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Versatile citizens: media reporting, political cynicism and voter behavior

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Chapter 3

**CAPRICIOUS CITIZENS:
THE EFFECTS OF POLITICAL CYNICISM ON VOTER BEHAVIOR**

*Manuscript submitted for publication,
co-authored by Claes H. de Vreese and Philip van Praag.*

Abstract

Political cynicism has risen in many European democracies in the past decades, while in the same period voter behavior has become less stable. This study investigates the relationship between the two and distinguishes several aspects of individual voter behavior: hesitation which party to vote for (uncertainty), change between two successive elections (volatility) and turnout. We determine whether citizens hesitate and change between ideologically different parties and thus float between the left and the right end of the political spectrum. Our results, based on a panel survey (N=733) conducted before and after the 2006 Dutch elections, suggest that political cynicism affects both voter uncertainty and well as volatility. Politically cynical citizens are hesitant in their vote choice and change party more often in-between elections than less cynical citizens. Also, cynicism affects the intention to turnout, but not actual turnout. While the distinction between ideologically proximate and distanced parties applies mostly to multiparty consensus democracies, this chapter concludes with a discussion about the implications and relevance of our results in different political systems.

Introduction

Citizens in most western democracies are less trustful and more cynical than they were a few decades ago (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007). At the same time, citizens more frequently hesitate which party they should vote for and often do not vote for the same party in two successive elections (Gallagher, et al., 2005; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Because of this simultaneous growth of political cynicism and voter uncertainty (hesitation) and voter volatility (change), the question arises whether there is a relationship between these developments. Cynical citizens have more doubts about political actors' motives and competences and we expect them to have greater difficulty in deciding which party to vote for. Scholars studied the relationship between cynicism and several aspects of voter behavior, such as vote choice, turnout and other forms of participation – but the effect of cynicism on the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior was never addressed. The main question we therefore address in this chapter is whether *political cynicism induces voter uncertainty and volatility on individual level*. We argue that discontented citizens can give voice to their grievances in two ways – either by choosing another party or by not voting at all – and for this reason we look both at party choice and turnout.

Cynicism, volatility and uncertainty are regarded as developments societies should be worried about (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Pharr & Putnam, 2000), both by academic scholars and by opinion leaders. By exploring the connection between these and other developments, this study can help to determine to what extent political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility are indeed worrying, under which circumstances it is worrying, and which citizens are most likely to be prone to it. First however, we elaborate on how we define our main concepts.

Political Cynicism: Distrust in Reliability and Competence

Political cynicism is also often regarded as the negative end of political trust. Eisinger (2000: 55-56) made a comprehensive inventory of definitions of cynicism and concluded that these definitions: "...collectively denote that cynicism is more than mild distrust. Cynicism entails intense, antagonistic distrust or contempt for humanity. A cynic has a sense of the political; she is not politically indifferent, but rather keenly aware of her politics and her political environment by self-consciously distancing herself from it". Political cynicism can thus be described as *harsh distrust* (Eisinger, 2000) or as the opposite of political trust (Dekker, et al., 2006; Miller, 1974a). Several other authors explicitly regard political cynicism as the opposite of political trust (Citrin & Luks, 2001; Craig, 1980; Dekker, et al., 2006; Erber

& Lau, 1990; Koch, 2003; Krouwel & Abts, 2006, 2007; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; Rodgers, 1974; Southwell, 2008). In line with this literature, we regard political trust and cynicism as opposites on a continuum that runs from very positive to very negative attitudes.

Political cynicism thus appears inversely related to trust. However, what kind of trust (or distrust) is it related to? In Chapter 1, we found that two dimensions of political cynicism and trust are prevalent in the literature: trust in *political actors' reliability* and trust in *political actors' competence* (Aberbach, 1969; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Dekker, et al., 2006; Krouwel & Abts, 2006; 2007; Miller, 1974a; Owen & Dennis, 2001). Closed-ended and open-ended questions in our study confirmed these two dimensions. In Chapter 2 we used seven statements to test the dimensional structure of cynicism and found that reliability and competence load on one dimension. Apparently, when asked about both dimensions, most cynical citizens confirm both, while when asked unaided, many citizens do not mention both. The results of Chapter 1 nevertheless suggest it is important to include both aspects of political actors' reliability and their competence in a measurement instrument of cynicism. Chapter 1 revealed that political actors' reliability is related to their integrity, the extent to which they hold their promises and whether they act in the public interest, while their competence has to do with their ability to do their job, the extent to which they take charge of problems, and whether they know what is important for the people.

This study focuses on political actors as the *object* of political cynicism. According to Easton (1965), positive or negative political attitudes can be directed towards different objects: the political community in general, the regime and the political authorities. Dalton (2004) and Norris (1999) refined this classification and distinguished between different aspects of the regime: regime principles (democratic principles), regime performance (satisfaction with the performance of democracy) and regime institutions (parliaments and government in general). In general, in developed democracies, support for the political community and the regime principles, performance and institutions are high; even the most cynical citizen is more or less supportive. The recent rise in cynicism in many countries applies to the level of the authorities. Although we argue not only that cynicism cannot be directed to other levels, this study therefore focuses on the authorities consisting political actors – which implies political parties as well as politicians in government, in parliament and in general – as the *object* of political cynicism.

