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Informed floating voters?

The impact of media on electoral volatility

Geers, S.

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Chapter 2

Effects of Media Coverage on Electoral Volatility: Conversion or Crystallization?

Abstract

In the last decades, electoral volatility has been on the rise in Western democracies. Scholars have proposed several explanations for this phenomenon of floating voters. Exposure to media coverage as a short-term explanation for intra-election volatility has of yet been understudied. This study fills the void in prior research by examining the effect of media content (issue news and poll news) on two different types of vote change: conversion, switching from one party to another, and crystallization, switching from being undecided to casting a vote for a party. We use a national panel survey (N = 765) and link this to an extensive content analysis of campaign news on television and in newspapers during Dutch national elections. Findings reveal that exposure to issue news increases the chance of crystallization, whereas it decreases the chance of conversion. Conversely, exposure to poll news increases the chance of conversion, whereas it decreases the chance of crystallization.[1]

Introduction

The number of floating voters in Western democracies has risen over the past decades. Not only do voters change their party preference from election to election, but also during election campaigns. This development has been particularly noteworthy in the Netherlands, where the electorate has changed from one of the least to one of the most volatile electorates in Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). Understanding the impact of the media on electoral volatility is important in order to judge whether it weakens or rather strengthens democratic processes: do voters use the media for substantial deliberation to get to an informed vote choice? Or are they guided by peripheral cues in the media, such as poll news, leading to arbitrary election outcomes?

Most research has studied volatility at an aggregate level, looking at the overall shift in party support in society. The studies that address electoral volatility at the individual level are scarce. Yet, it is only at this level that individual predictors of volatility, such as political interest and media use, can be studied. Furthermore, media as a short-term explanation for volatile voting behavior has received little research attention. In this study, we do examine volatility at the individual level, focusing in particular on the influence of the media on vote switching during campaign time.

Moreover, this study distinguishes between different types of volatility that media may affect. One of the earliest studies of campaign effects on voter behavior already differentiated between different types of vote changes during the campaign (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948): conversion, crystallization and reinforcement. In this study we only focus on the first two, since the latter one does not refer to actual *change* in vote, but to the "effect of reinforcing the original vote decision" (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 87). Thus, the first type of volatility we will study is conversion, which means 'switching from one party to another in response to campaign exposure'. The second is crystallization: 'when a voter's latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign exposure'.

While Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948) already mentioned presumed media influences on voting behavior five decades ago, the studies that have focused on media

exposure as a possible explanation of electoral volatility are limited (Baker, Ames, & Renno, 2006; Dassonneville, 2011; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Schmitt-Beck & Partheymüller, 2012; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013). In addition, recent research on electoral volatility in Western Europe has not differentiated between the different types of vote change that Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) initially laid out. Scholars either focus solely on conversion (Van der Meer et al., 2013) or study conversion and crystallization together without differentiating between them (Dassonneville & Hooghe, 2011; Takens, 2013). However, we argue that media may influence crystallization in a different way than it influences conversion, depending on the specific news content that voters are exposed to. However, the influence of specific news content has not been incorporated in previous studies (exceptions included, Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2012; Takens, 2013). Therefore, we not only study the effect of media exposure on volatility in general, but also study which specific aspects of media content, namely news on issues and news on polls, induces which type of vote switching. In this way we are able to examine the link between media and volatility more closely.

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility in two ways. First, this study contributes to the understanding of (limited) campaign effects by distinguishing between two types of vote change that might be influenced by media: conversion and crystallization. Second, it studies the effect of news exposure in an extensive way by incorporating the exposure to specific types of media content into the analysis (issue news and poll news), while controlling for other important predictors of volatility.

Media and electoral volatility

Electoral volatility is generally defined as "the changes in party preferences within an electorate" (Crewe, 1985, p. 8). Previous studies have explained the rise in volatility by the decline of cleavages and voter loyalties, which implies that the attachment between parties and voters has weakened (Dalton, 2000; Franklin, Mackie, & Valen, 1992). More recent research has related electoral volatility to the process of voter emancipation (Kuhn, 2009; Van der Meer et al., 2013), implying that voters are making more informed political choices instead of relying on traditional loyalties. Considering

the fact that social characteristics as a long-term account for the stability of voter preferences have lost much of their predictive power, one would expect that voting behavior is at least to some degree dependent on short-term factors, such as exposure to media coverage of the election campaign (Dalton, 1984, 2000). As a consequence, we only focus on vote changes *within* the election campaign, so-called campaign volatility.

