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Informed floating voters?

The impact of media on electoral volatility

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Chapter 4

Informed Switchers?

How the Impact of Campaign Exposure on Vote Change Depends on Political Information Efficacy

Abstract

The increase in electoral volatility in European democracies has raised the question whether volatile voters are just randomly switching or actually making more informed vote choices. This study addresses this question by examining the underlying mechanisms through which political campaign exposure influences two types of electoral volatility: crystallization and conversion. Specifically, it examines how political information efficacy and campaign cynicism mediate the impact of campaign exposure on both types of vote change. We use a Dutch panel survey ($N = 1349$), collected during the 2014 European Parliament elections. A structural equation model analysis reveals that campaign exposure positively affects electoral volatility, both directly and indirectly via information efficacy. Both effects were especially pronounced among voters who were undecided at the onset of the campaign.¹

¹ This chapter is under review as: Geers, S., Bos, L., & De Vreese, C.H. (2016). Informed switchers? How the impact of campaign exposure on vote change depends on political information efficacy. *International Journal of Communication*.

Introduction

Scholars have observed an increase in electoral volatility in European democracies over the past decades (Mair, 2008). Not only do voters switch from election to election, but they also change their party preference over the course of the election campaign (Dassonneville, 2011; Van der Meer, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013). Previously, the stability of voter preferences could be predicted by long-term factors, such as socio-demographic characteristics (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). These days, short-term forces, such as exposure to the campaign in the media have become more important for explaining voting behavior (Dalton, 2000).

The current study examines campaign exposure as a short-term factor influencing vote change. Therefore, we only focus on vote switches during one election campaign, so-called intra-election, or campaign volatility. Moreover, we will distinguish between two types of volatility, based on a typology proposed in one of the earliest studies on campaign effects on voter behavior (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). The first type of volatility we will examine is conversion, which refers to ‘switching from one party to another in response to campaign exposure’. The second is crystallization: which is ‘when a voter’s latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign exposure’. Recent studies on electoral volatility have not distinguished between the different types of vote change that Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) initially laid out (for an exception, see chapter 2 of this dissertation).

In chapter 2, we study the impact of specific campaign content on both crystallization and conversion. However, we argue that campaign 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 political campaign 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). We thus expect the effect of campaign exposure to be stronger for crystallization than for conversion. Voters who already have a party preference are probably less likely to convert to another party in response to campaign exposure.

This study aims to clarify whether volatile voters are either well-informed or uninformed, irrational switchers. This question is addressed in two steps: first, we examine to what extent citizens change their vote because of exposure to campaign information. Secondly, we test the psychological mechanisms underlying the impact of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion. In this way, we attempt to unravel whether voters who switch in response to campaign exposure are indeed more informed. One of the underlying explanations we study is political information efficacy, i.e. perceived political knowledge (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007). If voters feel better informed by being exposed to the campaign, and this increase in political information efficacy consequently induces vote switching, we might conclude that these voters are indeed informed switchers.

If the effect of campaign exposure on vote change is not dependent upon information efficacy, this might suggest that volatile voters are in fact uninformed and perhaps switch as a result of media-induced cynicism. Several studies have shown that media can induce cynicism (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jackson, 2011). Other studies have shown that cynicism is an important predictor of vote switching (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011), as voters with lower levels of trust are more likely to switch parties to voice their frustration (Zelle, 1995). In this study we combine the two strands of research and examine to what extent the effect of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion is mediated by cynicism.

The current study uses Dutch panel survey data ($n=1349$), collected during the 2014 European Parliament elections, to investigate the mediating role of political information efficacy and cynicism as mediators in the effect of campaign exposure on two types of electoral volatility: crystallization and conversion. By doing so, this study expands the understanding of mediation models of communication effects (e.g., Jung, Kim, & de Zúñiga, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). To our knowledge, this is the first study examining what role political information efficacy plays in explaining vote change. As such, we extend the research on political information efficacy (e.g., Kaid, et al., 2007), which has mainly focused on its impact on political participation, as well as contribute to the existing literature on individual-level predictors of vote change (e.g., Dassonneville, 2011).

Electoral volatility: Conversion and crystallization

In this study, we distinguish between conversion and crystallization and study effects of campaign exposure on each of these types of volatility. The idea of crystallization was already introduced by Lazarsfeld, et al. (1948), who stated that the election campaign activates voters' political preferences. Rather than changing voters' attitudes and party preferences, campaign information is more likely to bring voters' preferences in line with their ideological predispositions (Finkel, 1993). In a multi-party system like the Netherlands, with small ideological differences between parties, it is not immediately clear which party matches a voter's activated ideological predispositions. Therefore, voters who switch from being undecided to decided, i.e. crystallize, can be regarded as volatile voters too.

In early research studying election campaigns the general accepted view was that campaigns only have minimal effects (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). Campaign effects were defined very narrowly and only when campaign messages persuaded voters to change their vote intention from one party to another, it was regarded as an effect. Yet, results showed (e.g., Berelson et al., 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) that the power of the mass media to *alter* political attitudes and preferences was rather limited. More recent research has, however, broadened the definition of campaign effects beyond the focus on persuasive effects, arguing that campaigns do matter (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996). Besides persuading voters to change their party preference, campaigns may have an informational role helping undecided voters to make up their mind and crystallize their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2005; Gelman & King, 1993; Hillygus, 2010).

