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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The effect of formateur expectations on vote choice: A comparative analysis

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Abstract
Expectations about election outcomes shape voter behavior, yet little research has examined how expectations regarding the post-election formateur influence voting decisions. This study examines the conditions under which voters engage in formateur optimization – strategically supporting parties with a realistic chance of forming the government rather than their most preferred party. We argue that while formateur uncertainty plays a key role, its effect depends on voters' preferences regarding their most preferred party and their preferred formateur. Using modules 1–5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) and German pre-election surveys (1998–2021), we find that formateur optimization is more likely in tightly contested elections. However, our results also show that voters' preferences moderate the effect of formateur uncertainty: formateur optimization remains low even under high uncertainty when voters strongly favor a non-formateur party over the formateur's party. Furthermore, we find that voters who expect their preferred formateur candidate to lose behave similarly to those uncertain about the outcome – and still engage in formateur optimization. These findings highlight the interplay between expectations and preferences in shaping voting decisions in coalition systems, offering new insights into voter calculations in multiparty democracies.

Keywords: government formateur; strategic voting; coalitions; voting behavior

Introduction

In coalition governments, prevalent in modern parliamentary democracies, the ruling party and its leader – the prime minister – play a crucial role in shaping coalition structures and allocating portfolios, with significant implications for policymaking (Glasgow Golder and Golder 2011; Indridason and Kam 2008; Warwick and Druckman 2006). This reality, coupled with increasing trends of personalization that shift focus from parties to party leaders, draws public and campaign attention to candidates for the role of government formateur (Poguntke and Webb 2007; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009).

Despite the central role prime ministers play in parliamentary democracies, there is a surprising lack of understanding about the conditions that incentivize voters to strategically support parties with a realistic chance of forming a government, rather than their most preferred parties. This strategic behavior, known as strategic sequencing or formateur optimization (Cox 1997; 2018), has not been thoroughly explored. While other types of coalition-directed voting have

received substantial scholarly attention in recent years (e.g., Bargsted and Kedar 2009; Bowler Karp and Donovan 2010; Gschwend and Meffert 2016; Gschwend 2007; Herrmann 2008; Meffert and Gschwend 2010), studies on formateur optimization remain sparse. The few empirical works on this subject focus on a particular country at a particular time (see: Felsenthal and Brichta 1985; Harsgor Itzkovitch-Malka and Tuttnauer 2023; Indridason 2011; Nachmias and Sened 1999), thus holding the scenario and its features constant, instead of 'taking the scenario as the main independent variable and look for responses to changing scenarios' (Cox 2018: 279).

This paper addresses this lacuna and contributes to the understanding of formateur optimization both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, we advance the understanding of the conditions under which formateur optimization is likely to occur. While previous literature has emphasized formateur uncertainty as a leading condition to stimulate such strategic behavior (Cox 2018), we argue that focusing solely on uncertainty regarding the identity of the next formateur is insufficient. It is crucial to also examine how this uncertainty interacts with voters' preferences regarding their most preferred party and their preferences for formateur. Thus, the likelihood of formateur optimization behavior is determined not only by how close the race between potential formateurs is but also by its interaction with voters' preferences for the eventual formateur and the party they most like.

When uncertainty is high, voters are more likely to engage in formateur optimization, prioritizing coalition influence over ideological alignment. However, we argue that this likelihood is moderated by the intensity of their preference for their most favored party relative to their preferred formateur party. Additionally, even when formateur uncertainty is low, voters who expect their preferred formateur to lose may still engage in formateur optimization, driven by what we term the 'Puncher's Chance' perspective – the perception that, despite slim odds, their vote could still make a difference. By incorporating these nuanced voter calculations, our study advances the understanding of strategic voting in coalition systems and the conditions under which formateur optimization occurs.

Empirically, the paper presents a first-of-its-kind comparative cross-national analysis of formateur optimization alongside a more nuanced analysis of a specific case study, that of Germany, over six elections. We utilize modules 1–5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2024) to examine the effect of uncertainty regarding the identity of the next formateur on formateur optimization. Our data contain 50,907 observations from 107 election surveys in 28 countries between the years 1996–2021. While the comparative analysis is extremely important in providing a broad-brush overview of the phenomenon in question, the German case study allows the unveiling of important nuances and mechanisms that are unobservable in the CSES data. To do so, we utilize all German federal pre-election surveys from 1998 to 2021 (excluding 2013), encompassing 9,337 respondents.

The results support a general trend by which the higher the uncertainty regarding the identity of the next formateur, the more likely voters are to perform formateur optimization. In addition, we show that formateur optimization can remain low even when formateur uncertainty is high, as it depends on how much voters favor their preferred non-formateur party relative to their feelings toward their preferred formateur party. Next, we show that when coupling voters' expectations regarding the race for formateur (uncertainty) with their political preferences for formateur, an intriguing picture emerges: voters who anticipate that their preferred formateur candidate will lose behave similarly to those uncertain about the outcome. These voters, despite believing their candidate is likely to lose, still engage in formateur optimization and vote for their preferred formateur's party. We suggest that this behavior may stem from an overestimation of their influence on the election outcome.

This research makes significant contributions to our understanding of strategic voting in complex and multi-actor political systems characterizing the context of coalition governments. It builds upon and refines existing concepts, such as formateur optimization and formateur uncertainty, by providing a more nuanced and voter-centric perspective. Empirically, the study

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provides robust, comparative evidence for formateur optimization - a phenomenon that has been theoretically proposed but rarely tested across different political contexts. By employing both cross-national and longitudinal data, the research offers validation of this strategic voting behavior, enhancing our ability to predict and understand voters' calculations and decisions in coalition systems. Lastly, this research makes a significant contribution to the growing body of literature on personalization in politics, particularly in the context of parliamentary systems with coalition governments. By demonstrating the voters' motives to affect the identity of the next prime minister, it provides new insights into how personalization manifests in multi-party systems, moving beyond the more commonly studied presidential or two-party contexts, and illuminating a key aspect of political personalization that affects voting behavior.

Formateur optimization – the neglected part of coalition-directed voting

In most parliamentary democracies, elections are the first of several stages determining the composition of the government and the identity of the prime minister. This process, though nuanced and varied between countries, generally includes three steps.[1] First, a formateur is chosen based on parties' seat share and the institutional arrangements in place. Second, potential partners are typically approached, leading to the formation of a coalition. Third, cabinet members are assigned portfolios (Cox 2018; Kedar 2012). Vast literature has demonstrated that voters in such systems take into account this coalition formation process when making their vote choice, so that coalition-based considerations affect voting sometimes even more than party-based considerations (Blais, Aldrich, Indridason et al. 2006; Cox 2018, 1997; Duch May and Armstrong 2010; Hobolt and Karp 2010; McCuen and Morton 2010).

The types of coalition-directed strategic voting voters engage in are closely related to the abovementioned stages of government formations, each stage providing voters with different incentives to engage in policy voting (Kedar 2012). Voters thus engage in coalition-directed voting to influence either who will be the formateur; who will be available as partners to the possible formateur(s); or the balance of power within a likely coalition. Cox (2018) outlined these pathways as three potential strategies for coalition-directed voting: formateur optimization, partner optimization, and policy balancing (see also Gschwend and Meffert 2016). We first discuss policy balancing and partner optimization, the more well-known and well-studied forms of coalition-directed voting, followed by a discussion of formateur optimization and how it varies from the other two.

Policy balancing is a strategic voting behavior adopted by voters who perceive the composition of the next coalition as a foregone conclusion and are certain about the identity of the next formateur. Instead of focusing on changing the coalition's formation, they aim to influence the allocation of ministerial portfolios within the coalition by altering the seat shares of its constituent parties. This strategy is also commonly called 'coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting' (Bargsted and Kedar 2009). The core idea behind policy balancing is that voters seeking to impact government policy will strategically vote for a party they believe will enter the coalition and wield ministerial influence.