The majority of studies on media effects during election times are based on American election campaigns (Strömbäck, 2008). Yet, media may have far more impact in a Western European democracy like the Netherlands, for two reasons.

First of all, there are significant differences in media systems. The European media system gives more priority to serving the needs of democracy than the American media system, which is more directed toward maximizing profits. Accordingly, European television devotes more time to news and current affairs than American television (Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). As a consequence, European citizens are more likely than US citizens to be exposed to relevant political information about parties and issues.

Second, there are significant differences in party systems: media can have far more impact in a multi-party system like the Netherlands, than in a two-party system like the US. Voters in multi-party systems need to learn much more to get their vote in line with their interests and are more likely to change their vote intention, because of the high number of parties (Lachat, 2007) and the small ideological differences parties (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). Accordingly, voters in multi-party systems are more reliant on the information provided by the media during the campaign. For these two reasons, we consider it important to extend the media effects research in the US to the West-European context.

In early studies on the role of media in voting behavior, scholars were convinced that campaigns only have minimal effects (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and only conversion, due to persuasion by campaign messages, was regarded as an effect. Today, more and more scholars argue that campaigns do matter, in part because they have broadened the definition of campaign effects beyond the focus on persuasive effects (Brady, Johnston, & Sides, 2006; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996). Besides persuading voters to change their party choice, and *convert* to a different party,

campaigns may have an informational role helping the increasing share of undecided voters to make up their mind and crystallize their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2005; Gelman & King, 1993; Hillygus, 2010).

The idea of crystallization was already introduced by Lazarsfeld, et al. (1948), who stated that "what the campaign does is to *activate* [voters'] political predispositions" (p. 73). This idea of activation was further developed by Finkel (1993), who suggested that campaign information is more likely to bring voters' party preferences in line with their own predispositions, rather than *changing* their attitudes. Furthermore Finkel argued that party identification can be regarded as a summary indicator of the individual's political predispositions. Yet, in Western European countries ideology is a more important determinant for vote choice than party identification (Fleury & Lewis-Beck, 1993). Therefore, ideology can be seen as an indicator of political predispositions in the West-European context. In line with this, campaign information might *activate* voters' ideological predispositions. Since ideological differences between parties in the Netherlands are quite small, multiple parties might match an individual's activated ideological predisposition. Therefore, it is not immediately clear which party is to be preferred at the end of this crystallization process. From this perspective, voters who switch from being undecided to decided, or in other words 'crystallize', can be regarded as volatile voters too.

At present, studies rarely distinguish between these different media effects and different types of volatility (exceptions included, Dilliplane, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). In this study, we contribute to the understanding of campaign effects by distinguishing between conversion and crystallization and by studying the effect of exposure to media content.

The influence of specific media content on electoral volatility

In Western Europe, the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility has been understudied, let alone the effect of exposure to specific media *content*. However, for a deeper understanding of why media exposure has an effect on electoral volatility, one should examine the *content* to which an individual is exposed: Whether voters change

their voting intentions, and in what way (i.e., whether they crystallize or convert), is more likely to depend on the kind of news than merely the degree of news exposure.

To our knowledge, the effect of specific media content on volatility has only been studied by Adriaansen, Van Praag, and De Vreese (2012) and Takens (2013). Both studies investigated how exposure to issue news and strategic news 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 specifically poll news can induce vote switching, because of the volatile nature of polls, we do not focus on other aspects of strategic news, such as language of war, games and competition and emphasis on candidate style and perceptions. In this study, we are particularly interested in issue news and poll news, and will examine their effect on both conversion and crystallization.

Issue news 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). The basis on which votes are cast depends on the degree of issue news. According to agenda setting and priming theory, issues that are more salient in the news are more central in voters' considerations when evaluating a party (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Zaller, 1991). Voters may choose or switch to the party that performed well on the issue in focus, leading to retrospective voting (e.g., Söderlund, 2008); or they may vote for the party whose issue position is most in line with their own, leading to prospective voting (Lockerbie, 1992; Nadeau & Lewis-Beck, 2001). Either way, the party to which a voter switches depends on the media's coverage of issues and the coverage of parties' positions and performances on these issues.