Campaign exposure and electoral volatility

Although theoretical perspectives on the link between media and voting behavior differ, 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, Lefevere, & Hooghe, 2010). Third, unlike voters in a 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).

Studies examining the relationship between media exposure and electoral volatility are few and results are scattered and inconclusive (e.g. Baker, Ames, & Renno, 2006; Bybee, McLeod, Luetscher, & Garramone, 1981; Dassonneville, 2011; Forrest & Marks, 1999; Van der Meer et al., 2013). For instance, contrary to their expectations, Bybee and colleagues (1981) found that time spent watching television decreased volatility, whereas frequent newspaper use was associated with higher levels of volatility. Similarly, in a Dutch election study scholars found that readers of certain newspapers are more likely to change vote preferences between elections (Van der Meer, et al., 2013). On the other hand, Dassonneville (2011) found no effects of media exposure on vote switching in the 2009 Belgium elections. In other studies, which focus on explaining campaign volatility, positive effects of media use on volatility are found (Baker, et al., 2006; Forrest & Marks, 1999). So, even though these studies have contributed to our knowledge on the impact of campaign exposure on electoral volatility, prior results regarding this impact are still somewhat ambiguous. Yet, there seems to be a positive relationship between being exposed to more campaign information in the media and vote switching. Therefore we expect that:

H1a: Political campaign exposure increases electoral volatility.

Building on the work of Converse (1962) and Zaller (1992) we investigate whether the impact of political campaign exposure is more pronounced among voters who crystallize their vote during the election campaign or among voters who convert from one party to another. Converse (1962) proposed that those most influenced by the media are either highly stable or highly volatile voters. Highly stable voters, who decide what to vote well before the final weeks of an election campaign, are seen to pay close attention to the media's coverage of the campaign because of their interest in politics.

For them the election campaign has a reinforcing role. In contrast, highly volatile voters use the media as a source of new information to help them make their choice. For them the campaign has a persuading or at least guiding role. (Forrest & Marks, 1999).

According to Zaller (1992) voters with strong existing political attitudes and strong party identification are often already well-informed at the start of the election campaign. Although these voters are more apt and motivated to absorb information during the campaign than less-informed voters, they are not very likely to accept the new information and to consequently change their existing beliefs and preferences. Thus, voters with existing political preferences are less influenced by campaign exposure and rather remain loyal to the same party than convert to another party. Less-informed voters with weak or without prior political preferences, on the other hand, are more likely to accept new information and become more informed during the campaign. Therefore, we expect that especially voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign are influenced by political campaign exposure: i.e., undecided voters who are exposed to the campaign eventually crystallize their vote choice. Instead of deciding to abstain from voting, they decide to turnout on Election Day, and vote for a specific party.

H1b: The effect of political campaign exposure on electoral volatility is stronger for crystallization than for conversion.

Campaign exposure and political information efficacy

To gain a better understanding of whether voters who change party preference in response to campaign exposure are well-informed switchers, this study investigates to what extent campaign exposure affects electoral volatility *indirectly* via political information efficacy. We argue that if paying attention to the campaign in the media leads to a higher level of information efficacy and an individual consequently changes his or her vote, this indicates an informed vote switch.

The concept of political information efficacy was put forward by Kaid and colleagues (2007) and is conceptually linked to general political efficacy. Political

efficacy can be distinguished into two dimensions: external efficacy, defined as “beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizens’ demands” (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991, p. 1407) and internal political efficacy, referring to “beliefs about one’s own competence to understand, and to participate effectively in, politics” (Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1407). The concept of political information efficacy is closely related to internal efficacy and refers to “the voter’s confidence in his or her own political knowledge and its sufficiency to engage in the political process” (Kaid, et al., 2007, p. 1096).

In line with this argumentation, we argue that being exposed to campaign information is a crucial antecedent of political information efficacy. Studies have shown that exposure to political television debates (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007) and television ads (Kaid, Postelnicu, Landreville, LeGrange, & Yun, 2007) can increase political information efficacy. Other studies have shown that different types of news exposure are associated to the related concept of internal efficacy (Jung, Kim, & de Zúñiga, 2011; Möller, De Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014). Based on these findings, we assume that exposure to mediated information about the election campaign leads to increased information efficacy.

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. However, previous research has shown that an individual’s perceived lack of knowledge is a key predictor for non-voting (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2000). Conversely, voters who feel more efficacious are more likely to participate in politics, e.g., turn out on Election Day (Jung et al., 2011).

Especially for undecided voters, who are seeking for information and are uncertain of their party preference, exposure to campaign information might boost the self-assessment of their political knowledge. We know from the literature that voters with a greater sense of political information efficacy are more likely to turnout (Kaid et al., 2007; Möller et al., 2014). In a similar manner, an increase in information efficacy might encourage undecided voters to crystallize their vote choice: i.e., instead of deciding to defect on Election Day, they decide to turnout, and vote for a specific party. Hence, we expect that the effect of campaign exposure on crystallization is mediated by political

information efficacy, such that a higher level of campaign exposure increases political information efficacy, which in turn leads to crystallization. For conversion, on the other hand, it is less evident how information efficacy induces switching between parties. For voters with existing party preferences higher levels of campaign exposure and information efficacy might rather reinforce than change their original voting decision. Therefore, we formulated the following hypothesis and research question:

H2: The effect of political campaign exposure on crystallization is mediated by political information efficacy, in that (a) political campaign exposure increases political information efficacy and (b) political information efficacy leads to crystallization.

