

Coalition Mood in Times of Crisis: Cooperation and Conflict in Contemporary Governments

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Introduction

Coalition governments are strategic partnerships between parties for a limited time. Parties in such governments are in a constant struggle between cooperation and competition, between implementing policy together and keeping their own profiles for the next elections (e.g., Fortunato 2019). How well parties deal with this dilemma varies over governments and time, with harmony and cooperation being prevalent at some times and conflict and in-fighting at others (e.g., Sagarzazu and Klüver, 2017). There is little knowledge about changes in this 'atmosphere' over time, which is hard to directly observe, often static proxies (like policy distance) are used. In Imre et al. (2023), we introduced the **Coalition Mood**, a time-varying measure of the atmosphere or level of conflict, both policy and non-policy based, between coalition parties. We used **applause between coalition partners during parliamentary debates** as a data source, as applause can be regarded as a mostly unsolicited, spontaneous and non-consequential behavior. For the Day of Parliamentary Research, I extended the timeline to include all Austrian governments formed after the phase of single party governments and test whether the measure has validity for a period of over four decades.



Methodology

Applause is documented in detail by stenographers in the protocols of the Austrian Nationalrat. I collected the full texts of the stenographic protocols of every parliamentary session from 1983 to 2025 from HTML files and scanned PDF files using the Parliament's API. Across **around 89 million words of floor speech**, I detect over **380,000 applause events**, for each of which I assess who applauded for whom.

Only applause occurring during speeches by members of coalition parties is retained. It is aggregated on a party-by-month level, measuring how often each parliamentary party applauded for each government party in each month, and differentiating whether this is an opposition party applauding a government party; a government party applauding its coalition partner; or a government party applauding itself.

The number of applause events are then modelled as a Negative Binomial process:

$$\mu_{ijt} = \exp(\beta_{rel,t} + \gamma Z_{ijt})$$

in which the expected applause count (μ_{ijt}) depends on the type of party relationship at time t ($\beta_{rel,t}$), while controlling for how much the receiving party spoke in that month (Z_{ijt}), as parties speaking more have more opportunity to receive applause. The monthly estimates for intra-coalition applause are the Coalition Mood, the coefficients are rescaled to 0-10.

Applause in Parliament



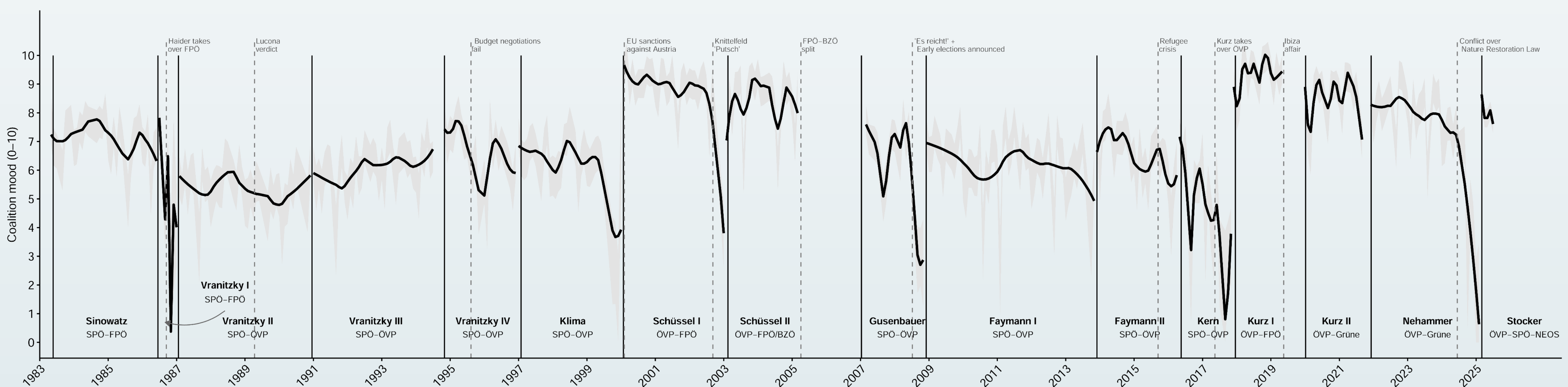
Stenographic Protocols

Abgeordneter Philip Kucher (SPÖ): Für die Kinder wird es in Zukunft die Kindergrundsicherung geben, ein intelligentes Modell. Wir sorgen da ganz konkret für Lösungen. (Beifall bei der SPÖ sowie bei Abgeordneten von ÖVP und NEOS.)

Detection & Modelling

Protocols are scraped, within-government applause events are detected (here ÖVP → SPÖ; NEOS → SPÖ), aggregated by month, used to model coalition mood.