Previous research on the effect of issue news on electoral volatility has yielded inconclusive findings. Adriaansen and collegues (2012) found that issue coverage can induce voter uncertainty, which was particularly the case for highly sophisticated voters. Contrarily, Takens (2013) found a negative effect from two types of issue coverage on volatility. This suggests we should study the relationship between issue news and volatility more closely and focus on the process at work. The distinction between

crystallization and conversion volatility is useful in that regard. Issue news might especially have an informational function for undecided voters, helping them to make up their mind and eventually crystallize their vote choice. Based on motivated reasoning literature we assume that voters *without* a prior preference are guided by different motivational goals than voters *with* a prior preference when processing information (Kunda, 1990; Nir, 2011). Undecided voters are more likely to be driven by accuracy goals than directional goals, because of an absent or weaker prior preference, and thus invest more effort in processing issue-relevant information (Kunda, 1990). They may use issue news to learn about parties' performances and stances on issues, to get their party choice in line with their pre-existing attitudes (Arceneaux, 2005). We, therefore, expect that:

H1: Exposure to issue news has a positive effect on crystallization (H1a) and no effect on conversion (H1b).

Poll news may lead to vote-switching in several ways. Extant research has shown that poll news can lead to a so-called bandwagon effect (e.g., Farnsworth & Lichter, 2006; Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof, Oegema, & De Ridder, 2007; Schmitt-Beck, 1996; Van der Meer, Hakhverdian, & Aaldering, 2015). The bandwagon effect refers to the tendency of voters to vote for successful parties (McAllister & Studlar, 1991). Furthermore, polls provide voters with information about possible future coalitions, which may prompt voters to cast a strategic vote (Meffert & Gschwend, 2011; Moy & Rinke, 2012). Regardless of whether poll exposure invokes a bandwagon effect or prompts strategic voting, in both cases it may lead to more volatility due to the dynamic nature of polls. Parties' stances in the polls fluctuate over the course of the campaign, and media's coverage on potential winners and losers of the election is often based on these polls. This fluctuation in who is winning or losing according to the media possibly also leads to fluctuations in a voter's party preference (Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2007). Accordingly, it is imaginable that voters will convert to another party in response to poll news. Yet, poll news might also help individuals to crystallize their vote choice. For instance, undecided voters might wait for additional information, like poll news, until

the last moment, in order to cast an informed strategic vote (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008). We thus argue that poll news might lead to both types of electoral volatility.

H2: Exposure to poll news has a positive effect on crystallization (H2a) and on conversion (H2b).

Method

The Dutch case

The Dutch situation is an interesting case to study in this regard, as the Netherlands has had some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). Previous research has shown that Dutch voters tend to switch to ideologically similar parties within one of the two party blocks: a block of left-wing parties and a block of right-wing parties (Van der Meer, Lubbe, Van Elsas, Elff, & Van der Brug, 2012). In line with our previous argumentation: The Netherlands is a multi-party system with a high number of parties and small ideological differences between parties, making voters more likely to rely on the media when they change their vote intention. Hence, in this study, we focus on the Dutch 2012 elections. We use two waves of a five-wave panel dataset and link these panel data to a substantive content analysis of campaign news on television and in newspapers during the Dutch 2012 election campaign. In this way we are able to assess the impact of exposure to media content on individual-level volatility.

Panel data

Sample. The panel survey dataset we used was collected by TNS NIPO in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and *de Volkskrant* using computer-assisted self-interviewing. These data were gathered in the campaign period of the 2012 Dutch parliamentary elections of September 12. The first respondents were approached May 17, 2012 (t-4: N = 1,537), and recontacted June 21 (t-3: N = 1,239; recontact rate: 81%), August 16 (t-2: N = 1,206; recontact rate: 97%), August 30 (t-1: N = 1,187; recontact rate: 98%) and September 14 (t: N = 1,162; recontact rate: 98%). In this study

we only included those respondents that have participated in all waves (N = 765).[i] We only used the data of the last two waves (t-1 and t), since we are interested in the influence of the media's campaign coverage which only started *after* t-2.[ii] Our data are by and large representative of the Dutch population.[iii]

Measures. The *dependent* variable is based on one variable in the panel dataset measured at two points in time.[iv] At t-1 respondents were asked which party they would vote for if elections were held today. At t, the post-election wave, respondents were asked which party they ended up voting for in the elections. We constructed a dependent variable with four possible outcomes: (1) stable: staying loyal to same party between t-1 and t, (2) abstention: abstaining from voting at t, (3) crystallization: changing from not voting or being undecided to a party choice between t-1 and t, (4) conversion: changing party choice between t-1 and t.[v]