RQ1: To what extent is the effect of political campaign exposure on conversion mediated by political information efficacy?

Cynicism as alternative mechanism

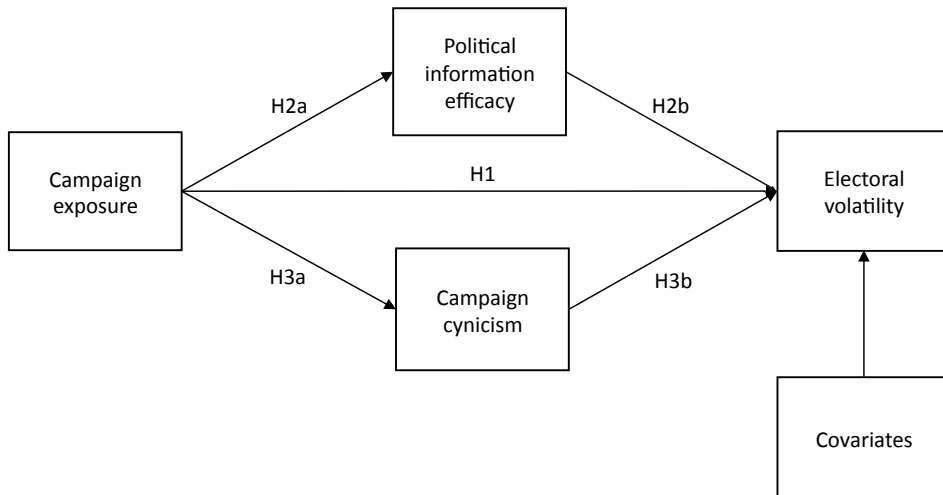
An alternative mechanism explaining the relationship between campaign exposure and vote switching is cynicism. According to the 'frustrated floating voter' hypothesis (Zelle, 1995), voters who are dissatisfied with democracy and have lower levels of trust are more likely to switch parties to voice their frustration. Various recent studies have supported this hypothesis and have shown that political cynicism is an important predictor of vote switching (Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Dassonneville, 2011). 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). Several studies have shown that strategic news coverage induces political cynicism (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2010; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Jackson, 2011).

Although the current study does not specifically examine the effect of strategic news on cynicism and vote switching, content analyses have shown that strategic news has increased at the expense of substantive news (e.g., Lawrence, 2000; Patterson, 1993). Therefore, we can assume that voters who pay attention to the election campaign are

exposed to at least a considerable amount of strategic news. Following the ‘spiral of cynicism’ thesis (Capella & Jamieson, 1997) and the ‘frustrated floating voter’ hypothesis (Zelle, 1995), we can thus expect an indirect effect of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion through cynicism. Whereas some scholars focus on political cynicism in general, others specifically focus on cynicism induced by the campaign. This study examines both political cynicism and campaign cynicism.

H3: The effect of political campaign exposure on electoral volatility is mediated by campaign cynicism, in that (a) political campaign exposure increases campaign cynicism and (b) campaign cynicism leads to crystallization and conversion.

Figure 4.1: Theoretical model of the effect of campaign exposure on volatility.



Method

Research setting

In this study, we focus on the Netherlands, a democratic corporatist country with a multi-party system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This context is relevant for this study as the Netherlands has a high number of parties with small ideological differences between parties (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999), making voters more likely to rely on the media and change their vote intention. Furthermore, it has experienced some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s (Mair, 2008). However, this trend in increased volatility is not unique for the Netherlands, but is observed in most Western European multiparty systems. Hence, in this study, we focus on the campaign of the 2014 European Parliament elections in the Netherlands. Although the salience of EP Elections in the media is typically rather low (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006), the majority of European citizens receive most of their information about the EU and EP elections from traditional news media, such as television news and newspapers. Moreover, EU related news was more prominent in newspaper and television news in the months preceding the EP Elections of May 2014, than it was in previous European elections (Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2016). As such, these elections are a suitable setting for testing hypotheses of campaign exposure and political information efficacy on vote switching.

Data

To test our hypotheses, we rely on a four-wave panel survey in the Netherlands, which is part of the 2014 European Election Campaign Study (De Vreese, Azrout, & Möller, 2014).ⁱ The fieldwork was coordinate by TNS NIPO Netherlands, a research institute that complies with ESOMAR guidelines for survey research. The sample was drawn from the TNS NIPO database. The database consists of 200.000 individuals that were recruited through multiple recruitment strategies, including telephone, face-to-face, and online recruitment. Quotas (on age, gender, and education) were enforced in sampling from the database. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). Respondents were interviewed about six months prior, four

months prior, and one month prior to the May 2014 elections for the European Parliament and immediately after the elections. Fieldwork dates were 13-26th of December 2013 for the first wave, 20 – 30th of March 2014 for the second wave, 17 – 28th of April 2014 for the third wave, and 26 May - 2nd of June 2014 for the fourth wave. A total of 2189 respondents participated in wave one (response rate 78.1%), 1819 respondents participated in wave two (re-contact rate 83.1%), 1537 participated in wave three (re-contact rate 84.5%), and 1379 in wave four (re-contact rate 89.7%). The samples show appropriate distributions in terms of gender, age and education compared to census data.ⁱⁱ We only used the data of the last two waves, since we are interested in the influence of campaign exposure which is only tapped in wave 3 and wave 4.

