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### Informed floating voters?

*The impact of media on electoral volatility*

Geers, S.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

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In the past decades, the number of floating voters has been on the rise, especially in European democracies. An increasing number of voters change their party preference not only between elections, but also within election campaigns (Dalton, 2000; Drummond, 2006). This development has been particularly noteworthy in the Netherlands, which has experienced some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). Although a certain level of electoral volatility is deemed essential for the vitality of democracy (Lane & Ersson, 2007), high levels of electoral volatility may lead to an unstable democracy and may complicate governability (Mainwaring & Zoco, 2007). This renders the study of vote change and its determinants highly important.

One of the first empirical findings on the explanations of volatile voting behavior led to a pessimistic view on citizens who switch parties: volatile voters were considered random floating voters (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), uninformed about and uninterested in politics. According to Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948, p. 100):

“The real doubters – the open-minded voters who make a sincere attempt to weigh the issues and candidates dispassionately for the good of the country as a whole – exist mainly in deferential campaign propaganda, in textbooks on civics, in the movies, and in the minds of some political idealists. In real life, they are few indeed.”

Today, there also exists a more optimistic view on electoral volatility. This perspective implies an emancipated electorate consisting of informed voters, who make their own independent choices instead of relying on sociological predispositions (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). In order to judge the extent to which both perspectives hold some truth, the determinants of electoral volatility should be examined at the individual level. However, since volatility is mostly studied at the aggregate level, studies on individual sources of volatility are scarce (Kuhn, 2009; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013), and scholarly knowledge in this regard is limited. Furthermore, individual level studies that do exist mostly focus on changes between

elections and pay little attention to how people change their vote intention when Election Day draws near, even though more and more voters are still undecided during the campaign and change their mind in the last moment (Walgrave, Lefevere, & Hooghe, 2010).

In this dissertation I focus on individual vote switching, and in particular on intra-election (or campaign) volatility to investigate the extent to which voters are indeed randomly floating or rather are making informed vote choices (Crewe, 1985; Dassonneville, 2011). One of the main explanations of individual level volatility relates to voter emancipation: whereas voter behavior in earlier days could be predicted based on mechanisms of socialization and party identification (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Crewe, 1976; Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), the decline of cleavage politics (Franklin, Mackie, & Valen, 1992) has led to a decline in voter loyalty. Additionally, due to structural changes in our educational and media systems, citizens are potentially better informed, making more independent vote choices instead of relying on traditional loyalties, leading them to switch their vote occasionally (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). These structural changes imply that voting behavior is, at least to a certain extent, subject to short-term factors, like information provided by the media (Dalton, 1984, 2000). After all, “voting is about information, and thus understanding how people acquire and use information in making vote decisions is critical” (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006, p. 17). As the impact of traditional loyalties on voting behavior has weakened, voters have to search for information themselves in order to make an informed voting decision. For most voters the mass media are the primary source of information during election campaigns (De Vreese, 2010; Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese, & Albæk, 2010). Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the role of the media in explaining electoral volatility.

Surprisingly, attention to the role of information provided by the media has been scarce, with results scattered and inconclusive. Some authors do find positive effects of media exposure on volatility, with (Baker, Ames, & Renno, 2006; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012) or without (Van der Meer et al., 2013) taking previous preferences into account, and others do not (Dassonneville, 2011). Even though these studies have contributed to our knowledge on the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility, the effects of media content are understudied. However,

whether voters change their vote preference is more likely to depend on the kind of news than merely the degree of news exposure. This suggests that this link should be studied more in-depth, by not only looking at media exposure, but also incorporating media content (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2012; Takens, 2013).

This dissertation fills this void and aims to unravel how information provided by the media during election campaigns, i.e., campaign information, affects electoral volatility. It investigates how both exposure to campaign information in general, and exposure to specific campaign content, influences vote switching. More specifically, it examines how different kinds of campaign information, for instance issue coverage and poll coverage, influence different types of campaign volatility. Furthermore, it examines the underlying psychological mechanisms through which campaign exposure affects vote switching. These insights contribute to a broader normative debate on whether floating voters are indeed uninformed, or rather are making informed vote choices.

Before turning to the role of the media in explaining vote switching, I will further unpack the concept of electoral volatility, by zooming in on its definition, its development over time and its existing explanations. Secondly, I will focus on the changing perspective on the existence of campaign effects, and subsequently I will explicate how media relates to electoral volatility. Thirdly, the relevance of the relationship between media and electoral volatility in democratic societies will be discussed from a normative perspective. Thereafter, I will discuss the central theoretical concepts that form the basis of this dissertation. Lastly, I will discuss the research design and the focus and outline of the dissertation.

### **Defining electoral volatility**

Electoral volatility is generally defined as “changes in party preferences within an electorate” (Crewe, 1985, p. 8). Previous research has distinguished between several types of volatility, depending on the focus of study. Initially, scholars mainly looked at net volatility (e.g., Pedersen, 1979), which refers to the overall systematic shift in party support on the aggregated level. This has to be distinguished from so-called gross volatility, which refers to the total amount of individual vote switching (Crewe, 1985). On the individual level of vote change one can further distinguish between inter- and

