germany immediately after the 2021 *Bundestag* elections.[2] Our study presents respondents with a scenario in which we experimentally manipulate the negotiation strategy (i.e., remaining steadfast vs. accepting a compromise) of respondents preferred party (i.e., their 'in-party') – as well as the outcome of negotiation talks (i.e., negotiations continue vs. negotiations stall). To ascertain that our findings hold across different political issues, we randomly allocate respondents to either a salient *economic issue* (increase of the top tax rate) or a salient cultural issue (speed limit on the German *Autobahn*). Our experimental set-up allows us

[1] For a full discussion, see the report by the Scientific Desk of the GreenLeft (Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks 2021, p. 6).

[2] All analytical material can be found on our Online Compendium – Link anonymized for the review process.

to establish how citizens value parties' acceptance of specific compromises during coalition negotiations (vs. being steadfast) for different outcome scenarios, across two different issues. To ensure experimental realism and to increase engagement with the experimental stimulus, we present the scenarios as simulated party press releases in the form of an Instagram message. As we show in Section C of the Online Appendix (OA), such a visual presentation increases exposure to the stimulus material.

We find that citizens evaluate their party more positively when it remains steadfast during coalition negotiations than when it accepts a compromise. This findings hold across two different dependent variables (*party trust* and *party credibility*), across most parties and across both issues. This negative effect of party compromise is not attenuated by success in the negotiations, suggesting that respondents value policy representation over responsibility in governing negotiations. In line with Gutmann and Thompson (2014)'s theoretical propositions, we find that highly principled respondents and respondents with low levels of social trust are more likely to evaluate a compromising party less positively than a steadfast party. Additionally, to probe whether the relationship between compromise acceptance and political trust holds cross-nationally, we provide an additional preregistered observational analysis of the relationship between anti-compromise attitudes and trust in political parties. On the basis of data from Module 5 (2016-2021) of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) (Lenzner et al. 2016), we find that the anti-compromise attitudes are significantly correlated with low trust in politicians and low satisfaction with democracy in most West European countries.

The findings of our study are sobering. Despite the apparent support among citizens for the abstract principle of political compromise, our respondents find their preferred party ('in-party') less trustworthy and less credible when it accepts a compromise, as opposed to an uncompromising stance. In addition, respondents believe a party does a worse job in representing its voters when it is willing to compromise. Policy representation not responsibility in government negotiations seems to be valued more by citizens. Given the centrality of political compromise in virtually all representative democracies, these findings do not bode well for the perceived legitimacy of representative democracy. If distrust follows from party compromise, low political trust could be a *systemic*, integral feature of representative democracy – particularly in multiparty democracies characterized by coalition governments and consensus building.

The Desirability of Political Compromise

Political compromise between political parties is a key characteristic of representative democracy. Particularly in multiparty 'consensus democracies' (Lijphart 1999), virtually all political decision-making is subject to political compromise. Many political theorists have long emphasized the importance of compromise for liberal democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 2014). Theorists emphasize that liberal democracy entails a pluralist view on partisanship which presupposes the legitimacy of competing political claims for the common good (Muirhead 2006; Herman 2017). Compromise with one's adversaries, moreover, signals the recognition that one's own views remain 'partial and temporary' (Rosenblum, 2010, p. 364; see also White and Ypi, 2016, p. 152). Political compromise, then, can be seen as a democratically desirable aggregation of competing views (Kelsen, 2013; White and Ypi, 2016, p. 150-152).

At same time, political theorists also note the diluting effects of compromise. When a party compromises on its principles, it downplays its 'ideational commitments', which can cause confusion among its electorate (White and Ypi 2011). White and Ypi (2016, p. 163) make the normative argument that given the principled nature of partisan commitments, compromise in itself should not be intrinsically valued. White and Ypi (2016, p. 149) therefore point to the 'paradox of compromise': whereas accepting a compromise constitutes a violation of one's principles, rejecting compromise at all costs inhibits realization of one's political aspirations. In other words, political parties during coalition negotiations must navigate the tension between *policy representation* – maintaining the ideological and ideational association with their voters – and *responsibility* – the opportunity to realize their policy goals in office (Mair 2009; Gutmann and Thompson 2014, pp. 16-24). Our study addresses this conundrum from the perspective of citizens. How do citizens adjudicate between the competing virtues of responsiveness and responsibility that parties face during coalition negotiations?

On the bright side, scholars have found that many citizens value the *principle of political compromise*. Despite the advent of populist thought (Akkerman et al. 2014; Urbinati 2019), many citizens seem to support compromise. Wolak (2020, Ch. 3) provides observational evidence that US citizens tend to support political compromise (see also Green-Pedersen and Hjermitslev 2023). Moreover, evidence from a number of survey experiments shows that voters are more likely to support a political candidate when the candidate explicitly embraces the practice of political compromise (Wolak 2020; Hjermitslev 2022; Green-Pedersen and Hjermitslev 2023). This experimental evidence suggests that citizens' commitment to the *principle* of compromise is genuine, and not a consequence of social desirability bias.

Support for the principle of compromise notwithstanding, it is likely that such

explicit support differs from citizens' implicit attitudes towards compromise. Harbridge et al. (2014) argue that when studies directly measure whether respondents prefer compromising politicians over unflinching ones, they likely cue the positive valence of political compromise – driving support for compromise. With implicit approaches, however, respondents are not aware of which attitudes are measured and, thereby limiting the effects of positive valence cues (Kam 2007). What is more, support for political compromise is more likely when there are no clear costs or trade-offs at play. If we are to get a better understanding of how political compromise affects trust in political parties, the issue is not merely whether citizens support the *idea of compromise* but whether they would support political compromise in *practice*.