To recapitulate, most authors regarded cynicism as strong distrust. Furthermore, all definitions of political cynicism stress the importance of cynicism towards the political actors' reliability, but the aspect of cynicism towards the political actors' competence should be

included too. For this reasons we regard *political cynicism as a strong distrust in the reliability and / or competence of political actors.*

Individual Level Voter Uncertainty and Volatility

We distinguish between two kinds of individual voter behavior: changing and hesitating. On the one hand, we define a *changing voter* as someone who does not vote for the same party in two successive elections,¹⁹ which is in line with Van der Kolk et al. (2000; 2007). We refer to this as volatility. *Electoral volatility* is measured on the aggregate level and reflects the percentage of seats that changed party. It gives an insight in macro level changes in voter behavior between consecutive elections, but it might neglect a part of voter movements. *Voter volatility* is measured on the individual level and reflects the share of citizens not choosing the same party in two successive elections.

A *hesitating voter*, on the other hand, is someone who hesitates which party to vote for and who does not make a party choice until shortly before the elections. This behavior we call *voter uncertainty*, which can only be measured on individual level and which reflects the share of citizens not making a party choice long before the elections or hesitating which party to vote for (for an overview of voter uncertainty in several countries see: Drummond, 2006; Gallagher, et al., 2005; Mair, 2008; Van der Kolk, et al., 2007). Obviously, volatility and uncertainty are related: in most cases volatility as expressed in the polling booth is preceded by hesitation during the campaign period. Someone who hesitates about vote choice and decides shortly before Election Day is more likely to vote for another party as compared to the last election than someone who does not hesitate during the campaign.

Central to our argument is that a citizen that hesitates and changes between two ideologically related parties (e.g. a socialist party and a social democratic party) differs fundamentally from someone who hesitates and changes between two ideologically different parties (e.g. a socialist party and a conservative liberal party). A citizen that has very stable ideas about which set of ideological viewpoints a party should combine may hesitate and change between two ideologically related parties, which are both close to his or her ideal party. Another citizen may have no specific ideas about which set of ideological viewpoints a party should combine, and can therefore hesitate and change between ideologically different parties. While the first citizen votes according to a fairly stable ideological position, the second does not. For this reason, we argue that the ideological position of the parties a citizen

¹⁹ This concerns voters who have voted for another party than during the previous election, but also voters who did not vote during the previous election and who did vote during the present election and the other way around.

doubts about and changes between, should help to distinguish and differentiate between different types or degrees of voter uncertainty and volatility. The most often used indicator for an ideological position is the ideological left-right position. By including the left-right position of the parties someone doubts about, one can show the scope of the hesitation. Doubting between two related parties can then be regarded as a “smaller hesitation” than doubting between non-related parties. We call this scope of hesitation *ideological voter uncertainty*. Equally, changing between two related parties is regarded as a “smaller change” than changing between non-related parties and we call the scope of change *ideological voter volatility*.

This distinction between ideologically related and different parties applies mainly to multiparty consensus democracies. In most majoritarian democracies only two parties play a significant role in the political battlefield and the differences between these two parties are usually large. In most consensus democracies there are much more politically significant parties and consequently parties in these countries are often rather similar to at least one other party, while they differ fundamentally from other parties. Although this distinction specifically applies to consensus democracies, we debate the implications and relevance of our results for majoritarian political systems in the discussion section.

Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior: a Relationship?

The central question for this chapter is whether there is a relationship between political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility and more specifically ideological voter uncertainty and volatility. The idea that citizens that show low levels of trust, interest and knowledge are the ones that are most likely to hesitate and switch between parties is not new (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). It has however never been addressed whether those political attitudes are not only related, but in fact cause such voter behavior.

The rationale behind the idea that political attitudes can affect behavior is straightforward. According to Rosema (2004), attitudes concern the extent to which someone (dis)likes a certain object. The more positive the attitude towards an object is, the more likely a person is to act in favor of the object. Or the other way around, if the attitude is negative – for example politically cynical – the person is more likely to act to the detriment of the object – for example a politician (see Rosema, 2004 for an elaborate description of the relationship between attitudes and behavior). The relationship between political cynicism (or trust) and other aspects of voter behavior has been theorized in the past, but we have not found prior

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research on the relationship between political cynicism and voter uncertainty. Miller (1974b) showed that policy discontent and the unfulfilled desire for change among certain social groups (in this case among the blacks in post war US) leads to political cynicism. This political cynicism originating from policy discontent may in turn lead to a rejection of conventional modes of political participation (e.g. voting) and the use of noncustomary activities (e.g. sit-ins or riots) or even radical political change. Citrin (1974) rejected this idea. In his view, cynicism has to do with rejection of an incumbent government instead of the regime, while negative expressions in the political trust scales have more to do with a fashionable ritualistic negativism of complaining about politics than with an enduring sense of estrangement. He argued that for this reason mistrust of the government neither leads to political apathy nor to radical activism.