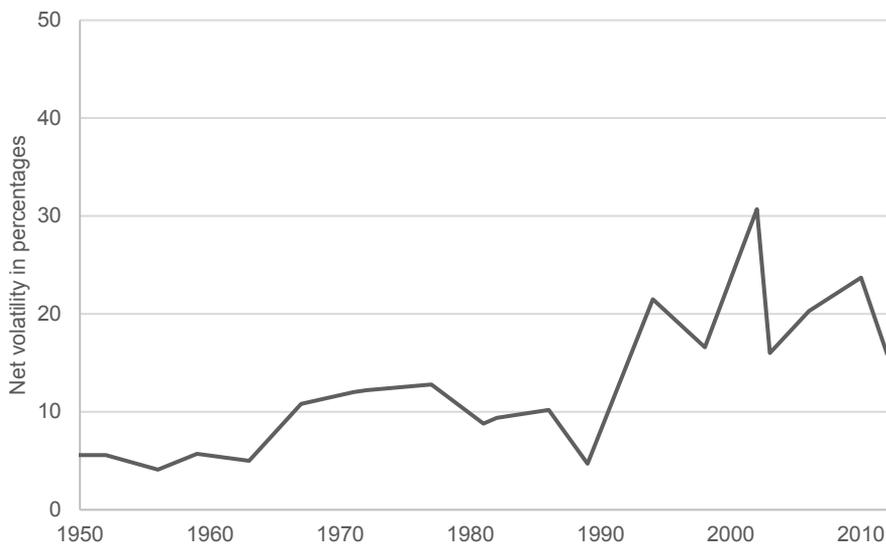
intra-election (or campaign) volatility. Whereas the first refers to party change between two subsequent elections, the latter refers to change in party preference from the start of the election campaign to Election Day. The distinction between campaign volatility and inter-election volatility was already made by Berelson et al. (1954). Although both kinds of volatility are related, there is no logical connection between the two. A voter can switch party preference between two subsequent elections, but still have a stable party preference during the election campaign – or vice-versa (Lachat, 2007). One can expect campaign volatility to be more and in part directly driven by exposure to campaign information and efforts to convert voters, whereas inter-election volatility is not necessarily. Since I study the impact of campaign information provided by mass media, I focus on campaign volatility at the individual level. In addition, I distinguish between two types of campaign volatility, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter: conversion, which refers to ‘switching from one party to another in response to campaign exposure’, and crystallization, ‘when a voter’s latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign exposure’.

### **The development of electoral volatility**

In the past decades electoral volatility has been on the rise in European democracies. Pedersen (1979) was the first scholar to point out that electoral outcomes and voting behavior were becoming increasingly unstable since the 1970s. His findings were soon followed by other scholars who also indicated increasing levels of electoral volatility in Western European democracies (Crewe, 1985; Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Drummond, 2006). Initially, these findings sparked a scholarly debate on whether and to what extent electoral volatility was on the rise. Mair (1993) argued that from a historical perspective the levels of volatility in the 1970s and 1980s were not exceptional at all. Instead, the electoral stability during the 1950s and 1960s was considered remarkable (Drummond, 2006). Also, a general pattern of increasing levels of volatility across European countries was absent (Bartolini & Mair, 1990). Although the rise in electoral volatility noted by the end of 1970s was debated at first, the trend towards increasing electoral volatility was well established by the end of the 1990s. Whereas the average level of (net) electoral volatility in sixteen European democracies was 8 percent in the 1950s, it had grown to 12 percent in the late 1990s (Gallagher, Laver, & Mair,

2005). Within this wider European trend of electoral volatility, the Netherlands is particularly noteworthy, with an average (net) electoral volatility of 19 percent in the late 1990s. As figure 1.1 illustrates, the instability in the Dutch electoral system has grown even further in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Figure 1.1: Net electoral volatility in Dutch parliamentary elections (1948-2012).



*Note.* Source: Kiesraad. Graph based on Mair (2008) and completed. Net (inter-election) volatility is measured as the aggregated electoral gains of all winning parties in a given election in comparison to the previous election (Pedersen, 1979).

The Netherlands has experienced some of the most volatile elections in Western Europe since 1950. Until the late 1960s the Netherlands was characterized by high levels of electoral stability, as voters were segregated into different pillars, each headed by its own political party. The increase in electoral volatility in the following decades can be related to the erosion of pillarization (Andeweg & Irwin, 2005). This trend, in combination with the relatively open structure of party competition in the Netherlands, helps to explain the exceptional character of the Dutch case (Mair, 2008). Electoral volatility rose to 22 percent in 1994 and the two largest parties (Christian Democratic Party and Social Democratic Party) lost between a quarter and a third of their followers.

It has remained at a historically and comparatively high level ever since, with a striking peak at 31 percent in the 2002 Dutch elections, marked by the sudden breakthrough of List Pim Fortuyn (LPF). In the elections of 2010 the level of volatility again rose to 24 percent, being the second most volatile election in the Dutch post-war period. At the individual level, (gross) electoral volatility is probably even higher. The aggregated change in party seats underestimates the individual changes that take place within the electorate, as opposite changes cancel each other out. Although levels of electoral volatility have increased enormously, it appears that most of the changes observed concern intra-block switching (Lachat, 2007; Van der Meer et al., 2013). In research on volatility one can distinguish between intra-block volatility, switching between ideologically similar parties, and inter-block volatility, switching between ideologically dissimilar parties. Intra-block volatility is still considered to be in line with theories of cleavages and thus stable voting behavior (Bartolini & Mair, 1990).

### **Existing explanations of electoral volatility**

The phenomenon of electoral volatility has led to a reassessment of the traditional models of voting behavior. These models were based on the idea that long-term factors account for the stability of voter preferences. In the United States, the Colombian School focused on the influences of the social environment on voting behavior. Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948) concluded that the key factor in explaining voting behavior is the social group a voter belongs to. Electoral choices could be predicted based on socio-economic status, religion and area of residence. According to the Michigan School, voting behavior could best be explained by the psychosocial model (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960). The central concept in this model of voting behavior is party identification, which designates a relative stable psychological attachment to a political party, acquired through socialization. At the same time, Lipset and Rokkan (1967) focused on the long-standing cleavage structures in European party systems. As their seminal work pointed out, the cleavage structures in Western societies caused voters to be strongly aligned to particular parties. Therefore, a large part of the society was said to be 'frozen' into these cleavages, explaining the stability of voting behavior.