We also included several *control* variables, starting with the usual socio-demographic variables, measured at t-4: age ($M = 51$, $SD = 17$), sex (49.7% male, 50.3% female), education (measured in 7 categories ranging from 'no education' to 'bachelor degree or higher', $M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.81$). In addition we controlled for various individual predispositions measured at t-2.[vi] First, political interest, which is measured at t-2 with an item that asked respondents how interested they are in politics on a 7-point scale (1= not at all interested and 7 = very interested, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.66$). Second, ideology, which is measured with a variable tapping left-right placement (1 = left and 10 = right, $M = 6.39$, $SD = 2.28$). Third, ideological extremity, by recoding ideology 1 through 5, where '1' denotes being in the middle of the political spectrum, and '5' being either at the left or right extreme end.[vii]

Content analysis

Sample. We used a content analysis of the last three weeks of the election campaign for the television programs and newspapers (August 22 to September 12, 2012).[viii] All items with political content were coded in collaboration with the Dutch public broadcasting agency (NPO), by a team of four coders. In this study we only included those media outlets for which media exposure was tapped in the panel dataset (i.e., the most used media outlets in the Netherlands). Those are the news programs of the public broadcaster *NOS Journaal*, and two commercial stations *RTL Nieuws* and *Hart*

van Nederland, the current affairs programs *Eén Vandaag* and *Nieuwsuur*, the talkshow *Knevel and van den Brink* (all public broadcasts), and the infotainment programs *De Wereld Draait Door*, *PowNews* and *RTL Boulevard* (only the latter is a commercial broadcast). For the newspapers we included two broadsheet/elite newspapers: *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, two semi-tabloid newspapers: *de Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, and two (popular) free dailies: *Sp!ts* and *Metro*. Items were coded that satisfied the conditions of campaign news, in the sense that the story was about the elections, party leaders, or about the government. Items were identified based on content and form.

Measures. In the content analysis we coded indicators of issue news and poll news for each item. Issue news was coded with the following dummy variables: "Is the story mainly about substantial policy issues, problems and solutions?", "Does the story describe the content or details of (proposed) legislation or other government policy?", "Does the story describe the position or standpoints of the actor on substantial policy issues?", "Does the story describe the consequences or effects of (proposed) legislation for the public?". Poll news was coded with: "Does the story pay attention to (the results of) polls?" and "Does the story pay attention to the position of politicians or parties in the polls?". In both cases '1' indicated presence of the type of news. The intercoder reliability was sufficient, with an average Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.74 for both the coding of issue and poll news. We checked whether the different items indeed constitute a scale by using a Mokken scale. The Mokken scale is a probabilistic version of the better-known Guttmann scale (Mokken, 1971) and is used for dichotomous items. The Mokken scale analysis showed that the four items measuring issue news together form a strong scale ($H = 0.748$, $p = 0.000$), and the two items tapping poll news also form a strong scale ($H = 0.564$, $p = 0.000$). We used an average score to tap the presence of each type of news in each item or article.

Linking survey data to content data

To link media content to the individual-level data we asked respondents about their exposure to the various media outlets included in the analysis: "Can you indicate how often you read the following newspapers?", "Can you indicate how often you watch the following television programs?". These media exposure variables were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from never (0) to (almost) daily (4).[ix]

For each respondent, exposure to media content was weighted on the basis of the issue news and poll news variables, computing individual exposure to the two types of news (De Vreese & Semetko, 2004; Schuck, Vliegenthart, & De Vreese, 2016):

$$Type \ of \ news_i = \frac{\sum Type \ of \ news_{medium_i} \cdot Media \ exposure_{medium_i}}{\sum medium}$$

These weighted media exposure variables were thus determined by the media outlets each respondent uses and by the average attention to issue news and poll news in each outlet.[x] The total exposure to issue news and poll news in newspapers and television programs was divided by the total amount of media outlets included in the analysis.[xi] For example, a respondent reads the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* on a daily basis (media exposure = 4) and the average presence of issue news in *NRC Handelsblad* is 0.34. We link this presence of issue news to the respondent by multiplying the issue news score with the respondent's media exposure score for *NRC Handelsblad,* resulting in an issue news exposure score of 1.36. This step is repeated for each newspaper (total of 6 outlets) and each television program (total of 9 outlets). Subsequently, we computed an average issue news exposure score for newspapers and television separately.[xii] For newspapers, the issue news exposure score is first summed for all 6 newspaper outlets and then divided by 6 to obtain an average issue news exposure score. For television, the issue news exposure score is first summed for all 9 television outlets and then divided by 9. A similar procedure is conducted to obtain average poll news exposure scores.