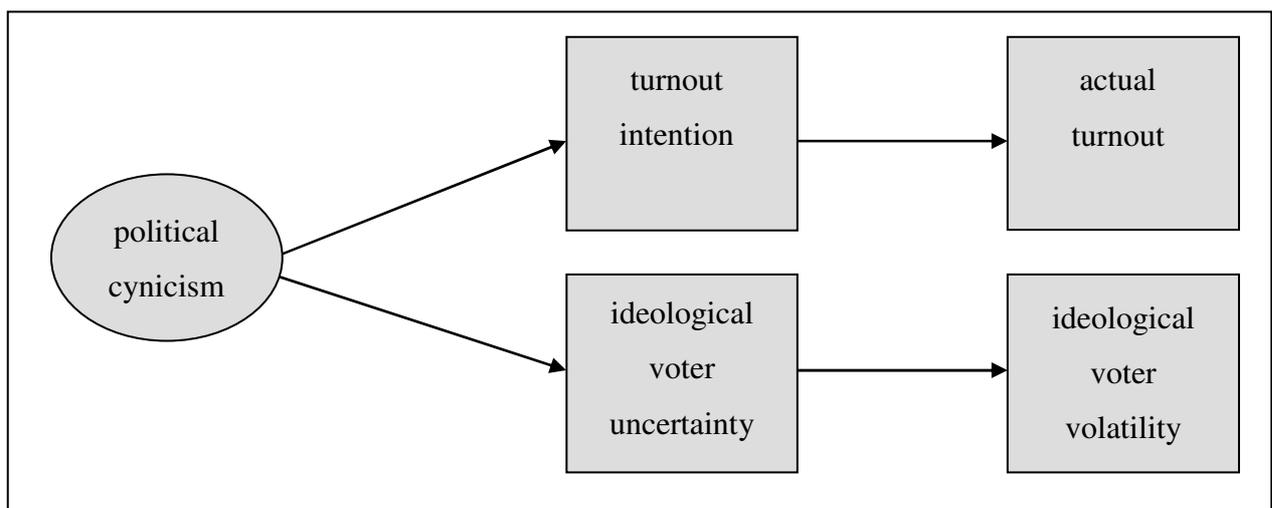
Empirical evidence on the relationship between cynicism and voter behavior is equivocal. Several scholars found that cynicism and distrust lead to lower levels of political interest and participation, especially lower turnout (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2006; Patterson, 2002; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001). This pattern is particularly visible among the younger generations (Bennett, 1997; De Winter, Schillemans, & Janssens, 2006; Putnam, 2000). Partly contrary to these findings, others showed that distrust may not affect turnout, but only the support for third-party alternatives (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005) or challenger candidates and parties (Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). Cynicism is even shown to positively affect turnout for black citizens (Southwell & Pirch, 2003) and for citizens with a moderate sense of powerlessness (Southwell, 2008). Other scholars showed that, although cynicism affected vote choice in a referendum (Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008), it may not necessarily cause reduced turnout. Moreover, citizens can be cynical but still involved in politics (De Vreese, 2005; De Vreese & Semetko, 2002). However, this can be nontraditional involvement: discontent or cynicism may coincide with different styles of political behavior, in which citizens engage in alternative actions intended to influence incumbent politicians (Craig, 1980).

The above mentioned studies have tried to establish a link between cynicism and several aspects of voter behavior, such as turnout and vote choice. We argue that cynicism potentially affects another aspect which has not been studied yet, namely the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior. Citizens that are politically cynical have more doubts about the motives and competences of political actors and the political process as a whole. We expect citizens that have these doubts to have more difficulty in deciding which party to vote for. Citizens that do not trust their political representatives may find it harder to decide which

party to vote for than their fellow citizens displaying higher levels of trust and they may more easily switch to another party. Also, they may more easily hesitate and change between ideologically unrelated parties. These citizens may not be searching for the party that represents their ideas best, but the parties that are most trustworthy. It might matter less what political actors stand for and what they promise, since they are not believed to hold their promises anyway. To these citizens political cynicism may operate as a heuristic (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989) which leads to hesitation and change between ideologically non-related parties, in other words to hesitation and change between the left and the right end of the political spectrum. This leads us to our two central hypotheses of this study: *political cynicism positively affects ideological voter uncertainty (H1) and subsequently ideological voter volatility (H2)*.

For cynical citizens, who have doubts about the motives and competences of political actors, choosing another party than the one they voted for during the last elections is not the only option. Discontented citizens that hesitate between parties can also decide not to choose at all and thus abstain from voting. For this reason, we consider uncertain voter behavior and fluctuating turnout as two related potential consequences of political cynicism. In order to get a broader picture – which is visualized in figure 3.1 – we study not only ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, but also turnout and we integrate these two aspects of voter behavior in this study. The main focus of the study however, is on voter uncertainty and volatility as this is *terra incognita* in extant research.

Figure 3.1: Research Model



Data and Method

In this chapter, we used the 2006 Dutch national election campaign as a research venue. Both political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility have increased in the past decades in the Netherlands, while turnout has fluctuated (Aarts, Van der Kolk, & Rosema, 2007; Mair, 2008; Van Holsteyn & Den Ridder, 2005). The case of the Netherlands fits into the wider pattern of grown political cynicism and changing voter behavior in Europe (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Dalton, 2004; Gallagher, et al., 2005), but changes have taken place in a relatively short period, which makes the case useful for investigating the relationship between cynicism and voter behavior. We draw on original data collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with ASCoR/University of Amsterdam and newspaper De Volkskrant. These data are gathered around the 2006 Dutch parliamentary elections. There were three time points of measurement in 2006: September (t1), early November (t2) and just after the Election Day on November the 22nd (t3). Party choice during the previous elections in 2003 was registered just after these elections (t0).²⁰ The data set has a panel component (N=733). We used AMOS 16.0 to build a structural equation model, because we could include ideological voter uncertainty and volatility and turnout as dependent variables in one model. This enabled us to also study the relationships between these dependent variables.