Empirical studies provide strong evidence for this form of strategic voting. Bowler et al. (2010) found that voters tend to abandon their preferred party if they perceive it as unlikely to join the expected coalition. Similarly, Herrmann (2008) documented comparable patterns in Austria. Bargsted and Kedar (2009) showed that in Israel, voters who believe their preferred party has little chance of entering the post-election coalition are inclined to support the 'lesser of evils' among the viable coalition partners. Cox (2018: 268) refers to this phenomenon as 'policy balancing by out-voters', where voters from outside the expected governing bloc strategically shift their support to

[1]Not including the initial step in which votes translate into legislative seats, giving rise to a parliamentary party system – on which "traditional" strategic voting is focused.

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moderate coalition parties to temper the anticipated government's policies. Cox (2018) also identifies another variation called 'policy balancing by in-voters', in which voters who support the anticipated coalition cast their votes for more extreme coalition partners to influence the coalition's policy direction in their preferred ideological direction (Kedar 2005; 2012).

Partner optimization, in contrast, focuses on shaping the composition of the next coalition by influencing the availability and strength of potential coalition partners. A well-known example of this strategy is 'threshold insurance' or 'rental voting', where supporters of a major party temporarily vote for a smaller, allied party that risks failing to meet the electoral threshold. This ensures the smaller party's survival and availability as a coalition partner. Studies by Gschwend (2007) and Meffert and Gschwend (2010) provide empirical evidence of threshold insurance voting, highlighting cases where large-party supporters strategically lend their votes to secure the parliamentary presence of their preferred junior partners.

Formateur optimization, also referred to as sequential voting, refers to voters who vote to affect which party gets the first opportunity to form a government and thus, most likely, who will be the next prime minister (Cox 2018; 1997). The most straightforward way to influence the identity of the formateur is by voting for his/her party, under the assumption that the larger the party's seat share, the greater the likelihood that its leader will be appointed as formateur. Indeed, in many cases, the formateur is the leader of the largest party in parliament (Bäck and Dumont 2008; Martin and Stevenson 2001).

While at first sight this strategic behavior might seem very different from the classic Duvergerian strategic voting, a careful look allows adapting the Duvergerian logic to this strategic behavior as well. Instead of looking at the potential loss in votes 'wasted' on a party that did not make it into parliament – as in the case of the classical strategic voting, or at the potential loss in votes 'wasted' on a party that did not make it into the coalition – as in the case of 'coalition-targeted Duvergerian voting' (Bargsted and Kedar 2009), it is possible to take this logic one step further and apply it to formateur voting – looking at the potential loss in votes 'wasted' on a party that did not become the formateur's party. In this scenario, voters weigh their choices in light of how their decisions might impact the identity of the head of government, just as they would weigh the trade-offs in a Duvergerian system, where the objective is to avoid 'wasting' a vote and ensure their desired outcome within a two-party structure.

Cox (2018) argues that formateur optimization is most likely when there is high uncertainty regarding the identity of the next formateur but minimal uncertainty about possible future coalition compositions. However, he also argues that formateur selection precedes coalition formation in voters' strategic considerations. The sequencing reasoning suggests that voters first assess the likelihood of their preferred formateur's success before considering coalition partnerships. Consequently, even under high coalition uncertainty, the formateur consideration remains primary. Findings from Harsgor et al. (2023) support this reasoning, showing that the effect of coalition expectations is significant only among voters who are certain about the formateur race outcome. This further reinforces our decision to focus on formateur uncertainty, as it shapes the initial stage of voters' strategic calculations.

An important question that arises in the context of formateur optimization is how to conceptually and analytically distinguish it from other types of coalition-oriented voting, such as partner optimization and policy balancing. For partner optimization, the differentiation is rather easy, as, by definition, partner optimization involves voting for non-formateur-coalition-partner-parties rather than voting for formateur parties. A more complex differentiation is that between policy balancing and formateur optimization as both are forms of strategic voting in which voters may choose to vote for a formateur party instead of their preferred non-formateur party. The distinction between the two is thus analytical and is based on the different conditions and the distinct motivations they are driven by.

Formateur optimization focuses on voters who prefer non-formateur parties but strategically vote for a formateur party to influence which party will have the first opportunity to form the next

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government. This behavior typically occurs in situations of formateur uncertainty, where there is close competition between potential formateur parties. In these cases, voters shift their support to the potential formateur party they believe has the best chance of leading the government, prioritizing the goal of ensuring that their preferred coalition leader forms the government.

Policy balancing, on the other hand, occurs when voters are confident about which party will form the next government and instead seek to influence the internal distribution of power within the anticipated coalition. In such scenarios, voters might opt to vote for the assumed formateur party rather than their preferred non-formateur party, but their goal is different – they aim to shape the balance of power and the allocation of ministerial portfolios within the coalition. A notable example of this can be seen in Bargsted and Kedar (2009), where voters in Israel, confident that a particular coalition would form, strategically voted for the formateur party because it represented the most moderate option within the coalition. In these cases, the choice to vote for the potential formateur party is driven by the desire to moderate government policies rather than to influence the identity of the next formateur (which is assumed to be certain).

Nonetheless, the theory we set forth in our paper suggests that formateur optimization is not restricted to cases of high formateur uncertainty and is expected to occur also under low formateur uncertainty, contingent on voters' preferences. This further complicates the differentiation between formateur optimization and policy balancing, as in cases where formateur uncertainty is low and supporters of a non-formateur party shift their vote for a formateur party. However, we move forward with the assumption that the group of voters for which formateur optimization and policy balancing is indiscernible is rather small. We base this assumption on studies documenting policy balancing, for example: Bowler et al. (2010) or Herrmann (2008), which show that for the most part, policy balancing does not involve strategically voting for the formateur party, but rather voting for non-formateur expected coalition partners. It is only in a very specific political conjecture, such as the case of Israel 2009, where this was not the case. Considering this discussion, we assume that a non-formateur party's supporter who strategically votes for a formateur party engages in most cases in formateur optimization, and not policy balancing.

While partner optimization and policy balancing have been extensively studied, formateur optimization remains largely unexplored. This is quite surprising given the central role prime ministers play in shaping coalition structures, portfolio allocations, and policymaking. Also, the growing trend of personalization, which shifts the focus from parties to party leaders, further underscores the importance of studying this type of consideration that voters might hold. Only a few studies empirically examine formateur optimization voting behavior, focusing on a particular country at a particular time (see Felsenthal and Brichta 1985; Harsgor et al. 2023; Indridason 2011; Nachmias and Sened 1999). Nonetheless, it is important to note that such studies find evidence for the existence of formateur optimization voting. For example, Indridason (2011) shows that voters have incentives to attempt influencing policymaking after elections through the identity of the formateur. Other studies suggest that formateur considerations may affect vote choice. Kedar (2012:10) stresses the importance of examining the selection of the formateur as a possible venue for coalition-directed voting, noting that 'voters may desert a favorite small party and instead support a larger party if they think this party may be the largest or the one chosen to lead the government'. Abramson, Aldrich, Blais et al. (2010) also note that tactical voters in PR systems may be motivated by their desire to influence the identity of the formateur.

Most recently, Harsgor et al. (2023) provide empirical evidence for formateur optimization in the Israeli case, driven by formateur uncertainty. Focusing on a particular case of vote-switching in repeat elections, they show that voters are more likely to switch their vote to affect the identity of the next formateur, the higher the formateur uncertainty is. However, Harsgor et al. (2023) focus on one specific context of repeat elections and the inclination of vote switching between elections rather than strategic voting *per se*. They do not develop the role of uncertainty in formateur optimization to a broad comparative context and do not develop theoretically the different conditions in which uncertainty works. In addition, they measure formateur uncertainty in one

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way only and do not provide an extensive examination of voter preferences nor offer a comparative framework to understand formateur optimization. Thus, a deeper examination of the impact of formateur uncertainty on formateur optimization and its potential interaction with other factors is greatly needed.

Determinants of formateur optimization: Theoretical expectations

Formateur optimization inherently involves trade-offs that can be effectively framed using insights from spatial voting models (Enelow and Hinich 1982; 1984; Hinich and Pollard 1981). These models assume that voters evaluate parties based on their ideological proximity, deriving the highest utility from parties closest to their own policy preferences.[2] In the context of formateur optimization, however, voters face a unique decision: whether to prioritize ideological alignment by supporting their most-preferred party or to vote strategically for a party likely to influence coalition formation as the formateur. This decision involves balancing costs and benefits.