Citizens' Trust in *Compromising* and *Steadfast* Parties

In the context of coalition formation, the key question is thus whether citizens prioritize the virtue of holding unflinching policy commitments or, instead, accept concession to facilitate government participation. One could expect that citizens in multiparty democracies prefer 'responsible' parties that are prepared to make policy concessions in order to successfully conclude coalition negotiations. Research on the effects of 'winning' and 'losing' in elections has found clear effects of winning on regime support (van der Meer and Steenvoorden 2018). Citizens also tend to be more satisfied with democracy when their preferred party is in government (Anderson et al. 2005; Singh et al. 2012). After all, governing parties are more likely to see their preferred policies enacted in legislation. Voters are also found to value coalition participation as such (Bowler et al. 2010), and take the composition of future coalitions into account when voting to express which coalition they prefer (Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Duch et al. 2010). At the same, much can be said for the expectation that citizens prefer their political parties to be firm in their policy commitments (White 2021). After all, only a clear and distinct ideological and programmatic profile can set a party apart from its competitors. Moreover, given that voters are generally risk-averse (Bernhardt and Ingerman 1985), they should dislike the uncertainty that is associated with parties departing from their previously stated policy commitments. Research on citizens' perceptions of political parties that change their policy positions suggests that this sentiment is shared among voters. Citizens tend to regard candidates who reposition themselves as less honest than their steadfast counterparts (Tomz and Van Houweling 2013). What is more, repositioning can have adverse effects on electoral success (Tavits 2007; Doherty et al. 2016; Tomz and Van Houweling 2016; Sorek et al. 2018). Lupu (2013, 2014) shows that inconsistent party positions can result in 'brand dilution' – i.e., blurring a party's programmatic profile, which can ultimately contribute to

its demise. Lupu argues that alliance formation with former rivals, in particular, can give rise to brand dilution.

A part of that blurring is that coalition compromise can obfuscate what a party's 'pure' policy commitments are and which policies it supports as a coalition partner (Martin and Vanberg 2014). Recent research has shown that also parties' coalition participation affects the clarity of their policy positions from the perspective of voters. For instance, citizens perceive coalition partners to be ideologically more proximate (Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Falcó-Gimeno and Fernandez-Vazquez 2020), and voters update their perceptions of party positions after coalition negotiations (Fortunato 2019b). Citizens particularly update their perceptions of the positions of smaller coalition parties to reflect the policy profile of the prime minister's party (Fortunato and Adams 2015; Adams et al. 2016). Only when coalition parties adopt extreme positions during subsequent election can they offset such voter discounting (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Fernandez-Vazquez 2020). This suggests that citizens are aware of coalition compromises, and update their party perceptions accordingly.

What is more, there is evidence that citizens perceive partisan compromise as a negatively valenced outcome. While compromises are ideally to the mutual benefit of both parties, Harbridge et al. (2014, p. 328-9) argue that compromises can produce outcomes that 'are more akin to losses than wins for a particular party, especially if the alternative is standing firm and winning'. Fortunato (2019b) and Fortunato (2021) finds that citizens punish compromising parties at the polls. Focusing on the US case, Harbridge et al find that citizens do not show greater support for bipartisan outcomes (Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Harbridge et al. 2014).

Hypotheses: The Reputational Costs of Compromise

The previous discussion suggests that citizens in multiparty democracies are essentially cross-pressured between two representational ideals. On the one hand, voters want their party to represent their electorate by sticking to the policy positions they have campaigned on. On the other hand, citizens like to see their party in government to have direct control over policy-making. We argue that the research design of previous studies inhibits a conclusive answer to this question. In particular, extant studies have not been able to analytically separate citizens' evaluations of partisan compromise from evaluations of the (non-)success of the negotiations in multiparty democracies. Previous observational studies show that coalition participation, and hence compromise, affects perceptions of party positions and support for parties (e.g., Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012; Fortunato and Stevenson 2013; Fortunato and Adams 2015). Yet, the effect of the counterfactual of not participating

in the coalition is not clear. A survey experiment conducted by Fortunato (2021, Ch. 4) is a very important first step in establishing citizens' implicit disdain for specific compromises. Prompting respondents with scenarios of two fictitious parties engaged in coalition negotiations, Fortunato shows that respondents tend to favour a stalemate over any form of compromise. Yet, also in this study the presence of a party compromise and the successful negotiation outcome are conflated. What is more, Plescia et al. (2022) find in a survey fielded immediately after the 2019 Spanish general elections that perceived issue saliency and partisanship matter for one's willingness to accept compromise in coalition negotiations. It is unclear, therefore, whether the findings of Fortunato's experiment with fictitious parties holds in a politically salient context with high stakes.

To address these shortcomings, and to test how citizens adjudicate between steadfast and compromising parties in the context of coalition negotiations, our survey experiment focuses on respondents' party evaluations of their so-called preferred party (i.e, 'in-party'), uses highly salient issues during a real election campaign, and keeps keep party strategy (i.e., compromise or steadfastness) and negotiation progress as distinct experimental conditions. Guided by the literature on compromise perceptions and policy repositioning, we posit that voters would prefer to their 'in-party' to remain form to its previous commitments, rather than conceding to a competing party. Keeping all else constant, we therefore expect voters to place higher levels of trust in their 'in-party' when it rejects compromise and remains steadfast in its original position.[3]. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H1) *All else equal, in-partisans view their party more positively when a party remains steadfast in coalition talks, compared to accepting a compromise.*

At the same time, the literature on electoral winners and losers and on strategic rental voting for coalition purposes suggests that citizens prefer to see their party in government . Therefore, we expect that citizens prefer to see the negotiations of their 'in-party' with a competiting party to continue ('success' in our scenario) over a scenario in which the coalition talks 'stall (i.e., 'failure') when holding all other experimental aspects constant. We posit the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2 (H2) *All else equal, in-partisans view their party more positively when coalition talks continue compared to stalling of the coalition talks.*

Although we expect citizens to evaluate their 'in-party' more positively when it remains steadfast, we expect that there is an interaction effect between the party

[3]The hypotheses and the empirical design discussed below have been pre-registered. The preregistration can be found here: Link

strategy (i.e., compromise vs. steadfast) and the negotiation outcome (i.e, talks continue vs. talks stall). We expect that citizens are more accepting of their party's willingness to compromise when the coalition talks continue compared to when the talks break down. In other words, we expect that negotiation success can attenuate the negative evaluation of partisan compromise:

Hypothesis 3 (H3) *All else equal, in-partisans view their party that accepts a compromise more positively when coalition talks continue compared to stalling of the coalition talks.*