To determine how well the model fits, we show the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the parsimony-adjusted comparative fit index (PCFI). Based on Byrne (2001), we assumed values for CFI above .95 (above .90 is still acceptable) and for PCFI above .50 to indicate a good model fit. Also we assumed values below .05 for RMSEA to indicate a good model fit (0.08 is still reasonable). PCLOSE shows how likely it is that the RMSEA value is below .05 and PCLOSE is preferably higher than .50.

Voter Behavior

The measure for ideological voter uncertainty involves two components. As a first step regular *voter uncertainty* is constructed by measuring vote intention at t1 and t2 and the actual vote choice at t3 and in this way registered *party choice* (PC) at three time points. A comparison of t1, t2 and t3 yields two possible *vote hesitations* (VH),²¹ which were added up

²⁰ TNS NIPO registers party choice of her respondents shortly after each election and therefore has these data at their disposal for all respondents (N>200.000) in their database.

²¹ Two possible changes are registered: September – November, November – actual vote. Those who changed their vote choice were coded 1 and those who did not change were coded 0. Stable non-voters (those who did not intend to vote on in September or early November and who did not vote) are not certain voters but not uncertain

to a scale of *voter uncertainty* (VI) (0=no hesitations, 1=one hesitation, 2=two hesitations, 3=three hesitations). This scale registers whether someone indicates to favor different parties during different points in time. By measuring the hesitation early in the campaign ($t_1 - t_2$) as well as the hesitation in the “hot phase” of the campaign ($t_2 - t_3$), we made a distinction between those who did not hesitate, those who hesitated once in the campaign, and those who hesitated in both stages. Also, we compared intention early in the campaign with actual vote choice ($t_1 - t_3$). This makes sure that a citizen who indicates to vote for a party at t_1 , for another party at t_2 and again for the first party at t_3 has lower score than another citizen who indicates to vote for three different parties at the three moments in time.

As a second step we constructed the *ideological voter uncertainty* measure. To measure ideological party position, respondents are asked to place each party on a scale from (1) left to (10) right. We defined *ideological position* (IP) as the average score all respondents gave for each party to determine the left-right position of the party.²² The party choice variables PC were recoded such that it indicates the left-right position of the party a respondent intended to vote for and this variable is called *ideological party choice* (IPC). For someone who intended to vote for the Greens IPC was 2.58. The difference between a respondent’s ideological position on t_1 and t_2 was called *ideological vote hesitation* (IVH). A respondent that intended to vote Greens at t_1 and Social Democrats at t_2 , $IPC_{t_1}=2.58$, $IPC_{t_2}=3.55$ and $IVH_{t_1-t_2}=0.97$. For someone who intended to vote for the same party on t_1 and t_2 , $IVH_{t_1-t_2}=0$. Since the largest difference is between the Greens (2.58) on the left end and the national conservatives (7.50) on the right end, the largest possible ideological hesitation is 4.96.²³ The *ideological voter uncertainty* (IVI) scale was calculated by taking the average of the two ideological vote hesitation scores $IVH_{t_1-t_2}$, $IVH_{t_2-t_3}$ and $IVH_{t_1-t_3}$. This scale ranges from 0 (no hesitations in party choice) to 4.96 (maximum hesitations in party choice from left to

either and are therefore given the mean value, which has the same consequence as coding them as missing. Those who indicated they did not know which party to vote for were coded the middle value which is .50.

²² The question was: ‘Could you please indicate where you would place the following parties on a left-right scale? Where do you place <party> on a left-right scale?’ The average left-right positions respondents gave each party are: CDA (Christian democrats) 6.55, PvdA (Social Democrats) 3.55, SP (Socialists) 2.67, VVD (Liberals) 7.14, Partij voor de Vrijheid (National Conservatives) 7.50. GroenLinks (Greens) 2.58, ChristenUnie (Christian Conservative) 6.03, D66 (Social Liberal) 4.85, Partij voor de Dieren (Animal Rights Party) 4.35, SGP (Christian Fundamentals) 6.41. We chose to use the average score all respondents gave, instead of the score individual respondents give to the parties. Respondents might be inclined to place their preferred parties close to each other, in order to justify their own choices. Therefore we think the average score is a better measure.

²³ Respondents who said three times they would not vote are not certain voters but not uncertain either and are therefore given the mean score on ideological voter uncertainty, which has the same consequence as coding them as missing. Someone who does not know which party to vote for is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (2.5). To test the robustness of the model with this dependent variable, we have also tested a model in which these respondents are given highest score (5.0). The effects of and on ideological voter uncertainty were comparable with both measures.

right). With this ideological voter uncertainty, one can determine the “scope of the hesitation”, so it is possible to show to what extent a citizen hesitates ideologically.

Ideological voter volatility was constructed in a similar manner. We started by constructing regular *voter volatility*. We compared party choice (PC) during the previous elections in 2003 ($t-1$) with party choice during the 2006 elections ($t3$). A comparison of these two time points yielded one possible *vote change* (VC), which formed the *voter volatility* (VV) scale (0=no changes, 1=change).²⁴ This scale registers whether someone did not vote for the same party in 2003 and 2006. Again we constructed ideological party choice variables: IPC_{t0} (2003) with IPC_{t3} (2006) and compared these to measure *ideological voter volatility* (IVV).²⁵ For someone who voted Liberals in 2003 ($IPC_{t0}=7.14$) and Christian Democrats in 2006 ($IPC_{t3}=6.55$), $IPC_{t0}=7.14$, $IPC_{t3}=6.55$ and $IVI_{t0-t3}=0.59$. While voter uncertainty registers hesitation in the period before the elections, voter volatility registers changes between two consecutive elections.