Results

Table 2.1 displays shifting vote intentions between the two waves per party. The results show that most parties lose as well as gain votes, which indicates that most parties do not have fully stable electorates. Whether voters switch from one party to another, or from 'don't know' to a party, cannot be inferred from this table. Our results, however, indicate that between the two waves 66% of the voters were stable and stayed with the same party. Of the voters who switched their vote intentions 8% eventually

crystallized, 16% converted from one party to another party and 10% eventually did not turn out on Election Day.

Table 2.1: Gain and loss of voters between waves.

	t-1 - t	
	Gained	Lost
VVD	4.3%	-1.8%
PvdA	9.8%	-0.8%
PVV	2.2%	-1.6%
SP	1.9%	-7.9%
CDA	1.8%	-1.4%
D66	1.2%	-2.5%
GroenLinks	0.4%	-0.8%
CU	0.3%	-1.0%
PvdD	0.0%	-0.5%
SGP	0.0%	0.0%
OBP/TON/DPK	0.3%	0.0%
50+	1.6%	-1.3%
Don't know	0.0%	-7.6%
Abstain	4.5%	-1.0%
Blank	0.3%	0.0%
Other	0.3%	-0.6%
Refuse	1.0%	-0.4%
Total	1.8%	-1.7%

Table 2.2 shows the average amount of issue coverage and poll coverage in television programs and newspapers, as well as the average media consumption per media outlet. In general, media cover more on issues than on polls. However, there are some differences between the various media outlets. Overall, newspapers pay more attention to issue news than television programs; and on television, current affair programs and talkshows featuring more issue news than infotainment programs. Conversely, television programs pay more attention to poll news than newspapers. Infotainment programs generally pay little attention to both issue and poll news, suggesting that other (campaign) news is probably more present in these programs.

Table 2.2: Overview issue coverage, poll coverage and media use per medium.

	N	Issue coverage		Poll coverage		Average media consumption (N = 765)	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
TV News							
NOS journaal	36	0.22	0.33	0.24	0.35	3.03	1.35
RTL nieuws	28	0.34	0.41	0.39	0.44	2.51	1.52
HvNL (vroege editie)	19	0.42	0.25	0.24	0.42	1.59	1.53
Current Affair Programs							
Eén Vandaag	57	0.31	0.32	0.46	0.42	1.52	1.48
Nieuwsuur	85	0.39	0.34	0.26	0.37	1.16	1.34
Talkshow							
Knevel & vd Brink	39	0.36	0.36	0.05	0.15	0.99	1.33
Infotainment programs							
DWDD	46	0.15	0.28	0.28	0.44	1.43	1.46
RTL Boulevard	12	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.14	1.16	1.38
Pownews	21	0.04	0.12	0.17	0.24	0.41	0.91
Broadsheet newspapers							
Volkskrant	109	0.41	0.35	0.17	0.32	0.44	0.92
NRC Handelsblad	145	0.34	0.35	0.16	0.31	0.29	0.74
Tabloid newspapers							
Telegraaf	109	0.45	0.34	0.12	0.28	0.93	1.30
Algemeen dagblad	77	0.44	0.35	0.08	0.22	0.57	1.06
Free Dailies							
Metro	50	0.37	0.32	0.16	0.29	0.47	0.68
Sp!ts	36	0.35	0.33	0.14	0.33	0.42	0.65

Note. Average media consumption shows the average value of the media consumption variables in the panel data set. N = 765. Scale runs from 0 to 4 where 0 denotes 'never' and 4 '(almost) daily'. Newspaper consumption includes offline and online (websites) newspaper use.

The effect of issue news and poll news on conversion and crystallization is tested with multinomial logistic regression analyses, since the dependent variable has four possible outcomes. In multinomial logistic regression the impact of predictors on the outcome is compared relative to the impact of the predictors on the base category. For theoretical reasons the impact of the variables on the outcome 'conversion' are compared relative to the base category 'stable'. The impact of the variables on the outcome 'crystallization' are compared relative to the base category 'abstention'.[xiii] The estimates for both outcomes are shown in table 2.3.

Table 2.3: The impact of media content on crystallization and conversion.