Coalition Mood over Time



Face Validity

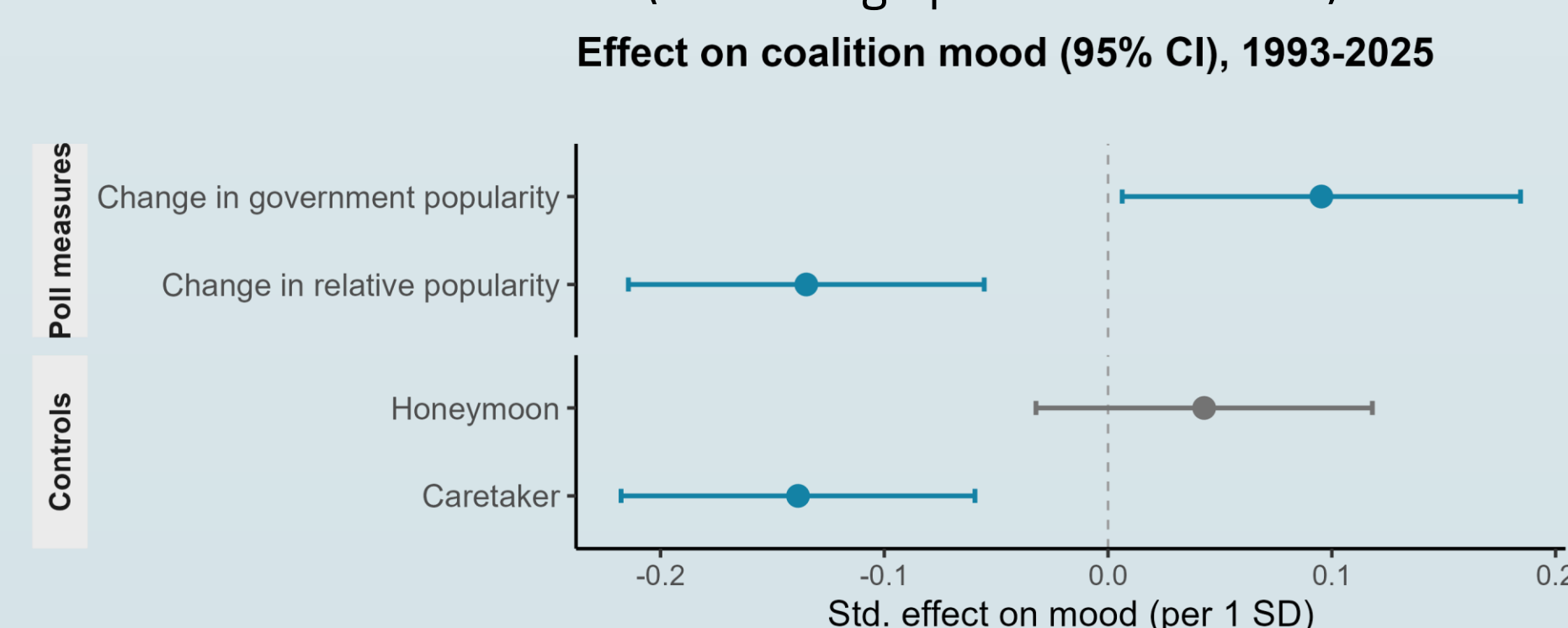
Coalition Mood coincides with real-life patterns, e.g.:

- **Honeymoon effects:** most governments start with a relatively high mood that declines over time – particularly if the next government consists of different parties
- **Personnel changes:** the FPÖs takeover by Jörg Haider (1986) and the ÖVPs takeover by Sebastian Kurz (2017), which led to a lot of conflict within the coalitions and were soon followed by early elections, coincide with steep declines in the mood
- **Party differences:** grand coalitions between SPÖ and ÖVP, which are described in the literature as rarely being "love marriages" but rather often the only (realistic) option (e.g., Müller 2021), generally start with a lower mood than other coalitions
- **Crises:** drops in mood are visible during crises that were very conflictual within the government (e.g., the European refugee crisis 2015) while it remains stable when the government appeared united (e.g., sanctions of the EU against Austria in 2000, early phases during the COVID pandemic).
- **Conflict:** publicly aired conflict (e.g., conflict about the Nature Restoration Law in 2024) coincide with steep declines

Concurrent Validity

Coalition Mood correlates with poll ratings ("Sonntagsfrage"):