Individual-Level Mechanisms of Compromise Rejection

How does compromise acceptance and rejection differ among citizens? We argue that the tendency to reject or accept compromises is likely rooted in differences in personality and psychological dispositions. To fully understand why some people reject compromise, we examine the individual-level mechanisms behind compromise perceptions. In their theoretical exposition on the virtues of political compromise for representative democracy, Gutmann and Thompson (2014) argue that *the uncompromising mindset* is one of the biggest obstacles for political compromise. This "mindset", according to Gutmann and Thompson, consists of two characteristics: *principled tenacity* and *mutual mistrust*. Principled tenacity refers to a mindset, or psychological trait, in which compromises are seen as unattainable because they violate deeply held core beliefs or principles (Gutmann and Thompson 2014, p. 70). While material interests are more amenable for compromise, compromise is more difficult on core moral principles. Indeed, Ryan (2017) finds that moralized attitudes are related to compromise rejection. Similarly, Wolak (2020, p. 43) finds that dogmatism is negatively related to compromise acceptance. In a similar vein, Arceneaux (2019) shows that absolutism is related to intolerance toward political disagreement and compromising politicians. Absolutism refers to a perspective in which a belief in universal moral values are combined with an idealistic worldview (Arceneaux 2019, p. 2). Importantly, however, Ryan (2014) shows that 'moral politics' is not limited to commonly assumed specific moral issues, such as same-sex marriage, abortion, or religious practices. Instead, citizens can hold moralized attitudes about a wide range of issues (Ryan 2014). We therefore expect that citizens who hold strongly principled views about the issue at hand, as well as citizens who adhere to a absolutist (or morally principled) worldview are more likely to reject compromise:

Hypothesis 4 (H4) *All else equal, the more principled a respondent is, the higher the evaluation of a steadfast party.*

The second characteristic of Gutmann and Thompson's uncompromising mindset is mutual mistrust. Mutual mistrust refers to the belief that one's opponents are "motivated mainly by a desire to defeat them and the principles for which they stand" (Gutmann and Thompson 2014, p. 85). Someone with high levels of mutual mistrust is cynical about the motives of their counterparts and, as such, is wary of brokering compromises. Political theorists arguing that political parties are normative desirable as institutions of representative democracy highlight that regulated party conflict emphasizes that political victory is always partial and temporary (Muirhead 2006). When one mistrust the other party's motives, however, this 'party spirit' is in danger of being violated.

Social trust, or generalized trust, refers to a person's trust in her fellow members of society. Social trust facilitates an open cooperative social environment, encourages collective behaviour, and stimulates thinking about the public interest (Mannemar Sønderskov 2009; Zmerli and Newton 2008). Social trusts moreover lowers the barriers for interpersonal interaction and dependence. As such, it has often been said that social trust is key for citizens' democratic commitment (Zmerli and Newton 2008). We argue that the same is true for citizens' support for political compromise. We expect, therefore, that lower levels of social trust, are related to a higher evaluation of an uncompromising party:

Hypothesis 5 (H5) *All else equal, the more distrusting a respondent is, the higher the evaluation of a steadfast party.*

Data and Method

We test our hypotheses using a preregistered survey experiment fielded to a large sample of German adults immediately following the German *Bundestag* elections of 2021 (`N = 7,562`).[4] The necessary sample size was determined on the basis of a power analysis (see Figure OA.1 in Section A of the Online Appendix, OA). Respondents were recruited through Respondi. Respondi collects non-probability samples using non-random opt-in respondents. To ensure that our sample approximates a nationally representative sample, we use quota sampling with quotas for age, gender, and education.

[4]The preregistration can be found here.

Experimental Design and Protocol

The survey was conducted in German. Upon acceptance of an informed consent message, respondents were forwarded to the main questionnaire.[5] Before receiving the treatment, respondents were asked to give their opinion about a number of issues, including the increase of the top tax rate and the introduction of speed limit on the German highway – two issues that were featured in the experimental treatment. In addition, respondents were asked to indicate how important they find these issues. Subsequently, and still pre-treatment, respondents selected their preferred party (i.e., their 'in-party') from a selection of four parties. Participants could choose between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU), the Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), and the conservative-liberal Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*, FDP). Respondents thus had the choice between two left-wing and two right-wing parties. These parties were the fourth biggest parties in the newly elected German *Bundestag* with the SPD being the largest parties (with 28.0 per cent of the seats), followed by the CDU (20.7 per cent), the Greens (16.0 per cent) and the FDP (12.5 per cent). These four parties were also the most plausible candidates for a coalition government.[6]

Experimental Treatment

As experimental stimulus, respondents were presented with a scenario in which their in-party is engaged in coalition negotiations. The experiment follows a 2×2 design. In the first condition of the survey experiment, the in-party remains steadfast on an issue or, alternatively, accepts a compromise (i.e, a policy concession). In the steadfast condition, the stimulus highlights that this position can hurt its chances of government participation, while in the compromise condition the treatment highlights that this position is taken to improve its chances for political office. The second condition juxtaposes a scenario in which the coalition negotiations continue with a scenario in which the talks do not proceed to the final negotiation phase. Figure OA.8 in OA F shows that the manipulation was successful: those who saw a treatment with a party staying steadfast statistically significantly report that this was the case – compared to those who did not see it. The same holds for the second condition.

The treatment is introduced by a message that highlights that coalition talks were taking place at the time of the survey and that we would present respondents

[5] The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of one of the author's home institution.

[6] A CDU-led government was less likely given that the SPD won the plurality of the vote.

with a hypothetical press release – in the form of an Instagram message – about hypothetical bilateral coalition talks with another party. In reality, three parties (the SPD, the Greens and the FDP) were engaging in coalition talks at the time of survey. For the purpose of our experimental design, our treatment focused on bilateral coalition talks.

Political parties can strike different kinds of compromises (White and Ypi 2011). As Weinstock (2013, p. 539) outlines, compromises can be *additive* in which the compromise incorporates the initial positions of both parties. Compromises can also be *substitutive* in which parties exchange each others positions (i.e, 'tit-for-tat'). When it comes to spending on a certain policy issue, parties can also compromise to 'meet in the middle' to find common ground. The most arduous compromises, however, are *subtractive* compromises in which a party is prepared to concede its previously held position. Our treatment focuses on a scenario in which the compromising party makes a policy concession in order to improve its chances for political office. This is a strong type of compromise, which given the one-time exposure is preferred as experimental stimulus.

The treatment is presented to respondents in the form of a press release in an Instagram message to increase experimental realism and respondents' engagement with the stimulus material. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 highlights that Instagram is a key source of political information for citizens (Newman et al. 2021). The Instagram posts closely follow the parties' real branding identity (i.e., logos and colors). In an additional survey experiment presented in the Online Appendix C, we show that respondents spend more time with a Instagram-based image treatment than with the same treatment in simple text form. This difference is statistically significant at $\alpha < 0.05$. Hence, treatment exposure is higher when using visual cues in comparison to text-only cues.

