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**Informed floating voters?**

*The impact of media on electoral volatility*

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## **Chapter 5**

## **Conclusion**

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This dissertation aimed to empirically investigate whether and how campaign information provided by the media influences electoral volatility during election campaigns. Scholars have argued that due to the decline of cleavage politics (Franklin, Mackie, & Valen, 1992), rising levels of education and the expansion of mass media and other information sources, media are more likely to affect voting behavior (Dalton, 1984, 2000). These structural changes have sparked a scholarly debate on whether floating voters are making informed vote choices. Whereas in the past scholars held a pessimistic view on floating voters, arguing that they are uninformed about and uninterested in politics (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948), scholars nowadays also hold a more optimistic view on electoral volatility (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000). This perspective implies an emancipated electorate consisting of informed voters, who make their own independent choices instead of relying on traditional loyalties. In order to judge the extent to which both perspectives hold some truth, one should examine the information to which voters are exposed. The gained insights in this dissertation on how media relate to electoral volatility, contribute to the broader discussion on whether electoral volatility is inherently positive or negative for democracy. In order to contribute to this debate and to get a more complete picture of how media influence volatility, this dissertation not only studied the impact of media exposure on electoral volatility in general, but also examined which kind of campaign information led to which type of switching, through which psychological mechanisms.

This concluding chapter starts with summarizing the findings of the three empirical studies that were conducted to examine the relationship between media and electoral volatility. Thereafter, I will elaborate on the scientific implications of these findings and the normative implications for democracy. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of the studies and directions for future research.

### **Summary of research findings**

*Chapter 2* focused on the impact of issue coverage and poll coverage on two types of campaign volatility: conversion, ‘switching from one party to another in response to campaign exposure’, and crystallization, ‘when a voter’s latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign exposure’. To examine how the

two different types of campaign coverage influence vote switching, an extensive media content analysis was linked to an individual level panel survey during the election campaign of the 2012 Dutch national elections. The results showed that that exposure to issue coverage decreases the chance of conversion, whereas it increases the chance of crystallization. Thus, voters with an existing preference rather remain stable than switch their preference when exposed to issue coverage. Undecided voters eventually crystallize their vote choice in response to issue coverage exposure. Conversely, the findings revealed that exposure to poll coverage increases the chance of conversion, whereas it decreases the chance of crystallization. Thus, exposure to poll coverage either induces voters to switch parties or to abstain from voting.

*Chapter 3* examined the effect of issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news on vote switching between parties. Whereas the study in *Chapter 2* investigated how campaign coverage *in general* affects vote switching *in general*, this study particularly focused on how coverage on *specific* issues and the visibility and evaluations of *specific* parties in news coverage affect vote switching to a *specific* party. To do so, *Chapter 3* also relied on a combination of media content analysis data and panel survey data during the 2012 Dutch national elections. The use of a stacked data set with a voter-party combination as unit of analysis allowed to examine which voters change to which party at the individual level. The findings revealed that issues in the news lead to vote change in the direction of the party that owns the issue. Even stronger was the effect of party visibility on vote switching between parties: more exposure to news about a party, increases switching to that party. The results, however, show the strongest support for the effect of party evaluations on vote change, in that more favorable news about a party increases switching to that party.

In *Chapter 4* the underlying mechanisms of the effect of campaign exposure on two types of electoral volatility, conversion and crystallization, were investigated. This study examined how campaign exposure affects vote switching directly, and indirectly via political information efficacy and political cynicism. In order to do so, it relied on a panel survey conducted during the election campaign of the 2014 European Parliamentary elections in the Netherlands. Structural equation modeling revealed that campaign exposure positively affects crystallization, both directly and indirectly via information efficacy. Thus, for undecided voters, exposure to campaign information

seems to boost their feeling of political knowledge. This increase in information efficacy eventually encourages them to crystallize their vote choice. As for the impact of campaign exposure on conversion, no effects were found, neither directly nor indirectly. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the effect of campaign exposure on both conversion and crystallization is not mediated by political cynicism.