However, voting behavior has drastically changed over the last decades and the description of Lipset and Rokkan's (1967) frozen party systems no longer seems valid. Turnout levels and party membership rates have declined, and electoral volatility has increased in Western European democracies (Mair, 2005). Research on volatility at the aggregate level focuses on structural and institutional explanations of net volatility (cf. Bartolini & Mair, 1990; Birch, 2003; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999; Tavits, 2005). First, studies have found significant differences between electoral and party systems. For instance, the number of parties within an electoral system is related to levels of volatility, as voters will be more inclined to switch when they have more options (Tavits, 2005). Secondly, differences in levels of electoral volatility can be related to economic development rates. The better the economic development of a country, the lower volatility should be (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999).

On the individual level, the rise in electoral volatility has been attributed to the weakening attachment, or dealignment, between parties and voters, due to the declining impact of social cleavages (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Dalton, 2000; Franklin et al., 1992). The process of social modernization has changed the basis of traditional cleavages. The social class cleavage has become less salient, because of economic growth, increasing educational levels and increasing social and geographical mobility. A trend toward secularization has affected the religious cleavage, as frequency of church attendance has declined. As the impact of cleavages declines, so does the loyalty of voters to a specific party (Franklin et al., 1992). Another source of dealignment is the process of cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984). Dalton argues that due to rising levels of education and the expansion of mass media and other information sources, voters now possess the skills and the resources to make independent informed political choices without reliance on traditional loyalties. Recent research on the causes of electoral volatility found evidence supporting this view of emancipated voters (Van der Meer et al., 2013). Considering the decreasing impact of long-term factors on voting behavior, short-term factors, such as issues and evaluations of parties and candidates, have become more important for explaining vote choice (Dalton, 1984, 2000).

The few studies on the individual sources of electoral volatility focus on socio-structural and individual level variables, such as education, age, personality traits, partisanship and political interest (e.g., Bakker, Klemmensen, Norgaard, & Schumacher,

2015; Dassonneville, 2011; Kuhn, 2009; Lachat, 2007; Van der Meer et al., 2013). These studies found, for instance, that younger voters are more volatile than older voters, as the political attitudes of younger voters are less stable (Kuhn, 2009; Söderlund, 2008). With regard to personality, citizens who are open to experience are more likely to switch parties since they are more likely to think about alternatives and take risks (Bakker et al., 2015). Furthermore, moderately sophisticated voters are more likely to change their party preference, than lower and higher sophisticated voters (Lachat, 2007; Van der Meer et al., 2013). Voters' levels of political cynicism has also been related to electoral volatility, showing that the more cynical are more likely to switch (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011; Zelle, 1995). Although these studies give insight into the individual-level predictors of vote change, they mostly disregard the media in explaining vote change. Furthermore, these studies have mostly examined inter-election switching. They pay little attention to how people change their vote intention at the end of the funnel, while we observe an increasing part of the electorate still being undecided during the campaign and changing their mind in the last moment (Walgrave et al., 2010). Assuming that voters increasingly vote on the basis of evaluations of issues and candidates, the need to understand how issues and candidates are presented in the media and how this influences voters' decisions is crucial. Therefore, this dissertation examines how exposure to campaign information in the media in general, and exposure to specific media content in particular, influences vote switching during the election campaign. Before turning to the role of the media in electoral volatility, the next section discusses the changing perspective on the existence of campaign effects.

### **Campaign effects: A changing perspective**

Do election campaigns matter? This question has driven much political communication research, and yet has not been easy to answer. While political parties spend a lot of money on election campaigns, and media devote considerable attention to the elections, there has been a lively scholarly debate on whether and how campaigns matter (Brady, Johnston, & Sides, 2006; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996). In the 1940s and 1950s scholars were convinced that campaigns only have minimal effects on voting behavior (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). The first empirical study on election campaigns and the role of the media, concluded that most people did

not change their mind over the course of the campaign (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Vote choice was mainly a product of long-standing predispositions (Campbell et al., 1960), leaving little room for the campaign to influence voting behavior. This gave rise to the ‘minimal effects’ paradigm, which dominated the campaign literature for decades (Klapper, 1960). This paradigm only changed when effects were redefined to include also attitudinal and cognitive changes, besides behavioral changes. Today, more and more scholars argue that campaigns *do* matter (Brady et al., 2006; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996), in part because they have broadened the definition of campaign effects beyond the focus on persuasive effects, to consider a wider range of indirect campaign effects, such as learning and priming. Whereas previous election studies often neglected the role of information effects (see Bartels, 1996), the role of the campaign and the media has now become more central in electoral research. The development of more sophisticated multi-method research designs over the past 30 years has helped to capture both smaller and larger campaign and media effects (De Vreese, 2010). During this same time, voters have become more volatile in their vote choice and rely more on issues and candidates as cues (Dalton, 2010), making campaign and media effects more likely to occur. Another explanation for the ‘minimal effects’ perspective is the fact that the literature on campaign effects suffers from an American bias. Most research on campaign effects is still based on American political campaigns (exceptions included, Brady et al., 2006; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002), where minimal effects are found. Although campaign effects might be limited in the United States, we can expect much larger campaign effects in countries with a parliamentary system, proportional electoral system and multiple parties (Brady et al., 2006).

### **Media and electoral volatility**

For most citizens mass media are the primary source of political information (De Vreese, 2010; Hopmann et al., 2010). Since the majority of voters only see and read about parties and their candidates in the media, there are obvious reasons to assume that media have an effect on voters’ evaluations of parties and candidates and on their decision to vote for one party or another (e.g., Mendelsohn, 1996). Moreover, there are numerous reasons to assume that exposure to the campaign in the media induces electoral volatility. First, media generally focus primarily on short-term events and

concerns and not necessarily on long-term developments, by which media undermine the stability of the political agenda, and consequently cause instability in the electorate (Van der Meer et al., 2013). Second, undecided voters who have to make a vote decision as Election Day draws near, have to rely on media coverage in their search for information (Walgrave et al., 2010). Third, unlike voters in two-party systems, voters in multi-party systems need to learn much more to get their vote in line with their interests and thus are more reliant on campaign information (Jensen, Aalberg, & Aarts, 2012).