The costs of formateur optimization stem from the ideological distance between the voter's most-preferred party and the expected formateur. Voting for a party that is ideologically farther away entails a sacrifice in utility derived from policy alignment. In spatial terms, this cost can be conceptualized as the 'distance penalty' that voters incur when deviating from their ideal point on the policy spectrum.

The benefits, on the other hand, arise from the potential to influence the identity of the next formateur. By supporting a viable formateur, voters can influence coalition outcomes, potentially ensuring that the overall government's policy orientation is closer to their preferences. In this framework, the utility gained from successfully influencing the formateur – and, by extension, the coalition – is weighed against the utility lost from not supporting the most ideologically proximate party. Spatial voting models, therefore, provide a clear structure for understanding these trade-offs: voters maximize their overall utility by balancing the ideological cost of their vote with the strategic benefit of influencing coalition dynamics.

However, it is important to note that while spatial proximity plays a central role in structuring these trade-offs, the utility may also stem from non-ideological considerations, such as perceptions of party competence, leadership, or the desire to block an undesirable formateur from gaining power. For instance, a voter might support a centrist party expected to act as a formateur, even if it is ideologically distant, to block the formation of a government led by a party they strongly oppose. Similarly, identity-based considerations, such as shared ethnicity, religion, or regional affiliation with the expected formateur, may generate utility for voters independent of ideological alignment. This broader conception of utility acknowledges that voters may prioritize coalition outcomes or the identity of the formateur over strict ideological alignment. Thus, formateur optimization voting reflects a complex calculus where spatial and non-spatial factors combine to inform voter decision-making.[3]

Our hypotheses aim to address the abovementioned gap by exploring the conditions that enable formateur optimization. We specifically focus on theoretically developing the concept of formateur uncertainty and its interactions with voters' preferences.

Our first hypothesis seeks to directly assess formateur optimization as a function of formateur uncertainty. As could be expected, we examine this mechanism within the subset of non-formateur parties' supporters, positing that when there is high uncertainty regarding the

[2]Of course, there are other models of spatial voting, most notably directional models, which assume that voters prioritize the direction and intensity of a party's stance relative to a neutral reference point (for example, Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). However, these models are less central to our discussion. For the sake of clarity and focus, we chose to base our discussion on the proximity voting model.

[3]Given this complex calculus of spatial and non-spatial factors we chose to use thermometers to indicate voters' most preferred party, rather than using ideological proximity. We elaborate on this decision in the empirical strategy section.

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formateur, these voters are more inclined to engage in formateur optimization, thus voting for a formateur party instead of their most favorable non-formateur party. As stated earlier, the rationale behind this expectation is straightforward – when the race between the potential formateurs is close, voters are more motivated to strategically endorse a formateur's party in the hope of influencing the selection of the next formateur, compared to when the formateur's identity is more or less certain.

H1: *Among voters who prefer a non-formateur party, formateur optimization will be more likely when formateur uncertainty is high, compared to situations when formateur uncertainty is low.*

Following this preliminary hypothesis, we delve into more complex expectations concerning the interplay between formateur uncertainty and voter preferences. We present two such expectations: the first addressing voter preferences regarding his/her most preferred party and the second addressing voter preferences regarding the identity of the next formateur.

In general, the literature finds that the intensity of the voter's preference for a party is expected to have consequences for their willingness to engage in strategic voting (Abramson et al. 2010). Studies show that voters who identify with a party are reluctant to desert their first party of choice, as the cost of deserting this party is sizeable (Gschwend 2007; Niemi Written and Franklin 1992). Furthermore, the distance – in terms of ideology or favorability – between one's preferred party and a possible strategic vote choice has been found to affect the likelihood of strategic voting (Daoust and Bol 2020). How do such calculations influence formateur optimization strategic voting? Our next hypothesis addresses this question, explaining how the gap in favorability between the voter's most preferred party and her most preferred formateur party moderates the relationship between formateur uncertainty and formateur optimization.

We expect that the larger this gap, the less likely voters will be to engage in formateur optimization. When the gap between how much a voter likes her most preferred party and how much she likes her favorite formateur party is large – she will be less likely to strategically vote for a formateur party, as the cost of deserting the preferred party is higher compared to when the gap is small. Put differently, we expect voters to be less sensitive to formateur uncertainty when there is a large gap in affection between their most preferred party and their preferred formateur party.

H2: *Among voters who prefer a non-formateur party, formateur optimization will be less likely when there is a large gap in thermometers between a voter's favorite non-formateur party, and favorite formateur party, even when formateur uncertainty is high.*

While H1 and H2 echo the view of high uncertainty as a necessary condition for formateur optimization, H3 presents further progress in the conceptual understanding and the empirical examination of formateur optimization. Here, we argue that formateur uncertainty is not a necessary condition for formateur optimization. Even when it is relatively clear who will end up as the government formateur, some voters may be inclined to engage in formateur optimization. In this context, we distinguish between voters who are certain about the victory of their preferred formateur candidate and voters who are certain that their preferred candidate will lose. This approach integrates voters' preferences for the government formateur with their expectations regarding the election's outcome, allowing us to explore the possibility that the effect of expectations on voting may be contingent on preferences. Consequently, it aids in providing a more precise understanding of the circumstances under which voters are inclined to engage in formateur optimization.

We begin by reaffirming that influencing the formateur's identity is important for voters in coalition government systems. Voters confident that their preferred candidate will become the prime minister can feel safe enough to shift their focus to other coalition-directed strategies, such as partner optimization and policy balancing. Conversely, voters who believe their preferred

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candidate is likely to lose might not see formateur optimization as a worthwhile behavior, as it is neither a vote for their most preferred party nor a vote that they think is likely to change the formateur outcome. However, these voters may still be motivated to engage in formateur optimization, as demonstrated before (Harsgor et al. 2023).

The reason voters may vote for their preferred formateur party rather than their most-preferred non-formateur party is what we call a 'Puncher's Chance' perspective. Borrowed from sports, a 'Puncher's Chance' is a boxing idiom that indicates an improbable yet possible outcome, specifically referring to a boxer who is outmatched yet still has the capacity to win if they can land one or two clean heavy punches (Jones 2013). Thus, even with slim chances of influence, such voters may still see value in supporting their preferred candidate as a final effort or hope.

This kind of 'Puncher's Chance' behavior is in line with voting in general. Voters frequently participate in electoral acts even though they know they have minimal chances of altering the outcome. As Blais and Young (1999) and Blais (2000) noted, the act of voting itself has a negligible effect on election results. Yet, as Duffy and Tavits (2008) observe, voters often overestimate, even subconsciously (Blais and Rheault 2011), the likelihood that their vote will be pivotal, acting as if their individual contribution could sway the outcome. If a non-formateur party supporter votes strategically for a formateur-candidate party she expects to lose, i.e., not end up as the formateur; she risks losing both the benefit of voting for her most preferred party and the benefit from having her preferred formateur elected. However, assuming that voters hold great value in the identity of the next prime minister, who will greatly affect the country's policymaking for the next 4–5 years, such a risk may be worth taking.[4]

This leads us to hypothesize that the likelihood of formateur optimization among voters with low uncertainty about the formateur's identity hinges on whether the voter believes their preferred candidate will win or lose. If the voter anticipates a win for their preferred candidate, formateur optimization will decline as voters have little to no incentive to strategically vote for the formateur's party instead of their most preferred non-formateur party. This is because such voters can have the best of both worlds: they can vote sincerely for the party they feel closest to and have their preferred candidate as formateur. However, if the voters think their preferred candidate is about to lose, they may still be motivated to support this underdog in hope for the improbable, keeping formateur optimization akin to cases of high uncertainty. We thus hypothesize:

H3: *Among voters who prefer a non-formateur party, those who expect their preferred candidate for formateur will lose are more likely to engage in formateur optimization, compared to those who expect their preferred candidate for formateur will win.*

Figure 1 is an illustration of H3. The figure depicts the difference in the likelihood of engaging in formateur optimization between voters who expect their preferred formateur candidate to win and those who expect their preferred candidate to lose, across varying levels of uncertainty regarding the identity of the next formateur.