In sum, media have been shown to influence electoral volatility at the individual level both directly and indirectly. The studies in this dissertation have shown that the question as to *how* media affect electoral volatility during election campaigns depends on the type of media content that voters are exposed to, and on the type of volatility. In the next section I will discuss the scientific and normative implications of the empirical findings in this dissertation.

## Discussion

The main aim of this dissertation was to shed light on how media influence electoral volatility. In this discussion I will use the gained insights to reflect on the question whether volatile voters are randomly floating or rather making informed vote choices. I will do so by discussing the normative implications of the findings concerning the three central aspects of this dissertation: first, the type of information that induces vote switching; second, the type of vote switching that media exposure induces; and third, the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility.

### Type of information: Campaign coverage and vote switching

With regard to the first, the findings in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3* of this dissertation showed that different kinds of campaign coverage induce vote switching in a different manner. *Chapter 2* showed that both issue coverage and poll coverage influence vote switching, but in a different way. Whereas issue coverage led either to crystallization for undecided voters or to a stable preference for voters with an existing party preference, poll coverage led either to conversion from one party to another or to abstention for undecided voters. These findings are largely replicated in *Chapter 3*, in which the impact of campaign coverage on electoral volatility was studied more in-depth, by examining

how *specific* issues in the news, and the visibility and evaluations of *specific* parties in the news lead to switching to a *specific* party. The finding in *Chapter 3* that issues in the news lead to vote change in the direction of the party that owns the issue, indicates, similar to the finding in *Chapter 2*, that voters are guided by substantive issue information in their voting decision and thus make an informed vote switch. Especially 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). However, the results in *Chapter 3* showed that the effect of party visibility on vote switching between parties is stronger than the effects of issues in the news. Moreover, the strongest support was found for the effect of party evaluations on vote change. This latter finding is consistent with the finding in *Chapter 2*, which shows that poll coverage leads to conversion, and findings in previous research (Adriaansen, Van Praag, & De Vreese, 2012; Takens, 2013) that poll and strategic coverage in general, by evaluating the performance of parties, leads to volatile voter behavior.

To what extent do these results indicate informed or uninformed vote switching? In the introductory chapter I distinguished between media coverage governed by media logic and media coverage guided by political (or public) logic. Whereas media logic takes shape in the content of political news coverage by focusing on the horse race and a more interpretative style of reporting (Strömbäck & Dimitrova, 2011; Takens, 2013), a political (or public) logic is expressed in more substantive issue coverage and a more descriptive journalistic style. Especially the latter contributes to a healthy democratic process (Brants & Van Praag, 2006). The findings on which type of information leads to electoral volatility, give an indication of which kind of logic influences citizens most. The findings in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*, that exposure to issues in the news induces volatile voting behavior, suggest that citizens are influenced by content based on political (or public) logic. However, the findings in both chapters also showed that poll coverage in general, and visibility and evaluations of parties in the news in particular, lead to vote switching. Thus, media coverage guided by a media logic also seems to have an impact on electoral volatility. One could even argue that media logic has a dominant influence (over political logic), since the strongest support was found for the effect of party evaluations on vote change.

How should these findings be interpreted according to the different models of democracy? Strömbäck (2005) argues that the extent to which the increase in game-framed news coverage, at the expense of policy framed news coverage due to the emergence of media logic (Patterson, 1993), is problematic also depends on the perspective on democracy. From the perspectives of the participatory and deliberative models of democracy, a focus on strategic or game news coverage is problematic for two reasons. First, it does not provide citizens with the information they need about the issues at stake. Second, research has shown that game-framed news coverage induces cynicism and political distrust (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). From the perspective of the competitive model of democracy, game-framed news coverage might also be criticized since it does not focus enough on the issues. Yet, according to this model, it is considered only a minor problem, as people should be treated as spectators rather than active participants of politics. According to the procedural model of democracy, an increase in strategic and game news coverage is simply not a democratic problem at all (Strömbäck, 2005), since the only normative requirement of this model is that politicians and citizens adhere to certain democratic rules and procedures like free and fair elections. Porto (2007) takes a different perspective on the matter, departing from the 'interpreting' citizen model of citizen competence. According to this model, voters can fulfill the expectations of democratic theory if these expectations are understood in terms of "citizens' ability to interpret political reality, as opposed to the demand of being well-informed" (Porto, 2007, p. 312). Whereas the informed citizen bases her or his vote on what she or he believes are the most important issues, the interpreting citizen uses evaluative information as an effective shortcut to interpret political reality and form preferences. In a complex information environment and in a party system with multiple possible choices, it is not an easy task to process all available information. In this situation people can rely on heuristics, as these are "apparently quite useful in the most difficult choice situations, where cognitive limited voters need all the help they can get" (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006, p. 252). This means that if evaluations in the media function as a running tally, voters could still come to a 'correct' vote (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). Here, a correct vote decision is defined as "one that is the same as the choice that would have been made under conditions of full information." (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006, p. 75). However, although heuristics improve the decision quality of