Measures

The *dependent* variables are based on one variable in the panel dataset measured at two points in time.ⁱⁱⁱ In wave 3 respondents were asked which party they would vote for if European Parliament elections were held tomorrow. In wave 4, the post-election wave, respondents were asked which party they voted for in the European Parliament elections. We constructed three dependent dummy variables: volatility, crystallization and conversion. The dummy variable ‘volatility’ was constructed by assigning each respondent a ‘0’ by default, and a ‘1’ if they changed vote preference between wave 3 and wave 4. We treat a switch from one party to another party, and a switch from ‘don’t know’ or ‘abstain’ to a party as a vote switch. For ‘crystallization’ respondents were assigned a ‘0’ if they responded ‘don’t know’ or ‘abstain’ in wave 4, and a ‘1’ if they changed from ‘don’t know’ or ‘abstain’ to a party preference between wave 3 and wave 4. For ‘conversion’ respondents were assigned a ‘0’ if they reported to vote for the same party in both waves, and a ‘1’ if they changed from one party to another between wave 3 and wave 4.^{iv} Of the 1379 respondents 29% stayed with the same party in both waves, 10% crystallized their vote choice, 14% switched their party preference, and 47% eventually did not turn out on Election Day.

The *independent* variable is campaign exposure. Campaign exposure is measured with three items on a 7-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to daily (7) that asked respondents how often they had seen, read or heard anything about the EP elections

during the past month (Cronbach's alpha = .76, $M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.47$). The exact wording of the items is included in Appendix A.

The *mediating* variable political information efficacy is measured at wave 4 with three items on a 7-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) (Cronbach's alpha = .90, $M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.36$). Campaign cynicism (cynicism induced by the campaign, as opposed to political cynicism) is also measured at wave 4 on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree with five items (Cronbach's alpha = .68, $M = 4.86$, $SD = 0.96$). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high cynicism and low scores meant low cynicism.

We also included several *control* variables, starting with the usual socio-demographic variables, measures at wave 1: age ($M = 49$, $SD = 17$), sex (49.2% male, 50.8% female) and education (measured in 7 categories ranging from 'no education/primary education' to 'master degree', $M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.72$). In addition we controlled for various individual predispositions measured at wave 4. First, political interest, which is measured 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, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.66$). Second, political cynicism, which is the average score of 4 items measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree' (Cronbach's alpha = .82, $M = 4.74$, $SD = 1.24$). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high cynicism and low scores meant low cynicism. Third, political efficacy, which is the average score of 6 items measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree' (Cronbach's alpha = .84, $M = 3.37$, $SD = 1.25$). Scores were converted so that all high scores meant high efficacy and low scores meant low efficacy. Fourth, ideological extremity was measured by recoding ideology 1 through 5 (ideology is measured with a variable tapping left-right placement on a 10-point scale), where '1' denotes being in the middle of the political spectrum, and '5' being either at the left or right extreme end.^v Fifth, we controlled for the likelihood of vote switching by including a dummy variable where respondents were assigned a '1' if they changed vote preference at least once in earlier waves. Lastly, we include political information efficacy at wave 3 as a control variable (Cronbach's alpha = .87, $M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.32$), which is measured with the same items as political information efficacy at wave 4.^{vi} In this way we control for the initial status of political information efficacy of the respondents,

enabling us to assess the influence of the change in political information efficacy at wave 4 on vote switching (Romer & Kenski, 2006).

Data analysis

The hypotheses regarding how political campaign exposure directly affects electoral volatility were tested using logistic regression analyses. To test the indirect effects of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion via political information efficacy and campaign cynicism, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) in Stata 13 using maximum likelihood estimation. A partially latent structural regression model, see figure 4.2, was tested with crystallization and conversion as dependent variables.

Before testing the overall model, first a confirmatory-factor analysis (CFA) measurement model was specified to test for discriminant and convergent validity. The obtained measurement model suggested moderate model fit (Kline, 2011): $\chi^2 (71) = 568.54, p < .001$; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .071 (CI: .066, .077). In general, the data showed no indications of poor discriminant validity, as all cross-factor correlations were beneath the threshold value of .80 (Kline, 2011). However, high correlations between political information efficacy in wave 3 and political information efficacy in wave 4 were observed as they measure the same construct at two different time points; covariances between the error terms of all indicators of information efficacy at wave 3 and 4 were specified. To obtain satisfactory convergent validity, indicators with standardized factor loadings beneath .70 (Kline, 2011), were removed (see Appendix B). After respecifying the measurement model, satisfactory model fit was reached (Kline, 2011): $\chi^2 (35) = 83.82, p < .001$; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .032 (CI: .023, .041).