The graph demonstrates a nonlinear relationship centered around the point of complete uncertainty (50%), where voters are maximally unsure whether their preferred PM will win or lose. Importantly, in cases of complete uncertainty, preferences for one candidate over another become meaningless. That is, when uncertainty about the winner in the race for formateur is maximal, it is unlikely that voters can articulate specific expectations regarding the identity of the winner. Thus, under conditions of complete uncertainty, we do not distinguish between different expectations about the outcome and therefore leave this segment of the graph blank. However, at

[4]It should be noted the costs of formateur optimization when a loss is expected may be relatively low. By voting for a formateur party instead of their most preferred non-formateur party, voters forgo their ideal choice. However, they still support a party guaranteed to enter parliament and become a significant parliamentary actor, usually as the leading opposition and main challenger to the government.

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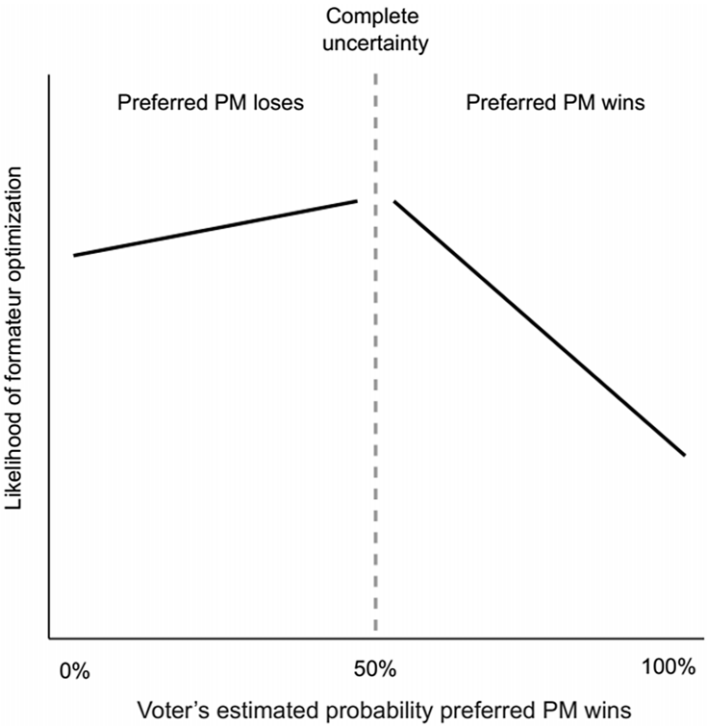

Figure 1. The effect of voter expectations and preferences on formateur optimization.

other levels of uncertainty, the two can coexist – individuals can hold expectations even when they lack full certainty or have low confidence in those expectations. This distinction aligns with psychological and political science research on probabilistic reasoning and belief formation. For example, Tversky and Kahneman (1992) demonstrate that people often form expectations even under uncertainty, relying on heuristics and incomplete information. Similarly, research on electoral forecasting (e.g., Kayser and Leininger 2016; Murr 2011) suggests that voters develop expectations about election outcomes even in situations where uncertainty is significant.

Following this logic, as we move from complete uncertainty to high uncertainty, it is possible to differentiate between voters with different expectations regarding the winner. Nevertheless, when formateur uncertainty is high, different expectations regarding the perceived winner do not translate into differences in the likelihood of formateur optimization. This is because, under high levels of formateur uncertainty, both groups of voters are inclined to vote strategically to affect the identity of the next formateur regardless of their political preference for a specific formateur, and thus the likelihood of formateur optimization peaks for both groups.

As formateur uncertainty decreases and the race for formateur becomes less competitive – moving away from the center of the x-axis toward either end, right or left – voters are less motivated to engage in formateur optimization. However, the effect of formateur uncertainty on voters' likelihood to engage in formateur optimization is contingent on the combination of voters' expectations and preferences. This is why the slopes on either side of the 50% mark diverge. Voters who believe their preferred PM is likely to lose (left side) are less sensitive to changes in the level of uncertainty in the prime ministerial race and are likely to engage in formateur optimization even when formateur uncertainty is low. In contrast, voters who believe that their preferred PM will win (right side) are more sensitive to such changes, and thus for them the likelihood of formateur optimization declines sharply as certainty increases. Put differently, formateur uncertainty matters

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less for voters who expect their preferred candidate for formateur to lose compared to those who expect their preferred candidate to win.

Empirical strategy

Our empirical strategy is twofold. First, we conduct a cross-national analysis using the broadest available survey data in order to establish the relationship between formateur uncertainty, preferences, and strategic voting. This analysis allows us to take advantage of the variation in real-world political competition – specifically, how tight the race was in each election cycle – and use it as an independent variable instead of having it remain constant, as with case studies. In a second step, we analyze six pre-election surveys in a single country, Germany, to delve deeper into the perceptions of individual voters, leveraging specific questions about the electoral race and its outcomes that were not available in the comparative setting.

Before we dive into the specifics of our research design, we wish to address a few key challenges involving the study of formateur optimization. The first and most complex challenge is that of empirically distinguishing between different forms of strategic voting. Unfortunately, existing datasets do not include direct questions about voters' motivations to vote. However, even if such questions were available, it would still be challenging to disentangle overlapping motivations, as voters often pursue multiple goals simultaneously. For example, a voter might aim to influence the formateur while also considering ideological representation or coalition policy outcomes. This makes it very hard to use empirical measures to isolate distinct types of coalition-oriented voting behavior.

Instead, we argue that the question of distinguishing between different forms of coalition-directed voting – such as voting to influence the formateur versus voting to achieve policy balancing – is primarily a conceptual and analytical question. As a result, we rely on the analytical definitions discussed above. We classify voters who are non-formateur party supporters but cast their vote for a formateur party as engaging in formateur optimization. We believe this decision is justifiable, since, as we explain above, the possible overlap between formateur optimization and policy balancing is minor and may exist only in cases of low formateur uncertainty and in a very specific political conjecture.

Another key challenge in studying formateur optimization is the measurement of uncertainty. The CSES surveys do not provide information on voters' assessment of uncertainty in the formateur race. Thus, we rely on post-election outcomes to infer the level of uncertainty about the formateur's identity before the elections. This allows us to measure uncertainty using an objective measure that does not include voters' subjective evaluations; however, such a measure exists only at the system level. Contrarily, the German survey, on which we will further elaborate, provides some individual-level information on uncertainty. Specifically, the survey asks respondents whether they think it is clear who will win the election approximately one week before the vote. While this does not directly measure uncertainty about the formateur, it provides an indirect indication of voters' perceptions regarding the likely outcome of the election, which we use in our analysis. We further discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the measurement approaches in the concluding part of the paper.

Main analysis: Cross-national design

Data

Our comparative analysis relies on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2024) dataset, modules 1–5. We include all parliamentary and semi-presidential free democracies (Freedom House score of 2 or lower, Freedom House 2024) with proportional or mixed-member proportional electoral systems. We exclude Switzerland, whose cabinet formation is detached

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from electoral outcomes. We further exclude three outlying cases with an extremely large gap between the two largest parties (Romania 2012, South Africa 2009 and 2014), which we use as our main independent variable as explained below. We focus only on respondents whose favorite party, according to their party thermometer responses, is not one of the largest two parties and are thus potentially able to engage in formateur optimization.[5] Voters who equally prefer a non-formateur and a formateur party are excluded from the analysis. In total, we have data on 50,907 respondents from 107 election surveys in 28 countries between the years 1996–2021 (see the full list in Table A1 in the online Appendix). Descriptive statistics of all variables used in this analysis can be found in Table A2 in the online Appendix.

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is a binary indicator for formateur optimization voting, which equals 1 for those who report having voted for one of the two largest parties ($M = 0.12$, SD = .33). Because we only include respondents who report having the highest thermometer score for parties that are *not* among those two largest parties, such vote choice is regarded as an insincere, or strategic, vote for one of the formateur candidates, i.e., formateur optimization.