experts, they do little to improve the decision making of novices. As research has shown that a large part of the electorate is disinterested in and unknowledgeable about politics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), heuristic use might not lead to a well-informed voting decision for all citizens.

From a psychological perspective, the extent to which citizens making informed vote choices depends on how voters use campaign information in the decision making process (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006). The findings that poll coverage leads to either conversion or abstention might suggest uninformed vote switching. Poll coverage as a part of strategic and game news coverage, might induce political cynicism (Jackson, 2011; Valentino, Beckmann, & Buhr, 2001), which in turn either leads to demobilization (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), and thus abstention from voting, or to frustrated vote switching (Zelle, 1995), and thus conversion. Conversion motivated by peripheral cues, such as poll coverage or party evaluations in the news, could signal that volatile voters are indecisive and uninformed (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), making random vote changes, using media's evaluation of a party as a heuristic to vote for or against a party. Still, it is difficult to judge whether the effect of poll coverage and evaluative coverage on conversion is inherently positive or negative. If exposure to poll coverage induces heuristic information processing leading to a bandwagon effect based on irrational considerations (Hardmeier, 2008), this is regarded as negative. However, polls can also be used as a guidance for strategic considerations to cast an informed vote (Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008), which leads to informed volatile voting behavior. Alternatively, if vote switching is based on an informed decision driven by substantive considerations related to issue coverage, it could be considered to be positive. The findings in this dissertation that issue news leads to vote change suggest that voters use this information for substantial deliberation to come to an informed vote choice. Yet, voters who base their vote choice mainly on issue news, do not necessarily use this information substantively in the decision making process. An issue discussed in the news could merely function as a symbolic issue. In contrast to hard issues, symbolic issues are affectively charged and contain little substantive information on the possible desirable end states and the various policies to achieve these ends (Wojcieszak, 2014). For these issues voters are more guided by the moral value attached to the issue than the substantial arguments for or against a certain policy.

In sum, the findings on the type of information that induces vote switching provide a mixed answer to the question as to whether volatile voters are making informed vote choices. The fact that both issue coverage and poll coverage induce vote switching supports both the assumption of informed voting behavior, as well as the assumption of random and uniformed vote switching. Yet, the finding in *Chapter 3* that party evaluations have the strongest effect on vote switching might be worrisome from the normative perspective that voters should be well-informed on policy issues and consider their vote rationally.

### Type of vote switching: Crystallization and conversion

The second aspect that was studied to understand *how* voters change is the type of vote switch they make in response to campaign exposure. Did exposure to campaign information help undecided voters to make a vote choice (crystallization), or did it persuade voters to change their party preference (conversion)? Both in *Chapter 2* and in *Chapter 4* the distinction between crystallization and conversion as two types of campaign volatility was made. In *Chapter 2* campaign effects were found for both crystallization and conversion. Whereas undecided voters crystallized their vote choice in response to issue coverage, voters with an existing preference converted to another party in response to poll coverage. These findings suggest that media fulfill an informational role in helping undecided voters to make up their mind, as well as a persuasive role with poll coverage prompting voters to alter their party preference. Whether conversion induced by exposure to poll coverage is bad or good from a normative perspective depends on whether it is a result of a bandwagon effect (Hardmeier, 2008) or political cynicism (Zelle, 1995); or whether it is a result of strategic voting (Meffert & Gschwend, 2011). In *Chapter 4* campaign effects were only found for crystallization and not for conversion. This further substantiates the conclusion that media mainly fulfill an informational role for undecided voters who crystallize their vote choice when exposed to campaign coverage. The finding in *Chapter 4* that campaign information does not seem to persuade voters to convert to one party to another, might suggest that voters who convert their party preference are making an uninformed vote switch, as they apparently switch based on other factors than information. One of the main factors that explained conversion in both *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 4* was ideological