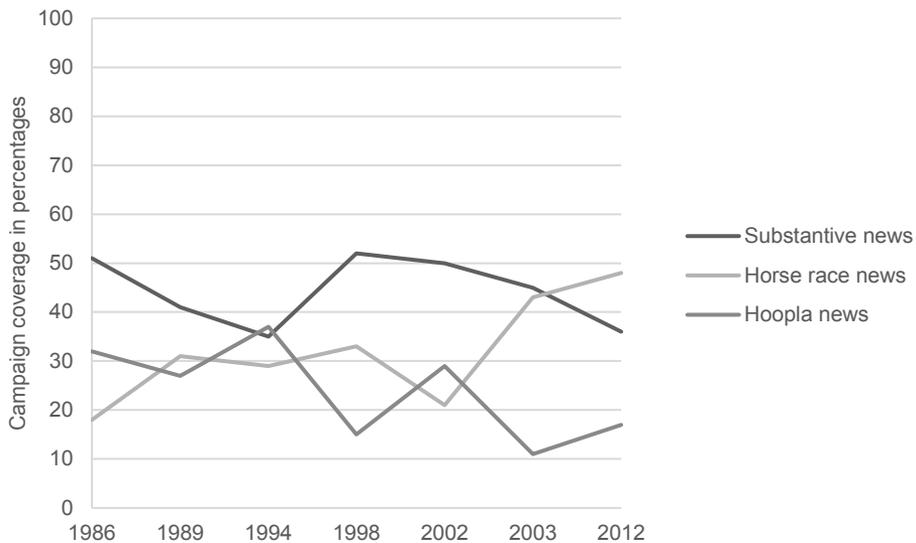
However, studies examining the relationship between media exposure and electoral volatility are few and results are scattered and inconclusive (e.g., Baker et al., 2006; Bybee, McLeod, Luetscher, & Garramone, 1981; Dassonneville, 2011; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Van der Meer et al., 2013). Some report positive correlations between media use and volatility (Baker et al., 2006; Forrest & Marks, 1999), while others find a negative relationship (e.g., Bybee et al., 1981) and some find no effect (Dassonneville, 2011). Furthermore, although these studies give insight into the effect of media exposure, the effect of exposure to specific media coverage is understudied.

### Media logic and campaign coverage

The nature of media coverage during election campaigns has changed over the past decades due to a process of mediatization. The term ‘mediatization’ refers to “a social change process in which media have become increasingly influential in and deeply integrated into different spheres of society” (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014, p. 4). One central aspect of the mediatization of politics is “the degree to which media content is governed by media logic or political logic” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2009, p. 215). Strömbäck (2008) defines ‘media logic’ as “the news values and the storytelling techniques the media make use of to take advantage of their own medium and its format, and to be competitive in the ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention. The storytelling techniques include [...] the framing of politics as a strategic game or ‘horse race’ (Mazzoleni, 1987; Patterson, 1993)” (p. 233). ‘Political logic’ is described as “the needs of the political system and political institutions—in particular, parties, but also governmental agencies as well as democracy as a set of norms and procedures” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 234). Media logic takes shape in the content of political news coverage by focusing on party leaders, the horse race and negative news, because these

fit important news values (Takens, 2013). Furthermore, under the conditions of media logic the journalistic style of reporting has shifted from a more descriptive style, in which journalists report about facts and political issues, to an interpretative style, in which journalists provide analysis or context (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011). In contrast, a political (or public) logic (Brants & Van Praag, 2006) is expressed in substantive (issue-driven) coverage of the campaign and a more descriptive journalistic style. As a consequence of the emergence of media logic, the literature suggest that issue coverage has decreased at the expense of horse race coverage (Patterson, 1993). In the Netherlands the evidence of this development is also present, but less pervasive.

Figure 1.2: Campaign coverage on Dutch public broadcasting (1986-2012).



Note. Source: Brants & Van Praag (2006, 2014). Data from the 2006 and 2010 Dutch national elections are lacking.

Brants and Van Praag (2006) expect that due to increased competition and commercialization of the media, the campaign coverage in the Netherlands should also show more signs of media logic. They find that horse race coverage (focusing on opinion polls and reflections) has increased since the 1980s (see figure 1.2). Yet, this increase does not seem to come at the expense of substantive (issue-driven) coverage, which remains high and relatively stable (except in 2012). The increase seems to come

from a decrease in hoopla coverage (focusing on campaign events and stunts). Thus, although the development of increased horse race coverage is definitely visible in the Netherlands, a considerable part of the news is still substantive (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). Nevertheless, if media logic influences the kind of content that dominates political campaign coverage, the question arises to what extent this affects the ability of voters to make a well-informed voting decision (Takens, 2013).

### **Media, electoral volatility and democracy**

This dissertation touches upon the very core of the role of the media in democratic and electoral processes. Understanding the impact of media on electoral volatility is of significant importance, especially in the Netherlands, which has experienced one of the most dramatic increases of volatility. Within scholarly literature it is debated whether volatility is inherently positive or negative, i.e., emancipatory or bad for democracy. On a system level, a certain level of electoral volatility is considered to be needed for the vitality of democracy (Lane & Ersson, 2007). In a well-functioning democracy, voters are expected to change their opinion and party preference from time to time, based on changing policy preferences or by holding parties accountable for past performances. Yet, if electoral volatility rises above a certain level, this may lead to an unstable democracy and may complicate governability. Higher levels of volatility lead to an increasingly fragmented party system, which makes it more difficult to form manageable and stable government coalitions (Van der Meer et al., 2013). Furthermore, high levels of volatility, especially campaign volatility, might eventually harm the legitimacy of the election outcome. If voters continually shift parties during the campaign, the election outcome might strongly depend on the timing of the election; meaning that the outcome might be substantially different if elections were held one week earlier or later. The outcome of the election might then seem coincidental rather than a robust reflection of people's preferences (Takens, 2013).