In each treatment, we randomize whether the issue at hand in the coalition negotiations pertained to a economic issue or a cultural issue. This allows us to establish whether or not the treatment effects found are a function of idiosyncratic policy issue. We selected two relatively salient policy issues, because Plescia et al. (2022) find that issue salience matters for the evaluation of party compromises. The economic issue pertained to the question whether or not the *top tax* rate for high incomes should be increased. The cultural issue addressed the question whether or not a general *speed limit* on the German motorway should be introduced. To be sure, the speed limit, or *Tempolimit*, on the German motorway is a highly contested issue in German politics that touches upon cultural attitudes both with respect to environmental values as well as to questions of social lifestyle. Alberini et al. (2022) note that resistance to a general motorway speed limit is rooted in Germany's 'deep-seated cultural identification with cars'. Bamberg et al. (2020) have moreover found that car use is a distinct element of mobility culture.

To ascertain that results were not driven by the negotiating 'out-party', we vary the party with which the in-party engages in coalition negotiations with. For the SPD and the Greens, the negotiating partners were the CDU and the FDP – and vice-versa. This ensured that each scenario contained a hypothetical negotiation between a left and a right of centre party. Moreover, according to the *Wahl-Kompass* data based on party statements there was political disagreement between the left-wing and the right-wing parties on these issues, but there was no disagreement on these issues amongst neither the SPD and the Greens, nor the CDU and the FDP (see Thomeczek et al. 2021). We control for in-party and negotiating party in our models, and explore differential treatment effects in OA K and I, respectively. The full text of the treatments can be found in OA B. Figure 1 shows an example of a the stimulus material for secnarion in which the SPD takes an uncompromising stance (vs. the FDP) on the issue of the speed limit, whilst the talks are discontinued.

Figure 1: Example of Simulated Instagram Stimulus Vignette.

Dependent Variables and Manipulation Checks

In line with our preregistration, our key dependent variable is *trust* in the party. Immediately following the experimental treatment, we measure trust with the question "Based on the Instagram message, how much do you trust [PARTY]?" using a 11-point scale ranging from strongly distrust (value of `0`) to strongly distrust (value of `10`).

To explore the broader implications of political compromise on perceptions of representation, we also inquire about the perceived *credibility* of the party as well

as the perceived *representational performance* of the party. We measured *credibility* with the question "To what extent do you think a party like [PARTY] acted sincerely?" using a 11-point scale ranging from extremely insincere (value of `0`) to extremely sincere (value of `10`). Representational performance is measured by asking "To what extent do you think a party like [PARTY] does a good job in representing its voters?" using a 11-point scale ranging from very poorly (value of `0`) to very well (value of `10`).

Immediately following the dependent variables treatment, we conduct two manipulation checks. The first manipulation check asked whether their party accepted a compromise or not. The second manipulation check asked whether the parties would continue the talks or not. In OA F, we show that the manipulations where successful. In addition, we test whether the results hold when excluding respondents who failed the manipulation check. In addition, we included a 'reality check' to see if knowledge about the real-world coalition negotiations affected responses to the experimental treatments. In OA J we show that this is not the case.

Measuring Pyschological Traits

Hypotheses 4 and 5 postulate that the pyschological traits *principledness* and *social trust* affect individuals' responses to compromise.

We measure *Principledness* in two different ways. First, following Arceneaux 2019, we measure principledness using the Ethical Positions Questionnaire using a 7-point Likert scale (*Strongly Disagree*, *Disagree*, *Somewhat Disagree*, *Neither Agree nor Disagree*, *Somewhat Agree*, *Agree*, *Strongly Agree*). We reduce the initial 20 statements to 12 based on an Item Response Theory (IRT) analysis, which showed that the level of information of these 12 items brought to the latent construct was sufficient (see analysis, where statements 1–6 measure idealism and statements 7–12 measure relativism; absolutism is the combination of idealism with the rejection of relativism. On the basis of these items, we constructed an additive scale.

Secondly, we use Ryan 2017's measure of Willingness to Accept Benefits, where participants imagine receiving money (€0, €1, €2, €3, €4) but donate the same amount of money to an organization that is against their preferred policy position on the policy issue for which they saw the fictitious Instagram-press release . It is important to note that respondents were informed that no actual funds would be transferred.

Social trust is measured using three items adapted from the European Social Survey using an 11-point scale, where 0 is the most negative answer, and 10 the most positive one. Respondents are asked whether they think most people can be trusted, most people try to take advantage of you, and most people are willing to help others. We create an additive scale on the basis of these items.

Control Variables, Balance Tests and Attention Checks

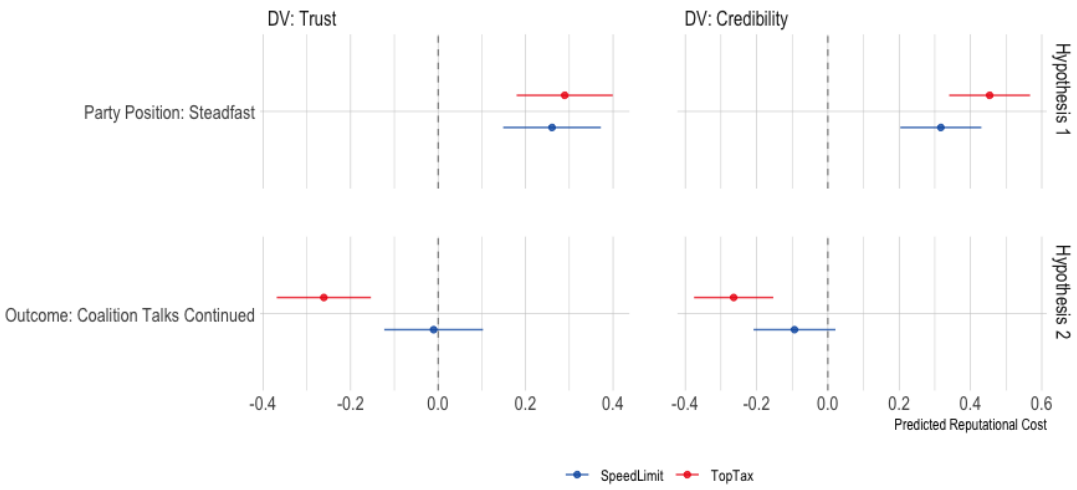
Lastly, we measured a number of control variables before the treatment. The following *demographics* are measured: gender, age, education, geographical region, vote choice in the 2021 parliamentary elections, employment, and income. Balance checks were conducted to demonstrate whether certain categories are over represented in a certain experimental group. For the analysis, only variables that are unbalanced over the experimental conditions will be included. OA B gives an overview of the questions asked in the survey in the English translations. To ensure good quality of our data, two attention checks are included. The attention check are discussed in more detail in OA B.