Independent variables

Formateur uncertainty: We estimate formateur uncertainty based on the gap between the two largest parties in the elections, relying on previous findings that identify party size as the single most important party characteristic for predicting formateur or prime minister status (Bäck and Dumont 2008). We rely on information in the CSES regarding the eventual electoral results to compute this gap as a proxy for the citizens' overall perception of how large or small that gap would have been when they made their vote choice. A larger gap implies a higher degree of certainty in the identity of the eventual formateur, which we theorize will be associated with fewer instances of formateur voting. The gap ranges between 0.1% (Belgium 1999) and 25.4% (Romania 2016), with a mean of 7.3% and standard deviation of 5.9%. In a separate analysis, we alternatively rely on polling data that represent the information that voters could have had before the elections. We use data from Jennings and Wlezien's (2016) article and Politico.eu's Poll of Polls (2022) to calculate the gap according to the last polls before each election for a subset of 19,538 respondents in 48 election surveys from 17 countries, for which the datasets overlap. Our findings also hold under this specification (see Table A4 and Figure A1 in the online Appendix).

To test for H2, we present a second independent variable, which measures the difference between the respondent's feelings toward their most preferred party and their most preferred formateur candidates' party. Specifically, we measure the *thermometer drop*, which captures the difference in thermometer scores between the respondent's scores for their most preferred party in general and their most preferred formateur party. This variable captures the size of the drop in the respondent's utility in moving from their sincere vote choice to voting for one of the formateur candidates' parties. To assist with the interpretation of the interaction effect, the values are transformed so they range between 0 and 9 instead of 1 and 10 ($M = 1.91$, SD = 2.07). As a robustness check, we also ran our analyses using a different measure relying on the difference in the perceived ideological distance between the respondent and the closest party to them compared to the closest *formateur party*. The results hold and are reported in the online Appendix (Table A5 and Figure A2).

[5]Although we rely theoretically on principles of spatial voting theory, we choose to use party thermometers rather than perceived ideological proximity because they are much less ambiguous. In our data, 44% of the respondents placed both a formateur candidate party and a non-formateur party as ideologically closest to them. In comparison, only 16% gave both a formateur party and a non-formateur party their highest thermometer score.

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Control variables

At the individual level, we control for *a formateur difference* measure that captures the difference in respondents' thermometer scores between the two formateur parties. The smaller the difference, we assume, the less pressure the respondent would feel to influence the race between the two formateur candidates. This measure also ranges between 0 and 9 ($M = 2.71$, SD $= 2.24$).

We also control for a battery of demographic factors, including age group, gender, and education level. At the country level, we control for the average district magnitude, as smaller districts may incentivize voters to support large parties, which are often also formateur parties. Finally, we use logistic regression models with country- and year-fixed effects to capture context-specific unobserved factors and cluster the standard errors by country-year. Alternative models using multilevel logistic regression with random effects can be found in the online Appendix (Table A6 and Figure A3).

Results

We present the results of our regression analyses in Table 1. Model 1 includes only the gap variable and the fixed effects. Model 2 includes all control variables, and Model 3 introduces the interaction term between the gap and the thermometer drop. Finally, Models 4 and 5 split the population between those who preferred the first-place party over the second-place party (i.e., the winner of the formateur race) in Model 4 and those who preferred the second-place party (i.e., the loser of the formateur race) in Model 5.

The gap variable has a negative, statistically significant effect in all models except for Model 5. This means that as the race between the two leading formateur parties tightens (lower gap, high formateur uncertainty), the likelihood of small-party supporters insincerely voting for one of the two leading formateur parties increases. These findings corroborate H1. When all other variables in Model 2 are held to their observed values, a move from a hypothetical blowout (gap $= 25\%$) – a scenario of extremely low formateur uncertainty – to a tie (gap $= 0$) – a scenario of extremely high formateur uncertainty – entails an increase in the likelihood of formateur optimization from 9.2% to 15.1%. A more moderate move, from one standard deviation above the mean gap to one standard deviation below it (13.3% versus 1.5%), entails an increase in the likelihood of formateur optimization from 11.7% to 14.7%, a three percentage points increase. These differences are all statistically significant.

This relationship is depicted in Figure 2. These findings also contribute to the distinction between formateur optimization and policy balancing, as outlined in the theoretical section. Policy balancing typically occurs in cases where there is high certainty regarding the identity of the next formateur. However, our analysis shows an increased likelihood of voters who prefer non-formateur parties to vote for formateur parties as uncertainty transitions from low to high. This suggests that policy balancing is not the driving factor behind this behavior and is likely less common than formateur optimization in such contexts.

Wouldn't small party supporters who expect with high certainty that their candidate will lose be likely to abstain from voting altogether rather than vote for their preferred formateur? In other words, isn't formateur voting connected to the more basic question of turnout? Theoretically, small party supporters' default, when they see the race for formateur as hopeless, is to vote sincerely for their preferred party rather than abstain, so we would not expect the formateur race to affect turnout by making strategic formateur voters into non-voters (or vice versa). Empirically, we tested two models to assess this claim. First, we reran Model 2 in Table 1, adding a control for the election's turnout percentage (Table A7 in the online Appendix). The results hold. Second, we ran a multinomial version model of Model 2 in Table 1 with a categorical dependent variable that distinguishes between sincere voting, formateur voting, and non-voting as the reference category (Table A8 in the online Appendix). The effect of the electoral gap – our measure of uncertainty – on the likelihood of formateur voting as compared to non-voting is insignificant.

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Table 1. Determinants of formateur optimization in 28 countries

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Baseline	With controls	Interactive	Preferring the winner	Preferring the loser
Electoral gap	−2.187*	−2.479**	−2.798**	−3.109*	−1.776
	(0.976)	(0.916)	(0.994)	(1.234)	(1.164)
Thermometer drop		−0.396***	−0.418***	−0.405***	−0.441***
		(0.023)	(0.037)	(0.044)	(0.049)
Gap * drop			0.289	0.053	0.591
			(0.333)	(0.391)	(0.397)
Formateur difference		−0.001	−0.001	−0.006	0.021
		(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.010)	(0.016)
Female		0.107**	0.108**	0.047	0.179**
		(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.038)	(0.059)
Age					
25-34		0.136*	0.136*	0.179*	0.055
		(0.066)	(0.066)	(0.086)	(0.095)
35-44		0.149*	0.149*	0.231**	-0.004
		(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.086)	(0.105)
45-54		0.257***	0.257***	0.263**	0.238*
		(0.073)	(0.073)	(0.096)	(0.096)
55-64		0.266**	0.267**	0.282**	0.228*
		(0.087)	(0.087)	(0.098)	(0.106)
65 and over		0.321**	0.321**	0.365**	0.259*
		(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.122)	(0.106)
Education					
Primary		−0.370**	−0.371**	−0.281+	−0.577*
		(0.136)	(0.136)	(0.146)	(0.228)
Secondary		−0.472**	−0.472**	−0.361*	−0.746**
		(0.149)	(0.149)	(0.148)	(0.255)
Post-secondary		−0.447**	−0.448**	−0.379*	−0.648**
		(0.147)	(0.147)	(0.152)	(0.227)
University		−0.488***	−0.488***	−0.395**	−0.743**
		(0.143)	(0.142)	(0.146)	(0.255)
Average DM		0.016	0.016	−0.004	0.063
		(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.032)	(0.039)
Constant	−1.924***	−1.015**	−0.988*	−1.026**	−0.956+
	(0.291)	(0.386)	(0.387)	(0.398)	(0.523)
Country FEs	√	√	√	√	√
Year FEs	√	√	√	√	√
Observations	50907	44974	44974	28309	16665

Standard errors in parentheses.
+ $P < 0.1$, *$P < 0.05$, **$P < 0.01$, ***$P < 0.001$.