In the literature, the importance of political knowledge or information for the functioning of democratic processes has been widely discussed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Classical democratic theory assumes that a properly functioning democracy requires an informed citizenry (Lippmann, 1922). Well-informed citizens should develop rational preferences and vote for political parties that best represent their

preferences. These preferences should consequently shape the actions and policies of democratically chosen governments. Yet, research has revealed that voters cannot live up to the expectation of an informed citizenry put forward by democratic theory. Survey studies generally find low levels of political information among the public and low levels of political interest (Berelson et al., 1954; Neumann, 1986). The widespread political ignorance among the average citizen has led some scholars to conclude that voters cannot fulfill the expectations of democratic theory.

Yet, whether citizens and media can live up to democratic standards depends on the model of democracy. There is not just one model of democracy, but several; each placing their own normative demands on citizens and media. Porto (2007) distinguishes between two basic models of citizen competence, the ignorant citizen model and the rational citizen model, and proposes the interpreting citizen model as an alternative view. The ignorant citizen model affirms the view that citizens' low levels of political information prevent them from fulfilling their civic role in society and proposes that democracy should be centered on experts or 'the elite' (Lippmann, 1922). The rational citizen model, however, states that low levels of political information do not necessarily prevent citizens from making rational choices, since they rely on shortcuts that compensate for their lack of information. Moreover, according to the 'interpreting' citizen model, voters can fulfill the expectations of democratic theory if these expectations are understood in terms of "citizens' ability to interpret political reality, as opposed to the demand of being well-informed" (Porto, 2007, p. 312). These different models of citizen competence should not be conceived as opposing and antagonistic perspectives, but should be viewed as complementary (Porto, 2007). Strömbäck (2005) distinguishes between four normative models of democracy: procedural democracy, competitive democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy (for a description of each model, see Strömbäck, 2005). Although each model of democracy has its own core and distinguishing normative demands on citizens and media, most models stress the importance of a citizenry that is informed on political matters and that participates in the political process (Strömbäck, 2005). Four nearly universally accepted premises of democratic theory are: "that citizens should be tolerant of difference, well-informed about a wide range of important policy issues and public controversies, open to persuasion rather than fixed in their preferences, and willing to

orient themselves toward the common good rather than narrow self-interest.” (Althaus, 2006, p. 94).

This dissertation assesses the viability of democracy from the normative perspective that in a well-functioning representative democracy citizens are expected to consider their vote rationally and to be well-informed about relevant policy issues. The first empirical findings on the impact of media on electoral volatility led to the pessimistic view on the role of citizens in democracy: volatile voters were considered random floating voters (Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), uninformed about and uninterested in politics. Today there is also a more optimistic perspective on volatility. Due to structural changes in our educational and media systems, citizens are better informed and make more independent vote choices, leading them to switch their vote occasionally (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). Researchers have questioned the assumption of the uninformed ‘floating voter’, suggesting that volatile voters could also be well-informed citizens who choose to switch parties based on rational considerations (Dassonneville & Dejaeghere, 2014; Van der Meer et al., 2013). This is based on findings that not the low politically sophisticated, but voters with a moderate level of political sophistication are most likely to switch parties. Moreover, when voters change, they switch within blocks of ideologically similar parties. From a normative perspective, “voters who change parties within the same ideological block are thought to act strategically and rationally, while switching blocks is considered whimsical” (Dassonneville, 2015, p. 253). The findings imply “emancipated voters who display informed rather than capricious voting behavior: they choose between a set of rather similar alternatives. We therefore conclude that the increased levels of electoral volatility do not point to a crisis of representative democracy” (Van der Meer et al., 2013, p. 11). Although these findings hint towards informed vote switching, one should consider to what extent vote change is driven by exposure to campaign information to clarify whether volatile voters are indeed displaying well-informed voting behavior.

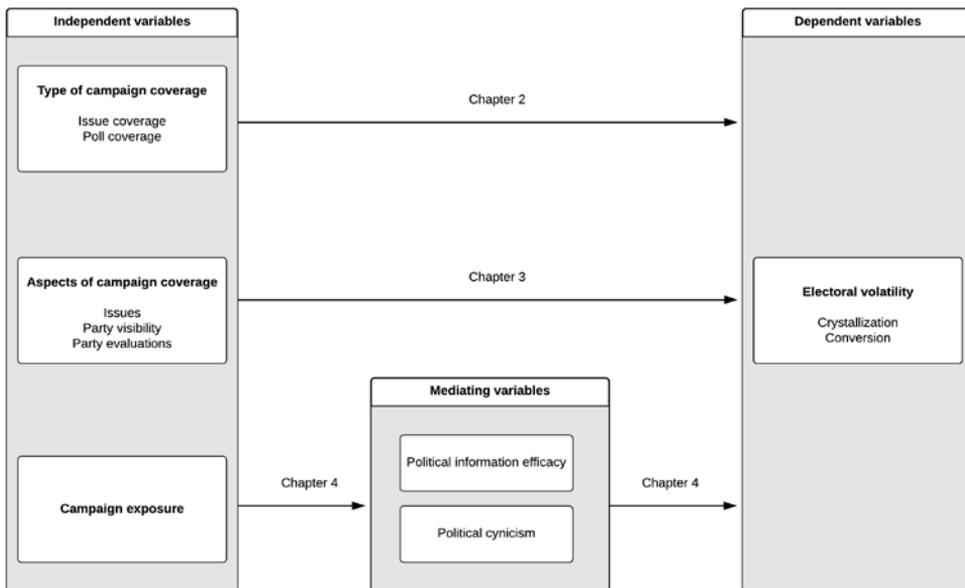
The extent to which citizens are able to make an informed voting decision is partly dependent upon how they process information, but also depends on the supply of information. Due to the mediatization of politics, the presence of strategic and horse race coverage in the media has increased at the expense of substantive issue news (Brants & Van Praag, 2006; Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). This might harm the possibility

to make a rational vote choice, as from a normative democratic perspective, people should be guided by substantive issue information in their voting decision. This dissertation examines how the supply of information, i.e., different kinds of campaign coverage, affects vote switching. In this way, it aims to gain more insight into the extent to which citizens are making well-informed vote choices and, as such, live up to the expectations of democratic theory.