extremity, which refers to the extent to which voters are in the middle of the political spectrum or at the left or right extreme end. The findings revealed that 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, Lefevere, & Hooghe, 2010). This suggests 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, Van Elsas, Lubbe, & Van der Brug, 2013). Moreover, it has to be noted that the findings in this dissertation show that conversion in response to campaign exposure is less prevalent than crystallization in response to campaign exposure. These results are largely in line with the original study by Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1948) who concluded that “some people *were* converted by campaign propaganda, but they were *few indeed*” (p. 94), instead most people did not change their mind over the course of the campaign. The voters that did change their mind were considered random floating voters (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), uninformed about and uninterested in politics. In this dissertation I draw a more nuanced conclusion. Although, still a large share of the electorate remains stable during the campaign and a smaller share converts to other parties due to campaign exposure, the findings demonstrate that volatile voters are not necessarily uninterested and ignorant. The campaign mainly seems to affect undecided voters who use media as a source of information to crystallize their vote. These floating voters are not uninterested and ignorant, but rather making informed vote choices.

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

The third and last aspect that was examined to gain a better understanding of *why* voters change their vote intention, is the psychological mechanism that underlies the relationship between campaign exposure and electoral volatility. The findings help to unravel whether voters who switch in response to campaign exposure are indeed more informed. One of the underlying explanations under study was 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, this might indicate 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 (or possibly for another reason). Especially since cynicism seems to be negatively correlated with information efficacy (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 1998), as cynical citizens tend to feel less confident to engage in the political process. The findings in *Chapter 4* showed that exposure to campaign information boost the feeling of political knowledge for undecided voters. 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, De Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014). Furthermore, this confirms the findings and conclusion in *Chapter 2* that voters who are undecided and crystallize in response to campaign coverage indeed have stronger feelings of being informed. Since the findings show that crystallization is driven by exposure to campaign information and this relationship is explained by higher levels of information, it can be concluded that these volatile voters are indeed informed switchers. This conclusion is further substantiated by the null findings for the impact of political cynicism and campaign cynicism. Whereas the ‘spiral of cynicism’ poses that cynicism is demobilizing (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), no effects of cynicism on vote switching were found. The idea that cynical voters switch parties to voice their frustration (Zelle, 1995) is not supported by the data in this dissertation. These findings provide 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.

### **Are volatile voters uninformed floaters or informed switchers?**

The answer to the above question is a mixed one. There is not one clear answer, as there is truth in both the pessimistic and the optimistic perspective. The studies in this dissertation show that there is a share of the electorate that converts to other parties

during the election campaign, but whose switch cannot be explained by exposure to campaign information. There is a smaller share of converters that is influenced by campaign exposure, but mostly by non-substantive information like poll coverage and party evaluations. These findings support the pessimistic view that floating voters are uninformed about politics. However, the findings in this dissertation have also shown that there is a share of, mainly undecided, voters who crystallize their vote choice in response to campaign exposure. These voters crystallize in response to more substantive information, like issue coverage, and report higher levels of information efficacy. These findings support the more optimistic perspective that media have an informational role and that volatile voters are making informed vote choices. Thus, there is no clear-cut one-sided support for either of the perspectives. At least this dissertation shows that widespread idea of *randomly* floating voters – which is the general idea in earlier research as well as the common thought in society - should be nuanced, as it also provides support for the more recent developed perspective of emancipated voters. Yet, the question on whether electoral volatility is good or bad for democracy remains a delicate one. By no means do I intend to claim to have the entire answer to this question. It should be noted that the empirical studies in this dissertation do not directly answer the question on whether or not voters are informed. Rather they answer the question on whether and how media affects electoral volatility. Nevertheless, the findings are very relevant to the normative discussion. They fuel the normative debate with new insights and underline the importance of investigating the supply of information and the processing of information in electoral research, to get at a better understanding of whether voters are making informed choices.