Concerning turnout, we included intended as well as actual turnout. Actual turnout is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the respondent voted (1) or abstained (0). We also included turnout intention, which was measured by asking respondents to indicate with a percentage how likely they would vote during the next elections (0 percent = definitely not voting, 100 percent = definitely voting). This was measured at two time points before the elections ($t1$ and $t2$) and the turnout intention variable is the average of these two points divided by 100. Turnout intention can range from 0 (no intention to vote) to 1 (maximum intention to vote).

Political Cynicism

To measure political cynicism, the following standard items are used in the Netherlands:²⁶ (1) politicians promise more than they can deliver, (2) ministers and junior-ministers are primarily self-interested and (3) friends are more important than abilities to become Member of Parliament. We chose to keep these statements for reasons of comparability and to add others for reasons of conceptual completeness. Since critics argued

²⁴ Respondents who did not vote in 2003 and who did not vote in 2006 are given the mean score on voter volatility. Someone who did not vote in the one election and who did vote in the other, is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (.50).

²⁵ Respondents who did not vote in 2003 and who did not vote in 2006 are given the mean score on ideological voter volatility. Someone who did not vote in the one election and who did vote in the other, is given the position in the middle between the lowest score and highest score (2.5). To test the robustness of the model with this dependent variable, we have also tested a model in which these respondents are given highest score (5.0). The effects on ideological voter volatility were comparable with both measures.

²⁶ These items are used in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies since 1977.

that the traditional items are not fierce enough and are therefore not capable of distinguishing cynics from non-cynics (Dekker, et al., 2006), we added a stronger statement: (4) parties are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion.²⁷ The above statements concern the reliability of political actors, but a series of statements about political cynicism should also entail elements about competence. For this reason, we added three additional statements: (5) politicians do not understand what matters to society, (6) politicians are capable of solving important problems and (7) most politicians are competent people that know what they are doing. For each statement, we used a four point scale: completely agree, agree, disagree and completely disagree. For every statement a respondent is given a score between 1 and 4 (from highly disagree to highly agree). We used the political cynicism items as measured in September and combined the scores for the seven items in a scale (Cronbach's alpha .87²⁸).

Control variables

Because we expected voter behavior as well as political cynicism to be related to other attitudes and predispositions, we included a number of controls in our model. Political interest, political knowledge and ideological orientation are generally regarded as indicators for voter behavior (see for example Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983). Our political interest scale combines interest for the election campaign and talking about politics with acquaintances (Cronbach's alpha .80²⁹). The political knowledge measure counts the amount of politicians someone recognizes.³⁰ We controlled for left-right self rating of the respondent (ranging from 1=left to 10=right) as a measure of ideological orientation.³¹

²⁷ Statement 4 is asked in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies as an item for political efficacy. Statements developed to measure political cynicism and external political efficacy are based on different operationalizations. On face value, however, they seem to measure the same concept and statistically they also relate to one dimension. We did a factor analysis as well as a reliability test on the political cynicism and external political efficacy items in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) 2006. These six items all load one factor. A scale of the six items combined has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.751.

²⁸ A reliability test on the September political cynicism items shows that the Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .866. The inter-item correlation of all items is between .353 and .599. Factor analysis shows that all items load on a single factor with factor loadings between .670 and .810.

²⁹ The correlation between the two political interest items is: $r = .416$, $p < .001$.

³⁰ The politicians were: Balkenende (CDA), Bos (PvdA), Rutte (VVD), Marijnissen (SP), Halsema (GroenLinks), Stuger (Lijst Vijf Fortuyn), Pechtold (D66), Pastors (Eén NL), Wilders (Partij voor de Vrijheid), Rouvoet (ChristenUnie), Nawijn (Partij voor Nederland). Prime Minister Balkenende is best known (94 percent), while not so many know Stuger (22 percent). The Cronbach's alpha for the political interest scale is .801. The inter-item correlations are between -.343 and .950. Factor analysis shows that the items load on two factors. The first factor includes all politicians that had already been in parliament or government (factors loadings between .665 and .911), while the second factor includes three new politicians who were relatively unknown (factors loadings between .559 and .756).