Findings: The Cost of Compromise

When and why does parties' compromise acceptance or rejection affect their political reputations? To answer this question, we present the results for our main pre-registered dependent variable *trust*, as well as for our exploratory dependent variable perceived *credibility* using OLS regression analyses. All models control for 'in-party' choice and 'out-party' negotiating partner. The results for our exploratory dependent variable perceived *representation* are shown in OA Section H. For H1 and H2, we show the effects for both policy issues (*top tax* and *speed limit*), but due the the potential of lower power, we present the pooled results for the interaction hypotheses (H3-H5) – as pre-registered. After a balance test (see Section E of our OA), we additionally included degree of urbanization, employment, region of residence and birth, left-right position of the respondent, attitude towards the speed limit and top tax policies, and issue importance of top tax as additional control variables in all analyses. In the paper, we only present the visualizations of the main variables of interest, in OA Section G the full regression tables with all coefficients are presented.

Figure 2 demonstrates the effect of being steadfast (as opposed to accepting a compromise) in the coalition talks (H1) in the upper row, as well as the effect of a successful outcome of the coalition talks (H2) in the second-upper row. In line with Hypothesis 1, we find that people value remaining steadfast more positively than accepting a compromise. Specifically, being presented with a treatment in which their 'in-party' remains steadfast, as opposed to accepting a compromise, has a statistically significant positive effect on trust in the party. This finding holds both for the top tax and the speed limit issue (p-value = `0.000` for both issues). This finding suggests that parties can incur reputational costs when accepting compromises to access political office. The effect size of `0.3` is, as expected, a small effect on the 11-point scale of trust. However, as these situations in which

Figure 2: Predicted Reputational Cost.

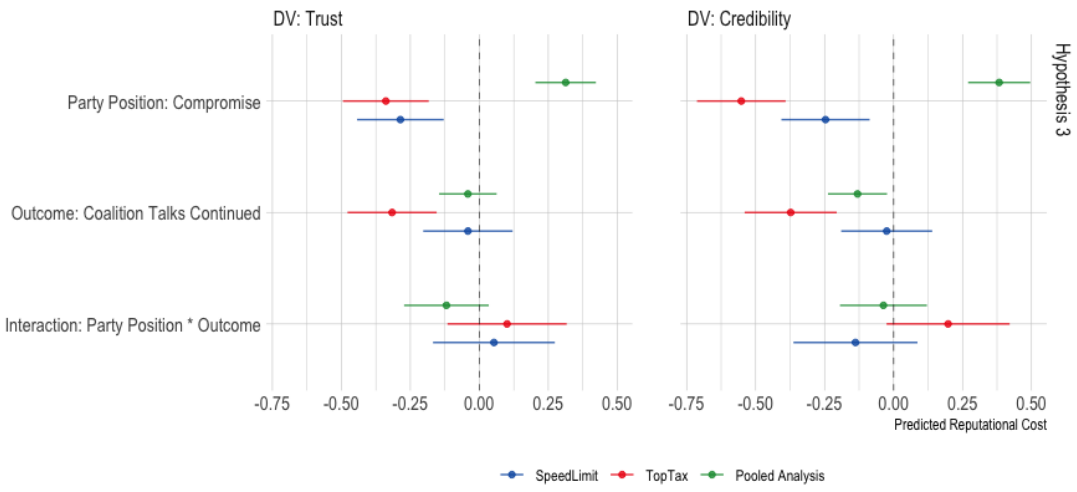


a party trades off staying steadfast versus making a compromise happen regularly in real-life politics, the negative reputational effect of striking a compromise can likely accumulate. We find similar effects for the alternative dependent variables *credibility* and *representation* with significant positive effects of remaining steadfast for both issues.

Hypothesis 2 stipulated that respondents would reward parties when the coalition talks with the negotiating 'out-party' continue (i.e., success), as opposed to when the negotiations stall (i.e., failure). This, however, is not supported by our findings. For the top tax issue (in red in Figure 2), we find that continuing talks is actually valued less by respondents – as 'continuing talks' has a statistically significant negative effect on trust in the party (p-value = `0.000`). The effect size of `-0.26` is, as expected, a small effect on the 11-point scale of trust. A similar significant negative effect is also found for the dependent variables *credibility* and *representation*. With respect to the speed limit (in blue in Figure 2), we do not find a significant effect of continuing talks on trust or credibility (p-values of `0.887` and `0.831`, respectively), but we do find a significant negative effect on perceptions of representation. These findings imply that an office-seeking strategy – i.e. having success in the coalition talk so that down the line the party can implement it's policy preferences into policy – is not always rewarded by voters. Instead, it can come with negative reputational costs.

While we expected citizens to evaluate their in-party more positively when it remains steadfast, Hypothesis 2 expressed the expectation that there is an interaction effect between the party strategy (i.e., compromise vs. steadfast) and

Figure 3: Predicted Reputational Cost.



the negotiation outcome (i.e, talks continue vs. talks stall). Specifically, we expected that votets are more acceptant of compromise when the party is successful in contn=inuing the negotiations. However, Figure 3 shows that this does not hold up empirically. We find no statistically significant interaction effect between party position and outcome for neither *trust*, *credibility*, nor *representation*. Calculating the marginal effects, we see that respondents prefer parties to stay steadfast regardless of the outcome. In other words, success in the negotiations does not attenuate the negative effect of compromises. This suggests that also when parties have the prestige of office in sight, partisans do not value when the party compromises on the issue at stake. These findings suggest that citizens believe that commitment to previously voiced positions to be more important than success in coalition talks.

Individual-Level Mechanisms of Compromise Rejection

Turning to the individual-level mechanisms that drive compromise rejection, Hypothesis 4 posited that the more principled a respondent is, the more trust she places in a party which remains steadfast in coalition negotiations – as opposed to accepting a compromise. Figure 4 shows the heterogeneous treatment effects of our two measures of principledness on the steadfast/compromise treatment condition – with the first measure being the behavioral measure and the second measure being an attitudinal measure. We find that being principled has clear positive effects on appreciation for steadfast parties compared to compromising parties. This effect

holds across the different dependent variables and across issues.[7] For the behavioral measure of principledness, we see in the upper panels of Figure 4 that going from being unprincipled (value of `0`) to being very principled (value of `4`), the appreciation for the party increases with `0.45` and `0.6` on an 11-point scale for trust and credibility, respectively. In Section F of the OA we show that this effect is similar for representation. For the attitudinal measure, presented in the lower-panels of Figure 4, we see that people who are not at all principled, appreciate parties that strike a compromise – indicated by the negative effect of being steadfast on the dependent variables. High levels of principledness, however, has the opposite effect: Those respondents value parties that stay put.

