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Informed floating voters?

The impact of media on electoral volatility

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English Summary

In the past decades, the number of floating voters has been on the rise in Western democracies. An increasing number of voters change their party preference not only between elections, but also within election campaigns. Understanding the impact of media on electoral volatility is of significant importance, especially in the Netherlands, which has experienced some of the most volatile elections within Western Europe since the 1960s.

This dissertation aims to unravel how information provided by the media during election campaigns affects electoral volatility. As such, it touches upon the very core of the role of the media in democratic and electoral processes. Whereas in the past scholars held a pessimistic view on floating voters, arguing that they are uninformed about and uninterested in politics, scholars nowadays also hold a more optimistic view on electoral volatility. This perspective implies an emancipated electorate consisting of informed voters, who choose to switch parties based on rational considerations. The extent to which citizens are able to make an informed voting decision largely depends on the information to which they are exposed. This dissertation examines how both exposure to campaign news in general, and exposure to specific campaign news coverage, influences vote switching. In this way, it aims to gain more insight into the extent to which citizens are making well-informed vote choices and, as such, live up to the expectations of democratic theory.

More specifically, this dissertation examines how different kinds of election news coverage, for instance issue coverage and poll coverage, influence different types of electoral volatility: namely conversion, which refers to ‘switching from one party to another in response to campaign news exposure’, and crystallization, ‘when a voter’s latent support for a party changes into an actual vote in response to campaign news exposure’. Furthermore, it examines the underlying psychological mechanisms - political information efficacy and political cynicism - through which campaign news exposure affects vote switching. These three aspects are examined in order to provide an empirically founded answer to the overall question on how news media affect electoral volatility.

First of all, the type of information that induces vote switching is studied. *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*, which focuses on the specific aspects of campaign coverage. *Chapter 3* examined the effect of issues, party visibility and party evaluations in the news on vote switching between parties. The findings revealed that issues in the news lead to vote change in the direction of the party that owns the issue. These findings indicate that voters are guided by substantive issue information in their voting decision and thus make an informed vote switch. 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. This last finding might be worrisome from the normative perspective that voters should be well-informed on policy issues and consider their vote rationally.

Secondly, the type of vote switching that media exposure induces is examined. 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. The findings in *Chapter 4* revealed that campaign exposure positively affects crystallization. As for the impact of campaign exposure on conversion, no effects were found. This 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. However, the overall 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.

Thirdly, the psychological mechanisms underlying the effect of campaign news exposure on electoral volatility are tested. The findings in *Chapter 4* showed that exposure to campaign news boosts the feeling of political knowledge for undecided

voters. This increase in information efficacy eventually encouraged them to crystallize their vote choice. Since the findings show that crystallization is driven by exposure to campaign news 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. 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 news coverage boosting feelings of political knowledge, which consequently sparks informed vote choices.

In sum, media have been shown to influence electoral volatility at the individual level both directly and indirectly. The studies in this dissertation show 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. 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 remain 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.