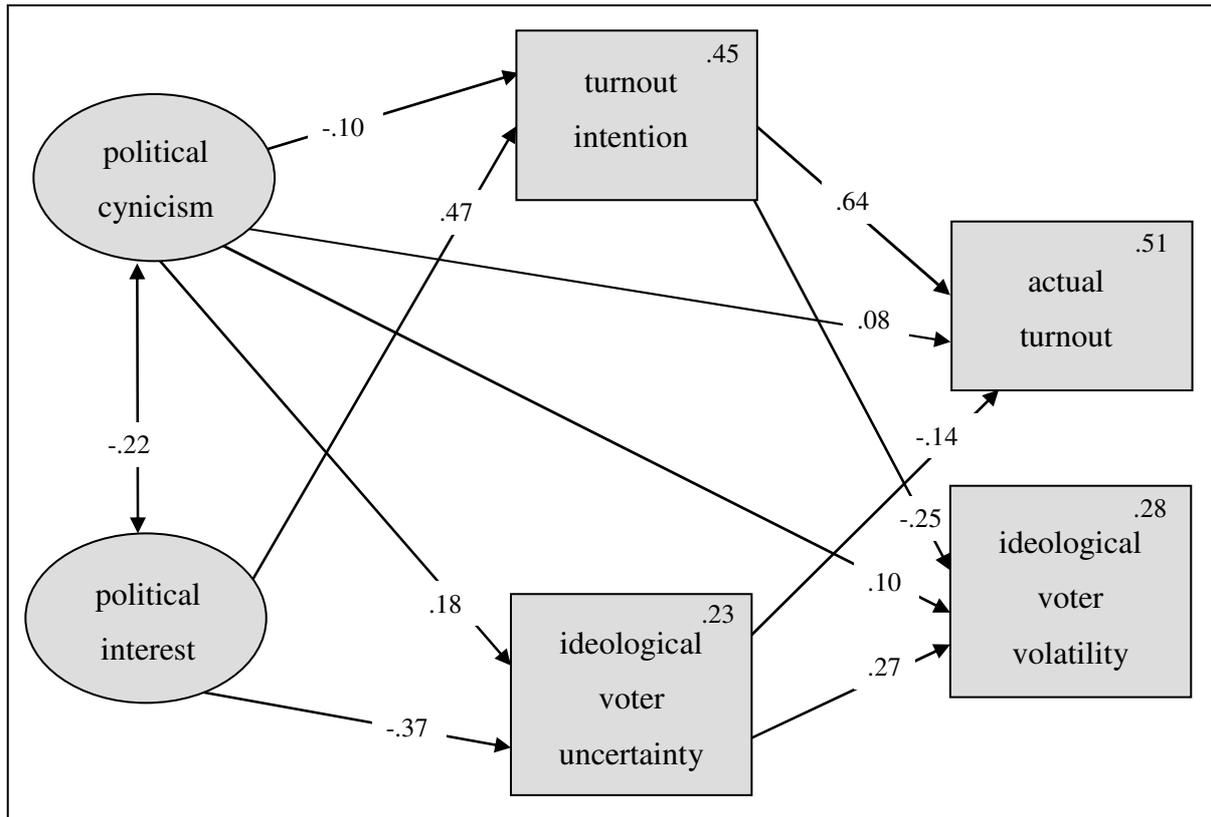
³¹ Although party identification is a useful predictor for voter behavior in majoritarian democracies with two-party systems, we think it should not be used in the setting of a multiparty system in consensus democracies like the Netherlands. Scholars studying German and Dutch voters found no evidence that party identification causes vote preference, or that the two concepts can even be distinguished genuinely (Kaase, 1976; Thomassen, 1976,

Furthermore, we controlled for socio-demographic factors likely to be related to voter behavior as well as political cynicism: age, gender and education.

Results

To test the causal relationships as hypothesized in the model in figure 3.1, we constructed a Structural Equation Model.

Figure 3.2: Structural Equation Model Explaining Voter Behavior



Note. The figure shows standardized regression coefficients, N=733. Only significant relationships are shown. Fit indices: CMIN=210.568, CMIN/DF=2.340, CFI=.962, PCFI=.506, RMSEA=.043, PCLOSE=.942.

Figure 3.2 visualizes the effects of political cynicism and political interest on ideological voter uncertainty and turnout intention (intermediary variables), as well as on ideological voter volatility and actual turnout (dependent variables). Because of its large effects on the intermediary variables and on political cynicism, political interest is shown too.

1996) and argue that although party identification does perform well in predicting vote choice in two-party systems, ideological identification is a more accurate predictor in multiparty systems (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005; Van der Eijk & Niemöller, 1983). Therefore we did not control for party identification, while we did include two measures tapping ideological orientation.

Figure 3.2 shows only significant effects, all effects on the intermediary and dependent variables are summarized in table 3.1 and 3.2.

Table 3.1: Direct, Indirect and Total Effects on Intermediary Variables

	ideological voter uncertainty			turnout intention		
	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects
independent variables:						
*gender (male)	0.03		0.03	0.08	-0.01	0.08
*age	-0.12		-0.12	0.08	0.03	0.12
*education	0.03		0.03	0.01	-0.01	0.00
*left right position	-0.05		-0.05	0.03	0.01	0.04
*political cynicism	0.18		0.18	-0.10	-0.05	-0.15
*political interest	-0.37		-0.37	0.47	0.10	0.57
*political knowledge	0.01		0.01	-0.05		-0.05
intermediary variables:						
*ideol. voter uncertainty				-0.27		-0.27
*turnout intention						

The SEM fits the data well; the main relationships we hypothesized are significant and work in the expected direction. The test values indicate a good fit, based on the criteria we described in the data section. CFI is above .90 (CFI =.962) and PCFI is above .50 (PCFI=.506), while RMSEA is below 0.05 (RMSEA=.043) and PCLOSE is above .50 (PCLOSE=.942). For reasons of presentational clarity, the measurement models for latent variables as well as the effects of control variables are displayed in Appendix G. The measurement models of political cynicism and political interest adequately represented the data: the standardized factor loadings were between .63 and .75 for political cynicism and between .57 and .75 for political interest.

As we predicted, political cynicism positively affected ideological voter uncertainty (.18), which suggests that cynicism makes citizens hesitate which party they should vote for. This provides support for our first hypothesis. Political cynicism directly as well as indirectly positively affected ideological voter volatility. The total effect of cynicism on volatility (.18) suggests that political cynicism makes citizens change between parties, this supports our second hypothesis. Overall, cynical citizens hesitate more often than average and consequently change more often.