	Crystallization (versus abstention)		Conversion (versus stable)	
Sex	0.430	(0.382)	0.357	(0.212)
Education	0.049	(0.114)	-0.129	(0.065)*
Age	-0.023	(0.012)*	-0.001	(0.007)
Ideology	0.000	(0.109)	-0.141	(0.054)**
Ideological extremity	-0.132	(0.171)	-0.342	(0.091)***
Political interest	0.528	(0.134)***	0.008	(0.080)
Issue news				
In newspapers	11.648	(5.026)*	3.910	(2.252)
On television	6.476	(3.962)	-5.357	(2.025)**
Poll news				
In newspapers	-30.835	(15.597)*	-11.093	(7.014)
On television	-5.675	(4.125)	5.448	(2.124)*
Intercept	-1.979	(1.170)	0.064	(0.741)
Log Likelihood	-658.463		-658.463	
Nagelkerke R²	.288		.288	

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from multinomial logistic regression models. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. N = 765. *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$.

Hypothesis 1a stated that exposure to issue news has a positive effect on crystallization. Indeed, we find a significant positive effect of issue news in newspapers on crystallization. However the effect of televised issue news on crystallization is insignificant.[xiv] Hence, hypothesis 1a is partly confirmed. More exposure to issue news in newspapers leads to a higher chance that people eventually crystallize their vote choice. So, for voters who are undecided in the last weeks of the election campaign, exposure to issue coverage helps them make up their mind. Hypothesis 1b stated that exposure to issue news has no effect on conversion. On the contrary, we find a significant negative effect of issue news on conversion. Voters who are exposed to issue news on television are less likely to convert, i.e. switch between parties. Hence, hypothesis 1b is not supported. We also find effects for political interest and age on crystallization. The more politically interested are more likely to crystallize than to abstain from voting. And older voters are more likely to abstain from voting than to crystallize their vote choice.

Hypothesis 2a stated that exposure to poll news has a positive effect on crystallization. We actually find the opposite effect: exposure to poll news in newspapers *decreases* the chance of crystallization, and leads undecided voters to abstain from casting a vote. Hence, hypothesis 2a is not supported. Hypothesis 2b stated that exposure to poll news has a positive effect on conversion. Indeed, we find a significant positive effect of exposure to televised poll news on conversion. However, the effect of exposure to poll news in newspapers on conversion is insignificant. Hypothesis 2b is thus partly supported. Voters who are exposed to poll news on television are more likely to switch between parties.[xv] For the other predictors, we find an effect of education, ideology and ideological extremity on conversion. Voters who are lower educated, left-wing, and ideologically less extreme are more prone to convert from one party to another during the campaign than to remain stable.[xvi]

Discussion

The steady increase of electoral volatility over the past decades has inspired many scholars to explain this phenomenon. However, little research has focused on short-term explanations of electoral volatility. Especially the effect of specific media coverage on vote-switching has been understudied. This study examined how exposure to specific media content, issue news and poll news, affects vote change at the individual level. In addition, we distinguished between different types of volatility (conversion and crystallization). The study showed that different kinds of news can lead to different voting decision patterns.

First of all, we find an effect of issue news for both types of vote switching. Whereas issue news exposure decreases conversion, it increases crystallization. Thus, voters with an existing preference rather remain stable than switch their preference when exposed to issue news. Undecided voters eventually crystallize their vote choice in response to issue news exposure. It thus seems that exposure to issue news has a reinforcing role for voters with an existing preference and informational role for undecided voters. Voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign learn about parties' performances and stances on issues in order to get their party choice in line with their attitudes (Arceneaux, 2005; Gelman & King, 1993). These results provide support for the argument that scholars should adopt a broader definition of campaign

effects, including also the informational role of media, when studying the impact of media on voting behavior (Hillygus, 2010).

Secondly, we find a positive effect of exposure to poll news on conversion and a negative effect on crystallization. Thus, exposure to poll news either induces voters to switch parties or to abstain from voting. The finding that poll news increases the chance of conversion is in line with work by Takens (2013), who found that strategic news enhances electoral volatility. Future, experimental research should examine whether this can be explained by the bandwagon effect or by strategic voting (Moy & Rinke, 2012). As for the impact of poll news on crystallization, our results show that it is not the case that poll news provides undecided voters with additional information helping them to crystallize their vote choice by casting a strategic vote. Instead, poll news leads to abstaining from voting. This might be explained by the fact that poll news, as a part of strategic and game news, might induce political cynicism (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010), which in turn leads to demobilization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997) or frustrated vote switching (Zelle, 1995). Future research should further explore these findings, by examining the underlying mechanisms of media effects on volatility.