Hypothesis 5 formulated the expectation that citizens with higher levels of social trust are more accepting of compromises. Figure 5 shows the the heterogeneous treatment effects of our social trust measure on the steadfast/compromise treatment condition.[8] In support of Hypothesis 5, we find that respondents with higher levels of social trust are more accepting of political compromise. The negative slope of the coefficient signifies that higher one's level of social trust, the less pronounced the positive effect of steadfastness on our main dependent variable. We see the same effect for *credibility*.

Exploring Additional Heterogeneous Treatment Effects

In addition to our pre-registered hypotheses, we explore whether there are heterogeneous treatment effects for party choice as well as a number of other political moderators.

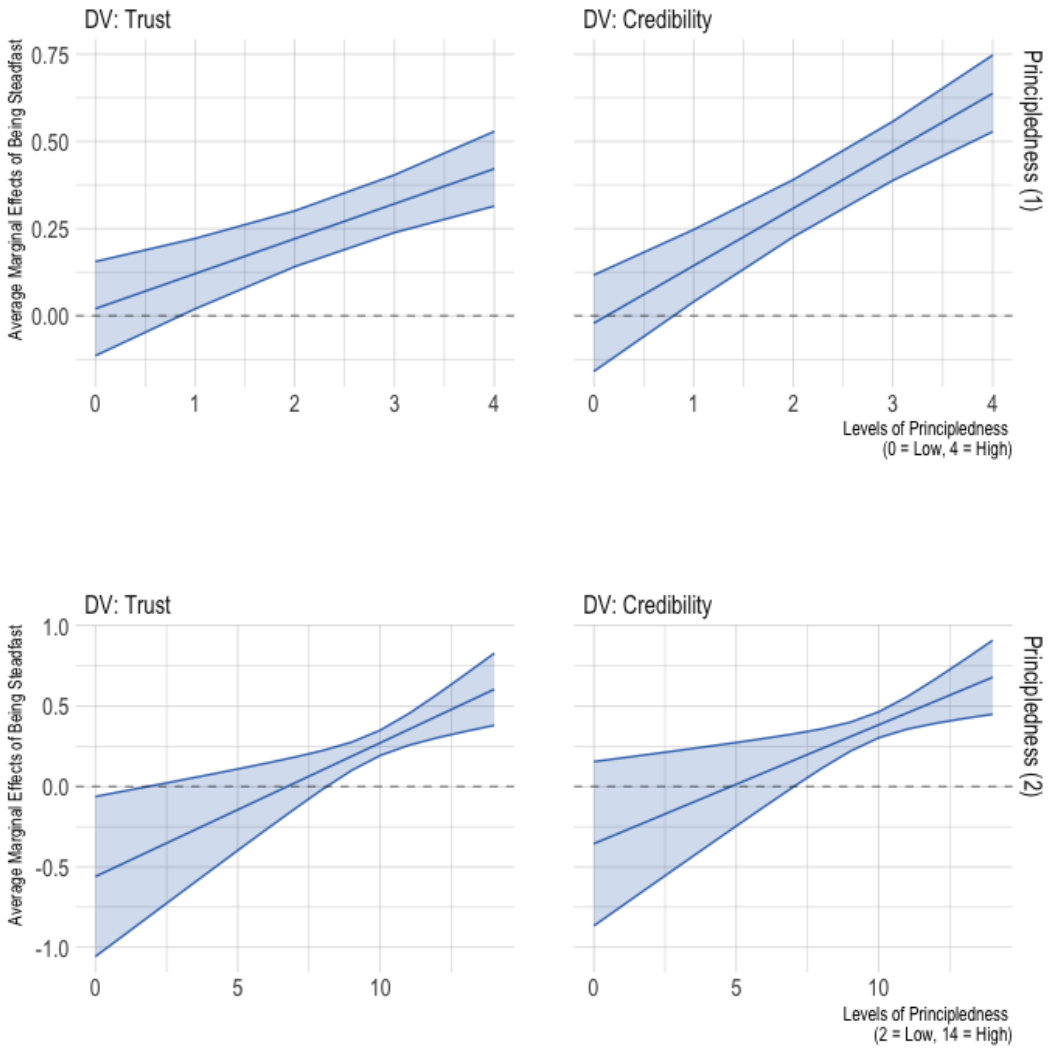
First, we probe whether the negative effect of remaining steadfast during negotiations, as opposed to conceding to the opponent, holds for all parties in the treatment. Split-sample analyses in OA I (Figure OA.17) shows the results for the forced in-party (not all parties where listed there). show that remaining steadfast is preferred over compromise for all parties, except for the SPD. For the SPD, there is no statistically significant effect of remaining steadfast for the *trust* outcome variable for both the top tax and the speed limit issue. The effect of steadfastness on the SPD's *credibility* is also not statistically significant for the speed limit issue, but is significant and positive for the top tax issue, as hypothesized. SPD voters are likely more accepting of compromises because that the SPD became the largest party in the election and was expected to form the government.

Second, since we force respondents to choose between four 'in-parties', it is possible that voters from parties not included respond differently to the treatment,

[7] Figure OA.15 in Section H of the OA shows that the direct effect of principledness is close to 0, due to opposite effects for both sides of the scale.

[8] Figure OA.15 in Section H of the OA shows that the direct effect of social trust is also positive and significant.