### **The central concepts of the dissertation**

The previous sections provided an overview of the scientific literature on electoral volatility, media (effects) and their role in democratic societies, and described the context in which this dissertation is situated. This section discusses the central concepts of the dissertation and how they are related, which is illustrated in the conceptual framework in figure 1.3. In short, this dissertation examines which types of campaign coverage (issue coverage and poll coverage) and which aspects of campaign coverage (issues, party visibility and party evaluations) affect which type of electoral volatility (crystallization and conversion). Furthermore, it examines the underlying psychological mechanisms (political information efficacy and political cynicism) through which campaign exposure affects electoral volatility. In this section I will explicate how this dissertation contributes to the scholarly knowledge on each of the concepts and to the understanding of the relationship between media and electoral volatility as a whole.

Figure 1.3: The conceptual framework of the dissertation.



## Two types of electoral volatility: Conversion and crystallization

In this dissertation a distinction is made between two types of electoral volatility, crystallization and conversion. In the early research on voting behavior, the ‘minimal effects’ paradigm was also partly due to the fact that the ‘effects’ of election campaigns on voting behavior were defined too narrowly (Strömbäck, 2008). There has been a tendency to perceive conversion, switching from one party to another in response to campaign exposure, as the only effect that matters. However, the original study by Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948) already differentiated between different types of vote changes during the campaign: “People who did not make up their minds until sometime during the campaign differed in the way they came to their final vote decision” (p. 65). Besides conversion, they also included crystallization and reinforcement as two other kinds of effects. This dissertation only focuses on conversion and crystallization, since reinforcement does not refer to an actual *change* in vote preference, but to the “effect of reinforcing the original vote decision” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 87).

Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) concluded that: “The first thing to say is that some people *were* converted by campaign propaganda, but they were *few indeed*” (p. 94). The people who were most exposed to media, were not only mostly exposed to partisan information, but were also most resistant to conversion because of their strong predispositions. Therefore, these people were more likely to reinforce their vote choice. On the other hand, voters who were most open to conversion were non-interested in politics and thus exposed the least. The voters that were converted by campaign propaganda, were exposed to propaganda in opposition to their predispositions and voted “*in line with the propaganda and out of line with their predispositions*” (p. 96). There was only a small number of converters who were greatly interested in the election and confirmed to the standard stereotype of the rational democratic voter. They had weak predispositions and could ‘afford’ conversion through thought. Furthermore, if media exposure led to conversion, it was through a redefinition of issues. Issues which had previously received very little thought or concern, were deemed more important as they were stressed by campaign propaganda. “In this way, political communication occasionally broke down traditional party loyalties” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 98).

Rather than persuading voters to change their minds, campaigns may also have an informational role helping voters make up their minds and crystallize their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2005; Gelman & King, 1993; Hillygus, 2010). Crystallization occurs when exposure to campaign information *activates* voters’ latent predispositions, which transform into a manifest vote during the course of a campaign (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1948). This process of activation starts with campaign exposure arousing interest and increased interest leads to increased exposure. Next, due to processes of selective attention and selective exposure, voters select information that reinforces their existing political predispositions. Since ideological differences between parties in multi-party systems are quite small, multiple parties might match voters’ activated ideological predispositions. Therefore, it is not immediately clear which party is to be preferred at the end of this crystallization process. Finally, the end result is that votes crystallize: “The latent has become manifest; the uncertainty disappears, the voter is ready to mark his ballot” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 76).

Although the first empirical study on the effect of election campaigns already differentiated between conversion, crystallization and reinforcement (Lazarsfeld, et al.,

1948), recent studies rarely distinguish between these different kinds of effects (exceptions included, Dilliplane, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). This dissertation departs from the typology made in the original study by Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948) and reassesses the impact of campaign information on both conversion and crystallization.

### Campaign coverage and electoral volatility

In this dissertation I will examine which types and which specific aspects of campaign coverage induce vote switching. Thus far, only Adriaansen et al. (2012) and Takens (2013) have studied how one of the manifestations of media logic, namely horse race and strategic coverage (as opposed to issue coverage), influences electoral volatility. Both studies investigated how exposure to issue coverage and strategic coverage can induce volatile voting behavior, but come to diverging conclusions, probably because of their different approach in operationalizing both types of news. However, what they both include in their operationalization of strategic news is the media's coverage of polls. Poll coverage is a key aspect of strategic news (Jamieson, 1992) and is closely related to Patterson's (1993) game frame or a horse race frame. Since one can expect that especially poll news can induce vote switching, because of the volatile nature of polls, this dissertation solely focuses on poll coverage and disregards other aspects of strategic news, such as language of war, games and competition and emphasis on candidate style and perceptions. The other type of news this dissertation focuses on is issue coverage, which can be distinguished from poll coverage. Issue coverage is generally defined as providing information about present and future policies, about political stands of parties, and about ideologies and ideas (Van Praag & Van der Eijk, 1998). Theories of agenda setting, priming and issue ownership explain how exposure to issue coverage can lead to vote switching (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Although previous research has shown that different types of campaign news can induce change in voting intentions (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Takens, 2013), research focused on explaining how the different aspects of campaign news lead to volatile voting behavior is lacking. By focusing on how campaign coverage *in general* affects electoral volatility *in general*, prior research has omitted to explicitly test the processes underlying these effects. Rather than campaign coverage in general affecting volatility