VERSATILE CITIZENS

Ideological voter uncertainty and volatility are related to intended and actual turnout. Ideological voter uncertainty negatively affected turnout intention (-.27) and turnout (total effect .31). Those who hesitate which party to vote for also hesitate whether they should vote at all. Citizens that hesitate which party they should vote, more often decide not to vote, than those who do not hesitate about party choice. Also, turnout intention was related ideological voter volatility (-.25). Citizens that are not sure whether they should vote subsequently more often change to another party than citizens that strongly intend to vote.

Table 3.2: Direct, Indirect and Total Effects on Dependent Variables

	ideological voter volatility			turnout		
	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects	direct effects	indirect effects	total effects
independent variables:						
*gender	0.00	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	0.04	0.09
*age	-0.11	-0.06	-0.17	-0.04	0.09	0.05
*education	-0.01	0.01	0.00	-0.03	0.00	-0.04
*left right position	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.02	0.03	0.02
*political cynicism	0.10	0.09	0.18	0.08	-0.12	-0.04
*political interest	0.00	-0.24	-0.24	0.02	0.42	0.44
*political knowledge	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.04	-0.03	0.01
intermediary variables:						
*ideol. voter uncertainty	0.27	0.07	0.33	-0.14	-0.17	-0.31
*turnout intention	-0.25		-0.25	0.65		0.65

Political cynicism negatively affected the intention to turnout (-.12), but there is no significant effect on actual turnout (total effect -.04). Cynicism is thus indirectly related to turnout. Cynicism induces hesitation to cast one's vote; it does not induce abstention from voting. In other word, politically cynical citizens more often hesitate whether they should vote, but they do not more often decide not to vote.

Some control variables had important effects too. All effects of control variables are included in Appendix G, only some are highlighted here. While political knowledge was only related to other control variables, political interest was strongly related to several variables in the model. At first, political interest is related to political cynicism (-.22), which means those who are politically cynical tend to be less interested and the other way around. Political interest was a strong negative predictor for ideological voter uncertainty (-.37). Interest did not directly affect ideological voter volatility, but there was a strong indirect effect (total

effect -.24). Also, it strongly affected turnout intention (.47) and indirectly affected actual turnout (total effect .44). This suggests that low interest makes citizens hesitate which party they should vote for and whether they should vote at all. Ideological orientation had no significant effects.

The demographic control variables education was not directly related to one of the intermediary or dependent variables. Education was related significantly with political cynicism, interest and knowledge (see Appendix G). Gender was only weakly related to turnout intention; males are somewhat more inclined to vote. Age was related to the intermediary and dependent variables, as well as to other variables. Age negatively affected ideological voter uncertainty (-.12) as well as ideological voter volatility (total effect -.17). Age positively affected turnout intention (.08), but it did not affect actual turnout. Finally, age is positively related to interest (.18), but not related to cynicism. Age appears to be an important variable for explaining citizens' attitudes and behavior. The younger citizens are, the less interested they are, the more likely they are to hesitate and change, and the lower their turnout intention is, while actual turnout is not lower. Also, younger citizens are not more politically cynical than older ones.

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between political cynicism on the one hand and ideological voter uncertainty and volatility on the other. Our results showed that political cynicism affects ideological voter uncertainty as well as volatility. Those who are politically cynical have more doubts about political actors' motives and competences and the political process as a whole. Because of these doubts they have greater difficulty in deciding which party to vote for and ultimately are more inclined to choose another party than during the previous elections. Also, politically cynical citizens are not only more than average inclined to change their party choice, they are also more hesitant whether they should vote at all, but they do not abstain from voting more often. Politically cynical citizens who want to give voice to their grievance seem to have two options: switching to another party or abstaining from voting, but they do not (yet) use the latter.

The effect of political cynicism on the uncertainty and volatility of voter behavior was not studied before, but various scholars have shown that cynicism and distrust lead to lower interest and participation (Bennett, 1997; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Valentino, Beckmann, et al., 2001) and affect vote choice (Belanger & Nadeau, 2005; Elenbaas & De Vreese, 2008; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998). Although scholars disagree about

the exact nature of the relationship, most studies show that political cynicism affects voter behavior and our study concurs. Nevertheless, one effect of political cynicism is disputed, which is the effect on turnout. Disagreement exists about this effect, even among studies that were conducted in European consensual democracies. While Kleinnijenhuis et al. (2006) showed that distrust in party leaders had a negative longer-term effect on turnout during the 2002 Dutch national election campaign, De Vreese & Semetko (2002) showed that cynicism did not reduce turnout in the 2000 Danish EU referendum. In this chapter, we have shown that, while cynicism did not affect turnout, it did make citizens more hesitant whether they should vote. Although these three studies seem to contradict each other, they agree on the absence of a short-term effect of cynicism on turnout. If cynicism decreases turnout intention, this may however result in a longer-term decline of turnout. On the other hand it is also possible that cynicism changes citizens' attitudes towards voting; the act of voting may not be an indisputable given for these citizens, while in general they do vote.