This dissertation departed from the normative perspective that in a well-functioning representative democracy citizens are expected to consider their vote rationally and to be well-informed about relevant policy issues. The findings of this dissertation do not point to a crisis of representative democracy. Although there are some voters who seem to be uninformed floaters, there is still a large part of the electorate which either remains stable or eventually make up their mind by informing themselves on important political issues. Electoral volatility might thus 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.

## Limitations

This dissertation has made several contributions to the literature on electoral volatility and the literature on campaign and media effects. However, inevitably, the results in this dissertation come with some limitations. In this section, I will discuss the general shortcomings of the dissertation.

First of all, with this dissertation I aimed to provide insights into how and why citizens change their vote intention in response to campaign exposure. I did so by examining the type of switching and examining the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of media on electoral volatility. One of the mediating mechanisms that this dissertation did not investigate is interpersonal communication. However, according to the two-step-flow of communication, citizens who are not exposed to media can still be influenced indirectly by means of interpersonal communication about newspaper articles or programs on television or radio (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). A mass public composed of relatively uninformed citizens can still act as if it was fully informed, since “ideas often flow *from* radio and print *to* the opinion leaders and *from* them to the less active sections of the population” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948, p. 151). As interpersonal communication is potentially more influential than the formal media of communication, since it has certain psychological advantages over formal media, it would be interesting to assess its mediating influence on the effect of media exposure on electoral volatility. Furthermore, to get an even better understanding of the conditionality of media effects on voter behavior, it is important to consider individual differences between voters. I agree with Hillygus (2010), that “...scholars should move beyond trying to estimate the effect of campaigns, and instead should study for whom, when and in what ways campaigns matter” (Hillygus 2010, p. 328). Therefore, future research should take individual level variations into account, by examining whether the effect of media on electoral volatility is moderated by individual predispositions like age, partisanship and political sophistication.

Secondly, this dissertation aimed to incorporate the influence of specific media content on electoral volatility in the analyses. This was done by linking content analysis data to panel survey data. However, due to restrictions in the data or the study design, not every study could incorporate media content in a similar fashion. The study

described in *Chapter 2* included the different kinds of campaign content separately for newspaper and television. The study described in *Chapter 3* does not separate between newspaper and television. This would make the study design too complex as the content characteristics in this study are already grouped in separate parties and separate issues. In the last study, *Chapter 4*, media content is not incorporated at all, since there was a lack of variance in the content analysis measures. One could argue that the absence of media content, or the different ways of including media content in the analyses, hinders the comparability across studies. However, I argue that the main conclusions for at least *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3* remain similar and comparable, since the focus is on the effect of specific media content and not on the effect of different media (outlets). Furthermore, one can expect similar effects for the study in *Chapter 4* if media could have been included. More specifically, one 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, decreases political information efficacy and increases political cynicism and accordingly leads 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 vote switching. It would be an interesting step for future research to further disentangle the relationship between campaign content characteristics and these mediators.

Thirdly, with regard to the studies described in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*, the rich data allows for testing the hypotheses in a real life setting. However, it remains difficult to isolate the independent impact of the separate content characteristics with observational data. Future research should therefore test the hypotheses in an experimental study in which the different aspects (evaluations, issues and parties/candidates) are manipulated both in absence and presence of each other. Such an experimental design would also allow a test of the stages of agenda setting, (affective) priming, issue ownership and voting, and an investigation of the extent to which voters are involved in the rational cognitive processing of (non)-substantive information. Nevertheless, for the study of electoral volatility panel survey data are preferred above experimental data, as it allows for the measurement of *changes* in voting behavior. Furthermore, in contrast to experimental data, panel survey data are measured in a real

world setting, leading to higher external validity and generalizability (Kinder, 2007). Whereas experiments involve forced exposure to specific media content, in the real world media exposure varies considerably among individuals, depending on the specific media outlets they use. This dissertation has taken this variation into account by linking media content analysis data to panel survey data on the individual level, allowing to examine the micro level effect of exposure to specific media content on vote switching.