Next, we examine how the difference between the respondent's feelings toward her most preferred party and her most preferred formateur party (*thermometer drop*) moderates the relationship between formateur uncertainty and formateur optimization. As recalled, we expect that the larger this drop is, the less likely voters will be to engage in formateur optimization even when formateur uncertainty is high. In other words, we expect the effect of the electoral gap to decrease in strength as the thermometer drop increases. We test this expectation in Model 3.[6]

The interaction term in Model 3 appears to be statistically insignificant, but a further graphical analysis, following the guidelines by Brambor Clark and Golder (2006), reveals that there is, in

[6]As shown in Table 1 Model 3, formateur indifference has no significant effect on the dependent variable. Moreover, when we estimate an interaction model between (in)difference and the gap variable, the interaction is insignificant. In a triple interaction including the thermometer drop, the triple interaction term is significant. However, when we graph the marginal effects, we see that indifference does not substantially moderate the relationship. Since the triple interaction adds considerable complexity without the benefit of added insight, we decided to keep it out of the analysis.

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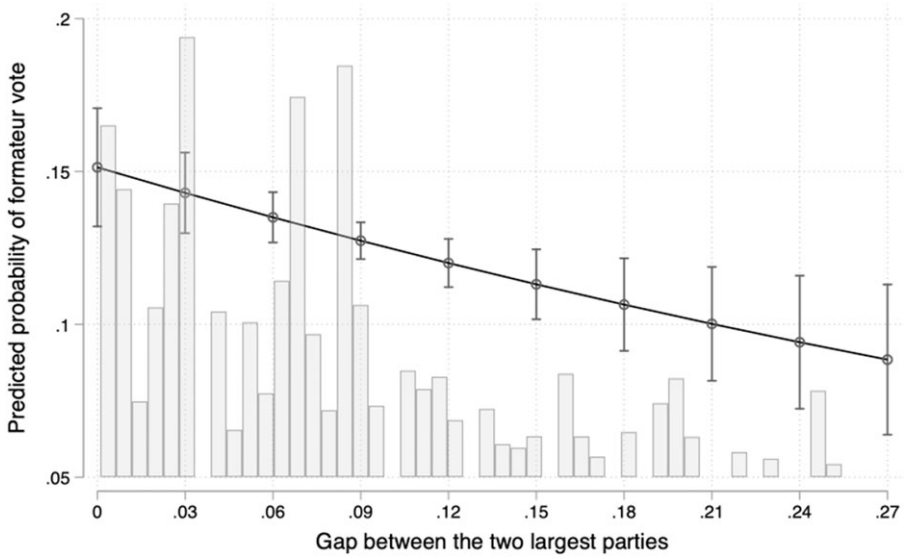

Figure 2. The effect of the electoral gap on formateur optimization.
Note: Predicted probabilities based on Model 2 in Table 1. Gray bars depict the percentage of cases for each value on the x-axis. Vertical capped lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

fact, an important interactive effect. As shown in Figure 3, the marginal effect of formateur uncertainty, measured by the electoral gap between the two formateur parties, is negative and statistically significant in low levels of thermometer drop (0–2). Importantly, as the gray bars in Figure 3 indicate, almost 72% of the respondents in our data are in this range. However, as the level of thermometer drop increases, the effect of formateur uncertainty diminishes and becomes indistinguishable from zero. In line with H2, when the gap between a voter's most preferred non-formateur party and their preferred formateur party is small, she is more likely to be affected by formateur uncertainty. The closer the race between potential formateurs, the more likely voters are to engage in formateur optimization. However, when voters strongly favor their non-formateur party over the formateur party, the level of formateur uncertainty has little impact. This is because the 'cost' of formateur optimization depends on the degree of preference difference between the two parties.

In Models 4 and 5, we split the population according to which of the two formateur parties the respondent preferred. We compare the models to see whether the effect of formateur uncertainty on formateur optimization differs between these two subpopulations. The main finding is that the effect of formateur uncertainty is statistically significant only among those who prefer the first-place party, i.e., the party of the winner (with the interactive effect following the pattern shown in Figure 3 for the whole population). In contrast, the main and interactive effects are both insignificant among those who prefer the second-place party, i.e., the party of the loser. We see this finding as supporting our suggested mechanism and an indication against the possibility that a bandwagon effect drives the general pattern we observe. If it was a bandwagon effect, that is, voters join the formateur party because it is expected to win, we would, first, expect a positive effect of the electoral gap on formateur voting among those who prefer the first-place party instead of the negative effect found. Second, we would expect the negative effect to be stronger among those who preferred the second-place party, as hopping on its bandwagon becomes decreasingly appealing with an increase in the electoral gap. We find the opposite trend, whereby those who prefer the second-place party are unaffected by the electoral gap, suggesting that they are probably driven by a kind of 'Puncher's Chance' motivation. These findings support the trend depicted in Figure 1 and elaborated by H3. We present further support for this hypothesis using the German case.

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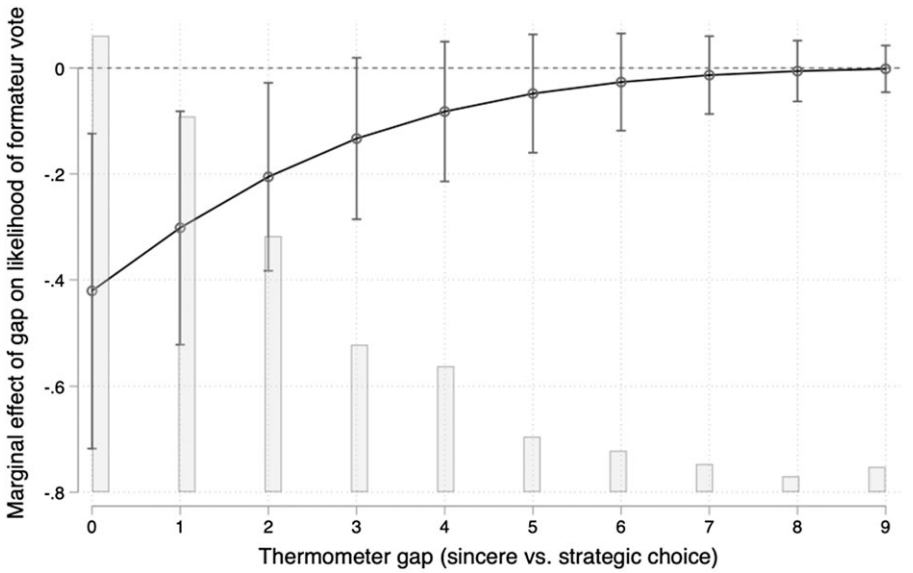

Figure 3. The marginal effect of formateur uncertainty conditional on thermometer drop.
Note: Marginal effects based on Model 3 in Table 1. Gray bars depict the percentage of cases for each value on the x-axis. Vertical capped lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

The comparative cross-national analysis of formateur optimization thus supports all three hypotheses. We now move to a more nuanced analysis of the German case study, which allows us to further probe into the phenomenon of formateur optimization.

The German case

To investigate the mechanism underlying our findings in the cross-national analysis, we compiled a dataset of German pre-election survey responses. This dataset complements the cross-national one and differs from it in several ways. First, it includes questions that more directly get at the respondents' perceptions and expectations regarding the race between the two largest parties and for the eventual prime minister. As such, it allows us to directly test for H3. Second, the surveys were conducted before each election (rather than after the elections as with the CSES data), making the measurement of respondents' affect toward the parties independent from the eventual electoral results. Third, the surveys allow for individual-level variation regarding formateur uncertainty, as they include voters' subjective expectations regarding electoral outcomes.

Data and variables

Our dataset contains pre-election surveys from Germany preceding the federal elections in 1998, 2002, 2005, 2009, 2017, and 2021 (2013 was omitted because the survey did not include the required questions). Overall, the dataset includes 9,337 respondents, 2,351 of whom placed a party other than the large ones (CDU/CSU and SPD) as their favourite. Descriptive statistics of all variables used in this analysis can be found in Table A3 in the online Appendix.