in general, it are *specific* issues in the media, or the visibility or evaluations of *specific* parties in the media, that lead to vote switching to a *specific* party. For issue coverage, theories of issue voting (issue ownership) are expected to explain the effect on vote switching. Rather than issue news in general affecting volatility in general, it are specific issues in the media, owned by specific parties, that lead to vote switching to a specific party. Poll coverage in itself also does not explain why voters might change their vote choice (as is assumed in Adriaansen et al., 2012; Takens, 2013). It is the positive or negative portrayal of a specific party (i.e., party evaluation) in poll coverage that causes voters to consider switching to that specific party (Balmas & Sheaffer, 2010). Thus, for both types of news the missing link between news coverage on the one hand, and vote switching on the other, is the party. Therefore, to gain a more complete picture of the effect of news coverage on vote switching, one should also take into account the visibility of each party in the news.

This dissertation aims to study the relationship between campaign coverage and vote switching more in-depth. Besides examining the effect of different types of campaign coverage (issue news and poll news) on conversion and crystallization, it studies how specific aspects of campaign coverage (issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news) lead to vote switching by building on theories of agenda setting, (affective) priming and issue ownership.

### **Underlying mechanisms: Political information efficacy and political cynicism**

Traditional voting models have been able to predict electoral outcomes, but have not been able to explain why voters do what they do. These models take as given that voters process information, but they do little to unpack the black box of acquiring, processing and using information (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Recent media effects models, on the other hand, propose that the effects of media use on certain outcomes are mediated by the way in which media are processed (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The indirect effects paradigm in media effects studies suggests that media effects are strong, but largely indirect through their impact on many personal-psychological outcomes (Cho et al., 2009; Mcleod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah et al., 2007). Previous research on the relationship between campaign exposure and electoral volatility has paid little attention to the psychological mechanisms

underlying this relationship. Examining these underlying mechanisms is important to understand *how* campaign exposure influences electoral volatility. Therefore, in this dissertation I test the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of campaign exposure on vote switching. Specifically, I investigate the mediating role of political information efficacy and political cynicism in the effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility. By doing so this dissertation contributes to both the understanding of the relationship between media and electoral volatility and the expansion of mediating models of communication effects (e.g., Cho et al., 2009; Jung, Kim, & de Zúñiga, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

One of the underlying explanations under study is political information efficacy, i.e. perceived political knowledge (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). The concept of political information efficacy was put forward by Kaid and colleagues (2007) and refers to “the voter’s confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process” (p. 1096). This dissertation argues that being exposed to campaign information is a crucial antecedent of political information efficacy, which has also been shown in previous studies (Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, LeGrange, & Yun, 2007; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007). As a predictor, political information efficacy is an important determinant for participation and engagement in politics (Kaid et al., 2007). While there is ample evidence that political efficacy is related to turnout, the relationship between efficacy and electoral volatility has of yet been understudied. To fill this void, this dissertation investigates whether the effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility is mediated by political information efficacy.

An alternative mechanism explaining the relationship between campaign exposure and vote switching is cynicism. Cynicism seems to be negatively correlated with information efficacy (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998), as cynical citizens tend to feel less confident to engage in the political process. Political cynicism can be described as “an individual’s attitude, consisting of a conviction of the incompetence and immorality of politicians, political institutions and/or the political system as a whole” (Schyns & Nuus, 2007, p. 97). Scholars have shown that in most Western democracies political trust has declined, while cynicism has risen (Catterberg & Moreno, 2005; Dalton, 2004; Hay, 2007). The rise in cynicism over the past decades is often blamed on the media, which have changed their coverage from more substantive news to more

strategic and game news (e.g., Patterson, 1993). At the same time, voters have become more volatile and change their vote preference more often (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000; Drummond, 2006; Mair, 2008). The simultaneous increase in both political cynicism and electoral volatility raises the question to what extent these developments are related. Whereas previous studies have either examined how campaign coverage induces political cynicism (Jackson, 2011; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), or how political cynicism sparks vote switching (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011), this dissertation examines the entire causal chain from campaign coverage to political cynicism to vote switching.

### **Focus of the dissertation**

This dissertation aims to shed light on whether and how information provided by the media influences electoral volatility during election campaigns. The insights that are gained in this dissertation fuel a broader discussion on whether electoral volatility is inherently positive or negative for democracy. Finding out whether vote change on the individual level is explained by exposure to campaign information in the media is an important aspect in that regard. In order to provide an empirically founded answer to the overall question on how media affect electoral volatility, three aspects need to be examined. First of all, the type of information that induces vote switching is studied. Do voters change their voting decision in response to issue coverage or poll coverage? Or more specifically, are it the issues in the news, the visibility or the evaluations of parties in the news that lead to volatile voting behavior? Secondly, one needs to examine the type of vote switching that media exposure induces. Does exposure to campaign information help undecided voters to make a vote choice (crystallization), or does it persuade voters to change their party preference (conversion)? Thirdly, the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility are tested. More specifically, the mediating role of both political information efficacy and political cynicism are investigated. By examining these three aspects, this dissertation contributes to and expands the understanding of the role of the media in individual level vote switching. Understanding the impact of the media on electoral volatility is important in order to judge whether it weakens or rather strengthens democratic processes.