Fourthly, it could be considered a limitation that this dissertation primarily focuses on two elections in one country. However, this single country research setting ensures high validity, the opportunity for more in-depth research, and overcomes the problem of heterogeneity of cases (Gerring, 2006). Besides, the Dutch context is an appropriate setting for investigating the impact of media exposure on vote switching, since the Netherlands is characterized by high levels of electoral volatility (Mair, 2008), and a large number of political parties with small ideological differences between parties (Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). Therefore, voters in multi-party systems like the Netherlands, need to learn much more to get their vote in line with their interests, making them more likely to rely on the media and to change their vote intention. These considerations make the Dutch case a most likely case (Gerring, 2006) to find media and volatility effects. This raises the question whether the results would be replicated in other settings with a lower number of political parties to choose from and where volatility is not saturated yet, leaving more space for electoral volatility. Nevertheless, the Netherlands is a typical example of Hallin and Machini's (2004) democratic corporatist media system and exemplifies a multi-party system with an open structure of party competition (Mair, 2002). Therefore, one can assume that the findings also extend to at least central and northern European countries. Future, comparative studies could test this by including more countries.

### **Directions for future research**

Beyond the research suggested by the limitations, I will give some first leads for a number of other directions for future research. The first relates to the conditionality of media effects, which I already referred to in the limitations. I argue that especially for political sophistication, often operationalized as political knowledge or political interest, one can expect moderating effects (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Converse, 1964; Price &



Zaller, 1993; Zaller, 1991). In *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3* additional analyses were run to test the interaction effect of political interest and media exposure, but the findings were mixed and inconclusive. Nevertheless, following Zaller (1991), one can assume that low and highly politically sophisticated voters differ in how they are influenced by information. Zaller argues that the highly politically sophisticated will probably not be persuaded by campaign information to convert their party preference. However, highly sophisticated voters who are still undecided at the start of the campaign might crystallize their vote choice in response to campaign information. Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008) argued that late deciding voters may include more sophisticated voters, who are searching for additional information until the last moment in order to cast an informed vote. This information might either be issue news, to learn about parties' performances and issue positions; or poll news, used as a guidance for strategic considerations. With regard to less politically sophisticated voters, Schmitt-Beck and Partheymüller (2012) claim that less sophisticated voters are not motivated to extensively absorb campaign information for substantive considerations and only make up their minds short before Election Day when the decision can no longer be postponed. Although they may not intensively absorb complex campaign information, such as issue news, they might pay attention to more simple campaign cues, such as polls. Polls can function as a peripheral cue for which interest in and understanding of the information is not necessary in order to receive and accept it (Hardmeier, 2008; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Since less politically sophisticated voters are more likely to change their existing preferences once they are exposed to campaign information (Zaller, 1991), it seems reasonable to assume that for voters with low levels of political sophistication, as opposed to highly sophisticated voters, poll news exposure might lead to conversion. It would be interesting if scholars could test these assumptions in future research.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to include more than two election campaigns, gaining more insight into the long-term changing relationship between media and political behavior. Such a longitudinal setup would especially allow for studying the development of electoral volatility over time and test whether the process of 'mediatization of politics' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck & Esser, 2009), as a shift from political logic to media logic, is related to this development. Furthermore, including multiple elections on different levels of government, gives more insight into

the differences in effects in information rich and information poor contexts. For instance, the study in *Chapter 4* is conducted in the context of the 2014 European Parliament elections. These elections are characterized by lower turnout rates (Franklin, 2014) and lower media coverage (De Vreese, Banducci, Semetko, & Boomgaarden, 2006) than national elections. Therefore, one could wonder whether our findings would be different for national elections, where turnout and media coverage is usually higher. A recent study on the effects of campaign activities on electoral participation showed that effects were rather similar in first- and second-order elections, although baseline levels of turnout were higher at general elections (Trumm & Sudulich, 2016). Future, comparative, studies could test whether this also holds for the effect of the campaign on electoral volatility. In a similar vein, the studies described in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3* are conducted in the information rich context of national elections, making campaign and media effects more likely to occur. In such an information rich election context one could also expect higher levels of political information efficacy than in an information poor context. It would thus be interesting to test the hypotheses in this dissertation in different elections at the municipal, national and supra-national level with varying levels of information richness.