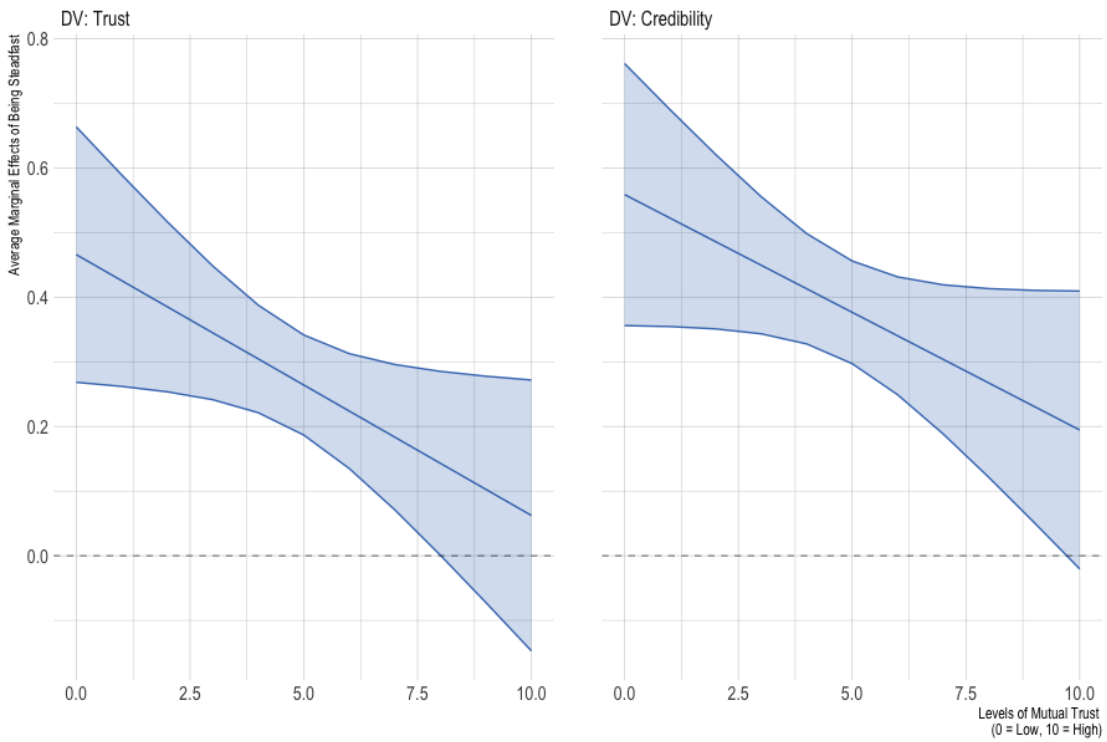
Figure 4: Heterogeneous Treatment Effect: Principledness.



such as the leftist *Die Linke* and the far right *AfD*. OA K (Figures OA.22 – OA.25) shows a split-sample analysis based on vote choice in the previous election. We see that the effects are substantively similar for all parties. Interestingly, the effects for SPD are more negative (only statistically significant for *credibility* on the speed limit issue) compared to the split sample analyses based on in-party selection (see Figure OA.22). This suggest that core SPD voters could even punish the party for forsaking political office for policy commitment.

In the OA we also explore the heterogeneous treatment effects of ideological position, political interest, and political knowledge (Figures OA.14-OA.16). With respect to left-right self-placement, we see the positive effect of steadfastness holds

Figure 5: Heterogeneous Treatment Effect: Social Trust.



across the scale, but fails to meet statistical significance for respondents on the far right. This treatment effect also holds across levels of political interest and political knowledge, but is not statistically significant on the low ends of both variables. Finally, we examine whether respondents whose policy preference aligns (i.e., 'congruent') with their in-party respond similarly to the steadfast/compromise treatment as respondents who disagree with their in-party (i.e., 'incongruent'). We find, looking at the pooled results, that there is no difference between being congruent or incongruent with the party on the political issue, one still prefers the party to stay steadfast (see Figure OA.13). Figure OA.13 does show some differences between the issues: This effects particularly holds for the issue of speed limits.

Compromise Attitudes and Political Trust across Western Europe

To what extent do our findings on the relationship between anti-compromise attitudes and political trust hold in cross-sectional fashion and, more importantly,

does it hold across multiple countries? To test this we conducted a preregistered pooled cross-sectional analysis of election study data in 9 West-European countries using OLS regression analysis. Specifically, we examine the effect of holding anti-compromise attitudes on trust in parties and satisfaction with democracy. The operationalization of the variables of interest are discussed in OA L.[9]

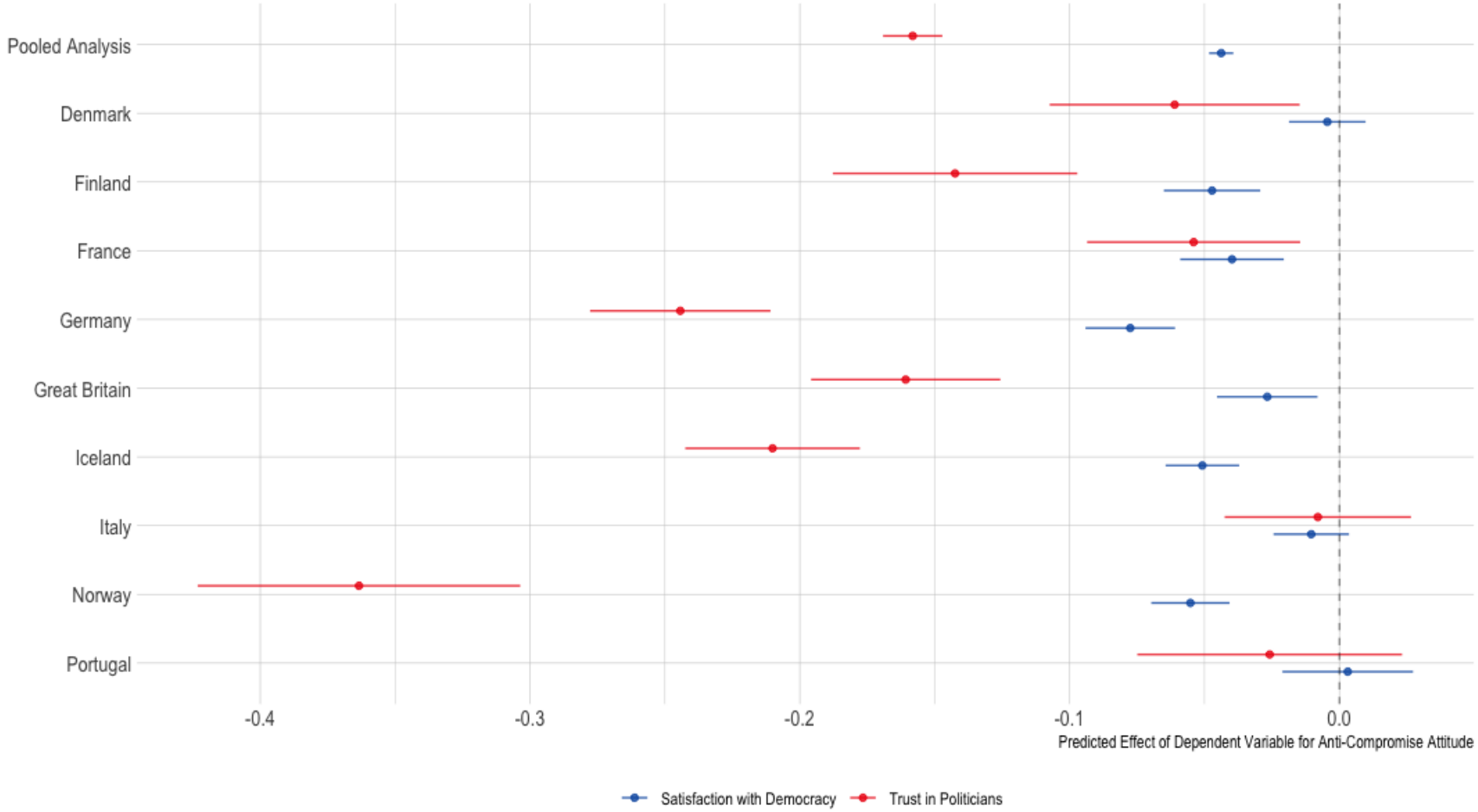
Figure 6 demonstrates the pooled cross-sectional analysis of election study data in the 9 West-European countries (top row), as well as the effects per country in alphabetical order.[10] The coefficient of *willingness to accept compromise* of `-0.16` for the dependent variable *Trust in Politicians* in the pooled sample points to a negative and statistically significant effect, albeit rather small. As we hypothesized in our pre-analysis plan, the coefficient indicates that the higher one's willingness to accept compromise, the higher one's trust in politicians. The negative effect on satisfaction with democracy is similar, yet smaller.