## Research setting and design

The impact of media on electoral volatility is best studied by means of panel data. Panel data allow for the measurement of *changes* in voting behavior, i.e. campaign volatility. In addition, it allows for the study of campaign effects. Most evidence of campaign effects is based on cross-sectional survey data (Iyengar, 2001). Cross-sectional studies measure both cause and effect at one point in time, inhibiting conclusions about causal order (Bartels, 2006). In order to properly study campaign effects or make causal attributions, panel surveys are necessary. Furthermore, in contrast to experimental data, panel survey data are measured in a real world setting, leading to a higher external validity and generalizability (Kinder, 2007). Experiments involve forced exposure to specific news content, but in the real world exposure to certain news content varies considerably among individual citizens, depending on the specific media outlets that citizens use. Therefore, the media environment, and the available media content, should be analyzed at the individual level. This “entails content analyses of media outlets and media specific measures of exposure” (Druckman, 2005, p. 517). This dissertation relies on media content analysis data and panel survey data collected during two election campaigns to examine the influence of media on vote switching.

### Research setting: The Dutch case

This dissertation focuses on the Dutch case, which has experienced some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). However, as discussed before, this trend in increased volatility is not unique for the Netherlands, but is observed in most Western European multi-party systems. The Netherlands has a multi-party system with a relatively open structure of party competition (Mair, 2002). This is a relevant context of study for this dissertation as the Netherlands has a high number of parties with small ideological differences between parties (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999) and parties’ positions on certain issues are often fairly similar. Therefore, voters are likely to rely on the media and change their vote intention. As such, the Dutch context is an appropriate setting to investigate the impact of media exposure on vote switching. This single-country study ensures high validity, the opportunity to do more

in-depth research, and overcomes the problem of heterogeneity of cases (Gerring, 2006).

This dissertation particularly focuses on the 2012 Dutch national parliamentary elections and the 2014 European parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. The 2012 Dutch parliamentary elections on September 12 were the result of a premature ending of cabinet Rutte I. The cabinet fell in April 2012 when the coalition parties (Liberal Party and Christian Democratic Party) could not agree with the Freedom Party, which supported the cabinet from outside, upon the austerity measures for 2013. Prior to the elections the Socialist Party was expected to gain support, primarily at the expense of the Labour Party. However, in the last weeks of the campaign the support for the Labour Party increased instead. Eventually, the Liberal Party won the elections, and the Labour Party became second. Both the Freedom Party and the Christian Democratic Party lost seats and the Socialist Party obtained the same number of seats as in the 2010 Dutch parliamentary elections. This led to an aggregate level of electoral volatility of 15.9 percent and a turnout rate of 74.6 percent. In the 2014 European parliamentary elections, 37.3 percent of the Dutch citizens turned out to vote. The 2014 election campaign was characterized by a double race. There was a race between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, and a battle between pro-European parties and Eurosceptic parties. In the Netherlands, the Christian Democratic Party became the largest party due to their alliance with two other Dutch Christian parties, even though the Democratic Party obtained most votes. On the European level, the Christian Democrats won the 2014 EP elections and the Social Democrats became second.

## Data

This dissertation uses three data collections to study the impact of the mass media on electoral volatility. First, a five-wave panel survey study was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*, including measures of media exposure and vote intention in every wave. These data were gathered in the campaign period of the 2012 Dutch parliamentary elections of September 12. With these survey data (n=765) the influence of media exposure on electoral volatility is established.

Second, a comprehensive quantitative media content analysis of the last three weeks of the election campaign of the 2012 Dutch parliamentary elections (n=869) was conducted in collaboration with the Dutch public broadcasting agency (NPO). This content analysis included six national newspapers (two broadsheets, two semi-tabloids and two free dailies), three evening news programs (one public news program, and two private news programs), two main public TV current affairs programs, one public talk show, and three infotainment programs (two public, one private). Content coding included indicators of issue and poll coverage, and the coding of issues, party visibility and party evaluations in news items.

To assess the effects of the media coverage of the campaign on individual-level vote switching, the panel data and the content analysis data are linked so that the individual exposure to media coverage can be computed (following e.g., Schuck, Vliegthart, & De Vreese, 2016). These variables were computed by weighing the panel survey data on exposure to specific news media outlets with content analysis data on specific media content variables in each news media outlet.

Finally, a second panel survey study was collected by TNS NIPO, as part of the 2014 European Election Campaign Study (De Vreese, Azrout, & Möller, 2014), including key variables, such as campaign exposure, vote intention, political cynicism and political information efficacy. These data were gathered in the campaign period of the 2014 European parliamentary elections in the Netherlands of May 22. With these survey data (n=1379) the impact of campaign exposure on electoral volatility is examined directly, and indirectly via political information efficacy and political cynicism.

## **Outline of the dissertation**

This dissertation consists of three empirical studies, each of which is documented in a separate chapter. Since the three empirical chapters were originally written in the form of articles, they can be read as stand-alone papers. Figure 1.3 illustrates the conceptual framework of the dissertation, and explains how the chapters are related.

Chapter 2 focuses on issue coverage and poll coverage as independent variables, explaining electoral volatility. In this chapter a distinction is made between the two types

of campaign volatility, crystallization and conversion. It is investigated how both types of campaign coverage affect the two types of campaign volatility differently.

Chapter 3 also deals with the influence of campaign coverage on electoral volatility. However, it focuses on the specific aspects of campaign coverage. Whereas chapter 2 examines how campaign coverage *in general* affects electoral volatility *in general*, chapter 3 examines how *specific* issues in the media (owned by *specific* parties), or the visibility or evaluations of a *specific* party (or candidate), causes voters to switch to a *specific* party.

In Chapter 4 the underlying mechanisms of the effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility are studied. This chapter again distinguishes between crystallization and conversion and examines how political information efficacy and political cynicism mediate the effect of campaign exposure on both types of campaign volatility.

The concluding chapter provides a summary of the research findings and elaborates on the scientific and normative implications of the three studies. The final chapter also discusses the limitations of the studies and provides suggestions for future research.

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