The dependent variable, *formateur vote*, is operationalized in the same way as in the comparative study. The two main independent variables are based on two questions. The first, *formateur uncertainty*, asks the respondents whether they think it is already clear or not

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(approximately one week before the elections) who will win.[7] We recoded the responses so that 1 denotes formateur uncertainty. The second variable, *formateur expectation*, relies on an open-ended question in which respondents were asked *who* they think will win. We first recoded all responses to map onto either the CDU/CSU or the SPD (along with their leaders or as the main coalition parties), or another party. We then relied on the party thermometers to discern whether each respondent expected their preferred formateur party to win or lose. Finally, we combined this variable with the uncertainty variable with a resulting three-categories variable in which one category includes respondents who were certain that their preferred formateur party would win; a second category includes respondents who were certain that their preferred formateur party would lose; and a third category including all who were uncertain of the results (i.e., responded that it was not yet clear who will win). Those who reported being certain of the results but mentioned a small party as the winner were excluded.

We use the same set of controls at the individual level as in the comparative analysis: the thermometer drop from the most liked party to the most liked formateur party, the respondent's (in)difference between the formateur candidates' parties, as well as their gender, age, and education level (here operationalized as attaining the German 'Abitur' or not). Additionally, in Model 4, we account for the actual gap between the two largest parties, measured by the average of the final polls before each election as reported in Wahlrecht.de (2025). Finally, in all models, except for Model 4, we include year fixed effects to control for election-level unobserved factors.

Results

As we did in the comparative analysis, we focus on non-formateur party supporters, that is, those who gave the highest thermometer score to parties other than the CDU, CSU, and SPD. In a bivariate analysis, we find that those who are uncertain of the results are more likely to make a formateur vote (14%) than those who are certain about the winner (10%), with the difference being statistically significant ($p = .03$). We then turn to the regression analysis. Table 2 presents five models, all including our controls and year fixed effects. In Model 1, we use the formateur uncertainty measure as the main independent variable. In contrast with the bivariate test, it does not come out statistically significant. The next four models all include the *formateur expectation* measure that combines voters' expectations regarding formateur uncertainty with their preference for formateur.

When we use this measure in Model 2, we find a negative effect for those who are certain that their preferred formateur candidate will win. As we expected, compared to those who are uncertain of the results of the election, those who are certain their preferred formateur will win are less likely to make a formateur vote. In contrast, the difference between the uncertain and those who expect their formateur candidate to lose is insignificant and substantively small. This means that voters who expect their preferred formateur will lose are indistinguishable from those who see the race as close in their likelihood to perform formateur optimization. These findings, which support H3, are graphically presented in Figure 4.

To reinforce H3, we include in Model 3 only voters who are certain of the formateur race outcomes. The coefficient for 'preferred wins' denotes here the effect of expecting the preferred formateur to win, compared to expecting the rival to win. The effect is negative and substantial: holding all other variables to their observed values, the difference between expecting to win and

[7]Unlike the comparative analysis in which we use the eventual electoral results to compute the gap between the two largest parties as a proxy of formateur uncertainty, in the German case the measure of formateur uncertainty is subjective in nature and thus allows for individual-level variance. We examined whether this subjective measure is in accordance with exogenous information. To this end, we relied on the average of the last public opinion polls before each election (wahlrecht.de 2025). The poll-based gap between the two largest parties varies widely in the years studied, between 2% in 2002 and 14% in 2017. When we distinguished between tight races (2-4%) and "blowouts" (8-14%), we found that more people report being certain of the results in blowouts (31%) than in tight races (20%). This correlation is significant and moderately strong (gamma = -.27, p<.001).

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Table 2. Determinants of formateur optimization in Germany 1998-2021

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Uncertainty	Inc. expectation	Inc. expectation only certain	Inc. electoral gap	Inc. expectation interactive
Formateur uncertainty	0.148				
	(0.201)				
Expectation					
Rival wins		0.022		0.550	0.202
		(0.297)		(0.690)	(0.337)
Preferred wins		−0.593*	−0.987*	0.400	−0.544
		(0.293)	(0.476)	(0.491)	(0.335)
Thermometer drop	−0.734***	−0.734***	−0.980**	−0.777***	−0.686***
	(0.108)	(0.113)	(0.328)	(0.112)	(0.120)
Electoral gap				−0.049*	
				(0.025)	
Rival wins * gap				−0.069	
				(0.069)	
Preferred wins * gap				−0.165*	
				(0.079)	
Rival wins * drop					−0.446
					(0.447)
Preferred wins * drop					−0.122
					(0.468)
Formateur difference	0.058	0.076+	−0.067	0.105**	0.078*
	(0.038)	(0.039)	(0.105)	(0.038)	(0.039)
Female	0.058	−0.010	0.196	−0.030	−0.007
	(0.162)	(0.168)	(0.413)	(0.166)	(0.168)
Age					
25-34	0.299	0.351	1.026	0.403	0.356
	(0.333)	(0.343)	(1.184)	(0.339)	(0.343)
35-44	0.375	0.359	1.067	0.348	0.355
	(0.312)	(0.324)	(1.138)	(0.320)	(0.324)
45-59	0.668*	0.728*	1.663	0.735*	0.732*
	(0.305)	(0.315)	(1.147)	(0.310)	(0.315)
60-69	0.735*	0.774*	2.024+	0.662+	0.780*
	(0.353)	(0.366)	(1.224)	(0.359)	(0.367)
70 and over	0.929*	0.995*	2.118	0.954*	0.999*
	(0.394)	(0.407)	(1.307)	(0.399)	(0.407)
Education	−0.521**	−0.495**	−0.019	−0.609***	−0.494**
	(0.171)	(0.175)	(0.421)	(0.166)	(0.175)
Constant	−1.971***	−1.765***	−2.056	−1.516***	−1.791***
	(0.480)	(0.455)	(1.514)	(0.422)	(0.456)
Year FEs	√	√	√		√
Observations	1591	1506	334	1506	1506

Standard errors in parentheses.
$^{+}P < 0.1$, $^{*}P < 0.05$, $^{**}P < 0.01$, $^{***}P < 0.001$.

expecting to lose is associated with a 7.5 percentage points decrease in the likelihood of formateur optimization, down from 14.8% to 7.3%.

In Model 4, we explore how the different levels of macro-level uncertainty, captured by the gap between the two largest parties as represented in the pre-election polls, condition the effect of the individual's expectations and perceptions. First, we find that an increase in the electoral gap – meaning lower formateur uncertainty – is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of formateur voting among those who are uncertain of the outcome, as the coefficient for the gap shows. This echoes our findings from the cross-national analysis (Model 2 in Table 1). Moreover, when we compare those who expect their preferred formateur candidate to win and those who expect their preferred candidate to lose, we find the effect is strong and significant for the former ($p = .007$) but not the latter ($p = .126$). This means that as formateur uncertainty decreases, those who

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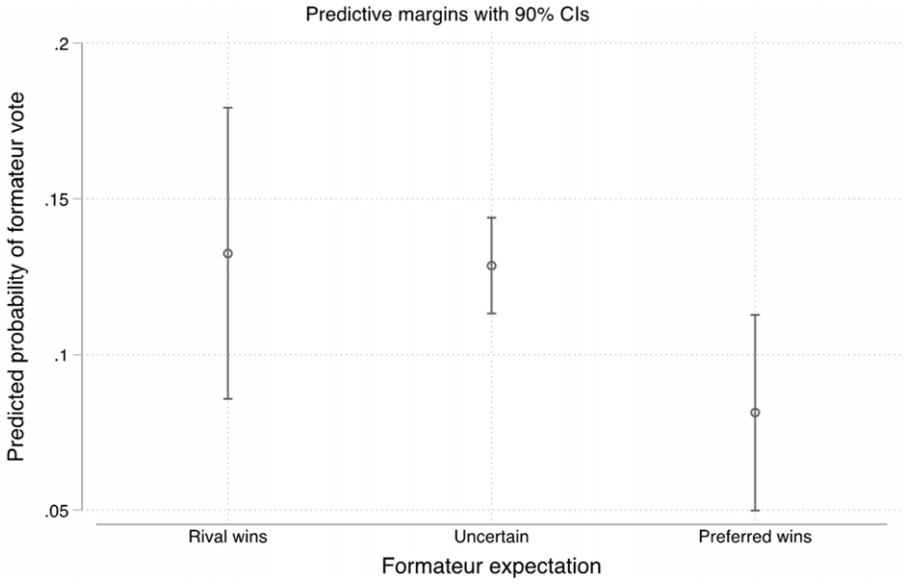

Figure 4. The effects of formateur uncertainty and preferences on formateur optimization.
Note: Predicted probabilities based on Model 2 in Table 2. Vertical capped lines represent 90% confidence intervals.

expect their preferred formateur candidate to lose are more prone to engage in formateur optimization compared to those who expect their preferred formateur to win. These findings, again, echo the findings of the cross-national analysis (Models 4 and 5 in Table 1).