Our results showed that age is an important for explaining political attitudes and behavior. Younger citizens are less interested, more uncertain and volatile, but not less trustful than then older citizens (or just equally cynical). Also, they are more hesitant to turn out to vote, but eventually they vote as often as older citizens. The picture arises of a generation in the process of experiencing what it is like to be a citizen. In these formative years in the life of young citizens, they become more interested, less cynical, and more inclined to participate (Binnema, et al., 2007). This is a very important stage in ones political life, in which the news media easily affect ones attitudes, as we found in Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, we study in more detail how news content can affect attitudes and behavior, as well as the differences among young citizens.

How to Value the Changes in Political Cynicism and Voter Behavior?

As stated above, the growth of political cynicism as well as voter uncertainty and volatility are often considered to be worrying. We would like to put these concerns into perspective. First, not only citizens change, but political parties change their ideological position as well. Based on election manifesto analyses (Pennings & Keman, 2003) and voter perception (Adriaansen, et al., 2005) scholars showed that, while traditional Dutch political parties moved to the political center, new parties emerged and subsequently old parties moved back. One may say that citizens hesitate and change because parties adapt their ideology. Second, with regard to consensus democracies were many citizens used to vote according to class and religious cleavages without making their own decision based on ideological

evaluations, the growth of voter uncertainty and volatility has been interpreted as a sign that citizens make a party choice more consciously than before (Rose & McAllister, 1986). Third, when citizens hesitate and change between parties this does not necessarily mean they hesitate and change between substantially different ideologies. While ties to individual parties have weakened, ties to the broader identities of left and right blocks are maintained and most citizens in multiparty consensus democracies switch within one block (Adriaansen, et al., 2005; Gallagher, et al., 2005). Thus, while citizens are more uncertain and volatile in their voter behavior, most of them are not “adrift”. Nevertheless, there is a group that does ‘float from left to right’ or does not vote at all. If this group is growing, we should indeed be worried.

Concerning political cynicism, one has to consider that it is not mutually exclusive with political interest. De Vreese (2005) showed that there is a positive relationship between political sophistication and cynicism. He suggests cynicism might be little more than an indication of an involved and critical citizenry. We would like to argue that it is the *combination* of political cynicism and low involvement that is potentially worrying. We have shown that, while political cynicism induces ideological voter volatility and uncertainty, political interest reduces it. The effect of cynicism can thus be softened or strengthened by interest and citizens that are most prone to ideological voter uncertainty and volatility might highly cynical *and* uninterested. Cynical and uninterested citizens that show high levels of ideological voter uncertainty and volatility seem to have turned their back to politics and the image of “a voter adrift” does apply to these citizens. However, we should confine the image of a voter adrift to this group and not include those citizens who are cynical but also interested. The last group shows uncertain and volatile voter behavior but does not roam from the left to the right.

Limitations and Lessons for Future Research

The results of this study are particularly relevant for consensus democracies with multiparty systems, in which cynical citizens could possibly drift from the left to the right end of the political spectrum. When higher levels of cynicism make citizens hesitate and change from left to right, which our data suggest, this could lead to higher levels of system instability in these countries. The broader implications of our results, however, also have relevance to majoritarian democracies. In majoritarian systems, citizens can generally choose between two parties: one leftist and one rightist. These citizens cannot switch between ideologically related parties, since there is no (serious) alternative. Cynical citizens who want to voice their

grievances have two options: either switching to the other party at the other side of the political spectrum or abstaining from voting. While hesitation to vote caused by cynicism does not lead to abstention from voting in the consensus democracy we studied, abstention will more likely be the consequence in majoritarian democracies, since in these systems the other party often is no possible alternative for citizens that want to vote according to their ideology. When interpreting research results, we think it important to be aware of the differences between these political systems.

For the construction of the values of the ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, we have used the left-right position as a proxy for ideological position. Although it is the most often used indicator for an ideological position, we acknowledge that the left-right dimension is not the only relevant dimension. Traditionally, most European societies were divided by a class cleavage, and some countries also by another cleavage, such as a religious one in the Netherlands. Recently, Kriesi, et al. (2006; 2008) have shown that the electoral space in the Netherlands and many other European countries now consists of an economic and a cultural dimension, which both run from an open attitude and integration to a closed attitude and demarcation. According to Kriesi, et al., on the economic dimension the protectionist national market is opposed to the neoliberal free market with open borders and the cultural dimension entails a cosmopolitan multicultural view as opposed to a culture-protectionist one. Although not all scholars agree on the exact nature of the economic and cultural dimension, and some include religion as a third dimension, several authors have confirmed the existence of these two dimensions in voter preferences (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Pellikaan, et al., 2007; Pellikaan, et al., 2003; Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009), although some argue that political parties are still positioned on one economic dimension (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). Although we think that the inclusion of the economic left-right position is good first step to improve the voter uncertainty and volatility measures, future research should consider integrating both the economic and cultural dimension in a measure.

Obviously, a statistical model can never enable us to reach a final conclusion about the direction of causality. Our results make it plausible that cynicism causes voter uncertainty and volatility. Nevertheless, other possibilities might be plausible as well. Reversed causality seems at least counterintuitive. Perhaps both developments of grown political cynicism and voter uncertainty and volatility fit into a wider perspective of increased variability in politics: there might be another development that induces both. One can think of a “supply side” change in the political culture, when political parties change their strategies and position and citizens react on it. Also there might be “demand side” social changes that incline a general

instability. These limitations notwithstanding, this is a first study linking political cynicism with ideological voter uncertainty and volatility, and at the same times gives insights on the broader relationship between political attitudes and voter behavior.