Lastly, this dissertation focused on the effect of traditional media (newspaper and television) on electoral volatility. As such, it can be regarded as a very classical media study. Yet, it would also be interesting to study new dynamics in the new media environment. Ever since the internet became available for the general public in the 1990's, there have been two opposing views on whether and how online media can contribute to democratization, citizen competence and citizen engagement. On the one hand there are scholars who argue that online media have the potential to mobilize citizens to become more politically sophisticated (Hirzalla, van Zoonen, & de Ridder, 2010; Kenski & Stroud, 2006). On the other hand there are scholars who believe that the expansion of media choice maintains or even exacerbates the knowledge gap in the electorate (Norris, 2001; Prior, 2007). The jury is still out on the extent to which internet matters. Thus far, studies have mainly focused on web effects on political knowledge, engagement and participation (e.g., Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegthart, & de Vreese, 2014; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). A meta-analysis of research on the impact of internet use on political engagement does not provide support for the

argument that internet use contributes to civic decline, but suggests that there is a small positive effect of internet use on engagement (Boulianne, 2009). Fewer studies have examined web effects on electoral support, showing that using social media (Twitter and Facebook) is positively correlated with electoral support (Kruikemeier, 2014; Spierings & Jacobs, 2014; Williams & Gulati, 2006), and that parties who have a website gain votes during an election campaign (e.g., Gibson & McAllister, 2011).

Studies on the effect of internet on electoral volatility are even scarcer, even though the online media environment has the potential to induce voter uncertainty and vote switching considering the increasing volume and diversity of political information on the internet. Only one study has shown that the use of internet as a source of political information can increase voters' electoral uncertainty, which is closely related to electoral volatility (Sudulich, Wall, & Baccini, 2014). Internet use can affect electoral volatility in two directions. On the one hand, scholars argue that the internet facilitates selective exposure, as it offers voters the opportunity to choose political information which is tailored to their prior preferences (Mutz & Martin, 2001). This re-enforces voters pre-existing ideological predispositions and thus lowers the level of electoral volatility. On the other hand, scholars argue that the diversity of online information and the ease with which multiple websites can be accessed, makes the internet a platform in which voters are exposed to alternative opinions that challenge their pre-existing beliefs (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2013; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). This makes voters more open to alternative political options, increasing the chance of vote switching.

Furthermore, online (social) media have features that offline media do not, like interactivity (Kruikemeier, 2014). Specific interactivity features, such as liking or sharing a post on Facebook or retweeting a message on Twitter, might substitute the effect of (the coverage of) polls on voting behavior. Whereas polls, based on preferences of a distant public, might induce a bandwagon effect (Schmitt-Beck, 1996) which leads to vote switching, the expressed preferences for a certain party or candidate by close friends on social media might be much more influential (Bond et al., 2012). A more specific online platform that has the potential to induce electoral volatility are Voting Advice Applications (VAA). VAA's, like the Dutch *Stemwijzer* and *Kieskompas*, offer users personalized voting advice based on a match between the user's issue preferences

and the issue positions of parties on salient political issues. From the normative perspective that democratic citizens are expected to consider their vote rationally and to be well-informed about relevant policy issues, the use of VAA's might enhance the quality of voting decisions, considering its strong focus on political issues. The use of VAA's may induce electoral volatility, since "the comparative element of the tool enables voters to systematically evaluate the electoral choice set, and possibly discover vote options or alternatives that have not been considered before" (Pianzola, 2014, p. 654). With a few exceptions (Enyedi, 2015; Walgrave, van Aelst, & Nuytemans, 2008) most studies have found an effect of obtaining VAA advice on vote switching (Kleinnijenhuis, Scholten, & Van Atteveldt, 2007; Ladner, Fivaz, & Pianzola, 2012; Pianzola, 2014; Wall, Krouwel, & Vitiello, 2014). Future studies could examine whether obtaining VAA advice is more likely to result in crystallization or conversion. One could especially expect effects for crystallization as a recent study showed that doubting voters are influenced most heavily by VAA advice (Kleinnijenhuis, Van de Pol, Van Hoof, & Krouwel, 2014).