Results

Table 4.1 first presents the estimates of the logistic regression models testing the direct effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility in general and the estimates for the direct effect of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion. Hypothesis 1a stated that political campaign exposure positively affects electoral volatility. As shown in table 4.1, campaign exposure has a significant positive effect on electoral volatility ($B = 0.171, SE = 0.057, p = 0.003$). This finding provides support

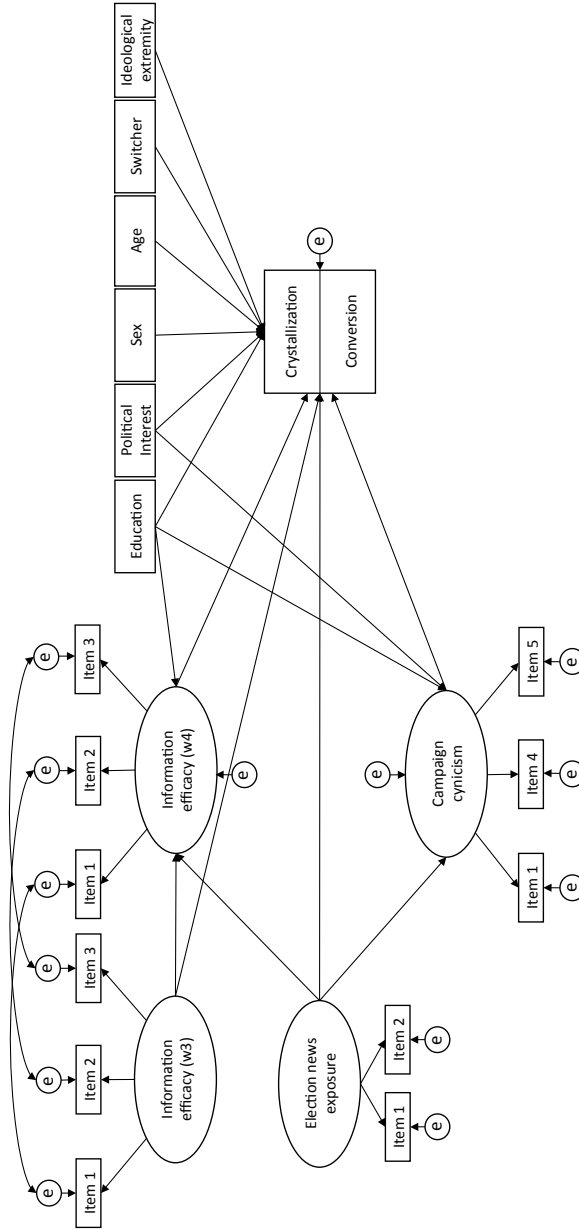
for H1a: exposure to the campaign leads to more vote switching. Hypothesis 1b stated that the effect of political campaign exposure on vote switching is stronger for crystallization than for conversion. First, table 4.1 shows that campaign exposure has a positive and significant effect on crystallization ($B = 0.209$, $SE = 0.087$, $p = 0.017$). Second, no effect of campaign exposure on conversion was found ($B = 0.123$, $SE = 0.086$, $p = 0.152$). These findings provide support for H1b. Only voters who are undecided at the start of the campaign are influenced by campaign exposure. Undecided voters who are exposed to the campaign eventually crystallize their vote choice.

Table 4.1: Logistic regression models for the impact of campaign exposure on electoral volatility, crystallization and conversion.

	Electoral volatility (N=1170)	Crystallization (N=609)	Conversion (N=561)
Campaign exposure	0.171 (0.057)**	0.209 (0.087)*	0.123 (0.086)
Information efficacy (w ₄)	0.172 (0.085)*	0.392 (0.138)**	-0.048 (0.122)
Campaign cynicism	0.020 (0.075)	0.010 (0.127)	0.006 (0.109)
Age	0.001 (0.005)	0.005 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.007)
Sex	0.341 (0.144)*	0.489 (0.240)*	0.190 (0.204)
Education	0.067 (0.045)	0.219 (0.079)**	-0.067 (0.062)
Political interest	0.090 (0.062)	0.283 (0.101)**	-0.089 (0.090)
Political cynicism	-0.027 (0.077)	-0.223 (0.133)	0.140 (0.110)
Political efficacy	0.013 (0.060)	-0.162 (0.109)	0.163 (0.086)
Ideological extremity	-0.002 (0.053)	0.080 (0.084)	-0.176 (0.077)*
Switcher	0.510 (0.143)***	-1.327 (0.308)***	1.315 (0.200)***
Information efficacy (w ₃)	-0.335 (0.084)***	-0.531 (0.143)***	-0.128 (0.121)
Intercept	-2.739 (0.712)	-3.290 (1.234)	-1.459 (1.010)
Log Likelihood	-627.934	-243.201	-313.901
Nagelkerke R ²	0.075	0.229	0.184

Note. Cells contain unstandardized regression weights from logistic regression models. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 4.2: The partially latent structural equation model testing the effect of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy.



The overall structural model is visualized in figure 4.2. This structural regression model estimates the indirect effect of campaign exposure on crystallization and conversion via political information efficacy and campaign cynicism. Before testing the effects related to the hypotheses, it was tested how well the model fitted the data. We first tested a structural regression model which also included political cynicism and political efficacy as covariates.^{vii} However, this model only moderately fitted the data ($\chi^2(236) = 793.75, p < .001$; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .062). Furthermore, table 4.1 shows that neither political cynicism nor political efficacy affects crystallization or conversion. Therefore, these predictors are removed from the model, to retain a more parsimonious model.

To examine whether there is a difference in impact between voters who switch from being undecided to a party preference (crystallization) and voters who switch from one party to another (conversion), two structural equation models were specified with a similar path structure but different outcome variables. The structural model predicting crystallization indicated good model fit: $\chi^2(95) = 187.57, p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .040 (CI: .032, .048). The structural model predicting conversion also fitted the data well: $\chi^2(95) = 170.30, p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .038 (CI: .028, .047). The estimates for the effects of both models are presented in table 4.2 and table 4.3.