We also find an effect of political interest on crystallization. The more politically interested voters are more likely to crystallize, and are not more likely to convert. Yet, we did find that highly educated voters are more likely to remain loyal to the same party than to convert to another party. These results are in line with Zaller (1991), who argues that highly politically sophisticated individuals are more apt and motivated to absorb information during campaigns, but not very likely to accept the new information and to consequently change their existing beliefs and preferences. Yet, highly interested voters who are still undecided at the start of the campaign do crystallize their vote choice. They might be searching for additional information until the last moment in order to cast an informed vote (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008).

Understanding the impact of media content on electoral volatility is important for assessing whether it is positive or negative for democracy. It is often argued that electoral volatility leads to an unstable democracy and complicates governability. However, volatility can also be positively interpreted, as a sign of voter emancipation (see Van der Meer et al., 2013). On the one hand, vote switching could be positive if it is based on an informed decision driven by substantive considerations: when voters

crystallize in response to issue news. On the other hand, volatility motivated by peripheral cues, such as polls, could be a signal of indecisive and uninformed voting, leading to arbitrary election outcomes. Still, it is difficult to judge whether the effect of polls, used as a peripheral cue, on vote switching is inherently positive or negative. The influence of polls is often regarded as the latter, as it induces 'heuristic' information processing leading to a bandwagon effect based on irrational considerations (see Hardmeier, 2008) or induces political cynicism leading to frustrated vote switching (Zelle, 1995). However, poll reports can also be used as a guidance for strategic considerations to cast an informed vote. This may lead to volatile voting behavior, which is not per se negative, but also implies voter emancipation.

This study is obviously not without a few shortcomings. First, we only focus on a sample of the information sources available, excluding online sources (although we do include exposure to newspaper websites). Yet, most people tend to visit only the online news sources of the traditional news media, often even combined with using the offline counterpart (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015). We, therefore, assume that including online sources would lead to similar conclusions, because of similar news content. Second, we are restricted to self-reported measures of news exposure, of which accuracy has been questioned (e.g., Prior, 2009). Yet, our study is one of the few that measures news exposure on an individual level, differentiating between different media outlets, which has shown to be a reliable and valid approach (see Dilliplane, Goldman, & Mutz, 2013). Third, one might expect that news exposure has a different impact on crystallization than on conversion. Especially voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign might be influenced by news exposure. They may use media as a source of new information to become more informed and to eventually crystallize their vote choice (e.g., Arceneaux, 2005). Voters who already have a party preference are probably less likely to convert to another party in response to news exposure. One might thus assume the effect of news exposure to be stronger for crystallization than for conversion. This assumption will be further examined in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

Of course, future longitudinal and comparative research is important to substantiate the conclusions of this study. Meanwhile, this study provides support for the idea that scholars should go beyond estimating *the* effect of campaigns and instead investigate in what ways, which campaign news influences vote choice or vote change

(Hillygus, 2010). In particular, this study shows that different kinds of campaign news can have different effects on different types of voting behavior. Whereas some campaign coverage, i.e. poll news, might persuade voters to alter their party choice, other campaign content, i.e. issue news, can affect voting behavior in a more indirect way. Our findings also demonstrate that volatile voters are not necessarily uninterested and ignorant. Electoral volatility might also be a result of a continuing process of voter emancipation, with voters using campaign news as input for substantial deliberation to come to an informed vote choice.

Notes

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[i] Panel attrition does not seem to affect our findings. Most respondents dropped out between May and June. Those are probably respondents who found it too much effort to participate in the whole panel survey. In the other waves the recontact rate is very high. The respondents that we finally included in our study did not differ a lot from the drop-outs on the most important variables, such as political interest and media use.

[ii] One could argue that media effects on volatility already occur earlier in the campaign. Therefore, we tested whether voters also converted or crystallized between t-2 and t-1 after one week of exposure to campaign news. Yet, no significant results were found. This implies that voters change their vote intention only later in the campaign when they have been exposed to a certain degree of campaign news.

[iii] A representative sample (2,250 persons) was selected. The respondent data of the 765 persons who completed the survey in all waves mirror census data by and large in terms of age, gender and education. Older respondents (65-80) are slightly overrepresented in our sample.