Finally, in Model 5, we return to H2 and introduce the interaction between the formateur expectations and the drop in thermometer scores between the respondent's 'sincere choice' and their preferred formateur. Figure 5 shows the effect of expecting the rival formateur to win (left) or the preferred formateur to win (right) and provides further, albeit more nuanced, support for H2. We find that the negative effect on the likelihood of formateur optimization is significant only for those who expect their preferred formateur to win, and only when the thermometer drop to the formateur party is small (applicable to 81% of respondents who expected to win). For those who expect the rival formateur to win, the interaction is insignificant across the whole range of the thermometer drop variable.

Discussion and conclusion

How do voters' expectations regarding the next prime minister affect their vote choice and their likelihood of strategically voting for a formateur party? In this study, we present findings from an individual-level cross-national comparative analysis, as well as an in-depth case study analysis, exploring this question. Our point of departure is the stark contrast between the vast literature on other types of coalition-directed voting and the scarce research on formateur optimization. This is especially puzzling concerning the importance and influence that prime ministers hold in parliamentary democracies. We thus present an in-depth analysis of formateur optimization voting behavior, highlighting its complexity and versatility. The paper contributes empirically to establishing the existence of formateur optimization voting behavior, using a first-of-its-kind cross-national analysis, alongside a more nuanced analysis of a specific case study. This research design allows us to present a complex picture regarding the quantification and measurement of formateur uncertainty, alongside its theoretical development.

While formateur uncertainty is a significant determinant of formateur optimization, we contend that high formateur uncertainty is neither necessary nor sufficient for formateur

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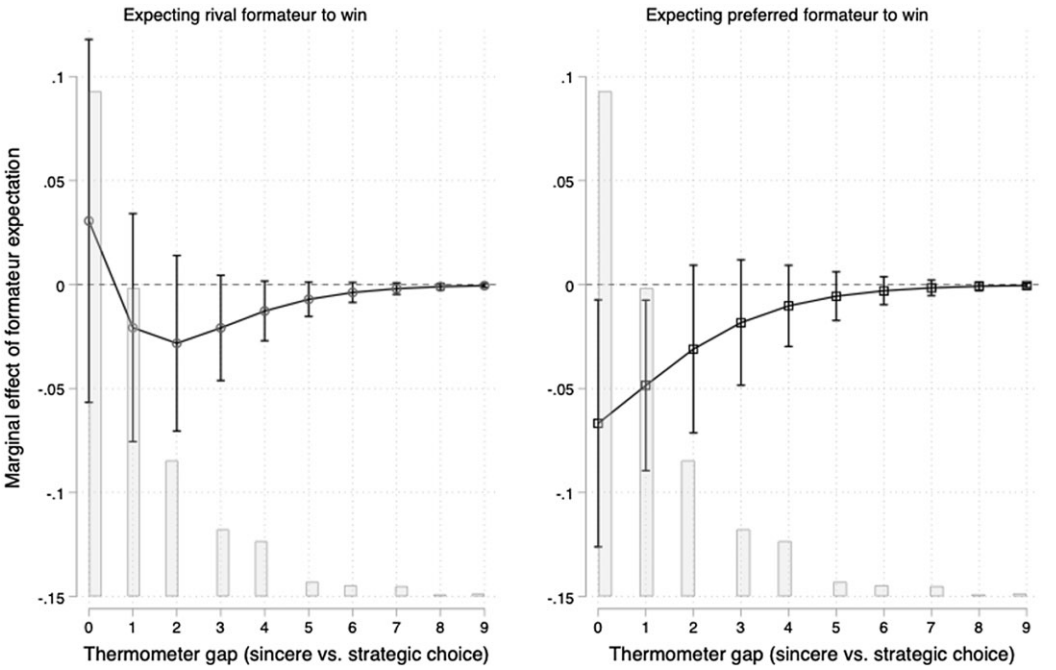

Figure 5. The marginal effect of formateur uncertainty conditional on thermometer drop, by voters' preferences and expectations.

Note: Marginal effects of formateur expectation based on Model 5 in Table 2. Gray bars depict the percentage of cases for each value on the x-axis. Vertical capped lines represent 90% confidence intervals.

optimization. Its influence must be examined in conjunction with other factors, such as political preferences. Our findings confirm this theoretical argument. Formateur uncertainty matters for formateur optimization, but voters' preferences often moderate its effect. We demonstrate two such mechanisms. First, even when formateur uncertainty is high, voters might hesitate to engage in formateur optimization. This reluctance occurs when there is a significant gap between their affection for their most preferred party and their preference for the formateur's party. Second, even when formateur uncertainty is low, voters might still engage in formateur optimization. This is true particularly for voters who are confident about the formateur's identity yet expect their preferred candidate to lose the race. We speculate that such voters behave with a 'Puncher's Chance' mentality, still hopeful regarding their ability to influence the race for formateur even though they expect not to succeed.

While worthy of a separate article, the real-world implications of the micro-level mechanisms we describe in this article are substantial and worth elaborating on here. As an example, we estimated the effect of the percentage of formateur-voters (out of all small-party supporters) on the electoral party system fragmentation. Controlling for district magnitude, mixed electoral systems, and semi-presidentialism, the formateur-voting percentage has a significant and negative effect on the effective number of parties in the electorate (see Table A9 in the online Appendix). This effect is similar in size to that of district magnitude, perhaps the single most important institutional determinant of fragmentation.[8] These findings suggest that formateur optimization is

[8]A change between one standard deviation below the mean for the formateur vote share and one above the mean results in an expected decrease of 1.23 in the effective number of parties. A similar change in the logged average district magnitude results in a 1.82 increase in the effective number of parties.

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a mechanism with potential long-term implications for the party system and the composition of the legislature, warranting further study in future research.

Formateur uncertainty can be assessed using both external information and voters' subjective perceptions. External sources such as election polls or post-election results are more objective in nature. However, they provide system-level uncertainty only, with no individual-level variance within countries (between voters). Individual voters' direct assessments regarding uncertainty are subjective and provide insight into voters' expectations (which may or may not be biased); however, the availability of such data is scarce, especially for comparative large-N studies. In this study, we use both measurements – objective and subjective – to provide a full and comprehensive understanding of this type of strategic voting.

This strategy allows us to compare these two measurements. The comparison shows that while the objective measurement of the gap in eventual electoral results predicts formateur optimization quite well, voter's subjective expectations do not do the same. In the analysis of the German case, the latter's effect vanishes when the objective measurement is introduced in the model. This is rather interesting. Even though the subjective measurement is often considered more authentic or accurate, it appears to be more 'messy' or 'noisy'. This coincides with Bowler McElroy and Müller (2022), who show that macro-level factors are much more relevant for correct coalition predictions than individual-level characteristics of respondents. It appears that voters' subjective expectations are based on a mix of objective, factual poll information and preference-driven projections (Blais and Bodet 2006). Though not the central focus of this paper, we consider this an intriguing tangent and a promising avenue for further research.

Future research should strive to combine the benefits of the two analytical approaches presented here, by conducting dedicated cross-national surveys using tailor-made items to measure respondents' formateur preferences and expectations. Beyond validating the findings of this paper, such research would be able to leverage individual-level variation in preferences and uncertainty at the country level, while also leveraging between-country variation to investigate the institutional and systemic factors influencing the cost-benefit calculus for formteur-maximizing voters. Thus, a dedicated cross-national data collection effort would allow to explore the institutional scope conditions of formateur optimization.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676525100236

Data availability statement. All data underlying the analyses presented in this article are fully available in the supplementary materials. The dataset has been provided in a reproducible format to enable verification and replication of the results.

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