Table 4.2: Parameter estimates for the partially latent structural regression model predicting crystallization via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy.

Hyp.	Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>	
1b	Campaign exposure	Crystallization	0.063	0.021	0.003	
2b	Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₄)	Crystallization	0.061	0.024	0.011	
3b	Campaign cynicism	Crystallization	-0.001	0.013	0.944	
	Age	Crystallization	0.000	0.001	0.799	
	Sex	Crystallization	0.066	0.030	0.028	
	Education	Crystallization	0.024	0.010	0.012	
	Political interest	Crystallization	0.024	0.013	0.071	
	Ideological extremity	Crystallization	0.012	0.011	0.266	
	Switcher	Crystallization	-0.148	0.032	0.000	
	Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₃)	Crystallization	-0.076	0.020	0.000	
	2a	Campaign exposure	Information efficacy	0.144	0.046	0.002
		Education	Information efficacy	0.057	0.022	0.009
Political interest		Information efficacy	0.204	0.030	0.000	
Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₃)		Information efficacy	0.475	0.040	0.000	
3a	Campaign exposure	Campaign cynicism	-0.025	0.052	0.624	
	Education	Campaign cynicism	-0.111	0.031	0.001	
Total indirect effects						
2ab	Campaign exposure → Information efficacy	Crystallization	0.009	0.004	0.042	
3ab	Campaign exposure → Campaign cynicism	Crystallization	0.000	0.000	0.944	
Variance accounted for:		Crystallization	R ² = .15			
		Information efficacy	R ² = .62			
		Campaign cynicism	R ² = .03			
Fit indices:		$\chi^2 (95) = 187.57 p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .04 (CI: .032, .048)				

Note. Cells contain unstandardized (*B*) regression weights with standard errors (*SE*) in parentheses and probabilities (*p*).

Table 4.3: Parameter estimates for the partially latent structural regression model predicting conversion via campaign cynicism and political information efficacy.

Hyp.	Independent variable	Dependent variable	<i>B</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>p</i>
1b	Campaign exposure	Conversion	0.049	0.034	0.152
2b	Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₄)	Conversion	0.007	0.039	0.865
3b	Campaign cynicism	Conversion	-0.003	0.019	0.893
	Age	Conversion	-0.001	0.002	0.355
	Sex	Conversion	0.031	0.039	0.425
	Education	Conversion	-0.015	0.012	0.211
	Political interest	Conversion	-0.020	0.019	0.293
	Ideological extremity	Conversion	-0.029	0.014	0.038
	Switcher	Conversion	0.284	0.039	0.000
	Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₃)	Conversion	-0.044	0.038	0.247
2a	Campaign exposure	Information efficacy	0.111	0.046	0.016
	Education	Information efficacy	0.031	0.021	0.131
	Political interest	Information efficacy	0.142	0.034	0.000
	Information efficacy (<i>w</i> ₃)	Information efficacy	0.697	0.048	0.000
3a	Campaign exposure	Campaign cynicism	0.055	0.048	0.254
	Education	Campaign cynicism	-0.118	0.028	0.000
	Total indirect effects				
2ab	Campaign exposure → Information efficacy	Conversion	0.001	0.004	0.865
3ab	Campaign exposure → Campaign cynicism	Conversion	-0.000	0.001	0.894
Variance accounted for:		Conversion	R ² = .13		
		Information efficacy	R ² = .74		
		Campaign cynicism	R ² = .04		
Fit indices:		$\chi^2(95) = 170.30$ $p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .038 (CI: .028, .047)			

Note. Cells contain unstandardized (*B*) regression weights with standard errors (*SE*) in parentheses and probabilities (*p*).

Hypothesis 2 stated that the effect of political campaign exposure on crystallization is mediated by political information efficacy, such that campaign exposure leads to a higher sense of information efficacy, which in turn leads to crystallization. Table 4.2 shows that (H2a) campaign exposure has a positive and significant effect on information efficacy ($B = 0.144$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = 0.002$) and (H2b) information efficacy has a significant positive effect on crystallization ($B = 0.061$, $SE = 0.024$, $p = 0.011$). The indirect effect of campaign exposure on crystallization via information efficacy was also found to be positive and significant ($B = 0.009$, $SE = 0.004$, $p = 0.042$). Still, the direct effect of campaign exposure on crystallization remains significant when the mediating variable is added, indicating partial mediation. These findings provide support for H2a and H2b.^{viii} With regard to the effect on conversion, the question was posed whether the effect of campaign exposure on conversion is mediated by political information efficacy (RQ1). Table 4.3 shows that campaign exposure positively affects information efficacy ($B = 0.111$, $SE = 0.046$, $p = 0.016$). However, no effect of information efficacy on conversion was found ($B = 0.007$, $SE = 0.039$, $p = 0.865$). The indirect effect of campaign exposure on conversion via information efficacy was also insignificant ($B = 0.001$, $SE = 0.004$, $p = 0.865$). This leads to the conclusion that the effect of campaign exposure on conversion is not mediated by information efficacy.