What does today's information environment mean for the effect of information on the type of vote switching? Some scholars argue that the internet increases selective exposure (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Pariser, 2011), whereas others argue that the internet decreases it or has no clear causal relationship with it, for reasons mentioned above (Garrett, 2009; Messing & Westwood, 2012). The extent to which internet leads to political selective exposure has important consequences for the existence of conversion or crystallization effects. A recent article argues that it is rather the customizability (or personalization) on the internet, than merely internet use in general that leads to greater levels of selective exposure (Dylko, 2015). The customizability technology enables users or internet platforms to modify users' personal information environment to a selection of sources and topics, in order to control the abundance of available information. This personalization creates 'filter bubbles' in which users are selectively exposed to information that reflects their prior dispositions (Pariser, 2011). If voters no longer receive counter-attitudinal content and thus are not sufficiently exposed to conversion efforts, this might be the end of conversion. In fact, these filter bubbles in which users are exposed to the same (ideological) content over and over again might only induce crystallization and reinforcement effects, which might pave the

way for political polarization (Stroud, 2010) or lead to the return of (digital) pillarization. However, although customizability facilitates the process of selecting information based on users' long term content preferences (Dylko, 2015), its implications are different from searching for information. Especially during election times, other temporary considerations may arise, making voters search for information which is incongruent with their initial dispositions and preferences; for instance by making use of the VAA's discussed earlier. This might especially be the case for highly sophisticated voters who are driven by accuracy motivations to make an informed voting decision. Which features of future information environment and future media technology lead to what sort of exposure with what kind of consequences, will be an exciting avenue for future research.

Although future research might establish a growing impact of online media on political behavior, the findings in current studies are still modest. Although several studies have found positive effects of online media on political behavior, thus far, the effects have often only been small (for an overview, see Boulianne, 2009, 2015). It has been argued that parties often use social media to capture mainstream media coverage (Gibson & McAllister, 2011), implying that the effects of 'old' media are still substantial (Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). After all, journalists are among the most active users of social media (Spierings & Jacobs, 2014). Furthermore, research has shown that most citizens tend to visit only the online news sources of the traditional news media, often even combined with using the offline counterpart (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015). For both reasons, one can expect that including online sources, because of similar content, would lead to similar conclusions as the ones reached in this dissertation. This suggests that the findings of the media studies in this dissertation are still highly relevant in the current media environment.

### **Final remarks**

This dissertation contributes both to the research on electoral volatility and to the literature on media and campaign effects. It extends earlier political scientific research on electoral volatility, which mainly focused on individual predispositions in explaining vote change and paid little attention to campaign coverage as a possible explanation for vote switching (Dassonneville, 2015; Kuhn, 2009; Van der Meer et al., 2013). It also

enhances the study of electoral volatility by differentiating between different types of volatility, following the typology made in the original study by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948). Recent studies rarely distinguish between these different kind of effects (exceptions included, Dilliplane, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008), while the studies in this dissertation show that exposure to different kinds of media coverage can have different effects on different types of voting behavior. As such, this dissertation also contributes to the literature on media and campaign effects. Whereas in the early days scholars were convinced that campaigns only have minimal effects on voting behavior (Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948), more and more scholars nowadays argue that campaigns do matter (Brady, Johnston, & Sides, 2006; Farrell & Schmitt-Beck, 2002; Holbrook, 1996), in part because they have adopted a broader definition of campaign effects. Furthermore, this dissertation contributes to the expansion of mediating models of communication effects by examining two psychological mechanisms which help explain how campaign exposure affects voting behavior (e.g., Cho et al., 2009; Jung, Kim, & de Zúñiga, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). The findings in this dissertation provide support for the idea that scholars should go beyond estimating *the* effect of campaign and instead investigate in what ways, which campaign coverage influences which type of vote change.

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