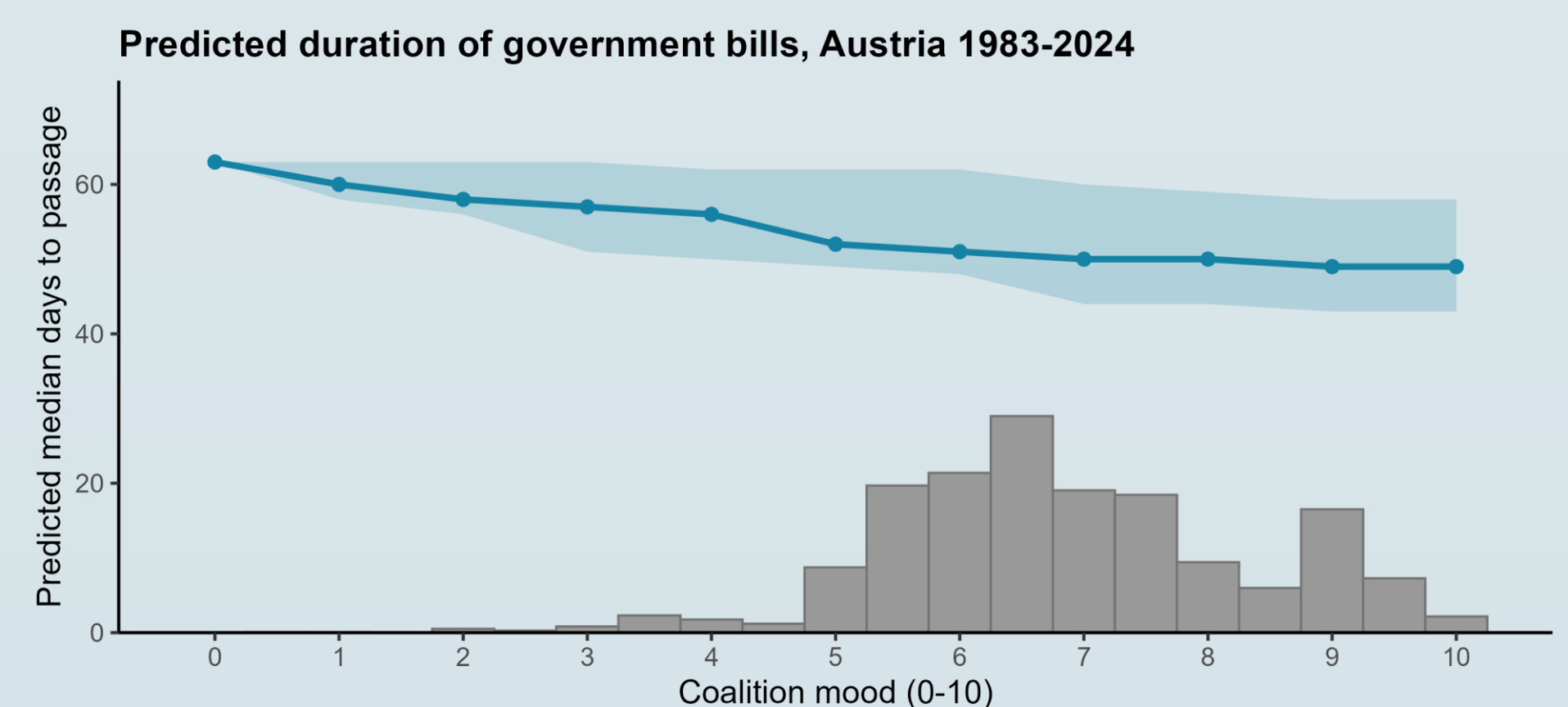
- **Change in government popularity:** mood *increases*, when government parties get more popular compared to last election
- **Change in relative popularity:** mood *declines*, when popularity of coalition parties drifts apart compared to the last election (e.g., one party gets more, another gets less popular → increases pressure to deviate from coalition deal)
- Model: linear regression; controls: honeymoon phase, caretaker periods, lagged mood, party-dyad fixed effects
- Time frame: 1993-2025 (not enough polls before 1993)



Predictive Validity

Coalition Mood helps predict government output:

- **Faster government bill passage:** higher mood increases a bill's monthly chance of passing by 5%
- A typical bill at very low mood passes in ~63 days, at very high mood in ~49 days
- Model: Cox proportional hazards model; controls: time the bill has been pending, policy distance within government, policy-area fixed effects, party-dyad fixed effects



Conclusion

Coalition Mood is a valid, continuous measure of the time-varying atmosphere in Austrian coalition governments across more than four decades!

- Varies as expected with real-life patterns and events
- Correlates with the opinion polling of coalition parties
- Predicts how fast the coalition legislates

Applause is not just an empty ritual!

- Can mostly be regarded as a spontaneous, costless, sincere and *informative* act of approval
- Has been used as a data source in other quantitative studies (e.g., Ash et al. 2025, Küpfer et al. 2025) since the original Coalition Mood paper

Coalition relationships are dynamic, not fixed!

- Coalition Mood rises and falls within single terms – something static proxies cannot capture

References

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