Finally, hypothesis 3 stated that the effect of political campaign exposure on electoral volatility is mediated by campaign cynicism, in that (a) political campaign exposure increases campaign cynicism and (b) campaign cynicism leads to crystallization and conversion. As shown in table 4.2, no significant direct effect of campaign cynicism on crystallization was found ($B = -0.001$, $SE = 0.012$, $p = 0.944$). The effect of campaign exposure on campaign cynicism was also insignificant ($B = -0.025$, $SE = 0.052$, $p = 0.624$). The indirect of campaign exposure on crystallization via campaign cynicism was also insignificant ($B = -0.000$, $SE = 0.000$, $p = 0.944$). Table 4.3 shows that, in the model with conversion as outcome variable, the direct effect of campaign cynicism on conversion ($B = -0.002$, $SE = 0.019$, $p = 0.893$) and the direct effect of campaign exposure on campaign cynicism ($B = 0.055$, $SE = 0.048$, $p = 0.254$) were both insignificant. The indirect of campaign exposure on conversion via campaign cynicism was also insignificant ($B = -0.000$, $SE = 0.001$, $p = 0.894$). Hence, both hypothesis 3a and 3b are rejected.

Discussion

This study focused on the impact of political campaign exposure on two types of electoral volatility: crystallization and conversion, arguing that the effect of campaign exposure is stronger for crystallization than for conversion. We aimed to clarify whether volatile voters are well-informed or uninformed switchers, by examining to what extent vote change is driven by exposure to campaign information and which psychological mechanisms underlie this relationship. Does campaign exposure increase political information efficacy sparking an informed vote switch? Or does campaign exposure induce cynicism leading to random or frustrated vote switching?

First of all, we found that exposure to campaign information induces vote switching. Thus, the more a voter is exposed to campaign information in the media during the last month of the election campaign, the more likely he or she is to change his or her vote intention. While previous studies on the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility have offered mixed and inconclusive findings (e.g., Baker et al., 2006; Bybee, et al., 1981; Dassonneville, 2011), this study adds new evidence to the literature in favor of campaign effects (Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996). Moreover, our results showed that the effect of political campaign exposure was especially pronounced among voters who crystallize their vote during the election campaign, whereas no effect was found for conversion. This is in line with Converse (1962) and Zaller (1992), who argued that voters with strong political attitudes are often well-informed and thus are not very likely to change their existing preferences when exposed to new information. This study shows that especially undecided voters use campaign information to help making their vote choice.

Besides a direct effect of campaign exposure on crystallization, we also found an indirect effect of campaign exposure on crystallization via political information efficacy. For undecided voters, exposure to campaign information seems to boost their feeling of political knowledge. This increase in information efficacy eventually encouraged them to crystallize their vote choice. This finding is in line with prior research on the effect of information efficacy on political participation, which found that voters with a greater sense of political information are more likely to turnout (Kaid et al., 2007; Möller et al., 2014). Since we find that crystallization is driven by exposure to campaign

information and this relationship is explained by higher levels of information, we can thus conclude that these volatile voters are indeed informed switchers. This conclusion is further substantiated by our null findings for political cynicism and campaign cynicism. Whereas the ‘spiral of cynicism’ poses that cynicism is demobilizing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), we do not find that cynicism affects vote switching. The idea that cynical voters switch parties to voice their frustration (Zelle, 1995) is not supported by the current data. As such, this study provides support for a more optimistic view on the role of the media in explaining electoral volatility. Instead of inducing cynicism leading to random or frustrated vote switching, media fulfill an informational role with campaign coverage boosting feelings of political knowledge, which consequently sparks informed vote choices.

Although we find an effect of campaign exposure on crystallization via political information efficacy, we find no effects for conversion. Campaign information does not seem to persuade voters to convert from one party to another. This might suggest that voters who convert their party preference are making an uninformed switch. We do find that ideological extremity influences conversion: voters who are in the middle of the political spectrum are more likely to switch between parties. This is in line with prior research which has shown that volatile voters mainly switch to ideologically similar parties, so-called intra-block volatility (e.g., Van der Meer, Lubbe, Van Elsas, Elff, & Van der Brug, 2012; Walgrave et al., 2010). These findings imply that voters who convert from one party to another are also quite emancipated, choosing between rather similar parties instead of randomly switching to ideologically dissimilar parties (Van der Meer et al., 2013).

In the literature, the importance of political knowledge or political information for the functioning of democratic processes is undisputed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Most models of democracy stress the importance of a citizenry that is informed on political matters and that participates in the political process (Strömbäck, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that a share of the volatile voters are rather informed voters, crystallizing their vote choice after exposure to the campaign due to increased confidence in their political knowledge. As such, this study supports the notion of an informed citizenry and shows that volatile voters are not necessarily harmful for democracy. The question remains whether citizens who *feel* politically informed, actually

possess the political knowledge to make an informed vote choice. In order to come to a correct voting decision, citizens should at least have some degree of political knowledge, besides having confidence in their own political knowledge. Future research could investigate to what extent the level of political information efficacy and the actual level of political knowledge are positively associated, and examine whether both are related to campaign exposure and vote switching in a similar manner.