Figure 6 shows that this effect holds for seven of the nine countries in our sample when it comes to `Trust in Politicians`, and in six out of nine when it comes to `Satisfaction with Democracy`. The relationship between an anti-compromise attitude and political trust does not hold in Italy and Portugal. Moreover, in Denmark, we find a significant negative effect for trust in politicians, but not for satisfaction with democracy. All in all, these findings suggest that anti-compromise attitudes and trust in politicians and satisfaction with democracy correlate across in most Western European national contexts. This suggests that our experimental findings apply more broadly beyond the German case.

[9]The preregistration was registered for 6 countries only (Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, UK) given data availability at the time. We have complemented these six countries with more countries from CSES Module 5 upon their release. Pre-registration can be found here.

[10]In keeping with the political trust literature, we control for respondents' age, gender, educational attainment, and household income. In addition, we control for relevant political attitude confounding variables known to influence political trust including partisanship, political interest, and left-right placement. Lastly, to ascertain we do not capture governmental performance, we control for evaluations of governmental performance. Since our interest lies at the individual-level effects, we control for all country-level variation by including country fixed effects. We also estimate country-specific models.

Figure 6: Results Pooled Cross-Sectional & Country Specific Analysis.



Conclusion

Does parties' compromise acceptance during coalition negotiations affect their political reputations? The evidence from a survey experiment using `7,562` respondents in Germany immediately after the 2021 *Bundestag* elections demonstrate that political compromises come at the cost of voters' trust. That is, when a party stays steadfast in coalition negations, this tends to be favored by voters, regardless of the outcome of these negotiations. Voters thus seem to value *policy representation* over *responsibility* in taking office, at least during coalition negotiations. Corroborating the claim by Gutmann and Thompson (2014), we further find that individuals' 'principled tenacity' and 'mutual trust' affect compromise acceptance – with respondents with high levels of principledness and low social trust exhibiting lower support for political compromise. In addition, compromise acceptance is lower for highly populist citizens, but higher for citizens with high political interest and those who believe the issue to be salient. An additional observational cross-sectional analysis on the basis of CSES data shows that the relationship between compromise acceptance and trust in politicians and satisfaction with democracy holds in most West European countries.

This study is not without its limitations. First of all, our study focused on one particular kind of political compromise during coalition negotiations: a *subtractive* compromise in which one of the parties remove their initial positions (Weinstock 2013, p. 539) to gain access to political office. As our study is one of the first to explore the causal effect of party compromise on trust, such a strong treatment was desirable. Yet, not all compromises need to be as arduous as subtractive compromises. Compromises can also be *additive*, when the positions of both parties are incorporated, or *substitutive*, when both parties agree to a position that was not part of either's initial position (Weinstock 2013, p. 539).

Second, we provide evidence of an implicit bias against compromise (vs. remaining steadfast) in government coalitions. It is possible, however, that political compromise is rejected in the short-term for representational motives, while taking office is valued in the long-term. However, our conclusion that compromises for the purpose of coalition participation affect distrust is buoyed by the extensive observational evidence offered by David Fortunato (2019; 2021) which shows that voters punish coalition parties with greater willingness to compromise. What is more, other experimental evidence also points to the conclusion that compromises are not valued in practice (Harbridge et al. 2014; Fortunato 2021, Ch. 4).

Third, our study focused on compromises during coalition negotiations in Germany only. Our findings demonstrated that compromise rejection was overall shared among the voters of most parties. However, voters of the SPD, which won the elections and would most likely lead the new German government, were not more

likely to support a steadfast candidate. This suggests that the political context at hand can influence appraisals of party compromise. Comparative work on voters' appraisals of compromises in the context of coalition negotiations is therefore welcome.

Our findings arguably paint a rather bleak picture of political representation in European democracies. Like many democracies worldwide, European democracies are increasingly marked by affective polarization (Bettarelli et al. 2022), increased electoral volatility (Dassonneville 2022), and the electoral decline of mainstream parties (Trubowitz and Burgoon 2022). As a result, coalition governments are constituted by increasingly diverse coalition parties (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020, p. 1372). This arguably has a profound effect on the need for cooperation and political compromise across parties. Cooperation between ideologically distinct political parties will require parties to broker more contentious compromises. Our findings suggest that this will negatively affect trust in politicians and satisfaction with how representation works.

In view of the centrality of political compromise in European democracies, our findings hint at the possibility that political distrust could be a *systemic* component of representation. What is more, if political compromise breeds distrust in mainstream parties and distrust propels the success of populist parties (Meijers and Zaslove 2021), the compromise-distrust nexus could well prove to be a vicious circle for modern democracies. After all, populist parties advocate an uncompromising, majoritarian vision of representation (Urbinati 2019), which is also shared by citizens with high levels of populist attitudes (Zaslove and Meijers 2023). More research is needed on whether political compromise in increasingly diverse governing coalitions does indeed drive political distrust and the populist vote.

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