[iv] Volatility on the individual level can be operationalized in several ways. Some studies differentiate between changes within and between party blocks (e.g., Kuhn, 2009). Other divide voters in several categories, e.g. stable, change and abstain (Söderlund, 2008). A common method is to construct dummy variables based on whether a voter changes party choice ('1') or not ('0'). Yet, studies differ in which responses they regard as a change (Dassonneville, 2011; Dilliplane, 2014; Van der Meer et al., 2013).

[v] For both the conversion and the crystallization outcome respondents were only assigned a '1' if they actually voted for a party at t. A switch from or to 'other, namely…' from or to another party is treated as a conversion switch. For the crystallization variable we treat a switch from 'don't know', 'blank', 'abstain', and 'refuse' to a party choice as a crystallization switch. Only 'refuse' in the last wave and 'no right to vote' were treated as missing.

[vi] We also wanted to include political cynicism as a control variable, as several studies found that this is an important predictor of volatile voting behaviour (e.g., Adriaansen et al., 2012; Dassonneville, 2011). Yet, due to missing values on this variable we decided to not include political cynicism in the analyses. When we do include political cynicism in the analyses, we find no effects of political cynicism on either crystallization or conversion.

[vii] Recent research has found that people in the middle of the political spectrum are most volatile (Van der Meer et al., 2013).

[viii] Although we only look at vote switching from t-1 to t, it is likely that respondents were already influenced by campaign news that appeared before t-1. Therefore, we include campaign news as from August 22. Since the election campaign started later due to summer recess, we only use content analysis of the last three weeks of the campaign.

[ix] For newspaper reading we also included exposure to newspaper websites.

[x] Although scholars are still debating on the most reliable and valid measure of media exposure, they agree that this measure of exposure per medium overcomes at least some of the limitations of conventional news exposure measures (for a more elaborate discussion see, Bartels, 2008; Dilliplane et al., 2013; Price & Zaller, 1993; Slater, 2007).

[xi] By employing the average exposure to media content instead of the sum, we control for potential overreporting of news exposure (see critcisms on self-reported news exposure measures, Prior, 2009).

[xii] We computed issue news exposure and poll news exposure separately for newspapers and television for two reasons. First, the content analysis for newspapers differs from the content analysis for television programs in its design. Whereas the unit of analysis for newspapers is clearly distinguished by separate news articles, the unit of analysis for television programs is decided upon for each television program based on content and form. Some television programs, like the news, clearly switch between substantial topics. In other television programs the distinction between topics is less clear, and items can be identified by devised interruptions like, for instance, a commercial break. Secondly,

to test whether television programs differ from newspapers in the amount of attention they pay to issue news and poll news, an independent samples *t*-test was performed. The results show that the average attention to issue news was significantly higher (*t*(13) = -2.22, p = .045) in newspapers (*M* = .39, *SD* = .05) than on television (*M* = .25, *SD* = .15). The average attention to poll news is higher on television (*M* = .24, *SD* = .14) than in newspapers (*M* = .14, *SD* = .03), yet this difference is not statistically significant (*t*(13) = 1.68, *p* = .116). However, since we find a significant difference for issue news, and taking into account that the unit of analysis was different for both media, we decided to compute issue news exposure and poll news exposure for newspapers and television separately.

[xiii] As conversion is conceptualized as switching from one party to another, the point of departure in the pre-election wave is 'having a party preference'. Therefore, the other option in the post-election wave opposed to conversion is remaining 'stable'. As crystallization is conceptualized as changing from being undecided to casting a vote for a party, the point of departure in the pre-election wave is 'having no party preference'. Therefore, the other option in the post-election wave opposed to crystallization is 'abstention'.

[xiv] We also estimated multinomial regressions models including general newspaper and television exposure variables (instead of content exposure variables). Neither newspaper exposure, nor television exposure had an effect on either crystallization or conversion. We can thus assume that the media effects we find can be ascribed to the differences in content and not to the differences in media.

[xv] We also estimated multinomial regression models in which issue news exposure and poll news exposure are not separated for newspapers and television. In these models we still find a significant positive effect for issue news on crystallization. However, we find no effects of poll news and on conversion, which is not that surprising as our results show that the effects of both media are contradictory.

[xvi] Since we know that there can be individual-level variation in the way media influences voters (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013; Zaller, 1991), we ran an additional analysis to test the interaction effect between political interest and the media exposure variables. The findings revealed a marginally significant effect of issue news and poll news on conversion for moderately interested voters. Voters with moderate levels of political interest remain when exposed to issue news, but convert to another party when exposed to poll news.

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