We know from previous studies that, besides media use in general, specific media content characteristics can induce electoral volatility (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers & Bos, 2016; Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Takens, 2013). Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to examine the effect of specific campaign content, like issue news, horse race and strategic news, on vote switching. Future research should further disentangle the relationship between campaign content characteristics and the mediators in an experimental setting. We can expect that differences in campaign content affect political information efficacy and cynicism differently, leading to different vote decisions. For instance, one could expect that non-substantive media content, like horse race and strategic news, can decrease political information efficacy and accordingly lead to non-voting. On the other hand, exposure to informative content -such as information on policy issues- could lead to increased information efficacy, which subsequently sparks informed voter switching.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature on individual-level predictors of vote change (e.g., Dassonneville, 2011; Van der Meer et al., 2013), as well as extends research on political information efficacy (e.g., Kaid, et al., 2007), by showing that campaign exposure positively affects electoral volatility, both directly and indirectly via information efficacy. Furthermore, the results of this study touch upon the general debate on campaign effects. It shows that exposure to the campaign does not persuade voters to alter their party preference (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). However, the campaign does seem to have an informational role helping undecided voters to crystallize their vote choice (Arceneaux, 2005; Hillygus, 2010).

The question whether volatile voters are randomly switching or making informed vote choices remains interesting for future research. This study shows that distinguishing between different types of vote change is helpful in this regard. Although we find no effects for conversion, we do find that undecided voters who eventually

crystallize their vote choice actually feel more informed. Future studies should further explore which factors drive conversion, and whether these factors indicate random or rather informed vote switching. For now, this study provides a first insight into the mechanisms that underlie the impact of campaign exposure on vote change, which is a fruitful avenue for future research.

Notes

ⁱ Based on previous research one can expect effects of specific media content characteristics on electoral volatility (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Geers & Bos, 2016; Kleinnijenhuis & De Ridder, 1998; Takens, 2013). The 2014 European Election Campaign Study (De Vreese et al., 2014) also included a media content analysis of the election campaign coverage, including content analysis measures of issue news and poll news. Unfortunately, in the current study, we were not able to weight the media exposure measures from the survey with the content analysis measures due to a lack of variance in the content analysis measures.

ⁱⁱ Panel attrition did not lead to a significant difference in the composition of the panel with regard to age, gender. The average level of education has slightly decreased between wave 1 and wave 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ 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 preference ('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).

^{iv} For crystallization, respondents who were stable or changed parties from wave 3 to wave 4 were treated as missing. For conversion, respondents who reported 'abstain' or 'don't know' in either wave 3 or wave 4 were treated as missing.

^v Respondents could also report 'don't know' on the ideology question. These responses are treated as missing, resulting in 209 missing values on the ideological extremity variable.

^{vi} We do not control for campaign cynicism in wave 3, since there was hardly any campaign before wave 3. If we estimate a model in which we do include campaign

cynicism in wave 3 as a control variable, we find a positive effect on campaign cynicism in wave 4 and no direct effect on volatility.

^{vii} We also estimated models with political cynicism as mediator (as opposed to campaign cynicism). Findings revealed that the effect of campaign exposure on electoral volatility is not mediated by political cynicism.

^{viii} We also estimated the models predicting crystallization and conversion using generalized structural equation modelling (GSEM) in Stata. GSEM allows for generalized linear response functions, like the logit function for our binary outcome variables. However, GSEM does not allow tests for goodness of fit and indirect effects. The results produced by the GSEM procedure are similar to the reported results analyzed with SEM.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Question wordings.

	Items
Campaign exposure	<p>How often did you do any of the following during the past month?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. See anything about the European Parliamentary elections on television? 2. Read about the European Parliamentary elections in a newspaper? 3. Hear about the European Parliamentary elections on the radio?
Political information efficacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people. 2. I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country/the EU. 3. If a friend asked me about the EU elections, I feel I would have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for.
Campaign cynicism	<p>During the European Parliamentary election campaign:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. many promises are made that are never kept. 2. politicians make it clear what this election is about. 3. politicians are too concerned with the interests of their own country. 4. politicians are more concerned with their own image than with the future of Europe. 5. politicians are too concerned with their standing in the polls.
Political cynicism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Almost all politicians will betray their ideals or will break their promises when it increases their power. 2. Most politicians are in politics for personal gain. 3. Most politicians are honest with their voters. 4. Most politicians are committed and we should be grateful to them for the work they do.
Political efficacy	<p>People like me don't have any say about what the EU does.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I don't think the EU cares much what people like me think. 2. Having European Parliamentary elections makes the EU pay attention to what people think. 3. People like me don't have any say about what the EU does. 4. I don't think the EU cares much what people like me think. 5. Having European Parliamentary elections makes the EU pay attention to what people think.

Appendix B

Table 2. Factor loadings on the latent constructs.

	CFA measurement model	
	St. estimate	Unst. estimate (SE) ^a
Campaign exposure		
Item 1	0.77	1.00 ^b
Item 2	0.78	1.05 (0.05)
Item 3	0.60	0.80 (0.04)
Political information efficacy (wave 4)		
Item 1	0.87	1.05 (0.03)
Item 2	0.85	1.00 ^b
Item 3	0.87	0.96 (0.02)
Political information efficacy (wave 3)		
Item 1	0.83	0.97 (0.03)
Item 2	0.84	1.00 ^b
Item 3	0.83	0.91 (0.03)
Campaign cynicism		
Item 1	0.82	1.00 ^b
Item 2	0.22	0.26 (0.03)
Item 3	0.17	0.22 (0.04)
Item 4	0.91	1.16 (0.03)
Item 5	0.88	1.07 (0.03)

Note. Cells contain unstandardized and standardized factor loading estimates. Standard errors are reported in parentheses. ^a All factor loadings are significant at $p < .001$. ^b Unit loading indicator constrained to 1.